Summary

Violence, Drugs and Crochet:
An Ethnography of Masculinities, and Changing Gender Relations on the Mexican Riviera

Playa del Carmen and Cancun were the cities where I investigated men, their presumed disempowerment, and violence against women. This tourist area of Quintana Roo, Mexico, is an area in flux. The expanding tourist economy brings many employment opportunities for both men and women, and attracts migrants from all over the country in search for work. This, in combination with a high report of violence against women, seemed to make this the ideal location to find out how the relationship between masculinity and violence evolves in a setting of socio economic transformations. What place does violence have in the performance of masculinity, and does the inability to be the (main) provider, result in (more) male violence against women in this tourist area? Mexican national and state policies are focused on curbing violence against women; how is the performance of masculinity shaped by these policies? Violence against women is often treated as if it occurs in isolation from the society at large, but how is domestic violence related to other forms of violence? What is the connection with drug- and alcohol abuse that are often considered to be causal to domestic violence?

Methodological practicalities, such as my own safety and getting access to the particular research population of men who had histories of violent behavior, made that I sought for informants through a number of organizations. Alcoholics Anonymous, prison, and the organization for Integrated Family Development (DIF) with its therapy group for male perpetrators of violence, have been particularly important for this research. Doing research through these organizations meant I mostly became acquainted with a population of low- and lower middle class men. They are more often penalized in the juridical system, they are the target population for the DIF and they lack the money to find private care for drug addiction and other problems. Doing research among the lower class population had consequences for the kinds of violence I was to research.
Domestic violence was embedded within a range of different forms of violence.

Almost all informants were migrants and their backgrounds were quite divers. Some came from big cities like Mexico City or Veracruz, others came from the country side, some from remote rural areas. The types of violence they had experienced and perpetrated were quite diverse depending on location. For example, the informants with an urban background had become acquainted with gang related violence, something unlikely in rural areas. Despite these differences, the men who had perpetrated violence in their adult lives had grown up in circumstances where often some form of violence, such as parental physical and emotional abuse or gang violence had been present. Within the commonsensical way of looking at violence, physical violence is prioritized as more serious than non-physical violence. This dissertation shows the unjustness of such prioritization. Neglect, rejection and other forms of psychological violence hurt like physical violence.

The relationship between direct violence (physical and non-physical), structural violence and symbolic violence is investigated within this work. These different forms of violence interact and reproduce each other. For the informants of this research the frequent occurrence of violence meant that violence became normalized. The informants generally considered a parental beating with the belt as a normal form of disciplining. Extreme forms of violence were recognized as such, but living through violence means that one has to adapt to this violent reality. The normalization of violence is a coping mechanism; the violence that is witnessed, that is endured, and also the violence that is acted out becomes mitigated. Likewise, the inequality of societal structures is often not experienced as injustice, as a form of violence; it is just the way it is.

The harsh circumstances that the informants had lived in, lead them to reproduce violence. Some said they had vowed to never use physical violence as adults, because they did not want to replicate their father’s behavior. However, being accustomed to experiencing violence it proved hard to not reproduce it. For the informants of this research being a man is associated with domination, if necessary by force, with being the one who orders, but also with being the one who provides. These aspects of masculinity are often equated with ‘machismo’. The violent backgrounds of the informants had resulted in the compliance with the hegemony of
‘machismo’. Gender studies often take ‘machismo’ as the cause of violence, how violence produces certain gender identities has received little attention. While violent circumstances produce machismo, machismo at the same time legitimizes violent behavior.

Within the public discourse in Mexico ‘machismo’, and male alcohol and drug use are pointed out as the main causes behind violent behavior. Drinking is part of male socializing, the end of the work week is celebrated with large quantities of alcohol. Within current addiction research much attention goes out to the way in which the brain changes as an effect of drug abuse, creating the image of a ‘diseased brain’ with a perpetual hunger for drugs. The function that alcohol and drugs have as a coping mechanism deserves more attention: alcohol has a great ability to numb the pain of social trauma. It can give an immense release and pleasure to not be bothered by thoughts, desires and pain, which in itself is a great stimulus to continue using drugs. Defining drug use and drunken violent behavior as symptoms of a disease ignores the context that produces these behaviors.

The AA was an important location to find research participants. The notion of addiction as a disease, is accepted as common knowledge among the local members of the AA. According to Furedi (2004) in times of increasing individualization people seek meaning within themselves, which may partly explain the popularity of the AA. The AA provides an explanatory narrative for all the wrongs committed: suffering from the illness addiction inevitably leads to violence, imprisonment, hospitalization and eventually death. Interestingly, the prescribed medicine, attending group sessions, does not remedy this random disposition but has a social function. The AA is a place where everyone is welcome, one becomes a member, a part of a group where one finds acceptance. Within the AA, the informants found a safe place in which they could show some of their vulnerability. Hegemonic masculinity was confirmed through crude language, referrals to sex and violence. At the same time, within the liminal space of the group, hegemonic masculinity could, momentarily, be defied. Since problems are defined as individual not societal, the AA disease discourse does not challenge any oppressive structures, be it the hegemony of machismo or that of the upper classes.
The terms that I use throughout this book: normalization of violence, symbolic violence, and hegemony are all similar terms that explain our compliance with the structures we live in. No matter how violent or dysfunctional, we tend to devise ways to fit into our surrounding structures, not to brake them. This is often not a conscious process, the term symbolic violence refers explicitly to the unconscious, embodied, process of becoming accomplices within our own oppression. Bourdieu (1992) argues that male domination is one of the most paradigmatic forms of symbolic violence. It is therefore that many non-physical forms of domestic violence go unnoticed. Like Stark (2006) argues practices of coercion and control are hard to discern from ‘normal’ practices of male domination.

Whether women are perpetrators of domestic violence to an equal degree as men have lead to polemic discussion among domestic violence theorists. To merge the opposing theories, Johnson (1995) proposed new terms to separate different forms of violence: patriarchal terrorism versus common couple violence. With the micro sociology of violence Collins (2008) has added a new perspective to the debate. Entrainment is a key concept within this perspective: it refers to the process of drawing the other along with oneself, and together being in sync. The aggressor and the victim learn a pattern of behavior together, whereby the aggressor feeds of the process of entrainment with the victim, deriving his power from it. The partner cooperates with the aggressor by giving space to act out his violent behavior.

Surprisingly, in the debate about domestic violence many authors omit to take into account the way gender shapes meanings and practices of violence. Collins’ focus on the process of violence itself has been of great value to this research, still a purely micro sociological perspective is not enough to understand domestic violence, we have to take gender into account. Within the context of this research, men are more likely to derive power from women than vice versa. Women are more likely to take on a submissive role, letting men derive power from them in the process of entrainment makes sense within the way they are used to perform gender. Women are also more inclined to call their own behavior violence than men do, because violence is not part of the way in which women ‘do gender’. For the male informants of this research violent behavior is a normal way to express their compliance to hegemonic masculinity; men
have to show their dominance, if they do not they are taken to be
mandillones, lesser men. However, hegemonic masculinity can conflict with
new Mexican laws and policies that are protecting women. Enforcing a
dominant position through violence may no longer be accepted.

What is understood as violence is political and gendered and under
constant construction (Hume 2008). The creation of definitions of
(domestic) violence and their inclusion in the law shows that power
relations are changing. New categories, like those of victims of domestic- or
sexual abuse are created, while the occurrences of violence may not have
changed. In Mexico, the creation of these categories occurred in the
nineteen seventies and eighties. International pressure on Mexico to
democratize and modernize gave momentum to the feminist movement.
The feminist movement pressed for law reforms to protect women against
rape, including marital rape, and domestic violence. A proliferation of laws
has seen the light since then, and a number of governmental organizations
is burdened with the execution of these laws. Non-governmental
organizations have followed with programs for (the protection of) women.
The execution of these laws and policies often fails due to bureaucratic
flaws, lack of police capacity and corruption. However, the organizations
have managed to create awareness of the existence of violence against
women and the possibility to report it. The normalization of violence is
countered, a sensitivity for the topic of domestic violence is slowly being
created. Women learn that violence is not something they have to accept:
they can go to the police or other organizations for help. This knowledge
empowers them and allows for a renegotiation of the relational balance of
power. Some manage to stop the violence by stepping out of the process of
entrainment with their abusive partner. Men in the field area also proved
to be aware of the topic. The willingness to talk about the subject was
striking, apart from the men I had met through the organizations that I
worked with, I had random encounters with men in which the topic of
violence was discussed. Some men had come to interpret their own
(potentially) violent behavior as wrong, while others had become aware of
the domestic violence laws but lamented the interference of the
authorities in what they saw as their private affair: the enforcement of
their authority within their own household.

Male authority is under pressure in this area, to maintain a position of
provider and head of the household within this expensive tourist zone is
impossible for many workers, especially for those at the lower echelons of the employment market. Men may have to allow their wives to work because they cannot make ends meet on a single income. They expressed their worries over the care of the children, and also over women’s access to a social life outside of the domestic sphere, and their control. These worries can be especially acute for rural men who in their villages of origin had often been able to maintain a household with a traditional division of labor. The transition to this urban zone might bring challenges to their masculinity that they had not anticipated. These transitions can bring about feelings of anxiety, the men themselves most often talk about jealousy (celos) to express these feelings of a loss of control over their partners. In the wordings of the social scientist these men are ‘disempowered’ or in ‘crisis’. Assumptions about increasing violence as a consequence of this disempowerment cannot be confirmed. For the informants, violence, in one form or another, has been part of their lives, but violence was often normalized and not recognized as such. Policies to protect women are now making violence against women visible. Practices of coercion and control, in compliance with hegemonic, macho, masculinity, are now signified as violence. Women who have undergone these practices are starting to recognize themselves as victims. As I have argued, different forms of violence interconnect, and diminishing symbolic violence affects other forms of violence. The increasing recognition of violence as something that is not normal, and the consequent feeling of being victimized, leads women to seek interventions from governmental organization like the DIF and the police. The fact that they know of the existence of organizations willing to help them, whether able or not, can change the balance of power within their relationship.

While these changes give a hopeful outlook for the future there are reasons for worries. First: what will happen once the public at large notices that policies directed at protecting women are not as effective as they may seem to be? Once women know that actual convictions for domestic violence are quite rare, that the police can only intervene when they catch the perpetrator red handed, that their partners are not likely to be taken away if they have money or influence, will they still be able to shift the balance of power? Secondly: policies to protect women have little to offer to men. The violence enacted against their partners seemed normal to them (at least at the time), and is in accordance with what other men expected of them in order to not be taken for a mandillon, a lesser man.
The policies that protect women do nothing but add to male disempowerment. Apart from the DIF’s male therapy group, no efforts are undertaken to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity. Even those men who had learned to think of (their own) violent behavior as wrong, were left to wonder how to change. How to be non violent while maintaining a dominant position within the household? How to be recognized by others as a man when not enforcing a dominant position?

The last chapter ‘Doing masculinity in a Mexican prison’ shows that physical violence can diminish if men are given an incentive to restrain themselves, and if they are given a different outlet to ‘do’ masculinity. Necessity makes that practices that would normally be called effeminate, such as crochet, can be made acceptable by molding them in a discourse of providing for the family. The malleability of masculinity should be mobilized much more to promote a non-violent, more egalitarian performance of masculinity. It is unlikely that such a performance of masculinity will arise without outside pressure, among men of the lower social classes. At the time of writing, drug wars are raging in Mexico. Young men like my informants grow up in context of everyday violence, reinforcing the hegemony of a machismo. Awareness of the need to change is not enough. Men will have to learn a performance of masculinity that will be recognized by others and themselves as strong, while not being violent. The current policies give men little clues of how to do this. The creation of new images of strong, non-violent men are needed to construct alternatives to the image of the ‘macho’ that still speaks to the imagination of many men and women.