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Violence, Power and Security

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Abstract

Taking as its point of departure debates on the value of criminal statistics and victimization surveys, this article explores the methodological challenge of an alternative approach to Central American violence(s). How can we collect qualitative data that help address the social construction of (in)security? The research project "Public Spaces and Violence in Central America" used multiple data sources, including guided interviews and pupils' essays. Drawing on research experience in Nicaragua, this paper asks, How can we collect data that reveal lifeworld experiences as well as hegemonic and counter-discourses on violence? Why is it crucial to keep a research diary? What is a "failed" or a "good" interview? This article argues for a research design based on theoretical considerations, impulsiveness and, most notably, constant self-reflection.

Keywords: Central America, violence, insecurity, qualitative research, methodological problems, discourse analysis

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Zusammenfassung

Qualitative Sozialforschung und Gewalt in Zentralamerika:
Zur Praxis der Datenerhebung

Wenn die Aussagekraft von Kriminalitätsstatistiken und Viktimisierungsumfragen begrenzt ist, wie wäre ein Forschungsdesign zu konzipieren, das die soziale Konstruktion von (Un-)Sicherheit in Zentralamerika angemessen zu erfassen vermag? Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit den Herausforderungen der Datenerfassung und greift dabei auf praktische Erfahrungen in Nicaragua zurück, die im Rahmen des Forschungsprojektes zu „Öffentlichkeiten und Gewalt in Zentralamerika" gemacht wurden. Dabei stehen methodische Fragen im Mittelpunkt, die durch die Durchführung von Leitfadeninterviews und eine Schüleraufsatzerhebung aufgeworfen wurden: Wie lassen sich Daten erheben, die sowohl lebensweltliche Erfahrungen als auch hegemoniale und Gegendiskurse abbilden? Warum ist es von zentraler Bedeutung, ein Forschungstagebuch zu führen? Wann ist ein Interview „gut" oder „misslungen"? Dieser Artikel plädiert für ein Forschungsdesign, das auf theoretischen Erwägungen, Impulsivität und vor allem konstanter Selbstreflexion beruht.

Do Qualitative Data Help in Addressing Central American Violence? Research Note on Data Collection

Anika Oettler

Article Outline

> *"[…] the apparent identification of nonquantitative social science with the open-ended interview needs to be reexamined. This does not mean that we should never interview, but that, as a minimum, we should first think through the alternatives." (Silverman 2003: 359)*

1 Introduction

In recent years, many scholars have taken the pulse of violence and globalization, dealing with the "new paradigm of violence" (Wieviorka 2003) that has accompanied global social changes after the end of the Cold War. With regard to Latin America, there is a wealth of literature on the wave of criminal violence that is sweeping over the continent. Although there is a growing awareness of the unavailability of systematic data on homicides in many countries of the world, scholars still tend to rely on homicide rates when explaining the magnitude of criminal violence in Latin America; these homicide rates for Latin America exceed homicide rates for other regions of the world.

"And yet, at the same time, there seems to be more to the public obsession with criminality and disorder than the mere fact of its reality" (Comaroff/Comaroff 2006: 273). Since the late 1990s, social scientists have been concerned with Latin American "societies of fear" (Koonings/Kruijt 1999). It seems a likely supposition, however, that this diagnosis was mainly taken up by ethnographers. Various authors including Caldeira (2000), Scheper-Hughes (1992), and Rodgers (2006) have provided detailed accounts of violent dynamics at the local level.

This paper, part of an ongoing research project on "Public Spaces and Violence in Central America," is concerned with our methodological approach to local, national and cross-border constructions of violent realities (see Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006b, Oettler 2007). Initially we discussed several research designs in terms of their appropriateness to the research question. Building on a wealth of literature (for instance, Denzin/Lincoln 2003, Gubrium/Holstein 1997, Silverman 2005), we proposed a research design that is based on multiple data sources.

The three members of the research team (Sebastian Huhn, Peter Peetz, and myself) conducted field research in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua between October and December 2006. As I was concerned with Nicaragua, this paper basically deals with my field experience and the data gathered in Nicaragua. In the following sections, I will both explore and expose some of the field experiences and unexpected twists our research project has undergone. In pursuit of self-reflexivity, this article will hopefully contribute to the methodological debate in the sociology of violence.

The paper is organized as follows. The second part exposes our conceptual and methodological approaches to the social construction of violent reality in Central America. It will briefly discuss the implications of the theoretical considerations for research design and data collection. Data for our study were collected from multiple sources. While our experiences with pupils' essays will be briefly described in part three, part four will focus on guided interviews. The fifth part is concerned with this paper's key question: How can we collect qualitative data that contribute to our understanding of violent realities? The conclusion takes up some of the earlier arguments in order to highlight the importance of self-reflexivity and methodological openness.

2 Approaching Central American Violence(s)

Central America remains on the margins of international political life, but developments related to crime, violence, and insecurity are attracting growing interest. According to policy papers and academic studies, there "are two key areas of crime in which Central America is remarkable by global standards: the volumes of drugs trafficked through the region and the rate of murder" (UNODC 2007: 45). Even though there is scant evidence, the majority of these crimes tend to be attributed to youth gangs (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006b). In recent years, the question of "How the Street Gangs took Central America" (Arana 2005) has evolved to become the core of public debates, prescinding from the multifaceted character of

violence. When we began our exploration of the issue in 2005, we compared current academic debates with our own field experiences in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. From our point of view, there were two basic presumptions to be made when addressing Central American crime. First, the waves of criminal violence that followed the times of state terror, insurgent action, and war of the 1970s and 1980s did not spread to all countries at the same speed. While public life in El Salvador has been shaped by fear and criminal violence for almost a decade, in Costa Rica the level of attention to this issue has only recently begun to rise. Second, the "real" level of crime is mostly unknown. Throughout Central America, criminal statistics are incomplete, out of date and, thus, unreliable. In general, they reflect police activity rather than levels of violent crime, or, in Muncie´s words: "An 'increase in crime' may be due to more crime being reported, rather [than] to more crime being committed" (Muncie 1996: 23).

As the state's monopoly on the use of force does not function completely in most Central American countries, the police and other state institutions are far from being omnipresent. According to Rodgers (2004: 117), many crimes are not registered in Nicaragua because the police are completely absent in over 20 percent of all municipalities. And the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO 1998: 384) states that in Nicaragua the majority of deaths were not registered in 1995. From this percentage of nonregistration, being inaccurate by nature, we can infer the fragility of empirical evidence from Nicaragua. Regardless of these inaccuracies, however, it should be taken into consideration that criminal statistics reflect *and* (re)construct patterns of violent action. "But if the information they give on crime is restricted, they may nevertheless reveal other facts about the society that produces them" (Caldeira 2000: 106). First of all, Central American criminal statistics refer to hegemonic discourses on violence, with the police being one of the most powerful speakers involved.

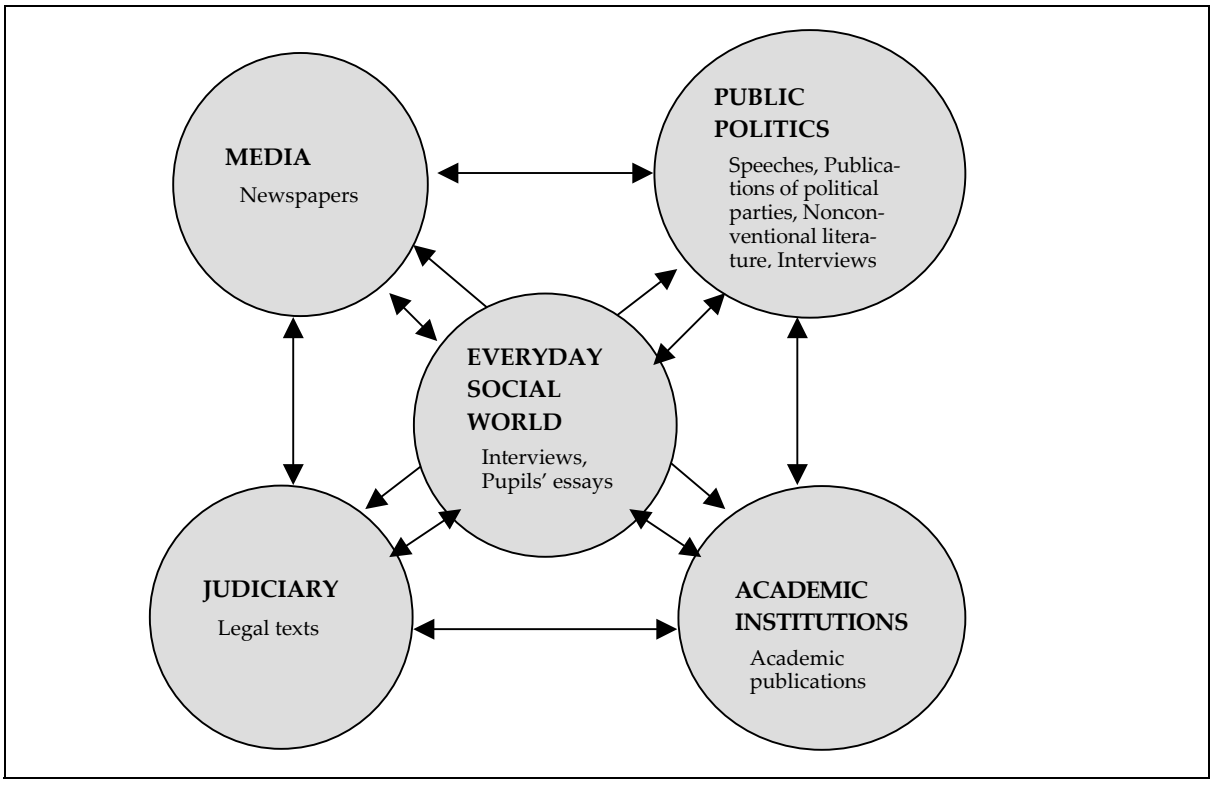
As in other countries, researchers dealing with Central American violence(s) have utilized victimization surveys in order to overcome underreporting and inaccuracies in criminal statistics. These surveys may provide more reliable estimates of (certain types of) violence and crime, but they simultaneously discourage a more thorough study of complex experiences that may be contradictory and/or traumatic. The limits of victimization surveys include preestablished categories of crime as well as the disregard for both the perception of security and the processural nature of threat. Imagine the case that interviewees do not remember concrete violent events but nevertheless feel threatened by members of their family or community—or even by politicians being held responsible for social disintegration.

Initially, we questioned the undifferentiated image of a vulnerable region that suffers from escalating violence and juvenile delinquency. We hypothesized that there are national differences as well as varying threat levels and patterns of attention.

The research project, in sum, is concerned with public discourses on violence that produce and reproduce collective patterns of interpretation as well as systems of social rules. As the "social construction of [violent] reality" (Berger/Luckmann 1966) takes place in public spheres, we

decided to focus on five types of public spheres that play a central role in the performance of the "talk of crime" (see Figure 1). In general, (1) mass media and (2) public politics are cornerstones of the architecture of the public sphere. They are highly relevant for both agenda setting and decision making regarding how problems of violence, crime, and insecurity should be treated. There are two further public spheres that are usually not thoroughly investigated, and these are (3) the judiciary and (4) academic institutions. Moreover, discourse is processed via (5) basic "communities of discourse" that are constituted within the framework of daily life, within the horizon of the life-world. It seems a likely supposition that the daily "talk of crime" focuses on the ever-present danger of murder, robberies, and rape, a sword of Damocles hanging above daily life. Thus, the research project explores how the issues of crime, violence and (in)security are discussed across different publics. It focuses on a wide range of hegemonic spheres and of "subaltern counter publics" (Fraser 1993) related to the media, public politics, academic institutions and the everyday social world.

Figure 1: Public Spaces and Sources



Source: Author's representation.

From our point of view, it was reasonable to use multiple data sources. Through the combined use of sources, our goal was to find the best way to explore the discursive fragments circulating within the five public spheres. We reasoned that academic discourses could best be understood by exploring academic papers and legal discourses could best be understood by exploring legal texts. Given the prominent function of newspapers in disseminating ac-

counts of discursive and nondiscursive events related to violence and insecurity, we decided to analyze six Central American newspapers, chosen for a variety of editorial stances (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a). With regard to discursive fragments circulating within the spheres of public politics, we used a variety of data sources, including speeches, the publications of political parties, nonconventional literature, and interviews. Finally—after having thought through the alternatives—we decided to use interviews and pupils' essays to create a multifaceted picture of the daily perception of (in)securities. The whole sample could be disaggregated into subgroups representing various social strata.

It is important to note, however, that these data sources do not represent hermetical units but rather interconnected components of a complex patchwork. The relative importance of data sources within this compilation of sources depends on both the research questions and practical constraints. The interviews and pupils' essays did not just add to the data gathered, but rather evolved to become our most valuable source. The following paragraphs illustrate how interviews and pupils' essays help put the pieces of violent Central American realities together.

3 Pupils' Essays

What we are calling the "social (re)construction of violent realities" is characterized by the involvement of different—more or less powerful, more or less institutionalized—social groups. We presume that the notion of crime is part of a dominant ideological-discursive formation (Fairclough 1995) and not necessarily linked to life-world experience. In general, powerful social groups, such as political parties, churches, and entrepreneurial associations, and state institutions such as the police have preferential access to and control over public discourse (see van Dijk 2002). Most of the sources mentioned above (newspapers, legal texts, academic papers, publications of political parties) reflect dominant discourses. These sources contain hegemonic discursive fragments as well as counter-discursive fragments, with the latter being far less numerous, common, and determinative than the former. Central American newspapers, for example, operate between the imperatives of "professionalism," including a certain degree of plurivocality, and conservative and/or right-wing editorial stances (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006a). Despite the fact that powerful social groups tend to dominate the architecture of the public, public urgencies are produced and reproduced by discursive elites as well as less powerful speakers. This notion refers to the Gramscian concept of hegemony and, thus, to the consent given to elite dominance by the subaltern classes (see Martin 2002: 227-336). This concept of hegemony refers to the terrain of common sense, within which dominant groups and dominated groups encounter each other.

Certainly, there are various groups with no or rather passive discursive power. As van Dijk states, "in everyday conversations, there may be culturally different patterns of access based on age, gender, class, education or other criteria that define dominance and discrimination: women may have less access than men, blacks less than whites, young people less than

adults" (Van Dijk: 86). Our data include 226 essays written by pupils from rural and urban, marginal and elite schools in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The pupils were between 10 and 18 years old, with the majority (77 percent) being between 14 and 17 years old. If we "spell out a 'discourse access profile'" (van Dijk 2002: 111) for this group, we may, first of all, conclude that pupils represent a social group with little discursive power. Pupils have no access to public debates. They may be engaged in neighborhood organizations or political parties; they may be interviewed by journalists (or researchers); they may behave deviantly in the classroom, at home, or in the streets, but they do not control the agenda. Secondly, the pupils participating in our investigation have more access to public debates than most adolescents in Central American countries, who leave school at an early age. Thirdly, the group of pupils actually represents various domains of dominance and repression. There are female and male pupils, pupils from marginalized urban neighborhoods, pupils from wealthier neighborhoods, pupils from rural areas, pupils coming from cohesive families, and pupils who have experienced instability and/or violence.

On the one hand, the source of pupils' essays was chosen in order to explore discourses circulating within the everyday world. Were pupils likely to (re)produce dominant perceptions of violence and insecurity? In recent years, international organizations as well as prestigious think tanks have stated that perceptions of insecurity tend to predominate in political attitudes in Central America, albeit with varying intensity (for instance, UNODC 2007). Latinobarómetro has pointed to the existence of national differences, with the fear of crime being most prevalent in El Salvador.[1] We asked pupils from nine schools and a theatre project to write short essays, dealing with two questions.

In a first step, the pupils, who were told that we were carrying out a comparative study on the development of Central American countries, were confronted with the following question: "Imagine you were the president of the country. What are the country´s most important problems and how would you solve them?" This question was not directly linked to our research question (perception of (in)security, violence and crime) but rather allowed for a variety of answers. In general, the pupils' essays corroborated Latinobarómetro´s findings with regard to national differences in the perception of threat. Eighty percent of the Salvadorean pupils identified problems related to violence, crime, and (physical) insecurity. On the other hand, 67 percent of the Costa Rican pupils and 25.6 percent of the Nicaraguan pupils highlighted these problems (for the interpretation of the pupils' essays, see Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2008; Huhn 2008).

The second question the pupils had to deal with was directly connected to our research topic: "Do you feel secure in your family/neighborhood/village/town/country? Why/Why not?"

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[1] In last year´s Latinobarómetro poll, 40% of Salvadorean respondents considered crime to be the country´s most important problem and 18% said that unemployment is the most important problem. In Nicaragua, by contrast, 1% of the respondents identified crime and 37% pointed to unemployment. In Costa Rica, 16% of the respondents perceived crime as being the most important problem and 14% mentioned unemployment (*Latinobarómetro* 2006, see www.latinobarometro .org – last accessed April 20, 2008).

It was particularly interesting to compare (1) the poor's perceptions of violence to the images (re)produced by the more privileged and/or the pupils living in rural areas, (2) female to male perceptions, (3) Salvadorean to Costa Rican to Nicaraguan experiences, and (4) public discourses ("What are the country´s most important problems?"/"Do you feel secure in your country?") to life-world experiences ("Do you feel secure in your neighborhood?").

Practical Experiences & Lessons Learned

- With pupils' essays we can get close to both life-world perceptions and hegemonic public discourses.
- The empirical material produced by pupils is shaped by the relationship between the researcher and the school. While, for instance, the director of the German elite school in Managua was very engaged and provided disciplined pupils who turned in exam-like papers, the director of the rural school in Costa Rica, who was the neighbor of a cousin of a woman who came to know our student assistant, was less enthusiastic. The essays were shorter than those written by students from other schools. Notwithstanding these differences, the pupils' essays as a whole reflect (though not in the sense of being 100% representative) the fabric of contemporary discourses on violence.
- Do not expect in-depth personal narratives. Pupils tend to state the questions as briefly as possible. For many of them, it seems to be an exam-like situation. The very nature of pupils' essays connects us to specific methods of analyzing the material. Instead of focusing on the structure of the texts written by pupils, we should concentrate on words and metaphors. This work may be supported by software (Weitzman) such as atlas.ti.

4 Guided Interviews

As we were concerned with the everyday social world and, hence, individual perceptions of violence, crime, and insecurity, we decided to carry out guided interviews. In November and December 2006, we gathered a total of approximately 90 qualitative interviews, representing a wide range of professions and social classes. When deciding upon the sample to be studied, we gave consideration to various claims. First, it was impossible to create a representative sample, but we were eager to capture various social strata and made sure that the samples could be compared over the cases. Second, we aimed to get close to the everyday social world through interviewing, taking into account different domains of dominance and privilege. We ended up with a list of interviewees that indicated professions (emergency nurses, domestic employees, taxi drivers, entrepreneurs, priests, shopkeepers, etc.), gender, and locale (rural/urban). Ethnic affiliation was not taken into account *per se*.

4.1. How to Select 30 Interviewees out of 5.7 Million[2]

Interviewing and participant observation usually go hand in hand (Fontana/Frey 2003: 74). When we (two male, one female "white" German researchers) arrived "in the field," we all carried our own baggage of fears and prejudices that impeded an unbiased approach. For me, the act of moving around the "disembedded city" of Managua (Rodgers 2004) implied a constant, more or less subliminal threat. Each time I ("white"/rich/woman) entered a taxi, I was uncomfortably conscious of danger. At the time of our fieldwork, a wave of assaults on passengers in (stolen) taxis attracted a great deal of public interest. As Rodgers has noted, Managua is a "fragmented metropolis of semi-autonomous districts connected by a Byzantine transport network" (Rodgers 2004: 115). In Managua, there are no street names, and taxi drivers usually try to find either the quickest way, following "secret" paths, or the most effective way, picking up as many passengers as possible. As a consequence, you never know which way you will go, and you never know with whom you will go. Fear is predictable. After two months, I had been engaged in conversations with dozens of taxi drivers and passengers. Interestingly, my research topic did not attract much interest. For most people I met, insecurity has risen in recent years, either *because of* or *in spite of* neoliberal policies. In either case, other issues such as inequality, working conditions, poverty, and corruption seemed to be more important. Public perceptions of (in)security are often of a Janus-faced character. Many people, who are afraid of robberies, assaults, and—in the case of women—sexual assaults, treat the issue of violence as a political problem of secondary importance. Irrespective of life-world perceptions, Nicaraguans tend to (re)produce the elite discourse of Nicaragua being a safe country.

After my arrival in Nicaragua, I started to contact people who fit within the categories on my list of potential interviewees. Sometimes these contacts were facilitated by personal networks. For instance, I got in touch with a shop owner from the notorious Mercado Oriental because she was the friend of the wife of a friend. In most cases, however, I tried to make "independent" contacts rather than using the snowball method. In the end, I had taped conversations with a hotel employee (female), a theater educator (female), two employees of security firms (male), a director of an NGO (female), two *vigilantes*/guards (male), an emergency nurse (female), two psychologists (female), a taxi driver (male), a prison functionary (male), a police woman, an evangelical pastor (male), a money changer (male), a bus driver (male), two shop owners (female), a member of a lesbian group (female), a judge (male), a Catholic priest (male), a consultant (male), and an entrepreneur (male), all located in Managua. In other parts of the country, I carried out interviews with two policewomen, a farm worker (male), two shop owners (female/male), a psychologist (female), and a seamstress (female).

Every time I returned home to write in my research diary, I dealt with the basic questions: "Was the interview good (enough)?" and "What is a good interview?" The circumstances

[2] Estimated total Nicaraguan population, 2007.

that shaped the data gathering were constantly changing, as was the relationship between myself and the interviewees. Sometimes I had the impression that the interview was not "good." See, for example, the following diary entries:

> *Diary, October 30, 2006:* "[...] utterly devastating personal encounter, some interesting contradictions, 'professional' NGO discourse [...]."
> *Diary, November 1, 2006:* "5 p.m.: Interview with an employee of security company XX. The sophisticated website does not reflect reality; the small company is located near Mayoreo—dark road, asphalt, not inspiring confidence. It took a while, but then the interviewee consented to taping and NOT going through the questions before. The interviewee seemed to be particularly concerned with giving the 'right' answers. No 'talk of threat' but rather a 'talk of poverty.'"
> *Diary, November 2, 2006:* "Interview with a vigilante (guard), in 'my' upper-middle-class neighborhood. Nearly every street corner has its own guard. They seem to be quite bored, some have a 'visitor´s chair.' The vigilante spontaneously agreed to give an interview, and consented to taping. He ignored my first question (referring to security/insecurity in his private and professional surrounding), and talked about grand corruption and untrustworthy presidential candidates instead. After a while, a second man (a driver, working at the opposite side of the street) joined us. The interview transformed into an open group conversation that focused on corruption scandals, including a few remarks on security/insecurity. As the vigilante started to talk to a woman passing by and the driver began asking me about my personal life, I pressed the 'stop' button. [Some weeks later, the vigilante talked about grand corruption again, stating, "El dinero no sirve allá abajo" (Money doesn´t help down there) (that is: in hell).]"

In these cases, things did not go according to plan. In the first case, the relationship between the interviewee and myself was characterized by dislike and annoyance. While the interviewee presented her institution, I became indignant over her unwillingness to answer my questions. But were her statements less likely to represent contemporary discourses on violence? In the second case, I intended to talk to the owner of a big private security company. Instead, I was referred to an employee, and the company proved to be a small one. The interviewee was not telling stories but rather was focused on the rigid questionnaire he expected me to have. This case brought up two questions: Should I ignore the interview because the interviewee did not fully fit the category on my list of potential interviewees? And, again, were his short answers less likely to contain prevailing discursive fragments? In the third case, the "interview" quickly transformed into an informal street-corner conversation, with the "interviewees" circumnavigating the issue of physical violence. But was the "interview" therefore less likely to represent (male) perceptions of (in)security?

In many cases, however, there seemed to be no doubt that the interview was "good." During our field stay, Peter, Sebastian, and I met in person for a few days, and we also had tele-

phone conferences in order to constantly exchange experiences concerning interview situations, conversational dynamics, and interview accounts. All of us experienced ups and downs. In the beginning, though, as we started to learn about people's perceptions of violence, every interview was exciting. After some weeks, interviewing had transformed into a daily routine. Most notably, interviewing reached a certain point of saturation, with interviewees making statements we were already familiar with. At this point, some interviews that might have been experienced as very interesting at the beginning of our field stay were perceived as "ordinary" interviews.

In the case of the Nicaraguan interview sample, one interview turned out to be the most favorite interview of our student assistants, and this was the interview with the theater educator. Why was this interview considered one of the "best" interviews? Unlike most interviewees, the theater educator told stories based on her own agenda, oscillating between concise analysis and fascinating personal accounts. This kind of appreciation of particular interviewees is, obviously, highly subjective. And this is exactly why we refer to this example: Qualitative research is subjective. Even though the methods of data processing, especially coding, allow for a certain degree of dispassion, there are some interviews that leave deeper marks on one's memory.

4.2 The Taped and the Noted

Our research diaries aimed to both reflect upon and talk about our research experiences. Yet, as Silverman (2005: 251) reminds us, "the most important thing about keeping a research diary is that it will encourage you to be *meticulous* in record keeping and *reflective* about your data." In our case, the diaries kept by the three members of the research team were used to collect and keep basic data (interview situations, degree of intimacy, topics addressed before and after the interview, etc.). On the other hand, many diary entries amounted to preliminary analyses of interviews. Actually, they were written as letters to the other members of the research team.

The following extracts from my research diary indicate the relationship between "the Taped and the Noted." In both cases, the interview situation as a whole (degree of intimacy, interview topics and dynamics, talks before and after the interview) may be more revealing than the interview transcript.

> *Diary, November 7, 2006:* "The hospital is one of three major state (or rather semi-state) hospitals in Managua (most taxi drivers complain about prices). I chose the hospital because the press usually reports on victims (of traffic accidents, violence) being transferred to this hospital. The hospital differs dramatically from the state hospitals in El Salvador and Guatemala I know: the Managuan hospital is by no means crowded. In the hall, I meet two tattooed male adolescents, one with a stabbing injury. We (the emergency nurse and myself) meet at 8 a.m.. The final election results are still unknown, nobody is talking about anything else. In this context, people tend to refer to the 1980s,

> with some people talking about deprivation and war and others talking about imperialistic aggression and the absence of hunger. I mention that the taxi driver stated that everything had been better under Somoza. She smiles, and says 'in a way, that may be true.' The nurse provides for a 'professional' interview setting (no noise, no disturbances), and gives brief answers my questions. Most surprisingly, the first violence-related problem the nurse talks about is suicides and suicidal attempts by women (knowledge about suicidal methods seems to be widespread among working-class women, who know where you can buy *cura frijol* – (medicine for beans), that is, pesticides). After the interview, the nurse tells me that she was interviewed by a U.S. journalist in the 1980s and that she had been afraid of it, because she was only allowed to talk about certain things. The informal conversation is more interesting than the interview. The nurse summarizes her life story (grew up in a marginalized neighborhood, worked as a seamstress, later trained as a nurse). Currently, she lives in a middle-class neighborhood adjoined by a slum. From time to time, she says, injured local *pandilleros* (youth gang members), who keep an eye on the whole area, visit her in order to get mended."

This diary entry contains information about my perceptions and interpretations. It shows, for instance, my perception of the hospital and my interpretation of the interview situation rather than "objective" information about the hospital and the interview situation. There are, from my point of view, two passages that deserve further attention.

See, first of all, my statements/questions concerning the political atmosphere on the day of the interview, post-election day. This information may be useful in seeing the interviewee´s statements in context. What about the Somoza-related statement/question? From my point of view, it was important to mention this sequence of the pre-interview small talk in my diary, because, for instance, I encouraged the interviewee to make a certain sense of political events. Moreover, the Somoza-related statement/question may appear to be affirmative and hence may have affected the interviewer/interviewee relationship. Imagine a Nicaraguan interviewer referring to a "Under Hitler, everything was better" statement in Germany. It seems a likely supposition that this would reduce the German interviewee´s trust in the Nicaraguan interviewer. Actually, the nurse briefly answered my questions. After the interview, she focused on personal experiences, telling stories that she could have told during the interview.

Second, the analytical nature of the diary entry deserves some attention. As the research project was concerned with discursive nodes and patterns of attention associated with contemporary violence in Central America, many diary entries assess the interviewee´s perceptions of violence-related problems. In the case of the emergency nurse, the diary entry refers to my perception of male working-class adolescents in the hall as well to the story that the emergency nurse told me after the interview. Notably, the problem of organized youth violence was not treated prominently during the interview. Instead, the problem of self-directed violence by women was the first violence-related problem the nurse talked about. This has since led me to pay more attention to self-directed violence.

> *Diary, November 9, 2006:* "La Trinidad. I went to the *pulpería* (small shop), gave XX's kind regards, and asked the owner if I could talk to her. She consented to interviewing, but wanted to stay behind the shelter. In the shop was an old woman; in the backroom I saw a young woman. From time to time, male customers entered (and left) the shop. My initial question referred to the owner´s personal situation and the interviewee (approximately 50 years old) promptly stated that there were NO problems in her family. For me, the following (short) conversation was like a slow vicious flow. The interviewee portrayed La Trinidad as a very calm village, with the drunk people (*borrachos*) being the sole problem. As I repeatedly addressed the issue of domestic/sexual violence, a man suddenly appeared behind the interviewee—stripped to the waist, with a potbelly, and giving me a 'you-are-next stare' (very subjective impression). At the same time, the interviewee stated that this kind of problem did not exist. I added some more questions (all of them followed by short answers) and left as soon as I could. Actually, the man made me feel highly uncomfortable. The interview may be interesting in spite of and because of the short answers, as it indicates the limits of public discourses of violence."

This diary entry informs us about an apparently failed interview. According to the standards of qualitative research, there should be an interview setting which allows for privacy and trust. In this case, the interview was conducted spontaneously, with a low degree of commitment and trust. Given the presence of other people, the interviewee was not fully concentrated on my questions. During the very short interview (5.04 minutes), the interviewee shared two main statements: "There is no violence, the drunken, a bit more when there are fiestas"; and "El Salvador, because of the youth gangs, is more violent [...] they exist in Managua, in Estelí, but not in La Trinidad." The presence of the man ("stripped to the waist, with a potbelly, and giving me a 'you-are-next stare' (very subjective impression)") made me think that the interviewee was not telling the truth. But why should this be relevant? Why would the judge, the prison functionary, or the psychologist be more likely to tell "the truth"? And what if none of the interviewees was telling the "truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth"? It is important to underline that the research project is not concerned with people's "true" experiences. Instead, it focuses on perceptions of and public discourses about violence. It does not matter if this interviewee lied or withheld information. The statements she gave were the statements she was able to give in public. They reflect dominant discourses on violence in (rural) Nicaragua. A recurring question in the face of such research experience is how to accommodate and integrate the "the Taped and the Noted."

5 Violence-Related Qualitative Research

Our data indicate that the perception of insecurity is associated with prejudices and not necessarily linked to life-world experiences. There are public spaces which are widely perceived as dangerous. At the same time, these spaces are mostly unknown to the people talking about them. Many Nicaraguans, who classify certain *barrios* (for instance, Reparto Schick, Jorge Dimitrov, San Judas) as dangerous, have never been there. On the other hand, many Nicaraguans show off with anecdotal evidence, often referring to an incident of robbery taking place at the notorious Mercado Oriental.

These observations apply to researchers too. If we leave for the "field," we may look back on former experiences. We may have lived in the "field" before, we may have been robbed, we may have felt secure or insecure. Earlier encounters in the "field", that is, in a certain city/neigborhood/district/country, may have led us to belive or to question "valid" knowledge with regard to violent local realities. However, it is rather unlikely that we know every part of the city/district/country. On one hand, we may support the principle of presumption of innocence ("poor people/male adolescents are poor people/male adolescents rather than delinquents"). On the other hand, our positionality in the field ("white"/rich/female researcher) affects our mobility and liberty of action (see McCorkel/Myers 2003). Exploring the field means navigating between Scylla (biased research) and Charybdis ("real threat").

As described above, interviewing may produce unexpected results. It is important to note, however, that "failed" interviews do not obstruct the research process. Instead, they may accelerate it. The preliminary evaluation of research experiences is affected by various factors such as the perception of (extra)ordinary personal encounters; interview situations that make one uncomfortable or relaxed; and strong sentiments, particularly sympathy/antipathy (whether mutual or not) and the fear of the unknown. The above examples, however, have indicated that interviews which one might qualify as "not good" at first glance may, nevertheless, contain the "typical" (or even untypical) statements you are searching for.

Thus, one of the most important and difficult challenges in qualitative research is the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of multifaceted research experiences. The Hegelian term combines three contradictory meanings of the German word *aufheben*: to preserve, to annul, and to take to a higher level. The above examples concerning "the Taped and the Noted" have demonstrated, first of all, the need to reflect on and save interview experiences. Second, we should avoid allowing unexpected (or frustrating) experiences to dominate our relationship with other interviewees ("annulment"). Third, it is important to take research experiences to a higher and more abstract level of analysis.

Practical Experiences and Lessons Learned

- *Try* to put aside your individual baggage of prejudices, former experiences, and academic knowledge.

- With regard to the interview sample, taking theoretical considerations into account is as important as acting on impulse. When you start contacting people, you tend to be passed from person to person. Sometimes it can be valuable to disregard your initial list of potential interviewees.
- Never be discouraged by "failed" interviews or unexpected results. Even if the interview accounts are short or implausible, they may nevertheless contain core discursive fragments.
- Interview accounts have to be seen in context (political atmosphere, interview situation, etc.). It is crucial to keep a research diary. At the end of the day, your memory is already distorted, but not as distorted as it would be after some weeks or months.
- If you are carrying out a research project that involves more than one researcher, talk, talk, talk! You may detect conceptual constraints and you may thus adjust some aspects of your research design.

6 Concluding Remarks

In the above paragraphs, I have briefly summarized our project's approach to the social construction of violent realities in Central America. For the analysis of discursive fragments circulating in the everyday social world, we drew on two different types of sources. First of all, the idea of asking pupils to write short essays proved to be as realizable as it was valuable. After carrying out this "experiment," however, it became clear that this source was more useful for detecting the macro-structure of discourses than for in-depth examination of discursive structures (see Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2008; Huhn 2008). With regard to the second type of source, guided interviews, I have indicated some of the challenges researchers can face while undertaking research. Research based on interviewing consists of different stages. In this paper, I have focused on the process of data collection, corroborating the importance of reflective practice as a key standard of qualitative research. The above examples have shown the difficulty of classifying an interview as "good" or "not good." Interview circumstances and conversational dynamics are often unexpected, facilitating or frustrating extensive narrations and/or lines of reasoning. It is important to note, however, that even "failed" interviews can prove to be valuable. The five interview experiences mentioned above indicate the uniqueness of each conversational dynamic. Yet, researchers face the paradoxical challenge of prescinding from and adhering to unique personal experiences.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the sentiment of saturation we articulated at the end of our field research proved to be accurate. We had, in fact, recorded a sufficient number of "typical" and "atypical" statements. As we have explained elsewhere (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2008; Huhn 2008; Peetz 2008; Oettler 2008), the multiple data sources placed our analysis on a fairly solid foundation.

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