

Honduras: Violence, Research and Young People’s Patterns of Thought Franklin Moreno

“¿Todo tumbao, Franklin?” “Si, todo tumbao.” This was a daily exchange I had with a group of about 20 students I got to know in the Chamelecón sector of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. They were taking a four-month English language course at the National Foundation for the Development of Honduras (FUNADEH) that included an interview for potential job placements—a vital component in violence prevention. This extraordinary opportunity was made possible through the support from the Tinker Foundation and FUNADEH to conduct fieldwork on moral judgments of children and adolescents regarding physical violence and interpersonal relationships. Over the course of the month I visited Outreach Centers (Centros de Alcance) in various neighborhoods, conducted youth focus groups and individual interviews, and spoke with youth, community leaders, Center coordinators, and staff from United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and FUNADEH. The purpose of my research in Honduras is to contribute to the growing body of research on violence from a cognitive perspective –and to lay the groundwork for continued research in the country.

Features of Violence

Violence is a serious problem in Honduras that some argue has been normalized by those forcefully exposed to it¹ (Ransford et al., 2016). Economically speaking, violence containment efforts in the country cost an estimated 34% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2014 (ranking 6th in GDP costs behind Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq; IEP, 2016, p. 108). Other global estimates ranked the city of San Pedro Sula as number one in homicide rates between the years 2012-2014, placing second in 2015 (CCSPJP, 2016).

Personal observations and conversations adumbrated other subtle and not so subtle features of violence. The spatial impact of gang-enforced borders, for example, has caused Outreach Centers to shift their working models; adapting from being a central space for surrounding communities to one of working within distinct borders². Focus group participants from the sector of Chamelecón spoke of the strain on interpersonal relationships, economic resources and personal sense of insecurity due to these borders. “It’s ugly and it gives you grief when they are assaulting a person in front of your house and you can’t do anything because they can do something to you,” stated one participant. “You can’t even go to the street corner or you can’t stay there, you don’t feel a sense of freedom, you don’t know what can happen to you.” Some expressed loss of friendships or the inability to visit family because of these hazardous borders.

The salience of violence also includes police forcibly searching the phones of youth under threat, or facing discrimination by employers. One participant noted, “No employers hire you because of where you live for discrimination or fear of where you live. [Company] Drivers can’t drop you off in the neighborhood for fear of being killed.” Sources of discrimination were partly attributed to news media, police representatives and politicians symbolically linking certain zones with extreme violence without any proper investigations. In other words, there is an “assault on human dignity and sense of worth” across time and space in the form of *symbolic violence* (Scheper-Hughes, 2004, p. 14).

¹ In one focus group conducted by the author, some participants stated they have become desensitized to seeing human corpses in their community.

² Coordinators of Outreach Centers in different neighborhoods, FUNADEH staff and focus group participants stated that children and adolescents who live outside their neighborhoods cannot cross gang borders to attend programs at an Outreach Center in another neighborhood.

Honduras: Violence, Research and Young People's Patterns of Thought Franklin Moreno

Research on Thinking about Violence

Policy experts, researchers and practitioners have strongly urged for much needed multi-disciplinary research on violence and prevention impact studies in the country³ (Korthuis, 2014; Moestue, Moestue, & Muggah, 2013; USAID, 2014). Physicians from the World Health Organization (2014) called for expanding data collection beyond single events (e.g., homicide counts) to include the lasting effects of physical and psychological trauma⁴. Despite this need, there is no coherent metric system from which to quantify and qualify the range of actual and latent characteristics of violence. In addition, specific mechanisms for reporting violence are lacking, and current reporting systems face serious limitations (Ransford et al., 2016; IUDPH, 2014; USAID, 2014; WHO, 2014). As a result, multiple dimensions of violence, such as child sex trade or mental health, go largely unaccounted for⁵.

From a developmental perspective, there is much complexity in determining factors associated with *types* of violence given that human ontogenesis involves biological functioning, patterns of thinking and emotions, and behaviors acted upon as well as constrained by the social world (Bandura, 2002; Costello et al. 2006; Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009; Gottlieb & Helpen, 2002; Dekker & Karmiloff-Smith, 2011; Piaget, 1970; Overton & Ennis, 2006; Trembly, 2002). Determining how young people think about particular forms of violence in relation to social affiliations, and expectations and norms is highly relevant to prevention efforts aimed at changing norms and behaviors (Daiute, 2010; Moestue, Moestue, & Muggah, 2013; USAID, 2012). The CURE Violence program model, implemented in Chamelecón in 2013, sought to change individual and community norms around the use of violence (Ransford et al., 2016, p. 3). Yet a recent CURE impact study did not measure the “attitude or belief around violence” (Ransford et al., 2016, p. 10). Other studies in the country have examined victimization, perceived social capital, perceptions and expectations of occurring violence, and people’s sense of security (Hansed et al., 2014; IUDPH, 2016; USAID, 2014). But no prior studies on child and adolescent moral judgments have been conducted.

By contrast, my recent study examines moral judgments from a social domain theory perspective. Accordingly, children and adolescents develop distinct social, moral and personal domains knowledge (Turiel, 1983). The moral domain corresponds to concepts of welfare, harm, justice and rights; social concepts refer to rules or laws, authority, and conventions organizing social relationships; and personal concepts refer to areas of personal choice outside of rule contingency or moral concerns. The purpose of the study is to examine how children and adolescents coordinate and apply socio-moral and non-moral concepts in complex situations as a function of age; whether moral judgments and reasoning will vary with differences in the relationships between victim and aggressor; and whether children and adolescents view particular acts of physical aggression as *alright* or *necessary*, and under what circumstances. To address these areas of interest, I interviewed fifty-five participants, ages 11-12, 14-15, and 17-18-years, and presented them with situations involving gangs and differences in interpersonal relationships (i.e., non-family gang members and family members affiliated with gangs).

Patterns of Thinking

³ A few evidence-based violence prevention programs have been implemented in recent years under the auspice of the Central America Regional Security Initiative in the cities of Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and Choloma: *Proponente Mas*, *A Ganar* and *CURE Violence*.

⁴ Undoubtedly, integrating individual and collective models of trauma is necessary, as I have discussed elsewhere (Moreno, 2014).

⁵ Although in 2015, I did assist on a study on intimate partnership violence among adolescents in Honduras.

**Honduras:
Violence, Research and Young People's Patterns of Thought
Franklin Moreno**

Because the data is currently in the preliminary stages of coding and analysis, offered here are a few general remarks regarding the study. In the previous questionnaire studies on perceptions of violence, survey items referenced violence in general terms. Consider this item in a 2016 study: 68% percent of respondents disagreed with the statement, "Violence is a necessary response to an injustice", whereas 29.5% agreed (IUDPH, 2016, p. 13). What is ambiguous is the type and severity of the violence or of the injustice that was evoked by the participants when responding. By contrast, the study I conducted examines judgments and reasoning about decontextualized and specific situations of violence. Abstract assessments include, "*Is it alright or not alright for someone to hit and physically harm another person?*" or "*Do you think there are times when it is necessary to hit and physically harm another person?*" A majority of the participants did not accept inflicting harm in general. This corresponds with previous research showing that children and adolescents judge unprovoked intentional acts of physical aggression as wrong (Smetana, 2013; Turiel, 1983).

Children and adolescents were also asked to evaluate multifaceted situations such as a boy physically harming a gang member who charged a "war tax" on his family, thereby returning the money to his family to buy food for the month. One participant accepted this form of violence because of the needs of the family and the perceived injustice of charging a war tax. But if the extorting gang member was also a cousin (a switch in relationship), the same respondent did not accept the aggressive act because of the family tie. This example suggests that individuals prioritize certain concepts in one situation and subordinate them in others. Based on previous research, we expect that judgments and reasoning will vary in response to the situational features, beliefs, age, type of moral transgression (Ardila-Rey, et al., 2009; Astor, 1994; Helwig, 1995; Wainryb, 2004; Posada & Wainryb, 2008). To my surprise, participants shared personal, anecdotal stories for certain conditions, offering some indication of the relevance to their lives. One participant went on to describe their own personal experience with extorting others.

Conclusion

During my fieldwork in Honduras, I observed an underlying sense of hyper-vigilance among youth and adults alike, stemming from blurred inferences of perceived and actual violence around every corner. I also learned of the many challenges to conducting research in high-risk areas. People expressed their fear and hesitation about being interviewed, not knowing who might overhear. In fact, a staff member of another organization conducting interviews at people's homes said to me that a mother refused to divulge where her son was living for fear that gang members may find him. Despite these levels of fear and sense of anticipated violence, there is something to be said for the trust that has been forged among youth, Outreach Center coordinators, FUNADEH and USAID staff. It is absolutely vital to take into account what young people think about conditions of violence in their society and what policy makers, researchers and practitioners may learn from them. By addressing a gap in cognitive research being conducted in Honduras, I believe that the findings of this study will make a modest contribution towards shedding some light on the complexity of young people's thinking about violence.