Irene Vasilachis de Gialdino

REPRESENTATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ASSOCIATED WITH CRIME IN EL SALVADOR'S WRITTEN PRESS

This paper attempts to uncover the interpretive models underlying the construction of social representations about the identity of young people associated with crime by El Salvador's written press. To achieve this goal, I explore the ways in which these young people are categorized and characterized and the metaphors used to represent them and their actions as well as the consequences of the latter. My research has been carried out from the interdisciplinary perspective I call 'sociological and linguistic discourse analysis' (SLDA). This examines the resources and strategies used in oral and written texts to impose, maintain, justify, or propose certain interpretive models seeking to make sense of social reality.

Keywords categorization; characterization; metaphors; interpretive models; identity deprivation; SLDA; violence

Goal

I have set out to determine the interpretive models underlying the construction of social representations about the identity of young people associated with crime by the Salvadoran press. To achieve this goal I have examined, on the one hand, the terms and expressions used to categorize and characterize them, and, on the other, the interpretive models underpinning the texts.

According to the media, these young people belong to *maras* or gangs. In El Salvador the word *mara* has been used to designate a group of friends sharing the same school, church, neighbourhood, etc. Nowadays it has taken on derogatory connotations, referring almost exclusively to organized groups of young people associated with violent or criminal acts. Research into these groups has concluded that their organization is a complex phenomenon with multifarious causes, expressions, and consequences. Gangs are not in and of themselves criminal organizations. Different circumstances lead young people to join them, among them social and economic marginalization, unemployment, underemployment, a culture of violence, transculturation, family problems, lack of basic technological qualifications, and the discontinuance of their formal education (Smutt & Miranda, 1998). Microsocial

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conditions such as the poverty and socioeconomic abandonment of the neighbourhoods in which gangs are formed are the key to this phenomenon (Cruz, 2004a).

The Central American subregion, particularly Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, is the most violent of Latin America (Briceño-León & Zubillaga, 2002; Cruz, 2004b). El Salvador had the highest per capita homicide rate in the western hemisphere during the 1990s, after the end of the civil war (1980–1991; Bourgois, 2001). The causes of such violence are disputed. To Bourgois (2002, p. 23): '[S]tructural violence often becomes expressed in an everyday violence of interpersonal rage and delinquency as well as in a set of institutionalised relations and norms that dehumanise.' To Binford (2002, p. 209):

> [T]he lines of causality leading from structural inequality, political oppression and armed resistance to everyday violence and symbolic violence are complex, all the more so in those cases in which historical memory mediates the experience of past violence, of whatever form, and its expression in the present.

Interpretive models and sociological and linguistic discourse analysis

Sociological and linguistic discourse analysis (SLDA) approaches the links between discourse and society from the standpoint of the latter, privileging the epistemological, methodological, and theoretical contributions of sociology. This constitutes its special perspective (Weber, 1971).

By and large, models aimed at interpreting social reality are not textually explicit. They manifest themselves through the linguistic resources and argumentative strategies used by speakers to represent such reality and its actors, relations, and processes. These models presuppose a certain way of being of society and societal organization, one or more ways of differentiating or hierarchically placing its members, and a dominant type of social relationship. All this, in turn, may hold greater or fewer possibilities for individual and social actors *vis-à-vis* the construction of such society, its values, rules, meanings, and direction, and the transformation of the systems governing the distribution of material, symbolic, spiritual, and transcendent goods (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1997, 2003).

The present study has been carried out from the interdisciplinary perspective of SLDA, which examines the resources and strategies used in written and oral texts to uphold, justify, propose, or impose certain models for interpreting social reality. Interpretive models are largely grounded, at the cognitive level, in the epistemological paradigms I define as the theoretical and methodological framework used by researchers to interpret social phenomena in the context of a given society. I have identified three currently prevailing and coexisting social science paradigms – historical materialist, positivist, and interpretive – each prompting a different kind of epistemological reflection (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1992a). They provide the foundations for the different interpretive models used by speakers to describe society and its actors, processes, and relationships.

Textual representations of society, of its relationships and their legitimacy, of individual and collective identities, and of the greater or lesser scope for individual autonomous development, are textually constructed from the standpoint of these models – that is, from the standpoint of the theories on which they are based.

It is the interpretive models presupposed by speakers that provide meaning contexts. Thus, the same words may have different semantic content depending on the interpretive model assumed. In previous research (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1997) I discussed how the discursive convergence of the Argentinean executive and written press led to the reiteration of a certain interpretive model, which became dominant. In the present paper I will show how this convergence takes place between the Salvadoran press, police, and government, with similar results. Therefore, the semantic content of some terms, the reference to certain category-bound activities, or the metaphorical allusion to the identity of individuals or groups can hardly be separated from the dominant model. In such cases, the chances for alternative interpretive models to modify the meaning horizon are very slim.

In a previous paper I created, from the data, a concept of social representations (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994) that I think can be validly extended to the present study. Social representations are individual and/or collective symbolic constructions that people use or create to interpret the world, reflect on their own or others' situation, and determine the possibility of their historical action as well as its scope (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1997, 2003).

Detection of the interpretive models underlying the discursive representations of social reality requires a grasp of social science theories. Most of these theories have been created in contexts that differ socially, historically, culturally, or economically from those to which they are applied. Therefore, unreflective, uncritical reproduction of the interpretive models grounded in them contributes to the acceptance of current societal ways of being as well as of certain ways of knowing society. The construction of new ways of being and knowing is thus hindered or prevented.

The SLDA approach: (1) places social theory at the basis of interpretive models; (2) considers social theories as ways of discursively representing social reality; (3) highlights the role of linguistic analysis in qualitative data analysis and, therefore, in the creation of sociological and linguistic theory and concepts from these data; (4) acknowledges the risks inherent in the tendency to verify or use theories, even critical ones, uncritically, instead of analysing both the dominant and alternative interpretive models; and, therefore, (5) stresses the need to study the discursive social practices that tend to produce and reproduce the social world. Thus, it aims at detecting both the actions and processes that preserve and strengthen the current social order and those that oppose and resist it, challenging the ways in which goods and resources are distributed.

SLDA draws on the contributions of critical discourse analysis (CDA), in particular regarding the relationship between discourse and power – the role of language in reproducing relations of domination, exploitation, discrimination, injustice, and inequality. However, SLDA differs from CDA in that it also examines ways of representing society and its relationships that are not dominant, that are grounded in alternative interpretive models, and that challenge oppression as well as deprivation strategies. SLDA assumes the coexistence of different paradigms within the

social sciences, and the coexistence of different interpretive models for social situations. These models underpin textual forms of expressing social conflicts.

Corpus and methodological strategies

Corpus

My research project comprised two stages. This paper will focus on the first, pointing to the similarities and differences between both. Corpus 1, corresponding to this phase, is made up of 84 news items published from December 27, 2002 to February 17, 2003. These have been taken from the two newspapers with the widest circulation in the country, *La Prensa Gráfica* (LPG) and *El Diario de Hoy* (EDH), as well as from the evening paper *El Mundo* (EM). They deal with violence in general as well as with the young people the press link to criminal acts.

Corpus 2, corresponding to the second phase, comprises 182 news items on the same subject, which were published in the same papers as well as in *Co Latino* (CL) between May 7, 2003 and February 17, 2004. They mainly discuss: (1) President Francisco Flores's 'Hardline Plan' for the army to fight maras or youth gangs; (2) his proposal of an Anti-Gang Bill (*Ley Antimaras*), which was passed on October 10, 2003 by the Legislative Assembly, enacting special rules on a temporary basis; and (3) the February 16 proposal of a new bill establishing special rules on a permanent basis. These legal texts also form part of the corpus.

Methodological strategies

The linguistic strategies and resources on which my analysis focuses were not determined *a priori*. They were selected after studying the corpus and noticing their significant and recurring use in news items. Among them are categorization, characterization, social action representations, and metaphors, which will be examined in this paper, together with the interpretive models associated with them. I will discuss these analytic tools, focusing on categorization, illustrating them with examples from the corpus.

Categorization processes. In order to explore the ways in which the Salvadoran press characterizes the young people it links to crime, I will sketch Sacks's theoretical contribution. He (1) develops an empirical method to analyse social interaction, tackling the fundamental methodological and epistemological problems posed by social science; (2) suggests focusing on the microscopic level and not on the macroscopic one studied by traditional sociology (Sacks, 1992a); (3) examines small social phenomena to understand the ways in which people do things and the resources they employ (Sacks, 1984b); (4) proposes a research field in order to describe the methods used by people in constructing social life; and (5) claims that the description mode he employs in the proposed field is intrinsically stable (Schegloff, 1992).

Sacks maintains that the characteristics of the methods used by people to go about their activities enable the formal description of singular occurrences. Such findings have led him (Sacks, 1984b) to argue that sociology may be an observational science and that observation is at the basis of theory.

He wonders about the conditions for the recognition of descriptions (Sacks, 1992a), regardless of the receiver's knowledge of the circumstances to which they refer. To answer this question he introduces the basic concept of a *membership categorization device*, which presupposes the existence, at the cultural level, of collections of categories to which people may be ascribed, as well as of certain rules governing their application.

> So there's a collection of categories and there are rules of application, where these devices can be applied to populations and members apply them to populations to say things about them, like 'that's a baby'. Typical collections are things like sex (male/female), race (white/Negro), etc.
>
> (Sacks 1992a, p. 238)

By *membership categorization device* Sacks understands

> any collection of membership categories, containing at least a category, which may be applied to some population containing at least a member, so as to provide, by the use of some rules of application, for the pairing of at least a population member and a categorization device member. A device is then a collection plus rules of application.
>
> (Sacks 1992a, p. 246)

To Widdicombe (1998a), categorization may involve inferential problems for those directly or indirectly referred to in these categories – such as when membership categorization is used to enable unfavourable inferences. The ascription of a certain identity may constitute, in these cases, a form of social control, as can be seen in the following headlines:

> GANGS, *WEAPONS AND DRUGS* ... A TRAGIC RELATIONSHIP (LPG, February 10, 2003)[1]
> GANGSTERS *CONFRONT* THE POLICE. The three detainees have been accused of attempted *homicide*. (EDH, February 16, 2003)
> MARAS *LOOT* 300 STATE SCHOOLS (EDH, August 17, 2003)

In all these cases, the association of the 'gang', 'gangster', or 'mara' categories with serious crimes leads readers to draw highly unfavourable inferences about the identity of gang members. Consequently, they may feel inclined to agree with the paper's position on the need for a change in the security, control, and sanctions system.

Sacks (1992a) incorporates the notion of *category-bound activities*, which are those that, among a great number of activities, are deemed to be carried out by a particular category or categories of people. Thus, disparaging people consists in assuming that they do something circumscribed to a lower category than that to which they belong.

'Killing' and 'murdering' are bound to the 'gangsters' and 'mareros' (i.e., mara members) categories, as can be seen in the following headlines:

> *DEATHS* CAUSED BY GANGSTERS ON THE INCREASE (LPG, January 15, 2003)
> MARAS *MURDER* ⟨THREE⟩ IN SOYAPANGO (EDH, January 19, 2003)

The same happens in other texts with ‘committing crimes’ (EDH, January 25, 2003). In all these cases, the speaker either attributes certain actions to the groups to which these young people belong or predicates the former on the latter. This becomes particularly noticeable in the second example.

Unlike these headlines, the next two refer to a certain killing as only possibly committed by mareros:

> MAREROS ACCUSED OF *KILLING* ⟨FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENT⟩. Police capture nine *suspects* (st) (LPG, February 14, 2003)
> NINE ACCUSED OF *KILLING* ⟨FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENT⟩ (EDH, February 15, 2003)

Selecting identifications is not an easy task, since it is hard to choose the correct one from a wide range of possibilities (Sacks, 1992a). Identifying categories may be selected in many ways. Categorizing involves choosing among different options, and such options are always available for the speaker to describe people (Hester, 1998). Categories and identities are conventionally associated with attributes, activities, rights, and duties (Widdicombe, 1998b). Therefore, the speaker’s choice will entail ascribing certain attributes to the people described, assuming they carry out certain activities and have certain rights, denying them other rights, and demanding their compliance with certain duties. Jayyusi (1984) claims that categorization is embedded in a moral order that operates practically and deeply in social life. Thus, applying a particular category to someone means reproducing a specific type of interaction rule and moral order (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002).

Following Hester (1994), Housley (2000) and Housley and Fitzgerald (2002) see membership categorization analysis as a methodological system that stresses the occasional, situated character of categorization processes. The term *categories in context* refers to their deployment in different contexts, each of which constitutes an interactive realization of the linguistic activity of its members. The context is thus considered as realized, not imposed. Category use is a local and therefore situated phenomenon that can be recognized through the methodical processes of interaction. The collection to which a certain category belongs, as well as that which the collection itself is, are constituted in the process of using the category – through the way in which it is applied (Hester, 1994). Thus, both collections and categories depend on the context –that is, they are situated – and the meaning of the terms designating them is conditioned by the specific occasion on which they are used (Lepper, 2000; Leudar & Nekvapil, 2000; Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002).

Hester and Eglin (1997) claim that the focus of membership categorization analysis is on the locally used, invoked and organized, presumed commonsense knowledge of social structures. They hold that it is in the use of categories that culture is constituted (Hester & Eglin, 1996). To them, the sense made of categories, devices, and predicates is a situated, contextually embedded sense. They wonder whether there is any human activity carried out in language that does not entail describing, judging

and inferring, to which membership categorization (extended to things other than persons) is not applicable (Hester & Eglin, 1992).

Among the categories used by speakers are those belonging to specific contexts, such as the media. Drew and Sorjonen (1997) point out that speakers tend to relate to institutional contexts partly by choosing from a variety of ways of describing people, objects, or events. This may involve the adjustment of lexical selection to the type of institutional context.

Since language is a way of producing and reproducing the social world (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1992b), speakers both draw categories from their life-world and create new ones, sometimes modifying the meaning of the former. Often they put forward alternative interpretive models, as I found in my research into the Anti-Gang Bill.

Categorization and description. Categorizations are not activated by situations, according to Edwards (1998). It is discourse that defines events and highlights situations through the categories it uses. Social categories are not fixed but produced, resisted, and negotiated in speech and text – that is, they are constructed in everyday discursive practices (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Meân, 2001; Potter, 1996) and used as resources that constitute these practices. Drawn from a reservoir of argumentative traditions, such categories constitute collective ways of understanding people, actions, events, and social practices (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002).

Schegloff (1997) wonders about the criteria for focusing on certain aspects and disregarding others in characterizing a sociocultural event. He warns of the risks involved in establishing a frame of reference for understanding the world, arguing that even certain social groups well disposed towards the incorporation of the participants' perspective (Schegloff, 1997; West & Fenstermaker, 2002) may tend to this kind of theoretical imperialism. This may be practised by intellectuals and academics as well as by journalists, who construct discursive representations of social events and, in this particular case, of those with criminal or violent connotations.

The secret to making a description recognizable lies, according to Sacks (1992a), in putting together a category and an activity bound to it. Certain events, such as the criminal acts to which the news items analysed refer, deserve to be narrated, even by those that have not witnessed them (Sacks, 1992b), as is usually the case with reporters. They are worth being included in a story because they are not ordinary components of an ordinary scene, although it should be pointed out that the same scene might be perceived by different people as different events (Sacks, 1984a, 1992b).

Descriptions take place largely through categorization (Potter, 1996). Different categories imply different stories of motive and responsibility and have different implications for what should come next. Blum and McHugh (1971) point out that we must consider the public social conditions for the ascription of motive. The latter is a common sense device for ascribing social membership, since motives are used by members to link particular concrete activities to generally available social rules.

Thus, specific meanings are constructed through categorization, descriptions being selected and rejected in what has been called 'ontological distortion' (Potter, 1996, pp. 177, 200). This can be seen in two headlines that appeared on the same day in the same paper, referring to the same event:

> GANG THAT *MUTILATED* ⟨WOMEN⟩ GOES DOWN (EDH, January 25, 2003)
> CAUGHT! *Suspected mutilators* (st) (EDH, January 25, 2003)

I will point to some outstanding differences between both descriptions:

1) The former headline predicates the act of 'mutilating' on the gang, whereas the latter merely presumes that it has been carried out by certain individuals.
2) The latter headline stresses police action ('caught'), without naming its subject, whereas in the former detention appears as the result of an accident (gang 'go down').
3) The action predicated ('mutilated') and the victim ('women') carry the strongest semantic charge in the former headline, whereas the latter focuses on the passive subjects of police action and, by contrast, stresses the active and positive role of the police.

These texts show how headlines draw readers' attention to particular stories and suggest a way of reading their contents. According to Lee (1984), '[T]o do this headlines must allow readers to use a variety of sense assembly methods so that they can be decoded to discover their message and instructions.'

Potter (1996) points to the temptation to consider representational practices, especially those that include quantitative data, as a clear and obvious way of apprehending reality – that is, to see them as descriptive instead of rhetorically constructed. The following headline and subtitle provide an example of this.

> LEGAL GAPS REGARDING MARAS. Police investigations reveal that 40 *crimes* out of 100 are *committed* by mara members either as *victims* or *offenders* (EDH, January 25, 2003)

In this case, the presentation of quantitative data is prompted by the need to justify a special Gang Bill (LPG, January 27, 2003) or Anti-Gang Bill (LPG, July 25, 2003) first promoted by the Director of the Civil National Police (CNP) and then by the executive. This law, passed in October 2003, applied to children above the age of 12 and also even to younger children capable of 'understanding the unlawful nature of their behaviour' (Article 2), limiting the scope of the Offending Minors' Act, which seeks to protect children's rights.

The same quantitative reference has been included in another newspaper through indirect reported speech: 'CNP Commissioner PN, estimated that gangs are related to 40% of the *homicides* perpetrated in the country, either as *victims* or as *offenders*' (LPG, January 26, 2003). The same figure is reiterated on the same page when it is claimed that 'gangsters are *involved* in 40% of the *crimes*.' Thus, the same percentage is used along a continuum of responsibility. This ranges from the commission of homicides to the commission of crimes in general, and from the attribution of the act of committing those crimes to the attribution of the circumstance of being involved in them or 'related' to homicides. This different use and interpretation of the same statistic makes it impossible for readers to determine what aspect of reality is being measured, but they will probably perceive the threat to society that members of certain social groups constitute. Such representation is reinforced by a new and different use of the same datum in a subtitle:

> Gangs are *responsible* for 40% of the *crimes committed* in the country, according to Civil National Police (CNP) statistics (LPG, February 13, 2003)

In Corpus 2, the day after President Flores's announcement of the Hardline Plan to fight maras, the same source claims that '60% of the *crimes* perpetrated in the country are *committed* by gangsters' (LPG, July 24, 2003).

The categorization of young people associated with crime

The categories most frequently used by the press to refer to the young people it associates with crime are, among others, 'gangsters', 'mareros' (mara members), 'mara member/s', 'member/s of Mara No. 18', and 'member/s of the S M'. This categorization is based on their belonging to groups variously designated as 'gangs', 'maras', 'clicas' (gang cells), or, more specifically, 'Salvatrucha Mara' or 'Mara No. 18'. In other cases, as the following five examples show, categorization relates to the speakers' characterization of these young people and evaluation of their actions.

1) A woman was arrested for *complicity* (ph) MARA MEMBERS ASSOCIATED WITH *CRIME*. Police claim that gangsters *committed the crime with* a sharp weapon (st) (LPG, January 15, 2003)
2) MAREROS OR SERIAL KILLERS? (LPG, January 20, 2003)
3) SNIPER AND EXPLOSIVES EXPERT (EDH, January 26, 2003)
4) GANGSTER 'C' *FLEES* CNP JAIL. Marero thought to be among those responsible for *mutilating and beheading* ⟨two women⟩ (st) (LPG, January 28, 2003)
5) EXECUTIONERS OF THE R FAMILY. Gangsters have *snatched away* ⟨two relatives⟩ of 60-year-old MHR in the last two years (st) (LPG, January 28, 2003)

These utterances circumscribe the act of killing, crime, murder, or criminal activities to the 'marero' or 'gangster' category. In the first one, the pre-headline refers to police action ('arrested') by using the passive voice without naming the agent. The act of associating mara members with crime is not attributed to the police in the headline. It is the subtitle that, by using police discourse, attaches responsibility for the crime to those who, in other parts of the text, appear as mere suspects. This strategy is also used in other texts.

In the second example, mareros' and serial killers' actions are placed at the same level of possibility by means of the disjunctive and alternative conjunction 'or', in relation to a series of crimes whose authors have not been determined yet. Thus, the similarities between the actions of both groups are emphasized, strengthening the attribution of the act of 'killing' to the 'marero' category.

The third headline introduces a news item taking up half a page, in which a member of 'Mara No. 18' is shown to have been formerly enlisted in the army. He is categorized according to this military role and background, and his training in the US is highlighted, 'where he passed a sniper, command and counterinsurgency course' (EDH, January 26, 2003). The other half of the page is devoted to a piece entitled:

I'M NOT A NUN; I'M A CRIMINAL (EDH, January 26, 2003)

Direct reported speech by a supposed member of 'Mara No. 18' is used, in which he categorizes himself as a 'criminal', his own words being quoted and argumentatively deployed as self-incriminating testimony. In these, as well as in other news items in both corpora (LPG, January 24, 2003 and January 25, 2003), the writer, playing the role of a dramatist (Bajtin, 1990), uses direct reported speech to represent what has been said and how it has been uttered (Baynham, 1996). Thus, through offensive rhetoric (Dixon, Reicher, & Foster, 1997), a negative image of those to whom the words are attributed is constructed.

The seriousness of the actions for which the speaker takes responsibility is stressed through the opposition between 'nun' and 'criminal'. This corresponds semantically to the moral antagonism between 'good' and 'evil', and, at the societal level, to the centre/periphery metaphor. The text further categorizes the speaker as a 'former guerrilla'. Another paper states: 'A *murder*, a *robbery*, a *rape* . . . all has to be approved by the former guerrilla' (EDH, January 25, 2003). In another news story he is claimed to be 'a person . . . ++ inclined to evil++' (LPG, January 31, 2004).

The terms 'former army member' and 'former guerrilla' are part of the historical component of the news items analysed, aiming to show the backgrounds of these two people. This resource brings a past conflict into the present, so that mara members are portrayed as parties to and continuators of this conflict, which now seems to have found another way of expressing itself.

In the fourth example a marero is identified by his nickname ('C'), which gives the impression that this clue will be enough for the reader to recognize him. The action of fleeing becomes more serious because of the mutilation and beheading of two women, which are attributed to C. In this case as well as in others, the terms 'gangster' and 'marero', indistinctly used, apart from designating the category to which he belongs, are aimed at characterizing and evaluating him negatively. This negative judgement is associated with the actions that have been circumscribed to that category as well as with the other unlawful deeds attributed to him by the headline.

In the fifth and last example, as in other corpus texts (LPG, January 20, 2003), 'gangsters' are categorized as 'executioners', and characterized by attributing to them the traits shared by the members of such category, whose function is to apply both the death penalty and corporal punishment.

In the following two examples, the written press reinforces categorization processes by using the speakers' self-categorization as gang members (6) and their predication of actions bound to the marero category on themselves (7).

6) 'I will be a gangster till they kill me', he told us then, +with rather twisted *pride*+ (LPG, February 10, 2003)
7) 'If (the adversaries) came now, I will *shoot* them', J. says, *pointing* the submachine-gun he *carries* at an invisible **enemy** (LPG, February 10, 2003)

In the former example, the young man's self-identification as a gang member has testimonial value. The headline of the news item containing this text showed that neither his belonging to a mara or gang, nor the commission of the unlawful acts bound to this category, can be modified:

GANGSTER TO DEATH

There were other headlines with the same meaning construction function (Thetela, 2001) during the passage of the Anti-Gang Bill:

> TO *LIVE* OR *DIE* FOR THE MARA. Gangsters not *afraid* of new Anti-Gang Law (st) (LPG, July 25, 2003)

The metaphorical association of conflicts between maras with war is stressed by referring to the early death of young people categorized as gangsters or mareros. This can be seen in the following paragraph, which closes a piece on a 'battle' between those groups:

> M knows that few will survive it. And therefore +he is not in the least concerned for his future, he is not interested in learning anything from life+. At any rate, I'm not going to last for long, sooner or later I'm going to get killed', he *says* grimly. (LPG, February 10, 2003)

Thus, killing and dying are represented as unavoidable processes in which young people take part, being both unwilling and unable to modify them. This is also shown in example 7, in which the speaker takes a threatening attitude towards others whom he thinks will try to kill him.

Gang members are not seen by the press as equal to other young people. It may, therefore, be argued that the linguistic forms used in these news texts to refer to young people associated with crime constitute identity deprivation acts, since 'they violate the principle of essential equality of all human beings by portraying existential differences as essential' (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003, p. 101; see also Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1999).

In this sense, Police Commissioner PG argues that municipal rules ought to be revised in order to determine the times at which young people may walk through the streets, and then adds, 'Not ordinary young people, but those who belong to maras' (LPG, January 26, 2003). The construction, at the level of social representations, of this difference between 'ordinary young people', who are part of the collective 'us', and 'those who belong to maras', who are 'them', justifies the passing of a 'special Gang Bill' (LPG, January 27, 2003) or 'Anti-Gang Bill' (LPG, January 29, 2003). This was first promoted by the police: 'To the police, stronger and more specific laws are needed to judge youngsters under 18 who *belong* to maras and *commit crimes*' (LPG, January 27, 2003).

President Flores calls these groups 'maras' or '*criminal* gangs', considering them 'unlawful organisations' (LPG, January 15, 2004 and January 31, 2004). Accordingly, the Anti-Gang Bill defines the 'unlawful association' called 'mara' or 'gang' as

> a group of people *acting* to *disturb* law and order, or against decency and public morals, provided that they *meet* some or all of the following criteria: that they *meet* habitually, that they *mark out* a territory as their own, that they *use* signs or symbols to identify themselves, that they *mark* their body with scars or tattoos. (Article 1)

The mere fact of belonging to a gang constitutes a crime (Article 6, Anti-Gang Bill), gangs being referred to in the bill as 'criminal groups' and 'maras or criminal gangs'.

The characterization of young people associated with crime

Young people associated with crime by the press are usually characterized by means of certain actions considered as circumscribed to the category to which they supposedly belong. Characterization reproduces the distinction between 'them' and 'us' discussed in examining categorization, as can be seen in the following utterances:

8) Forty-year-old CEML +is only 1.70 metres tall and weighs 130 pounds, but his *potential for evil* is *boundless* + . . . + MI's *criminal potential* had increased+ after serving his time. (EDH, January 26, 2003)

The strategy used in this text consists of describing the members of a category as if their attributes were shared by all the other members – that is, in applying individual members' attributes to the whole category (Leudar & Nekvapil, 2000). In this case, a member is discursively represented as a 'gang boss' (EDH, January 26, 2003) 'accused of *mutilating* a woman' (LPG, February 11, 2003). It is further claimed, 'The Police added that ML was the aider and abettor in the ⟨young woman's⟩ *homicide* . . . he *beat*, *raped* and *beheaded* his ⟨victim⟩ and then ordered the other gang members to *mutilate* her.' It should be pointed out that ML was acquitted of this and other charges for lack of evidence a few days later (LPG, February 11, 2003).

Young people associated with crime are characterized by characterizing the groups to which they are deemed to belong:

9) Since last December, Mara No. 18 has been notorious for *committing* a series of *crimes*, many of them with *wanton barbarism*. (EDH, January 25, 2003)
10) Few make it to the underworld of the maras to know first hand their *gut feelings*. The written press has explored their *terrifying hate*, *weapons* and *drugs* stories. (st) (LPG, February 10, 2003)

'Gangs' and 'maras' are characterized as '*criminal*' (LPG, January 15, 2003 and January 20, 2003; EDH, January 26, 2003), as '*atrocious criminals*' (EDH, November 5, 2003), as '*violent groups*' (LPG, January 27, 2003), and as '*real threats to the stability of our way of life*' (EDH, February 6, 2004). They are seen as '*dangerous killers*' by President Flores (EDH, October 25, 2003), with the members of a certain mara claimed to have '*more aggressive and murderous*' behaviour than the members of another (LPG, January 20, 2003).

In article 9 'Mara No. 18' is claimed to have 'been notorious' for its negative actions, which violate socially accepted values. The action of committing crimes is attributed to it, and the way in which such crimes have been carried out is described as 'with wanton barbarism', a characterization reiterated by President Flores (LPG, July 24, 2003) in announcing his Hardline Plan. As actions can only be performed by human beings, their attribution, characterization, and evaluation apply to group members, who are thus represented as 'criminals' and 'barbarians'.

Maras are also personified in article 10. As in the previous case, the 'gut feelings' and the 'terrifying hate, weapons and drugs stories' can only be attributed to

people – to gang members. The same happens with the characterization of gangs as 'criminal', 'violent', and 'aggressive'. Thus, the characterization of these groups applies to all the young people supposedly belonging to them. Traits are linked to certain categories and therefore to their members.

Both this lack of differentiation between category members and the generic assumption of their criminality and danger constitute identity deprivation and discrimination strategies. According to the epistemology of the known subject,[2] discrimination is 'the act by which some of those involved in social relations disregard the essential component of the others' identity – common to all human beings – or deny, reject or do not tolerate their existential differences' (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003, p. 76; see also Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2006).

Such discrimination, deprivation, denial, and rejection are likely to strengthen these young people's ties with the groups to which they belong, thus consolidating their social identity to the detriment of their personal one. Identification with these groups leads them to downplay the differences between them and the other members, highlighting their distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* other groups.

These parallel processes of internal identification and external differentiation result in the individuals' depersonalization. In line with the stereotypes applied to the group, they tend to perceive themselves as interchangeable members of a category rather than as unique human beings, different from all others (Deschamps & Devos, 1998).

Through categorization, characterization, and the attribution of category-bound activities and metaphors, a stereotyped, highly simplified image of these young people is produced (Rydgren, 2004), portraying group members as indistinguishable from each other and differentiated from the collective 'us' (Van Dijk, 1995, 1997, 1998). The former are depicted as a threat to the latter (Erjavec, 2001), which stresses the need for social and legal control (Lynn & Lea, 2003). The negative character of this type of image is virtually irreversible, separating those represented by it from the rest of society and denying them the right to participate in the construction of its future (Ferrándiz, 2004).

The categorization and characterization of the victims

The assumed difference between young people associated with crime, who form part of the maras or gangs, and 'ordinary young people', applies, by extension, to the rest of society and to crime victims. These are categorized and characterized according to the group to which they belong. In the following examples, victims are seen as close to the writer's group – as 'us' – which encompasses all those whose behaviour and attitudes conform to socially accepted values.

11) HE WAS A ⟨RESPONSIBLE FATHER⟩ (LPG, December 29, 2002)
12) ⟨YOUNG WOMAN⟩ FOUND MUTILATED WAS A ⟨UNIVERSITY STUDENT⟩ . . . [H]er fellow students defined her as a ⟨young woman⟩ devoted to her studies. (LPG, February 10, 2003)
    S made clear that the investigation had determined that ⟨she did not belong to any gang⟩. She was a well-known and very proper ⟨student⟩. (LPG, February 15, 2003)

13) No one in the place could believe that the tragedy had happened. They looked at the wet eyes of the family members and joined them in their farewell to an ⟨exemplary young man⟩. (LPG, February 13, 2003, November 1, 2003)
⟨VICTIM⟩ DEFINED AS A ⟨LEADER⟩ . . . The ⟨young man⟩ had been a ⟨representative⟩ to the School Governing Council for two years . . . His academic achievement was exceptional . . . (LPG, February 15, 2003)

In all these cases victims are categorized and characterized in terms of attributes and behaviour that are consistent with shared social values – for example, as a ‘responsible father’ (article 11). In other texts, the words of the victims’ relatives are quoted: ‘My daughter took care of her children and they came to take away her life’ (LPG, January 28, 2003). Direct reported speech makes these words present, lending a dramatic quality to the situations represented, whereas the speakers’ closeness to the victims leads the reader to take their truth for granted.

In examples 12 and 13, victims are categorized by stressing the fact that they were receiving formal education. The ‘young woman’ is categorized as a ‘university student’, and her fellow students are quoted to emphasize her dedication to academic work. Police discourse is used to evaluate her behaviour morally through the negative and affirmative argumentative paradigms: she ‘did not belong to any gang’ and ‘was a well-known and very proper student’. Her not belonging to any gang is thus seen as a positive trait.

In these and other cases, the categorization is direct, as in ‘under-age student’ (LPG, February 15, 2003). Indirect categorization is achieved through reference to activities bound to the student category, as by stating that the ‘young man’ had been ‘a representative to the School Governing Council’ (article 13). The victim is characterized as ‘an exemplary young man’ whose ‘academic achievement was exceptional’, direct reported speech being used to present him as a ‘leader’.

Articles 11 to 13 point to the antagonism between ‘them’ – those who belong to ‘gangs’ or ‘maras’ – and ‘us’ – the group of which the victims form part. ‘Us’ and ‘them’ appear as ‘contrastive categories’ (Leudar, Marsland, & Nekvapil, 2004, p. 251). Criminal, aggressive, violent acts are circumscribed to ‘them’; the opposite behaviour and values are attributed to ‘us’. The difference between ordinary young people and those who belong to maras or gangs applies to victims, as can be seen in the following examples:

14) The **homicide spiral** started on 4 December with the *murder*, *rape* and *dismemberment* of MIRM, a ⟨minor⟩ who lived with DCH . . . the victim had been a ‘Salvatrucha Mara’ gangster’s ⟨mistress⟩. (EDH, January 25, 2003)
15) The CNP revealed that the ⟨women⟩ *had been mutilated* by the gangsters for having relations with members of the ‘S M’. (st) (EDH, January 25, 2003)
16) CNP: ‘⟨VICTIM⟩ HAD TROUBLE IN JAIL’ (LPG, January 29, 2003)
17) A female <gangster> and <*drug addict* >’s body turned up at La Esperanza settlement. (LPG, February 15, 2003)
18) According to the initial investigation the ⟨woman⟩ was a <*drug addict*> and <member of the SM> . . . both the ⟨woman⟩ and the *suspects* used to *commit robberies* in the area and *distribute* drugs. (EDH, February 15, 2003)

In these examples, unlike in previous ones, the victims are categorized and characterized by associating them with behaviour that is socially unacceptable, linked to crime, or downright criminal.

In the first case (14), in spite of the victim's being under-age, her full name is stated, as well as the fact that she was assaulted, killed, and mutilated, and certain aspects of her private life are also mentioned in article 15. In 16, the victim's stay in jail is suggested as a police explanation of the act that took away her life. Examples 17 and 18 refer to different events, and although the news items belong to different papers, both victims are characterized as drug addicts and categorized as gang members.

This negative way of categorizing and characterizing certain victims constitutes an identity deprivation act, with discriminatory content and effects. It also leads the reader to associate them cognitively with the offenders, since they share common traits. The role indirectly attributed to these victims, therefore, is not merely passive. It does not differ from the criminals', as they have close bonds and belong to the same category, carrying out the same activities. Thus, some victims are represented in such a way that they seem to be partly responsible for their own death.

Therefore, the lives of the victims represented positively do not have the same value as those of the victims represented negatively. The discursive distance between the young woman who was a university student (12) and the woman who turned out to be a drug addict (18) is achieved through the essentialization of existential differences. The principle of essential equality of all human beings is thus violated by means of a violent act that deprives certain people of the essential component of their identity. This component is shared by all human beings and constitutes the source of their dignity.

The metaphors used to represent young people associated with crime, their actions, and their consequences

The war metaphor

Newspaper headlines portray the relationship between groups of young people associated with crime as a war:

> **WAR** BETWEEN 'MARAS' CLAIMS MORE ⟨VICTIMS⟩ (EDH, January 15, 2003)
> MARAS AT **WAR** (LPG, 20 January 2003)
> ⟨TWO NEW VICTIMS⟩ IN MARA **WAR** (LPG, January 26, 2003)
> *HATE* 'CLICAS'. Senseless **battle** between maras (st) (LPG, February 10, 2003)

One story claims that certain communities 'live in a **state of war**'. Other texts allege that 'these **wars** are [fought] with firearms' (LPG, January 20, 2003), or talk of '**battles** between maras' and 'deadly **battles**' (EDH, July 24, 2003), '**wars** of extermination' (LPG, July 24, 2003), 'bloody gang **wars**' and wars 'between gangs' (LPG, January 20, 2003) or wars 'between gang members' (EDH, January 24, 2003).

The war metaphor encompasses open and latent war and is semantically reinforced through the reiteration of terms such as 'battle', 'combat', 'fight', and 'army': 'Mara No. 18 is an **army of criminals** immersed in organised *crime*' (EDH, January 25, 2003).

The relationship between these groups of young people and the police is also depicted as a war: 'The Police are preparing a special team of investigators to **combat** the *unlawful actions committed* by *criminal* gangs' (LPG, February 13, 2003; EDH, August 17, 2003).

In announcing his Hardline Plan, President Flores argued that 'there are more armed mareros than police and the military put together', and that 'they are already a *threat*' (LPG, EDH, July 24, 2003). Some media, reiterating the government's rhetoric, defined the 'gangs' as 'an **army** that **lays siege** to neighbourhoods', maintaining that 'in the gang **army** there have always been endless **ranks** of **recruits**' (EDH, July 24, 2003).

The examples quoted so far presuppose a metaphorical comparison: the conflicts between maras and between maras and police constitute a war. Any conflict with the police is a conflict with society, since police action aims at 'safeguarding community security' (LPG, January 27, 2003). The problem is how to specify the similarities between the concepts of 'conflict' and 'war' in which the comparison is grounded (Glucksberg & McGlone, 1999).

The metaphor vehicle 'war' provides the properties that may be attributed to the topic 'conflict', and the similarities between both concepts may be described in terms of their belonging to the same category. Thus, metaphorical comparisons may be expressed as category assertions or, according to Harris and Mosier (1999), as the classing of objects, situations, or relations. The most easily comprehensible vehicles are the prototypes of attribution categories (Blasko, 1999; Glucksberg & McGlone, 1999), such as the term 'war', a prototype of deadly, bloody things, situations, and relations.

The categorization of the conflicts between maras, and between maras and the police, as a war has consequences for the categorization of both the individuals that take part in it and their actions, as well as for the characterization of the latter. Such individuals become enemies (Edwards, 2004), mara members being categorized as an 'army' (EDH, January 25, 2003). The action of confronting the police is attributed to the 'gangsters' (EDH, February 16, 2003) and that of fighting maras to the police (LPG, January 29, 2003).

Metaphors have been considered as a type of reasoning rather than as a linguistic resource, as an inferential process, fundamental to the structuring of conceptual knowledge (Blasko, 1999). In this case, the war metaphor helps structure the concept of social order. To Harris and Mosier (1999), metaphors provide clarification, provoke thinking, and enable comparison by showing similarities and by adding interest and emphasis to texts.

The war metaphor was used during the passage of the Anti-Gang Bill to highlight the idea of a threat or danger and the risk of losing control of the situation (Van der Valk, 2003). Thus, a headline, referring to the CNP Director, states:

> S CRITICISES MINORS ACT. He reiterates the need to create rules to **combat** maras (st) (LPG, January 29, 2003)

Another headline on the same page runs:

> **COMBAT** AGAINST MARAS IS COMPLEX

When the Hardline Plan and the new Anti-Gang Bill were made known, a headline read:

> TOTAL **WAR** AGAINST MARAS. Last night President Flores announced a plan to **free** neighbourhoods from gangs, backed by the army and CNP (st) (EDH, July 24, 2003)

Media reports declared: 'The government starts an anti-gang **war**' (LPG, July 24, 2003), 'a frontal **war**' (LPG, July 25, 2003). In all these cases, the term 'war' has lost its metaphorical meaning, leaving the fictional world to enter the realm of concrete political action (Cruz, 2004a; Ferrándiz, 2004), which is justified by the repeated use of the metaphor and the reproduction of police and presidential rhetoric. Those who, resisting 'the discourse of the dominant ideology' (Erjavec, 2003), put forward an alternative interpretive model, talked of a 'dirty **war** against maras' resulting from an 'authoritarian culture'. They argued that 'the demonization of a specific social group, on which all the blame is laid, does the country no good' (CL, January 16, 2004).

The war metaphor has been also incorporated into the legal world. 'The legal **fight** against the groups known as maras or gangs' (article 1) constitutes the goal of the bill introduced by the executive in the Legislative Assembly in July 2003. A second bill, introduced in February 2004, aims at establishing special rules 'to **combat** the *criminal activities* of the groups known as maras or gangs' (article 1) on a permanent basis. The 'legal fight' against the maras or gangs has thus been replaced by combat against their criminal activities. Among the latter is the mere belonging to one such group (article 5), which is punished with three to six years of prison, regardless of the commission of any other crime.

The use of other metaphors

Another metaphor used by the media to refer to young people associated with crime involves a comparison between society and living organisms, as the following headline shows:

19) EL SALVADOR'S **VIOLENT CANCER** (LPG, January 20, 2003)

In this text, society is considered as an organic system that is preserved by the spontaneous tendency of its components to keep it functioning as a whole. In this view, deviance is the tendency to contravene institutionalized rules, which is checked by control; the more potentially violent and divisive the possible conflicts, the greater the functional need for control (Parsons, 1966). This perspective stresses legality and the irreversibility of unicausal processes, as can be seen in the story below the headline: 'Certain social conditions are the **culture medium** in which *youth violence* grows, according to the experts' (LPG, January 20, 2003). Also: 'Maras have spread like **the plague** throughout the departments' (EDH, July 24, 2003).

Thus, on the one hand, society is biologically represented as suffering from a terminal illness and, on the other, 'social conditions' are depicted as the environment in which 'youth violence' naturally develops. No mention is made of the violence of which these young people are victims, of the social conditions in which their

basic economic, social, cultural, civil, and political human rights are disregarded, rendering the praxis of citizen self-determination impossible (Habermas, 1999).

Violence is explicitly portrayed, along these lines, as a disease: 'Our **environment** has been **invaded** by the **virus** of the most cruel and pernicious violence . . . the different forms of violence present in the social **body**' (LPG, January 23, 2003). This way of reasoning implicitly legitimizes the use of certain strategies or mechanisms to 'heal', 'cure', or 'purify' the 'social body'. The strengthening of security and social control measures, to the detriment of individual freedoms, is usually grounded in this kind of textual representation of the social context (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1997). Thus, in his speech announcing the Hardline Plan and proposing the Anti-Gang Bill, President Flores said: 'We intend not only to **capture** gang leaders, but also to **recover** the territories in which they *commit* their *crimes*. We are going to **clean up** these places and **make** them **healthy**' (LPG, July 24, 2003).

Another metaphor from the natural world appears in a headline attributing the properties of aquatic disasters (Van Dijk, 1997) to unlawful acts:

> **CRIME WAVE** IN GREAT SAN SALVADOR (LPG, January 20, 2003)

Waves constitute a relentless, unstoppable, destructive, and, above all, threatening phenomenon – gangsters' criminal acts being therefore presented as a rising menace that can hardly be contained. 'Preliminary inquiries show that the motives of these *murders* are linked to *vendettas* between the two majority gangs,'the Police Deputy Director of Investigations is quoted as saying in the news piece that follows.

Personification[3] is also a frequent metaphor, as this example shows:

20) A **CITY 'TATTOOED'** WITH *INTOLERANCE*. As in a **battlefield**, Mara Salvatrucha's and Mara No. 18's graffiti proliferates, *claiming* territories (LPG, January 29, 2003)

News stories are often illustrated with photographs of profusely tattooed mareros' bodies, sometimes taken right after their detention. The designs engraved on their skin also decorate the walls that can be seen in the background of the pictures, which seek to show the scenes of particular crimes, as well as the arrest and death of the young people suspected of them (LPG, December 20 and 29, 2003, February 10, 13, and 14, and January 31, 2004; EDH, January 25, 2003, among others). The presence of tattoos is one of the criteria used by the 2003 and 2004 Anti-Gang Bills to identify mara members (articles 1 and 4, respectively). They constitute deeply discrediting attributes (Goffman, 1970) of greatly discredited groups, being part of the media's process of symbolization (Cohen, 1972).

As I have already argued, the Salvadoran press has a significant influence, both at the cognitive and the social level, on the construction of the identity of young people associated with crime, as well as on its transmission and unfolding. The image of these young people conveyed by newspaper information (Goffman, 1959) is visually complemented by pictures of tattooed gangsters, which reinforces their categorization and characterization, as well as the attribution of certain actions to them. Thus, the chasm between them and the rest of society is highlighted, since

photographs are considered a model, a reproduction of reality (Kitis & Milapides, 1997), from which their argumentative and persuasive power derives.

Headline 20 personifies the city, attributing to it the features of those that struggle for a space in it, as well as the graffiti, which is said to claim territories. Through this identification of the city with the latter's authors, intolerance becomes a trait of Mara Salvatrucha and Mara No. 18 members. The struggle is in turn represented as a war, hence the reference to the 'battlefield'.

The next news story drew a distinction between two kinds of victims: 'Since the beginning of this year, *fights* between *rival* gangs have become more violent, with at least ⟨10 people killed⟩, between ⟨INNOCENT VICTIMS⟩ and ⟨MAREROS⟩'(LPG, January 20, 2003). This opposition involves a presumption of guilt based on membership of certain groups, leading to a differential estimate of the value of the victims' lives and the mareros' lives. This essentialization of existential differences constitutes an identity deprivation act.

Because of its consequences, the war between 'them' is considered a war against all of 'us', which is stressed by the use of the centre/periphery metaphor and the emphasis laid on the distance between 'them' and 'us'. Whereas 'they' are portrayed as the embodiment of evil, the actions and omissions of other social actors with decision-making power are concealed, although they may have contributed to the current undesirable situation. Society is divided in accordance with the moral attributes of its members: the 'innocent' are exempt from responsibility and repressive measures against the 'guilty' are endorsed.

The following text uses a metaphor from the animal world to depict a gangster dwelling place:

21) In fact, the day we went into his **den** . . . he was performing a *financial task*, that is to say he *was packing* marijuana and cocaine for later sale. (LPG, February 10, 2003)

Metaphors are figures of speech through which people or things are described in terms of something that literally they are not (Rae & Drury, 1993). They activate common-sense notions (Van Teeffelen, 1993), helping legitimize prejudice (Wodak & Matouschek, 1993) and naturalizing certain discursive representations of reality. In this case, a negative image of a young man is constructed by cognitively evoking his similarity to animals (Bishop & Jaworski, 2003), thus hinting at the difference between him and human beings (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003) and suggesting inferiority (Guimarães, 2003). Unlawful acts are attributed to him by someone who seems to have witnessed them: 'he *was packing* marihuana and cocaine for later sale.' The story is confirmed by a photograph of a boy engaged in such activity and through direct reported speech: 'I am in charge of the "market" (money).' The transcription of this young man's own words serves to characterize and evaluate him and his group (Gruber, 1993). It highlights the distance and antagonism between different social groups and the conflict between socially accepted behaviour and mara members' actions (Álvarez-Cáccamo, 1996).

Interpretive models

One of the most outstanding aspects of Corpus 1 is that the information contained in it has been provided by police authorities. The dominant interpretive model in these news items is, therefore, that of police discourse. This model is reiterated in Corpus 2 through the reproduction of President Flores's texts, which are thematically and argumentatively connected with those included in Corpus 1 (Leudar et al., 2004). Only 27 of the 266 texts in these corpora (10.1%) refer to alternative interpretive models, the dominant model being, thus, both qualitative and quantitatively significant.

By citing police and government sources, the media use direct reported speech to reproduce certain categorizations and characterizations of young people associated with crime, and to predicate certain actions on them or attribute certain behaviour to them and evaluate it. Although reporters avoid personal commitment by quoting what other people say, the evaluations conveyed by these utterances are communicated to the reader, their strength depending on who the speaker is (Gruber, 1993).

Direct reported speech constitutes a powerful rhetorical resource to disguise normative messages as mere repetitions of other people's words. On the one hand, by dramatizing certain situations and making them real, it shows the authenticity of such utterances. On the other hand, as an epistemologically privileged source of evidentiality, it activates linguistic ideologies. These not only provide false or distorted views of reality but also represent power processes that play an important role in the construction of reality, in the determination of truth, and in the naturalization of discursive authority (Matoesian, 2000).

Alternative interpretive models aim at changing the meaning horizon (Habermas, 1990), challenging the truth, normative rightness, and validity criteria of the dominant model used by speakers to refer to the physical, social, and subjective world. Such models tend to reduce the common ground of previously shared convictions, calling into question both the certainties underlying our representations of society and the current system of social relations, hierarchies, and distribution, whose legitimacy is often taken for granted.

I will now compare the dominant interpretive model, which has been already analysed, with the alternative ones present in the corpora, in order to determine the level at which the latter contradict the former.

Categorization

Alternative interpretive models do not distinguish between kinds of 'young people', who are called such or referred to as 'youth', 'adolescence', or 'childhood'. Usually these models: do not categorize young people according to their belonging to certain groups or to the actions they perform or might have performed; do not avoid distinguishing between young people, even if they belong to the same group; do not associate youth with violence; and incorporate young people's voices in order to create a positive image of them.

Characterization

The dominant model distinguishes between 'them' and 'us'. Its characterization of the former group is based on certain actions that are predicated on young people

associated with crime, with 'criminality' and 'violence' being consistently attributed to them (LPG, January 15, 20, and 27, 2003). Alternative interpretive models do not point to fundamental differences between groups of young people, recognizing that all of them have an equal share in socially accepted values. This is summed up by the following headline:

> THERE IS A *RESERVOIR OF ENERGY* AND *MORALS* IN OUR YOUTH (LPG, February 15, 2003)

Actions

Within the framework of the dominant interpretive model, the representation of young people linked to crime is constructed by circumscribing certain actions, such as killing or murdering, to the gangster or marero category. Alternative interpretive models point to the possibility of preventing violent acts and modifying behaviour that might contradict social expectations by taking action – by implementing schemes and programmes (LPG, February 15, 2003). These models do not establish a necessary relation between social group and type of action.

Guilt

Mareros and their adversaries are presumed guilty and dangerous by the dominant interpretive model, their guilt being opposed to the innocence of the other citizens, who might become their next victims (EDH, January 15, 2003; LPG, January 20, 2003). This innocence/guilt opposition reiterates the centre/periphery metaphor and, therefore, the 'us'/'them' distinction. Alternative interpretive models do not include such presumptions; one example advocates that the 'dirty war against the maras' is the outcome of an 'authoritarian drive' (CL, January 16, 2004).

Causes

The dominant interpretive model considers violence, irrationality, and madness to be traits of young people associated with crime (LPG, January 15 and 20, 2003). These traits are essentialized and therefore presented as irreversible and unmodifiable (LPG, February 10, 2003). Alternative interpretive models claim that the causes of violence are not subjective and individual, but social and structural. Lack of opportunities (LPG, February 10, 2003), particularly educational opportunities (LPG, January 29, 2003), and poverty (LPG, February 15, 2003) and discrimination (EM, February 15, 2003) are listed among them. Thus, to these models, society is constructed by its members, and therefore is not subject to unavoidable processes of 'social violence' (EDH, February 15, 2003). It is not a living organism (LPG, January 23, 2003) and not, therefore, ill (LPG, January 20, 2003), or subject to unavoidable processes (LPG, January 15 and 20, 2003) to which all individuals would have to adapt with only a few succeeding.

Legal rules

The solutions put forward by the different interpretive models depend on what they consider should be primarily protected. The dominant model demands repression and control, since the causes of violence are viewed as subjective and security takes precedence over human dignity. Ferrajoli (1999) argues that the lack of a system of guarantees for social rights, comparable to the traditional system guaranteeing property rights and freedom, may not only render those rights ineffectual but also provide fertile ground for corruption and arbitrariness.

Representations depicting mareros and gangsters as 'murderers' (EDH, January 25, 2003) and 'violent fanatics' (LPG, January 20, 2003) that despise social rules portray them as different by essentializing their (presumed) existential traits. This difference determines the application of special rules, since they cannot be treated like other young people (Leudar & Nekvapil, 2000).

By quoting the Chief of Police (LPG, January 29, 2003) and President Flores (EDH, LPG, July 24 and 25, 2003) on the need to pass special 'rules to fight maras', the media presented an ideal, hypothetic future (Myers, 1999) without these groups as an argument for a new bill that violated the constitutional principle of equality. This Anti-Gang Bill was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice on April 2, 2004, a day after the Legislative Assembly approved a new version of it, which would be in force for three months.

The solution proposed by alternative interpretive models lies in the transformation of social, political, economic, and cultural conditions, since the causes of violence are mainly social and human dignity takes precedence over security. This transformation would enable the autonomous development of young people and their families.

As can be seen, speech representational practices, such as direct reported speech, play an important role in preserving or undermining certain states of affairs. They may legitimize specific categories, attribute responsibility, justify adopted courses of action, and evaluate the nature of the risk attached to particular situations (Hall, Sarangi, & Slembrouck, 1999). In this case, the Salvadoran press quoted President Flores's and police officers' words in order to reinforce the arguments put forward by the dominant model.

A study of the interpretive models present in the corpus reveals the different possibilities for representing reality that language offers. More importantly, it shows how the speaker's choices presuppose an underlying societal model that either respects the principle of essential equality of all human beings or overrates difference, favouring some to the detriment of others' dignity.

Conclusions

The recontextualization of police and presidential discourse by the written press reproduces interpretive continuities (Hall et al., 1999) in different times and spaces, in relation to a discursive order that emphasizes social hierarchies, divisions, and inequality. In this sense, through this homogeneous, closed, uniform discourse, the press, as an ideology producer and transmitter (Oktar, 2001), would not only simplify and trivialize complex social, political, and economic problems, but also put them off and dissolve them (Suhr & Johnson, 2003).

Reported speech is the most expressive representation (Mushin, 2000) of other people's words. In it, the evidence of the situation seems to entail the truth of the utterances, especially when the speakers are socially considered to be authoritative voices. The reproduction of President Flores's and police rhetoric lends credibility to the facts (Calsamiglia & López Ferrero, 2003) narrated by the press, providing it with institutional authority to legitimize and reinforce its message (Wodak & Van Leeuwen, 2002). At the same time, it strengthens the position of the speakers by repeatedly giving them voice, which involves assuming the truth of what they say, and recognizing their social function and the appropriateness of their proposals.

These legitimized sources, to which the press resorts in order to give its claims an air of veracity and authenticity, provide it with a certain *Weltanschauung* as well. This worldview, held by those in positions of power and influence, reinforces the effectiveness of social control (Habermas, 1987), which in the Salvadoran case has translated into the passage and modification of the Anti-Gang Bill. As a result, the visibility and influence of these sectors increases, whereas the voices of the powerless, among them the young people associated with crime, are systematically silenced (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Teo, 2000).

It may be asked whether the situation described in this paper could be interpreted in terms of the analytic concept (Goode, 2000) of 'moral panic' (Cohen, 1972, p. 9). The homogeneity of this concept has been called into question (Hunt, 1997), and some argue that it should be revised (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). However, I have found that the young people associated with crime by the Salvadoran press are stereotyped and depicted as a threat to law and order, to social values and interests (Erjavec, 2003; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This threat is considerably magnified (Thompson, 1998) and overstated (Soothill, Peelo, Pearson, & Francis, 2004) by the police (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995), the need to 'do something about it' (Ward, 2002) justifying greater social control and repression and tougher laws. All this improves the public image of politicians and lawmakers, who are called upon to solve the problem (Burns & Crawford, 1999), even if the suggested course of action entails the violation of basic human rights (Erjavec, 2003).

As I have shown, the press reproduces President Flores's and police rhetoric linking violence to these young people. Representing them as different, however, constitutes in itself a violent act, since it involves essentializing their (presumed) existential differences and denying the essential equality of all human beings.

This violence, which is not usually viewed as such, brings about all sorts of injustice. Through it, some are categorized, stigmatized, stereotyped, evaluated, and characterized by others, whose judgement they are unable to challenge. The fact that these identity deprivation acts are not considered a form of violence prevents those who commit them from recognizing their guilt, and prevents those who suffer from them standing up for their right to be protected.

Notes

1 **Bold type** has been used to highlight the metaphors representing young people associated with crime, their actions, and the consequences for other people and

for society in general. The different ways in which they and their groups are categorized have been underscored. *Italics* indicate the actions attributed to or predicated of them, and *underscored italics* the ways in which they are characterized. Their physical, mental, psychological, and social traits are enclosed within + signs. The <> signs indicate the categorization and characterization of victims. CAPITAL LETTERS are used to quote newspaper headlines, whereas subtitles are indicated as (st) and pre-headlines as (ph). The names of the papers have been replaced by their initials: *El Diario de Hoy* (EDH), *La Prensa Gráfica* (LPG), *El Mundo* (EM), and *Co Latino* (CL).

2 The present study is based on the epistemology of the known subject, which entails a rupture *vis-à-vis* the ontological nature of human identity. According to this epistemology, ontological identity is made up of two components: an essential one, common to all human beings, and an existential one, which makes each human being unique. The epistemology of the known subject is grounded in the principle of human beings' essential equality, which leads to a focus on identity deprivation acts, enabling their detection. Such acts are discriminatory and therefore violent insofar as they fail to recognize – implicitly or explicitly –the essential equality of human beings or to show due respect for their existential differences (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2003).

3 In personification, the source domain is provided by our experience of ourselves as animate/human beings, which allows us to make sense of inanimate and possibly alien entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities (Semino, 2002).

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Irene Vasilachis de Gialdino is an LLD, a sociologist, a discourse analysis specialist, and a postgraduate professor at Argentinean and foreign universities. She is a senior researcher with the National Council for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICET) of Argentina and the Centre for Labour Studies and Research (CEIL-PIETTE). Her work is characterised by its interdisciplinary legal, sociological, and linguistic approach. Her areas of interest include epistemology, qualitative methodology, linguistic discourse analysis, media and political creation of social representations, poverty, and social conflict. [email: ivasilachis@ceil-piette.gov.ar]