

BOOK PROPOSAL (ABBREVIATED)*

“It Could Have Been Me”: Violence, Empathy and Civic Engagement in Mexico

Rebecca Bell-Martin, PhD
Visiting Scholar
University of California, San Diego
Center for US – Mexican Studies

Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science and International Relations
el Tecnológico de Monterrey, México

Email: rebecca.bell.martin@tec.mx

Contents

Book Overview	1
Chapter Synopses	3
About the Author	8

*Full proposal available by request

Book Overview

On March 19, 2010, two students passed through the gates of a prestigious private university in one of Mexico's most prominent cities, Monterrey. The students were soon ambushed and killed by members of the Mexican military who claimed to mistake the students for cartel hitmen. Despite the precipitous increase in criminal violence in recent years, the public outcry to this specific case was remarkable. As we might expect, the students' parents and family members joined the movement for justice for the students. However, in addition to the students' families, hundreds of other Monterrey citizens with no personal connection to the case and no victimization experience of their own also pursued civic action as a response to the students' death. They organized protest marches, stood up new NGOs, started community improvement projects and more, all with the aim of addressing violence. This outcome is just one case in a similar trend that others have identified across the globe. From Africa to the United States and Eurasia, exposure to violence is positively associated with future political participation and civic engagement. What explains this relationship? Existing accounts emphasize the role of direct victimization, that is, instances in which an individual or their family member is harmed. These arguments posit that victims channel the trauma of victimization into political action. Yet, these cannot account for the widespread civic and political action of non-victims, like those mentioned in the above case, that is, those who live in a violent context but who are not directly victimized. Why do non-victims take up anti-violence civic engagement despite not being victimized themselves?

"It Could Have Been Me": Violence, Empathy and Civic Engagement in Mexico reveals and explains these puzzling instances of non-victim civic action. The book's central thesis is that the choice to participate versus abstain from civic engagement for non-victims is not motivated by trauma, but instead by empathy for the victimized. To develop this theory, I spent 16 months embedded in communities beset by violence in one important site of criminal conflict, Monterrey, México. Usually off-limits to outsiders, I gained unique access to these local conflict spaces, where I lived and worked alongside residents. Building on insights from psychology, I find that citizens are more likely to pursue civic action in response to violence if they have imagined themselves in the place of a victim. This empathic imagining is triggered through channels I explore in the book, like social identification with victims and geographic proximity of violence. I develop and test my theory of empathy politics through a mixed methods study that integrates ethnographic interviews and participant observation in Monterrey with large-n statistical analysis, qualitative content analysis, and an original behavioral experiment outside that case. The behavioral experiment is directly informed by my ethnographic work.

It Could Have Been Me advances dialogue on the political consequences of criminal violence by revealing that direct victimization is not the only conduit through which violence shapes individual political action. Instead, I find that even the most indirect forms of exposure to violence, such as through the mass media, can provoke civic action when those instances of violence stimulate a sense of empathy for victims. In doing so, the book sheds important light on democratic politics amidst large-scale criminal violence, the increasingly common but poorly understood face of the post-Cold War political landscape. Seven out of 10 of the most violent countries today are democracies not in civil war (UNODC). These are what Arias and Goldstein (2010) call "violent democracies." Through in-depth analysis of one important case,

Mexico, *It Could Have Been Me* describes how living in these contexts shapes the everyday civic lives of citizens, including whether they choose to participate in civil society, or not, and the cognitive processes behind those choices.

The book's primary intellectual interventions are to identify a heretofore unrecognized relationship between non-victims and civic engagement and uncover the mechanism driving that association, empathy. While most research on the relationship between exposure to violence and future political action emphasizes direct victimization (Bateson 2012; Bellows and Miguel 2009; Cassar, Grossjean and Whitt 2013; Ley-Gutiérrez 2014; De Luca and Verpoorten 2015), *It Could Have Been Me* theoretically distinguishes between different forms of exposure to violence and focuses particularly on those experiences that go beyond direct encounters. Understanding these other experiences is important because direct victimization is rare. In a nationally representative survey I carried out in Mexico for this research, 83% of respondents indicated neither they nor anyone in their family had experienced a violent crime. Recognizing that most citizens will not become direct victims, this project sheds light on how citizens living in contexts of sustained violence experience and interact with violence simply by living in its shadow. In exploring this understudied aspect of life amidst violence, the book reveals empathy as a previously unrecognized pathway to civic engagement. The intersection of political mobilization and emotions like fear, outrage, or humiliation is widely documented (see Costalli and Ruggeri 2017 and Jasper 2011 for reviews). The political power of empathy during violence, meanwhile, remains unexplored.

The book's six chapters begin on the ground, in Monterrey. The first three chapters transport readers to the Mexican criminal context through firsthand accounts from more than 150 hours of interviews with victim and non-victim citizens and 16+ months of ethnographic participant observation in vulnerable neighborhoods of the city. In these chapters, audiences gain rare insight into daily life amidst large-scale organized crime violence through the perspectives, experiences, and words of those who lived it. I ground and interweave these firsthand accounts with theoretical insights from political science, psychology, and victimology to construct the theory of empathy politics at the heart of *It Could Have Been Me*. These chapters not only provide readers a deep description of political transformation amidst violence, but also a theoretical framework through which to understand it.

The book's latter three chapters move away from in-depth analysis of Monterrey in favor of testing the theory's broader applicability and robustness outside that case through three types of evidence. Whereas the first part of the book is characterized by ethnographic richness, the second part of the book features rigorous and innovative empirical testing of those ethnographically-generated insights. In one chapter, an original behavioral experiment carried out in Tijuana, Mexico, demonstrates that the political import of empathy is not exclusive to Monterrey nor to the ethnographic research sample. In another chapter, qualitative content analysis explores an alternative indicator of citizen empathy amidst violence – states' and human rights actors' manipulation of citizen empathy. Through in-depth interviews with state, human rights and media figures, I explore how we would expect these actors to behave if citizen empathy could be manipulated to depress or provoke political action, as I argue. In a final chapter, I present statistical analyses of survey data from other Latin American cases as well as instances of civil war in Africa and Eurasia to interrogate the portability of empathy politics outside Mexico, outside Latin America, and outside the context of criminal conflict. Through three different research approaches, three distinct forms of evidence, and at multiple levels of analyses, this latter half of the book brings a dynamic

and diverse body of evidence to bear on the relationship revealed by the ethnographic evidence presented in the first part of the book. I then derive policy prescriptions from the book's findings that are relevant for policymakers, social activists, and peace advocates. The result is a methodologically and theoretically rich account that advances a single line of reasoning: when you mobilize empathy, you mobilize the citizenry.

Chapter Synopses

Table of Contents

Ch. 1 The Politics of Empathy in Violent Democracies

Ch. 2 Conceptualizing a Spectrum of Victimization

Ch. 3 Explaining Non-Victim Civic Engagement

Ch. 4 Experimental Evidence for the Power of Empathy

Ch. 5 Criminals, or Victims? How States and Human Rights Advocates Leverage Empathy

Ch. 6 Empathy beyond the Drug War: Comparative Perspectives and Policy Lessons

Ch. 1 The Politics of Empathy in Violent Democracies

Chapter 1 introduces the research puzzle motivating the book: Why do some, but not all, non-victim citizens living amidst sustained criminal conflict pursue civic engagement as a response to violence? I locate Mexico as a prominent case of such conflict within a broader, global trend of new democracies experiencing large-scale criminal violence, or “violent democracies” (Arias and Goldstein 2010). In this section, I argue that conventional theories of civic engagement and political participation, which emerged largely from the United States context and during peacetime, do little to help us understand the political engagement of democratic citizens in violent democracies like Mexico. This, despite the fact that such contexts are increasingly common in the post-Cold War democratic landscape. The chapter then describes the logic and value of my mixed-methods research approach, which marries ethnographic theory-building from one important case, Monterrey, Mexico, with qualitative, experimental, and quantitative theory-testing outside that case.

In the second part of Chapter 1, I motivate the book's focus on Mexico and on Monterrey specifically by briefly recounting the contemporary history of the country's “drug war” and its relationship to processes of democratization in the country. I then describe how these same processes played out on a microscale in Monterrey, highlighting how a wave of high-intensity violence between 2009 – 2013 impacted residents. I then describe Monterrey's political context, drawing on both original and secondary qualitative data to describe an atmosphere in which the likelihood of civic engagement is low due to weak traditions of social mobilization, discouragement by local power elites, and few institutional outlets for citizen input. I show evidence that citizens bucked these trends precisely during the most intense years of violence and present preliminary data indicating that the violence was critical to this pivot.

The chapter then invites readers to question, “Why? Why would so many citizens take up new civic action precisely when the context of violence makes action risky?” At this point, I make a preliminary introduction of my “theory of empathy politics,” the central thesis of the

monograph: both victims and non-victims may respond to criminal violence with anti-violence civic action. Yet, whereas these choices are motivated by trauma among victims, civic engagement among the non-victim majority is sparked by empathy for the victimized. Since the theory is inductively generated through my ethnographic evidence (the subjects of Chapters 2 and 3), the introduction of the theory in Chapter 1 is a concise but comprehensive preview of what I develop fully in these later chapters. Readers will thus leave Chapter 1 with a firm understanding of the monograph's central claim and an invitation to engage it more deeply through the subsequent chapters.

Ch. 2 Conceptualizing a Spectrum of Victimization

Chapters 2 and 3 present the ethnographic evidence upon which the theory first introduced in Chapter 1 rests. These chapters engage the reader in the empathy politics theory through deep description of the lived experiences and political trajectories of citizens living amidst drug war violence in Monterrey. I give meaning and order to these firsthand accounts by grounding and synthesizing them with insights from political science and psychology which, together, produce the empathy politics theory.

While Chapter 1 describes the general context of criminal violence in Mexico, Chapter 2 focuses on how individuals experience that violence and its impact on their daily life. Drawing on my participant observation and in-depth interview with victims and non-victims, I first describe the multitude of ways citizens encounter organized crime violence. This includes a range of experiences, from the murder or disappearance of family members or getting caught in the crossfire of a gang shootout, to seeing images of mutilated victims' bodies in the newspaper or reading about a local family's kidnapping on Facebook. Readers will also learn how these experiences changed research participants' quotidian practices, particularly among non-victims. This includes living with a constant sense of paranoia, severely restricting one's social life and teaching Hobbesian self-preservation to young children. Contrary to conventional theories that consider victimhood namely as direct attacks to one's person, my fine-grained, qualitative data reveal that simply living in the shadow of violence has a profound impact on non-victims and thus has theoretical importance.

Building on theory from psychology and victimology, I conceptualize an alternative "spectrum of victimization" that more fully reflects this range of citizen experiences and provides the theoretical basis for interrogating the political consequences of experiences beyond direct victimization. At one end of that spectrum, I locate the direct attacks typically understood as victimization, such as when one is kidnapped, or their family member is killed. At the opposing extreme, I locate secondary, distant exposure to violence that happens to others and from afar, such as hearing about someone else's assault through the news, gossip, or social media. I advance the claim that these secondary, indirect exposures to violence befalling others exact a discernible toll on citizens in ways that can mimic direct victimization, particularly in contexts of long-term, sustained violence. The spectrum of victimization is a key theoretical contribution of the book because it helps us understand why violence experienced from afar and to a distant Other affects non-victims at all. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for the question addressed in Chapter 3: among all the ways non-victims may respond to violence befalling others, why do some choose the particular mechanism of civic engagement?

Ch. 3 Explaining Non-Victim Civic Engagement

Whereas Chapter 2 speaks to the ways non-victims are exposed indirectly to organized crime violence and a conceptual framework through which to understand why it impacts them, Chapter 3 completes the book's central theory by addressing what non-victims *do* with those experiences. Like Chapter 2, this chapter builds on my ethnographic data and in-depth interviews to provide rich illustrations of how individuals living amidst organized crime make sense of the violence around them and offers rare, detailed insight into the logic of their political choices therein. Chapter 3 begins by depicting the myriad ways non-victim citizens may respond to living amidst organized crime violence. Some migrate away from the violence to a new city or country. Others use self-protection strategies, like buying a home security system or avoiding traveling alone or at nighttime. Some citizens, as the book details, take up arms to fight violence with violence. The bulk of this chapter, however, focuses on one response to violence in particular: civic engagement. I define civic engagement as individual or collective actions that citizens take to address issues of common concern. As the chapter recounts, civic engagement addressing criminal violence may include lobbying one's mayor for greater security, standing up anti-violence NGOs, reviving public spaces, or participating in protests, to name a few. I argue that, in contexts of sustained criminal violence, participating in such activities is both costly (in terms of time, money, and effort) and risky (in terms of political or criminal reprisals). Given this, the fundamental puzzle driving Chapter 3 and the book is, "Among all possible responses to criminal violence, why do some non-victims take up the particular mechanism of civic engagement?"

I argue that the decision to pursue civic engagement as a response to violence tends to emerge from a particular, empathy-driven process. To guide the reader through this argument, I allow my research participants to speak. I share, in their words, how they came to first participate in anti-violence action. I entwine these firsthand accounts with theoretical insights regarding the psychology of victimhood, altruism and empathy. Through their stories, I show that non-victims were most often motivated to civic action not through violence in general but instead by a single case, or a "catalyst event." Such cases were unique because the non-victim perceived similarities between themselves and the victim of that event, which in turn prompted them to imagine themselves in the shoes of the victim, or what psychologists call "perspective taking." Taking the victim's perspective generated a vicarious sense of vulnerability as non-victims realized (many for the first time) that they, too, could fall victim to organized crime. In the words of so many portrayed in the book, the victim "...could have been me." This new sense of vulnerability motivated non-victims to pursue civic activities addressing violence as a means to prevent their own, future victimization. Critically, this chapter demonstrates that empathy-based civic action is not selfless, as popular notions of empathy suggest. Instead, realizing that a victim "could have been me" generates feelings of personal vulnerability, not charity, that the non-victim aims to alleviate through their civic action. The chapter thus contributes to ongoing debate about the altruistic and egoistic roots of empathy-based action while advancing the central claim of the book: non-victims are more likely to participate in civic action addressing violence when empathic identification with a victim vicariously triggers their sense that, "It could have been me."

Ch. 4 Experimental Evidence for the Power of Empathy

Chapter 4 presents empirical tests of the theory developed in Chapters 2 and 3 through a behavioral experiment carried out among a representative population of a separate, violence-afflicted city in Mexico, Tijuana. Readers first read abbreviated accounts of the local criminal

context in this border city. Like Monterrey, Tijuana has been the site of intense, localized conflict. Nevertheless, the sites of violence exhibit submunicipal variation, with some neighborhoods more likely to experience violence from afar while others experience it closely.

I then detail my approach to the experiment's design, which will be of interest to mixed-methods scholars and students across disciplines because it unconventionally pairs experimental tests with ethnographic insights. To simulate the sense of shared similarities I theorize incites empathy among non-victims, the experiment utilizes an algorithm to match personal characteristics of the experimental participant with the characteristics of a victim in a vignette describing a case of drug war violence. Another set of participants are matched with a dissimilar drug war victim in that same vignette. The former triggers the empathic process described in Chapters 2 and 3, while the latter inhibits it. The vignette, while fictional, describes a case of violence I scripted based on true stories recounted by my interlocutors and in the style of real Mexican news reports. After reading the vignette, participants are given the opportunity to contribute funds to an anti-violence civic organization and sign a petition lobbying the government for improved security. I posit that those participants who are matched with a similar drug war victim are more likely to adopt these anti-violence actions, compared to those who read about a dissimilar victim. I then calculate the magnitude of this empathy-inducing prime on research participants' decisions to adopt the available civic actions, or not.

Beyond empirically testing the empathy politics theory with new data and a different methodological approach from that in Chapters 2 and 3, this empirical chapter advances the argument in two ways. First, the experimental evidence from Tijuana assesses the degree to which what I document in Monterrey is representative of a broader phenomenon of empathy politics behavioral trends taking place elsewhere in Mexico. Second, the experimental technique allows me to estimate quantitatively the average effect of empathy on civic engagement. In other words, whereas the qualitative data presented in Chapters 2 and 3 first reveals *how* and *why* empathy influences civic engagement among non-victims, Chapter 4 helps the reader understand *how much* empathy matters.

Ch. 5 Criminals, or Victims?

How States and Human Rights Advocates Leverage Empathy

The theory and evidence I show in Chapters 1 – 4 tells us that empathy is an important motivator of individual civic action among the non-victim majority. Chapter 5 presents an additional empirical application of this argument at a different level of analysis and with different actors: states and human rights advocates. Given the importance of empathy for shaping civic engagement among the public, how do states and human rights advocates respond? In what ways do they utilize empathy to influence public engagement around organized crime violence? I argue that human rights advocates should attempt to persuade the public through appealing to its sense of empathy. States, in contrast, should discourage empathizing with victims. This is so because these two actors have distinct investments in the issue of organized crime violence. Human rights advocates aim to motivate public engagement around victims' rights and justice processes and thus benefit from tapping into citizens' empathy for drug war victims. States, on the other hand, seek the opposite. They aim to minimize public complaint generally and foster support for state security policies in particular. Given this, states should seek to discourage citizens' empathy for victims. Indeed,

just as stimulating a sense of empathy can arouse citizen engagement, depressing empathy can be a powerful tool in keeping citizen dissent at bay.

I explore these implications through qualitative content analysis of states' and human rights advocates' public statements surrounding four prominent cases of organized crime violence in Mexico: (i) the Sabino Gordo massacre; (ii) the Café Iguana shooting; (iii) the disappearance of 43 students in Ayotzinapa; and (iv) the Tlatlaya massacre. I then bring additional evidence of the logic behind either actors' public engagement strategies through in-depth interviews with state officials, human rights representatives and local and national media deputies. In sum, this chapter extends the line of reasoning behind the first part of the book, which focuses on the power of empathy to politically influence individuals, to its next logical implication: how, why and when do states and others choose to leverage that influence for political gain?

Ch. 6 Empathy beyond the Drug War:

Comparative Perspectives and Policy Lessons

Chapter 6 closes the monograph by considering three final questions. The first question interrogates the portability of the book's claim by asking, How does the empathy politics theory help us understand the choices and actions of citizens living amidst violence outside Mexico? It then asks, What are the real-world implications of empathy politics? And finally, What lessons should activists, policymakers, community organizers and others take away from the book's message about individual-level political engagement amidst violence? To address the first, I consider the generalizability of empathy politics to other contexts of criminal conflict outside Mexico, but within Latin America, drawing on survey analysis and secondary qualitative data from Colombia, El Salvador and Honduras. I then consider cases outside Latin America and outside the potentially unique context of criminal war through quantitative analyses of survey data from civil war contexts in Liberia, Uganda and Tajikistan. Despite great variation in these cultural contexts, political settings, and local conflict dynamics, evidence from these cases is consonant with the patterns described in the rest of the book: being a bystander to violence is equally or more important to future civic engagement and political participation than direct victimization.

The final half of this chapter concludes the book by discussing the real-world implications and policy-relevant takeaways of the book's central claim. I revisit the main argument and discuss its broader implications for democratization processes in violent democracies of the Global South, like Mexico. In particular, I emphasize the double-edged nature of violence, which can simultaneously undermine political order while strengthening the cornerstone of strong democracies, citizen civic engagement. In terms of policy, the book offers a number of lessons. In particular, I underscore the fact that most citizens will not fall victim to violence and thus any attempt to foster citizen participation in anti-violence policies, programs or services must appeal to the non-victim majority. I then remind readers that for this non-victim majority, empathic identification with individual victims, rather than violence in general, is an important catalyst of participation. As such, policy leaders and activist organizers should consider incorporating more personal accounts of victims into their public-facing campaigns. While skyrocketing homicide rates and other statistics may impress, shock or scare the public, these do little to motivate citizens' active participation in anti-violence civic activities. Empathizing with the victims in those personal accounts is much more likely to garner the citizen buy-in and participation necessary for policy success.

About the Author

Dr. Rebecca Bell-Martin brings over a decade of experience researching and contributing to policy debates on issues related to public security in Mexico. She is currently a Visiting Scholar at the University of California, San Diego Center for US – Mexican Studies and Assistant Professor of Political Science at el Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey. She earned her PhD from Brown University in 2019.

Dr. Bell-Martin's research interrogates the intersection of crime and politics in the lives of everyday citizens. In particular, her recent work explores the cognitive and emotional foundations of political choice during violence and the broader political consequences of those choices. Her work is published in *Geopolitics*, *la Revista Latinoamericana de Opinión Pública*, and the American Political Science Association's *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research Symposium*. Dr. Bell-Martin also regularly presents her work at international academic conferences, like the American Political Science Association, the International Studies Association and the Latin American Studies Association, as well as at the annual Illicit Economies and Extra-Legal Actors Conference, which draws scholars from across the globe to engage research at the intersection of crime and politics.

In addition to these, Dr. Bell-Martin actively engages broader audiences in debates about public security and politics in Mexico. Prior to completing her PhD, Bell-Martin served as a Rosenthal Fellow and Mexico country expert in the United States Department of Defense. Her academic and policy expertise has been sought out by public-facing forums in both the US and Mexico, including el Periódico AM, Radio Concepto Radial, Cristosal Human Rights, the Mexico Violence Resource Project, and the U.S. – Mexico Foundation.