Forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice from the perspective of family members of victims of violence in Mexico.

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Abstract

In Mexico, violence and insecurity have been established as two social problems that concern and affect the daily life of society. In view of this situation, the current Mexican government has proposed that the country undergo a process of pacification. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the understanding and disposition that victims of violence have regarding forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice. A sample of 42 individuals from the states of Sinaloa and Coahuila with a mean age of 34.67 years ($SD=$ 11.58) participated in this research. The results of this study indicated that participants presented an ambiguous discourse on forgiveness and reconciliation, which was mediated by justice. Although there may be a certain willingness to forgive and reconcile, the latter should be accompanied by a process of retributive justice in which the aggressor is punished for the offense committed. In sum, it is also important to emphasize that the participants understand forgiveness and reconciliation as two different processes. However, they also point out that it is necessary for both to be present in order to think about initiating a process of pacification and reconstruction of the social fabric.

Keywords: FORGIVENESS, RECONCILIATION, RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE, VICTIMS, VIOLENCE.

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Introduction

Violence is a phenomenon that has historically wreaked havoc on the social fabric of Mexico. The various forms of violence, including homicides, murders, kidnappings, and forced disappearances, have significantly impacted the daily lives of society. To illustrate, Domínguez (2019) pointed out that, in the context of the so-called war against drug trafficking in Mexico, it is estimated that between the years 2006 and 2019, there were more than 250,000 violent deaths. In this sense, it can be understood that the country has established an insecurity problem characterized by the violence exercised by criminal groups whose practices include homicides, forced disappearances, and kidnappings (Arocena & Camarena, 2013; Bataillon, 2015; Williams, 2010). It is therefore unsurprising that the National Urban Public Safety Survey (ENSU) reported that 72.9% of the population considered their city to be very unsafe (INEGI, 2019a; 2019b). Similarly, the ENSU (2019) survey revealed that 28.9% of respondents anticipated that insecurity would worsen over the next twelve months.

In the midst of this negative climate, the current government has declared that it intends to address violence-insecurity with a pacification plan and thus reduce the rates of violence (Gil, 2019). The objective of such plan is the construction of peace, which has as its basis, justice, truth, reparation of damages and the guarantee of non-repetition of the crimes committed. To this end, the government proposes full collaboration with the justice system, an unequivocal manifestation of repentance by the perpetrator and a pardon granted by the victims (Ortega, 2019). Thus, given the need for a project related to peace building, it is important to question the understanding and disposition that relatives of victims of violence may have about processes such as forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice.

Research on forgiveness, reconciliation and justice has yielded various results that can promote or limit peace processes. Specifically, when forgiveness and reconciliation are discussed, it has been found that individuals (victims) consider it offensive, depending on the type of offense-crime (Kadiangandu et al., 2007). It has also been found that in contexts where violence has been a serious problem, the perception that victims are willing to forgive and reconcile is unthinkable (Mullet et al., 2010). Furthermore, it has also been shown that negative emotions such as anger reduce the levels of forgiveness and reconciliation (Manzi & González, 2007).

Conversely, positive emotions such as empathy (Wohl et al., 2012), and hope (Leonard et al., 2011; Wenzel et al., 2017) or expressions such as trust (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013), sympathy (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006), and apologies (Wenzel et al., 2017) can facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation (Van Tongeren et al., 2014). Another process that has been shown to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation is justice and its types (see Gibson, 2002). Kpanake & Mullet (2011) found that justice such as procedural, retributive, restorative, or distributive justice can promote forgiveness. Van Camp & Wemmers (2013) also found evidence in their study of the positive effect of restorative justice on forgiveness and reconciliation. The study by Mullet et al. (2010) showed that people tend to forgive when the offender receives punishment (retributive justice). Likewise, the study by Cárdenas et al. (2013) showed that forgiveness is more prevalent when society trusts the institutions in charge of imparting justice (procedural justice).

Despite the above results that could confirm how certain processes or variables can facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation (as is the case of types of justice), studies such as Bombelli et al., (2014), Cortés et al., (2016) and González et al., (2013) have found that, despite the existence of apologies (by the aggressor) in contexts such as the Argentine, Chilean and Colombian, there was no disposition towards forgiveness and reconciliation. The latter suggests, as some theorists have considered, that the results vary according to the context and culture of those involved (Mullet & Neto, 2009).

Based on the above, the purpose of this study is to identify the meanings and forms of understanding that individuals who have been victims of violence construct regarding forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice. For

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this reason, and in light of the fact that when discussing these processes in the literature, the three are presented as linked processes, it is crucial to conceptualize each concept mentioned. In this study it is understood that forgiveness serves as a mechanism that reduces the motivation to seek revenge on the perpetrator and the motivation to remain distant from him/her, while it stimulates feelings of benevolence and reconciliation (Crespo, 2004). In contrast, reconciliation is a process that is characterized by its long-lasting nature and the transformation of beliefs, ideas, and behaviors within the groups in conflict. Moreover, reconciliation can facilitate the establishment of a relationship based on mutual trust and acceptance of both groups, wherein the needs of the other are taken into account (Bar-Tal, 2000). Finally, justice is defined as a concept that is based on the intrinsic principle of not harming anyone or giving each person what they deserve (Irani, 1995).

Method

Participants

A non-probabilistic quota sample of 42 family members of victims (N = 31 women and N = 21 men) of violence from the State of Sinaloa (N = 30) and Coahuila (N = 12) participated in this research. The mean age of the participants was 34.67 years (SD = 11.58). Of the total sample, 18% indicated that they were not religious at all and 82% indicated that they were religious. Also, 45.4% indicated being of liberal ideology, 34.5% neutral and 20.1% indicated being of conservative ideology. Finally, it should be noted that the mean date on which the crime (offense) was experienced was 81.03 months (SD = 63.48).

Instruments

Questionnaire of sociodemographic variables. This was carried out ad hoc and its purpose was to collect data on socio-demographic factors such as age, city, sex, religion, ideology, or time elapsed since the crime suffered.

Semi-structured interview. The purpose of the interview was to learn about the ideas that the participants had about forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice (Strauss & Corbin, 2002; Cortés et al., 2016). In order to validate the interview, the peer-judge strategy was chosen. In this sense, the interview script was sent to three specialists in the subject of political psychology. Thus, and after the observations made by the experts, the questions were adjusted to obtain the script that would be taken to the field. Some of the questions resulting from this process were: What do you understand by forgiveness? What conditions do you consider favor forgiveness? What do you understand by reconciliation? What conditions do you consider favor reconciliation? What do you understand by justice? What conditions do you consider favor justice?

Procedures

The strategy for contacting participants was as follows. A call was launched through social networks to invite people to participate in this research. The first contact with the participants consisted of explaining extensively the objectives and purpose of the study. Thus, and once the invitation was accepted, each individual was provided with an informed consent form (it complied with the ethical principles of the Helsinki declaration and agreements) where it was specified that all responses were completely anonymous and, in addition, they were also informed that they could stop answering the interview at any time. In the second contact, the application of the interview was implemented. At this point, it is very important to point out that a group of duly trained researchers (psychologists) assisted in the application of the interviews. Once the information was collected, the data was transcribed and subsequently analyzed.

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Data analysis

IRAMUTEQ 7 software performs different types of analysis, for example, group comparisons, top-down hierarchical classification, similarity, and word cloud analysis. For this research a top-down hierarchical classification analysis (clustering algorithm) was chosen, which allowed to obtain discursive patterns and segments (categories). Finally, in order to observe the distribution and connection between the different discourses, a similarity analysis was used. This analysis makes it possible to demonstrate the relationships between the elements of each category constructed (Greenacre, 2010).

Results

The body of words recovered from the interviews conducted with relatives of victims of violence is made up of 77,041 words. The HÁPAX (words that appear only once in the text) is 47.22%, so it is considered that the content of this body of words is appropriate for further analysis (Table 1).

Table 1.

Table 1. *Characteristics of the body of words.*	
Number of texts	42
Occurrences	77 041
Number of forms	3295
Number of hápax	1556 - 47.22% of forms - 2.02% of occurrences

Characteristics of the body of words.

Subsequently, a lemmatization process was carried out based on the dictionary of the language in which the body of words is written, in this case the Spanish dictionary. The objective of this process is to group singular and plural words in order to convert them to their infinitive form. Thus, the words are treated as synonyms and are not examined as different units in the analysis. At the end of this process, the HÁPAX increased to 54.33%, thus achieving greater stability in the body of words for analysis.

Regarding the top-down hierarchical classification analysis, the IRAMUTEQ 7 program yielded five classes-clusters (see Figure 1) that are divided into two main groupings: one related to the understanding of forgiveness-reconciliation (class 1), its causes (class 2) and justice (class 5). Another cluster related to the consequences that violence has on the social fabric (class 4), as well as the events-processes that can limit forgiveness and reconciliation (class 3).

The first class groups 18.3% of the total content and was called Forgiveness and Reconciliation. The main theme of this class is centered on the ideas that the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation evoke. Among other things, it is found that participants associate forgiveness and reconciliation, either considering that they are different concepts, or considering that they are similar. The most significant words in this class were: forgive ($\chi2 = 143.32$, $p = .000$), forgiveness ($\chi2 = 122.19$, $p = .000$), reconciliation ($\chi2 = 103.89$, $p = .000$), reconcile ($\chi2 = 98.07$, $p = .000$), you forgive ($\chi2 = 61.53$, $p = .000$), hurt ($\chi2 = 39.97$; $p = .000$), and emotional ($\chi2 = 35.5$; $p = .000$). The following are some of the most distinctive segments of the class:

There can be no reconciliation without forgiveness. It cannot. I mean, you can reconcile with someone, but if there is no forgiveness, it means that it is not a reconciliation, maybe it is an acceptance that the person is inside you, but it still continues to affect you. When it stops affecting you, it is because you reconcile and forgive. It is not so easy to forget what happened. I think that, well, it is different, in forgiveness you don't feel so much resentment of what happened, and reconciliation is like talking to the person who committed the crime, and I think that they are different. I think that, well, it is different, in forgiveness you don´t feel so

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much resentment of what happened, and reconciliation is like talking to the person who committed the crime, and I think that they are different.

The second class, Communities, and interpersonal relationships, accounted for 14.8% of the content. In this class, the discourse reflects ideas of community, social inequality, empathy, and desires for peace. The most representative words in this class are: error ($\chi2$ = 63.84, p = .000), reason ($\chi2$ = 46.37, p = .000), feel ($\chi2$ = 43.85, p = .000), live ($\chi2$ = 36.83, p = .000), opportunity ($\chi2$ = 36.72, p = .000), friendship ($\chi2$ =28.09, p = .000) and achieve ($\chi2$ = 24.91, p = .000). In this sense, these are some of the most representative fragments of this class:

Well, yes, I would agree, because we all have to forgive each other and we have to forgive him too, he has the right, but with the condition that we all live well, with peace and tranquility. Well, we have to forgive him, and we have to help him to get out and not make the same mistakes again. It is not only the problem of the governments that not all the people have the same job opportunities, above all it is the main problem that I consider, that the people who make this type of mistake, are people who did not have job opportunities to get ahead or who had some problem within their family. We need to support each other in order to move forward, and to be able to forgive each other, that everything is in peace, to forgive each other in order to move forward and not make the same mistake again.

The fifth class was called Retributive Justice and was the class with the greatest weight in the analyses, grouping 30.7% of the content. In this representation, the discourses of the participants were about justice and the way in which justice must be done, especially through punishment and the suffering of the victimizer. The discourses also reflected an inclination to accept processes through which those who committed an offense are judged and given a sentence. The words that were most representative of this cluster were: justice ($\chi2$ = 114.01, p = .000), crime ($\chi2$ = 73.19, p = .000), punishment ($\chi2$ = 72.94, p = .000), serve ($\chi2$ = 54.56, p = .000), prison ($\chi2$ = 47.24, p = .000), receive ($\chi2$ = 39.9, p = .000), and amnesty ($\chi2$ = 37.63, p = .000). Some fragments that exemplify this class are:

That the person is judged by the law, that the law has carried out the whole process so that the person serves his punishment, unfortunately once he has served his punishment based on the law, I believe that justice has been done. All this under a protocol, so that this person is truly reintegrated and is given amnesty, but to do good, so if that part exists, I believe that I would agree. There may be exceptions in certain minor crimes, in which there may be justice and there may be a certain amnesty, that is, as long as the matter does not go unpunished, it does not look as if something was not done.

The fourth class, called Disintegration of the social fabric accounted for 17.3% of the total content. This class refers to the relationships that were affected by the events, mainly in a negative way. The distancing of close family members, such as siblings or close friends, is reflected in this class. The words that characterize this part of the content are: brother ($\chi2$ = 89.1, p = .000), kill ($\chi2$ = 56.67), mother ($\chi2$ = 51.31, p = .000), walk ($\chi2$ = 48.97, p = .000), murderer ($\chi2$ = 37.26, p = .000), police ($\chi2$ = 31.19, p = .000) and woman ($\chi2$ = 29.09, p = .000). The following text exemplifies the discourse presented in this class:
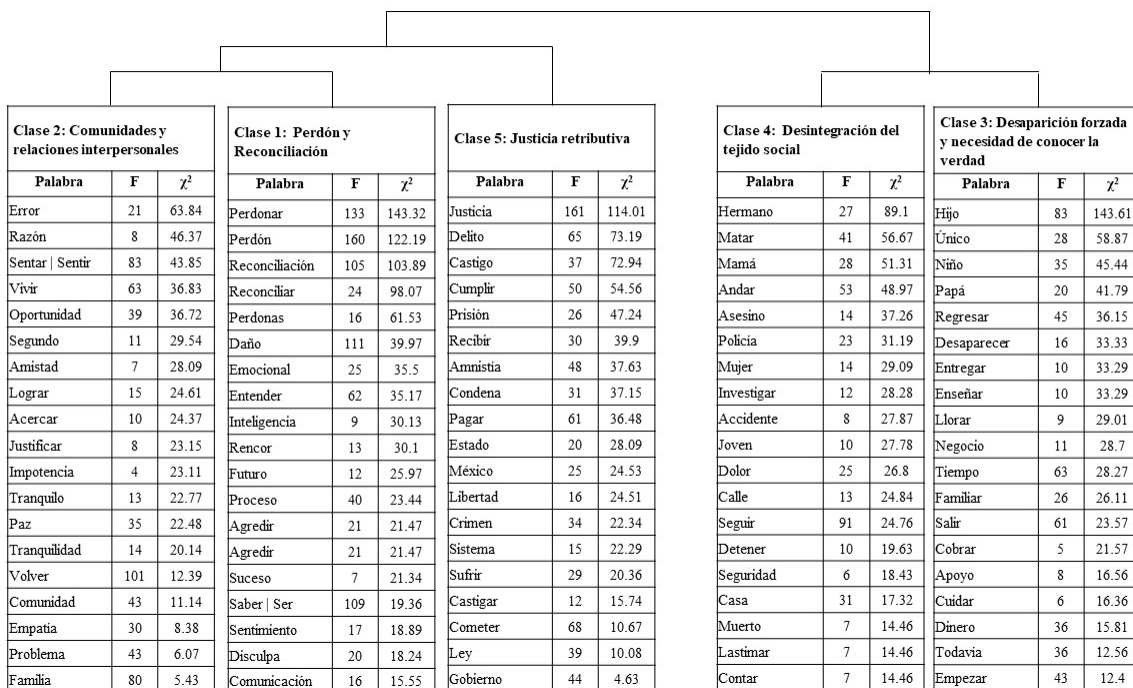
You walk and you find a dead man on the corner, or you find out that who knows who has already been killed and you can't bring your brother by the hand because they pass by and take him away from you. They thought they were first cousins and had grown up together, so I had a certain appreciation for them. However, it hurt me a lot that when this whole situation happened, they supported me a lot, I can't deny it, but what hurt me the most was that they dared to say that I was in bad habits, because I was always bringing money. If you thought he was bad, why didn't you sit down and say so? Why didn't you talk to him if he was like your brother? Then where is your honesty, right? Then honesty with me, I opened the doors of my house to you, I opened my trust to you, I opened everything to you.

The third class, named Enforced disappearance and need to know the truth, accounted for 18.9% of the content. The content found in this class refers to forced disappearances. Specifically, a discourse is reproduced that focuses on the need to know what happened to their missing relatives. Some ideas that are also presented

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in this class have to do with recovering economically, especially in the case of mothers who must support their children. The words with the highest chi-square indices in this class were: son ($\chi2 = 143.61$, p = .000), only ($\chi2 = 58.87$, p = .000), child ($\chi2 = 45.44$, p = .000), father ($\chi2 = 41.79$, p = .000), return ($\chi2 = 36.15$, p = .000), disappear ($\chi2 = 33.33$, p = .000), and deliver ($\chi2 = 33.29$, p = .000). The following excerpts exemplify the discourses that participants expressed in this class:

I must look after my children, I must move forward and no way, because it has been 10 years since it happened and my children, my little girl, the youngest one thought that I had sent her father away and that it was my fault that he did not return. So, for example, if they tell me that they have already found my aggressor, and if maybe he wanted to do something to him, and no, well, as I say, the only thing I ask from the authorities is that they tell me where my children are, and what happened, what happened to them. Reconciliation is that I really know what happened to my children, I feel a lot of anger, and I cry and ask God for forgiveness, because as I was a single mother and I always worked, I say, maybe I was not a good mother to my children.

Clase 2: Comunidades y relaciones interpersonales			Clase 1: Perdón y Reconciliación			Clase 5: Justicia retributiva			Clase 4: Desintegración del tejido social			Clase 3: Desaparición forzada y necesidad de conocer la verdad		
Palabra	F	χ^2	Palabra	F	χ^2	Palabra	F	χ^2	Palabra	F	χ^2	Palabra	F	χ^2
Error	21	63.84	Perdonar	133	143.32	Justicia	161	114.01	Hermano	27	89.1	Hijo	83	143.61
Razón	8	46.37	Perdón	160	122.19	Delito	65	73.19	Matar	41	56.67	Único	28	58.87
Sentar | Sentir	83	43.85	Reconciliación	105	103.89	Castigo	37	72.94	Mamá	28	51.31	Niño	35	45.44
Vivir	63	36.83	Reconciliar	24	98.07	Cumplir	50	54.56	Andar	53	48.97	Papá	20	41.79
Oportunidad	39	36.72	Perdonas	16	61.53	Prisión	26	47.24	Asesino	14	37.26	Regresar	45	36.15
Segundo	11	29.54	Daño	111	39.97	Recibir	30	39.9	Policia	23	31.19	Desaparecer	16	33.33
Amistad	7	28.09	Emocional	25	35.5	Amnistia	48	37.63	Mujer	14	29.09	Entregar	10	33.29
Lograr	15	24.61	Entender	62	35.17	Condena	31	37.15	Investigar	12	28.28	Enseñar	10	33.29
Acercar	10	24.37	Inteligencia	9	30.13	Pagar	61	36.48	Accidente	8	27.87	Llorar	9	29.01
Justificar	8	23.15	Rencor	13	30.1	Estado	20	28.09	Joven	10	27.78	Negocio	11	28.7
Impotencia	4	23.11	Futuro	12	25.97	México	25	24.53	Dolor	25	26.8	Tiempo	63	28.27
Tranquilo	13	22.77	Proceso	40	23.44	Libertad	16	24.51	Calle	13	24.84	Familiar	26	26.11
Paz	35	22.48	Agredir	21	21.47	Crimen	34	22.34	Seguir	91	24.76	Salir	61	23.57
Tranquilidad	14	20.14	Agredir	21	21.47	Sistema	15	22.29	Detener	10	19.63	Cobrar	5	21.57
Volver	101	12.39	Suceso	7	21.34	Sufrir	29	20.36	Seguridad	6	18.43	Apoyo	8	16.56
Comunidad	43	11.14	Saber | Ser	109	19.36	Castigar	12	15.74	Casa	31	17.32	Cuidar	6	16.36
Empatia	30	8.38	Sentimiento	17	18.89	Cometer	68	10.67	Muerto	7	14.46	Dinero	36	15.81
Problema	43	6.07	Disculpa	20	18.24	Ley	39	10.08	Lastimar	7	14.46	Todavia	36	12.56
Familia	80	5.43	Comunicación	16	15.55	Gobierno	44	4.63	Contar	7	14.46	Empezar	43	12.4

Hierarchical clustering dendrogram of the free association with the most frequent words and the words with the highest association $\chi2(1)$, p < .001.

In order to generate an image that reflected the cooccurrence between all the words in the corpus beyond their division into classes, a lexicographic similarity analysis was performed. The latter, with the purpose of analyzing how the words of the corpus were interconnected within each subcategory and identifying the semantic nuclei in order to graphically identify the discursive characteristics of the participants (see Figure 2).
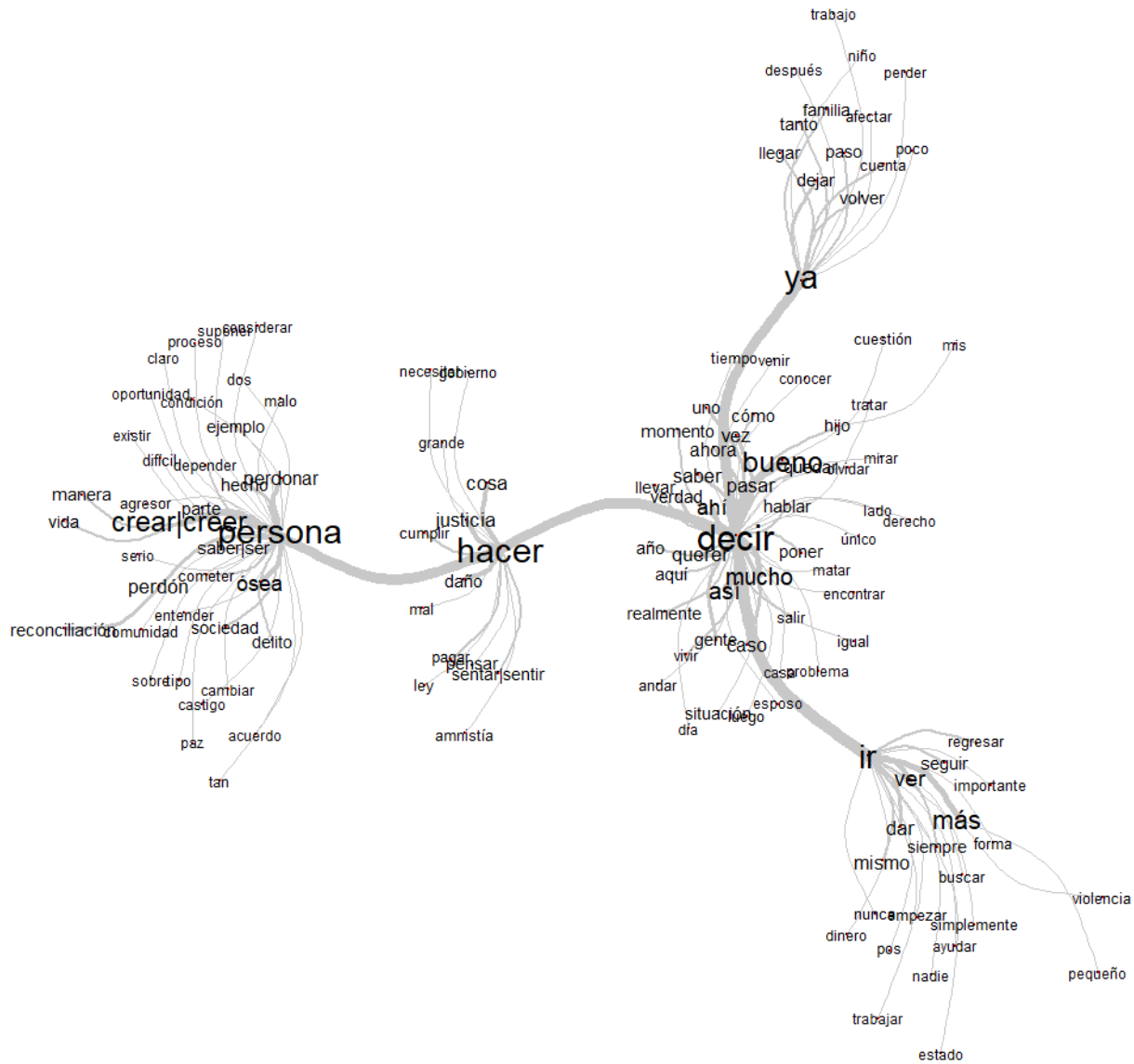
Figure 2.
Lexicographic similarity analysis.

The similarity analysis revealed that the corpus is centered around five cores. The core associated with the word person is connected to the variables of forgiveness and reconciliation, in addition to other words such as forgive, commit, society, crime, peace, aggressor and opportunity. On the other hand, a second core represented by the word do is connected to the variables of amnesty and justice, in addition to some other related words such as harm, law, comply and government.

Likewise, a third nucleus was found associated with the word say, where the words were related to the event, with words such as son, husband, look, kill, problem, situation, know and truth. This nucleus in turn is directly connected to the last two nuclei, one of them, on the word go and which is formed by words that during the speeches were used to communicate the concern of the relatives for the disappeared, and their need to know the truth, words such as help, nobody, status, follow, money, important and return. Finally, we

observe a nucleus of the word now, which is formed by words such as work, lose, after, child, family, leave and affect, words that in the speeches referred to the need to continue their lives, either because of the family that depended on the participants or because of their own need.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to know the understanding and disposition that family members of victims of violence have about forgiveness, reconciliation and justice in order to identify the panorama they have about the transition towards a pacification proposed by the federal administration of Mexico (Arvizu & Jiménez, 2019; Gil, 2019; Noor et al., 2015).

In terms of forgiveness, although to a certain extent the participants reported that they agree with forgiveness for their aggressors, there is, in general, a low willingness to forgive, mainly because of their perception of the events (offense-crime) and impunity on the part of the government. This is similar to what has been found in countries such as Colombia, Argentina or Chile, where there was a similar period of violence against the population (Bombelli et al., 2014; Cortés et al., 2016; González et al., 2013). On the other hand, some participants maintained a discourse more focused on the community, on second chances and, above all, on the causes of the establishment of violence (such as, for example, lack of opportunities for personal and social development). These discourses seem to promote a certain level of empathy, and in this sense, forgiveness can be seen as a more proximate feeling. Previous studies have suggested that feelings of empathy and hope (Leonard et al., 2011; Wenzel et al., 2017; Wohl et al., 2012), future orientation (Ugarriza & Nussio, 2017) or expressions such as trust, positively impact feelings of forgiveness and reconciliation (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013; Molina & Triana, 2009; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006).

Reconciliation was understood and constructed in two senses. In the first sense, it is linked to knowing the truth about the crime and what happened to the victims. More specifically, the participants in this study emphasize the need to know what happened to their relatives. In another sense, reconciliation appears linked to the concept of forgiveness (Cehajic et al., 2008; Tam et al., 2008). Thus, to the extent that it is perceived to diminish emotions such as anger and resentment. In addition, considering that the offense has happened in a distant time, can facilitate the reconciliation process (Cárdenas et al., 2013; Manzi & González, 2007). Something that appears in the discourses that is considered important to highlight, is that even though the participants of this study perceive similarities between reconciliation and forgiveness, it is also true that the participants describe them as two different processes. In particular, reconciliation is associated with the coexistence that is re-established between the aggressor and the victim (Bar-tal, 2000). Forgiveness, on the other hand, is constructed within an emotional dimension, i.e., when negative emotions diminish (Crespo, 2004).

With respect to the notions of justice, it was found that a large part of the sample has an inclination to request justice in a retributive way, that is, that those who committed a crime have a punishment, in this case the deprivation of their liberty (Gerez, 2010; Palop, 2012). As has been found in other Latin American countries, retributive measures are the ones that are best estimated in the population after violent events similar to those experienced in Mexico (Arnoso et al., 2015; Rodríguez, 2011). On the other hand, there are some discourses that lean towards a procedural type of justice, i.e., having a protocol to follow in their cases, for example, a trial and from that it is determined whether punishment is needed, but with emphasis on the process (Beneitez, 2014; Celano, 2001). These results confirm previous research that has yielded results of how in pacification processes, access to justice (and its types depending on the offense) can facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation (Castilla, 2019; Díaz, 2013; Toro, 2011).

It is important to point out, although it was not an objective of this research, that the notion of amnesty appeared in the discourses of the participants. The latter is linked to the notion of retributive justice. Thus, amnesty could occur once the aggressors are judged, and some type of punishment is established. However, it is

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important to highlight that we found discourses that show dissatisfaction with the justice system in Mexico and with the impunity that is perceived in their individual cases. In addition, such discourses show a distrust in government institutions and mainly the institutions in charge of handling this kind of cases, which may limit a peace process (Bailey, 2014; Blanco, 2013; Cárdenas et al., 2013).

In conclusion, two problems that are of utmost importance to the population should be highlighted when thinking about a pacification process. One problematic is related to the lack of opportunities for young people, this because it is considered that factors such as poverty, lack of decent job opportunities and economic problems are the ones that coerce young people to opt for criminal activities, such as, for example, drug trafficking (Almanza et al., 2018; Velasco, 2010). Although this discourse was not directly associated with the class related to justice, highlighting social inequalities is also a way to highlight the need for distributive justice (Zúñiga-Fajuri, 2011). The other problem is related to the fact of working on the difficulties that afflict the population who have been victims of violence. Mainly in the need to know the truth, which, as seen in the literature and found in the discourses of the participants of the study, is important so that the relatives may start thinking about forgiveness and reconciliation (Chapman, 2007; Gibson, 2002; Mathias et al., 2020; Mullet et al., 2012).

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