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Beyond the Boss: Rethinking Leadership Through Followership in Transnational Organized Crime

By

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Abstract

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Purpose	The purpose of this study is to explore how former members of transnational organized crime organizations experience followership in relation to their leaders, challenging assumptions present in criminological research by integrating organizational constructionist perspectives.
Methodology	Guided by abductive reasoning, we studied the narratives of former members of organized crime groups, their roles, and their relationships with leaders in transnational organized crime. We are drawing on social constructionism and a broader interpretivist tradition. Our data was collected from 13 video-podcast interviews.
Theoretical Framing	Our literature review presents existing research on the topics of organized crime, transnational organized crime, leadership and followership.
Contributions	Our study makes three theoretical contributions: conceptualizing pre-entry followership as an analytical category, challenging leader-centric assumptions by showing followership can be directed toward collective rather than individual actors and demonstrating that follower-leader relationships are dynamic rather than static.
Key Words	Organized Crime, Transnational Organized Crime, Leadership, Followership, Follower-Leader Relationship, Social Constructionism

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List of abbreviations

BJA	Bundeskriminalamt
CPI	Corruption Perception Index
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
HIP	High Influential Person
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LIP	Low Influential Person
MIP	Medium Influential Person
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NIP	Non-Influencing Person
TOC	Transnational Organized Crime
UNDOC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

1. Introduction

Imagine that you have spent ten years working for a criminal organization whose main bosses you have never met. You don't know what they look like. You have never sat across a table from them. Yet every decision you make, where you sleep, who you target, and whether you live or die, is led by them. You don't ask questions or negotiate, but you only follow their orders.

This is not hypothetical. It is the story of Ali, a former hitman for the Sinaloa Cartel and La Familia Michoacana. Born in rural Guerrero and raised in Southern California, Ali spent over a decade in the armed wings of some of Mexico's most powerful criminal organizations, not for money or drugs, but for something far more humane. However, this is just one story from one corner of one criminal organization. It immediately raises the question: What does it mean to be a member of transnational organized crime (TOC)?

Many individuals around the world are involved in transnational organized crime, not as leaders, but as followers within largely invisible structures. Their experience is one of the least understood aspects of organized crime.

The aim of this thesis is to understand how former members of TOC experience followership in relation to their leaders. To achieve this, we explore former members' narratives.

1.1 Problematization

Research on TOC has examined how criminal groups are structured, how they operate across borders and how they adapt to enforcement pressures (Finckenauer, 2005; Hagan, 2006; UNODC, 2018; Kaunert et al., 2025). Scholars and international institutions describe organized crime and TOC in terms of organizational forms, illicit markets, continuity over time, and the mechanisms that sustain criminal groups, such as corruption, violence, and restricted membership (Paoli, 2002; BKA, 2026; UNODC, 2018). Those details of structural and operational characteristics of such groups offer an important foundation for understanding how followership and leadership can function. However, it pays comparatively little attention to the lived experiences of individuals

within these networks, particularly how they perceive and navigate their own roles in relationship with leaders.

In criminological research, leadership is frequently associated with individuals at the top of criminal organizations, reinforcing the idea that it is something held by only a small number of powerful actors (Rosen, 2025; Siegel, 2014), and undermining the role of followers. Terms like “kingpin”, “the one in charge”, or “cartel leader” suggest a vertical, hierarchical image of leadership. This risks oversimplifying the understanding of a follower-leader relationship, particularly given that criminal organizations, as the TOC literature demonstrates, often also take fluid and adaptable forms (UNODC, 2018).

On the other hand, organizational studies conceptualize leadership and followership as a relational and social process that unfolds between followers and leaders rather than as a fixed position (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011; Alvesson et al., 2017). This perspective highlights how influence, meaning-making, and asymmetrical relationships are socially constructed through interaction. Importantly, the research stresses that leadership cannot be understood without considering the role of followers (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). This is further developed in followership studies, which examine how followers understand and enact their role within leadership processes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Followership research treats followers as active participants who contribute to sustaining organizations and co-constructing leadership through processes such as “claiming” and “granting” leader and follower identities (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Despite this, the literature we reviewed shows that such perspectives are absent from the study of organized crime.

As a result, although the areas of study of organized crime, leadership, and followership have each been researched, we still lack an understanding of how individuals in TOC groups experience followership in relation to leaders.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

As suggested previously, existing research on organized crime has concentrated on defining the phenomenon, mapping its structures, and analyzing the leadership dimension. While the latter has received considerable attention, followership remains an understudied area in the field. Little existing work explores how followers themselves experience their role within the follower-leader relationship, and they tend to be viewed through the lens of leadership rather than treated as subjects in their own right. This gap is further deepened by the transnational dimension of organized crime, which adds considerable complexity to the dynamics between followers and leaders. Ultimately, we know too little about how followership as a relational and social process unfolds in TOC.

In response to the lack of research in TOC and followership, our study shifts the focus from structural and operational forms to the relational dynamics between followers and leaders within these groups. Drawing on a constructionist understanding of followership and leadership as co-constructed through social interaction and meaning-making, we view this relationship as an experience- and context-shaped process rather than a fixed structure of command.

To investigate this, we draw on qualitative narrative accounts from video-podcast interviews with former members of Latin American criminal organizations, employing a social constructionist and interpretivist lens, guided by abductive reasoning. In doing so, we seek to bring into focus a dimension of TOC that remains overlooked by focusing on the perspectives of those who have been part of these organizations. This leads us to ask:

How do former members of transnational organized crime experience followership in relation to their leaders?

1.3 Research Outline

To address the research question introduced above, our study is structured into five sections.

The first section, *the literature review*, presents the theoretical foundation of our study. We begin by explaining the phenomena of organized crime and transnational organized crime, defining each and highlighting their key characteristics. We then turn to leadership in criminal contexts and conclude with the review of follower and followership theory.

The second section, *the methodology*, outlines our chosen research approach and philosophical grounding. This is followed by the study's research design, including a relevant contextual background, the data collection process, and the analytical framework applied. The section closes with a reflection on our methodology, along with a discussion of its limitations and the ethical considerations involved.

The third section, *the findings and analysis*, presents the empirical results of our research across three thematic categories, each approaching our research aim from a different angle: followership within the entry process to TOC, motivations for followership, and the social construction of follower-leader relationships.

The fourth section, *the discussion*, interprets our findings in light of the existing research presented in the literature review, situating our results within the academic conversation.

The fifth and final section, *the conclusion*, synthesizes our main findings into an answer to the research question. It further states the theoretical contributions of our study and reflects on its limitations while also showing potential directions for future research.

2. Literature review

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that guides the study of our research question on how former members of TOC experience followership in relation to the leader. We begin by defining organized crime, examining its structures and dynamics, and then extending the discussion to the transnational dimension of organized crime. Next, we explore the concept of leadership within criminal research as well as in organizational studies. Finally, we turn to the concepts of followers and followership, drawing on relevant research to frame our analysis.

2.1 Definitions of Organized Crime and Transnational Organized Crime

When we think of organized crime, we picture a rigid hierarchy led by a powerful figure whose subordinates simply carry out orders. Yet, as the following chapter of our literature review demonstrates, the reality is far more complex than this stereotype suggests. As Finckenauer (2005, p.64) warns, applying the label “organized crime” too loosely can distort empirical understanding, exaggerate the capabilities of criminal groups, and ultimately contribute to misguided policy responses.

2.1.1 Organized Crime

The concept of organized crime has long been researched in academic literature, with definitions shaped by differing theoretical priorities and observations. The difficulty of defining the concept of organized crime is widely acknowledged in the academic field as well as in public institutions (Finckenauer, 2005, p.68; Hagan, 2006, p.127).

For instance, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) (2025) describes organized crime as a “notoriously difficult concept to define” (p.57) emphasizing the multiplicity of criminal forms and actors involved. Likewise, Hagan (2006, p.134) distinguishes between “organized crime” as a set of activities and “Organized Crime” as the actors who carry them out. Paoli (2002) similarly characterizes organized crime as an “ambiguous catchphrase”

(p.61) noting that it can refer both to highly structured, mafia-like organizations but also loose, small groups or networks engaging in profit-driven illegal activities.

For the purposes of this study, what matters most is not resolving this definitional debate but identifying the most relevant features to understanding the setting of organized crime where followership and leadership develop.

Despite their differences, scholars and institutions converge on a set of characteristics that together define the organizational environment in which such relationships unfold. Organized crime is generally understood as profit-oriented through illegal activities, non-ideological and enduring, sustained through mechanisms such as violence, corruption, restricted membership and immunity, and characterized by the repeated commission of criminal acts rather than isolated offenses (Finckenauer, 2005, p.81; Hagan, 2006, p.128; Bundeskriminalamt (BKA), 2026; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2018). Institutional definitions, meaning those advanced by official bodies such as international organizations and legal institutions, echo these themes, highlighting continuity, collective action and the conduction of criminal offences for material gain (EU Council, 1998 cited in Paoli, 2002, p.62). In addition, UNODC (2018) emphasizes that organized crime does not fundamentally differ from legitimate business structures, apart from the fact that the goods and services involved are illegal. It could therefore be called a criminal enterprise.

2.1.2 Structure and Dynamics of Organized Crime

To deepen the understanding of what we mean by organized crime in this study, it is essential to also examine the structure and internal dynamics of organized crime groups, as they provide the organizational context within which the follower-leader relationships are shaped and experienced.

The UNODC (2018) defines an organized criminal group as at least three individuals who cooperate over time to commit criminal offences, noting that memberships may be fluid as individuals assemble for specific criminal objectives, disperse, and later reform in new constellations. The BKA (2026) similarly describes such groups as involving more than two actors who collaborate on a long-term or indefinite basis and use commercial or business-like structures.

As further identified by the UNODC (2018) organized crime groups vary in their internal organization. Some follow a clear hierarchical model, while others function through loose, informal networks without fixed roles. Their group size may range from small, local units to large complex organizations. UNODC (2018) identifies three broad organizational patterns commonly observed among organized crime groups. The first consists of *hierarchically structured organizations*, characterized by a rigid chain of command, clearly defined ranks, and formalized roles through which leaders direct and coordinate the activities of subordinate members, as exemplified by the Sicilian Mafia (Cosa Nostra). The second pattern includes *groups rooted in shared local, cultural, or ethnic ties*, typically smaller, community-embedded networks whose cohesion is maintained through kinship, cultural affinity, and trust rather than formal hierarchy or centralized authority, as seen in MS-13, which originally formed around shared Salvadoran immigrant identity and neighborhood ties. The third pattern encompasses *groups organized around economic or business-like relationships*, which operate primarily as profit-driven enterprises that emerge in response to illicit market opportunities and structure themselves according to economic incentives rather than identity or hierarchy, as illustrated by the Sinaloa Cartel, which operates primarily as a profit-driven enterprise structured around supply chains and distribution networks. In practice these categories often overlap and appear in different combinations.

All these characteristics help distinguish organized crime from other forms of criminality that may also display organizational features. It should be noted that organized crime takes diverse forms, and not every highly organized or complex criminal activity necessarily meets the criteria outlined above for defining organized crime (Finckenauer, 2005, p.76; Hagan, 2006, p.134). A group carrying out tax fraud, for instance, may act in an organized and profit-oriented manner without constituting organized crime, as it does not necessarily involve a continuing criminal enterprise, a structured group, or the use of violence, corruption, or coercion. UNODC (2018) further demonstrates this through two other examples: white-collar crime, which may be committed by a single individual abusing legitimate business structures, and terrorism, which is driven by political or ideological aims rather than financial gain. Both serve to sharpen the boundaries of what organized crime, as defined here, implicates.

Finally, for the purpose of this study, we refer to organized crime as an enduring and collectively organized structured criminal enterprise in which a group of individuals cooperate over time to commit criminal offences for financial or material gain, maintaining their operations through mechanisms such as violence, corruption and controlled membership. This distinguishes it from other forms of criminality, including white-collar crime or terrorism, which lack this combination of features.

2.1.3 Transnational Organized Crime

Transnational organized crime extends these structures and dynamics across borders, operating through planned yet flexible networks engaged in activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering, and human smuggling (Hillmer et al. 2024, p.323; Kaunert et al. 2025, pp.1-2; Miraglia et al., 2012, p.4). These operations typically span multiple countries of origin, transit, and destination (UNODC, 2018). The concept of TOC is relevant to this study given that the transnational dimension introduces added complexity to hierarchical dynamics, shaping how leadership is exercised and followership is experienced.

Far from being static, TOC functions as a dynamic illicit marketplace that continually adjusts to shifting demand, enforcement pressures, and regulatory environments (UNODC, 2018). Estimates suggest that the global illegal economy may account for between 8% and 15% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with even higher proportions in some developing regions, highlighting the scale and embeddedness of TOC within the global economy (ICAIEpress, 2025). In doing so, it generates new forms of criminal activity that move across cultural, social, linguistic and geographical boundaries (UNODC, 2018).

Scholars emphasize that TOC groups rarely limit themselves to a single criminal enterprise. Instead, they engage in multiple, mutually reinforcing activities across jurisdictions, forming decentralized networks that resemble multinational corporations in both structure and adaptability (Hillmer et al. 2024, p.323; Noriega, 2015, p.1). These networks respond quickly to law enforcement interventions by altering routes, alliances, and leadership structures while combining financial, logistical, technological, and coercive tools to sustain illicit flows of goods, people and capital (Noriega, 2015, p.1).

The evolution of TOC is closely intertwined with broader global transformations. Expanding international trade, increased mobility, and advances in communication technologies have deepened global connectivity, enabling criminal networks to broaden their reach and enhance their operational efficiency (Kaunert et al. 2025, p.4). Simultaneously, weak institutions, corruption, and legal loopholes create openings that TOC actors systematically exploit (Kaunert et al. 2025, p.3; Noriega, 2015, p.6). This continual adaptation underscores that TOC is an ever-evolving phenomenon shaped both by globalization and by attempts undertaken to counter it (Kaunert et al. 2025, p.4).

Ultimately, TOC should not be understood as the activity of a specific type of actor, but a social system that connects professional criminals, politicians, law enforcement officials, and entrepreneurs within complex transnational relationships (Kaunert et al. 2025, p.5; Cubides-Cárdenas et al. 2025). Organized crime is not confined to a particular social group or demographic profile, rather it can draw in actors from any socioeconomic or cultural background (Kaunert et al. 2025, p.4).

Overall, these perspectives demonstrate that TOC is a fluid and adaptive phenomenon influenced by globalization and cross-border social networks. As mentioned above, this is important for this study because it provides a broader context for understanding the complexity of follower-leader dynamics.

2.2 Leaders and Leadership in the Criminal Context

The ways in which the terms ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ are employed in criminological literature reveal some of the underlying assumptions that have shaped how these concepts are commonly understood in criminal contexts, including organized crime and TOC.

Some scholars refer to ‘leaders’ or ‘leadership’ without providing a conceptual definition, leaving space for interpretation. For instance, in Rosen’s (2025) analysis of different criminal actors in Latin America, he uses both terms interchangeably: he writes “dismantling criminal organizations by targeting the leadership or kingpins to decrease their power” (p.5) and “gang leadership

incarcerated in Salvadoran prisons” (p.7). The underlying assumption is that ‘leadership’ means the same as ‘leader(s)’. The use of these terms interchangeably is also found in NGO’s reports, such as the InSight Crime’s (Dudley et al., 2024) report of organized crime in Ecuador where the prisoner’s quote “to change who was in charge” was interpreted as “undermining the leadership by moving it around the prisons” (p.20).

A second assumption present in the criminal literature is that leaders are positioned ‘at the top’ of a criminal organization, and that this role can be occupied just by a limited number of individuals. This assumption is evident, for example, in Siegel’s (2014) description of women’s path to becoming criminal leaders as “the rise [...] to the top of the criminal world” (p.53), as well as in Rosen’s (2025) references to “*the* former leader of Sinaloa cartel” (p.66, emphasis added) and “*the* leaders of los Chapitos” (p.21, emphasis added).

Following these assumptions reduces the understanding of leaders and leadership in criminal contexts to a trait that is possessed by a small group of individuals within a highly hierarchical organization. This perspective is also reflected in Chopin & Dupont’s (2025) definition of leadership in criminal activities as “the *ability* of an individual or group to influence and direct criminal activities of a group of people involved in illegal activities” (p.530, emphasis added). Furthermore, they conceptualize criminal leaders as individuals who rely on power, charisma, or expertise to acquire influence, and who employ manipulative and coercive tactics to secure authority and maintain their positions of power (p.530). These understandings may overlook the complexity of TOC organizations discussed in the previous section. For this reason, in our research, we consider it relevant to adopt a definition of leadership that allows for a more nuanced understanding of leadership within TOC contexts.

Having said that, the definition of leadership that will guide us through our study is the one proposed by Alvesson et al. (2017, p.8, emphasis in original):

We therefore restrict leadership to being about people involved in an *asymmetrical* (unequal) *relationship* (formally or informally, permanently or temporarily, but not only momentarily) *involving followers*. Leaders are *interpersonally trying to define*

meaning/reality for others who are inclined to (on a largely voluntary basis) accept such meaning-making and reality-defining influencing acts.

This definition allows us to explore leadership as a social and relational process of influence grounded in interactions between leaders and followers. Alvesson et al. (2017, p.92) emphasize that these relationships are asymmetrical based on status and influence, meaning that leader and follower roles may or may not correspond to formal positions, and may change over time. Moreover, they argue that leaders seek to influence others' meanings and reality by appealing to their "hearts and minds" (p.69), which is further explained as the influence of values, ideas, beliefs, meanings, understandings, and identities (Alvesson et al. 2017, p.98; Alvesson and Blom, 2015, p.273). At the same time, they stress that followers' willingness to accept leaders' meaning-making attempts is primarily voluntary (Alvesson et al. 2017, p.92). In this way, leadership is distinguished from the exercise of coercive power (Alvesson et al. 2017, pp.96-98). Accordingly, our study seeks to move beyond coercion and to explore other forms of influence that do not rely on force or violence in TOC.

Thinking of leadership as a social and relational process necessarily implies the involvement of individuals who follow leaders. However, the role of followers and the process of followership remain underexplored, especially in criminal literature.

2.3 Followers and Followership Research

Organizational leadership literature has largely emphasized the importance of leaders while paying limited attention to followers (Alvesson et al., 2017, p.77; Uhl-Bien et al. 2014, p.83), a tendency that is even more evident in criminal leadership literature. Assuming that leaders are central in organizations results in attributing many organizational outcomes to leadership while ignoring other possible explanations, such as followers taking the initiative, complex group dynamics, and cultural, social and economic forces (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011, p.18). This may also apply to TOC leadership, particularly in light of research demonstrating the limited effectiveness of leadership decapitation or kingpin strike strategies (Calderón et al. 2015, pp.1455-1485), which are based on "removing the leader(s) at the head of a group from that position" (Chopin & Dupont, 2025, p.540).

Given the limited research on followers and followership in criminal contexts, organizational studies offer a valuable theoretical starting point for this study.

While research on followers within organizational studies is diverse, it has mostly been approached through the perspective of leaders or leadership. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) provide a comprehensive overview of the main approaches within the field. They suggest that in leader-centric approaches, for instance, followers are viewed as passive recipients of leaders' influence, thus its focus has been "nearly exclusively on leaders" (p.84). On the other hand, follower-centric and relational leadership studies treat followers as relevant actors at the moment of "constructing leaders and leadership" (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014, p.86). They argue that in these cases followers are being recognized as part of leadership, however it took more time to acknowledge followership as a research area (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014, p.89).

Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) built a followership theory defining it as "the study of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process" (p.96). The theory proposes to study how followers view and enact following behaviors in relation to leaders, instead of studying leadership from the follower perspective (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014, p.96). Based on previous literature, they propose two research approaches: a role-based approach and a constructionist approach (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. 2022, p.655; Uhl-Bien et al. 2014, p.89). Both views converge on a central concern: how followers understand and enact their role within the leadership process (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012, cited in Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022, p.655). For both, leadership is a dynamic system where "leaders (or leading) and followers (or following) interact together in context" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p.89). However, there is a fundamental difference. While the role-based perspective identifies followers on formal hierarchies (i.e. subordinates are followers and managers are leaders), from a constructionist perspective, leader and follower positions are socially constructed in a dynamic relational process (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p.90).

Under the role-based lens, researchers have proposed different followership typologies. For example, Kelley's (1988, cited in Alegbeleye, 2026, p.67) model of effective followership classified followers into five types, based on their level of engagement, independence and critical thinking: (1) Passive, (2) Alienated, (3) Conformist, (4) Exemplary, and (5) Pragmatist, where the "Exemplary" is the ideal follower type in an organization. Similarly, Chaleff (2009, cited in

Alegbeleye, 2026, p.67) proposed a typology distributed among two dimensions: the courage to support and the courage to challenge, with four types of followers: (1) Resource, (2) Individualist, (3) Implementer, and (4) Partner. Building on these typologies, Alegbeleye (2026, pp.71-73) presents a “situational followership model”, that incorporates four contextual factors: (1) leaders’ inspirational behavior, (2) leaders’ participative behavior, (3) psychological safety climate of the workplace, and (4) followers’ psychological bravery. The model emphasizes follower agency and situational variability and argues that followership styles are not fixed but flexible depending on the leader type, so followers can move from one style to the other depending on the leader and the situation (Alegbeleye (2026, p.73).

In contrast, the constructionist approach moves beyond formal roles and focuses on the dynamic interactions through which leadership and followership are co-constructed (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. 2022, p.655). From this perspective, we identify two frameworks that facilitate the study of these interactions. DeRue & Ashford (2010), for instance, propose an integrative leadership theory that highlights the dynamic nature of leader and follower identities, the preconditions that shape those identities and leader-follower relationships, as well as various contextual factors that may cause the shift of leader and follower identities over time and across situations (pp.627-647). They argue that leader and follower identities are socially constructed by an underlying process of “claiming” and “granting”, and that through this process follower-leader relationships develop (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p.628). Furthermore, Alvesson et al. (2017, pp.20-22) propose a conceptualization of “high influential people” (HIPs), “low influential people” (LIPs), “medium influential people” (MIPs), and “non influential people” (NIPs), which supports a relational and fluid understanding of asymmetrical relationships within an organization based on the degree of influence between individuals.

In line with the constructionist approach, and consistent with the definition of leadership presented in the previous section, this study adopts Spoelstra’s (2018) definition of ‘followers. He argues that, when followership is associated with leadership, the “term ‘follower’ is reserved for someone who follows another person” (p.106), thereby excluding other forms of following, such as adhering to guidelines or following a chain of command (p.105). He further suggests that a follower is someone who “*follows after* the leader” or “*imitates* the leader” (p.106, emphasis in original). In

this sense, followers may follow the orders or the footsteps of the leader or aspire to become more like them (p.106).

In summary, organized crime and TOC literature provide important insights into the complexity of the contexts where leadership and followership develop, however criminal leadership research often overlooks this complexity. Criminal leadership literature tends to reflect assumptions that position leaders and leadership as concentrated in a limited number of individuals at the top of vertically structured organizations, while marginalizing the role of followers. On the other hand, organizational literature conceptualizes leadership and followership as relational and dynamic social processes. By integrating leadership and followership perspectives from organizational research into the study of criminal contexts, we seek both to challenge some of the existing assumptions within criminal leadership literature and to draw on the useful frameworks they offer for addressing our research question:

How do former members of transnational organized crime experience followership in relation to their leaders?

Building on the theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter, the following chapter outlines the methodological framework that guides this study.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, we present the methodological framework that underpins our study. We begin by outlining the philosophical grounding of the research, describing how our study is anchored in a social constructionist ontology and an interpretive epistemology. We also explain how an abductive reasoning approach guided the development of our research. We then describe the research design, including the context of our study, our methods of data collection, and the process of data analysis. Finally, we reflect on the study by discussing its limitations and the ethical considerations relevant to our research.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding and Research Approach

Our study aims to explore followership in relation to the leader in transnational organized crime. We study the experiences of former members of organized crime groups and how their narratives can be interpreted within the follower-leader relationship.

Our research centers on the perspective of followers and followership, recognizing that leadership can only be understood in relation to how followers enable, shape, or challenge the leadership process, as suggested by Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p.89). Followership examines the role of followers and the social process associated with leaders (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014, p.89). It shifts attention to followers' own experiences, perspectives, and sense of responsibility in the leadership process. (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014, p.89)

Based on this foundation we followed a qualitative research design that is based on the ontological perspective of social constructionism. According to Bell et al. (2022, p. 27), ontology concerns the nature of reality and the assumptions we hold about what it means for something to exist, as well as what exactly we aim to understand. Furthermore, they argue that a social constructionist ontology assumes that reality is not fixed but is continually produced through human interaction, meaning making, and context. This stance aligns with our study because it allows us to interpret former members' experiences as shaped by their social environments and later reflections, rather than as definitive representations of past events.

In addition, we assume that the narrated experiences in our research are inherently subjective (Prasad, 2018, p.14). Depending on their personal perspectives, backgrounds, and meanings they attach to events, individuals may interpret and experience the same situation in different ways. This understanding is central to our study because it enables us to view followers and leaders as active participants in the co-construction of leadership, followership, and their outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014, p.89). Both are therefore regarded as equally significant in shaping these processes.

At the same time, we stress that identifying patterns and socially negotiated meanings within these subjective experiences is central to our study, as it allows us to draw broader, more generalizable conclusions from our findings. We believe that highlighting this dimension reinforces the relevance of social constructionism as the theoretical foundation of our work.

As previously outlined, we view leadership and followership as a relational concept, which further resonates with our epistemological stance. Bell et al. (2022, p.29) define epistemology as the study of knowledge and the assumptions about how we know what we know. It concerns what counts as valid knowledge and how such knowledge can be generated and justified in research.

We employed “human interpretation” (Prasad, 2018, p.13) as a lens for understanding and gaining insight into followers’ experiences. This approach recognizes knowledge as socially constructed and emphasizes that understanding emerges through how former members make sense of their lived experiences. It aligns with a broader interpretivist tradition. Instead of prioritizing causal explanation, interpretivism focuses on how individuals create meaning in everyday life, highlighting “subjective reality construction” (Prasad, 2018, p.14). This fits our study because it provides insight into how former members actively construct the meaning of followership from their lived experiences rather than describing past events objectively.

This perspective also aligns with phenomenology (Prasad, 2018, p. 13) and Weber’s notion of *verstehen* (Weber, 1949, cited in Prasad, 2018, p. 14), both of which highlight that social reality emerges through lived experience and the subjective meanings individuals attach to their actions. Together, these approaches highlight the need to interpret the world from the actor’s own standpoint rather than relying solely on externally imposed, objective explanations.

Moreover, we applied abductive reasoning, allowing analysis and interpretation to move iteratively between empirical data and theory in search of the most plausible explanation of the phenomenon (Schwandt, 2007, p.1). This approach enabled us to engage with existing theory, followership and leadership theory in our case, prior to data collection, while also refining and expanding our theoretical understanding as new insights emerge throughout the analytical process. An example of this abductive process appears in the discussion chapter, where our empirical finding of an influential group involved in a TOC member's followership experience led us to reconceptualize this dynamic through theory, understanding the group as 'medium influential people' (MIPs) performing leadership work.

3.2 Research Design

In the following section, and in line with our research question on how former members of TOC narrate their experiences of followership in relation to leaders, we first outline the contextual background of our study. Although the research question is formulated broadly, our empirical focus lies exclusively on narratives from former members of Latin American criminal organizations. Following the contextual overview, we proceed by detailing our data collection processes and analytical framework.

3.2.1 Contextual Background

Latin America represents a particularly meaningful context for this study, partly due to personal ties: one of the researchers originates from the region and maintains a strong connection to it, which naturally shaped our interest in this geographical focus. Moreover, the regional emphasis is driven by the availability of publicly accessible interviews with former TOC members. This pragmatic sampling decision does not imply claims of global representativeness but reflects the contextual depth and accessibility of sources from this region.

In addition, to clarify why this region is analytically relevant for our study, it is important to consider the structural and operational conditions that have enabled the expansion and consolidation of TOC in Latin America.

Despite recent improvements, the region remains the most unequal globally: in 2024, the richest 10% earned 12 times more than the poorest 10% (OECD, 2025, p.12). This inequality has been demonstrated to be a contributing factor to criminal activity (Schargrodsky & Freira, 2023, p.199). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2026) further observes that weak growth, crime, and insecurity form a “vicious cycle” that depresses tourism, investment, and accelerates emigration.

Furthermore, corruption remains a significant issue in Latin America. In 2024, the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) recorded a score of 42/100 for the region, indicating widespread perceptions of government inaction in combating corruption (Transparency International, 2025). This persistent issue has a damaging impact on various aspects of society, including the undermining of democratic institutions, the facilitation of organized crime, and the erosion of public services. Collectively, these socioeconomic conditions persist in inflicting harm upon communities throughout the region.

This context is important to bear in mind throughout the study, as our findings and conclusions are shaped by the specific cultural, economic, and institutional conditions of the region and cannot be straightforwardly generalized to other forms of organized crime operating in different contexts.

3.2.2 Data Collection

As mentioned beforehand, our research interest is motivated by Latin American TOC organizations, given the increasing significance they have gained in social, economic and political spheres in the region (Dammert & Sampo, 2025).

As conducting our own interviews was not feasible, this study relies on video-podcast interviews as its primary source of empirical material. Access to former members of transnational organized crime is limited due to the secrecy of these networks, their high mobility, and the personal and legal risks associated with disclosure. These constraints made it impossible for us to contact former members directly. The video-podcasts therefore offer an ethically appropriate opportunity to access firsthand narratives that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

We further excluded the option of interviewing, for example NGOs operating in this field, as their insights, while contextually informative, would have constituted second-hand accounts. Given the

study's focus on narrative analysis, direct testimonies from former members of organized criminal groups were considered substantially more suitable.

The podcasts used are publicly available on YouTube, which served as the sole platform for identifying and selecting relevant data. The videos consist of long-form interviews in which former TOC members recount their experiences, offering narratives that provide rich insight into their personal trajectories, reflections, and relationships.

Our sampling process followed a set of predefined criteria that each interview needed to meet. We began by searching for interviews featuring *former members of transnational organized crime in Latin America*. The interviews identified through this process were conducted in Spanish or English, and took the form of narrative, interview-driven documentary podcasts. In total, we included 13 interviews in the dataset. This number offered sufficient depth and variation to address our research interest and enabled us to reach a point of saturation, where additional interviews no longer generated new analytical insights. In the following section, we present the selected video-podcasts, outline the specific criteria that guided the inclusion of individual interviews and present a full list of the interviewees.

Penitencia: A podcast hosted by Saskia Niño de Rivera, an activist with over 17 years of experience in Mexican prisons. The project gives a voice to people deprived of liberty across Mexico. Episodes (45-60 minutes) focus on the interviewees' life histories and the broader context surrounding their cases (Penitencia, 2026).

Cárceles: Recorded in Colombian prisons and hosted by María Camila Díaz, a journalist with 15 years of experience in television, radio, and digital media. The podcast seeks to reveal stories, lived realities, and perspectives from within the Colombian penitentiary system, with episodes between 30-60 minutes long (Cárceles Podcast, 2026).

The Connect with Jonny Mitchel: A podcast hosted by Jonny Mitchel, featuring in-depth conversations with guests from diverse backgrounds. The show focuses on personal stories, pivotal life moments, and the emotional experiences that shape people's lives. Episodes (around 45-120

minutes) aim to create an open space for honest reflection and human connection (The Connect: With Johnny Mitchell, 2026).

All interviewees are former members of TOC of diverse origins, genders, ages, and roles, selected according to the following criteria:

- The interviewee is a former member of a Latin American TOC group.
- The interviewee talks about relevant leadership and followership experiences.
- The length of the interview is longer than 30 minutes.
- The language of the interview is Spanish or English.

Table 1. Overview of Interviewees

Name	Gender	Age	Role in TOC	Podcast Links
Abraham	Male	22	Hitman	Penitencia
Alex	Male	50-60	Hitman, Drug mule	The Connect with Jonny Mitchel
Ali	Male	30-40	Hitman	The Connect with Jonny Mitchel
Beto	Male	36	Hitman	Penitencia
Bocanegra	Male	30-40	Hitman	Penitencia
Gabriela	Female	17	Hitwomen	Penitencia
Johanna	Female	40-50	Drug dealer/mule	Penitencia
Orlando	Male	17	Hitman	Penitencia
Oscar	Male	46	Hitman	Penitencia
Ramiro	Male	56	Logistics coordinator	Cárceles
René	Male	40-50	Hitman and drug dealer	Penitencia

Tere	Male	43	Cross-border Trafficker, Transporter, Distributor	Penitencia Part 1 Penitencia Part 2
Tochito	Male	50-60	Accountant	Penitencia

Finally, the selected podcast episodes were transcribed using the TurboScribe AI tool (TurboScribe, 2026). To ensure accuracy, all transcripts were checked against the original audio. For interviews conducted in Spanish, the tool produced English transcripts, which were subsequently reviewed by one of the researchers, a native Spanish speaker, who verified the correctness of each translation.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

To analyze our empirical data, we began by transcribing the interviews, as previously described. The check for accuracy gave us the first chance to reengage with our data.

To structure our analytical process, we followed the *sorting-reducing-arguing* (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) approach, allowing us to gain conceptual clarity of our data. It guided how we organized, narrowed and interpreted our data.

The sorting phase, understood as a coding process (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), began after completing the transcription of all selected interviews. At this stage, we identified, highlighted, and differentiated segments of the material, which later enabled us to develop preliminary themes and core content areas. Because our study focuses on narrative material, we followed Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2018) recommendation to “not cut up the material too much” (p.191) ensuring that the coherence of each narrative was preserved.

In line with Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2018) framework, we paid particular attention to the ‘what’s and ‘how’s of sorting. The ‘what’s’ refer to the empirical elements we chose to sort, those parts of the material we judged to be analytically valuable for addressing our research question. The ‘how’s concern the practical actions taken to organize this material: how we grouped excerpts,

how we decided which segments belonged together, and how we moved pieces across emerging categories as our understanding developed. This allowed us to identify which data were central, which patterns recurred across interviews, and how the material could be meaningfully structured.

As not all collected material was relevant for our study, we proceeded with the reduction phase in which the data was sorted into a more manageable and analytically useful corpus. To ensure a systematic approach to the interview analysis, we created a tabular overview in an Excel spreadsheet. In this table, interviewees' quotes were systematically assigned to thematic questions concerning their experiences of leadership and followership and subsequently organized into overarching thematic categories. Additional classificatory variables included age, gender, heritage, level of education, the region in which the crimes were committed, and the individual's role within the TOC organization. This process enabled us to identify recurring patterns as well as contrasts across the interviewees' narratives. Building on this, we organized the findings into three thematic sections that explore our research question from different angles: followership within the entry process of TOC, motivations for followership and the social construction of the follower-leader relationship.

Finally, in the arguing phase, we connected our empirical findings to the theoretical framework established earlier in the thesis. This involved relating our interpretations to existing research and situating our results within the broader field. To present our analysis transparently, we employed the excerpt-commentary-unit model (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 193), which structures each analytical point through a short empirical excerpt, an interpretive commentary, and the analytical unit it exemplifies. This approach made it possible to show clearly how our interpretations were grounded in the data and how individual narrative segments contributed to the development of broader themes.

All quotations used in the analysis were crosschecked twice to ensure that their meaning was preserved. When necessary, minor adjustments were made to translated words to enhance clarity without altering the original intent.

3.3 Reflexivity and Limitations

Reflexivity has been integral to our research process, enabling us to step back, reassess our analytical choices, and, when necessary, return to earlier stages with a revised approach. Throughout the project, we engaged in ongoing dialogue about our interpretations, challenged one another's assumptions, and offered constructive feedback. Our distinct backgrounds enriched this process: one of us contributing a fresh academic perspective and a European origin, the other bringing many years of professional experience and a Latin American origin. This interplay of perspectives fostered a productive exchange of insights that shaped the study and enhanced the interpretive precision of our work.

Before beginning our analysis, we held certain expectations about what the results might reveal. For instance, we anticipated finding a follower-leader dynamic, with clearly defined roles and hierarchical relationships. In reality, the connections we encountered were far more loosely structured than we had assumed. Becoming aware of these preconceptions, by discussing them explicitly with each other, was essential to avoid interpreting the data in ways that merely confirmed our assumptions and to remain genuinely open to alternative meanings. To further minimize potential bias, we adhered closely to the interviewees' own words during the analysis, checking that our interpretation aligned with the broader context of what the participant had said rather than isolating a passage to fit a predetermined idea. Finally, we remained attentive to the feedback provided by our supervisor.

As with any research, our study also comes with certain limitations. First, we acknowledge that our focus on a specific segment of transnational organized crime, namely actors operating within a Latin American context, limits the transferability of our findings. This setting is particular, and insights derived from it cannot be readily generalized to criminal groups embedded in different cultural or organizational environments. This again aligns with the interpretivist perspective guiding our research, which holds that knowledge is context-bound and therefore not intended to be generalized beyond the specific cultural and organizational setting examined (Prasad, 2018). Nevertheless, within this context we sought to maintain breadth by including interviews from a diverse range of individuals, recognizing the considerable variation that exists even within this single regional frame.

A further limitation concerns the nature of our data. The interviews we analyzed consisted of self-narrated accounts of criminal experiences. We cannot be entirely certain whether these narratives represent complete, factual accounts or whether they reflect a strategic self-presentation, identity construction, or selective disclosure. As our materials draw on publicly available media materials, interviewees were likely aware that their accounts would reach a broad audience, which could mean they were particularly conscious about what they chose to share and how they framed it. Moreover, because we did not conduct the interviews ourselves, we were unable to pose follow-up questions or probe for clarification. This also means we cannot fully assess the extent to which the interviewer may have influenced the direction or content of the narratives.

Lastly, the scope of our study was inevitably shaped by time constraints, which limited the possibility of conducting an even more extensive or in-depth exploration.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

We would also like to acknowledge the ethical sensitivity of our topic within the field of transnational organized crime. At the outset of the project, we consulted with our supervisor to ensure that the study was both appropriate and feasible within our university context.

We were aware that the interview material we analyzed contained potentially traumatic and criminal content. For this reason, we maintained an ongoing dialogue with one another about the experiences described in the interview podcasts and reflected on how engaging with such material affected our analytical process.

Furthermore, we made a conscious effort to avoid stereotypical portrayals of individuals involved in criminal activities or of the groups they belonged to. Although the interviews were publicly available, we approached the narratives with respect and caution. We considered it our responsibility to present these accounts with sensitivity and without moral judgement.

3.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the methodological foundation of our study. To examine how followers in transnational organized crime narrate their experiences and their relationships with leaders, we adopted a qualitative research design grounded in a social constructionist ontology (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This perspective assumes that reality is not fixed but constructed through interaction and meaning making, an assumption that aligns closely with our narrative material. Epistemologically, an interpretivist approach was most appropriate, as it acknowledges that knowledge about social reality is subjective and shaped by individuals lived experiences. Additionally, abductive reasoning enabled us to remain open and flexible throughout the research process, allowing us to move iteratively between empirical data and theoretical concepts as our understanding evolved.

We then described our data collection procedures, which involved analyzing podcast interviews with former criminals, and outlined our analytical strategy, guided by the *sorting-reducing-arguing* method proposed by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). This approach structured how we organized, refined, and interpreted the material.

Finally, we reflected on the limitations of our study and the ethical considerations inherent in researching a sensitive topic such as transnational organized crime.

4. Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, we present and analyze our empirical findings gathered from the podcast interviews. Our central findings suggest that followership in TOC emerges and develops over time through dynamic follower-leader relationships, in which followers' motivations are often attached to their leaders, the organization, or a group of influential members.

The analysis is structured in three parts, all oriented around our research question concerning how former members of TOC groups experienced followership in relation to their leaders. The first part explores how followership emerges and evolves within the entry process to TOC groups. The second part focuses on followership motivations and how they are attached (or not) to the relationship with the leader. The final part describes the types of follower-leader relationships we identified.

4.1 Followership within the Entry Process to TOC

When reflecting on their experiences as followers, former members of transnational organized crime groups often begin by describing how they first became involved in these organizations. These accounts provide relevant insights into how followership emerges and evolves in relation to leaders.

For instance, Tochito states that involvement with these criminal groups often starts within social interactions:

Usually it [entering a criminal group] is through friendships. I never saw a person who came like that on their own. I mean, at times it is during conversations, during events, at parties. There were some very big parties, many [music] groups, famous groups. - Tochito

Tochito explains that the introduction of new members into a criminal group is normally facilitated by existing members, who bring people they know to gatherings that are often informal and, at times, extravagant.

Oscar's personal account reinforces Tochito's general description:

[I entered] through a friend, out of necessity. I saw him in cars, I saw him armed. [...]. He invited me to have a drink, a cigarette, and talk. I listened to his conversations, and said, "no, this is not normal". Until one day I told him I wanted to be like him, "why don't you give me a job? Why don't you invite me?" [...]. That's how he took me there. They interviewed me. They told me how the [criminal] environment was, what it was about. At that time, I got in as a 'hawk'. - Oscar

Oscar describes his followership experience as a gradual process and primarily guided by someone close to him who was already a member. For instance, he identifies the individual's possessions, such as cars and guns, as well as their conversations, as influential factors in his decision to join. In addition, his account reveals that his followership initially developed toward a particular individual and later expanded to other members of the organization who assigned him a formal position within it.

Ramiro presents a broader view of this process:

You start with people who represent certain people. You start to get involved with them, you start doing the basic jobs, they say "get it [drugs], sell it to me". Then, one of them arrives and says, "there is a place here, associate with us", and along that line you start to make yourself known. - Ramiro

Similar to previous accounts, Ramiro portrays the involvement in organized crime groups as a process that is gradual and socially mediated. Furthermore, his account suggests that trust between leaders and followers is built through repeated demonstrations of reliability, beginning with low-level criminal tasks that later lead to greater opportunities within the organization.

On the other hand, Johanna reflects more critically on her experience:

I suppose that many organizations work in different ways, but when I found these people, in reality, they do not force you, they do not force you as such; rather they attract you, they attract you through people, and exactly what makes you vulnerable is your [drug] consumption. [...]. So, through that part I think it's how they infiltrate

[your mind] [...]. This girl and this guy who attracted me to this organization, they paint this perfect picture for you, and they see your economic lack. - Johanna

While Johanna describes her involvement in a criminal group because of manipulation exercised by some of its members, she reflects that her participation was not enforced. Her account suggests that her decision to join the group was influenced by members who presented an idealized and attractive image of the organization, which she interpreted as an opportunity to address the needs and vulnerabilities she was experiencing at the time. Thus, her engagement with the influential efforts of leaders appears to be mostly voluntary, although she now retrospectively interprets those efforts as manipulative.

Overall, based on the first accounts, we could argue that former members of TOC groups experience followership during their initial involvement with the organization mostly as an informal, gradual, and social process shaped by interactions with existing members. Through these interactions, followers' ideas, meanings, and understandings of criminality are influenced, primarily on a voluntary basis. In addition to conversations, elements such as extravagant parties, luxury goods, and weapons appear to play a role in this meaning-making process, functioning as symbols of status that contribute to constructing an idealized image of the organization and a social asymmetry between existing members and potential ones. Finally, our findings suggest that followership in TOC may begin before an individual is formally accepted into the organization, when formal positions have not yet been granted.

However, other accounts describe different patterns of entry into TOC groups. It is important to note that these patterns are generally found in the narratives of former hitwomen or hitmen, whose positions are characterized by high levels of violence.

For instance, Gabriela explains that her initial involvement with a TOC group was through a training program run by its members to prepare recruits for the role of hitwomen and hitmen, which she joined voluntarily. As part of this program, she experienced intense physical training, learned how to use weapons, and was required to commit acts of violence.

Well, at first you don't kill people. They give you something to take care of, like a pet, and then they tell you to kill it. At first, yes, I felt ugly, I started to feel bad, but

it was more and more, so that you no longer feel anything. [...]. You start to think about what you are doing, but at the same time they convince you. And little by little you start to stop feeling, because at one point it is to show that you can, more than others, more as a woman. So I didn't want to die from training. - Gabriela

Gabriela's account reveals a moral conflict that appears to be progressively diminished through trainers' coercive practices. She points out that her initial feeling toward killing was one of distress, a response that seems to have been reshaped by her trainers' active persuasion and repeated exposure to violence. Moreover, when she states, "*so I didn't want to die from training*", suggests that failing to demonstrate the ability to kill may have resulted in violent repercussions. This indicates that followership in TOC may initially emerge on a voluntary basis, but later it may be conflicted by the follower's moral boundaries, cases in which leaders apply gradual coercive practices to reduce any kind of resistance.

Gabriela later acknowledges that the training altered her behavior, resulting in an increase in the level of violence, which suggests that her personal values, and the ideas and beliefs of criminality were influenced during the training program:

Interviewer: Who is that Gabriela? Who is that woman who leaves the training? [...].

Gabriela: Well, I felt that I was the same. Like, as I told you, I was always angry and I always liked to hit, I always liked to take revenge. [...]. But now it was an extreme beyond anything I had ever reached before.

Like Gabriela, Beto also became involved in a criminal group through a training program. When he was nine years old and living on the streets, he was kidnapped and taken to a training field. There, he was held against his will and subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse at the hands of the trainers:

They kept me there for a year and three months, and not just me, doing exercise, damaging your mind, telling you that you're a piece of shit, that you're useless. [...]. I never took a shower. I was stinky. After a while my girlfriend couldn't stand the exercise and they killed her. - Beto

This account suggests that the trainers attempted to influence Beto's ideas, understandings, and even his identity through aggressive practices, including extreme physical exercises, verbal degradation, and intimidation. The combination of these practices and constant exposure to them appear to function as coercive mechanisms employed by the leaders to reinforce obedience.

Furthermore, Beto describes the training as a turning point in his life:

And from there my life as a criminal started. More than stealing [...] before I only stole. After that training, after so much shit that they put in my head, I started doing pure bullshit. But not because I wanted to. Because it was my life. - Beto

Beto recognizes that the training was a mechanism through which his ideas and perceptions about criminality were shaped, leading him to engage in forms of criminality beyond theft. Additionally, he emphasizes that these crimes were experienced not as voluntary actions, but as something imposed and inevitable.

Gabriela's and Beto's cases suggest that these systematic coercive practices debilitate followers' resistance and reinforce their obedience toward the leaders. Within this process, followers' values and identities are impacted, and their sense of personal agency is significantly reduced.

Comparing Gabriela's and Beto's followership processes with those described in earlier accounts, we can argue that followership in TOC groups may be experienced both voluntarily and through coercion. In addition, followership can be understood as a gradual process in which followers' ideas, beliefs, meanings, and understandings of criminality, as well as their values and identities, are often reshaped. In earlier cases, the recognition of a leader appears to develop informally through interpersonal dynamics, whereas in the latter cases it seems more closely tied to the trainers' formal authority within the organization. Furthermore, the emergence of followership as part of the entry process into TOC groups suggests that, given the nature of their activities, meaning-making attempts from leaders become relevant at early stages of criminal involvement, even before a follower formally becomes a member of the organization.

Throughout this section, we have presented how followership emerges and develops during the process of entry into TOC groups. In doing so, several accounts have already revealed elements that become central in the following section, in which we explore followers' motivations for

accepting such roles, and the extent to which these motivations are connected to their relationships with leaders.

4.2 Motivations for Followership

Across the interviews, former members of TOC groups describe diverse motivations for accepting follower roles. These motivations are often rooted in personal goals, needs, and desires that, in some cases, are fulfilled through their relationship with the leader, a group of influential members, or the organization itself. The exchanges that occur within these relationships appear to play a role in the social construction of follower-leader relationships.

For instance, throughout Orlando's interview, it becomes evident that his motivation for engaging in criminal activity was to avenge his brother's murder:

I went to Torrión to look for my dad, to get revenge on my dad and on all those who killed my brother. - Orlando

In the search for his brother's murderers, he met a man connected to a TOC group. In the following quote, he highlights the importance of this figure in facilitating his pursuit of revenge:

He trained me, he gave me my first weapon. In fact, he was helping me to kill each one of those who killed my brother and those who were close to my dad. Without lying to you, I killed about 19 people involved in my brother's case and close to my father. - Orlando

In Orlando's case, followership represented an opportunity to achieve a personal goal through the relationship between him and the leader. Their follower-leader dynamics become visible when Orlando explains that he received orders from the man to kill other people:

He put people for me to kill. He told me, "look, there is an extortionist on this side, there is a rapist on that side," and I went. - Orlando

A comparable pattern can be observed in Abraham's account. Abraham recounts what the man, who became his leader, said when offering him a position in a TOC group:

You're going to be my 'hawk', yes?, but at 12 at night I want you here in the house, you're going to come three times, three times you're going to eat, three times you're going to bathe, three times you're going to change clothes, whatever you have to do [...], and you come back to your job, to keep working, that's fine, [...] right here you are going to sleep. - Abraham

At that time, Abraham was living on the streets and often survived by eating from the trash. In this context, his willingness to follow this man's orders in exchange for food can be understood as primarily driven by survival.

Orlando's and Abraham's cases suggest that personal goals and material needs can play a role in the development of followers' relationships with leaders. Followers may be more inclined to accept a role when their leaders provide a means to fulfill them.

In contrast, other accounts reveal followers' personal motivations that do not appear to be linked to their relationship with the leader. This pattern is evident in Ali's account:

They saw that I was really efficient in what I was doing and, obviously, it wasn't that I was efficient. It was more that I was looking for a way out in my own life. I didn't have the courage to take my own life. I wanted to die, but I didn't want to die by my own hand. I wanted to die in battle. - Ali

Here, Ali emphasizes that he had proven to be a competent hitman, a quality that was appreciated by those who ordered him to kill. However, beyond the recognition he received, his motivation for following orders appears to have been driven by his desire to die, while the organization provided an environment in which that outcome could theoretically be achieved.

Similarly, Tochito highlights that what motivated him was the money he earned as a TOC accountant:

They arrive and offer me, "you know what? We offer you 100,000 per week", then it dazzled me, I had many needs. Well, I thought I'll join and tomorrow I'll go out after two or three months and that's it. They never forced me to stay, you know? I could have gone out or anything, I could have left whenever I wanted to. - Tochito

Tochito describes his motivation for followership as based on the personal needs that were covered by the monetary benefits he received from the organization in exchange for his work. Although his account reveals interactions with a group of members who offered him this financial compensation, his decision seems to have been driven primarily by the money rather than by those individuals.

In Ali's and Tochito's accounts, followership does not appear to be based on an exchange between follower and leader, but rather between the follower and the organization. This suggests that followers' motivations can sometimes be more closely tied to the possibilities associated with participation in the organization than to the follower-leader relationship itself.

An additional dimension to our analysis is provided by René's account. When he is asked by the interviewer how his life changed when he started to work with a TOC group, he answers:

[...] I was someone who could be in charge or who could coordinate things. Or others came close to me to ask "let's go there, they caused us trouble on this side. Come on, take us so you can defend us." It started giving me that position from that moment. Also being a leader, they give it to me. The people with whom I started to do the damage, they themselves give it to me. The other people [the neighbors] already knew that I got along with them, then they also knew that they could not mess with me. That gives you strength, it gives you power, it makes you believe that you are strong, to know that you will be able to be in charge and organize. - René

In this account, René highlights the benefits he derived from his association with this group, including a sense of authority, protection, and power among peers. It is important to note that these benefits appear to be socially produced through external recognition, based on the fear and respect that outsiders' feel toward the group. This suggests that followership motivations may be linked to a collective of influential members rather than to a single leader or to the organization, as in previous cases.

In sum, our findings reveal that motivations for accepting a follower role are diverse, including personal goals, needs, and desires. These motivations can be linked to a particular leader, to the organization itself or to influential groups within it. They also suggest that individuals may be more

likely to adopt follower roles when they find the opportunity to fulfill these motivations through their relationships with any of these actors.

The first section of the analysis served as a starting point for exploring the motivations for followership. Next, our focus will be on describing the types of relationships co-constructed between followers and leaders in TOC groups.

4.3 Social Construction of the Follower-Leader Relationship

Our analysis of the former TOC members' narratives revealed three analytically derived types of relationship between followers and leaders: personal, professional, and non-followers. This categorization provides a clearer framework for the next part of our study. It helps us understand how former TOC members experience followership differently, depending on the nature of their relationships with leaders, and how they co-construct these relationships.

In *personal* relationships, former members describe their bond with their leader as a friendship or familial connection. They experience emotional closeness, trust and loyalty. They care for the leader beyond organizational matters. Furthermore, their relationship often depends on reciprocity.

In *professional* relationships, members describe their connection with the leader as simply formal, by following orders and sticking to certain codes of conduct. These members also demonstrate respect for their leader's role and hierarchical structures within the TOC group. Many former TOC members associate their relationships with their leaders with punishment and coercion.

The *non-followers* are members whose relationships with their leaders shift over time, moving away from followership and toward a growing sense of aversion. They frame their relationship with their leaders as either non-existent or they challenge the leaders' orders. Although they are part of the TOC group, they do not develop loyalty or identification with the leader anymore. Rather, they are individuals who think for themselves and view their leaders as equals.

Before focusing on the three types of relationships, it is important to note that some followers can be categorized under multiple types. Therefore, we do not strictly adhere to the types, rather they

help us to gain a better understanding of how they make sense of their roles in relation to their leaders. Another point to note is that although former TOC members usually call their leaders ‘bosses’ or something similar, we will refer to them in the following as ‘leaders’ to keep it more general.

Personal Relationships

Alex’s account offers an illustration of this, as he describes the relationship towards his leader in the Cali Cartel the following:

Because I was also lost in the streets and then he would also, I mean, this guy, I could say that he was like a father to me. [...]. But this guy, I don’t know if he loved me so much, because my daughter had played with his daughters and he knew my family and he even met my mother. I mean, it was already so close. There was a bond there. - Alex

“*Lost in the streets*” shows a certain vulnerability of Alex and a lack of direction prior to meeting his leader. This positions the leader as someone who entered Alex’s life in a moment where he was in need. Furthermore, the comparison “*like a father to me*” shows the familial connection Alex felt towards his leader, indicating that their relationship exceeds a simple organizational hierarchy. The parts where Alex outlines that the leader knew his family and met his mother, additionally support a personal relationship. Finally, Alex’s claim that “*there was a bond there*”, explicitly frames the connection as intimate rather than formal.

Moreover, Alex states that he tattooed his leader’s name, which suggests that he most probably saw his leader as a person of importance in his life.

At the end of the interview, Alex recalls that he was a drug addict and that his leader tried to get him clean once. He states:

He would pay a hotel and doctors and they would put me in with, you know, what do you call that? [...] . There were IVs, fluids and all that crap [put] in me to try to get me clean and, or at least to survive. - Alex

He then talks about never getting clean, but that he would still work for his leader:

[...]. But I was doing jobs. Whatever he asked me to do, I would do and I would do it really good. And he really just trusted me for that. - Alex

The first quote shows on one hand that his leader cared for Alex as he would try to get him clean. It indicates that also from the leader's side, the interest in the relationship goes beyond a professional connection and that in this case the leader acts more like a caregiver. Furthermore, the second quote illustrates that Alex shows loyalty and that he is ready to repay his leader's care through dedication and obedience. Also, in return for that he receives trust from his leader.

All these quotes by Alex suggest a reciprocal bond between him and his leader based on emotional attachment, loyalty and care.

This dynamic between Alex and his leader is similarly visible in Beto's account. After the interviewer asked him how he got an apartment at 11 years old, Beto states that it was his leader and that he sees him as a friend.

I would say he was my friend because regardless of all of that I could tell him my things. These days I received a hug, words of encouragement, a "here we are", and with that I felt like a superhero I felt important. At least I felt that guy cared. I was his puppet if you want to see him like that. But in those moments I felt important. I felt loved for the first time. - Beto

Something new that Beto's account shows compared to Alex's is that he was able to talk to his leader about "his things." This suggests a level of openness and trust. Additionally, the words of encouragement he received from his boss and the physical gesture of a hug show that these forms of attention had an impact for Beto, as they made him feel like a "superhero." These points reflect a feeling of recognition and belonging. Beto mentioning that he felt cared for and loved, further underlines this feeling. It appears that he had not experienced such feelings before, which may

explain why, despite him acknowledging manipulation in the phrase *“I was his puppet”*, he still values the sense of love and importance he received.

This highlights how, within the personal bond, empathy and dependency can coexist with and enable control.

The last account to be considered in the personal relationship type is that of Abraham. He recalls about his leader:

I was 14. When I met my ray of light, he was 23 years old, [...] he has my respect, I can't say much about him [...], a lot of respect. He's like my father, my brother, he's everything to me these days. - Abraham

Similar to Alex and Beto, Abraham sees his leader as his friend and father, which shows the multiple familial connection he feels towards him. The reason he is calling his leader his *“ray of light”* is because Abraham grew up on the streets, with almost no food and addicted to drugs. He encountered his leader, who had noticed him on the street and who had given him 200 pesos. At a later stage his leader found him again asking what he was doing. Abraham replied:

I tell him, “surviving, surviving”, he said “stop that, come on, get in,” I get in, [...], the same person, the ray of sunshine. I tell him the same, the ray of sun that lit me up. - Abraham

After that, Abraham reflects:

He took me out of the garbage, and from there, believe me, he helped me to form my family, not to form a family, but to get a girl. - Abraham

These narrative points are a sign of appreciation and a lifesaving memory. Abraham calls his leader his *“ray of light”* and later *“the ray of sun that lit me up”*. This metaphor illustrates the leader as a person of rescue in a life that he beforehand described as hopeless. When Abraham says, *“surviving, surviving”*, he emphasizes existence over living. The leader's response further reinforces the notion of rescue, as Abraham is invited to come inside.

The part where Abraham states that his leader took him out of the garbage is strong for the relationship as he perceived his life worthless before meeting his leader. For Abraham, his leader filled an affective necessity in his life.

In conclusion, across all three accounts it becomes clear that the relationships former TOC members have with their leaders are not purely transactional, rather emotions, trust, and personal bonds play a central role in shaping them. Leadership takes on a caregiving quality; relationships are grounded in reciprocity and empathy; and dependency and closeness are not contradictions but coexist naturally. What underlies these relationships is a need for recognition and a sense of belonging.

Professional Relationships

In contrast to the personal relationships that Alex, Beto and Abraham had with their leaders, a more formal and hierarchical dynamic is also evident in our findings. These relationships are characterized by the giving and receiving of orders, and the punishment of disobedience. Several of the former TOC members talk about certain codes of conduct they are obliged to follow, and which are imposed by their leaders. The codes include rules, like no killing of women and children or never killing without the permission of a superior.

For instance, Bocanegra narrates that he always had to ask for permission before he was killing someone. He states: *“I just remember that I went where I had to go, I dialed the phone, I asked for permission, they told me, “yes”. [...], because I never killed anyone without permission.”*

This illustrates that there are rules to follow and that Bocanegra must ask his leaders for authorization. This is an example of a formal relationship, with Bocanegra respecting the role of his leaders. His communication with them is task-oriented, not personal. He is positioning himself as a subordinate who follows orders from above.

Similarly to Bocanegra, Oscar also follows the rules he has been given. In one of his accounts, he describes an event where he and a group of hitmen were in a car, ready to carry out a killing. As they approached the target, he noticed children nearby. Realizing that harming children would

violate the organization's code of conduct, he accelerated the car, thus preventing the order from being carried out.

Afterwards his leader invites him for a talk. He recalls the following about it:

I was already hooked, in front of the boss. They had me sitting like this, hooked. "Why did I fail?" So, I told them, I asked them, "why did that happen?" [...]. "Yes", he said, "I told you which were the codes, how was the business." Well, at that moment, you feel fear, because you're out of control, you're shaking, why me, if I hadn't made a mistake. But no, I mean, the three that were behind, even my partner, who was involved, he [the boss] executed them at that moment, and he made the others see that it was the code, that it was what he wanted. - Oscar

Oscar then further explains that after this incident he starts respecting his leader even more and that he is proud of himself following the codes. He thinks that his boss, *"because of the codes. Because of how he was. He was respected a lot."*

Oscar, being brought in front of his leader, signals the hierarchical nature of their relationship. It reflects his role as a follower. His leader's reference to the codes and his expectation that they be followed further underlines the organizational nature of their relationship. Even though Oscar followed the codes, his physical reaction, shaking and feeling out of control, demonstrates his subordination. Oscar witnesses firsthand the consequences of violating the codes, in this case the use of violence as a disciplinary instrument. Notably, rather than distancing himself from his leader after this experience, Oscar describes feeling an increased sense of respect and pride in having upheld the code. Pride draws him closer to his leader rather than away from it.

The consequences and intimidation that occurred when the codes of the follower-leader relationship were not followed, as described by Oscar, can also be observed in other accounts.

For instance, Ali recalls that if you don't follow orders *"you'll get the tablet [A tablet is something similar to a cricket bat]."*

René's account further illustrates this. He says that his leaders have put codes in place to prevent drug theft and the harming of women and children. If these codes are violated, you are punished.

In fact, if you made a mistake for having the power [to steal drugs] [...]. You couldn't do it, because then they punished you. The cheapest was to punish you. The other was to disappear, because there were codes of respect. If you went to a house and there were children and women, let's go, let's go, let's go. It's not our thing. -
René

René describes a structure that is governed by rules and “*codes of respect*.” He also states that if the codes are not followed, he can at least expect to be punished by his leaders or even be excluded from the group. This shows that he is very aware of this and that there is no room for error. The example also implies a strict hierarchy between followers and leaders.

In conclusion, it is evident that the relationships between followers and leaders in this context are structured around hierarchy, formal rules, and the implementation of codes. While obedience is often reinforced through the threat of punishment and fear, these same codes also define clear boundaries for behavior. As a result, this establishes the leader's rules as the standard that members are expected to uphold. However, as Oscar's narrative shows, this formal structure does not rely only on coercion and fear, it can also generate respect for the leader.

Non-Followers

While the accounts discussed this far illustrate relationships shaped by personal and professional characteristics, some followers underwent transitions during their time as followers. At a later stage of their follower journey, these individuals distance themselves from their leaders, no longer attached by an emotional connection or personal motivations, and unwilling to obey or accept their subordinate position. We refer to these individuals as non-followers.

We focus on this change within the follower-leader relationship, because we believe it plays a crucial role in fully understanding the followership experiences of former TOC members. It underlines that the relationship between followers and leaders is not static but evolving, and that as the contextual factors and followers' personal motivations change, the follower-leader relationships may change as well.

Beto, whom we encountered earlier in the personal relationship section, serves as an example of this transition. He narrates an episode in which he disobeyed direct orders of his leader's bosses. He was told to kill his leader, because he was in their way. Beto's reaction to this was the following:

And since my boss had been so nice to me [...], I went and told him to escape. That they were going to kill him. That he wasn't useful anymore. - Beto

We can see that Beto has fond memories of his leader, as he remembers him being kind and caring. Beto's attempt to warn his leader reflects once again their personal relationship.

By warning his leader instead of killing him, he prioritizes his personal relationship with his leader over his professional relationship with his leader's bosses. This makes him a non-follower of his leader's bosses while maintaining personal loyalty to his leader. This suggests that it might be easier or more likely to become a non-follower when there is a professional relationship rather than a personal one.

A comparable account is that of Ali, whom we also encountered earlier in the context of the professional relationship type. At the beginning of his career as a hitman, he reflects that the job for him was all about getting it done. He states:

But I always put my mind or fix my mindset that it was just a job. It's nothing personal. I'm just there to do a job because obviously I want to continue my career in this. Because they gave me the opportunity to demonstrate who I was, so I wasn't about to let them down. - Ali

Later he states after his leaders asked him to kill two of his own subordinates [Ali rose up in the hierarchy after some time, becoming an 'area boss' himself]:

They're like, "do you have these two individuals there?" I'm like, "yeah, why? What's going on?" [They said,] "Cut them up into pieces." [I said,] "No, I don't do that to the people that are working with me. I'm not going to do that. " For me, it was morally incorrect. You live to work with me, and you've shown me loyalty and for someone else to call me and give me a stupid reason just to cut you up and use your body as a message for rivals, come on! - Ali

This transformation of obedience into disobedience is a clear example of how a relationship between a follower and leader can change over time and that the followers' motivations may have an effect on this change. At the beginning, Ali wanted to demonstrate his skills and usefulness, and he tried to remember that *"it was just a job. It was nothing personal."* Also, him not wanting to let down his leaders and him wanting to have a career in this job, show that it was important for him and that he cared about his leaders' opinion. Nevertheless, later, when he became a kind of leader himself, he was not ready anymore to listen to everything his leaders had to say.

Orlando, who also worked as a hitman, is another example of being a follower always obeying his leaders' orders, as he describes *"as soon as he told me, I grabbed my equipment, which was my gun and my vest, and I went and killed them."* Eventually Orlando described:

One day I told him that I didn't want to belong to his cartel [...]. I thanked him, but the truth is that I hate people who belong to a cartel. [...]. I grabbed my own way and everything. And I went to rent a house. It was how I started to meet guys who were dedicated to the same thing. They were not hitmen, but independent. - Orlando

Here, Orlando transitions from passively following to actively determining his own path. His statement towards his leader is his first step away from the professional relationship with his leader. His saying he hates people who belong to a cartel indicates that he does not feel any connection to them, hence he does not see the need to work for them. That he is going his own way shows how he seeks to find a way outside the hierarchical structure he was inside of.

Furthermore, Orlando added:

I had the mentality that I said, well, why am I going to listen to an asshole who is just as stupid as me, right? - Orlando

Here Orlando openly questions why he should follow his leader's orders at all, a clear sign of stepping out of his subordinate role. Rather than accepting the hierarchy, he positions himself as an equal, no longer seeing his leader as someone with greater authority or capability than himself. Furthermore, it is important to note that, as mentioned in the second section of this chapter, Orlando's personal motivation was avenging his brother's death. A goal that he achieved with the

help of his leader. This suggests that once a follower covers his/her personal needs or motivations, the follower-leader relationship may be redefined.

The last testimony in this type of relationship is Tere. At the time, she was paying a regular amount of money to her leader to keep her drug-selling business open. She described a situation in which her leader asked her how long she intended to keep the business running. She replied:

I said, "the time I want, because I pay, you receive, but I also have to put conditions. That is, you are not going to forbid me to do this, this and this." He said "no, it is not convenient for me that you have your business open, you close it." I said, "it is not convenient for me to close it because I just invested, so you have to wait." - Tere

She continued operating the business and making payments for several weeks. After this period, she decided that she no longer wanted to continue paying and stopped. When the interviewer commented that this meant the leader's power had prevailed, Tere responded: *"no, it is that you have to negotiate."*

Tere said that the decision was hers to make because she was paying her leader. In her view, this payment did not grant him unlimited authority, rather, it gave her the right to set certain conditions regarding what she would and would not accept.

Tere openly challenges her leader and attempts to negotiate with him, though the interview leaves it unclear whether she succeeds. What distinguishes her from the other accounts discussed above is the nature of her resistance. Rather than pushing back emotionally, refusing to follow orders or retreating from the relationship altogether, she engages with her leader's authority strategically. Her account reveals that their relationship was not one of simple submission, but a negotiation over power, control and autonomy.

In conclusion, the accounts demonstrate that follower-leader relationships are not fixed, but they can be renegotiated, resisted, or even abandoned by the followers when personal motivations or moral boundaries change. Furthermore, it can be argued that personal relationships tend to outlast professional ones. Lastly, Tere's account suggests that when followers perceive themselves as

equals to their leaders, they may disengage more strategically, maintaining the relationship only insofar as it continues to serve their interests.

4.4 Chapter Summary

In our analysis, we explored the experiences of former TOC members in their role as followers and in their relationships with their leaders, from three different perspectives. Firstly, we explored how followership emerges and develops within the entry process into TOC groups. Secondly, we focused on the motivations of former TOC members to become followers. Lastly, we presented the types of follower-leader relationships that we identified.

We found that followership in TOC develops through different pathways, whether voluntary or coercive. In all cases, however, it is a gradual, socially constructed process shaped by ongoing meaning-making between followers and leaders, which begins even before formal membership. Furthermore, we found that followership in TOC is shaped by personal motivations that can be fulfilled through the relationships with leaders, a collective of influential members, or the organization itself, increasing the likelihood that individuals will assume follower roles. Finally, follower-leader relationships in TOC are dynamic and co-constructed. These relationships can range from personal bonds marked by emotional closeness, trust, loyalty, and reciprocity to professional connections characterized by formal compliance, respect for hierarchy, and adherence to codes of conduct. They can also take the form of resistant stances, in which members distance themselves from their leaders, challenge authority, and no longer identify with or feel loyalty toward them. These relationships are shaped by emotional bonds, instrumental interests, and coercive power. They can also shift over time as members' experiences evolve within the TOC context.

In the next chapter of our study, we explore how our findings relate to current research.

5. Discussion

This study set out to explore how former members of transnational organized crime experienced their roles as followers in relation to their leaders. Through a qualitative analysis of video-podcast interviews, and guided by a constructionist perspective and interpretivist framework, we identified three key patterns: the emergence and development of followership during the process of entering TOC, the motivations for followership, and the socially constructed nature of follower-leader relationships over time. The discussion that follows interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, advancing the theoretical conversation at the intersection of followership studies, leadership theory, and criminological research on transnational organized crime.

5.1 Followership in a Criminal Context

One of the central findings of this study is that followership in TOC can be understood as a gradual process over time that develops through social interactions, either voluntarily or through coercion, and may emerge even before an individual is formally accepted into the organization.

This finding aligns with Alvesson et al.'s (2017, p.8) conceptualization of leadership as a social process involving asymmetrical relationships that may be formal or informal, temporary or enduring, but not merely momentary. (p.8). Our data suggests that these interactions may occur in informal settings, such as gatherings with friends or parties, although more formal interactions, including hitwomen/hitmen training, may also play a role. In informal contexts, asymmetry between followers and leaders is often co-constructed through symbols of status, such as luxury items and guns, as illustrated in Oscar's account. In more formal settings, however, asymmetry is reinforced through organizational positions, such as those of trainers and trainees. The temporal dimension is identified, for instance in Gabriela's account when she explains that her feelings toward killing changed "*little by little*", suggesting that her beliefs and values were influenced over time. These findings challenge Chopin & Dupont's (2025, p.530) thinking of leadership in criminal contexts as a trait located in an individual or a group. Instead, the findings support a reconceptualization of criminal leadership as a relational process of "meaning-making and reality-definition" (Alvesson et al. 2017, p.8).

Our analysis also suggests that followership in TOC cannot be fully understood if the exercise of coercive power is ignored. Following Alvesson et al. 's (2017, pp.16-17) proposal to approach leadership critically by distinguishing it from coercive power, we initially focused our research on influencing processes within TOC that appeared to be mostly voluntary, which, as our analysis demonstrates, were indeed present. However, we also identified several experiences of followership, such as those of Gabriela and Beto, that were driven by leaders' coercion, not only as a way of reducing followers' resistance, but also as a meaning-making mechanism. As a result of our initial intention to move beyond an exclusive focus on coercive forms of influence, our study highlights how both leadership and coercive power may contribute to the emergence of followership, without treating them as synonymous. This contrasts with Chopin & Dupont's (2025, p.530) conceptualization of criminal leaders that imply that their influential attempts occur through coercion or manipulation only. For us, this definition also draws attention to the moral dimension of leadership, which in criminal contexts is often assumed to be inherently negative, a topic that cannot be fully addressed within the limits of our analysis.

Finally, the findings suggest that followership may begin before an individual is formally accepted into the organization, which aligns with constructionist studies that emphasize that follower-leader interactions "might or might not coincide with formal hierarchical roles" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p.90; Alvesson et al. 2017, p.62). This is particularly evident in Oscar's account, in which he 'follows' in his friend's footsteps prior to being offered a 'hawk' position. In our view, this represents a novel contribution to constructionist literature and emphasizes the analytical value of engaging with unconventional organizational settings such as TOC. Organizational research often overlooks illicit organizations, although some of them, such as TOC organizations, mirror lawful business structures in most respects (UNODC, 2018). As this study demonstrates, incorporating such organizations can extend the understanding of leadership and followership in informal contexts.

5.2 Motivations for Followership: Questioning the Centrality of the Leader

A second major finding concerns the motivations underlying individuals' acceptance of follower roles within TOC groups. Our analysis reveals that these motivations are diverse and that they are not always fulfilled by a particular leader but may instead be attached to the organization itself or to a group of influential members. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that individuals may be more inclined to adopt follower roles when their relationships with these actors provide opportunities to satisfy such motivations.

This finding resonates with Alvesson and Spicer's (2011, p.18) argument that leadership research often faces the problem of over-attributing organizational outcomes to the leader while overlooking alternative explanations. During our analysis, we found ourselves assuming that followership is necessarily directed toward a leader, although our findings challenged this suggesting that followership could be linked to other actors. For instance, Ali described his motivation for followership based on his desire to die, which he found possible to achieve through his participation in the organization. Similarly, René's motivation for followership was linked to the sense of power and protection he derived from being associated with a group feared and respected by outsiders.

The latter case is particularly significant because our analysis does not clearly establish whether this influential group could be understood as a group of leaders. In this regard, Alvesson et al. 's (2017, p.21) concept of "medium influential people" provides a useful analytical lens. They argue that MIPs may organize in groups and thereby constitute a stronger source of influence and control than a single "high influential person" (2017, p.21). In this case, leadership and followership are still present, but in a more horizontal and collective form. Following this perspective, the influential group associated with René could be understood as a group of MIPs doing the work of a leader.

Moreover, followers' inclination to assume such roles when interactions with these actors offer opportunities to fulfil their motivations supports DeRue & Ashford's (2010, pp. 630-632) argument that followers' identities are socially constructed through a "claiming" and "granting" process at individual, relational and collective levels. This is further elaborated in the next section

of our discussion, connecting it to the follower-leader relationship types that we identified through our analysis.

Overall, we argue that the emergence and development of followership in TOC cannot always be attributed to the efforts of a leader. Rather, other factors, including personal motivations and other influential actors, also play a significant part. Taken together, these findings extend existing criminal literature on leadership decapitation (Chopin & Dupont, 2025, pp. 539-540; Calderón et al. 2015, pp. 1455-1485) providing a broader perspective on the conditions that may contribute to the endurance of TOC organizations. Therefore, we suggest that criminal leadership research would benefit from integrating a constructionist perspective, thereby reducing the risk of over-attributing the endurance of TOC organizations to the actions of a single leader.

5.3 The Co-Construction of Follower-Leader Relationships

A third major finding of our analysis is that follower-leader relationships are neither homogeneous nor static. Over time, the interplay between individual motivations, leaders, and other influential factors shapes the process of becoming a follower and gives rise to different types of follower-leader relationships. From our analysis, we derived three follower-leader relationship types in TOC: personal, professional, and non-follower. Personal relationships were found in the accounts from Alex, Beto, and Abraham, who described their leaders as caregivers and parental figures. These relationships were characterized by emotional closeness, loyalty, familial connection, and reciprocity. In contrast, the experiences described by Bocanegra, Oscar, Ali, and René reflected more formal follower-leader dynamics structured around hierarchy and codes of conduct, which we categorized as professional relationships. Finally, non-follower relationships referred to situations in which followers exited the leaders' influence or challenged their orders. The accounts of Beto, Ali, Orlando, and Tere demonstrated that follower-leader relationships in TOC can be actively negotiated, resisted, or abandoned over time.

The formulation of this relational typology allowed us to focus more closely on the follower-leader dynamics, making the individual and relational dimensions of identity construction more salient (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, pp.629-30). For instance, when Orlando explains his exit from the

follower-leader relationship by stating, “*why am I going to listen to an asshole who is just as stupid as me, right?*”, it illustrates that a leader’s identity is constructed not only by projecting the image of a leader, but it also depends on others “mirroring back and reinforcing (or not) that image as a legitimate identity” (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, cited in DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p.630). A similar process unfolds during the follower’s identity social construction. Following DeRue and Ashford’s (2010) leadership identity framework, when Orlando stopped “claiming” a follower position, although the leader was willing to continue “granting” him one, the co-construction of the follower’s identity failed (p.634). Therefore, this is an example that confirms that the identity of followers and leaders go beyond an individual’s self-concept, becoming reciprocal and mutually reinforced (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p.627).

Furthermore, it is important to note that the development of these follower-leader relationship types led us to reconsider the typologies already proposed in studies grounded in a role-based approach, such as Kelley’s (1988, cited in Alegbeleye, 2026, p.67), Chaleff’s (2009, cited in Alegbeleye, 2026, p.67), and Alegbeleye’s (2026). However, although these typologies challenge the assumption that followers are homogeneous and provide a more nuanced understanding of them, their categorizations remain too rigid to fully capture the complexities of followership, especially within unconventional organizational contexts such as TOC. This emphasizes the relevance of continuing to study followership and leadership through a constructionist approach, which may provide theoretical frameworks that are better suited to understand the ambiguities and complexities involved in these social processes.

6. Conclusion

The study aimed to understand the followership experiences of former TOC members in relation to the leader. To explore this question, we applied a social constructionist approach and used narrative video-podcasts as our empirical database. It can be concluded that followership in TOC is neither a fixed role nor a passive experience, but rather a gradual, socially constructed process that develops through asymmetrical relationships over time, is driven by diverse motivations not always tied to a single leader, and appears as a set of dynamic relationships between followers and leaders, that are shaped, negotiated, and at times resisted.

The following chapter outlines the theoretical contributions of our research and reflects on potential future research opportunities.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Our study makes several theoretical contributions at the intersection of followership studies, leadership theory, and criminological research on transnational organized crime.

First, it advances constructionist understandings of followership by conceptualizing it as a socially constructed and temporally unfolding process that may begin prior to formal organizational entry. While constructionist leadership theory emphasizes relational meaning-making (Alvesson et al. 2017), followership research has rarely examined how such processes emerge in illicit contexts. By demonstrating that followership may emerge before individuals formally join TOC groups, the study extends existing theory by introducing the notion of pre-entry followership as a relevant analytical category.

Second, the study challenges leader-centric assumptions that dominate both organizational and criminological research. Whereas much of the literature implicitly assumes that followership is oriented toward a single identifiable leader (Chopin & Dupont, 2025), the findings show that motivations for followership may be directed toward organizations, collective influential members, or other sources of influence. By drawing on Alvesson et al.'s (2017) distinction

between HIPs and MIPs, the study demonstrates that collective influence structures can sustain followership even in the absence of a central leader. This insight contributes to theoretical debates on leadership decapitation (Calderón et al. 2015) by explaining why the removal of individual leaders does not necessarily disrupt organizational continuity.

Third, the study advances relational perspectives on follower-leader dynamics by showing that these relationships are fluid, negotiated, and subject to change over time. Rather than treating follower and leader roles as stable or complementary, the study conceptualizes them as relational positions that can shift between personal, professional, and resistant forms. This contributes to followership theory by highlighting the dynamic interplay of emotional, instrumental, and coercive dimensions within follower-leader relationships, and it enriches criminological understandings of authority in TOC by demonstrating that compliance and resistance are not fixed states but evolving relational processes.

Together, these contributions deepen the understanding of how former TOC members experience followership in relation to their leaders by showing that such experiences are shaped by early socialization, diverse motivations, and shifting relational dynamics within TOC contexts.

6.2 Future Research

Our study has several limitations that provide opportunities for future research. Much remains to be explored to fully comprehend the complexities revealed by our study. Rather than aiming for broad applicability, our research focused on the experiences of former criminals in the Latin American context. While this can be seen as a strength, future studies could expand the geographical scope to study the social construction of follower-leader relationships in other criminal groups, such as European or Asian ones. This would allow researchers to identify which of our findings are Latin American specific and which might point toward more general dynamics.

Also, within the Latin American context, we believe there is much more to discover. We found that each individual has a unique story and that generalizing those into categories is nearly impossible. As outlined in the methodology section, we would like to emphasize that the number

of appropriate podcast episodes was limited due to the criteria we defined based on the scope of our research. And therefore, for further study we suggest including a larger sample of interviewees to expand the range of narratives. We would suggest researchers obtain firsthand accounts from former criminals, through for example ethnographic fieldwork, where they would have repeated access over time. This would enable follow-up questioning, relationship-building between former members and researchers, and access to more unguarded accounts, deepening the analytical depth.

Nevertheless, we recognize that this presents both an ethical and safety challenge that may be difficult to overcome. For participants, detailed disclosures risk exposing them to retaliation within their networks, undermining any guarantee of confidentiality. For researchers, operating near active or former criminal actors carries genuine physical danger. These challenges do not render such research impossible, but they require careful ethical preparation and safety infrastructure.

Another interesting area for future research would be to explore the co-construction of follower-leader relationships in other types of crimes, such as white-collar crime, to determine which factors play a role. Since coercion and violence are absent in such contexts, this comparison could reveal whether the follower-leader dynamics we observed are specific to TOC or reflect more universal mechanisms of influence and compliance.

The following section outlines opportunities for future research based on our study's findings. One intriguing question is whether leadership is a necessary condition for followership in the TOC context as defined here. Some of the followers in our study constructed meaning around their role without the leader occupying a central or significant position. Therefore, future work could shift the focus more deliberately onto the followers themselves, examining how they navigate and enact their roles within TOC directions with greater attention to the processes of identity construction that underpin this.

Another direction concerns an aspect that we set aside in the present study: the power and management concepts that can emerge alongside leadership, more precisely how they overlap with leadership. Although we did not highlight these concepts, our findings revealed that coercion and management play a significant role in shaping the relationship between leaders and followers. This interplay requires closer examination. Future research could approach the leader-follower

relationship through this lens by exploring how power and management intersect with and blur into the exercise of leadership in TOC.

In conclusion, research on followership remains a relatively young and emerging field. Moreover, we believe that stereotypes continue to play a crucial role in the field of TOC. We encountered these ourselves and recognize that we held some of them prior to conducting this study. Therefore, addressing this is an important area for future research. It may provide valuable insights for legitimate organizations, particularly when focusing on followership within the TOC context. This area has received very limited scholarly attention to date. Consequently, this highlights a broad range of opportunities for future inquiry and there is substantial potential for novel and meaningful contributions. We hope that this study can serve as a useful foundation for future research.

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