

Interview with Martín Hernán Di Marco



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Martín Hernán Di Marco is a PhD candidate in Social Sciences from Buenos Aires University (UBA), Argentina. He completed his degree in Sociology in UBA and he currently has teaching positions in the Faculties of Social Sciences and Law (UBA) and in the Health Sciences Department (UNLaM). His research

interests include violence and violent deaths, public health, socio-cultural epidemiology, the biographical method and data triangulation. His PhD project is focused on the analysis of social and institutional trajectories of men who have committed homicide in the outskirts of Buenos Aires Capital City.

Matej Vinko: It's not every day that we host an Argentinian researcher. How did you get to come to Slovenia?

Martin Hernán Di Marco: I came with a scholarship from ASEF (American Slovenian Education Foundation). I found out about it from the website of the Slovenian Embassy in Argentina. These scholarships are designed either for Slovenians or people with Slovenian heritage who want to do an academic exchange. I have been here for two months and I plan to come back, depending on some projects we are setting up with my mentor in Slovenia, Dr Tit Albreht. These two months helped me to get to know how public health works in Slovenia and, more specifically, contributed to getting acquainted with programmes and projects related to violence and violent deaths. For instance, I found two particularly interesting projects. One is related to suicide, as a violent cause of mortality, and addresses this topic through four pillars: gatekeepers, community, means, and media. Considering the change in the epidemiology of suicide in the country over the last 2 decades, the effectiveness and implementation of this approach seems extremely interesting. The other one is led by Dr Jasna Podreka from the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Arts, and deals with femicide - intentional killing of women. I found this study truly fascinating, as it resembles the kind of research I am currently conducting in Buenos Aires.

V: Your research is on homicides; what got you into this field?

M: I would have to say that violence is quite a popular topic in Latin American universities, or academia in general. Most of the empirical studies are from the Social Sciences. And there is quite a lot of research and data - statistical, criminological, anthropological, judicial, or law-related in general. But there are only a few studies that deal with violence as a public health problem that shapes the epidemiological profile of a country. Latin American countries have higher rates of violence, in particular homicides, in comparison with European countries. During my master's course in epidemiology, I started looking at how this phenomenon was approached in academia. In epidemiology, violence is often looked at from a statistical perspective and the risk factor paradigm, which has a lot of advantages, of course. You get to know historical trends, major structural variables that help researchers, and policy makers understand how this phenomenon is configured. But this information still does not contribute to the understanding of what triggers violent actions. So, I am following a specific line of enquiry focused on studying some usually overlooked aspects. One of these has to do with the meaning of actions - what is the meaning embedded in violent actions (from hitting to killing someone). This is a crucial aspect of my research, as it focuses on the key component to understand perpetrators of homicide, for instance. And the second dimension, which is equally important - but less often examined - are life stories. So we have some information about gender, family structure and educational background of perpetrators, but we still don't know how these aspects intertwine with a life story. A life story



basically means a trajectory that describes how you have perceived your own upbringing, the institutions that you were in contact with, the social networks that shaped your life course, etc. I am specifically interested in finding out how life stories are connected with structural situations. In order to do this, I need to be face to face with perpetrators of homicide.

V: That is indeed quite an interesting take on violence and has only been employed in public health recently. What kind of methods do you use in your research?

M: I apply a mixed-methods approach, using two main types of data. First, statistical data from epidemiological and criminological sources. This data allows a broad understanding of some trends, such as the higher incidence of homicide amongst young men from marginalised neighbourhoods. But since these sources have poor quality and the under-registration is considerably high, I am also conducting biographical interviews, which basically implies an attempt to reconstruct the life trajectory of homicide perpetrators through their own narrative. There are actually two main approaches in biographical studies, life stories and life histories. Life histories focus on events that have happened in the life of a person, for instance attending school, jobs and changes in economic situation, characteristics and changes in social networks, etc. On the other hand, life stories focus on how this person interprets, sees and interacts with all these processes and events. We need to know why and how a person interprets the acts, otherwise we will not be able to truly understand the social processes behind a homicide rate. I am using narrative interviews which is a type of unstructured interview where the main point is not to guide the conversation (that would happen with a previously-established set of questions). Conducting structured and standardised interviews would result in data that has already been organised in a certain way, with some topics stressed and some other topics neglected. In prison - where I conduct most of my interviews - this is crucial. There are typified discourses in prisons on what should be said and what shouldn't. Therefore, the main idea is to let the interviewees talk and let them decide and structure the speech in their own terms. That is sometimes quite different from what we might think.

V: Let's stop at the effect of the institutions for a bit. One is the effect of the institution on the discourse

that arises within the institution - in your case the prison. What did you have in mind when talking about institutions within life stories?

M: There is a mainstream and perhaps old-fashioned theory about the lack of institutionality or institutions in everyday life as the main condition for higher levels of violence. In addition, this might be linked to anomy, or some might even suggest that it is directly related to violence. This theory lacks a proper explanation and certainly does not allow an in-depth understanding of the process. In this theory, which is still quite strong in certain countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, the idea is that a lack of institutions allows or does not control the way people interact. That would be the simplest way to put it. And it also allows other informal institutions to gain power or domain in the neighbourhoods. For instance, the stereotypical idea of mafia, the mob in favelas or in villas, which are Argentinian shantytowns. And I am not sure if that is the case. Because these institutions are actually present - by an actual presence or by omission. And they still have interactions. A clear example is the police, who might reinforce violent processes. Perhaps the question here is not if there are institutions, or not, in everyday life, but how are they present, what processes are taking place around them, and how the interaction between people and institutions shape the violent practices.

V: While you are doing a qualitative approach, you get to evaluate the effect of different determinants or factors that affect behaviour. What is often lacking are approaches to quantify these relationships. Although there have been some advances in quantitative research on intersectionality in public health recently. Have you encountered similar research in your field?

M: I would say it is not an epistemological problem between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. It is a problem, and currently in Argentina it is also my problem, of a lack of adequate data to analyse or operationalise my questions. I have encountered studies that try to "measure" with quantitative methods, life courses of homicide perpetrators and risk factors of homicide. The question here is: can I answer my question with that approach? Usually, quantitative methodologies are quite structured and, thus, eliminate the possibility of actual induction. So you will not get to the same key point. You have some epidemiological studies that are more focused on social network and social capital analysis, and then

you have some research on life courses, but they do not usually emphasise or examine meaning. So you do not get to comprehend what an individual is feeling, sensing, and signifying.

V: We've been talking quite a lot about homicide and we've mentioned violence many times. How would you separate perpetrators of homicide and perpetrators of domestic violence, or violence in general? Is there such a thing that separates those two groups?

M: I would say there are quite a few hypotheses about it. In the first place, these forms of violence respond to different situations, and cannot be explained mechanically as a group. Although analysing them as a whole might give a broad view of violence in general, it will not allow us to study and prevent these actions specifically. I believe that the idea of laws that explain human conduct homogeneously, have been quite detrimental to the idea of science. Secondly, violence is an everyday action and it depends on how it is defined. This is one of the most crucial conceptual problems about this topic: there is no clear, unambiguous and transcultural definition of violence. Physical violence is, in some cases, easier to define, but still complicated. Maybe that is the clearest way to divide these populations: these phenomena are defined differently by social actors. Another differentiating aspect is that before analysing homicide and violent acts, we need a process to learn violence. People who perpetrate homicide have learned how to perform physical violence. So not everyone is equally likely to carry out a violent action. You need to learn it somehow and that is a key point - to learn how to. That is actually one of the explanations on why women do not carry out violent actions as much as men do. Women are not "socialised" to be as violent as men. We are socialised in different ways. That is probably why men are committing more homicides worldwide and being more physically violent in general. That could be the main difference. Here in Slovenia, some researchers, such as Jasna Podreka from the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Arts, have found that femicide has distinct patterns in terms of the relationships between the perpetrator and the victim. Violence towards women in general is a clear example of this socialisation process: it is based on a deeply-rooted gender pattern.

V: Would strategies and measures addressing domestic violence affect homicide as well?

M: Policies addressing domestic violence would probably have an effect on homicide, yet I would suggest a more specific approach on these forms of violence. Because they have different patterns and determinants, and also different backgrounds. I would say most interpersonal violent actions are gender-based. I wouldn't say violence against women is the only gender-based violence. Violence against men is equally linked to gender status and constructions. And that is something that should be stressed. Otherwise we could think it is quite natural that men fight against men. And it is actually related to masculinities and the ways we have learned to deal with conflicts. It has to do with the construction of how men relate to men, how strength is perceived, and so on.

V: And do the efforts in violence and let's say homicide prevention address the same determinants?

M: There should be specific approaches in domestic violence, gang violence, etc. But the overall approach is quite similar and has to do with how we learn to mediate conflict; how the population in general learn to deal with strength or honour. It also has to do with how it is portrayed in the media. And I know that this is something the institute [National Institute of Public Health] has pursued in an active campaign to regulate how suicide is portrayed. This approach is quite similar to the ones that some other countries might have on interpersonal violence. Because the media portrays a specific image of violence, homicide and suicide, and it is not always accurate and it has an effect on how people perceive and feel and actually act on these things. Coming back to the question, they require specific approaches, but they still all rely on the same pillars, which have to do with learning or socialisation, media portraying and the active role of certain actors.

V: You have highlighted the importance of the media. What do we never hear, when they report on homicides?

M: In general, you usually hear about serial killers and spectacular incidents. Homicides are bombarded to the population in Argentina and Latin America. There is a usual representation that you could be killed at any moment. The usual image of homicide is of an incident between people who don't know each other, and usually in the context of a robbery. And this is actually not so common. And usually the media portrays this in a sinister way. I

am not trying to defend the perpetrators of course, but they are usually dehumanised in the news. Also, violent deaths are often shown as linked to mental health conditions, like sociopathy, psychopath, schizophrenia. This portrayal of homicide in the media tends to erase its social conditions and patterns. For instance, in the case of femicide, since the pattern is so alike transnationally, and the regularity in certain interactions and meaning is quite constant, it might be implied that there is an underlying cultural pattern. And this should not be reduced to an overly-simplified statement like "these are evil men that want to kill women", but it is about how these men have learned how to treat or think about women in general.

V: Let's do a head to head comparison of Argentina and Slovenia on the topic of homicides.

M: Slovenia is quite a particular country in terms of its patterns of violent deaths. Argentina and Slovenia are not really similar in their epidemiology of violence and external causes. While both countries have the same proportion between external causes (first accidents, then suicides and finally homicides), the rates are completely different. For instance, the way Slovenia decreased its suicide rates is quite marvellous; it is quite strange in terms of what you would usually expect based on epidemiological transitions of this phenomenon. And that shows to some extent how social or political fabric is quite different from Argentina. My question, which I haven't answered yet and I don't know if I am able to, is if homicides and interpersonal physical violence in Slovenia answer to the same triggers as in Argentina. Europe in general has lower rates of homicide, but why is it that you find such different patterns here? Part of the answer probably lies in the way society here is regulated and how institutions are felt and dealt with and designed. It is also related to what Norbert Elias described as the civilising process. And it might sound old-fashioned, but the fact that Slovenia's population is smaller also has something to do with it. And yet again you have the contrast with suicides, which are much higher than in Argentina. I guess then an interesting question, to compare both countries, is how violence (both self-

directed and directed towards others) is manifested and signified.

V: Indeed, I have checked the homicide rates around the world and Slovenia is hovering between 0.5 to 1 per 100,000, Argentina is around 6 per 100,000. I was very surprised there were countries that have surprisingly high homicide rates, even when compared to countries with a shared history and similar socio-economic indicators. For example, the Baltic states have 3 to 4 times higher rates than other former Eastern bloc EU countries.

M: There are still methodological uncertainties on how to answer questions related to these differences. Ecological analyses have some explanatory power - we know that, at least in our region, in South America, homicide and suicide is directly correlated with economic processes. In Argentina, for instance, the major economic crises were followed by an increase in external causes of mortality, especially the intentional ones - homicide and suicide. And here, those two have been decreasing for the past 16, 18 years, even though you had an economic crisis. I still believe we should pay more attention, not only to institutions as an abstract concept, but how as specific and regular social interactions are engraved in everyday life, how people perceive them as norms, and what norms are people learning. Maybe that is more obvious in Latin America, but if you are facing everyday interactions with drug dealing, mafia, informal market, or social structural exclusion, you learn a different way of dealing with conflict. Regulation of everyday life in countries such as Slovenia is quite different. I would go back to the 1800s, with Durkheim's hypothesis of suicide, and say that it might actually have something to do with how rules are structured and perceived, although this last aspect was not so stressed in this theory. When you leave these macro-hypotheses, you should see the how. And the how is, in my opinion, never fully understood from a quantitative approach. You cannot access the how and the process, because it concerns actual human actions, and these are explained by meaning, not by external cause. But that is a whole different discussion.