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### Citation

Di Marco, M. H. (2024). Stories of Masculinity and Violence of Male Homicide Perpetrators in Argentina. In R. Biholar & D. Leslie (Eds.), *Gender-Based Violence in the Global South*. London: Routledge.  
doi:10.4324/9781003350125-3

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4211738>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## 2 Stories of Masculinity and Violence of Male Homicide Perpetrators in Argentina

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### Introduction

The connection between homicide, meanings of violence, and biographies of perpetrators have been central in the development of a wide range of sociological, anthropological and criminological theories (Collins 2009; R. P. Dobash and Dobash 2020; Riches 1986). Central topics in understanding how violent deaths, narratives and social structures are intertwined include the way perpetrators understand violent acts, the way perpetrators experience violent acts, and their lives prior to the violent events. This chapter focuses on the life stories of men who have intentionally killed other men in the context of fights or quarrels in Buenos Aires, Argentina. A series of guiding questions structure this chapter: how is violence and more specifically lethal violence seen and accounted for by these men? What biographical indexes are presented by them? How are these events related to their lived experiences, self-presentations, and notions of violence?

In the context of a broader socio-anthropological project on homicide, the objective of this chapter is to analyse, from a hermeneutic biographical approach, the violence legitimisation processes of men who have committed homicide of other men in the context of a fight or quarrel (*homicidio en el context de una riña*) in Buenos Aires. In the Argentinian context, the crime of killing is categorised into two broad categories by the Penal Code (Law 11.179)<sup>1</sup>: intentional homicide (*homicidio doloso*) and unintentional homicide (*homicidio culposo*). These two legal concepts are structured according to the intentionality and willingness of the perpetrators. This chapter focuses on the first specific form of killing that occurs in the context of a fight or quarrel among men. The choice to focus on this type of homicide derives from an analytical interest in exploring situations where violence was performed as a means of dealing with interpersonal conflicts (excluding, for instance, homicides occurring during robberies). This specific performance of violence is key to understanding the generalised pattern of physical abuse between men.

This chapter is divided into six parts. The following section briefly reviews literature focused on homicide perpetrators and illustrates a gap in the understanding of life stories from the men's own perspectives. The third section

describes the methodology employed to reconstruct life stories of men who committed intentional homicide and highlights the hermeneutic and narrative perspective to construct the data. In the fourth section, the life stories of two cases (Juan and Martín) are presented to illustrate how violence is conceived and normalised as a legitimate interactional resource. In the fifth section, the life stories of these two cases are analysed in the context of the broader sample of this study to indicate the underlying moral patterns found. Specifically, they are analysed with regard to masculine norms and contact with public institutions. In the last section, the conclusions are presented related to three aspects: their notions of violence, the link between violence and masculine achievement, and the meanings conveyed to institutions regarding problem resolution and intervention. Recommendations for violence prevention strategies are given based on this research, the connection between the biographical understanding of homicide perpetration and the Sustainable Development Goals are emphasised and methodological limitations of this study are mentioned.

### **The Perpetrator's Perspective: A Gap in the Literature**

Homicide represents an extreme form of violence (Brookman, Maguire, and Maguire 2017; United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2019). Research about intentional homicide<sup>2</sup> between men varies across the areas of knowledge, owing to their different conceptual and methodological frameworks. Nonetheless, studies have been mainly limited to focusing on victims, with particular attention devoted to the socio-demographic characteristics of victims, incidence, and the identification of risk factors (Innes, Tucker, and Innes 2017; Schuh Reif and Di Marco 2019;). Furthermore, research on perpetrators has tended to analyse them from an etic approach. Paradoxically, perpetrators and their lives are often left despite their important role in understanding the phenomena. From the policy-making perspective, this aspect becomes even more relevant, since engaging perpetrators is vital to develop successful violence prevention strategies (Flood 2019).

Gaining an accurate picture of the global scale of homicide has been challenging, mainly due to the heterogeneous data sources. National data collection initiatives often use differing definitions for the classifications, thus making the aggregation of these data for global estimates difficult. Aside from specific studies, the two main sources that systematically record data on homicide at national levels have traditionally been epidemiological systems (typifying homicide as a specific cause of external/violent mortality) and legal-judicial systems (including homicide as the result of legal procedures linked to the crime). Based on these sources, the UNODC (2019) estimated that in 2017 the global homicide rate was 6.1 per 100,000,<sup>3</sup> with vast differences between regions (the lowest being Asia with 2.1 and the highest being the Americas with 17.2). While these figures are likely to be an underestimate of the real burden, they illustrate the sharp differences between regions and the grave situation of the American continent. Furthermore, the high incidence in

Latin America of homicide in young (18–29 years old) men from low socio-economic sectors has triggered the formulation of concepts such as *juvenile homicide* (Valenzuela 2015) and genocide by drip (Zaffaroni 2016).

In contrast with the volume of research on victims, the available research on perpetrators is meagre (R. P. Dobash and Dobash 2020; Innes, Tucker, and Innes 2017; Schuh Reif and Di Marco 2019) and balkanised in disjointed subfields (Di Marco and Sy 2020; Jackman 2002). As noted by Ruotti, Massa, and Peres (2011), homicide perpetrators are the least understood of criminal offenders. Information gathering among perpetrators is complicated by issues of access, their willingness to participate in scientific studies, and the hesitance of researchers to engage directly with perpetrators (Adshead et al. 2018; Nee 2004).

Inquiries about the biographical factors of perpetrators have also been proven to be relevant in the analysis of homicide. Previous studies show that adherence to hegemonic masculinity—defined as the pattern of practice that allows male dominance (Carlsson 2013; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Di Marco 2018; Polk 1999)—plays a key role in the perpetration of homicide. Gender norms continually reinforce the unequal distribution of power between men and women in society, and violence is used by men to reassert control (Baird 2018, 2021; Barker 2005; UNODC 2019). Several theoretical frameworks seek to explain how constructions and understanding of masculinity serve as root causes for violence (Brookman, Maguire, and Maguire 2017).

Extensive academic research has broadened the knowledge about features and processes at the micro, meso, and macro levels of homicide (Innes, Tucker, and Innes 2017). Nonetheless, a central paradox in this field is that the meanings and biographies of performers of violence are rarely studied directly, even though this is central to understanding the drivers of the phenomenon. Moreover, since greater attention has been given to quantitative approaches, the specific ways in which variables interact with life courses examined through qualitative studies are widely unknown.

Different disciplines and theoretical schools—including life course criminology (Carlsson 2013), narrative criminology (Presser and Sandberg 2015), and sociology and anthropology of violence (Collins 2008; Katz 1988; Messerschmidt 2000; Riches 1986)—have addressed how perpetrators narrate their lives and how they signify violence. Biographical studies of homicide perpetrators have shown the profound impact of harsh experiences, especially during childhood, in future violence perpetration (Ferrito, Needs, and Adshead 2016; Viscardi 2006). The low/high threshold tolerance of violence has also been a common focus of attention to analyse how violent acts are minimised and normalised both in daily routines (Heilman and Barker 2018; Karandinos et al. 2014). Moreover, ethnographic fieldwork has illustrated how homicide perpetration is closely associated with specific forms of masculinity which are negotiated as a part of identity formation (Baird 2018; 2019; Dery and Kuumuori Ganle 2020). Phenomenological research has shown that violence and homicide are associated, on the one hand, to feelings of humiliation, respect,

and honour (Corzine 2011; Katz 1988) and, on the other hand, to the situational dynamic of the act itself (Collins 2019; Naepels 2017).

Furthermore, criminological and sociological studies employing desistance theory (Weaver 2019) have inquired about the influences and processes that explain the biographical pathways (Carlsson 2013). This field of research acknowledges the relevance of a wide range of processes operating at societal, interpersonal, and individual levels. Identity and its transformations are central to this analysis, and have been tackled through different approaches: some research has focused on the narrative dimension of subjective change, identity transformation, and overarching scripts (Cid and Martí 2012; Liem and Richardson 2014), while other studies have stressed the relevance of objective processes, events, networks and contexts influencing the actors (Byrne and Trew 2008; McGloin et al. 2011).

Another line of inquiry has focused on the meaning-making process and the explanatory narratives of homicide perpetrators (Adshead et al. 2018; Ferrito et al. 2013). These studies show that the life of perpetrators should be understood in relation to their biographies (especially when dealing with traumatic events) (Ferrito, Needs, and Adshead 2016). A different approach on this topic has shown the neutralisation techniques (Sykes and Matza 1957) employed by perpetrators to give meaning to and explain the killing; these studies have illustrated how agents construct images of themselves and their actions and therefore rationalise homicide (Henson and Olson 2010; Pettigrew 2020).

In Latin America, the relationship between violence and institutions has been explored over the past decades as a specific research topic. The disaffiliation theory (Briceño-León 2012; Briceño-León, Villaveces, and Concha-Eastman 2008; Minayo et al. 2018; Viscardi 2008, 2007) has shown that the detachment from public and private institutions is a common aspect in life histories of men convicted by homicide. According to Míguez and Isla (2010), subjective social fragmentation (relativisation of life projects, such as family, work, and education) and objective social fragmentation (such as neighbourhood relationships and bonds) are key processes in understanding the connection between violence, crime, and the transformations of the Argentinean State. Nonetheless, the way that institutions are seen by this population has remained largely unstudied.

Furthermore, socio-anthropological studies in Latin America have inquired how physical violence is normalised, legitimised, and regulated (Álvarez 2004; Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes 2015; Garriga Zucal 2016b; Santos 2009). These studies address an existing gap in the literature and critically respond to the academic inquiries that understand and define violence and its legitimisation in etic terms (which is the consequence of a long tradition in the criminological and public health scientific fields of not acknowledging the importance of meaning and subjectivity). Ethnographic studies in Latin America have mainly focused on the study of homicide in marginalised population, hence failing to show the general patterns of violence.

Given the known gaps relating to homicide perpetrators, understanding their perspectives is essential to identifying possible intervention points. A

better understanding of these potential levers of change will help with the development of more robust prevention programmes which fully engage men and boys and work to address the underlying social norms that perpetuate harmful expressions of hegemonic masculinity (Flood 2019; UNODC 2019). In the context of a broader socio-anthropological project on homicide and violence, the objective of this chapter is to analyse, from a hermeneutic biographical approach, the violence legitimisation processes of men who have committed homicide of other men in the context of a fight or quarrel (*homicidio en el context de una riña*) in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative biographical hermeneutic methodology was employed. The biographical perspective has proven to be productive in inquiring how lives, meanings, local contexts, and structural phenomena are intertwined (Meccia 2019), including in the study of violence and crime (R. P. Dobash and Dobash 2020; Farmer 2009; Messerschmidt 2000). The data was considered from the point of view of a life story (the analysis of discourse and storytelling elaborated by the actor), rather than life history (the analysis of the trajectory or life course) (Denzin 1989).

Narrative interviews were selected because of their unstructured nature allowing participants to drive the flow of the interview (Rapley 2001). Probing included the repetition of participant statements, requests for clarification, and simple interjections, among other techniques. The interviews followed the discourse, themes, and time periods that the men chose to explore in the interaction. An important aspect of conducting this type of interview is the effort to bracket or set aside personal experiences of the phenomenon under study (Husserl 1983). This bracketing process is critical to reflexivity in qualitative research as is the suspension of judgement (Denzin 1989), which allows criminological *verstehen* (Ferrell 1997).

A total of 44 interviews were conducted with 30 participants from Argentina, with most interviews lasting 60 minutes on average. Several interviews were carried out with each participant to promote addressing more topics in depth, instead of “formal” aspects in the presentation of the subjects. All interviews were recorded digitally, and field notes were taken *in situ*. Interviews were transcribed *verbatim*s (word-for-word reproduction). Each participant received the transcripts from the interviews conducted with him, and a short reconstructed life story in the first person was written collaboratively with the participants to validate the data (Leclerc-olive 2009).

Participants included those who: self-identified as cisgender males; had intentionally killed another man in the context of a fight, quarrel, or argument in the Metropolitan Buenos Aires in the last ten years; and their case was officially classified by the courts as “intentional homicide in the context of a fight” (*homicidio doloso en riña*) (*Ley 11.179* 1984). The sample consisted of 13 young adults (seven men between 18 and 20 years old, six men between 21 and 24) and 17 men in middle adulthood (five between 25 and 29, six

between 30 and 34, four between 35 and 39, and two between 40 and 45). The average age of the homicide was 22 years old. All the participants were born and raised in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. Data collection took place in three sites belonging to either the Federal or Municipal Penitentiary System in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Conducting fieldwork in prison poses a number of challenges including difficulties in gaining access to institutions, contacting potential interviewees, and moving within these contexts (Briggs 2011; Shaw, Wangmo, and Elger 2014). Therefore, a convenience sampling strategy was adopted. To diversify the cases, two main criteria were applied: the sample intentionally included cases of men from different socio-economic backgrounds (using educational credentials and work trajectories as the main indicators) and different age groups. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the characteristics of the fieldwork, the sample is not representative of the demographics of the prison population or homicide perpetrators.

Participant recruitment and interviews occurred in two distinct settings: prison educational facilities and semi-open penal facilities. These contexts differ by environment, daily routine, and the margins of freedom given to inmates as established by institutional policies. The placement in each of these settings depends on whether the men were pursuing a high school or university diploma or serving their sentence at the time of data collection. On the one hand, prison schools and universities represent autonomous areas without guards or other penal staff circulating in the facilities. This allows a greater margin of freedom for the respondent, less surveillance, better infrastructure, and more space to freely conduct interviews; ten interviews took place in this setting. On the other hand, semi-open facilities are best described as collective dwellings with freedom of movement in and out of the facility due to planned daily activities such as school or work. A range of professionals circulate through these facilities and inmate freedom is greater, representing the most comfortable setting to conduct interviews. Twelve interviews were conducted in this setting. All participants were participating in psychological therapy at the time of the interviews; such therapy is not compulsory as part of their sentences. A total of 44 interviews were conducted with 30 participants (18–45 years old).

All interviews were incorporated into a hermeneutic unit/ti project in Atlas.Ti 7.5.7. An open coding strategy following a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis of the interviews was guided by three domains of inquiry: biographical indexes (life events significantly impacting the personal narrative), turning points (moments identified as a life crossroads), and rationalities (participant explanations giving meaning to events).

The Bioethical Committee “Dr. Vicente Federico del Giúdice” of the National Hospital Prof. A. Posadas reviewed the study prior to its implementation. The informed consent form was designed in compliance with the guidelines N° 2857/2006 of CONICET (“Guidelines for ethical behaviour in Social and Human Sciences”). I opted to utilise both written and verbal informed consents; all data were kept confidential. The names used to identify participants in this chapter are pseudonyms.

## Two Stories of Homicide and Masculinity

In this section, the life stories of Juan and Martín are presented. While presenting the analysis with an intertestimonial strategy has shown the advantage of systematising life events and identifying structural aspects (Meccia 2019), it does not allow an in-depth understanding of the biographical data. These interviewees were selected as they represent two opposite extremes of the sample: their age, socio-economic status, and institutional backgrounds (i.e., educational credentials and work trajectories) are contrasting and yet they both illustrate the underlying moral and gendered patterns that emerged in the analysis of the life stories for different men. Despite their background differences, physical violence is a key aspect that structures both of their life stories and, thus, allows a detailed analysis of how it is symbolised.

### Juan - Life as the Eternal Fight

Juan was born in 1995 in Trujui, a marginalised neighbourhood in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. He is the youngest of six sons of María, who migrated from Paraguay at the age of 15, fleeing from the abusive behaviour of her father. Juan's father left them just before he was born.

Juan was 23 years old when I first interviewed him: he was incarcerated two years before for committing the homicide of a neighbour. I was introduced to him by the head of the gang in the prison, who referred to him as a “normal guy, with not much to tell”. In our first encounter, he presented himself as a run-of-the-mill person (“*uno más del montón*”): “It’s hard to talk about myself: I’m just a normal guy. There’s nothing really extraordinary about my life. I don’t know if there’s any difference between me and any other average Joe [*cualquier hijo de vecino*] from the block” (first interview).

Juan lived all his life, prior to the homicide, in the same neighbourhood. His biographical narrative did not begin when he was born, but when he started school at the age of six. Attending school and spending time with his siblings and neighbourhood friends were two central aspects of his life during his childhood: both activities coincided with his passion for football and playing hide and seek. His life story during his childhood is mainly focused on anecdotes with friends, playing games, and learning “the ropes” around the neighbourhood: where to play and where not to, learning how to interact with other children, and familiarising himself with the “codes of the street”.

Acts and situations of violence (such as physical abuse, robberies, gang attacks, etc.) are mentioned during this stage of his life, yet as background and “not meaningful” events, as he calls them. From the age of eight to the age of 13, Juan witnessed two homicides (one of a teenage neighbour and the other of a pedestrian in front of his house) and heard of at least ten other killings. References to the use of guns, and men beating their spouses and children

are mentioned as events of everyday life during this period. In his view, these events could not be defined as biographical indexes:

*I don't know if they were... you know, significant. They just happened normally, and you just learn about them. It's like background noise. I mean, I bet this happens everywhere just in the same way. But when I started attending high school here in prison, they started telling me that it shouldn't be normal. I think most of the guys from here [workers from the penal system] live in a bubble. That's just how life is and how people deal with stuff; you know?*

(Second interview)

As we explored the idea of “background noise”, Juan pointed out that he experienced these events in an ambivalent way: on the one hand, he could not image other possible scenarios of his everyday life, such as hearing gunshots or frequent fights; on the other hand, as a child, he hoped one day to be the “protagonist” of these events: “I wanted to be the one who called the shots [*llevar la batuta*] around here, and boss everyone around. Like be feared, you know?”. Regarding his view on the effect that this context had, he refuses to name it as violent, since: “It’s just too dramatic and like... dangerous or worrisome. I don’t think that’s actually so serious: there are worse places” (First interview).

Juan’s thematisation of violence as daily background in his childhood can be analysed as two simultaneous processes. First, the frequent acts of violence, the ongoing criminal activities, and the practice of physical aggression (which are considered exciting and desirable) illustrate the contextual factors that contribute to the naturalisation of violence. Studies about normalisation and legitimisation of violence in the local context (Auyero, Bourgois, and Schepers-Hughes 2015; Garriga Zucal 2016c) and other locations (Farmer 2009; Karandinos et al. 2014; Schepers-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) have indicated that aggression and suffering are included as part of the knowledge at hand by actors and, hence, turned into the world of the lifeworld (Schütz 1960). Secondly, the downplaying of the role of this context in his life could be analysed as a result of the interactional process of the interview and the presentation of the self (R. E. Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh 2009; Presser 2004; Toch 1993): minimising the relevance of living amidst marginalisation and violence is the result of Juan’s attempt to present himself a strong man, not afraid of the risks of being brought up in the shantytown. Furthermore, this redemption narrative—which turns harsh experiences into affectively positive life scenes (Mcadams et al. 2001)—illustrates that violence is a key experiential aspect that structures Juan’s life story and, hence, his attitude towards others.

At the age of 14, Juan dropped out of high school. While leaving his studies did not imply a significant decision, this moment of life was a turning point, as it changed the way he interpreted his position in society and life. In his perspective, abandoning school was greatly influenced by two major events. In the first place, his elder brother was shot point-blank in a confrontation with the police, after robbing a small shop in the city centre. Although this event

symbolises a key moment in his life, his description suggests that it was, to some extent, expected

*I guess I always knew that something like that could happen. But I don't know: I thought he would've been caught and send to prison for a while first, or something. I didn't expect him to be killed [bajado] so soon. [...]. After that, things started to lose importance. I realised that we were all in the same fight to earn a living, and against police [la cana], and school was not going to give me anything useful, you know? It's like an eternal fight, the law of the jungle.*

(third interview)

In the second place, Juan relates that his dropping out of high school is linked to his negative experiences with this institution. Feeling excluded and unsupported by school staff and, in his words, “not fit for studies” and a “misfit” greatly summarises his relationship with both the school and other public institutions.

*I also abandoned school, because I realised it's for fools. I knew that before, but then it clicked me. It's only useful if you have money. But for me, it's shit. Teachers didn't know how to handle me, preceptors hated me. They didn't want me and I didn't want them. But it's just the same with other places: hospitals, the government, the people from the social services. [...]. I wouldn't go ask them for help.*

(first interview)

This detachment from public institutions is central throughout his narrative, as it gives meaning to his avoidance of having any contact with “formal” actors of the State (such as social workers, physicians, etc.) and his belief that any conflict should be dealt with first hand. This subjective position shows that distrust in the State (Epele 2007) and a strategic logic centred on dealing with conflict without seeking aid from other actors (Garriga Zucal 2012) are fundamental moral values in his narrative.

After leaving school, Juan started committing minor crimes (mainly petty theft) and doing short-term informal jobs in construction. During this stage, he experiences what he called the “best period of this life”: “I was happy with the things I did. Nobody was bossing me around and I was starting to be someone, you know? Someone with power, strong. I got whatever I wanted” (second interview).

After turning 23 Juan got into a fight that ended in him killing another man. As he described it: “it was just another fight, like thousands I already had”. The incident started when his girlfriend at the time told him that a former lover of her and his current neighbour flirted with her.

*It was Friday evening. Of course, we were having a beer and she told me that. What was I supposed to do?! So I go to his house [casilla] and confront*

*him: “Who do you think you are messing with my woman [mina]?!” We got at it and then his friend gets in the fight. And he shouts, I remember it very well, he shouted: “Cuckold!” So I went back home and grab my gun [...], went back and shot the fucker. I couldn’t stand that insult. [...] My girl tried to call our next-door neighbours, an old couple, but that was not their business. [...] We... nobody called the police, why would anyone do that? It’s not that there was something they could do either.*

(Third interview)

Juan described the event as “unavoidable”: faced with this situation, the only possible course of action he could take, without putting in jeopardy his self and manhood, was to confront the other man aggressively. In his narrative, the situational dynamic was driven by humiliation and was seeking for respect. The display of these emotions coincides with previous phenomenological studies on male homicide (Baird 2018; Collins 2008; Katz 1988) and illustrates that, in this specific micro-social situation, the combination of emotions derived from masculine morality (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Heilman and Barker 2018) and the lack of trust and reliability of institutions resulted in the violent act.

### **Martín—A One-way Street**

Martín was born in 1979 in a rich city in the Northern region of Buenos Aires. He is the eldest of two siblings from a wealthy family. His father is a former judge, and his mother is the headmaster and owner of a private catholic school.

Martín was 29 when he was imprisoned for committing a homicide. We met in the university facility of a prison, while he was pursuing his third university degree. In a similar way to Juan and most of the interviewees, Martín first presented himself as a normal man “with nothing special”. Yet he shortly stressed the fact that his story (and self) cannot be compared with other cases of homicide:

*I’m nothing like the other guys here, because I do have an education and I was not raised in the middle of a shantytown [villa]. I come from a professional family with values and traditions. I’m not an illiterate beast like other men here. [...]. I was just caught in the moment, in the adrenaline of the moment.*

(First interview, initial description of himself)

Martín started his life story with a description of his family and his passing through primary and secondary schools. He attended a well-known private school and, like Juan, valued sport (in his case rugby) as a significant facet of his childhood. For him, the school was a space of social support and well-being that provided him with resources to “success in the future world”.

*I had everything I needed, I won’t lie. Books, education, private tutors, trips. I didn’t have to worry about anything. And, unlike most guys here,*

*during those years I didn't need to get physical, you know? I was only a kid and I was like protected by others. It was a safe environment.*

(First interview)

Martín identifies a major event in his life was the divorce of his parents, when he was 15 years old. Until then, his narrative does not include references to conflicts, arguments, or episodes of physical violence. In his view, this moment ruined his idyllic notion of family and showed the complications of human relationships:

*I looked back and realised that people can simply get in their way of your desires: my father, for instance, got in the way of the family, by deciding to give up and run with her lover. So, basically, I had to become the man of the house.*

(Second interview)

While his trajectory during high school and later in university continued uninterrupted, his new understanding of relationships, goals, and his self-assumed role marked his attitude:

*So if I wanted something, I just took it. I don't mean stealing of course: I mean an approach to life itself. You have to be committed and don't let anything be on your way. There is only one way between you [points and pokes at me] and your goal. So, you know, I started to get more physical, because that is sometimes the way you need to be. Of course, it was the 1990s, everything was different. We didn't have any rules, anything above us. [...] And by us I mean young men.*

(Sixth interview)

In the years after the divorce of his parents, Martín started practising boxing and continued playing rugby. He refers to these years, before starting university, as the “consolidation period of his temper”: he trained to become a fit and strong man, “someone who was intimidating”.

Martín's reference to perfecting his skills in sports and, at the same time, using this training to shape himself provide evidence that his gendered self, the notion of violence, and presentation to others are intertwined, in this trajectory, with the practice of sport itself. On the one hand, his narrative indicates that, to achieve an intimating and strong persona, he found that the field of competitive training was a viable and legitimate option. The discourse of sports, body, and masculinity (Garriga Zucal 2006; Messner 2019, 1990) provides a field of notions, practices, and rationalities which allowed him to shape himself. On the other hand, his reconstruction of this period of his life also shows a specific context of socialisation and legitimisation of violence in Argentina (Branz 2016): the economically-advantaged groups in Buenos Aires.

In the years following high school and university, his narrative interweaves two types of themes: aspects of this successful career through educational institutions (culminating with a master's degree) and the professional field and, at the same time, diverse anecdotes of quarrels and fights in different environments: discos, football and rugby matches, gym and between his group of friends, amongst other scenarios. In his life story, fistfights were “around the corner”, yet not understood as actual violence, but “just things that happen”.

In 2009, Martín was imprisoned for killing another man after a quarrel in a bar. He refers to this event as “the incident” and describes it as an “unfortunate accident”:

*It's something quite silly if you think about it. This guy, really rude and a low-life [villero], starts shouting in the bar. I was with my friends, so I asked him to tone it down. And it all started. [...]. And I do remember that he called me a pussy [cagón] and then I snapped. Everything got out of hands. [...]. I know it's not an excuse, but calling me that way, how would you react? It was obvious that I was going to beat him. Otherwise, you are just... proving him right. If somebody calls you that way you just go straight to it, you don't turn your back or call the police. That would actually [he emphasises] be acting like a pussy.*

(Third interview)

Martín was carrying a gun when the fight occurred. He shot the other man three times. Martín's description of the event, as well as the way he experienced it, provides certain elements to understand what triggered his action. As Katz (2002) suggests, the analysis of violent confrontations cannot be simplified to the analysis of background variables. Martín's reaction to the insult shows the direct attack on his pride and, in terms of the interaction, a dispute over the control of the situation. Honour, pride, and respect were negotiated in this scenario, under the norms of masculine conduct (Ellis 2016). While the interactional negotiation might imply different outcomes (Innes, Tucker, and Innes 2017; Luckenbill 1972), two aspects emerge in his narrative (i.e. in his learned view of male confrontations): the inevitability of the fight (“it was obvious”) and the unthinkable scenario in which he would call the police or other actors (“That would actually be acting like a pussy”).

### **A Broader Scenario of Masculinity: Recurrent Patterns in the Legitimisation of Violence**

Juan and Martín's life stories are part of a socio-economic and age-heterogeneous sample of men who committed intentional homicide in the context of a quarrel or fight in Buenos Aires. An evident common aspect of their lives is the fact that they are both serving prison sentences. Aside from this, how are their lives similar? Are there common subjective or interactional processes that they both went through? Are there common cultural

or structural “marks” of violence in their narratives? To put it simply, how are these biographies analytically relevant?

Before mentioning the common aspects, several differences in both biographies should be highlighted. Firstly, both cases belong to different age cohorts: while Martín was born at the end of the 1970s (when the country was still under a Dictatorship<sup>4</sup>), Juan was born in 1995 during a democratic government which encouraged a process of liberalisation of the economy and steep deindustrialisation. Martín was 29 years old when he committed the homicide, while Juan had just turned 21. Secondly, both were raised in different socio-economic contexts, and a key indicator of these backgrounds is their unequal educational credentials. Lastly, their institutional pathways (in one case dropping out in the first year of high school, in the other achieving a master’s degree) show the consequence of the different possibilities of social inclusion and the uneven distribution of opportunities.

Despite these differences, these two life stories exemplify the findings of the sample analysed in this study. These biographical narratives illustrate some of the underlying patterns of masculine construction that emerged in the other reconstructed cases: (a) physical violence is a valid and legitimate interactional resource to tackle problems and control specific face-to-face situations, (b) violence is a legitimate resource performed to define a “successful” self (i.e. it is through physical aggression or overpowering others that they achieve a sense of self-worth, and (c) asking for intervention or help to any kind of “external” institution seems like a counterintuitive, illogical and unreasonable pathway. While the first two aspects of masculinity have been addressed by socio-anthropological research over the past decades (Flood 2019; Garriga Zucal 2016c; Polk 1999; Tomsen and Gadd 2019), the third aspect has been less explored.

In the first place, the life stories show that violence—in emic terms—is employed as a resource to obtain, negotiate, or dispute their interests. Physical aggression is not experienced as a ubiquitous action, constant performance, or something derived from a personality, but the strategic use of force whenever needed. However, this resource is not uniformly used throughout life, but employed according to specific moral norms. For instance, Juan considered that violence was something out of his reach when he was a child and that he needed to “learn the ropes of the neighbourhood”, and Martín referred that violence was unnecessary during his childhood. This shows that violence cannot only be referred to as a situational resource (Collins 2008; Garriga Zucal 2016a) but that whether or not the actors employ violence depends on the legitimation of such action and the interaction with the specific context.

Moreover, the actors’ notion and understanding of violence are not directly linked with the ideas of destruction or aggression, but with references to success, power and, to some extent, “positive pedagogy” (Tomsen and Gadd 2019). Performing an act enables a strong presentation of the self and negotiates the subaltern role of other actors in the scene. For instance, for Juan violence became a violence pathway to acquire and maintain a dominating status

amongst his peers. This emic notion of violence is illustrated in the presentation of negative events as positive or educational situations (Mcadams et al. 2001; Presser 2004), which shows that violence is part of the interactional and moral repertoire of the actors and is a structural aspect of their biographical narrative (Santos 2009).

In the second place, the display of violence in these life stories is closely associated with achieving successful masculine selves. This “success” is understood in terms of achieving, maintaining, or negotiating a contextually adequate image of the self. A vast array of social sciences research (Baird 2018, 2021; Dery 2020; Dery and Kuumuori Ganle 2020; Jewkes and Morrell 2018; among others) has meticulously shown that acts of violence between men (namely violent quarrels, fights, intense displays of anger and, ultimately, homicide) are linked with presenting a strong self and, thus, achieving what is socially and morally accepted for a man in each particular cultural context. As micro-sociological studies have shown (Ellis 2016; Katz 2002; Lunneblad and Johansson 2019; Naepels 2017), emotional responses and situational dynamics are central aspects of understanding the performance of violence: Juan and Martín suffered insults (“pussy” and “cuckold”) which were interpreted as direct threats to their selves and initiated a tacit agreement to pursue the aggression.

Furthermore, the identification of turning points in their narratives also suggests that the legitimisation of violence is symbolically linked to their gendered selves. Juan and Martín locate major turning points in their life stories during their adolescence and amidst a coming-of-age stage: Juan was seeking independence and learning how to navigate his social context with the aid of the resource he had in hand to “survive in the law of the jungle”; Martín, in a different social space, applies a similar logic to achieve his goals. In their perspective, violence is not a negative action (much like most academic and grey literature defines it), but a valuable action which allows them to present themselves as strong men, navigate their surroundings, and achieve a morally acceptable position in certain interactions. This implies that violence is ultimately a gendered resource, which enables them to develop and shape relationships.

Desistence theory (Weaver 2019) provides useful insight into the analysis of the turning points that the men identified as precipitating their performance of violence. Personal relationships and the evaluation and meanings conveyed by violence (Byrne and Trew 2008), as well as the ideas of agency (Liem and Richardson 2014), are crucial dimensions to understanding these events. Furthermore, the groups of turning points to crime identified by Byrne and Trew (2008, 241–243) (i.e. sudden lifestyle change, response to early delinquency, positive offending experience, and background disadvantage) were also found in this study. However, the main aspect that is common in all the life stories (as a narrative mark) is that the turning points indicated inflection moments between biographical stages, usually a transition from childhood to adulthood. The personal, social, and contextual aspects influencing the performance of violence relate to how men pursue their male identities and, hence, age stands out as a central aspect in the analysis.

In the third place, the life stories of these two cases illustrate an aspect that emerged from the interviews of the entire sample: when these men are confronted with a situation of conflict, especially those affecting their “manhood” (i.e., when insults, threats or dispute over control are present), the idea of seeking for “external” help or intervention seemed illogical, humiliating or degrading. The recurrence of this perspective in the life stories indicates a logic of action or practical sense (Sandberg 2008): these actors evaluate that face-to-face conflict with other men<sup>5</sup> should be solved without involving third parties, especially public or private institutions. This aspect leads to a key aspect in terms of violence prevention and theorisation: emic notions of masculinity and violence are inseparable from the meanings conveyed to and relationship with public institutions.

The intervention of another actor, seeking aid or, simply, aborting the violent course of action would imply losing their respective dominant position in the definition of the situation. The intervention of the police (as public actors) or impartial actors present in the specific context (in Juan’s case, their next-door neighbours) is understood to be an “unreasonable” action. On the contrary, the intervention of peers (most typically friends) is considered natural due to loyalty and “aguante” culture (Alabarces 2008, 2015; Garriga Zucal 2012).

External intervention, as it would be considered by the actors, could be interpreted, and symbolised differently depending on several aspects: the institutional trajectory of the actors themselves, the contextual scenario (public space, residence, etc.), and the meanings conveyed to this “external” actor. As previous studies have shown (Collins 2009; Polk 1999), the “audience” of violent confrontations is a critical component in the outcome of the interaction.

In particular, the link between violence and public institutions has been tackled by studies in Latin America using the disaffiliation theory (Briceño-León, Villaveces, and Concha-Eastman 2008; Míguez and Isla 2010; Viscardi 2008, 2007). However, most of these studies have focused on the analysis of objective indicators (such as contact, access, and stability of the relationship with the school, work, health-care system, etc.) and, consequently, the analysis of the perspective of the actors in meagre. While the institutional trajectories of both interviewees (for instance, analysed by their educational careers) and their affiliations are sharply contrasting, both men interpret that the conflicts they are encountered should be dealt with in their own hands. Disaffiliation theory and analysing homicide from a materialist framework (such as relative deprivation, or reproduction of structural violence and marginalisation) would only focus the analysis on the economic and institutional aspects of violent deaths and, consequently, deflect the attention from the link between masculinity, violence, and symbolisation of institutions in the context of interpersonal conflicts (Tomsen and Gadd 2019).

As stated by Cid and Martí (2012), social bonds act as catalysts in the pathways of actors, and “changes in narratives may depend not only on participation in new social institutions but also on the new meaning that institutions present during the criminal career of offenders, such as family relationships,

may acquire in adulthood” (2012, 603). In the same way, motivations to desist are linked to the actor’s feeling of moral duty (to change as compensation to their partners, relatives, etc.), the motivations to engage in violence crimes can be equally associated with the dynamics of moral economy with institutions. The narrative effect of institutions and bonds in legitimising and offering “scripts” to deal with conflict are key elements in both Juan and Martín. This suggests that the analysis of homicide should consider not only pathways, but the available scripts operating in their decisions, motivations, and agencies.

The three aspects related to the legitimisation processes that have been emphasised in this section describe the overall biographical pattern of the interviewed men. Yet, due to the constructed and discursive nature of the life stories, a crucial question is what influences and shapes these processes and narratives (Bogner and Rosenthal 2017). Which are the predominant patterns of interpretation that shape these narratives? Which aspects imply differences in the legitimisation of violence? What institutions, pathways, and discourses influence these processes?

Four aspects were preliminarily identified as having an effect in shaping how these men narrated their life stories and the way they presented and talked about violence: age at the time of the interview, if they were first-time offenders, the time they had already spent in prison and attending any type of therapeutic dispositive. While the analysis of how these aspects shape their narratives requires a further study, the identification of how their perspectives are “scripted” is relevant to have a better understanding of their lives.

Previous research (Adshead et al. 2018; Adshead and Ferrito 2015; Ferrito et al. 2013) has shown the role of therapeutic programmes and institutional discourses in shaping the narratives of offenders. The time spent in prison and attending a therapeutic dispositive introduced rationalities, terms, and theories about their own biographies that were otherwise absent in life stories. A clear example of this is the reflection of the men about “unhealthy environments”, “unstructured families” and “violent personalities” to give meaning to their lives. Prison and psychology (as a knowledge) permeated the life stories and promoted institutionalised narratives, such as redemption or medicalised interpretations (Liem and Richardson 2014). Similarly, age worked as a proxy of institutionalised narratives: older men tended to “adhere” to formalised scripts about their own lives; younger men, with no prior convictions, tended to defend their actions and resorted to lay “street” rationalities to explain and give meaning to their lives.

Since most of the interviewees committed the homicide at a relatively young age (the average ages are 22 years old), we cannot analyse in this chapter the differences between the violence legitimisation processes of men who committed the crime during different ages. These aspects, although crucial for the overall understanding of violence performance, remain to be further studied.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This study reconstructed the life stories of incarcerated men who committed intentional homicide in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The analysis of their narratives is a way to inquire about the violent legitimisation processes they went through, from their own perspective. To date, this topic and approach have been largely ignored in the scientific literature, thus preventing an in-depth understanding of male-male homicide. This work presents the cases of two interviewees, Juan and Martín, to provide a description of their perspectives, turning points, and rationalities.

Three main aspects are highlighted in the analysis: (a) physical violence is seen as a valid and legitimate interactional resource to tackle problems and control specific face-to-face situations, (b) violence is experienced as a legitimate resource performed to define a “successful” self (i.e. it is through physical aggression or overpowering that they achieve a sense of self-worth, and (c) the contact with and notion of asking for intervention or help to any kind of institution is referenced as counterintuitive, illogical and unreasonable.

In this chapter, the presentation of two biographical cases intends to illustrate the diverse subjective processes involved in the legitimisation of the use of physical violence as a way to tackle interpersonal problems among men. The biographical approach allowed us to understand the perpetrator’s perspective on social and structural processes, including the normalisation of daily violence (Farmer 2009; Scheper-Hughes 1997), the gendered nature of male-male violence (Baird 2018; Ellis, Winlow, and Hall 2017; Flood 2019), and the violent norms grounded in hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Dery and Kuumuori Ganle 2020), among other aspects.

As this compilation stresses, violence prevention strategies require a clear and comprehensive understanding of how constructions of masculinities shape crime victimisation and perpetration. This study contributes to violence-prevention policies by drawing upon the cases analysed and a socio-anthropological perspective of violence and masculinity.

First, knowing that in certain contexts and interactions violence is not seen as an illegitimate and wrongful act, but an idealised and morally adequate means to an end (whether this is material or symbolic) implies that any strategy (independent of its scope) should be based on empirically grounded notions of the cultural ways in which violence is understood. As Tomsen and Gadd (2019, 28) state:

Anti-violence initiatives need to anticipate the shifting ways by which young men distance themselves and their own violence from negative meanings, along with a continuing belief in a category of male violence that they deem legitimate, admirable, or even heroic.

Since legitimised violence implies certain forms of moral neutralisation (Presser 2003; Sykes and Matza 1957), understanding the narratives and discourse available to the actors is crucial, as it is the cultural basis of their actions.

Second, this study suggests that prevention strategies merely focused on marginalised young population would simplify a much more complex problem. As Jewkes, Flood, and Lang (2015) have pointed out, prevention measures are mainly focused on young men as the most likely perpetrators of violence. While this is the population group with the highest levels of homicide worldwide (both as victims and victimisers), interpersonal violence as a phenomenon goes far beyond this group. The cases presented illustrate that the underlying patterns of masculine socialisation are common for different social sectors, although with cultural and societal differences.

Third, this study suggests that explaining male-male homicide focusing exclusively on masculinity (and certain socio-economic conditions) results in short-sighted conclusions and, most likely, poor strategies. The understanding and prevention of violence—understood as a context-specific interactional and legitimised resource employed by actors—is closely dependent on how problem-resolution actions are understood and how existing institutions in their daily lives are seen. The roles, strategies of and forms of access to these institutions deserve an analysis of their own. In this chapter, the most typified institution mentioned by the interviewees was justifiably the police, which has low credibility in Argentina (Dammert and Malone 2002).

Interpersonal violence (for which the study of intentional homicide in the context of a fight or quarrel is a direct indicator of its worst outcome) could be studied and understood in terms of how public institutions in a certain context achieve domain over this field. The reference to Hobbes' *Leviathan* in rural Colombia (Álvarez 2004) is a good example of how violence prevention strategies could base their interventions on the link between masculinity and societal regulations of conflict (centralisation vs decentralisation of violence).

This work aligns with the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. Violent deaths – and criminal activity in general – are amongst the main aspects that shape the well-being of the population. Particularly, the Americas have the highest homicide rates worldwide, where young men are especially at risk (UNODC 2019). Since the pillars of development have a reciprocal relationship with homicide (and violence in all its forms), the need to pursue the SDG is crucial. This study provides further evidence about the need to address gender as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone for a more peaceful society (SDG5 “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”) and to promote strong and accessible institutions (SDG16 “Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies”). This chapter shows the importance and connection between gender and institutions: these are interdependent aspects in the life stories of the interviewed men. Meanings, performances, and scripts about being a “man” and the meanings conveyed to institutions and their trajectories through them are crucial components to understanding homicide perpetration.

This study has several limitations. First, the number of cases in the *corpus* (due to the difficulties related to access to institutions and participant willingness to engage in the scientific study) does not allow an empirical generalisation of the findings. Nonetheless, theoretical generalisation and hypothesis formulation are still valid. Additional research is needed to expand upon the reconstructed life stories.

Since these data were derived from a hermeneutic framework, men told their life stories from their perspectives and an objectivist life history approach was not followed. Our main interest was to understand the subjective narratives constructed by men and, while contradictions, lies, and biases might be included in the interviews, this is still an integral part of the methodological approach (Meccia 2019). Future studies may consider triangulating data from multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive depiction of the topic of inquiry.

The perpetrators of homicide and victims in this study were all male. As such, this research only explores the male-male dyad and is not transferable to other violence or homicide situations, such as male-female or female-male, as explored by Santos (2009). Likewise, because we only explored homicides in the context of fights and quarrels, our findings are not transferable to homicide in the context of robbery or gang violence.

The participants in this study were incarcerated. The different data collection sites might have a role in shaping their narratives depending on the circulating and legitimised discourses in each place (for example, attending workshops and belonging to religious groups). However, due to the exploratory nature of this study, these aspects were not yet explored. Further, incarcerated men may differ from those who perpetrate but are not charged with committing a homicide.

Finally, the analysis carried out in this chapter raises new questions about homicide and biographies: are the underlying patterns of violence legitimisation similar in other sociocultural contexts? How do these men understand their agency in the situations of homicide? Are there differences in these processes in men who have committed homicide when they are being older? How do their “emic” theories change throughout life? And what can we learn from the “negative cases” in which the homicides did not take place?

## Notes

- 1 Article 80 of the Argentine Penal Code, which defines and classifies the types of homicide, has been modified in 1976 (Law 21.338), 1984 (Law 23.077) and 2012 (Law 26.791). In the latest modification, the term femicide was included as a specific type of homicide, acknowledging the gendered root of this crime.
- 2 This chapter focuses on male-male homicide (or MMmurder) (Brookman, Maguire, and Maguire 2017). Unless stated otherwise, all references to homicide indicate this category.
- 3 The estimate of the femicide rate has been widely discussed (Fernández 2012; Stöckl et al. 2013; among others) due to the series of difficulties regarding its measurement, sources, reliability and political agenda.

- 4 The civic-military dictatorship of Argentina, officially named National Reorganisation Process, took place between 1976 and 1983. The dictatorship started with the right-wing coup d'état that overthrew Isabel Perón as President and involved the systematic persecution of social groups and flagrant and repeated Human Rights violations, including abduction of children and “disappearing” civilians.
- 5 A specific inquiry should be made regarding male-female confrontations.

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