



Marking boundaries as a strategy of social control: the case of homicidal violence in Medellín, Colombia

Delimitación de fronteras como estrategia de control social: el caso de la violencia homicida en Medellín, Colombia

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ABSTRACT As part of a research study undertaken in the period 2003-2011 to understand situations of homicidal violence based in perceptions regarding the act of violence and the surrounding context, we reflect on the meaning of "invisible boundaries" in the neighborhoods of Medellín (Colombia). Using a qualitative approach that combines documentary sources and interviews, the experiences of 8 participants are analyzed. In the primary results we can see how control over neighborhoods is exercised by different actors through boundaries not visible to ordinary people. Nevertheless, around these lines people are recruited and controlled, and strategies to illegally generate economic resources and to regulate the cultural and social activities of inhabitants are consolidated, thus affecting the social dynamics and imaginary of the neighborhood. In this way, the territories, friendships, and affections of young victims – who are not linked to illegal groups and/or do not have "information" – and of defenseless older adults are controlled.

KEY WORDS Violence; Homicide; Perception; Colombia.

RESUMEN En el marco de un estudio realizado entre 2003 y 2011 para comprender escenarios de violencia homicida a partir de la percepción del hecho violento y su contexto, se reflexiona sobre el sentido de las "fronteras invisibles" en barrios de Medellín (Colombia). Desde un enfoque cualitativo que combina revisión documental y entrevistas, se analiza la experiencia vivida por ocho participantes. Entre los principales resultados se destaca que el control barrial es ejercido por distintos actores; que las fronteras no son visibles para el común de las personas, sino que son demarcaciones en las que son reclutadas y controladas, y que consolidan estrategias para recaudar recursos económicos de forma ilegal y regular las actividades culturales y sociales de los habitantes, lo cual repercute en la dinámica y los imaginarios sociales. De este modo, se controlan los territorios, las amistades y los afectos de víctimas jóvenes –que no se vinculan a grupos ilegales y/o no tienen "información"– y de adultos mayores indefensos.

PALABRAS CLAVES Violencia; Homicidio; Percepción; Colombia.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of the results obtained from the research study "Reconfiguration of homicide scenarios and their relationship with development: Medellín, period 2003-2009" (institutional code of approval CODI-2512). The objectives of this research study were to understand the scenarios in the context of public policies, the development trends of the city, and the perceptions of the victims' relatives regarding the act of violence. Homicides are the most radical expression of human asymmetries and the evidence of the incapacity to solve conflicts in a concerted way. The objective of the construction of scenarios is not to observe violence as mere data, but to approach violent deaths as a relational issue, which is the result of intentions, coercive power, circumstances, contextual and structural aspects of the city, and the act of violence itself. Two publications have resulted from this research study: the first one presents a quantitative description of homicides committed in the city within the last 30 years,⁽¹⁾ and the second one analyzes public policies on security and their relationship and incidence on homicide behavior in Medellín between 2003 and 2009.⁽²⁾

In Colombia, violence has been present throughout history; it has affected social and economic development in a large part of the population, and it has brought consequences to life and health since violence behaves as a phenomenon that creates uncertainty and impotence, and it destroys social structures. The State has been greatly responsible for this situation as Daniel Pécaut states: "Violence in Colombia is not entirely related to the excesses of an omnipresent and almighty State, but rather to the empty spaces that it left in society."⁽³⁾

Medellin, located in the northwest region of the country, is the second city of Colombia due to its industrial development and its population. Its population projection for the year 2011 was 2,664,394 inhabitants.⁽⁴⁾ As a global city, it has potential, but it also has major problems arising from social exclusion and inequality. According to Franco,⁽⁵⁾ while the city is being reorganized to make it attractive and competitive with others, by transforming the local government into a business organization, a global city, a business, a trading

and tourist center, a health conglomerate, and the main innovation backbone, there are still places affected by the hardship caused by poverty and inequality, where there is a high rate of unemployment, an informal economy, an aggravation of poverty, and profound inequalities. Such places function as reception centers for the victims of forced intra-urban eviction and displacement,^(a) all of which does not exist independently or as a problem of a faulty design or a mistake in the early stage of development, but as the correlate of wealth concentration.

Violence is distinctly a human learning experience, which is part of socialization/individuation processes and cultural constructions. It is characterized by the asymmetric exercise of power between at least two opponents who resolve their conflicts by using force to injure or damage the personal and/or material integrity of the other.⁽⁷⁾ Its materialization is the result of certain contexts, motivations, affections, legalities, resources and evaluative scales, and frequently, of conscious planning. The conflict is solved not by the rules defined to regulate social relationships, but by the means that are outside law and legislation.

In reference to the concept of urban violence, Gómez *et al.*⁽⁸⁾ defined it as a set of violent actions that occurs during the process of city construction, affecting their social fabric. Its main characteristic falls into the domain of interpersonal relationships, transcending the private sphere to move into the public one. Urban violence is also influenced by structural and conjunctural conditions that are expressed in socioeconomic inequalities, cultural and citizen participation weakness, precarious preventive counseling, social welfare and justice; and by an absence of mechanisms for concerted and regulated conflict management. In cities such as Medellín, the impact of drug trafficking is also felt,⁽⁹⁾ bringing about high profitability from the cocaine trade and causing an escalation of violence with high homicide rates and a deepening corruption within institutions.

Another characteristic of this type of violence is the multiplicity of manifestations, interests, ways of organizing, and highly differentiated objectives which intertwine on some occasions.⁽¹⁰⁾ Instead of an impulsive type of violence, it is instrumental and it is associated with organized crime and irregular armed groups⁽¹¹⁾ that exercise power over

regions where there is almost no State presence, giving rise to the development of alternative strategies for social control to substitute state control. In this sense, the victims and victimizers are not only those participating in armed conflicts or organized social groups, but also new actors that are part of everyday life.

For a better understanding of social control, Monedero defines it as follows:

As the State abandoned its responsibility in certain parts of society, the management of some public goods was taken over by other actors such as mafias, NGOs, companies, churches, paramilitary groups and unions. The effects of this situation are clearly seen in the areas known as "*brown areas*" which are spaces in which a multitude of people and groups with specific interests self-claim the monopoly of legitimate physical violence.^(12 p.219) (Italics in original)

In Medellin, homicide rates have fluctuated: there were 18,992 homicides between 1979 and 1989 (annual average of 1,726); 45,434 between 1990-1999 (annual average of 4,543); and 18,919 between 2000-2009 (annual average of 1,892). The annual average rate of homicides was 44 for every 100,000 inhabitants in 1979 and 47 in 2008, reaching a maximum of 388 in 1991. The magnitude of these figures represents an obstacle to construct civility.^(7,13)

In accordance with the relationships established between the government and the citizens, multiple territorialities that are expressed by the diversity in the appropriation of spaces can be differentiated in the city. One of the expressions of these territorialities are the "invisible boundaries" within the violence context in Medellin, a situation that has grown in the last 20 years. Two different modalities can be identified in them: in the first one, the illegal armed actors impose prohibitions to move from one place to another in order to control the economy and social community life in the territories. This is not only a violation of the right to free movement, but it also reinforces fear and hinders the construction of the city as a place for economic, social, and cultural transactions, as well as the establishment of social networks. Specifically, it becomes a limitation to the right to enjoy a city. Under these circumstances,

this limitation is caused by the actions of illegal actors. The other modality has a top-down configuration, and it is the result of the process of urbanization in which the city stratification generates a concentration of services, urban equipment, and a structure of private surveillance that sets up the context of a fragmented city with spaces and routines that are clearly differentiated. In such a context, people of low socioeconomic strata will look suspicious if they move around through territories belonging to higher strata. A similar situation occurs when those who live in higher strata want to move through the territories of lower income groups. Even if the territorial boundary caused by the urbanization that structurally stratified the city is the most visible and calls for research, it is not the main objective of this paper, which focuses on the control exercised by illegal groups over territories and people.

In a previous research study carried out by our research team,⁽¹⁴⁾ homicide scenarios were identified during the period 1990-2002, and three moments were defined, one of them being the most predominant: from 1990 to 1993, violence associated with drug trafficking and other organized illicit activities prevailed; from 1994 to 1998, violence related to economic or honor claims, and from 1999 to 2002, territorial violence in which the boundaries known as invisible boundaries are included. These boundaries are modalities that make the issue more complex since they deepen the intrusion into the life of the civilian population, constitute an ingredient to maintain and reconfigure the illegal structures of the city, and imply a geographical benchmark with great spatial or symbolic delimitations.

These boundaries are "visible" through codes or drawings located in familiar places on devices in the neighborhood (such as a payphone, an educational institution, a sports place, a store, a street light, or a wall). These codes force neighbors to learn this language in order to survive or reduce their fear. In some cases, these groups allow the members of the community to learn the limits of the territories they dominate, which must not be disclosed to strangers.⁽¹⁵⁾

This paper focuses on the implications these invisible boundaries have on the daily existence of the neighborhood residents, as one of the emerging categories under investigation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

With the aim of recognizing the realities of the subjects and the experience endured by the deceased's relatives as a result of those homicides, the qualitative approach was adopted, and elements from different methodological strategies were combined to describe the context (ethnography) and to make a double interpretation of the facts: from the actor and the investigator's point of view (hermeneutics).

The participants, who took part in the research voluntarily, were valid interlocutors with knowledge of what happened in Medellín during the research study period. Ethical considerations throughout the research process were taken into account as a cross-cutting theme. Initially, the participants' information was collected from the available databases in the Program for Victims of Armed Conflicts from the county of Medellín, but this was not successful since it was difficult to find them (they had either changed their address or telephone number), and since they were scared of being interviewed or of reviving their pain by narrating what had happened. As a consequence, the snowball sampling strategy was used to find the participants, and eight semi-structured interviews were carried out after contacting them by phone to arrange a time and meeting place. The interviews were guided by a research psychiatrist. The informed consent was presented to the participants to be signed so as to authorize the interview and its recording. After each interview, the researchers analyzed the observed significant aspects and together with the audio transcription, they started a thorough reading, codification, and categorization. The emerging codes were grouped to create descriptive categories that later would become explanatory regarding recurring issues. Finally, the analysis progressed towards the construction of interpretative categories that give answers to the theoretical description of facts, using Galeano's proposed elements.⁽¹⁶⁾ The testimonials contained in the results were identified with a fictional name for the deceased and a code made up of letters representing the participants' characteristics to protect their identities (E: Interview Codes; number of interview; M, F, B, RD: mother, father, brother, or other relative of the deceased; M or F: sex of the deceased; number of the commune where the deceased lived).

The handling of the information was confidential and for the sole purpose of the research. Moreover, the team committed itself to respect their sources and copyrights. As a result of the combination of the documentary review (press and journal articles), elements of the social context in which these events took place were gathered, and the participants' perceptions were obtained from the semi-structured interviews. The goal was not to reach the "saturation" point required by qualitative research studies, so as to avoid upsetting the participants or making them revive moments they had already overcome, bearing in mind the difficulty related to the narration of such painful moments; however, the information collected provides an approach to a reality only partially investigated.

RESULTS

Description of cases

A description of the deceased people, the circumstances surrounding their death, the perception of the aggressor's intent and the family, and the personal and social meaning of the life and death of the deceased were gathered from the accounts obtained.

The analyzed cases were the homicides of three women and five men; five of them between 15 and 19 years of age, a woman aged 34, and two men over 20 (aged 20 and 43); two of the victims were married and had children; one had no job, the others were students, workers of the informal sector of the economy, and one of them, a woman, was a contractor for a public institution. In reference to the relationship between the participants and the deceased, the information was obtained from four mothers, one father, one uncle, and a sister; five of them reported a history of homicide deaths in their immediate family (brothers, children, nephews and nieces).

The acts of violence occurred at different times of the day or the night. It is noteworthy that in the two cases that happened at night, the victims were young women. All the acts but one occurred on the streets – in neighborhoods near the deceased's place of residence. Firearms were used in all the cases, except for one of the homicides in which

the victim's death occurred as a consequence of mechanical asphyxia. In regards to the relationship between the deceased and the aggressor, relatives of the victim declared that they learnt about the aggressor's identity after the homicide occurred; some others think they know who the perpetrator is but do not dare report them for fear of retaliation. In one of the cases, the perpetrator was fully identified and prosecuted.

The participants' voices

The neighborhood context is described by the victim's relatives based on the forced changes that gradually took place in the last 20 years and caused difficulties for the inhabitants to move within the same neighborhood, while in others, the presence of certain actors impacted on or altered their daily life. Thus, two interpretative categories are highlighted: the first category refers to the existence of limits as an imposition made by certain actors. This causes fear and affects personal and community life; participants also emphasize the helplessness that violence brings about and the loss of dreams, such as having a harmonious neighborhood. In the second interpretative category the control exercised on people as an inexplicable and disproportionate situation appears as a decisive factor. This control invades social, familiar, and individual situations, and what happens to women draws attention, in particular those young women who have to follow rules on what activities they can perform or develop and on how to behave. The results obtained from the identified categories are listed below.

"You could not go there... there were boundaries and there were limits"

The most frequent victims of homicides related to invisible boundaries were people who did not accept the pressure to associate themselves with criminal groups; did not give in to the economic demands or logistical support; or had information, that is to say that they "knew too much" about the aggressor's criminal activities. The mother of a murdered victim named Leidy, a young woman aged 17, gives the following account:

It happened this year [2012], I was washing clothes and the same boys that were sitting there [...] made me keep some guns for them and nowadays if you say no, you become their enemy. I said: "Oh no!" and they told me "don't get..." well, they used a certain word and I suddenly got scared. [I thought] If I don't keep those guns, my 24-year-old son could be killed. These days, if they do not retaliate against you, they will do it against your family, that is why I kept those guns. When they came to pick them up at night, my son told me off... (E1MF3)

It was discovered that the boundaries that were set among neighbors, people who knew each other or came from a similar background, broke the implicit rules of the neighborhood as the place for solidarity, closeness, and recognition of the other as an equal, and they violently imposed the will or the interest of "others."

In the case of territorial violence, each group represents a threat to the other, who is seen as the foreigner or the stranger, the group that is not part of the whole. Yeferson's mother, a 15-year-old boy, explains:

...there were many groups known as "combos" [armed groups] and the members of those groups took over the neighborhoods, then it all turned into chaos. They were in charge and did not let people go through. They killed with no reason whatsoever and made people move [from the neighborhood where I live to another]. There were many public riots, [...] with the community, with the people and because of this they did not dare to move [to a different neighborhood]. We could not pass through because if we did, we were dead for sure. There were boundaries and there were limits. (E3MM13)

These stories lead one to think about people's daily existence invaded not only in regard to their mobility, but also in regard to being or not being part of a social group and the submission of their will to those who decide what the members of a community can or cannot do. Furthermore, these stories show how the inhabitants of these neighborhoods, who are victims of these forms of violence, are losing their neighborhood's collective history, since their neighbors' deaths or displacements occur silently at any time.

Boundaries: Unjustified and inexplicable forms of violence

The participants' voices help understand that life has cycles and that violent death interrupts everyday life, breaks routines and what is more: life itself. It causes pain, feelings of despair in families, loss of trust in the formation of values, in neighborhood solidarity, and in the state of apparent calmness.

Particular consideration should be given to how women are controlled in regard to the time they are allowed to be out of their homes, the types of clothes and makeup they can wear, or the people they can be with. In the case of men, the boundaries within which they can move, the women with whom they can establish affective relationships with, and the allotted time for visits is under the territorial control. Thus, behavior, territories, friendships, and affective relationships are controlled, and this is what their relatives find incomprehensible and unjustified. In this regard, the father of Gabriel, a 19-year-old young worker and father of two children who was killed with his cousin, gives an account of their murder:

My son's cousin had a girlfriend [in another neighborhood], for two years, and he used to go to her neighborhood till one day, one of the newcomers told him not to go anymore. He asked him, "Why? I'm not doing anything wrong, I just come here to see my girl" [the other answered:] "No, we do not want people coming from other neighborhoods" [...], after that conversation, my son and his cousin went twice until the day of their death. We were told [...] that the reason for their death was [...] that they visited the girl, and there were some other men interested in her, so they didn't want them to return. (E2PM13)

This testimony can confirm that invisible boundaries constitute a violent form for the participants, who have the conviction that the moral norms of their families were socially accepted; in this sense, homicide is a disproportionate response to the deceased's behavior. Within a context of territorial control, the everyday lives of the inhabitants are affected, and as members of the civil society, they feel vulnerable and unprotected against the

actions of legal and illegal actors. Leidy's mother describes this situation as follows:

...I live upstairs and [in] the last few days, there was a lot of violence, as you can imagine, on the sidewalk of my home there were armed men sitting and waiting for the other combo [group], and we locked ourselves up with our two kids in our house. On a given Sunday, while I was watching the midday news, I heard a horrible rumble, and we felt how they started to climb over my house. The police and the combo's men took down my roof. (E1MF3)

Based on the participants' interviews, these *combos* use boundaries to recruit and control people as if they owned them, to consolidate strategies to illegally generate economic resources, and to regulate the cultural and social activities of people, especially of young women. All of these have consequences on the neighborhood dynamics and social imaginary.

Beyond a violent rationality, boundaries have become embedded in social community dynamics, which can be explained by multiple interests: economic (a mix of legal and illegal practices in a context of an alternative microentrepreneurship business: control of local sales, of drugs and arms trade, of basic consumer products and goods sales); security (the need to shield the area); strategic (to consolidate a leader or boss); or the need for recognition (belonging to someone or to a group: this process initiates in childhood and in the jargon of armed actors it is known as being "the boss's pet").

Hector was a 43-year-old worker, and his sister talks about the control on local sales:

...according to what we were told, Hector had his clientele to whom he delivered milk and when he changed [companies], the local people already knew him... so they asked to keep on delivering milk no matter if it was of a different brand. He continued with his job... and they told us that [he was killed] because he took over another person's route. (E6HM7)

The participants' testimonies help to understand that boundaries are moving realities that include internal displacements, school dropouts, and fear. To address this situation, the organized social

responses allow to differentiate, on the one hand, the security policies that focus on the presence of public forces and the strengthening of punitive measures which increase fear and refines violence strategies; and on the other hand, the community responses that demand the State presence, not only seen as a control agent, but also as a guarantor for the improvement of people's living conditions.

This shift in the city's social life can be explained by the significant influence of the "narco issue" in the dominant social model, which is characterized by the need to own goods, beautiful women, territories, firearms, and easy money; this need also creates "new" illegal strategies related to territorial control for the generation of economic resources. For instance, the shift from trafficking at a large scale to micro-trafficking is a stimulus for the creation of spaces that are marked for the retail selling of drugs and are intended to keep and intensify the conflict.

DISCUSSION

Making visible the perspective of the victims' relatives presents a new dimension of reality that is different from the one that may arise from the investigation of victims and victimizers, both becoming a bridge between the act of violence and the community they affect.

The findings of this research study are in line with the conclusions reached by other social researchers⁽¹⁷⁻¹⁹⁾ about the structural and cyclical character of the homicidal violence that emerges from invisible boundaries which are more visible in areas with high population density, where living conditions are deficient in terms of the quality of urban facilities, and there are labor shortages and a lack of possibilities to participate in political decisions. In this way, a set of multiple representations is created, including violence – turned into social discourse – as a unifying element. Violence, instead of being chaos, becomes the order, brings subjects into existence, and determines social relationships.⁽²⁰⁾

The weakening of social bonds fosters a form of war that is hidden instead of disappearing. These wars are permanent in the *brown areas*⁽¹²⁾ where the State is hardly present, and there are other rules in

place. This scenario is typical in large metropolitan areas having double standards that are used to measure life in the center and on the periphery. A different set of rules is followed in this "non-area" where the ruins of the State share the authority with mafias, drug cartels, paramilitary groups, gangs, *maras*, mobs, and solitary predators. The *brown areas* represent the social uprooting built by the capitalist system that is exacerbated by the utopia of the capital known as neoliberal globalization.⁽¹²⁾

The fact that invisible boundaries work as a demarcation for security companies agrees with what Bedoya proposed⁽²¹⁾ for the last 30 years. Public security has been gradually controlled by illegal armed groups, who turned the violent extortion of their clients into a regular, and not always forced, tax payment. In this regard, territorial control is exercised as a "violent protection" initially adopted for certain mafia groups in Medellin as a new and productive source to generate wealth. This control has become a characteristic, not only of war and protection of the narcotic industry, but also of the control of small-scale markets, gambling, consumer goods' distribution, and protection of people and collectives.

The public space, which is based on the interpretation of the urban environment, is a place for meeting and sharing where participation can be reinforced, and community affairs can be constructed.⁽²²⁾ The temporal or permanent blockade of certain spaces in Medellin, such as squares, streets or parks hinders free circulation, attendance to work or school, and leisure enjoyment; it also makes the environmental, the social-urban, and the sociopolitical aspects of the city precarious since citizens' rights are violated together with the city's right to be a historical and social construction. It is in this context of precarious human security that the inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods are at risk of losing the collective history of their neighborhood as a stable way of creating a neighborhood and civic identity.

These invisible boundaries conceal the configuration of new forms of relationships within the community. They are enforced by "micro-powers" that arise from illegality and penetrate everyday life. These micro-powers also substitute the forms of relationships that were created during the construction and population process. Communities move or get dismantled, and different strategies

are created amid pain and uncertainty, providing answers to everyday war and the impunity of the State that moves around unconcealed acts or the silence imposed on most of the victims.

Finally, these invisible boundaries, as means of social control, should be mentioned to show the violent nature illegally imposed on the territories,

where armed actors and inhabitants of the city are involved. Boundaries are also an additional demonstration of how criminal structures are perpetuated and recreated despite the unstable behavior of violence in the city and the different strategies that were implemented by the institutions.⁽²³⁾

ENDNOTES

a. After Antioquia, Medellín is the second city in the country with the largest number of victims of armed conflicts. The estimated number of settled victims in the city was of approx. 250,000, 89.7% of whom were displaced by acts of violence.⁽⁶⁾

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors of this manuscript stated that there is no personal, commercial, academic, political, or financial conflict of interest. We also declare that all the financial and material support received for the development of this study research as well as for the preparation of this manuscript is clearly detailed within the text.

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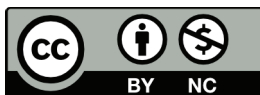
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