

Is Homicide a Turning Point in the Life of Perpetrators? A Narrative Analysis of the Life Stories of Marginalized and Middle-Class Male Homicide Offenders in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, Argentina

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyze the relevance given to violent deaths and imprisonment by male homicide perpetrators in their biographical reconstructions. Drawing on narrative criminology, this study examines the offenders' emic terms, rationalities, and stories. The analysis is based on seventy-three purposefully selected narrative-biographical interviews and field observations in prisons and homes of former convicts (2016-2020) in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, Argentina. The corpus was analyzed following an inductive thematic coding strategy using ATLAS.ti. Three central narratives about homicide and incarceration emerged: "opportunity," "rock bottom," and "disruptive." For most, homicide was described as a biographical opportunity to rethink their lives, pursue new pathways, and "stabilize" a previously uncontrolled lifestyle. However, homicides perpetrated by respondents with higher socioeconomic status were disruptive events. Participants used stoic rationality—the positive appraisal of painful experiences—to structure their sense-making and stories of violence. This rationality permeated perpetrators' presentations of themselves, their turning points and lived experiences, and the violence performed and suffered. This paper grapples with the widespread assumption that homicide is a radical change in the lives of offenders and questions the universal meaning of violent death. Performing violence is not only neutralized but is also seen as an expected and inaugural event in life stories, dependent on the worldviews of the social actors.

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How do homicide perpetrators make sense of their crime? How significant is such an event in their life stories? Is homicide perpetration a turning point in their lives? This paper aims to analyze the relevance given to violent death and imprisonment by male homicide perpetrators in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, Argentina (2016-2020) by examining their biographical reconstructions and the turning point descriptions in their narratives of the crime. By doing so, this study grapples with the widespread assumption that homicide is a radical change in the lives of offenders and questions the universal meaning of violent death.

Homicide has been a longstanding research topic in criminology and social sciences (Brookman, Maguire, and Maguire 2017). However, this phenomenon has largely been examined via quantitative methods, especially for patterns, victims' and victimizers' profiles, and criminogenic characteristics (Innes, Tucker, and Innes 2017; Dobash and Emerson Dobash 2020). The pre-eminence of statistical secondary data analyses in the study of lethal violence has been related to methodological issues (i.e., barriers to accessing the primary population, difficulties of conducting fieldwork in prison, or with former convicts, etc.), but also to institutional barriers, from the IRBs and prisons' authorities, and the frustrations and blocks experienced by researchers involved in dealing with prison systems' staff and inmates (Liebling 1999; Patenaude 2004). Consequently, few studies have endeavored to examine the rationalities and stories of violent criminals (Presser 2008; Imbusch and Veit 2011; Hartmann 2017), especially in Latin America (Birkbeck 2020:121; Di Marco and Sy 2020).¹

¹ Katz (2002), Presser and Sandberg (2015), and Sandberg, Copes, and Pedersen (2019) have extensively reviewed criminological

A small number of studies have used perpetrators' life stories to understand the significance of homicide. In the extant literature on perpetrator homicide, linking the crime to a lack of adjustment to stress and trauma (Ferrito, Needs, and Adshead 2016), the use of neutralization techniques to circumvent shame from the crime (Ferrito et al. 2016), and the struggle of perpetrators to convey their suffering and articulate painful experiences (McKendy 2006) have been highlighted. Envisioning a homicide as a turning point in the perpetrator's life trajectory remains mixed. Life-course studies have concluded that imprisonment may constitute a turning point in the perpetrator's criminal trajectory (Sampson and Laub 1993; Cid and Martí 2012). Alternatively, other studies have shown that violent deaths are normalized and not seen as a major life event, depending on their life courses and socialization contexts (Liles 2018), that the relevance given to the crime varies according to the perpetrators' worldviews (Birkbeck 2020; Gabaldón 2020), and that homicide can be presented—in the context of a research interview—as an irrelevant event (Birkbeck 2020). The justifications and neutralization strategies used by offenders (Rodríguez 2020) and the use of prevailing narratives to account for the crime (Presser 2008; Di Marco and Evans 2020) have been recent strategies to analyze the sense-making of homicide.

Micro-sociological studies have looked into the experiences and rituals that take place during physical confrontations, allowing "high resolution" analytical descriptions of violent deaths (Innes, Tucker, and Innes 2017:12). Stemming from the concept of situational transactions, as contextualized interactions in ritualized stages (Luckenbill 1972),

and sociological literature about this topic and discussed the tendency to undermine the stories and experiences of offenders.

radical interactionism has shown that male-male confrontations imply an honor contest (Athens 1977), a mutual agreement of aggression, and a defense of status (Polk 1999). Humiliation and shame are key emotions in the performance of violence (Athens 1977), and violence can be understood as “an attempt to replace shame with self-esteem” (Gilligan 1999:111).

Moreover, Katz (1988) suggested that “righteous manslaughter” is shaped by morality and emotions. In the actor’s experience, violence is based on the belief in the action’s justice. This approach to homicidal action is grounded in the premise that background biographical factors (such as socioeconomic status) are not enough to explain the action itself (Katz 2002). Collins (2008) has argued that, since violence is usually an unsuccessful project, key aspects to understanding its performance are the resources that actors use to overcome confrontational fear and tension. More recently, Ceretti and Natali (2020) proposed the concept of violent cosmology to complement this micro-sociological approach to a narrative understanding of violence.

These interactionist studies coincide in inquiring about meaning by looking into the self as a situated process (Athens 1977): meaning and *in situ* rituals are a necessary dyad. Nonetheless, empirical micro-sociological studies of homicide have been marginal in the field of homicide (Hartman 2017), mainly due to the methodological challenges of observing violent deaths. Access to data or the epistemological limitations of analyzing interviews to inquire about interactions are still a matter of discussion (Collins 2008; Hartman 2017).

From a broader perspective, the voices of incarcerated people have been a focal point of critical crim-

inology to understand inmates’ perspectives, their conflicts, and the effects of the penal device. Gaucher (2002:7) suggests that storytelling can be a means of survival, a strategy to “withstand the dislocation that prison life creates.” This approach, as it has been noted (Briggs 2011), allows for exploring the nuances of sense-making and highlights storytelling as a form of identity building.

Particularly, narrative criminology has contributed to the understanding of crime by looking into the stories told by offenders and analyzing their sense-making (Presser 2008; Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016; Sandberg et al. 2019). The sense-making is relevant to comprehend how perpetrators convey meaning to violence and to show that meanings shape past and future actions (Presser and Sandberg 2015:1). Drawing on neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), and sociology of accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968; Orbach 1997), the narrative approach has shown the array of resources at hand that actors situationally use to account for their actions. Similarly, desistance theory has highlighted how stories affect the persistence or desistance of violence performance, and the offenders’ subjectivity (Maruna and Copes 2005). Therefore, this broad framework focused on storytelling articulates narration, identity, and rationalization as connected social processes.

Whether focused on storytelling or emotional experience, the above-mentioned literature highlights how the offenders’ worldview and subjectivity are key to understanding their actions, their explanations of a past action, and, most importantly, the possibility to desist or resist in the performance of violence. Therefore, how homicide is placed in the perpetrators’ biographical reconstruction (the stories about it, its tropes, and the relevance it acquires)

is key to identifying what instigates and sustains harm-doing and what makes it change (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Furthermore, whether the narratives around violent deaths resemble or divert from common institutional discourses (i.e., individualizing, medicalizing, etc.) is central to understanding the subjective effects of prisons and the competing meanings around homicide and incarceration.

Drawing on narrative criminology, this paper focuses on how male offenders give meaning to homicide and present it in their life stories.² This study, thus, highlights the strength of this theoretical framework to understand the shifting ways in which violence is signified, how it is presented in life stories, and how moments of engagement with masculine norms provide an alternative logic frame to institutional rationalities to think about their lives.

Methodology

This paper is based on seventy-three narrative interviews with 25 cis-gender men who were charged with intentional homicide (*homicidio doloso*) of other men in the context of a quarrel or interpersonal dispute in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, Argentina (2016-2020). Data collection took place in four sites belonging to either the Argentine Federal or Municipal Penitentiary System, as well as the residences of men who had finished serving their prison sentence.

A purposive sampling technique was employed because of the challenges of conducting fieldwork in prison (i.e., accessing institutions, and contacting interviewees) (Briggs 2011). This strategy in-

tionally created a heterogeneous sample for the level of education, age, and incarceration time. Access to the prisons was granted via three channels. First, educational facilities within the penitentiaries (primary and secondary schools, universities, and workshop centers) were contacted. Second, permission to enter prisons and contact inmates was formally requested to authorities. Third, interviews were conducted as 'visits' (in visit areas), which are formally solicited simultaneously by the inmates and the researcher. These different access strategies ensured that the population was varied, especially regarding their education and social context in prison. Fraternizing with prison guards was avoided as far as possible to avert being seen as an institutional actor and, therefore, to prevent violating inmate codes and intensifying existing rivalries between participants and guards (Rosenfeld, Jacobs, and Wright 2003). Contact with men who had finished their prison sentences was made via references from other imprisoned men encountered during the fieldwork.

In the resulting sample, 36% (n=9) of the men completed primary school, 44% (n=11) had completed high school, and 20% (n=5) had university degrees at the time of the crime. All men were 18 years or older, with 48% (n=12) between 18 and 25, 36% (n=9) between 26-35, and 16% (n=4) 36 years or more when the crime was committed. While the mean age of the sample (27) coincides with the average of male homicide perpetrators in Argentina, the proportion of men with higher educational credentials in this group of interviewees was purposefully higher to encourage comparison. At the time of the interviews, 40% (n=10) of men were between 18 and 25, 32% (n=8) were between 26-35, and 28% (n=7) were between 36 and more. The average time in prison for the sample was of 4.5 years.

² I would like to acknowledge the substantial contribution of Dr. Subasri Narasimhan for her encouraging comments and the review of the manuscript before submission.

An unstructured narrative interview method was utilized to encourage the participants to guide the conversation, tackle emergent topics, and elaborate on meaningful themes (Corbally 2014). All interviews began by asking the participants to tell their life stories. Probing included follow-up questions, paraphrasing statements, and interjections. The conversation followed the sequences that the men brought up, and intrinsic questions (Chaitin 2004) were usually asked in the third encounter. Participants were asked to draw lifelines to make their stories visually assessable for the interviewer (Adriansen 2012). Special attention was paid to how the men sequenced their stories and which events or transitions created different stages (Rosenthal 2018). All interviews were conducted by the author of this paper. The interviews were digitally recorded and lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. A total of 73 interviews were conducted with participants.

In contrast with an initial hypothesis and some of the specialized literature about interviewing offenders (Umaña 2018), conversations developed smoothly and amicably. Humor and the thrill of telling their stories were common emotional predispositions. This general mood might not only be related to the gratification of relating anecdotes (Jackson-Jacobs 2004) and the interactional uses of laughter (criticizing authority, boasting their achievements, and alleviating suffering) (Sandberg, Tutenges, and Copes 2015) but to the fact that storytelling is a central identity-building practice and a ritual to establish a reputation in prison.

To ensure rapport, the fieldwork included other activities other than the interview itself. Participating in lectures and workshops, cooking and having lunch, playing board games, and simply talking about daily topics were ways to get to know each

other and, at the same time, to get to know the institutional spaces. Typically, the first interview with each case started after several other activities were shared with him.

The fact that I was dubbed *profe* (teacher) by the participants from the different prisons and settings is an indicator of how my presence in the field was seen. Being associated with a figure of educational authority is a way of making sense of an academic project by linking it with well-known hierarchies. This aspect of the fieldwork sheds some light on the expressed reasons why the participants accepted to talk about their lives. The main motivations expressed by interviewees included: a. seeking understanding and telling their stories to an outsider, b. the desire for change and reform, c. expecting that the interview would have an impact on other people's lives, and d. experiencing satisfaction by telling anecdotes.

The prisons in which the fieldwork was conducted did not have specific rehabilitation devices, treatment programs, or *programas de externación* (resocialization plans). Counseling (as specific guidance) was not present in these prisons, which is a structural feature of the Argentinean penal system (CELS 2005). Nonetheless, individual psychological treatment and religious groups (particularly, evangelists) were present. Furthermore, educational institutions (and more specifically, university courses within the prison) have a prominent role in everyday life by organizing courses, seminars, workshops, and, more generally, an influx of topics and discourses. The programs and activities organized by universities are, however, not discussed with or influenced by prison staff.³

³ Under Argentine law, universities are autarchic and autonomous institutions. Consequently, guards are not allowed to enter these facilities, and penal staff does not have the authority to intervene with educational material and plans.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, assigned pseudonyms to anonymize the participants, and analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. Open codes were created following a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Two independent researchers coded the entire corpus to assess the reliability of the analysis. This paper focuses on the biographical indexes, turning points, and life periods (Fischer 1978; Rosenthal and Bogner 2017:162-163) to reconstruct the private calendars (Leclerc-Olive 2009) of the participants. Biographical cases are used to illustrate the analysis. The analysis was based on the premise that the image of the self is not a direct reflection of experience, but a creative process situated in the context of an interview and related to the interviewees' construction of identity (Presser 2004; Butler 2005).

The narratives described in this paper are ideal types and are presented as sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1969) that encourage the identification and interpretation of the trends in storytelling and, ultimately, understanding the role that homicide/imprisonment has in the lives of perpetrators. Moreover, the narratives should be considered as products of the parameters of the interviews (Butler 2005)—they are the product of a situated social interaction.

Ethical approval was provided by the Bioethical Committee "Dr. Vicente Federico del Giúdice." Informed consent was utilized, in written and verbal forms, and data were kept confidential.

Results

How do perpetrators talk about homicides? Where was the homicide 'placed' in their biographical reconstructions? And how is imprisonment positioned and depicted in their life stories? Within the

interviews (n=73), the word homicide was rarely used by the participants to talk about their crimes (n=2). Instead, participants used a range of direct and indirect expressions to describe the crime, including "what happened," "the reason why I'm here," "the death," "the mistake," and "the incident," among others. The reluctance to directly name the killing as homicide has been previously documented (Kessler 2010:122; Presser 2008; Ferrito 2020), and serves as an indicator of how offenders manage their self-presentation and frame their stories in interviews.

Participants from this study had heterogeneous social backgrounds. The life histories of Walter and Serge synthesize the main features of middle-class and marginalized trajectories, as exemplary cases (Rosenthal 2018). Walter was born in a wealthy neighborhood of Buenos Aires. After attending primary and secondary school in a bilingual institution, he continued his education by going to a private university and working in his family's business. Contact with public and private institutions is presented throughout his narrative, whereas physical violence is mentioned exclusively during his adolescence in the context of sports. He was 39 when he committed the homicide of his brother-in-law as a result of ongoing arguments over money. Contrastingly, Serge was born on the outskirts of the city and moved several times before his adolescence. His father left his home when he was one year old and had a turbulent criminal career. By the age of 15, Serge had started committing small robberies and using drugs with his group of neighborhood friends. Having dropped out of high school, he pursued a career as a professional bank robber. Aside from school, institutions are notably absent in this life story. Fights, vendettas, and guns are mentioned throughout his life story.

Despite the diverse stories of the men, there were prevalent discourses to make sense of the crime and to give an account of oneself. Three main narratives—presented as ideal types—were used to talk about homicide: “opportunity,” “hitting rock

bottom,” and “disruptive” (see: Table 1). These categories were created based on two domains: first, how men talked about the effect of the homicide on their lives and, second, the continuation-alteration of a social trajectory.

Table 1. Narratives based on perspectives on homicide-imprisonment’s effect, and continuation-alteration of social trajectory

Narratives	Effect on life	Continuation-alteration	Exemplary quote
Opportunity	Departure from a problematic pathway and potential moment for self-improvement (focus on the future)	Alteration	“I had the chance to be locked up. That was the best thing that could have happened to me.”
Rock bottom	Negative expected turn (focus on the past)	The momentary alteration, the continuation of the self	“I guess I had it coming. I was like a car out of control, spinning out of control...”
Disruptive	Radical negative unexpected turn (focus on the future)	Alteration	“It was a sudden change in everything. Never thought I would end up here, so... I’m a different man after walking through those doors.”

Source: Self-elaboration.

An Opportunity: “It’s the Best Thing That Could Have Happened to Me”

11 of the 25 narrators predominantly used opportunity narratives. These stories revolved around seeing incarceration as a departure from their previous problematic pathways, a transition to a new stage of life, and a potential or effective opportunity for redemption or self-improvement. In these cases, homicide was presented as less meaningful than the event of being imprisoned or an inseparable event from imprisonment.

For Ruben, being incarcerated after killing another man with whom he lived in an abandoned house implied the prospect of a change in his self. He discussed that being arrested meant a key moment in his life—it allowed him to embark on a new life pathway and distance himself from the pre-determined future that his family expected he would have.

My family thought I had no future, “You’ll end up in jail, you’ll end up in a ditch.” And that was where I was heading...And I grew up thinking that, and I even wanted to become the worst badass [*poronga*] in

the neighborhood. Until I had the chance to be locked up [*caer preso*]. That was the best thing that could have happened to me. Otherwise, I would have ended up dead...This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Although I think my family sees that just as a pause in my pathway, behind bars. But, it is not; it put me back on track. [Ruben, 23 years old]

References to being “locked up” [*caer preso*] as a turning point and, simultaneously, a biographical opportunity were frequent in the life stories of young men from marginalized areas. These narratives were more frequent amongst those men who used redemption narratives (Ferrito et al. 2012; Liem and Richardson 2014; Di Marco and Evans 2020). Expressions like, “I had the chance to be locked up,” “it was the best thing that could have happened to me,” and “it was the only thing that put me back on track” not only refer to changes in their social contexts, resources, and potential pathways but also their worldviews. Redemption, possibilities, and self-improvement are discursive elements that the interviewees learn from the penal enunciation contexts (Mcadams et al. 2001).

In stories such as Ruben’s, homicide is presented as a life index—a mark in his trajectory (Atkinson 1998). However, going to prison represents a major event that supersedes death itself. In this participant’s story, the interchange between homicide and prison became clear as he omitted the killing altogether when drawing his lifeline and, in place, highlighted being arrested. When reading the line, he stated:

So, then I moved to this house, with these guys I knew from the streets and... not much else. The next important thing was when I was arrested [*encanar*] and came here. And then things started going better, smoother. [Ruben, 23 years old]

Serge’s story shares the view of imprisonment as an opportunity—it inaugurates a moment in his life when he felt safe from a potentially violent death himself, and he describes a halt to his criminal career.

I had a lot of negative moments in my life, many shitty decisions, you know. Getting high, hanging out with the wrong people, beating up my classmates. That was all negative, a burden. But, on the positive side, other things happened that kept me afloat. Having my nephews and seeing them grow up healthy and out of trouble. And being imprisoned, too, transforming myself and putting me back on track...Some of the good, positive things in life just hit you, but ultimately help you... This helped me grow up and realize that I was going down the wrong path. [Serge, 26 years old]

Ruben and Serge’s stories illustrate the discursive effect of penal knowledge devices, such as psychology and educational courses in prison (Jarman 2019). Seeing prison as a moment of atonement, redemption, and even learning is rooted in the discourses encouraged in correctional devices (Maruna and Copes 2005). The use of labels (“back on track,” “transformation,” etc.), which are more commonly used by prison staff and healthcare professionals, is connected to this discursive outcome. Furthermore, this presentation of the self as a redeemed character, indicates the parameters with which offenders can give an account of themselves (Butler 2005).

As Briggs (2011) and Gaucher (2002) noted, inmates’ storytelling is not only a key identity-building practice but a survival strategy. Ascribing to institutional stories about life, transformation, and opportunities allows them to shape their presentation of self in the penal context and grapple with the sense of agency (McKendy 2006). Identifying a prison sentence as a time to “transform” oneself can be a way

to deal with the emotions following the institutional speech.

Similarly, Nicholas presented his detention as a turning point more relevant than homicide itself. This crime was seen as an inevitable outcome of his lifestyle.

Sooner or later, it was going to happen. And it did happen [laughs and shrugs his shoulders]. You can get a bullet, crash when you're being chased by the cops, or get caught. I was caught...As a kid I didn't expect to end up playing for the national football team. I've always had my feet on the ground. But, I didn't expect to go through these changes inside here...I'm taking advantage of the situation now because I'll be all by myself when I get out. So, I'm learning from people who know more, you know? [Nicholas, 20 years old]

Detention is not only depicted as more meaningful than the crime itself, but it is described as a learning platform. Violent death is not an unexpected or distant event, nor does it disrupt the respondent's storyline. Prison is presented as a usual transition and, for some men, an aspirational event. The optimistic logic about detention and death takes the form of a compensatory biographical arc (Hankiss 1981).

Presenting a hopeful view of prison and highlighting detention over the crime was prevalent in these narratives. These stories allowed interviewees to distance themselves and their past actions from negative meanings (Tomsen and Gadd 2019). Furthermore, describing hypothetical scenarios ("I would have ended [up] dead"), by contrasting what happened and what could have occurred, allowed them to evaluate their stories within an optimistic frame (Labov 1982:226).

While most of the interviewees who used "opportunity" narratives stressed that prison could be a positive life-altering event, others used them to emphasize other aspects. For instance, Charly pointed out that being in prison is not only a place to "get back on track" but also to protect himself from his family and family legacy.

Coming here, after what happened, was sort of for the best. I thought, "I'll be sentenced for a long time, and I'll have the chance to study, and not worry about other stuff," you know? Especially about my family, my father, and my brothers...This was very, very important for me [raises his voice]. I didn't have many happy memories with my family. My father went in and out of prison during my whole life. A dead brother, two in prison for armed robbery...I still have a chance to... be different from them here. This keeps me away from them. Otherwise, I'll be in the same shithole. [Charly, 19 years old]

Charly's narrative exemplifies two tendencies in the stories. First, he indirectly references homicide ("what happened"). Second, he stresses the positive aspect of being imprisoned after violent death. However, unlike Ruben, Serge, and Nicholas, he emphasized this turning point to solve a family-related conflict and highlight the distance from family to combat inevitable generational legacies. This adaptation of the "opportunity" narrative into a different story shows the range of ways in which it can be adapted and presented depending on biographical trajectories and symbolic resources. It also shows that interpreting this stage as an opportunity is not necessarily related to individual 'personal change' narratives rooted in broader neoliberal discourses since it is also linked with local folk theories about crime, violence, and safety (Jarman 2019).

In contrast with these cases, other stories are more ambiguous as to the meaning of homicide and detention within the life course. Understandably, this is not a result of the ubiquitous sense of these events but of how men reconstruct their life stories and negotiate meaning in the context of the interviews (Presser 2005) and the ambiguity and opacity managed when giving accounts of themselves (Tewksbury and Gagné 2001; Butler 2005). Dan illustrated this ambiguity when he stated that being detained was one more “medal of honor”:

What really fucked me up was when I got the boot from the petrol station. That fucked me up [emphasizes]. You are a teacher, you'll understand. I had a chance in life then not to steal or end up selling shit in the streets...I'm here because that is what happens with the underdog...For a lot of people, that's a medal of honor: you have one for every cop you drop, every time you survive prison. For me, it's just one more small medal, an extra point...But, I'll use the time here to prove to everyone I can do my best and that I can have a proper job and life. [Dan, 37 years old]

Dan presents a variation of the stories of detention and death—these events do not highlight a set of before and after expectations but mark a less important biographical index. In his trope, losing a job meant the beginning of a personal decline. In this antithetical presentation of the self (Hankiss 1981), detention is one more moment in life—he is still the same person from before the homicide, and the crime underscores his prior, inescapable trajectory. Nonetheless, prison is still a stage to “prove to everyone” that he can change.

While Dan's story reinforces the tendency of the perpetrators to present imprisonment as a more important event than the crime, this case has some

key differences. First, he committed homicide at an older age (36) compared to the other offenders. Second, his life story is structured with a fatalist arc (Di Marco and Evans 2020)—his explanation and neutralization around the violence are related to his position in society, by his depiction, as an “underdog.” By directly interpreting the interviewer as a teacher, he stresses the ‘obviousness’ of this argument and seeks an accomplice to the narrative (Presser 2004).

The opportunity stories presented so far have a cross-cutting theme—the pivotal moments in respondents' lives not only “make them who they are now” but make them stronger, more resilient, and more prepared for the world. As masculinities studies have suggested (Messerschmidt 2000; Jewkes and Morrell 2018), the selection and interpretation of life events illustrated a way of presenting the self and making sense of adverse experiences as moral and subjective tests. For these men, violence is not alien—it is a force negotiated and contested. The possibility of using violence is presented stoically, by the resources at hand (Ellis, Winlow, and Hall 2017). Moreover, in most of these cases, homicide is presented as a righteous act (Katz 1988). Violence is committed because, from the men's perspective, the victim violated fundamental and unassailable values.

There are several main analytical features of “opportunity” narratives. In Ruben, Charly, and Dan's stories, for instance, being imprisoned [*encanar*] is seen as a marked turning point—it indicates the stop of a trajectory and a change towards a better life course. Changing the social environment, desisting from crime, or avoiding peers are the practical product of incarceration. This is presented as an “opportunity,” “chance,” and “a rest from a turbulent life.” Their stories are filled with expres-

sions and tropes (“the best thing that could have happened to me,” “I would have ended up dead”), which illustrate how imprisonment can be seen as a more relevant event than the actual homicide. Moments that are associated with trauma, tragedy, or despair are, therefore, interpreted, negotiated, and valued in their presentation of the self as having the potential to change them for good.

Hitting Rock Bottom: “Life Comes to a Halt”

Eight of the 25 interviewees primarily told rock bottom narratives. In contrast with opportunity narratives—in which an optimistic view on the dyad homicide-imprisonment is stressed—in this narrative, the optimistic interpretation of homicide/imprisonment is overshadowed by a sense of momentary negative alternation of life. Moreover, stories using the “rock bottom” plots focus on how detention implies the logical consequence of a previous life trajectory. This change in the protagonist’s story can be presented as necessary (“there was no other way”) or contingent (“I could have gone down the same path for many years”) at the time.

David illustrates this narrative in its necessary variation. He committed the homicide of a neighbor after a long-standing fight over a fence. He was 24 at the time of the crime.

Just before this happened, I lost my job. Because of a misunderstanding, I was fired...This changed me from that point onwards: I was really irritated and started fights over any little thing. My quarrel with Jacob [the neighbor] was just one more fight I picked up...But, because of that fight, I ended up here...I guess I had it coming. I was like a car out of control, spinning out of control... [David, 26 years old]

“Being here” is presented as a crucial moment, whereas “the quarrel” that ended up in homicide is downgraded to “just one more” incident in his decline arc. David’s story has a self-absolutive plot (Hankiss 1981)—the protagonist’s previous trajectory explains the crime. In this account, the background (being fired, his volatile temperament, the tendency to start fights) is stressed to give meaning to the homicide—the violent death is presented as a logical or comprehensible outcome of a prior personal tendency. For this, he uses an “out of control” script, which is common in rationalizing and neutralizing violent crimes committed by men (Hearn 1998; Presser 2004; Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh 2009).

David: Being irritated all day long, feeling boiling with rage, I could have gone down the same path for many years. But, this happened, and, well, I’m here.

Martín: Yes. Feeling boiling with rage. Before, you mentioned that some other men here see this as an opportunity.

David: Yes, some do. They think they’ll end up changed, reformed, purified [mocking accentuation]. I believe most of us are here, including me, because we hit rock bottom because we were far too taken by criminality, anger, greed, or something else. Sooner or later, they come here. [David, 26 years old]

Differentiating oneself from “others” serves as a chance to present a certain moral self and, at the same time, to depict the morality of “others” (Linde 1993). David’s distancing from men who see prison as an opportunity helps to understand the competing worldviews in this institution (who am I, who are the rest, what subjective processes take place in prison, what is change) and, at the same time, to evaluate how hegemonic are these narratives. His reference to other inmates’ perspectives (verdict or

not) illustrates how the narratives around homicide and imprisonment are being exchanged and disputed and, consequently, have micropolitical consequences for them. Opportunity and rock bottom narratives are competing in the penal context.

A common theme in rock bottom and opportunity narratives is the anticipated nature of negative events, including imprisonment, direct conflict with the police, and another major declining incident. Fights, violent accidents, or a “mishap” are presented as foreshadowed and routine events in their stories: “that’s what usually happens,” “it was meant to be,” “I had it coming,” “it’s not destiny, but it is what usually happens.” The fact that men who told these stories “took for granted” homicide or arrest was rooted in their inextricable relationship with violent dynamics (Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes 2015) and their normalizing of certain forms of physical violence (Karandinos et al. 2014).

While rock bottom and opportunity narratives are used to make sense of their lives and of the crime itself, the meanings conveyed differ. Rock bottom stories emphasize the momentary end of a stage in life, focusing on the events that led to this moment. In contrast with opportunity narratives (where the future is emphasized), the past is more relevant. This type of story not only is a neutralization strategy similar to the ones found in other studies (Presser 2004; Di Marco and Evans 2020; Rodríguez 2020) but it is also an indicator of how the violent act itself is defended and legitimized.

Patrick provides a variation of this narrative. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison after stabbing his former boss, who owed him money. His story accentuates that, while reaching the “rock bottom

moment” in his life, being imprisoned does not necessarily imply an end to his criminal activities.

I handled things wrong with him [boss], with him and my wife, and other people. But, I had a rope around my neck...This was a rock bottom moment in my life [*estaba en las últimas*], and somebody ended up dead, but I know I’ll end up again doing other shit when I get out...Of course, being here, imprisoned, is fucked up, and it’s, how can I put it? Something that I’ll remember for the rest of my life. That my family will remember for the rest of their life. But, there are a lot of things at the end of the tunnel, and, from what I’ve heard, not all of them are good. I might end up robbing again, who knows? [Patrick, 29 years old]

Although rock bottom narratives can depict the halt in the type of delinquency life course, they can also take the form of a temporary or momentary story (“I might end up robbing again”). For instance, Marc stressed that being imprisoned was a result of his lack of skills and inexperience as a criminal, and incarceration is a means of improving and perfecting his criminal activities.

I came here because I was stupid [*gil*], I didn’t know how to handle things, how to stop...I was high every time I went to rob. That’s for beginners. This was meant to be, but I’ll come out smarter [*más pillo*] at least...A guy died, unfortunately...Meanwhile, I’m sitting here in this shithole. [Marc, 23 years old]

Marc illustrates that hitting rock bottom might not imply a process for the “entire self” but a transition and change of a particular aspect of the protagonist. In this account, his “beginner self” changed and, thus, it is allowed a transformation to “come out smarter.” In contrast with the positive view of imprisonment in the opportunity narrative—in which redemption

and subjective transformation are brought up in the interviews as key components of their processes—in rock bottom stories, being imprisoned can imply “using this instance to perfect my skills.” As Kessler (2010) argues, the professionalization of delinquents usually implies reaching certain stages in their career, which can be experienced as landmarks—their life course and goals remain unaltered, yet halts are lived as learning stages.

What are the main analytical features of “rock bottom” stories? This narrative is used to present homicide and imprisonment as a momentary halt in the life course, whether it is seen as necessary or contingent. These variations all contain the same distinctive discursive elements—an expected alteration from a previous path is experienced. However, this change is not interpreted as a moment of complete subjective transformation or “self-improvement” (as “opportunity” stories highlight) but rather a smaller change in some aspect of the trajectory (criminal skills, temperament, “street smarts”).

The fact that the dyad homicide-imprisonment is presented with this narrative underscores the normalization of violent deaths in certain social contexts (Karandinos et al. 2014) and how this is related to prevalent worldviews (Santos 2012). Homicides were presented as righteous actions and, hence, neutralized. As other research in Latin America has suggested (Birkbeck 2020; Gabaldón 2020), these types of stories are indicators of the likelihood of violence occurring and, in general terms, of how it is signified in certain contexts.

Disruptive: “This Is Not My Life”

Six of the 25 participants predominantly used disruptive narratives in their life stories. In contrast to

the previous stories, these narratives stress that the protagonists suffer a radical unexpected change in their lives. “I never ever thought something like this might happen to me,” “everything turned upside down in the blink of an eye,” and “I was stunned, in shock; I’ve never even been to a police station before” were expressions that illustrate the pivotal meaning of homicide and imprisonment for these men.

Most of the participants (n=19) that employed opportunity or rock bottom narratives were young men who were raised in marginalized neighborhoods. Nonetheless, older offenders and especially those with higher socioeconomic statuses described the homicide as a disruptive story. The crime was viewed as a painful transition to an unknown and uncertain stage of life.

Denise killed his partner’s ex-husband after an argument over custody rights. At that time, he was working in his family’s company and living in a wealthy area of Buenos Aires. The killing marked a clear “before and after” event, and it is still a contemplative matter [*procesar*] in his current life.

I was about to buy a house on the beach. Just had even talked to the realtor...And then this happened and changed everything [puts his hand on his forehead]. I’m still figuring it out [*procesando*]. It was a sudden change in everything. Never thought I would end up here, so... I’m a different man after walking through those doors...I’ve been talking to the psychologist, and even knowing that I have a violent personality doesn’t make it easier for me to understand what happened...That pushed me here. [Denise, 39 years old]

In contrast with opportunity and rock bottom stories, Denise’s disruptive narrative emphasized an

abrupt change in his life trajectory. Both the death and the incarceration marked a negative change in his expected life course. His story illustrates the prevailing arc in disruptive stories—personal decline (Adshead and Ferrito 2015). The fact that he uses a biomedical label (“violent personality”) illustrates how certain medicalizing discourses shape the stories and accounts of these men. While not all of the participants used expert theories and terms to make sense of their actions, the presence of psychological categories shows the presence of dominant theories in penal devices, as has been found by other studies (Di Marco and Evans 2020; Di Marco 2022).

In Walter’s case, the death of his brother-in-law and his conviction for first-degree homicide was not only seen as a watershed in his life, but a change in his family’s dynamic.

Go figure that...I never, ever thought something like this could happen to me. Never. One day, out of the blue, everything went south. I lost my job; I lost my little sister. She didn’t want to talk to me ever again. My parents are still by my side. But, you can tell this situation hurts them...What makes it worse is that when I’m out, they’ll [his parents] be probably gone... If you asked the 35-year-old me if I would ever have fought with someone like that, or if I would be anywhere near such an atrocious incident, I would have laughed and said no...When I woke up at the police station, the day after, I remember thinking, so vividly, this is not my life. This is not my life...It’s been 2 years now, and I know that, even though that man, from that day [of the incident] was not really me, I have to man up [*bancársela*] and use this experience to learn something. [Walter, 42 years old]

The previous verbatim illustrates Walter’s symbolic distance from the violent deaths. The crime marks

his life story—it is the breakdown of relationships and a sudden, unexpected, and unfamiliar shift in his life course. Moreover, his distancing from the protagonist of the story (“this is not my life”) marks a stable narrative—the act of violence is explained by a temporary lapse in character and does not reference the narrator’s ‘true’ identity (Presser 2008). Unlike opportunity narratives, in which the past and present selves are presented as different, in stories about disruption, the protagonist does not change.

Despite the distance from violent deaths in Walter’s life before the crime, his interpretation of the situation is like his approach to prison—he must “man up” (*bancársela*) and learn from this experience. Sticism is a key element in the traditional construction of masculinities (Connell 1995), and it is a common topic in these interviews—either learning from the experience or being strong for a certain reason (a future, a relationship, faith, etc.) remain cross-cutting themes. Despite the grief, sorrow, and sadness expressed in the interviews, “surrendering,” as an interviewee said, was not an option. This could be interpreted as emotional illiteracy (Hearn 1988:27) or, conversely, as a specific type of rationality.

For Juan, who killed his cousin in an argument over inheritance, the crime altered the expected course of his life.

It’s hard to...It was a fight, yes. We were arguing about money, yes. But, it’s not something I premeditated, or that he provoked, or anything like that. It was truly an accident...The thing got out of control, and he fell [from a terrace]...I’ve heard all the stories from other men here, and they’ve all had these types of experiences before. They fought, stabbed, and hammered. I didn’t...That doesn’t mean I’m not guilty, legally

speaking. But, it's something that the judge didn't consider. And now my life is ruined. I lost everything I had. Family, house, wife. I'm alone now and I must start from scratch...At least I can prove everyone that that's not who I am, that it was an isolated event. [Juan, 29 years old]

Stories about accidents, mishaps, and being under the influence are common tropes to distance the narrator from the event and neutralize a crime (Dobash et al. 2009; Presser 2009). In Juan's story, his distancing from "other men here" is a key aspect of his narrative to present himself as less condemnable than other prisoners. Furthermore, the possibility of envisioning a future—in contrast with previous optimistic narratives revolving around redemption and self-transformation—is referred to as "ruined." Despite this presentation, "start from scratch" and "proving" himself illustrate the same stoicism from other stories.

In disruption narratives, the presentation of homicide-detention as a turning point oriented the biographical reconstruction towards the identification of key life indexes—stressors, decisive moments in their lives that marked them or events that could explain the death were common topics in these stories. Presenting the homicide as an unexpected dreadful event implied, in this narrative, accounting for its extraordinary nature.

Was it my character? Was it the greed for money? Was it debt? Was it how we were raised? I don't know. I don't know if there is an answer. But, I've been thinking about it ever since. Thinking about what could explain what happened. [Juan, 29 years old]

What are the main analytical features of "disruptive" narratives? In contrast with opportunity and

rock bottom narratives, stories that take this form highlight homicide as a turning point and its negative effect on their lives—death distorted an otherwise planned life course. The impact on subjective well-being, relationships, or their future life and self are the focal point of these stories. Men who had narrated their lives with this structure emphasized the unexpected nature of the crime. These men did not have prior experience with violent deaths, the police, and the judicial system. As Santos (2012) points out, the life-world that social actors take for granted explains the disruptive effect in their lives and the reason why these deaths are not justified as righteous acts. This offers a nuance to Katz's (1988) findings.

Discussion and Conclusion: A Necessity Made into Virtue?

How were homicide and imprisonment portrayed in these life stories? What is the analytical relevance of these narratives? The biographical analysis provides detailed and comprehensive data about turning points and how the actors perceived them. Previous research has scarcely asked why, how, or if homicide became a pivotal moment in the eyes of the perpetrators (Brookman 2015; Liles 2018). By adding the analysis of the offenders' rationalities, this analysis suggests four empirically-grounded points related to the sense-making process of violent deaths and the presentation of the self, which were "put on stage" (Goffman 1967) during the interviews.

Firstly, perpetrators made sense of the killings in heterogeneous ways, illustrating that homicide is not necessarily experienced as a negative or a "traumatic" event—in most cases, homicides were seen as a positive inaugural moment. This finding is further nuanced when comparing the structure of

the life stories of men from different socioeconomic backgrounds and age groups. The structuring (which events organize their stories/calendars) and sequencing (how they concatenate vital events) of the stories vary, as well as the expectations in their life—for younger men from marginalized areas, violent death is part of their expected future (Santos 2012). This finding reinforces the hypothesis that homicide is not inherently a turning point in the life of perpetrators since violent deaths were predominantly normalized (Liles 2018; Birkbeck 2020; Gabaldón 2020). Furthermore, stating that the act of killing is not necessarily 'traumatic' allows reinterpreting of dominant theories about painful experiences (McKendy 2006) and adjustment to stress (Ferrito, Needs, and Adshead 2016)—discursive contexts shape experiences of harm and pain.

As Presser (2004) noted, the elements of life stories are what the actors select to present in the interview. Therefore, the question about the conditions of selection and the variation amongst the different participants is key. The shifting ways in which homicide is signified are not only related to its centrality in the life stories but also to how it is symbolically managed. Young men from marginalized neighborhoods did not present the killing as a crossroad. Instead, being "locked up" [*encanar*] was an event that changed their life-courses. Narratively, the offenders used a metonymy between homicide and imprisonment—prison can replace death as a vital index. In line with a contextualized understanding of these narratives, the greater importance of imprisonment can be interpreted as a survival resource in prison and a strategy to reshape institutional discourses (Gaucher 2002). Talking about their life and the crime is necessarily related to the available and valid stories in prison and, therefore, a way to avoid stigma.

Distancing the self from the negative and stigmatizing meanings of violence has been a well-studied phenomenon (Presser 2004; Tomsen and Gadd 2019; Rodríguez 2020). As Presser (2008:78) has stated, placing the crime on the margins of their life story is a usual strategy by offenders to differentiate themselves from the criminal action, emphasize that the crime does not define them, and, ultimately, illustrates the creative process of self-presentation. This paper not only confirms this statement but contextualizes this phenomenon in the hegemonic discourses of Argentinean penal institutions.

Secondly, the sense-making process varied amongst men from different social backgrounds and classes. Identifying the violent act and incorporating it in the stories varied concerning how distant violent death was to a respondent's everyday life. Namely, men from marginalized neighborhoods "tolerated" more violent crimes (Cozzi 2014) and legitimized their transit through prison. As Hearn has pointed out, engaging in violence has a subjective effect, since the more frequent the violence is in everyday life, "the more it is taken-for-granted" (Hearn 1998:202).

Additionally, being in prison is neutralized and narratively treated as a positive event—being "locked up" [*encanar*] can be an expected event in life-courses and can also be interpreted as a transition to "rest," "train," or "be safeguarded" from daily hazards of their neighborhoods. Thus, homicide can be a positive index in life (Mcadams et al. 2001; Baird 2018).

This finding provides an opportunity to revisit the statement that homicide is intrinsically related to trauma and an abrupt change in a life trajectory, suggested in previous research (Liem and Richardson 2014; Adshead and Ferrito 2015), as well as com-

mon sense. Lethal violence—as well as other forms of harm and suffering—can be normalized in their perspective and, consequently, it might not represent a turning point (Liles 2018). Furthermore, these life stories allow understanding of violence perpetration in a different light from the hegemonic medicalized frameworks (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Epele 2019), which tend to apply biomedical labels to the actors' experiences, unacknowledging how human experience and meaning are shaped by discursive environments.

Based on this result, the following hypothesis could be formulated—the greater the symbolic distance with homicide, the more the tendency to experience and present this event with a disruptive narrative. Further exploration of this hypothesis might encourage the merging of narrative and interactionist theories of violence—namely, the perspectives of Collins (2008), as a continuation of Athens and Katz's work. As it has been suggested by Ceretti and Natali (2020), the sensible experiences of actors could indicate the sources of perpetrators' narratives. Considering Katz (1988) and Athens' (1977) phenomenological understanding of the self, the above findings suggest that social background influences how violence is experienced and narrated.

Thirdly, despite the heterogeneous tropes of the stories, a similar stoic logic was applied to present their lives—harmful, painful, or disruptive events were interpreted as “growing up” events that made them stronger. This prevailing rationality to interpret lived experiences—the positive appraisal of harmful events—can be linked to how hegemonic masculinities experience and interpret their lives (Hearn 1998; Messerschmidt 2000; Ellis, Winlow, and Hall 2017; Baird 2018) and to a restorative strategy of the self (Kimmel 2019).

Stoic rationality is illustrated with two main points. First, most biographical indexes were related to honor and ‘character-building’ stories. This was prevalent in either younger or older men: “becoming independent,” “becoming a man,” “learning about life,” or even being imprisoned. Second, presenting these events, and specifically the homicide, in a positive manner coincided with moments of engagement with masculine social norms (Connell 1995:122)—the moments of passage illustrate the proactive search for certain attributes.

Finally, the positive appraisal of harmful experiences, imprisonment, and homicide are linked to the institutional discourses themselves. Thinking in terms of personal growth, strengthening and safeguarding are deeply connected to the devices present in prison (i.e., psychology and religion). Hence, this dominant interpretation of their lives has institutional marks (Presser 2008) or text-atoms (Martin 2019) that shape it. This raises the question of whether replacing homicide with imprisonment as a turning point could be an unintended consequence of these discourses. This presents a paradox related to the fact that the more institutionalized discourses overshadow the homicide itself by incorporating expert labels and theories about self-improvement.

As previous research in Argentina has shown (Di Marco 2022), several narratives can be identified in the accounts of homicide offenders, including redemption, complicity, and fatalistic stories. While not all of these resemble dominant neoliberal psychological narratives (i.e., individualizing and medicalizing social actions) (Illouz 2008), the prevalence of self-improvement and self-help narratives in the findings above is noteworthy. Violent death and imprisonment can be seen as a life index that triggers a positive individual change. Nonetheless, rock bot-

tom stories, when considering homicide/imprisonment a momentary stage, show a clash between institutionalized penal discourses and folk theories of crime (Jarman 2019). In these cases, homicide can be justified and legitimized as a valid action and a foreseen moment in life.

The previous analysis can be related to two broad frameworks of biographical narratives. First, the selection and presentation of turning points can be a way to identify rationalizations and neutralization strategies of a past action (Sykes and Matza 1957; Orbuch 1997) and, second, it can be interpreted as sensible aspects that “enable” the crime itself (Katz 2002) since stories shape, instigate, and sustain future actions (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Either way, homicide “appears” and “disappears” from the life stories and is displaced by imprisonment as a turning point, depending on how normalized is violence and violent deaths in the horizon of expectations (Schütz 1967).

Identifying the narratives that perpetrators use to rationalize the crime offers a rare opportunity to analyze the first-hand stories told to manage the emotions about this event, and ultimately analyze the values and meanings that enable or prevent desistance (Presser and Sandberg 2015). This approach also illustrates that subjective transformation linked to correctional devices is not linear (Ferrito et al. 2016). As suggested above, men use new discourses (redemption, “opportunity,” etc.) to explain homicide. Analyzing how narratives are negotiated would allow engaging with offenders without simplifying their agency or the institutional setting in the shaping of stories. This is a key approach when designing and evaluating penal institutions and, more generally, identifying the conditions of the possibility of violence.

Drawing on narrative criminology, this paper addresses two gaps in the sociological literature on homicide. First, it reconstructs the life stories of perpetrators of male-male homicide focusing on the identification of biographical turning points presented by the actors themselves. Second, it analyses the sense-making of homicide and imprisonment by perpetrators and it shows how meanings about death can be managed differently according to socioeconomic background and horizon of expectations of inevitable life course events.

By exploring the life stories with an emic perspective, this paper grapples with the widespread assumption that homicide is a radical change in the lives of offenders and questions the universal meaning of violent death. Performing violence is not only neutralized but is also seen as an expected and inaugural event in life stories, dependent on the worldviews of the social actors. Furthermore, homicide tended to be made invisible in the accounts, superseded by detention that had a more significant role in their stories

The findings and nuances of this paper intend to expand the ongoing discussions about violence from an academic and public-policy perspective. The stoic rationality, the positive appraisal of painful experiences, and the metonym between homicide and imprisonment are key results that encourage reviewing how penal devices tackle offender treatment, especially in the Latin American context. Moreover, despite the institutional difficulties and reluctance of researchers to produce first-hand data with perpetrators—as it has been discussed by Brookman (2015) and Brookman, Maguire, and Maguire (2017)—this methodological strategy has proven to be an unavoidable step in comprehending the current regional and global scenario about homicide. In this research, the use of open-ended interviews has been central to

avoid guiding the participants with external terms and logic.

While there is a plethora of scholarly theories about homicide, only empirical explorations of sense-making can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. In academia and common sense,

killing is associated with an existential moment and an irrational, deranged, or immoral act. This research shows otherwise. Revisiting existing data, theories, frameworks, and institutional devices that state certain meanings conveyed to violence—without having empirical grounds for it—constitutes a worthy path of inquiry, still vastly unexplored.

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