

ORIGINALRESEARCH

Explanatory Contexts as a Critical-Analytical Approach to Understanding Violence Through the Colombian Experience

Los contextos explicativos como una aproximación crítico-analítica para la comprensión de la violencia a partir de la experiencia colombiana

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Abstract

In this essay, I analyze the explanatory contexts of violence as proposed by Saúl Franco, examining their components and the findings from Franco's original 1999 study on violence in Colombia. Through this critical review, I propose adjustments to update and strengthen this approach nearly 30 years after its formulation, while remaining faithful to its original conceptualization that views violence as a complex human phenomenon, characterized by temporal, relational, and interhuman dimensions. Among my key contributions, I propose replacing the classification of "types of contexts" with a processes' matrix defined by actors, tensions, times, and places, as Franco suggested. I also recommend revising the terms "structural conditions" and "conjunctural processes" to "structural dynamics" and "conjunctural conditions," which better reflect the dynamic and historical nature of violence. Additionally, I emphasize the importance of explicitly including the historical-territorial dimension, examining how social interactions and spatial configurations shape and sustain violence, disproportionately affecting communities according to their position within power structures. I conclude that explanatory contexts must go beyond simply understanding violence to actively contributing to its transformation through comprehensive and sustainable solutions. This updated approach strengthens its utility as a critical tool for analyzing violence and promoting collective well-being, reinforcing its relevance in the field of public health.

Key words: Violence, Social Medicine, Public Health, Social Sciences, Critical Theory.

Resumen

En este ensayo, analizo la propuesta de los contextos explicativos de la violencia desarrollada por Saúl Franco, examinando sus componentes y los resultados del estudio original de 1999, centrado en la violencia en Colombia. A partir de esta revisión crítica, propongo ajustes para actualizar y fortalecer este enfoque casi 30 años después de su formulación, manteniendo fidelidad a la idea original que comprende la violencia como un fenómeno humano complejo, caracterizado por una construcción temporal, relacional e interhumana. Entre los principales aportes, sugiero sustituir la clasificación en "tipos de contextos" por una matriz de procesos configurada por actores, tensiones, tiempos y lugares, como plantea Franco. También propongo reemplazar los conceptos de "condiciones estructurales" y "procesos coyunturales" por "dinámicas estructurales" y "circunstancias coyunturales", que reflejan mejor la naturaleza dinámica e histórica del fenómeno. Asimismo, destacó la importancia de integrar la dimensión histórico-territorial, considerando cómo las interacciones sociales y el espacio moldean y perpetúan la violencia, impactando de forma desigual a los colectivos según su posición en las estructuras de poder. Concluyo que los contextos explicativos deben trascender la comprensión de la violencia para contribuir a transformarla mediante soluciones integrales y sostenibles. Esta actualización refuerza su valor como herramienta clave para analizar la violencia y promover el bienestar colectivo, reafirmando su relevancia en el ámbito de la salud pública.

Palabras clave: violencia, medicina social, salud pública, ciencias sociales, teoría crítica.



Introduction

This essay is part of my doctoral research in Public Health, which analyzes homicidal violence in Colombia (1996-2016) through the explanatory contexts proposed by Saúl Franco in the 1990s to understand the escalation of violence that was affecting the country at that time.¹ This critical approach, adopted by other researchers in the field^{2, 3, 4} addresses the insufficiency of causal and unidirectional explanations in clarifying the complexity of critical human life phenomena, offering a profound approach to the social sciences.

Although, after Franco's initial work, some researchers have adopted this approach to understand violence in various settings,^{5, 6} none of the authors have critically reviewed the implications of the approach or the potential it holds for understanding contemporary violence through the incorporation of reflections that have emerged in recent decades within the frameworks of Latin American social medicine/collective health,⁴ which have approached the understanding of various phenomena affecting human life from critical perspectives.

Therefore, in the following pages, I will conduct a thorough review of this analytical framework, delving deeper into and discussing the author's proposals, especially from a theoretical standpoint. My goal is to enrich the author's original proposal by incorporating new perspectives and reflections on the understanding of violence, primarily derived from the field of Social Medicine/Collective Health. I will present the characteristics of each of the terms that comprise the concept to understand their singularities, scope, and criticisms, and I will propose a series of elements aimed at updating and strengthening the analytical approach.

Before starting the analysis, I want to highlight that the interest in understanding violence stems from the assumption that human life is a central concern of public health, and that violence is a phenomenon that determines the possibilities of living. In this way, I understand life as a set of elements that not only refer to pure biological and individual existence, or "the living" in Fassin's

words, but also to the relational and political dimension of the existence of human groups.⁷

Development

In-Depth Exploration of Explanatory Contexts

In his 1999 work, Franco defined explanatory contexts as "a specific set of cultural, economic, and political-social conditions and situations in which it becomes rationally possible to understand the presentation and development of a phenomenon."¹ In later studies, he continued to develop this initial concept, emphasizing that the explanatory context is formed by the combination of these specific conditions, which make the phenomenon under study historically possible and rationally understandable.⁸ This suggests that the context is constituted by what Bunge would call "real features of the factual world,"⁹ thus having an ontological nature. In turn, the context is a way of knowing reality, which implies that it also has an epistemological dimension, where actors, moments, and places move from being variables that describe patterns and trends, typical of causal approaches, to becoming a way of knowing that questions the why's and how's.

However, while "context" can be read as a container scenario separate from the processes that occur within it, the author clarifies its meaning by pointing out that it involves delving into the logic of a specific reality, analyzing processes, phenomena, and mediations. This includes identifying actors, tensions, spaces, and times, considering their interaction in a triple temporality: the past that reveals roots, the present that explains dynamics, and the future that projects possible trajectories.¹

Delving into the logic of a particular reality implies that explanatory contexts address specific phenomena in concrete settings, considering time, space, and actors. In this sense, while the explanatory contexts of a phenomenon may share common elements with other realities, their explanatory power lies in their own configuration process, which depends on "the specific trajectory through which the processes of the human order unfold, which, beyond singular wills, are intertwined in the social, historical-territorial

development, of global power relations, and that have both planned and unplanned elements.”¹⁰ This means that they obey conditions built in the social process and, although particular, are understood in relation to regional and global contexts.

Understanding explanatory contexts as the result of configuration processes reinforces what Franco proposed regarding the "times and spaces of the event," which refer to the historical-territorial processes that determine human processes. From this perspective, the historical is understood as the "relational matrix that organizes, supports, and structures the processes,"¹⁰ encompassing various temporal scales, while the territory is considered the "fundamental scenario where life unfolds" and where "the material existence condition of societies is expressed, established by the productive and reproductive processes occurring within them."¹¹

Thus, explanatory contexts respond to specific moments and spaces in which the conjunction of conditions of different natures and levels of organization occurs, resulting from historical dynamics that materialize in spaces constructed by the interaction between the human being and the space they inhabit. In this way, they account for the underlying dynamics and forms of determination that shape reality, while revealing the relationships-tensions between their own components and the interactions between different contexts.

It is in this sense that the context goes beyond a descriptive level and becomes explanatory. Rather than identifying the root causes of a phenomenon, it adopts an analytical-interpretative model in which the phenomenon is understood through the identification and comprehension of the social environment that determines it and the relationships that constitute it. This implies that explanatory contexts are expressions of what Breilh would call "a dialectical movement that obeys a critical contextual process."¹⁴

By making the dialectical perspective that underlies explanatory contexts evident, a

perspective characteristic of schools of thought such as critical social theory (CST), it is possible to highlight that the conjunction of the components of the contexts occurs amidst processes of tension, contradiction, interaction, and transformation that describe a reality which often may appear as "irrational," but which, as Lozano-Lerma points out, "must be brought to reason."¹²

After analyzing the concept of explanatory context, it is crucial to discuss Franco's classification, who distinguishes between types of contexts: economic, political, cultural, religious, etc.,⁸ highlighting their intersection to enhance their explanatory capacity. However, classifying contexts as types of circumstances simplifies reality and fails to capture the complexity of the social dynamics that the approach, according to its own conceptualization, aims to address.

To enrich the analysis, Franco introduced two complementary categories to contexts: structural conditions, which are deep, enduring, and highly explanatory, and conjunctural processes, which are high-impact events of short duration and lesser explanatory capacity.¹³ Structural conditions can be understood as those that generate the original possibility of the phenomenon – and which, in some way, precede it – and which become more complex and transformed as they are reinforced by other structural elements, while conjunctural processes are events that arise from the possibilities offered by the context and enhance the occurrence of the phenomenon.¹

Explanatory contexts highlight the structural as long-term dialectical historical processes, where the relationships between actors, moments, and places generate tensions and contradictions. These dynamics allow for understanding the continuity or transformation of the conjunctural circumstances that shape the phenomena. According to Borde, this approach is one of the author's greatest contributions, as it explains violence within a logic of production and reproduction that reflects the historical dimension of social processes, specifically the process of violence.¹⁴

Contributions of Explanatory Contexts to Understanding Violence

The explanatory context approach recognizes violence as a complex human process with a "character of temporal, relational, and interhuman construction" (p. 4), situated in a historical-social context where interests, interactions, and tensions between actors, territories, and trajectories converge, determining its emergence, maintenance, and transformation. Quintero and Beltrán⁵ highlight that this analysis links the dynamics of problems to preexisting historical structures, shaped in specific territorial scenarios resulting from social relations.

Thus, understanding the explanatory contexts of violence means not only accounting for a series of structural-conjunctural relationships that surpass comprehension through sets of variables, but also for the interactions that occur between different contexts and types of violence. In this sense, Franco notes that when explaining violences that occur simultaneously, it is not a matter of one violence explaining another or deriving from another, but rather that the traits they share point to a common historical matrix.¹

This highlights the influence of Critical Theory on the explanatory context approach, which is manifested not only in dialectical and relational understanding but also in the way this perspective must "reveal the character of domination and the foundations of injustices that particularly affect populations that have faced structural conditions of discrimination."¹² In this way, violence from the explanatory contexts is understood as part of what Breilh calls "unhealthy and destructive life processes"¹⁵ that systematically close spaces for the development of materialities, sociabilities, relationships, and subjectivities that promote life, health, and well-being, ones that are good for living and not just for surviving.¹⁴

In this way, explanatory contexts offer a solid alternative to causalist approaches to understanding violence, promoting a rationality that is less accusatory and more understanding of its nature, historical conditions, dynamics, and possible strategies for transformation.¹⁶ Its approach, rooted in a dialectical and historical

perspective, delves into the structural conditions that enable violence, challenging static and factorial views common in other fields of public health. In addition to seeking an integral understanding, it implies an active commitment to the formulation of holistic and transformative solutions.

Explanatory Contexts of Violence in Colombia 1975-1995

"*The Fifth: Do Not Kill*" is Saúl Franco's response to violence as the principal public health challenge in late 20th-century Colombia, due to its scope, diversity, and impact on both individual and collective life. Franco presented this proposal as an integrative and "border" effort¹ that combines perspectives from various disciplines within the social sciences and health, aiming to address a shared challenge.

In this study, the author identified three explanatory contexts of violence: political, economic, and cultural, each shaped by structural conditions of impunity, inequality, and intolerance, and influenced by conjunctural processes such as the intensification of armed conflict, the neoliberal shift, and the drug problem. The analysis combined epidemiological data, theoretical studies, and testimonies, observing that the political context predominated in testimonies and theoretical studies, the economic context in data and epidemiological analyses, and the cultural context in narratives.

The study highlights the political context as the most influential in violence, marked by the illegitimacy of the state, loss of credibility, an ineffective judicial system, and political repression. This was reflected in the militarization of life and the shift toward wealth concentration with the neoliberal shift of the 1990s.¹ Although the political-military conflict contributed to violence, it only represented 10% of homicides between 1976 and 1975, showing that its end would not significantly reduce homicides.¹ The drug problem, situated in both the political and economic contexts, was made possible by weak state conditions, alongside an international-scale issue that exploited the pre-existing conditions of violence in the country to consolidate itself.

In the findings of this study, the economic context is marked by inequality, distinguishing it from poverty as an ethical-political criterion of justice in wealth distribution.¹ Statistically, no direct correlation was observed between the increase in homicides and inequality, as according to the author, these relationships correspond to a set of situations that do not always occur simultaneously and should be observed on a broader temporal scale.

The cultural context, according to the author, is the least developed and requires further reflection and research to fully leverage its interpretive and propositional possibilities.¹ This context is shaped by structural conditions of impunity and intolerance, shared with the political context, and is reflected in corruption, which reinforces illegitimacy and distrust toward the state. Additionally, it encompasses values, psychological aspects, education, and media, which should play a key role in fostering a culture of consensus and respect for difference.

Following the publication of *"The Fifth: Do Not Kill"*, Franco identified three key characteristics of violence in Colombia: generalization, complexity, and degradation.¹⁶ Generalization means that violent forms, such as homicides, affect almost all areas of individual and collective life. Complexity is reflected in the diversity of forces in tension, the changing scenarios of conflict, and the transformations of actors, making violence dynamic and unpredictable. Degradation, of an ethical nature, addresses the coherence between principles and actions, the balance between individual and collective interests, and respect for universal ethical and humanitarian minimums.¹⁶

Validity and Provisional Nature of Explanatory Contexts

Franco emphasized the provisional nature of explanatory contexts, recognizing that reality is in constant historical transformation. Thus, identifying contexts is a retrospective exercise that uses the past as a tool to interpret the present. According to Franco, their current validity lies in their explanatory capacity, logical coherence, and alignment with the trends of the phenomenon, while, from a broader perspective, they are

validated historically.¹ This view aligns with Naupas, who asserts that social practice is the best criterion for validating hypotheses in social research.¹⁷ This means that the validity of explanatory contexts is not only based on their theoretical soundness but also on their capacity to transform realities.

Franco underscores the provisional nature of the contexts, noting that this condition prevents the search for definitive answers or immediate solutions, bringing it closer to reality and the continuous process of trial and correction.¹ This promotes constant critical reflection, questioning assumptions, methods, and conclusions to ensure they are supported by solid arguments. Moreover, he acknowledges that the results are neither definitive nor unquestionable, but subject to ongoing scrutiny and adjustments according to new data and perspectives, allowing for a deeper and more dynamic understanding of the phenomena analyzed.

Based on the findings and the application of the explanatory contexts model in the 1999 study, the following sections will examine the problematic aspects of this approach and propose strategies to update it, with the goal of adapting it to the analysis of violence in the current Colombian context.

A Re-reading or Updated Vision of Explanatory Contexts

Explanatory contexts have provided key insights into violence, revealing the structural dynamics that sustain its manifestation and persistence. To ensure their usefulness in understanding current violence in Colombia, especially after the critical moments at the beginning of the 21st century, it is necessary to review and strengthen their central elements in light of new approaches. While maintaining their explanatory essence, the arguments I present below aim to strengthen this approach, overcoming identified gaps and weaknesses, in order to offer a more comprehensive tool for analyzing violence.

According to Saúl Franco's proposal, the identification of explanatory contexts is divided into two main stages: a descriptive one and an

analytical one. In the descriptive phase, the goal is to identify trends in the data that represent the phenomenon, relying on epidemiological methods for analyzing homicide frequency measures and economic indicators, as well as reviewing interviews conducted with key actors, evaluating the recurrence in responses to questionnaires. In the analytical phase, these data are classified and interpreted according to predefined categories, integrating various types of quantitative and qualitative information.

Thus, my first observation of the approach is the need to reflect on the types of data used in identifying contexts. For example, Franco treats quantitative data (epidemiological measures of homicide frequency) as objective and sufficient, without examining the circumstances in which these data are generated, failing to recognize or problematize the fact that such data are the product of specific interests, possibilities, and recording capacities, which vary across the country.¹⁸ Additionally, when using standardized indicators (e.g., the Gini index) to describe social conditions such as poverty and inequality, the underlying assumptions of these concepts and the methods used for their collection and estimation are not reviewed or questioned. Therefore, if such information is considered for inclusion in the construction of explanatory contexts, the analysis must include a critical evaluation of the conditions under which this data is produced, what the indicators assume, and their interrelationship with other sources of information and dimensions of analysis.

Regarding qualitative information, it is essential, from the perspective of social research, to employ methodologies that maximize the potential of data obtained from sources such as interviews with key actors and documents. These methodologies do not limit themselves to quantifying responses into predefined thematic categories, but, by integrating progressively adopted approaches in public health research, such as grounded theory,¹⁹ discourse and content analysis,²⁰ or thematic networks,²¹ can promote a rigorous and structured approach to the data, ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings. One critique of Franco's study lies in the fact that qualitative data were not fully exploited from the perspective of qualitative analysis

possibilities, which highlights the importance of strengthening the methodological process through thorough qualitative analysis and triangulation of methods as a strategy to approach reality from different perspectives.²²

Regarding the Analytical Phase

In the analytical phase, it is important to recognize that due to the relational complexity inherent in the explanatory context, its articulation should not begin with the assignment of a "type of context," but with a statement that describes the matrix of processes that configure the context. In other words, instead of talking about types of explanatory contexts (political, economic context, etc.), it would be more appropriate to state the conditions of possibility that are generated within the framework of a particular network of actors, actions-reactions, tensions, times, and places. This aligns with what Franco himself points out when he mentions that, in the analysis of the explanatory contexts of violence, we must "specify with which actors, in what sense, to what extent, and through what mediations and mechanisms the context contributes to explaining it."¹⁶

This leads to a review of the concepts of "structural conditions" and "conjunctural processes." A "condition" implies a relatively static property, so if the structural is considered dynamic and changing based on the relationships between the elements that comprise it, it would be more appropriate to speak of "structural dynamics." This term better reflects how social structures change and evolve through interactions and continuous, ever-changing historical processes. This change is not merely semantic, but better fits the dialectical way in which explanatory contexts have been proposed to be understood and impacts how data is interpreted.

The review of the term "conjunctural process" also suggests a change. Since the term "conjuncture" refers to "the combination of factors and circumstances that appear at a particular moment,"³⁷ there is a discordance with the concept of process, which implies a development over time, i.e., historical, that causes the loss of the conjunctural character. In this sense, I propose using the term "conjunctural conditions," which

more precisely refers to events that are possible due to the structural dynamics and the particular elements that converge at a specific moment.

Thus, when describing an explanatory context, it is not a distinct category from structural dynamics and conjunctural conditions; rather, it is a matrix made up of these elements, where aspects of an economic, political, cultural nature, among others, converge.

On the other hand, it is important that, remaining faithful to its conceptualization, explanatory contexts reflect more explicitly the historical-territorial dimension of violence. This implies considering the medium- and long-term processes that have shaped individuals and societies in which violence manifests, as well as the interaction of human groups with the space they produce and inhabit. Although it has been previously mentioned that "space and time" are determining elements in defining contexts, these categories have been underdeveloped in the descriptive and analytical process of studies that have incorporated the approach.^{5,6}

Therefore, it is essential that research adopting the perspective of explanatory contexts include approaches that demonstrate that phenomena like violence do not occur in a "social vacuum." On the contrary, violence, as a human process, is configured within a historical-territorial matrix¹⁰ that, following the concept of the critical epidemiological profile proposed by Jaime Breilh,²⁴ impacts social groups in an unequal manner. These groups, with specific ways of life, find themselves in different positions within the power structure, which determines differential access to favorable or protective conditions, as well as to unfavorable or destructive conditions.²⁵

This is also the approach that other schools of thought in Social Medicine/Public Health have adopted to understand "(...) how the care of life is shaped by the mechanisms of inequality, exploitation, and subjugation inherent to class/race/gender domination and contemporary colonial order, which are expressed through a hierarchical organization of the care of life. In accordance with this, the possibilities and

restrictions for living well are organized according to these historical processes of differentiation and hierarchization, which are embodied in the experience of individuals, as the hierarchical scheme of valuation/valorization of life is consolidated."²⁶

Finally, the dialectical understanding of violence implies recognizing that in response to an action with a certain direction, reactions occur in different directions. This means that the analysis from explanatory contexts can be enriched through the incorporation of expressions of coping with violence, which I refer to as "social responses." This means that, just like the violence itself, social responses are possible due to the explanatory context and can have different impacts in various directions depending on the conjunctural conditions.

Conclusions

Homicidal violence is a complex phenomenon that involves different dimensions of individual and collective human life, both biological and social. Therefore, its understanding requires considering approaches that account for its relational and historical nature, where various interactions and tensions between actors and territories converge. This dialectical approach allows for understanding violence as a process with a temporal, relational, and interhuman construction.

In this essay, I reviewed Saúl Franco's approach of explanatory contexts, highlighting its relevance for understanding contemporary violences. This critical approach not only examines the structural dynamics and conjunctural conditions in which homicidal violence is produced and reproduced, but it also, beyond understanding, offers tools for transforming realities and addressing the underlying conditions that perpetuate violence.

Violence affects the possibilities of living fully, making it a central issue for public health. Only through a comprehensive and transformative approach will it be possible to move toward sustainable solutions that prioritize the defense and promotion of life in all its dimensions.

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