

What do epidemiologists do?

Investigating a controversial symptomatology following HPV immunization in Colombia

Context:

In Carmen de Bolívar, a town on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, different narratives developed around a mysterious symptomatology that appeared after the inoculation of the Human Papillomavirus vaccine in 2014. While the girls affected by the symptomatology and their families argued that the symptoms are adverse events following immunization, the Colombian National Health Institute affirmed that the symptoms were related to a psychogenic dynamic, which they also called collective hysteria.



"Nobody explained us what was happening and many girls didn't want to be vaccinated, but they got forced. Angelica started running around the garden crying because she didn't want to be shot. I was not afraid of the vaccine, because I thought that if they were shooting it, it was for something" (Sandra).

"...you feel like if your brain disconnects from you. [When a crisis is coming] I feel like if my soul is leaving me, because I can't breathe... when a crisis is coming I feel my heart beating very fast, I was saying 'mami please take me, I can't breathe'. I felt the trachea closing and a pressure on my chest....like if I was compressed between two walls. When I arrived at the first aid and they gave me oxygen I started feeling relieved" (Liliana).

"At one moment I got depressed. I was never able to leave this room. I used to spend my days lying in this bed. Everything was very difficult for me. It was very painful for me to walk from here to there. my knees were burning, all the legs and my spine were in so much pain@ (Beatriz).

Research question:

How do the girls narrate their experiences, through what mechanisms and through what purposes are their narratives reduced and synthesized in the epidemiological study?



In my thesis I argue that the epidemiological methods and practice are entailed with two dynamics that influenced the research conclusions.

(1) A double reductionism performed by the epidemiological report, which using the medical histories as its primary source silenced the girls, excluding many meanings and characteristics of the symptomatology.

(2) The influence of the center-periphery relation between the researchers and the researched in the way epidemiological data are generated.

Methods and frameworks:

I conducted fieldwork in Colombia amongst the girls affected by the symptomatology, and amongst the epidemiologists and the public health authorities that diagnosed the girls with the psychogenic reaction.

Relying on the Illness Narrative and Critical Epidemiology perspectives, I collected the girls' experiences, and I analyzed the epidemiological protocol highlighting which fragments this made visible and which invisible.



"We always try to do objective work, that's why we have to look at real sources, which in this case are the clinical records" (interview 3)

"what counts for us is the doctors' perspective" (interview 3).

"...yes, we were all going crazy. That was one of the worst times for the hospital. We had our normal daily workload and, additionally, twenty or thirty girls fainting with convulsions, to whom we didn't know what to do, we didn't have the time to fill all the histories and take all the vital signs....Many of the vital signs on the clinical histories were copy pasted" (Interview 6).