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Short communication

The Danger of a single story about forensic humanitarianism

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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1980s, forensic scientists have played a crucial role in the international response to mass violence, contributing evidence to war crimes tribunals and identifying bodies to end the tortuous uncertainty of loved ones. Recently, experts at the International Committee for the Red Cross have described these activities using the term "humanitarian forensic action," applying it from the field's origins in Argentina to the multiple organizations and types of projects that exist today. This article cautions against any account of the history of humanitarian forensic action, or its contemporary landscape, that is so simple and unified. It points to divergent mandates, working methods, and even definitions of humanitarianism, focusing especially on new ways in which forensic scientists are addressing the mass suffering caused by structural violence.

In her TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story," the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, "it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person."[1] Much of her talk focuses on how novels, the news media, and Hollywood movies often depict the "developing world" and former colonies only in stories of deprivation, violence, and despair—what Adichie calls "a single story of catastrophe."

The danger of a single story threatens places and people, but it can also shape the vocabularies and concepts we use to talk about science, law, and morality. When we reduce a concept with as complex and contentious a history as humanitarianism to a "single story," we forget important parts of that history. We stop asking questions that may be worthwhile, and stop imagining alternative ways of doing things. The danger of the single story is present, now, in the narrow definition of humanitarianism being used to describe forensic scientists' involvement in global projects to alleviate suffering.

Since the mid-1980s, forensic scientists have played a crucial role in the international response to mass violence. This movement originated in mid-1980s Argentina, when famed forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow and other experts joined with a group of local anthropology and archaeologystudents to exhume the clandestine graves of that country's *desaparecidos*, political prisoners kidnapped and murdered by forces affiliated with the right-wing military regime. The Argentine students, mentored by Snow, would eventually become the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (called the EAAF, for its acronym in Spanish). Since that time, teams of forensic scientists have investigated "scorched earth" campaigns in Latin America, genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, the graves of anti-Apartheid activists in South Africa, and many other scenes of violence. They have contributed evidence to war crimes tribunals and truth commissions, identified the dead in order to end the tortuous uncertainty of loved ones, and facilitated processes of reburial, mourning, memorialization, and care.

The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) entered this field at a key moment, as experts were grappling with conflicts between the priorities of courts and the international human rights community, on the one hand, and victims' loved ones on the other. These tensions surfaced with particular force in the former Yugoslavia, where pressure to collect evidence for war crimes trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) took precedence over, and in some cases interfered with, the work of identifying individual bodies buried in mass graves.[2] The 2003 international conference on "The Missing and their Families," organized by the ICRC, resulted in crucial statements about the importance of identification and other family needs—as well as the inauguration of the ICRC's own permanent forensic unit.[3]

The ICRC is known for its longstanding commitment to humanitarian neutrality. Though the organization's activities extend far beyond traditional war-time humanitarianism, most people continue to associate the symbol of the red cross (and red crescent) with aid workers providing food and medicine, visiting prisoners, and sheltering refugees, all while remaining outside of the politics of conflict.[4] In recent years, the organization's forensic unit has promoted the term "humanitarian forensic action" to describe its particular applications of forensic science. It emphasizes "the dignified management of dead bodies" and adherence to the Geneva Conventions and other principles of humanitarian law.[5] The ICRC has also trained investigators in many countries and even assisted in the creation of a new International Humanitarian Forensic Center in Gujarat, India.

Despite this undeniably impressive humanitarian work, there are reasons to think critically about how the ICRC is crafting and promoting its vocabulary of "humanitarian forensic action." First is the tendency to collapse a complex history and present-day landscape into a single

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story. In a speech in Australia, Morris Tidball-Binz, then-coordinator of the organization's forensic unit and a founding member of the EAAF, asserted, “When a small international delegation of forensic scientists visited my country, Argentina, in early 1984, to offer advice on the scientific investigation into thousands of victims from the military regime which ruled the country from 1976 until 1983, no one suspected that they were in fact laying the foundations of humanitarian forensic action.“[6] An article Tidball-Binz co-penned with another leader of the ICRC's forensic efforts, Stephen Cordner, similarly alludes to humanitarian forensic action's “origins in Argentina” and “further develop [ment]” by the ICRC, as if the same model was being pursued in both contexts.

While there certainly are shared principles, methods, and even some of the same individual experts circulating between these organizations (Tidball-Binz being an example), the story is not simply one of unity and continuity. In fact, significant disagreement persists amongst individual experts, as well as different forensic teams, about what forensic interventions after mass violence should look like. For example, the ICRC's mandate and the rules by which its experts are bound prevent it from being a direct participant in prosecutions of war crimes or crimes against humanity. This gives the organization an interest in maintaining and articulating a clean separation between humanitarianism (defined as the recovery and identification of bodies undertaken to repatriate them to loved ones, not to assess cause of death or criminal responsibility) and justice (judicial exhumations, prosecutions, reparations, and other ways of holding states and individual perpetrators accountable for their actions). Other experts object that these efforts cannot be separated so easily—politically or scientifically.[7]

In fact, the history of the EAAF contrasts with that of the ICRC precisely in this area. While sharing with the ICRC a crucial affirmation that the needs of families and mourners should be central to any investigation, the EAAF does not necessarily adhere to the particular rules of humanitarian neutrality.[8] Specific conditions, such as laws that shielded Argentine murderers and torturers from prosecution for almost two decades, have imposed external limitations on whether the team could provide evidence for prosecutions. But all the while, the team documented evidence and prepared expert reports, unconstrained by a promise to remain neutral and awaiting the day the evidence could be used in court. When former President Néstor Kirschner annulled Argentina's amnesty laws, the EAAF provided testimony and evidence leading to multiple prosecutions. The team's diverse and potentially even competing priorities—encompassing the four goals of “truth, justice, reparation and prevention of violations”[9]—require engagement with what team co-founder Mercedes Doretti, with Jennifer Burrell, has called the “gray spaces and endless negotiations” of any given context where the team works.[10]

There are likely strengths and weaknesses to both the ICRC and EAAF models: to working within the framework of international humanitarian law, or embracing the “Latin American model” of forensic humanitarianismwith its more explicitly political commitment to victims and to human rights, including the prosecution of crimes whenever possible. But the two models are not the same, and the ICRC's newly branded version of humanitarian forensic action—shaped by that organization's history, its internal ethos, and its constraints—was not “developed” by the EAAF, nor does it signal a next stage in the work the EAAF started. It is a branch on the tree, not the trunk. In fact, *both* the ICRC and the EAAF are branches, and neither of their models encapsulate all of the ways in which individuals and organizations act at the intersections of forensic science and humanitarian concern.

The biggest danger of a single story, in fact, is not how it oversimplifies the past. Rather, it is the ways in which a hegemonic story of forensic humanitarianism, as it is promoted through global channels, might limit visions of the field's present and future—ways in which experts can address violence and suffering that have largely escaped the attention of the human rights and forensic science communities.

Anthropologists who have worked to identify deceased migrants at the U.S.-Mexico Border, such as Bruce Anderson, Robin Reineke, Angela Soler, and Jared Beatrice, describe the deaths of border crossers from Mexico and Central America as a “mass disaster” or “humanitarian crisis.“[11] The crisis is caused not by armed conflict or mere “natural” forces, such as the heat of the desert and the length of the trek. Rather, it is the product of a long-standing U.S. policy of “prevention through deterrence,” which pushes would-be border crossers into the most desolate, riskiest parts of the Sonoran desert.[12] Research published by Soler and Beatrice show that identity and cause/manner of death are far from the only important information that can be gained from analyzing these bodies. Looking at stress indicators on the skeleton and teeth, the anthropologists found evidence of “chronic nutritional deficiencies and acute infections during childhood.” In these respects, the population of Unidentified Border Crossers (UBCs) that they studied had greater similarities to prehistoric skeletons than to contemporary U.S.-born individuals coming from across the spectrum of socioeconomic status.[13] Among other things, Beatrice and Soler's analysis makes it hard to sustain the belief, still widely held, that migrants are making reckless “choices” merely for a bigger paycheck or a shot at the American dream.[14] The skeletons tell stories of extreme material deprivation, and of people dying as they attempt to relocate to a place where malnutrition and illness are not the norm—a story of catastrophe that must be told, in part because it implicates all of us.

What does all of this have to do with forensic humanitarian action? Soler and Beatrice write, “skeletal indicators of stress in the remains of migrants represent embodied structural violence that is visible to careful practitioners. In broad terms, this means that forensic anthropologists are able to speak—dash;at least to some degree—about the ways in which structural forces affect the life histories of vulnerable subjects.“[15] Ultimately, they argue, anthropologists are under an obligation—crucially, a *humanitarian* obligation—to document and disseminate this “objective physical evidence of preventable suffering.“[16] This advocacy challenges the traditional conception of the forensic anthropologist as a strictly objective legal expert. It also goes beyond the ICRC's (and even the EAAF's)[17] original models of forensic humanitarian action, and reigning notions of what constitutes a humanitarian or human rights emergency—notions that reflect a failure to engage with the global distribution of wealth, how it impacts who lives and who is left to die.[18]

Some experts describe humanitarian forensic action in traditionalist terms,[19] and as if there were a single humanitarian ethos amongst practitioners, now spearheaded by the ICRC. Indeed, humanitarian forensic action could serve as a narrowly defined “brand” of intervention: promoted by the ICRC, guided and constrained by international humanitarian law,[20] and focused on the “dignified management of dead bodies.” If this were the case, the claims about its historical roots and its application to the entire sphere of forensic science interventions in contexts of mass violence should be kept both modest and specific—much more so than they are now. At best, this could allow ICRC experts to talk openly about the “gray spaces” and ambivalent bargains of their organization's work, embracing its unique tradition while acknowledging that they need to be part of a branching tree where other models of justice and humanitarian action are also pursued.

In her TED Talk, Adichie says, “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” This applies for scientists and humanitarians as for anyone else. Instead of simplifying such a complex history and landscape into a single brand, humanitarian forensic action could instead describe the many ways that forensic science has sought to respond to mass violence, disaster, and other widespread but (in Beatrice and Soler's words) “preventable” suffering—all of them meaningful and none of them perfect. Real-world humanitarianism is a series of questions, not an answer: questions about power, sovereignty, human solidarity, how we collectively determine (ethically, politically, and even scientifically) which lives and which deaths matter. Humanitarian forensic action has room in it for multiple histories and more than one vision of the future. Now it needs more

than a single story.

Declarations of interest

None.

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8. EAAF team members have consulted with the ICRC in contexts where they followed strictly "humanitarian" protocols, focusing only on identification and repatriation. The lesson here, again, is that the story of Humanitarian Forensic Action and its ethics is complex, in part because experts from organizations with different mandates still circulate and collaborate in what Is ultimately a small, and highly specialized, field.
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20. See Gaggioli G. International humanitarian law: the legal framework for humanitarian forensic action. *Forensic Sci Int.* 2018;282:184–194.