

## Positioning toward police violence against Black and White suspects

### O posicionamento frente à violência policial contra suspeitos branco e negro

### El posicionamiento frente a la violencia policial contra sospechosos blancos y negros

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#### Abstract

This study investigated whether the skin color of the victims of police violence influenced the arguments used in the face of this type of violence. 105 residents of João Pessoa (Brazil) participated in this study (age  $M = 25.31$ ;  $SD = 7.5$ ). A questionnaire with a fictitious report was used, in which the suspect of committing an assault had been seriously attacked by a police officer. In one condition, it was mentioned that the suspect was white and, in another, that he was black. Participants were asked to write a text justifying their views on the event. The responses were analyzed using Iramuteq. When the suspect was white, most of the positions (65 %) disagreed with the police action, justifying that the use of violence was illegal or arbitrary. When the suspect was black, most of the positions were in agreement with the use of violence (51.43 %), justifying it as a kind of punishment of the suspect and as a necessary procedure given the ineffectiveness of Justice in fighting against the crime. It was concluded that the position in the face of police violence is one of the expressions of discrimination against blacks and contributes to the maintenance of racial hierarchies in Brazil.

**Keywords:** prejudice; racial discrimination; police violence; racialized relations; textual analysis

#### Resumo

Este estudo investigou se a cor da pele das vítimas da violência policial influenciava os argumentos utilizados frente a esse tipo de violência. Participaram deste estudo 105 residentes de João Pessoa (Brasil). Utilizou-se um questionário com uma reportagem fictícia, na qual o suspeito de praticar um assalto havia sido gravemente agredido por um policial. Em uma condição, mencionava-se que o suspeito era branco e, em outra, que ele era negro. Os participantes foram convidados a escrever um texto justificando seus posicionamentos acerca do fato ocorrido. As respostas foram analisadas por meio do Iramuteq. Quando o suspeito era branco, a maioria dos posicionamentos (65 %) discordavam da ação policial, justificando-se que o uso da violência era ilegal ou arbitrário. Quando o suspeito era de cor negra, a maioria dos posicionamentos era de concordância com o uso da violência (51,43 %), justificando-se a mesma como medida de punição do suspeito e como procedimento necessário dada a ineficácia da justiça no combate ao crime. Concluiu-se que o posicionamento frente à violência policial consiste



numa das expressões da discriminação contra negros e contribui para a manutenção de hierarquias raciais no Brasil.

**Palavras-chave:** preconceito; discriminação racial; violência policial; relações racializadas; análise textual

### Resumen

Este estudio investigó si el color de piel de las víctimas de violencia policial influyó en los argumentos utilizados ante este tipo de violencia. 105 residentes de João Pessoa (Brasil) participaron del estudio (edad  $M = 25.31$ ;  $DT = 7.5$ ). Se utilizó un cuestionario con un informe ficticio, en el que el sospechoso de haber cometido una agresión había sido agredido gravemente por un agente de policía. En una condición, se mencionó que el sospechoso era blanco y, en otra, que era negro. Se pidió a los participantes que escribieran un texto que justificara sus opiniones sobre el evento. Las respuestas se analizaron utilizando Iramuteq. Cuando el sospechoso era blanco, la mayoría de las posiciones (65 %) estaban en desacuerdo con la acción policial, justificando que el uso de la violencia fue ilegal o arbitrario. Cuando el sospechoso era negro, la mayoría de las posiciones estaban de acuerdo con el uso de la violencia (51.43 %), justificándola como una especie de castigo al sospechoso y como un procedimiento necesario dada la ineficacia de la justicia en la lucha contra el crimen. Se concluyó que la posición frente a la violencia policial es una de las expresiones de discriminación contra los negros y contribuye al mantenimiento de las jerarquías raciales en Brasil.

**Palabras clave:** prejuicio; discriminación racial; violencia policial; relaciones racializadas; análisis textual

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The recognition of fundamental human rights and the guarantee of individual freedoms are basic principles of democratic societies (Nisnevich, 2012) as advocated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). In recent decades, however, democratic societies have seen the strengthening of populist extreme right movements that, among other characteristics, express positions ostensibly contrary to the principles of human rights, such as speeches of intolerance against minority groups and support for the use of violence by the state (Löwy, 2015; Verkuyten & Nooitgedagt, 2018). In the specific case of Brazil, the convergence between intolerance and repression has, in police violence against Blacks, one of its main forms of materialization.

In addition to representing a serious form of violation of fundamental rights, insofar as it involves the arbitrary and excessive use of physical violence by the state against ordinary citizens (León et al., 1999), police violence is one of the forms of expression of the structural racism of Brazilian society. This is because it manifests itself in a society that has its roots in the slavery of the black population and that, historically, has used the force of the state to exterminate black, young, and poor men (Flauzina, 2008). Therefore, the present work uses the context of police violence to analyze whether the justifications adopted for the use of this procedure represent forms of racial discrimination. Thus, our objective is to investigate whether the arguments used to accept or reject police violence are influenced by the skin color of the victims of this type of violence.

In Brazil, murders committed by the military police have always been present in the lives of residents of urban peripheries. However, data released by the Violence Monitor show that the numbers have been growing annually, especially since 2018. A closer look at the profile of the victims of this type of violence shows that, in 2020, of the 6,416 Brazilians killed by police actions, 78.9 % were black. The fatality rate in police operations is 2.8 times higher among Blacks than among Whites. Furthermore, Blacks (black and brown) represent 4.2 victims per 100,000 inhabitants, while among Whites this number is 1.5 per 100,000. Black people are the main victims of these actions in at least 36 of the 50 cities with the most occurrences of police operations in Brazil and the vast majority of these victims are between 18-29 years of age. All these data were published in 2021 by the Brazilian Public Security Forum and point to a systematization of police violence based mainly on interracial relations (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2021).

In fact, since the publication of Sérgio Adorno's (1995) work on racial discrimination and criminal justice in São Paulo, this topic has been discussed in more detail. This author showed, based on analysis of the distribution of judicial sentences for crimes of the same nature committed by Blacks and Whites, that despite the two groups committing violent crimes in identical proportions, black defendants tend to be more persecuted by police surveillance, face greater obstacles in access to criminal justice, and reveal greater difficulties in enjoying the right to a fair hearing guaranteed by constitutional norms. Therefore, Blacks would also tend to receive more rigorous penal treatment, represented by the greater likelihood of being punished compared to white defendants.

Another important work for the contextualization of the relationship between police violence and racism in Brazil is the book *Corpo Negro Caído no Chão: o sistema penal e o projeto genocida do Estado Brasileiro* [Black Body Fallen to the Ground: the penal system and the genocidal project of the Brazilian State], by Ana Luiza Flauzina (2008). According to this author, the racial logic that organizes the actions of Brazilian military police is based on a project of extermination of the black population that has been on the agenda since the abolition of slavery. However, also according to her, this finding would have the consequence of exposing the fact that the Brazilian State would have a genocide policy aimed at the systematic extermination of black, young, and poor men.

But how could that be possible in a country known worldwide for being a racial democracy? The answer to this question is not so simple, as we are talking about one of the myths that shape Brazilian identity (Centro de Formação da Vila, 2018; Leite et al., 2018). However, various authors, from the most different disciplines, have been systematically demonstrating that the idea of Brazilian racial democracy is profoundly false.

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, thus for more than 350 years, between 5-10 million enslaved Africans were brought to Brazil, with Brazil being the country that most used this workforce. Brazil was also the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. This fact, in itself, already shows that since its origins, the Brazilian nation has been marked by racial inequality. Abdias Nascimento, in his book *O genocídio do negro brasileiro: processo de um racismo mascarado* [The Genocide of the Brazilian Black: process of a masked racism], argues that, in addition to the murders committed by the slave owners, there was also an attempt to extinguish the cultural values brought by the enslaved. According to him, there was a state policy of repression of all types of cultural expression, which culminated, for example, in their whitening. The idea of religious syncretism would be an example of this whitening. Taken together, therefore, both

physical and cultural murder would constitute the true genocide of the Brazilian Black (Nascimento, 2016)

Here it is important to talk about whitening as a state policy as well. According to Santos (2019), abolition, which took place in 1888, did not bring with it policies for the social inclusion of the black population. This was mainly due to the racist ideology in force between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. Thus, instead of policies that guaranteed education and employment for the black population, what was seen was, on the one hand, the encouragement of European immigration as a public policy and, on the other hand, exposure of the idea that Brazil needed to be a white nation so that it could achieve full economic and social development.

From the perspective of intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1981), a number of studies have shown that Brazil is a profoundly racist country while it denies this is so (Camino et al., 2001; Camino et al., 2013). In addition to denying the existence of racism, racial relations in Brazil are characterized by whitening, understood as a set of norms, values, and attitudes associated with Whites, which non-white people adopt in order to establish a positive racial identity (Piza, 2000). Lima and Vala (2005), for example, analyzing the subjective perception of skin color, showed that groups that achieve professional success are commonly perceived as white and those that fail are blackened. Equally important, the study identified that whitening implies the inhumanization of Blacks. In other words, these authors demonstrated how, in Brazil, professional success is linked to white people and failure to black people. In addition, when seen as failures, black people are also seen as less human. Taken together, these results point out, in a certain way, how whitening policies are updated and remain alive in the Brazilian imagination based on the whiteness-success and blackness-failure binomials.

In this context, we can imagine the deep opposition to public policies for social inclusion. Only in 2012, Law 12.711, also known as the Quota Law, was passed, guaranteeing that all federal higher education institutions in the country must mandatorily reserve part of their vacancies for students from public schools, those with a low-income, and Blacks, Browns, and Indigenous people. Here it is important to clarify that young white people, as long as they come from public schools and those with a proven low income, could also apply for the quotas, in this case called “social quotas”. With this in mind, Torres et al. (2019) demonstrated that the stance against racial quotas was significantly greater than against social quotas. Equally important was the fact that discrimination against racial quota alumni was more accepted than against social quota alumni. In the same line of reasoning, Freitas et al. (2020) showed that the skin color of families benefiting from the *Bolsa-Família* [Family Grant] program also influences the stance in relation to this public policy. Thus, when the family was black, opposition to the *Bolsa Família* program was greater than when the family was white.

Studies have also analyzed the phenomenon of racism in soccer. Thus, Ferreira et al. (2017b), analyzing the interpretive repertoires used by people to position themselves regarding situations of racial prejudice in soccer, show that, of the five lexical classes found, only one denies the existence of racial prejudice in Brazil. However, in another study, these same authors (Ferreira et al., 2017a) showed that verbal aggressions emitted by fans during a soccer match would not only be demonstrations of negative attitudes towards the rival team but were associated in a significant way with racial prejudice, thus becoming a powerful form of legitimation of racism, while denying its existence.

Taken together, these studies show the existence of a structural racism that permeates all instances of the daily life of the Brazilian black population and that guarantees unequal relations not only because they are poor, but because, in addition to being poor, they are also black (Freitas et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2019).

Specifically in the context of police violence, the object of study of the work presented here, there is extensive empirical evidence that shows that minority groups are often the main targets of police violence (Dukes & Gaither, 2017; Holmes et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2020; Morrow et al., 2018) and that the population tends to support the use of this type of violence, especially when used against these groups (Álvaro et al., 2015; Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; da Costa Silva et al., 2019; da Costa Silva et al., 2018; Farias et al., 2017). In Brazil, specifically, da Costa Silva et al. (2018) showed that even adolescents, students of public schools in a city in northeastern Brazil, are more supportive of police violence when it is directed at black targets compared to white targets. These results are even sadder if we consider that these young people are likely to be victims of the police violence itself.

For Gomes et al. (2018), police violence results from the perception that certain lives are less important than others. This perception is endorsed both by the impunity of the violence practiced and by the culture that legitimizes it, which leads to the naturalization and trivialization of police violence (Farias et al., 2017; Ferreira, 2019). According to Lemgruber et al. (2017), police violence is perceived as an instrument of justice by the population, which supports the extreme use of force against criminals or those suspected of committing a crime. These authors observed that even though the police violence is considered excessive, such consideration does not imply the defense of universal rights; on the contrary, human rights were perceived only as “defense of criminals”. In this sense, support for police violence was supported by the maxim “a good criminal is a dead criminal” and by the concept that criminals do not deserve to have rights. Police violence, therefore, is accepted by the population, who consider it as a necessary measure in the fight against crime, and the notion of legitimacy permeates this acceptance.

Gaia and Zacarias (2020), based on the analysis of three songs -one samba, one rap, and one funk-, musical genres of black origin, problematize the perpetuation of racism in Brazilian society. Here it is interesting to emphasize that the samba *Preconceito de cor* [Color Prejudice] by Bezerra de Silva (1987), the rap song *Racistas Otários* [Racist Jerks] by Racionais MC's (1990), and the funk song *Delação Premiada* [Rewarded Snitching] MC Carol (2016) were released in different periods of recent Brazilian history, but all denounced the brutality of the military police against the black population. Thus, following the discussion by Gaia and Zacarias (2020), Bezerra da Silva's samba denounces the fact that black people are always seen as suspects, criminals, but white people who “simply wear suits” are not arrested, because what defines the scale of criminality, following the logic of the social structure denounced in this song, is skin color.

Racionais MC's rap denounces the same problems and the same crimes in a newly democratic Brazil, and 16 years later, the funk *Delação Premiada* denounces the same reality still experienced by the black population. According to Gaia et al. (2019), the perpetuation of racism both in Brazilian society and in the actions of the military police has to be understood as rooted in a project of a nation that, in order to become white, has to exterminate the black population. These authors go further and argue that the whitening policies of the early 20th century are taking on new faces, but with the same objectives. Therefore, police violence aimed at the black population would be the armed wing of this policy.

Taken together, therefore, the works discussed so far show Brazil not only as a racist country, but also committed to the extermination of the black population. And this racism, understood here as a belief that races would naturally be ranked with white at the top of this hierarchy (Munanga, 2003), permeates all instances of everyday life.

In the context presented, this work approaches the relationship between police violence and racism from a different perspective, as we are interested in analyzing how “ordinary” people organize their arguments to take a position regarding a situation of police violence. Thus, our objective is to investigate whether the arguments used to accept or reject police violence are influenced by the skin color of the victims of this type of violence.

## Method

This is a quasi-experimental study (Fife-Schaw, 2010) that uses quantitative and qualitative data analysis strategies.

### Participants

A total of 105 residents of the city of João Pessoa (Brazil) participated in this study, age  $M = 25.31$  ( $SD = 7.5$ ), 67.5 % of which were female; 42.5 % considered themselves White and 57.5 % Black (black and brown). As inclusion criteria, participants had to be over 18 years of age and accept participating in the research.

### Procedures

Participants were approached in public places, such as squares and malls in the city of João Pessoa (Brazil) and were asked to participate in the research. At the time, they were informed that it was an opinion study on police violence. For those who agreed to participate, questions regarding confidentiality, anonymity, free participation in the research, and other ethical issues were duly clarified through the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF). This work was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal da Paraíba (Brazil) under the Protocol n. 0494/15. CAAE: 48709015100005188.

### Instrument

The questionnaire used presented a real news story, adapted for the purposes of this investigation, in which it was reported that a robbery crime suspect had been seriously injured by a police officer through various kicks and punches. The report varied among two conditions depending on the suspect's color: White vs. Black; 50.6 % of the participants responded to the situation where the suspect was white and 49.4 % to the situation where the suspect was black. After reading the report, the participants were asked about their stance in relation to the conduct of the police, through a text explaining their answers. Finally, the participants answered a sociodemographic questionnaire, containing questions regarding age, sex, and color.

### Data analysis

Participant responses were formatted using the Iramuteq software (*Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires*) developed by Pierre Ratinaud (2009), which does textual analysis. In classic lexical analyses, the software identifies texts (initial context units, ICU), transforming them into text segments (elementary context units, ECU), does vocabulary research and reduces the words based on their roots, creating reduced and complementary forms (Camargo & Justo, 2016). In this work, the responses of the participants regarding their position regarding police violence were organized into two corpora: the first with the scenario of the Black suspect and the second with the White suspect. This procedure was adopted because the

participants had to take a position regarding qualitatively different scenarios depending on the color of the victim of police violence.

Although the reports generated by software do not constitute data analysis, based on Iramuteq we can use lexical analysis without losing the context in which the word appears or when it does not appear (Camargo & Justo, 2016). Through the method proposed by Reinert (1990), which obtains classes whose vocabularies are simultaneously similar to each other and distinct from other classes, we assume that the structure of the arguments presented indicates the representations associated with a material or symbolic object. Correspondence Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to present the spatial relationships between the classes.

## Results

### Analysis of the justification for positions regarding police violence against the black suspect

The analysis of the corpus through lexical analysis, after reducing the words to their roots, showed a total of occurrences of 1,122 different words with 428 distinct forms, corresponding to 70 % of the corpus. A number of texts equal to 51 (ICU) was obtained, divided into 270 text segment units (ECU). Descending hierarchical classification (DHC) showed that the analysis corpus was divided into four distinct classes (table 1).

**Table 1**

*CHD of the position in relation to the violence against the black suspect*

Position in relation to the violence against the Black suspect							
Justified violence		Violence as justice		Unjustified violence		Legal sanction	
Words	$\chi^2$	Words	$\chi^2$	Words	$\chi^2$	Words	$\chi^2$
Class 3 (28,57%)		Class 1 (22,86%)		Class 4 (20%)		Class 2 (15,24%)	
Duty	14,6	One	15,2	Violence	19,0	Measure	24,4
Crime	10,6	Agree	15,0	Need	18,0	Taking	23,8
Comitting	10,6	Justice	10,8	Already	13,1	Prision	6,3
Way	7,6	Law	4,5	Had	13,1	Agression	6,3
Policeman	5,2	As	4,5	Suspect	3,9	Necessary	3,9
Significant Absence		Significant Absence		Significant Absence		Significant Absence	
Agression	-4,6	Violence	-4,7	-	-	Policeman	-9,3

The semantic analysis of class 1, called *Violence as justice*, encompasses positions that conceive of police violence as an appropriate action given the crime committed by the suspect. The repertoires of this class consider police violence a form of punishment given a violation of the law and the ineffectiveness of justice. The word that represents

the significant absence for this class is *violence*, which indicates agreement with the actions of the police. Examples from class 1 repertoires present police violence as justice, being an alternative to impunity, such as: “I agree with the way the police behaved, because it is a way of carrying out justice, of complying with the law” and “I agree because given what is happening in justice, the action of the police is a means of punishing the suspect”.

The content of class 2, called *Legal sanction*, is less present in the corpus (15.24 %) and refers to police violence as unnecessary, but defends the need for a sanction for the crime committed by the suspect. The word that represents the significant absence for this class is *policeman*. This absence may lead to the exemption from responsibility of this law enforcement officer regarding the actions carried out against the suspect. In this sense, arrest is indicated as an appropriate action in the police engagement. Examples of the repertoires found here are: “I disagree with aggression in situations like this, but it is necessary to take another type of measure such as socio-educational measures and imprisonment” and “The aggression was unnecessary, but an adequate measure such as prison is necessary”.

Class 3, called *Justified violence*, is the most representative in the corpus (28.57 %) and presents repertoires that disagree with aggressive actions as part of the police officer's duty, however, they understand aggression as a consequence of the crime committed by the suspect. The word that represents the significant absence in this class is *aggression*, indicating that the violence practiced is perceived as necessary. In this sense, the arguments tend to justify police violence. For example: “It is not the duty of the police to attack the man, however he must suffer the consequences of his actions for the way he committed the crime” and “The police should not attack, but the individual is paying for committing a crime”.

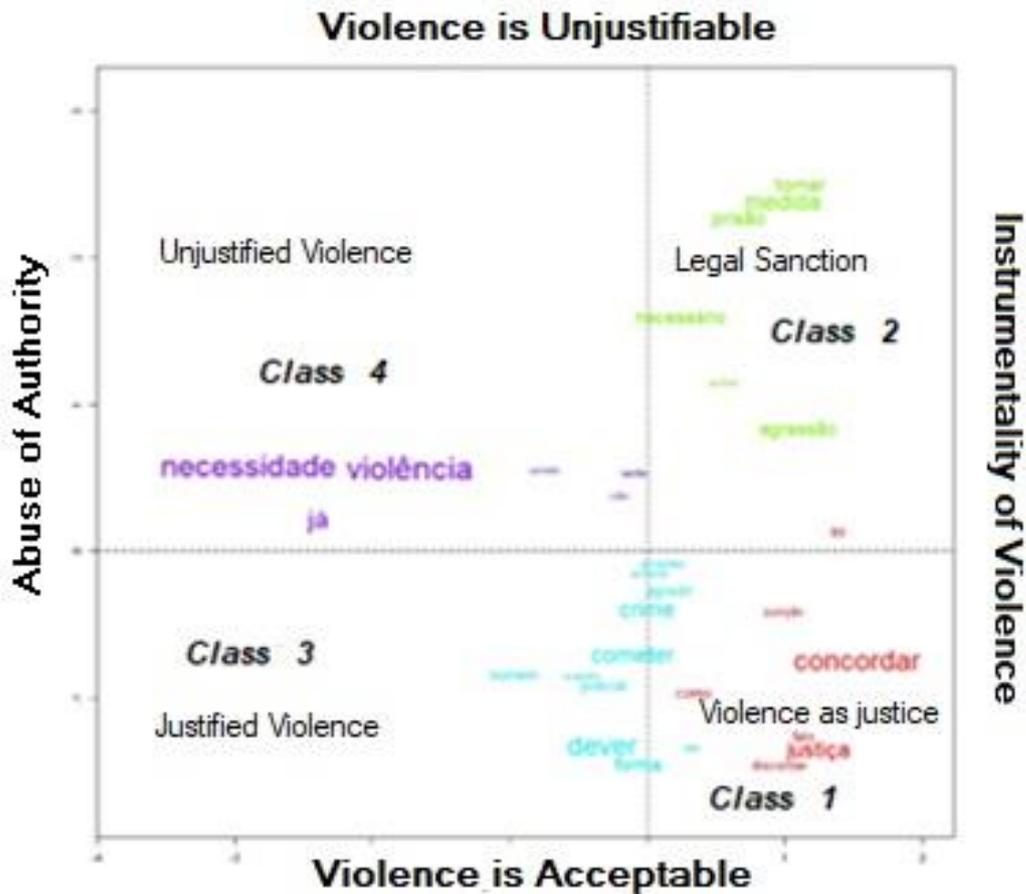
The semantic analysis of class 4, called *Unjustified violence*, refers to the lack of necessity for the use violence in the police action. This class did not show any significant absence. The justifications of this class emphasize the inappropriate conduct of the police in the unjustified use of violence, since the suspect had already been arrested. Examples of arguments about unjustified police violence are: “There was no need for violence, as the suspect had already been arrested” and “Since the suspect was already handcuffed, the police action is not justified, there was no need for violence”.

### **Organizing principles of positions regarding police violence against the black suspect**

When analyzing the factorial plane (figure 1), it is observed that the vertical axis organized the participants' positions according to the acceptability of police violence. In the lower part of the factorial plane, the arguments presented in classes 2 (*Legal sanction*) and 4 (*Unjustified violence*) reject police violence insofar as this action was considered unnecessary and unjustifiable. In the upper part of the factorial plane, the arguments presented in classes 1 (*Violence as justice*) and 3 (*Justified violence*) defend the idea that violence is acceptable, being understood as a form of justice, more precisely as a response to criminality, given the ineffectiveness of the judicial system.

**Figure 1**

AFC of the position in relation to the violence against the black suspect



The horizontal axis organizes the positions according to the arbitrariness of the police action and places the arguments referring to the abuse of authority against the arguments referring to the instrumentality of violence. On the left side of the factorial plane, it is observed that class 4 (*Unjustified violence*) is distinguished from the others, covering arguments that understand the police action as abusive, given that the suspect was already handcuffed. In contrast, on the right side of the factorial plane are classes 2 (*Legal sanction*) and 1 (*Violence as justice*) which present arguments associated with the instrumentality of violence. In class 2, there is disagreement regarding the use of police violence, although the need for measures necessary to combat crime is highlighted. Whereas, in class 1, police violence is seen as the instrument through which criminals are punished.

Class 3 (*Justified violence*) does not present a clear definition within the spectrum in the horizontal plane (Abuse of authority x Instrumentality of violence), comprising positions that perceive the police violence as a result of the suspect's action of having committed a robbery.

### **Analysis of the justification for positions regarding police violence against the white suspect**

The analysis of the corpus through lexical analysis, after reducing the words to their roots, showed a total of occurrences of 1,114 different words with 303 distinct forms, corresponding to 73 % of the corpus. A number of texts equal to 52 (ICU) was obtained,

divided into 164 text segment units (ECU). The descending hierarchical classification (DHC) showed that the analysis corpus was divided into five distinct classes (table 2).

**Table 2**

*CHD of the position in relation to the violence against the white suspect*

Position in relation to the violence against the White suspect							
Violence as a solution		Unnecessary violence		Illegal violence		Arbitrary violence	
Words	$\chi^2$	Words	$\chi^2$	Words	$\chi^2$	Words	$\chi^2$
Class 8 (35%)		Class 5 (22,5%)		Class 6 (22,5%)		Class 7 (20%)	
Violence	14,6	Policeman	15,3	No	7,0	Attack	23,3
Agree	10,6	Man	11,8	Disagree	6,0	Suspect	11,3
Already	8,2	Action	10,8	Law	4,6	Policeman	9,6
Better	8,2	Unnecessary	7,9	Agression	4,2	Duty	7,5
Solve	6,0	Case	7,0	Only	4,0	Police_Station	4,5
<b>Significant Absence</b>		<b>Significant Absence</b>		<b>Significant Absence</b>		<b>Significant Absence</b>	
Duty	-7,2	Agree	-5,0	Violence	6,0	Law	-4,9

The justifications of class 5, called *Unnecessary violence*, correspond to 22.5 % of the corpus and refer to positions that understand police violence as an improper procedure. For the participants, the police carried out an unnecessary and hasty action due to the lack of confirmation of the suspect's guilt. The word that represents the significant absence for this class is *agree*, referring to the participants' indignation with the injustice practiced. Class 5 examples emphasize the concern with anticipating the suspect's culpability: "In this case, I believe that the police action was unnecessary due to uncertainty about the man being the actual suspect" and "Violent action on the part of the police was unnecessary, above all because the man was only a suspect; I believe that they should confirm responsibility for the crime".

The semantic analysis of class 6 corresponded to 22.5 % of the corpus and was called *Illegal violence*, referring to the arguments that consider the police officer's action illegal. *Violence* is the word that represents the significant absence in this class, suggesting that the actions of the police exceeded the limits of their duty. Class 6 examples demonstrate the disagreement between the police action and the law: "I totally disagree with the aggression, the police officer should only act in accordance with the law" and "I disagree with the police action, there was no need for aggression, the suspect should just be sent to prison".

The semantic analysis of class 7, is the one with the lowest contribution to the corpus (20 %) and was called *Arbitrary violence*. It refers to the use of violence in an abusive way. The word that represents the significant absence for this class is *law*, highlighting the arbitrariness of the police action. The examples of this class demonstrate the arbitrariness of the police action and the failure to guarantee the suspect's rights and integrity: "The police officer does not have the right to attack the individual during this

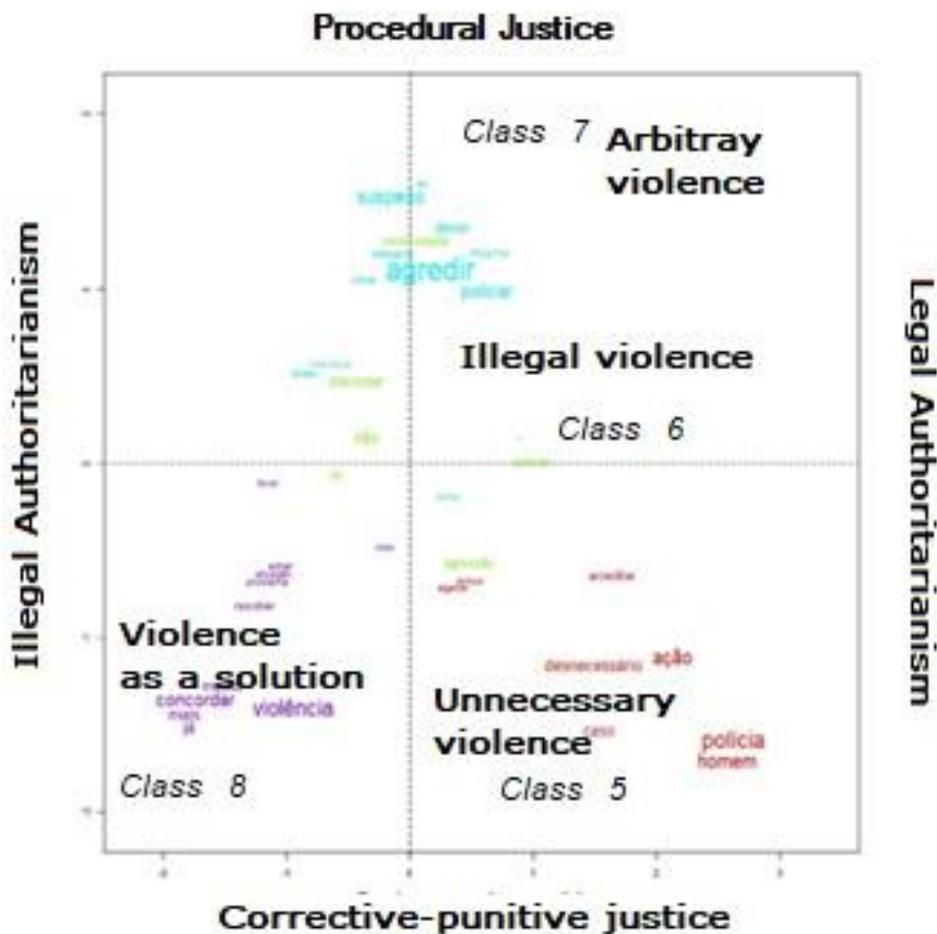
action, his duty is to send him to the police station, even if the suspect is guilty” and “Assaulting the individual, even if he is guilty, is unjustifiable”.

Class 8 is the most frequent in the corpus (35 %) and was called *Violence as a solution*. Here police violence is seen as a way to solve the problem. The word that represents the significant absence for this class is *duty*, which shows that the compliance of police actions and the duty to respect the suspect's right as a citizen is not a concern for these participants. The justifications of this class admit that, although it is not the most appropriate approach, violence can function as a punishment for the assailant. As examples we have: “I partially agree, because even if violence is not the most appropriate way to handle the situation, the assailant will think twice before committing another crime” and “I agree that violence is not the best way to solve the problem, but we live in a society where laws are no longer effective, so violence works as a punishment for the assault”.

### Organizing principles of positions regarding police violence against the white suspect

**Figure 2**

*AFC of the position in relation to the violence against the white suspect*



When observing the factorial plane (figure 2), from the vertical axis, one can see that the participants' positions are organized around the notion of Justice. In this axis, it is possible to observe the contrast between the arguments about procedural justice and the arguments about corrective-punitive justice. In the upper part of the factorial plane,

classes 6 (*Illegal violence*) and 7 (*Arbitrary violence*) present the idea that the actions of the police are in disagreement with the laws and social duties, demonstrating concern with the criteria and procedures employed in the use of force in an abusive way. In the lower part of the factorial plane, on the other hand, classes 5 (*Unnecessary violence*) and 8 (*Violence as a solution*) emphasize corrective-punitive justice in the police action. Class 5's arguments emphasize that the use of police violence, even if seen as a corrective measure, was unnecessary, since it was based on the suspect's presumed guilt. In class 8, in turn, the defense of violence is observed as a response to the impunity for crimes committed. The arguments of this class are organized around the idea that it is up to the police force to punish the suspect using violence.

In the analysis of the horizontal axis, the positions are organized around the illegality of the use of force and present arguments that range from illegal authoritarianism to legal authoritarianism. On the right side of the factorial plane, class 5 anchors its positions in legal authoritarianism. Although classes 6 (*Illegal violence*) and 7 (*Arbitrary violence*) are positioned closer to the center of the factorial plane, they present content qualitatively similar to that of class 5. In the discourses of these classes, the police action, in applying excessive force in the detention of the suspect, contradicts the principles of isonomy and law, ignoring practices that comply with the law. In contrast, on the left side of the factorial plane, class 8 (*Violence as a solution*) anchors its positions in illegal authoritarianism by defending punishment regardless of the rules and laws that guide the professional practice of police officers. In this class, it is observed that violent action by the police is perceived as a disciplinary measure capable of correcting criminal actions and preventing future events of this nature.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to analyze whether the arguments used to accept or reject police violence are influenced by the skin color of the victims of this type of procedure. To this end, a scenario was used in which police violence was committed against an individual suspected of having committed the crime of robbery. In one condition, it was mentioned that the suspect was white and, in another, that he was black.

Upon analyzing the positions adopted by the participants regarding the police violence, the results showed that, in general, the participants tend to disagree with the use of police violence. However, the frequency with which positions of agreement or disagreement were presented and the arguments to justify them differed depending on the color of the target of the violence.

With regard to agreement with the police violence (classes 1, 3, and 8), participants presented similar arguments for both suspects (white and black). The justifications used for this agreement are stated through an authoritarian repertoire that aims to defend against an imminent enemy, in addition to fighting criminality, which would justify the use of police violence (Jackson et al., 2018; Lemgruber et al., 2017). In these judgments, the police action, even if in disagreement with the law, is perceived as effective and is based on its punitive use (Farias et al., 2017). This aspect is important because the perception of effectiveness of police action is a legitimizing factor of police violence (Jackson et al., 2020).

It is worth noting, however, that in the scenario in which the suspect-target of police violence was black, the positions supporting the use of police violence totaled 51.43 % of the corpus (class 1 - *Violence as justice*: 22.86 % + class 3 - *Justified violence*: 28.57 %). Whereas, in the scenario in which the suspect-target of police violence was white, the statements favoring the use of police violence (class 8 - *Violence as a solution*)

corresponded to 35 % of the corpus. In this way, the idea of police violence as a legitimate measure of justice against crime is evoked more prominently when the suspect is black, which converges with previous investigations that qualify support for police violence as a discriminatory process (Álvaro et al., 2015; Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; da Costa Silva et al., 2018; Farias et al., 2017).

Differences were also observed depending on the suspects' skin color when analyzing the arguments that disagreed with the use of police violence. In the context in which the suspect was black, police violence was seen as inappropriate and unjustified (classes 2 and 4). Although these classes disagree with the police action, the emphasis of these repertoires is on the inappropriate conduct of the police officers without referring to the illegal nature of these actions, with control of the criminal being necessary (class 2), even if he is just a suspect. In the context in which the suspect was white, the justifications used to disagree with the violence emphasize illegality as the basis of the police violence (classes 5, 6, and 7). For the participants of these classes, the police action is at odds with their essential functions, which would be to guarantee the safety, rights, and protection of citizens and therefore, the arguments support that police officers should avoid the use of force against the suspect.

It is important to emphasize that, in the set of analyses, the presumption of innocence only appeared in the situation in which the suspect was white, anchored in the lack of confirmation of the suspect as a criminal (class 5). While the attribution of blame was seen in the context in which the suspect was black, supported by the indication of imprisonment as an appropriate sanction for the crime committed (class 2). These positions are supported by the results found by Dukes and Gaither (2017) who observed that black victims tend to be more blamed for their punishments, compared to white victims.

The results showed that, despite disagreeing with police violence, the arguments indicated a differentiated treatment between racial groups and are also in line with research that shows how police violence is more supported when perpetrated against ethnic/racial minorities (Álvaro et al., 2015; Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; da Costa Silva et al., 2018; Farias et al., 2017). This differentiation becomes more evident when we analyze the positions and observe that their organization presents two distinct lines of logic: when the judgment refers to the context of the white suspect, 65% of the arguments highlight the illegal conduct of the police (class 5 - *Unnecessary violence*: 22.5 % + class 6 - *Illegal violence*: 22.5 % + class 7 - *Arbitrary violence*: 20 %), while in the context of the black suspect, 66.67% of the arguments highlight the suspect's criminal conduct (class 2 - *Legal sanction*: 15.24 % + class 1 - *Violence as justice*: 22.86 % + class 3: *Justified violence*: 28.57 %).

These results come close to blatant expressions of racial prejudice and discrimination (Allport, 1954), in which the distinction of treatment stems only from the difference in color between victims of police violence. In fact, social categories are often used to explain complex events of a negative nature, especially when referring to minority groups (Tajfel, 1981). In this way, these positions can contribute to the processes of legitimation of interracial inequalities in our society, either through the preservation of the image of the white group, or through the demeaning of the black group.

Finally, although the analysis of moral judgment was not our objective in this study, upon analyzing the principles that organize the positions regarding police violence (figures 1 and 2), we were able to observe that the justifications were anchored in the basis of closeness and distance to the principles of justice, illegality, arbitrariness, and acceptance of police violence, leading us to the perception and assessment of the police

actions as morally right or wrong. In this way, the anchoring of these arguments can reflect action schemes concerning moral reasoning in this position-taking.

In recent years, developmental psychologists have demonstrated how the process of acquiring morality can provide a means by which racism can be thwarted. Morality consists of prescriptive norms about how people should treat each other, contemplating concepts such as justice, equity, and equality (Killen & Rutland, 2011). The process of acquiring morality depends both on children's cognitive development and on their socialization process, including the messages communicated by adults, which help children to understand what is fair or unfair in behavior towards different groups (Rutland & Killen, 2015). Morality, therefore, serves as a frame of reference for analyzing phenomena of a cognitive and social nature (Rique et al., 2013), such as racism.

One of the first models for understanding morality was presented by Piaget (1932/1994) in *Moral Judgment of the Child*, in which he demonstrates how, throughout cognitive development, the child moves from classifying actions as “right” or “wrong”, to depending on commands of authority, to adopting abstract principles of justice, by late childhood. Piaget's studies served as a starting point for the work of Kohlberg (1984), who developed a more comprehensive theory about the stages of moral development. According to Kohlberg (1984), for a social judgment to be considered moral, the norms underlying that judgment must be both prescriptive (specific criteria that must be adopted by individuals in a relationship) and universal (it must be applicable to all people). For him, the formation of moral judgment depends, simultaneously, on the subject's capacity for self-control and on the moral atmosphere of the group in which this behavior takes place (Díaz-Aguado & Medrano, 1994).

Kohlberg (1984) presents a model, according to which it is possible to classify three levels of moral development, which vary according to the conceptions of justice adopted in different situations. The first level, called Pre-Conventional Morality, involves the principle of “right” and “wrong” formulated from the immediate consequences of the action. The second level, Conventional Morality, encompasses moral principles based on the preservation of law and social order. Finally, the third level, identified as Post-Conventional Morality, involves conceptions of justice based on respect for civil rights and on principles such as balance of social relations through equity (Díaz-Aguado & Medrano, 1994; Kohlberg, 1984; Rique et al., 2013).

Consequently, the results presented here show that, on the one hand, the stance towards police violence was anchored in the principles of corrective-punitive justice, in the instrumentality of violence, and in the abuse of authority. The meanings of these arguments are primitive and follow an expiatory justice, which would be in accordance with the pre-conventional morality described by Kohlberg (1984). In this light, moderating circumstances, such as legal aspects (suspect's rights and police officer's duties), were not considered in the judgment. For these participants, punishment must be immediately applied after the transgression (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987), regardless of the color of the target of the police violence.

On the other hand, police violence was organized around procedural justice and legal authoritarianism. This view reflects a set of principles of justice at the level of conventional morality, and some aspects reflect the principles of post-conventional morality. In the conventional view, the arguments take into consideration the maintenance of the system of rules to resolve conflicts, ensuring impartiality in the protection of society; moreover, in the post-conventional view the arguments imply concern for rights and social welfare in the situation (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987). However, this concern for rights was only revealed in the context in which the suspect was white.

In view of this, it can be said that the position towards police violence seems to vary depending on the color of the target of the violence and presents qualitative changes in its meanings depending on the type of justice reasoning used by the participants. This means that discussing the problem of racial discrimination in a context where the use of physical force is perceived as legitimate implies seeking to know how moral judgment and racism are related to the way police violence is perceived.

### **Final considerations**

Police violence has generated a discourse that reinforces the belief in its necessity, by justifying and legitimizing violent actions in the fight against crime. As a result of this repertoire, defense and guarantee of protection are replaced by the abusive use of force (Jackson et al., 2018; Lemgruber et al., 2017; Sinhoretto & Morais, 2018). As a result, the perception of legitimacy of police actions is not always in line with an expression of justice, nor does it presuppose an assessment of the criteria of equality and proportionality. Although justice is considered the synthesis of ethical values, in the context of interracial relations these values are submitted to the interpretation of the symbolic position that different social groups occupy in society.

Based on the results of this study, we were able to observe a tendency regarding the different treatment between Whites and Blacks that is inclined to justify and legitimize social and cultural practices that propagate racial hierarchies. In this way, Blacks continue to be the target of a process of social exclusion, resulting from discriminatory situations in which prejudice develops. Furthermore, we consider that the arguments presented indicated that the way this violence was perceived is associated with different types of moral reasoning.

The results obtained show that it is necessary to analyze what happens in different contexts to understand the different positions of individuals regarding police violence and how their positions can support behaviors that, developed by legitimate institutions, such as the police, would go unnoticed without being seen as discriminatory practices, but as legitimate procedures. It is important to emphasize that the scenario of police violence presented in this study is fictitious and that it is not intended to attribute to police officers, individually, any prejudiced characteristics, but to reflect on real social situations that are conducive to the manifestation of prejudice and discrimination. And here we point out a line of research that can be deepened: how the military police, themselves mostly black, position themselves regarding police violence whose preferred target is the black population.

Another aspect that was not analyzed in the work presented here is the influence of skin color and social class of the participants in taking a position on the type of violence investigated here. It is true that, taken together, the results from da Costa Silva et al. (2018) show that public school students in a northeastern Brazilian city, mostly black and lower class, are more supportive of police violence when it is committed by a black person than in the situation with a white person. Furthermore, these youths would give greater compensation to a victim of police violence when the victim was white than when the victim was black. Equally important in this work was the fact that young people were also more supportive of lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 18 to 16 years in situations where crimes had been committed by Blacks than by Whites. However, the variable “participant skin color” was not directly investigated. Thus, this is a line of work that also deserves to be investigated in future works.

Finally, although the positions of the participants of this work present characteristics congruent with different forms of moral judgment, the relationship between these constructs was not tested. Future studies should be carried out to overcome these limitations.

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