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## Racial discrimination: how do university students evaluate and explain police violence when the victim is either a white or black youth?

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### Abstract

The existence and permanence of actions of social injustice and discrimination in democratic contexts also occurs due to their legitimation by the individuals and groups that make up such a social system, even if this is incompatible with egalitarian and humanitarian values. In Brazil, police violence is one of the phenomena that express structural characteristics of racism. In this context, studying the way university students assess situations of police violence, taking into account the racial categorization of the target, can be useful to better understand the psychosocial processes that accompany the perpetuation of racial prejudice and racism. The present study sought to analyze the degree of tolerance to police violence against members of a social minority and its justification by university students as an expression of racial discrimination. The study had 375 participants. A questionnaire was used that presented a fictitious scenario of police violence, in which the racial nature was manipulated to analyze the relationship between the target's skin color, the level of support for the use of physical force in the police approach, as well as the justifications of your positioning. The results pointed to a low tolerance for police violence and greater disagreement about the use of physical force in police action when the target was a young black man. The justifications indicated an attempt to relativize the existence of prejudice and racism, pointing to more subtle configurations, adapted to anti-prejudice norms, allowing the maintenance of the justification of the current status even in the face of situations of social injustice.

**Keywords:** Racial discrimination, justification, police violence..

### Resumen

La existencia y persistencia de acciones de injusticia social y discriminación en contextos democráticos ocurre también debido a su legitimación por parte de los individuos y grupos que conforman dicho sistema social, incluso cuando es incompatible con los valores igualitarios y humanitarios. En Brasil, la violencia policial se presenta como uno de los fenómenos que expresan características estructurales del racismo. En este contexto, estudiar cómo los estudiantes universitarios evalúan situaciones de violencia policial, teniendo en cuenta la categorización racial, puede ser útil para comprender mejor los procesos psicosociales que acompañan la perpetuación del prejuicio racial y el racismo. El presente estudio buscó analizar el grado de tolerancia hacia la violencia policial contra miembros de una minoría social y su justificación por parte de los estudiantes universitarios como expresión de la discriminación racial. El estudio contó con 375 participantes. Se utilizó un cuestionario que presentaba un escenario ficticio de violencia policial, en el que se manipulaba la naturaleza racial para analizar la relación entre el color de piel de la víctima, el nivel de apoyo al uso de la fuerza física en el abordaje policial, así como las justificaciones de su postura. Los resultados señalaron una baja tolerancia hacia la violencia policial y una mayor discrepancia sobre el uso de la fuerza física en la

acción policial cuando la víctima era un joven negro. Las justificaciones indicaron un intento de relativizar la existencia de prejuicio y racismo, señalando configuraciones más sutiles, adaptadas a las normas contra el prejuicio, lo que permite mantener la justificación del statu quo actual, incluso frente a situaciones de injusticia social.

**Palabras clave:** Discriminación, justificación racial, racismo, violencia policial..

## Resumo

A existência e permanência de ações de injustiça social e discriminação em contextos democráticos ocorre também pela sua legitimação por parte dos indivíduos e grupos que compõem tal sistema social, mesmo que isso seja incompatível com valores igualitários e humanitários. No Brasil, a violência policial se apresenta como um dos fenômenos que expressam características estruturais do racismo. Nesse contexto, estudar a maneira como estudantes universitários avaliam situações de violência policial, levando em conta a categorização racial do alvo, pode ser útil para compreender melhor os processos psicossociais que acompanham a perpetuação do preconceito racial e racismo. O presente estudo buscou analisar o grau de tolerância à violência policial contra membros de uma minoria social e sua justificação por estudantes universitários como expressão da discriminação racial. O estudo contou com 375 participantes. Utilizou-se um questionário que apresentava um cenário fictício de violência policial, em que se manipulava a natureza racial para analisar a relação entre a cor da pele do alvo, o nível de apoio ao uso da força física na abordagem policial, bem como as justificativas do seu posicionamento. Os resultados apontaram para uma baixa tolerância com a violência policial e maior discordância sobre o uso da força física na ação policial quando o alvo era um jovem preto. As justificativas indicaram uma tentativa de relativizar a existência de preconceito e racismo, apontando para configurações mais sutis, adaptadas às normas antipreconceito, permitindo a manutenção da justificação do status quo vigente, mesmo diante de situações de injustiça social.

**Palavras-chave:** Discriminação racial, justificação, violência policial..

## Introduction

Notably from the 20th century onwards, formally democratic societies have developed political and institutional mechanisms aimed at guaranteeing human rights. Examples of this are the Declaration of Human Rights, in 1948, UNESCO's condemnation of racial classifications, in 1950, and the law that criminalized racial discrimination in Brazil in 1951. Faced with these milestones that encouraged the spread of egalitarian ideals and the assimilation of democratic values, it would be consistent to expect that injustice and social exclusion phenomena would become less and less frequent. Contrary to this hypothesis, it has been observed that cases of racial discrimination and racism persist in the world and in the Brazilian context, as pointed out by the Brazilian Yearbook of Public Security (2022).

In Brazil, the scenario of legitimizing and maintaining discriminatory and racist processes goes back to a historical paradox between an imaginary of racial harmony and a reality of consolidated social inequality. The investment in the construction of a compensatory history for the Brazilian national identity sought to mitigate the history of violence and enslavement that victimized the black population in the country, contributing to a mythologized narrative in which Brazil would be a pluriracial nation and harmonious multicultural coexistence (Schwarcz, 2019). This optimistic view of race relations is today classified as a tradition of thought that was once dominant in the human and social sciences, while at the same time constituting an ideology based on the false idea of racial democracy (Guimarães, 2004; Melo & Schucman, 2022; Santos et al., 2012). In this context, the emphasis given to the process of miscegenation very often sought to sustain the belief in racial democracy and Brazilian paradisiacal singularity, as if the racial criterion were not relevant to define the social structure (Bernardino, 2002). By camouflaging the oppressive character of racial relations in Brazil, it inspired a country averse to admitting prejudice and racial discrimination (Costa, 1999), in the same way that historically whiteness in Brazil, which speaks of ethnic-racial belonging attributed to whites, was built and made invisible as a race, it starts to racialize the other, in this case blacks and indigenous people. Whiteness, as white privilege, is then understood as an obstacle to the construction of a consciousness of race on the part of blacks (Souza, 2000).

While the idea of an egalitarian and homogeneous society is being disseminated and assimilated, the place of white privilege is being reinforced and making it difficult to define who black people are in Brazil. The plurality of society is neglected and some groups have to fight to be recognized and worthy of their rights (Munanga, 2022). As an effect, due to the obstacles imposed, the consciousness of being black is becoming more distant and the racial identity is weakened, their self-esteem and their expressiveness compromised, to the extent that their body and culture are neglected and the white, in a hegemonic way, is instituted as a reference standard (Nascimento, 2016; Munanga, 2020). In the social imaginary, the belief that Brazilian society is free of prejudice legitimizes the permanence of social and cultural practices that reproduce processes of social exclusion with regard to access to opportunities, social ascension and basic rights (Schwarcz, 2019), the that foments, the maintenance of racism.

Conceptually, racism can be understood as a process of inferiority, of exclusion against an individual or an entire social category, which is defined as different based on some external physical mark, such as skin color, which is resignified as a predictor of a behavioral pattern, making a reduction of the cultural to the biological (Lima & Vala, 2004). In a biological conception, racism would be based on the belief in naturally hierarchical races, insofar as physical attributes would be associated with moral, intellectual and cultural aspects. Racism is expressed in the simultaneous meeting of three characteristics: the construction of difference based on whiteness, the white norm, as a point of reference; the hierarchization of difference based on values that establish a logic of inferiority and the phenomenon of prejudice; and, finally, historical, political, social and economic processes that guarantee whites the position of the dominant group in power relations and sharing of valued resources (Kilomba, 2019).

With racism, race gains a sociological meaning and is no longer a “group defined by physical traits” (Munanga, 2022) and is now considered a social, political, ideological, relational, historical and linguistic construction (Almeida, 2018; Nascimento, 2016), that is, a political factor used to naturalize

inequalities, legitimize segregation and genocide of groups considered sociologically minority, inferior (Almeida, 2018).

The phenomenon of racism necessarily involves power relations materialized in systematic actions to preserve the status and privileges of the dominant group to the detriment of subordinate groups (Lima, 2020). The need to maintain the current state can be understood as a process of social legitimation carried out by members of society, who actively and/or passively contribute to its maintenance (Jost & Jojanneke, 2012).

The ideologies and processes of false consciousness are, therefore, at the basis of this maintenance, since it is through these that people naturalize the cognitive dissonance between their own desires and needs for justice and the agreement with the current system, which does not guarantee this justice to all groups (Jost, 2019, 2020). In this case, the maintenance of discrimination is associated with its justification with arguments perceived as non-prejudiced, enabling the coexistence, in democratic societies, of discriminatory practices with policies to confront and eliminate discrimination. In this framework, discrimination is defined as an objective behavior, intention or support for actions against a target group or people belonging to that group (Pereira & Vala, 2010), and racial discrimination would be the attribution of different treatment to members of groups racially identified (Almeida, 2018).

It is added that the racist social structure is also necropolitical, since it defines who can live and who must die, based on an order aimed at the destruction of some groups, so that the State uses its power to create death zones, defining by race/ethnicity that which is at constant risk of death: the “killable” body (Mbembe, 2016). In this context, when racist actions are incorporated into institutions, regardless of the beliefs and preferences of individuals, institutional racism is characterized, as is the case with the selectivity of police violence against black people (Cashmore, 1996; Philburn & Quraishi, 2015).

Evidence of racism in population mortality can be found, for example, in the indicators of the National Public Security Yearbook (2022), in which 77.9% of murder victims were black people, 50% young and 91.3% male. Despite the data showing a reduction in police lethality by 4.9%, the mortality of blacks has increased, and the victims, disproportionately, are blacks (84.1%). Bahia, the blackest state in Brazil, concentrates and ranks fifth in terms of police lethality among the federative units, with more than double the national average and 97.9% of deaths are black people (Ramos 2020. Ramos et al., 2022). Data such as these have been interpreted as a product of racial selectivity associated with violent police actions and police lethality against the black and peripheral population in Brazil (Bueno & Lima, 2021; Cerqueira, 2021). Since this type of violence comes from the State, the official nature of police violence against groups and individuals is related to structural violence, which manifests itself in socio-racial inequalities and varies according to the degree of tolerance by the government and the population (Machado, Cardoso & Noronha, 1997).

A body of evidence in the field of social psychology has contributed to establishing important observations about racism and violence. Racial discrimination through social tolerance of violence against the black population is related not only to the degree of perception of rights conferred on the police authority, but also to greater support for these police actions when they are directed at minority groups; greater support for lowering the age of criminal responsibility when crimes are committed by black teenagers compared to white teenagers; there is greater agreement with the increase in the length of sentence of black people and people in poverty who have committed infractions compared to white people; there is greater blaming of black women victims of sexual violence, compared to white women (e.g., Costa-Silva, 2019; Costa-Silva et al., 2018; Álvaro et al., 2015; Linhares, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2022).

Based on this debate and using the paradigm adopted in other studies (Costa-Silva, 2019; Ferreira et al., 2022) that use vignettes, which describe short narrative situations that portray specific situations, to assess social judgment and attitudinal responses, the present research sought to analyze the perception and justification of police violence against members of a social minority as a form of racial discrimination in a sample of university students, and more specifically, to investigate whether police violence is more tolerated when the victim is a member of a social minority (black).

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants

The study involved the participation of 375 students from a federal public university, in the areas of Human Sciences, Exact Sciences and Health Sciences, located in the Northeast of Brazil, aged between 17 and 60 years ( $m=24.69$ ;  $sd=5.98$ ), of which 205 (55.9%) are women. Regarding racial self-classification, 161 (43.9%) declared themselves brown, 119 (32.4%) white, and 87 (23.7%) black. As for the political position, it was found that the mean was 4.13 ( $sd=1.69$ ), on an 11-point scale (ranging from 0 extreme left to 10 extreme right).

### 2.2 Data collection procedure

The collection was carried out between 2018 and 2019 and followed all human research protocols in accordance with current regulations. The questionnaires were answered individually in the classrooms, after signing the Free and Informed Consent. The applications lasted, on average, 20 minutes. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (IPS-UFBA), according to the opinion no 2.762.633.

### 2.3 Instruments

A printed, self-administered questionnaire was used, in which the participant was presented with a fictitious scenario of police violence in which a 19-year-old young man (white vs. black), after an anonymous complaint of crimes related to the possession and trafficking of illicit drugs, was approached by the police, who used physical force to detain him. Each participant responded to only one of the experimental conditions. After reading the news, the participant should indicate their level of agreement with the use of physical force in approaching the police on a six-point scale (1 strongly disagree to 6 strongly agree). Then, the participant should justify his position in an open question. Additionally, we tried to identify the university course; the age; sex (man x woman); self-declared skin color (IBGE indicators); and political positioning.

### 2.4 Data analysis procedure

To investigate racial prejudice, through the degree of tolerance for police violence, a t-test was performed for independent samples comparing the level of agreement or tolerance with the use of physical violence against a white youth and against a black youth. For this analysis, JASP (Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program) was used.

To analyze the discursive repertoires that justify the degree of agreement or tolerance with police violence, the lexical analysis software Iramuteq (Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires) was used (Ratinaud, 2014). The justification texts were organized into a textual corpus that was submitted to a Descending Hierarchical Classification (CHD). The CHD distributes text segments in lexical classes based on the identification of word competition patterns, allowing to organize and explore the main thematic dimensions present in the corpus and also to statistically compare the vocabulary used by different groups of participants according to the categorical context variables considered in the analysis (Sousa, 2021). At this stage, the originally continuous measure of agreement with police violence in the situation was transformed into a categorical variable with three modalities (1 to 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 5 to 6 = agree).

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Degree of tolerance for violent police action



The data revealed that the participants tended, in general, to disagree with the use of physical force in police action ( $m = 2.94$ ,  $sd = 1.319$ ), but this disagreement was more pronounced when the young person attacked by the police was black ( $m = 2.71$ ,  $sd = 1.182$ ) than when the youth was white ( $m = 3.18$ ,  $sd = 1.306$ ) (Figure 1).

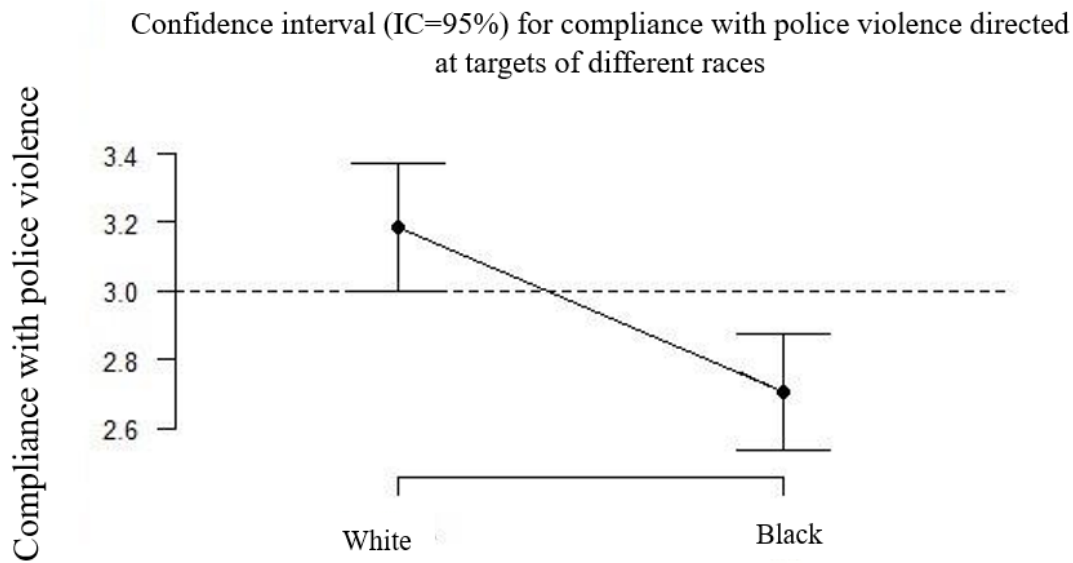


Figure 1: Degree of tolerance for police action according to the skin color of the young

### 3.2 Qualitative analysis of the justifications in the position towards police violence

For the analysis of justifications, the textual corpus was initially divided by Iramuteq into 366 text segments, of which 303 were used in CHD (82.79%). The procedure identified 4 lexical classes, which were named according to the themes identified from the reading of the most characteristic text segments of each class. Classes can be understood as endogenous empirical categories, derived from the way vocabulary is distributed in different text segments, which indicate the existence of linguistic and discursive patterns underlying the responses of participants (Sousa, 2021). The result of this organization can be briefly observed in the dendrogram that presents a synthesis of the themes of the classes, their most characteristic lexical forms, as well as the associated categorical variables (age, gender, self-declared skin color, political position, position towards police action, experimental condition (victim's skin color) (Figure 2).

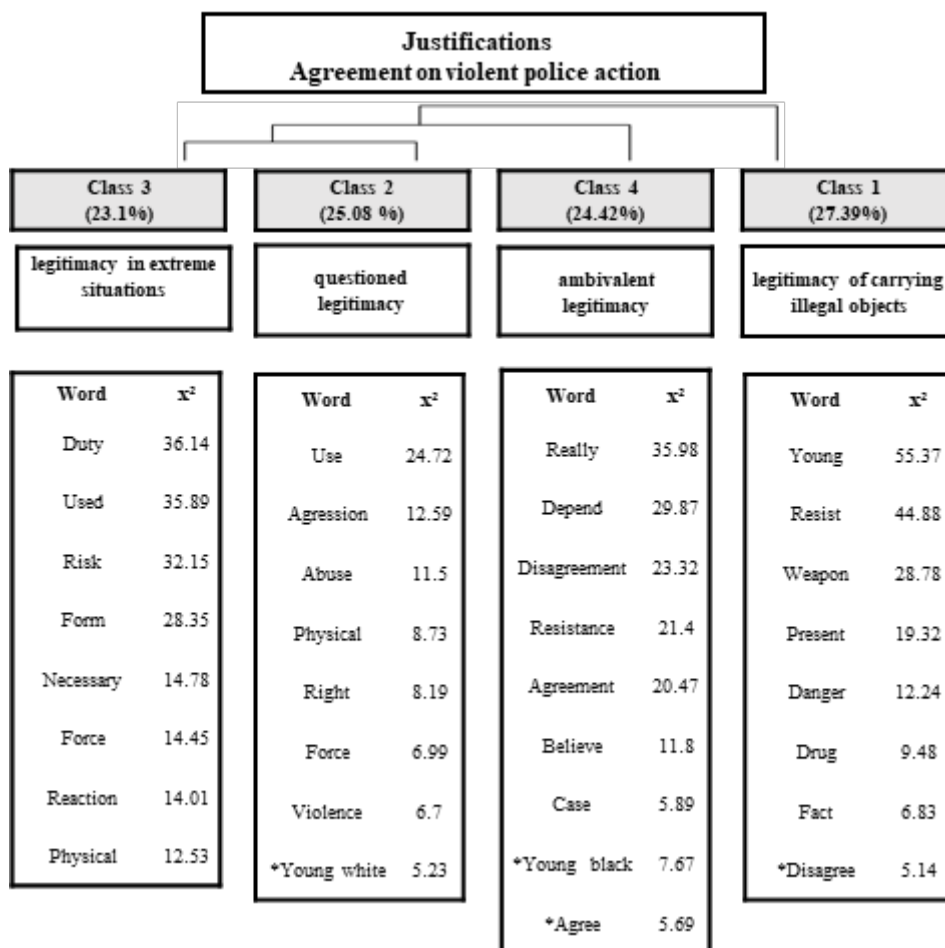


Figure 2: Dendrogram of the Justification in the position against police violence

Class 3 gathered 23.1% of the text segments, with justifications that deal with the youth's dangerousness, whether the youth offered some type of risk, whether he showed resistance or even whether the force used by the police was proportional to his conduct. In this class, in relation to the experimental condition studied, there were no significant associations between the content of the class and the variables of the young white conditions ( $x^2 = 2.44$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), young black ( $x^2 = -2.44$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), agreement ( $x^2 = -0.80$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) or disagreement ( $x^2 = -0.49$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) with police violence.

Among the more specific words of the class are: risk ( $x^2 = 32.15$ ), form ( $x^2 = 28.35$ ) necessary ( $x^2 = 14.78$ ) and reaction ( $x^2 = 14.01$ ), which highlight issues such as the risk of the situation, the young person's degree of danger, his reaction - resistance or not - in the face of the approach, and the real need for strength to contain him. As the speeches agree with the violent police approach reported in the news when there is some kind of need such as risk and dangerousness. The following excerpts illustrate these themes:

I believe that physical force should only be used when the person is a risk (participant 52, young black condition, discordant position).

Police action with the use of physical force should occur in the most serious cases and when there is danger for the agents, in no way would a 19-year-old young person represent a risk (participant 83, young black condition, discordant position)

Class 2 brings together text segments based on discourses questioning the legitimacy of the use of physical force in police approaches, based on concerns about the abuse of power in approaches, the trivialization of violent approaches and, eventually, on tolerance conditioned on the non-commitment of abuses by the police. In this class, an overrepresentation of text segments from the experimental condition young white was identified. ( $x^2 = 5.23$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), that is, the vocabulary of this class was proportionally more used in the experimental condition in which the youth was white. In this sense, the speeches reveal an association with the idea that the police acted abusively specifically when the youth was white, which



may indicate that the police's actions were less questioned when the violence was directed at the black youth.

Note that among the most specific words of the class are aggression ( $x^2 = 12.59$ ), abuse ( $x^2 = 11.5$ ), right ( $x^2 = 8.19$ ), and violence ( $x^2 = 6.7$ ). In this sense, the theme of the speeches contemplated by this class refers, in fact, to the action of the police, read as abusive, even exceeding the function of the institution, as legitimate or necessary, only in cases of extreme necessity and that do not exceed the limits. In this class, there were negative and significant associations between the class content and the young black experimental condition ( $x^2 = -5.23$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), but not in agreement ( $x^2 = -1.25$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) and disagreement ( $x^2 = 1.09$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ).

The use of physical force is not the best solution and sometimes there is abuse of power (participant 306, young white condition, discordant position).

If the suspect reacted, the use of physical force may be justifiable as long as there are no excesses (participant 220, young white condition, concordant position).

Because I think that citizens should be respected regardless of the use and/or drug trafficking, since what often happened is the abuse of power and the criminalization of poverty in addition to racism (participant 253, young black condition, discordant position).

Class 1 brings together justifications based on the understanding that if the young person approached was in possession of objects considered illegal, which would justify the use of violence. An overrepresentation of text segments written by participants who disagreed with the police action was identified, since the  $x^2$  of class 1 for disagreement with police violence was 5.143 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and for agreement was -4.246 ( $p < 0.05$ ). Although the terms resist ( $x^2 = 44.88$ ), weapon ( $x^2 = 28.78$ ), and danger ( $x^2 = 12.24$ ) are among the most characteristic lexical forms of the class, the statements include positions that affirm the need to use of force, since the young man was carrying illegal objects, and they question the use of physical force due to the absence of elements capable of evidencing the young man's dangerousness. Text segments were also found in which the theme of drug possession was a central element in the justification, assuming two main functions: (1) disagreement with violence, as the young person carried a small amount of drugs, configuring himself as a user; (2) agreement with violence based on the illegality of carrying drugs of any quantity in Brazil. There were no significant associations between class content and the variables of young black ( $x^2 = 1.07$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) and young white ( $x^2 = -1.07$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ) conditions. The examples in class 1 denote ambivalence in the justification depending on the objects in possession of the young person:

At no time is it explicit that the young man was armed or used brutal physical force. Faced with a prison like this, it is normal for young people to resist (participant 268, young white condition, discordant position).

I agree because carrying drugs, even if it is for personal use, is illegal here in Brazil, so the user or dealer is probably lying about the fact that he resisted, so the police had to use their strategies to stop him, completely disregarding his race (participant 372, young black condition, concordant position).

Class 4 brings together justifications centered on not expressing an open and assertive position in the face of police violence, that is, it denotes uncertainties and doubts in taking a position. The arguments are anchored in the need for more evidence, more information or witnesses to take a stand. In this class, the level of agreement with the violent action of the police and the skin color of the young person attacked exert a significant effect. The  $x^2$  of class 4 for agreement with police violence was 5.588 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and for disagreement was -7.403 ( $p < 0.01$ ), which reveals an overrepresentation of text segments formulated by participants who took a stand in line with police violence. In this sense, even though the justifications express a non-direct implication in decision-making regarding agreement with police violence, the responses of such participants pointed to a greater bias of concordant responses. In turn, the  $x^2$  of the condition of the young man as black was 7.67 ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that the justification is more pronounced and present in the speeches of the participants who evaluated the aggression of a young black man. There were no significant associations between class content and the young white condition variable

( $x^2 = -7.67$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The most significant words in this class are: depend ( $x^2 = 29.87$ ), resistance ( $x^2 = 21.4$ ), and believe ( $x^2 = 11.8$ ), and the examples demonstrate uncertainties:

It depends on what is true in the news there is no information if the veracity of the resistance was verified and what would be a resistance to attack the police the news can be tendentious like the majority for this reason in disagreement (participant 21, young black condition, discordant position).

If this is really what happened, the police generally use physical force without any need, so it is difficult to analyze this impasse without witnesses (participant 291, young white condition, concordant position)

## Discussion

The present study aimed to analyze the degree of tolerance and its justification for police violence against members of a social minority as a form of racial discrimination in a sample of university students. Specifically, we intended to investigate whether police violence is more tolerated when the victim is a member of a social minority (black).

To this end, the degree of agreement with the use of physical force in relation to the young person approached in the police action was analyzed. Contrary to our hypothesis and what is commonly found in studies regarding the perception of police violence in similar samples (e.g., Álvaro et al., 2015; Costa-Silva et al., 2018; Ferreira et al., 2022), we found greater disagreement with police violence when the victim of the violent approach was a black young man.

Such results may be anchored in the emergence of more subtle and discreet configurations of expressions of racial prejudice that occur in democratic contexts, in which the value of equality and anti-prejudice and anti-racism norms are widespread (Lima & Vala, 2004; Lima, 2020). In this sense, in order not to be frowned upon, to go against the norm of social desirability, influenced by anti-racist legislation and racial social movements in favor of the universalization of human dignity, it is consistent that the participants disapprove of an aggressive police approach against the young black. Especially in university contexts, where racial equality policies and practices are advocated. Strategy adopted by participants as a way to distance themselves from socially widespread racist and prejudiced practices.

It is also possible to understand the phenomenon from the model of the subjective dynamics of the group and the so-called “black sheep effect” by some authors (Marques & Páez, 1994), which analyzes how the perception of intragroup threat influences the evaluation of a member of the group. According to the theory, in-group members who express unacceptable behavior and deviate from the central norm for maintaining a positive group identity will be attributed negative evaluations and undesirable status by other members of the group itself (Marques et al., 2001). In an intergroup comparison context, the referred undesirable and deviant in-group members would receive even more negative evaluations and punishments than out-group members (Mendoza et al., 2005). In this sense, the result of greater agreement with police violence against young whites may indicate a greater social demand attributed to young whites, compared to young blacks, regardless of the participant self-declared skin color of the research. The white youth, by breaking with the central norm and starting to be seen as a deviant individual, could be evaluated as someone who deserves to receive greater punishment and rejection, justifying the greater acceptance of police violence. On the other hand, the lower social pressure on young black people could be associated with stigmatizing social representations and lower social status, in which this type of action is expected (Lima et al., 2019; Techio et al., 2019). The stigmatization process gives individuals a disqualified status, associated with essentialist beliefs that certain individuals, due to their category membership, have natural characteristics that would qualify them as less human (Pereira et al., 2011), which may be associated with benevolent discourses, of poor people and subjected to the docile domination of the other (Lima, 2020).

If, on the one hand, the participants showed low agreement with police violence and greater acceptance against a white youth, the same cannot be observed in the justifying speech, in which police violence is perceived as a legitimate instrument, less questioned when directed to young black people, therefore, an indirect form of manifestation of racial discrimination. The justifying discourses associated with

agreement with police violence, even if ambivalently (classes 3, 4 and 5), present arguments that in essence end up legitimizing violent actions. In the speeches, the police action, even illegitimate and contrary to Brazilian legislation, is accepted by the participants, especially in the young black condition. In these cases, senses of dangerousness and elements such as the possession of illegal and/or contranormative objects (weapons and drugs) are usually evoked, which accompany the authoritarian practices of “combating drug trafficking” and crime in peripheral communities, where the black and impoverished population predominates (Bueno & Lima, 2021; Cerqueira, 2021; Sousa, Barreto, et al., 2020; Sousa, Santos, et al., 2020). In these contexts, racism translated into police violence is often hegemonically endorsed and even desired (Jackson et al., 2018; Lemgruber et al., 2017; Farias et al., 2017).

The ambivalence in the justifying speeches, which sometimes agree with the action and sometimes disagree depending on the situation, point to the existence of a veiled and subtle prejudice, given the aforementioned social desirability, in the face of widespread anti-racist norms in democratic societies (Lima & Vala, 2004; Lima 2020). Ambivalence, similar to the psychological mechanism of cognitive dissociation, allows the individual to deny being prejudiced, but to accept the existence of negative stereotypes and prejudices in society in general (Camino et al., 2014). In these judgments, even if dangerousness was not associated with the context (young white vs black), the discursive elements produced tend to legitimize police violence, reinforcing institutional and structural racism (Philburn & Quraishi 2015). Brazilian society built on racial/ethnic inequalities shares in the social imaginary the belief that certain social categories have violent and dangerous essential traits (Lima & Vala, 2004; Pereira et al., 2011; Techio et al., 2019), which justifies stronger police action.

In turn, the discourse that questions violent police action is associated with the context in which the victim was a young white man (class 2), placing suspicion on the legitimacy of police action, considered abusive and inappropriate, a practice that should be used only, and only, in extreme cases. If we compare the discourses associated with the context (young white vs. black), the racist and prejudiced narrative that justifies police violence against the black population is evident, maintaining and reproducing the institutional and structural racism that privileges the rights of the white population. In the context of young white, police action was considered authoritarian, abusive and illegitimate, therefore questioned. In the context of young black, there is hesitation and uncertainty about the judgment of the police action, so that the speech was based on the need for more information and witnesses to take a stand against police violence. The content of the speech is based on the suspicion of the behavior of the young black man, who could have acted in such a way as to justify a more violent approach by the police (Álvaro et al., 2015; Costa-Silva et al., 2018; Farias et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2020; Ferreira et al., 2022).

In summary, the results suggest that when violent police action is directed at whites, there are no doubts about the youth's behavior and the abuse of power, but when it is directed at blacks, the youth's behavior is placed under suspicion. It seems that for a young black man (as statistics show), the presumption is guilt rather than innocence. The differences in the narratives can contribute to the elaboration of arguments that favor the presumption of innocence of white individuals in situations of violent police approach, while facilitating the justification of police action in situations represented as ambiguous or uncertain.

In this sense, although the responses of the participants point, in general, to a greater disagreement with the violent police action against young black men, one can observe in their justifications implicit mechanisms of social acceptance and naturalization of racial discrimination. At this point, the results are very similar to those found in previous studies that used the same paradigm (Álvaro et al., 2015; Costa-Silva et al., 2018; Farias et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2020; Ferreira et al., 2022). Therefore, discourses justifying police violence tend to contribute to maintaining the current status, legitimizing interracial inequalities, racial discrimination and racism, which would be explained, according to the theory of justification of systems, by the naturalization of cognitive dissonance between desires and needs of justice of individuals, even in the face of situations of injustice (Jost & Jojanneke, 2012).

## Final considerations

This present research was dedicated to analyzing racial discrimination practices through the perception and justification of violent police action against members of a racial minority among university students. The agreement with violent practices against racialized groups generates a narrative that legitimizes and reinforces discrimination and racism, still very present in Brazilian society. (Ferreira et al., 2022). Such narratives end up reinforcing the excessive policing of bodies and the black community, the use of authority and the abuse of force in police actions as a way of combating crime in specific contexts and the impunity of state agents, as shown by data from the Brazilian Yearbook of Public security (2022) e ONU (2021).

In view of the above, it can be said that the narratives regarding to the police violence differ depending on the skin color of the target. By legitimizing the action of law enforcement agents against certain bodies and contexts, it breaks with the belief that we, Brazilians, are a society based on egalitarian and universal values, that we live in a racial democracy. Given that violence is institutional, targeted at certain social categories and has been incorporated into the practices of law enforcement, regardless of individual attitudes (Mbembe, 2016; Cashmore, 1996, Philburn & Quraishi, 2015), we can say that in Brazil, discrimination racial and racism remains as a reality that afflicts black bodies.

In these narratives, supported by social desirability in the face of anti-racist norms, which have been gaining strength in the face of the actions of movements and public policies in favor of universalizing human dignity, combating the dehumanization of people and cultivating racial intolerance, inequality and violence, it is visible that racial prejudice remains active, in a more subtle, discreet and hidden way through the narratives of impartiality, of not taking a strong position against the unnecessary use of force and power in police actions, or even in raising doubts about the behavior of young black men (Lima, 2020; Ferreira et al., 2022).

Violence against the black population in Brazil goes far beyond institutional racism, as racial inequalities are systemic and structural and involve processes of socioeconomic and political marginalization (Almeida, 2018). The black population faces numerous barriers in accessing universal rights to health, education, housing, employment, political participation. This research points to the need for further investigations, within the scope of social psychology, theoretical and methodological deepening and expansion in studies on the subject of prejudice and racism in Brazil.



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