

## **Moral Judgment and the Perceived Legitimacy of Police Violence against Black People**

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This work analyzes the relationship between moral judgment and racial discrimination in Brazil, operationalized as the perception of legitimacy regarding the use of police violence against Blacks. Study 1 ( $N = 123$ ) found that racial prejudice predicts the legitimacy of police violence against Blacks and this relationship was moderated by moral judgment. Study 2 ( $N = 71$ ) identified that police violence against a Black suspect was perceived as more legitimate when compared to a White one. Study 3 ( $N = 129$ ) found that conventional morality increased the differences between Black and White in legitimacy of police violence, whereas post-conventional morality reduces this difference. In conclusion, the interaction between moral judgment and prejudice explains the racial discrimination in Brazil.

*Keywords:* racial prejudice, racial discrimination, moral judgment, police violence

### **Julgamento moral e a legitimidade percebida da violência policial contra pessoas negras**


Este trabalho analisa a relação entre julgamento moral e discriminação racial no Brasil, operacionalizada como a percepção de legitimidade do uso da violência policial contra negros. O Estudo 1 ( $N = 123$ ) constatou que o preconceito racial prediz a legitimidade da violência policial contra negros e essa relação foi moderada pelo julgamento moral. O Estudo 2 ( $N = 71$ ) identificou que a violência policial contra um suspeito negro foi percebida como mais legítima em comparação a um branco. O Estudo 3 ( $N = 129$ ) constatou que a moralidade convencional aumentou as diferenças entre negros e brancos quanto à legitimidade da violência policial, enquanto a moralidade pós-convencional reduziu essa diferença. Em conclusão, a interação entre julgamento moral e preconceito explica a discriminação racial no Brasil.

*Palavras-chave:* preconceito racial, discriminação racial, julgamento moral, violência policial

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### **Juicio moral y la legitimidad percibida de la violencia policial contra personas negras**

Este trabajo analiza la relación entre el juicio moral y la discriminación racial en Brasil, operacionalizada como la percepción de legitimidad de la violencia policial contra los negros. Estudio 1 ( $N = 123$ ) encontró que el prejuicio racial predice la legitimidad de la violencia policial contra los negros y esta relación fue moderada por el juicio moral. Estudio 2 ( $N = 71$ ) identificó que la violencia policial contra un sospechoso negro se percibía como más legítima en comparación con uno blanco. Estudio 3 ( $N = 129$ ) encontró que la moralidad convencional aumentó las diferencias entre negros y blancos en la legitimidad de la violencia policial, mientras que la moralidad postconvencional redujo esta diferencia. En conclusión, la interacción entre juicio moral y prejuicio explica la discriminación racial en Brasil.

*Palabras clave:* prejuicio racial, discriminación racial, juicio moral, violencia policial

### **Jugement moral et légitimité perçue de la violence policière contre personnes noires**

Ce travail analyse la relation entre le jugement moral et la discrimination raciale au Brésil, opérationnalisée comme la perception de la légitimité concernant l'utilisation de la violence policière contre les Noirs. L'étude 1 ( $N = 123$ ) a révélé que les préjugés raciaux prédisent la légitimité de la violence policière contre les Noirs et que cette relation était modérée par le jugement moral. L'étude 2 ( $N = 71$ ) a identifié que la violence policière contre un suspect noir était perçue comme plus légitime par rapport à un suspect blanc. L'étude 3 ( $N = 129$ ) a révélé que la morale conventionnelle augmentait les différences entre les Noirs et les Blancs sur la légitimité de la violence policière, alors que la morale postconventionnelle réduisait cette différence. En conclusion, l'interaction entre le jugement moral et les préjugés explique la discrimination raciale au Brésil.

*Mots clés:* préjugé racial, discrimination raciale, jugement moral, violences policières

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In today's society, the challenge that has been established about the conflicts of values and the socio-racial inequalities experienced daily demands a reflection on how prejudice and discrimination are deeply rooted in Brazilian society (Batista et al., 2014; da Costa Silva et al., 2018; Techio et al., 2019). From an intergroup relations perspective, the phenomena of prejudice and discrimination are directed at the processes of perception of oneself and others, and by the symbolic positions that each individual occupies in social relations (Doise, 1990). In this regard, morality, understood as the principles of justice that guide the relations of people in society (Kohlberg, 1984), is an important factor in this context and we question to what extent it is related to prejudice and has impact on the perception of social judgments that take place in racial contexts.

Prejudice can be defined as a feeling of dislike based on a wrong and inflexible generalization, which can be felt or expressed openly, and directed at a group or one of its members for belonging to that group (Allport, 1954). However, for Brown (2010), the definition of prejudice ought to include power struggles and the system of beliefs about what is not socially allowed. Thus, prejudice appears not only in the form of negative assessments, feelings, and beliefs, but it is related to derogatory social attitudes, the expression of negative emotions, the manifestation of hostile behavior directed at members of a group because they belong to that group. Its manifestations can be presented in various forms and its expressions include diverse motivations causing serious social consequences such as socioeconomic differences and racial discrimination (Brown, 2010). In this sense, discrimination often results from the materialization of prejudice and consists of actions that aim to preserve or create advantages for one group over another group (Schucman, 2014), for the purpose of legitimizing social inequalities at a given historical moment (Carone, 2002; Vala et al., 2012). Thus, discrimination

is a differentiated treatment directed at the individual as a consequence of belonging to a category (Brewer, 1994).

However, the expressions of prejudice and discrimination in contemporary society are multifaceted, as they are influenced by the social norms that regulate their expression. So, these phenomena do not necessarily appear in the social fabric in an open manner. In fact, racial prejudice has been manifested in more subtle forms (Batista et al., 2014; Da Costa Silva et al., 2018; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995), not openly contradicting the rules that curb its manifestation (Katz & Hass, 1988; Kinder & Sears, 1981; McConahay, 1983; Pereira & Vala, 2010; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Vala et al., 1999). In this configuration, racial discrimination has been observed in different contexts such as health, work, and education (Barros et al., 2017; Camino et al., 2013; Camino et al., 2014; Lima-Nunes et al., 2013; Souza et al., 2016). In some of these contexts (Batista et al., 2014; Ferreira et al., 2017; Ferreira, Leite et al., 2017; Lima et al., 2019) the anti-prejudice norm is not necessarily active.

One example of an anti-prejudice context or norm is that of urban violence and public security, in which police violence, which apparently would be the last defense strategy used in a confrontation, is perceived as the main instrument of justice in fighting crime and other violations of the law, and also as a strategy of coercive control (Bittner, 2003; Lemgruber et al., 2017; Sabucedo & Durán, 2007; Smith & Holmes, 2014; Torres et al., 2005; Zoran, 2018). In this case, its main victims are members of social minorities, such as Blacks, causing serious consequences for the mental health of these groups and for public safety in general (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; Charbonneau et al., 2017; Durán & Loza, 2017; Edwards et al., 2018; Holmes et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2018; Kahn & Davies, 2017; Kauff et al., 2017; Morrow et al., 2018; Osabogie & Newman, 2017; Scott et al., 2017; Sewell, 2017).

In fact, recent studies have shown that race / skin color influences various outcomes both in policing and in criminal justice as a whole, affecting police actions at lethal and non-lethal levels, prison rates, and

criminal penalties (Correll et al., 2002; Correll et al., 2015; Durán & Loza, 2017; Goff et al., 2016; Kahn & Martin, 2016; Price & Payton, 2017; Scott et al., 2017; Warren et al., 2019). Scott et al. (2017), analyzing the causes of racial disparities in the use of police force in the United States, demonstrated that fatal police actions are influenced by the suspect's social category (race / skin color), and not by questionable behavior. This relationship suggests that police officers are more apt to shoot Black suspects even when social differences in the crime are kept constant.

Thus, police violence can be considered one of the forms of expression of discrimination and the population tends to tolerate this type of violence more when perpetrated against racial minorities (e.g., Blacks) compared to dominant groups (Álvaro et al., 2015; Costa-Silva et al., 2018; Dukes & Gaither, 2017). Together, these studies indicate that underlying this police violence, there is the problem of racial prejudice. This means that the discussion of this problem is not limited to the issue of fighting crime, but demands an understanding of the interaction between police and suspect, as well as about the way in which this interaction is perceived by the public. The present research seeks to analyze police violence against Blacks from a psychosociological perspective, which comprehends that social dynamics result from the articulation between cognitive and motivational factors within a broader social structure (Doise, 2002).

From this perspective, we understand that moral judgment tends to play an important role regarding the phenomena of prejudice and discrimination, since morality can be understood as principles of justice that guide people's relations in society (Kohlberg, 1984). Thus understood, morality develops from a close relationship between the cognitive and the social (Camino et al., 2003; Rique et al., 2013), and involves principles of equality, reciprocity and solidarity, and justice, which are contrary to the processes of discrimination. This approach emphasizes the rational and social dimensions, and its main representatives are Piaget and Kohlberg, unlike approaches that emphasize affectivity and defend only moral heteronomy, autonomy is possible

(Díaz-Aguado & Medrano, 1999; La Taille, 2006). In this study, we will focus on the theory developed by Kohlberg (1984).

Kohlberg (1984) proposed a model of moral development based on a sequence of three levels with two stages each. These stages correspond to reasoning structures that change progressively with age, and qualitatively from cognitive and social development. Thus, the notion of justice is being gradually constructed from one stage to the next, based on socio-cognitive conflicts resulting from individuals' interactions with their environment. For him, the sequence of stages would be invariant and hierarchical, following the same sequential order in individuals, and universal, all people independent of culture would go through the same process (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987).

Thus, individuals go from the pre-conventional level, where actions and judgments are oriented according to the immediate consequences of these acts, whether breaking rules out of fear of punishment (Stage 1) or defending concrete interests and following rules for one's own benefit (Stage 2); passing through the conventional, in which actions are oriented according to the expectations of the family or group (Stage 3) or the maintenance of laws, considering the system as a whole (Stage 4); until reaching the post-conventional level of moral development, in which actions are oriented according to the social contract and the valuing of human rights (Stage 5), and universal principles of justice (Stage 6). This means that the different levels of moral reasoning affect how people perceive and assess social situations as morally right or wrong (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Kohlberg, 1984).

In fact, Rutland & Killen (2015) have shown that the evaluation of the processes of social exclusion does not result from the simple fact that others belong to different social groups, but from the construction of the intergroup context based on group norms and morality. Thus, morality has its expression concretized in the actions and positions of individuals (Moreira et al., 2018). In this regard, situations that present social conflicts, such as police violence (Álvaro et al., 2015; Costa-Silva et al., 2018) can be seen as just or unjust depending on the level of morality that the individual presents and the group to which the target

of these judgments belongs (Diaz-Aguado & Medrano, 1999; Killen & Rutland, 2011; Kohlberg, 1984; Rutland & Killen, 2015).

In view of the fact that police violence has been perceived as one of the main instruments to fight crime (Bittner, 2003; Lemgruber et al., 2017; Sabucedo & Durán, 2007; Zoran, 2018), being more frequent when directed at social minorities (Charbonneau et al., 2017; Durán & Loza, 2018; Edwards et al., 2018; Holmes et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2018; Kahn & Davies, 2017; Kauff et al., 2017; Morrow et al., 2018), and that tends to be more tolerated when perpetrated against the Blacks group (Álvaro et al., 2015; Costa-Silva et al., 2018; Dukes & Gaither, 2017), and considering that these conflicts can be perceived as just or unjust depending on the intergroup dynamics and the level of moral development of the evaluators (Diaz-Aguado & Medrano, 1999; Killen & Rutland, 2011; Kohlberg, 1984; Rutland & Killen, 2015), the work presented here aimed to test the general hypothesis that the relationship between the skin color of the target of police violence and the perceived legitimacy of this violence is moderated by moral judgment.

To this end, three studies were carried out, which allowed the testing of hypotheses derived from this general hypothesis. Given that prejudice has serious social consequences such as socioeconomic differences and racial discrimination (Brown, 2010; Pereira & Vala, 2010; Telles, 2004) and with studies that identify police violence as a form of expression of discrimination (Costa-Silva et al., 2018), Study 1 tested the hypothesis that racial prejudice would act as a predictor of the perceived legitimacy of police violence, such that the higher the level of prejudice, the more police violence will be perceived as legitimate, and that this relationship is moderated by moral judgment (H1). Next, Study 2 tested if this type of violence (police violence) would be perceived as more legitimate when directed at Blacks in comparison with Whites (H2). Finally, based on studies about moral development (Camino et al., 2003; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Díaz-Aguado & Medrano, 1999; Piaget, 1932/1994), we argue that the relationship between the skin color of the victim of police violence and the

perception of legitimacy of this violence would be affected by the type of moral judgment that the individual uses to judge social relationships. Thus, Study 3 tested the hypothesis that the relationship between the skin color of the target of police violence (Black vs. White) and the perceived legitimacy of this violence would be moderated by moral judgment (H3).

## **Study 1**

This study aimed to test the following hypotheses: racial prejudice predicts the perceived legitimacy of police violence and this relationship is moderated by moral judgment (H1). In making this prediction, we base the argument on studies that point to the role of morality as principles of justice that regulate people's relationships in society (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Kohlberg, 1984). In this regard, we derive two hypotheses from H1: a) conventional moral judgment accentuates the impact of prejudice on the perceived legitimacy of police violence (H1a), since morality at this level is strictly related to social convention and respect for authority (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987); and b) post-conventional moral judgment reduces the impact of racial prejudice on the perceived legitimacy of police violence (H1b), since at this level morality implies the preservation of the fundamental rights of all citizens (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987).

## ***Method***

### ***Participants***

A total of 121 residents of the city of João Pessoa in the state of Paraíba participated in this study, with ages between 19 and 65 years ( $M = 24.5$ ;  $SD = 6.8$ ); 32% were male and 68% female. Regarding skin color, 45% considered themselves White, 45.7% Black, and 9.3% Brown. The sample was non-probabilistic by convenience. Post-hoc sensitivity analysis for fixed model,  $R^2$  increase for linear multiple



regression, using G\*Power with  $\alpha = .05$ , number of predictors = 2, and total number of predictors = 3, showed that we had an 97.22% chance of detecting a main or interaction effect as small as  $f = .15$ .

### *Procedures*

Participants were approached in public places, such as squares and shopping malls, and were asked to participate in the research. Rapport was made stating that it was an opinion poll study on police violence. Each participant answered a questionnaire individually after signing the informed consent form for research. This work conformed to all American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines for research with human participants. Like the other studies reported in this article, all ethical recommendations prescribed in resolution 510/16 of the National Health Council, CAAE: 48709015.1.0000.5188, were followed.

### *Instrument*

The questionnaire used presents a supposed report in which, during an assault crime, a Black suspect, after being handcuffed, is severely beaten by a police officer in the act of arrest with punches, leg kicks, and toe kicks. After reading the report, participants were asked to respond to a set of six items ( $\alpha = .92$ ) regarding the perceived legitimacy of the police violence (for example: *To what extent do you agree that the police officer's action was fair? To what extent do you agree that the police officer's action was legitimate?*)

The participants then answered the Defining Issues Test - DIT ( $\alpha = .65$ ). The original form of this instrument was developed by Rest et al. (1974) and consists of an objective measure to assess moral judgment that indicates the moral stages proposed by Kohlberg (1984), with the exception of stage 1, through different notions of justice. The DIT uses six moral dilemmas, each with twelve statements that are rated on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 = maximum importance to 5 = no importance. The version used in this study was adapted and validated by Camino and Luna (1989) and two of the six dilemmas were applied:

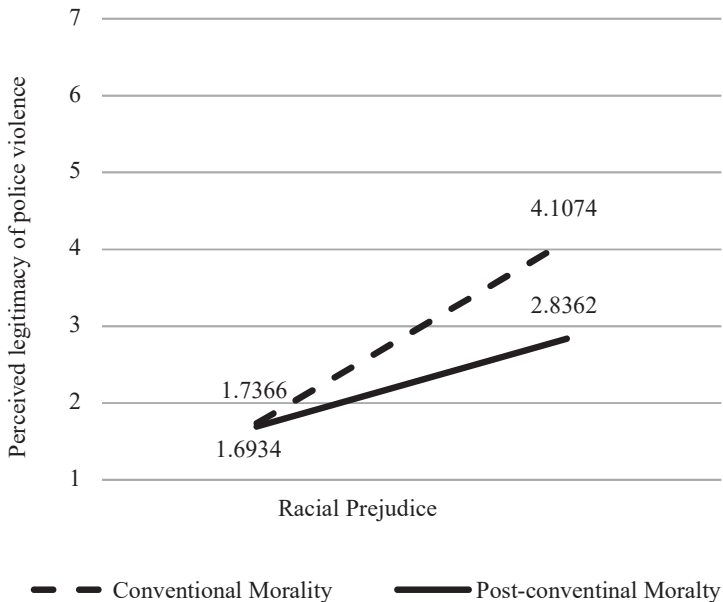
“the Heinz dilemma” and the “Escaped Prisoner dilemma”. After rating the items in each dilemma, the participants indicated which four items were considered most important in their judgment. For each question considered most important, an answer diagram was consulted to identify the stage to which the item referred. Once the stages of each item were identified, weights of 4, 3, 2, and 1 were assigned to each answer in decreasing order according to their relative importance. Finally, summing the assigned weights for each stage, the total score was obtained. Moral judgment was categorized according to the predominance of the choice of items referring to each level, whether conventional or post-conventional. The levels were coded as 0 (conventional) and 1 (post-conventional).

Right after this, the participants responded to a measure of prejudice that takes into consideration their knowledge of the anti-prejudice norm, for example, *if there were no anti-prejudice law, I would express opinions considered prejudiced by the law*. This measure was added due to the fact that in Brazil a large number of individuals have emerged who disagree with the legitimacy of the Law that prohibits racism, as well as the emergence of racist statements in places where individuals feel protected from the norm, such as on social networks (Batista et al., 2014) or on soccer fields (Ferreira et al., 2017). This measure is composed of eight items, in a seven-point Likert format, ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree, with a single factor structure ( $KMO = .80$ ; Bartlett's test of sphericity  $X^2(28) = 149.707, p < .001; \alpha = .77$ ). Finally, the participants answered a sociodemographic questionnaire, containing questions regarding age, sex, and skin color.

### ***Results and Discussion***

We conducted a regression analysis with the perceived legitimacy of police violence as the dependent variable and racial prejudice, moral judgment, and the interaction term as independent variables  $F(3, 117) = 13.4; p < .001; R^2 = .35; \eta^2 = .35$ . The results showed a significant main effect of racial prejudice on the perceived legitimacy of police violence,  $b = .91, t = 6.31, p < .001$ , and as the level of racial prejudice

increased, the perceived legitimacy of police violence also increased. Morality also presented a significant main effect on this variable, such that when participants were at the post-conventional level, they tended to disagree with police violence  $b = -.52, t = -2.12, p < .05$ . There was a significant interaction between racial prejudice and moral judgment,  $b = -.62, t = -2.22, p < .05$ , confirming our hypothesis H1. This means that moral judgment moderated the relationship between racial prejudice and the perceived legitimacy of police violence (Figure 1). However, police violence was perceived as more legitimate when the participants were at the conventional moral level ( $b = 1.18; t = 5.38; p < .001$ ), confirming H1a, while the participants at the post-conventional moral level perceived police violence as less legitimate ( $b = .56; t = 3.30; p < .001$ ), confirming H1b.



**Figure 1.** Interaction between the racial prejudice and the moral judgment on the perceived legitimacy of police violence

The aim of this study was to test the hypothesis that racial prejudice predicts the perceived legitimacy of police violence and this relationship is moderated by moral judgment. The results showed that racial prejudice is at the root of the perceived legitimacy of police violence, corroborating the data in the literature that demonstrate that situations of discrimination are explained by prejudice (Pereira & Vala, 2010; Farias et al., 2017), as is the case with police violence. And this violence is perceived as more legitimate when perpetrated against racial and/or ethnic minorities (Álvaro et al., 2015; Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; Costa-Silva et al., 2018).

We also observed that moral judgment presented a strong impact on the attitudes of individuals, in this case a prejudiced attitude, in relation to situations that involve police violence. The interaction between racial prejudice and conventional morality seems to indicate that reasoning based on maintaining the system of social rules and norms for conflict resolution can favor the maintenance of the status quo (Pereira & Vala, 2010; Rutland & Killen, 2015). Accordingly, in an unequal society where police violence is tolerated (da Costa-Silva et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2020), prejudiced attitudes can be justified by social conventions, such as containing the danger posed by some minority groups (Batista et al., 2014; Durán & Loza, 2017; Staub, 2007), leading to the perception that repressive measures against minority groups are legitimate, even when they are at odds with the law.

On the other hand, when prejudiced attitudes interact with moral reasoning at the post-conventional level, there is a reduction in the level of the perceived legitimacy of police violence, probably because this type of moral reasoning is based on principles of justice, such as equality and equity (Kohlberg, 1984). Thus, the fact that the individual shows a level of morality that implies thinking about social conflicts based on principles of justice leads to less agreement with situations of exclusion and discrimination (Rutland & Killen, 2015) and, consequently, police violence is perceived as less legitimate.

This study demonstrated how prejudiced attitudes are at the root of social judgments, confirming the data in the literature. In addition, we verified the effect of moral judgments in this context. However, as

this study had a correlational design, it is not possible to make conclusive statements about its results. Next, we will advance the discussion by analyzing how the types of moral judgments influence social judgments when the targets of this judgment belong to social groups included in power relationships, as is the case of the groups of Whites and Blacks in Brazilian society (Batista et al., 2014; da Costa Silva et al., 2018; Techio et al., 2019). For better clarity regarding the interaction of these variables, the studies that follow will present experimental designs.

## **Study 2**

This study aimed to test experimental manipulation in advance and test the hypothesis that police violence is perceived as more legitimate when directed at Blacks compared to Whites (H2). The hypothesis is supported by previous studies about tolerance of police violence (Álvaro et al., 2015; Costa-Silva et al., 2018), as well as findings that cite the representation of the Black group as aggressive, dishonest, and a threat to society (Batista et al., 2014; Durán & Loza, 2018), requiring an ostensible response to contain the imminent danger (Smith & Holmes, 2014; Staub, 2007).

### ***Method***

#### ***Participants***

Seventy-one (71) individuals from the general population participated in this study, with a mean age of 35 years and  $SD = 13.5$ ; 42.3% were male and 57.7% female. Regarding skin color, 46.5% were White, 36.6% were Brown, and 16.9% were Black.

#### ***Procedure***

Participants were approached in public places, such as squares and shopping malls, and asked to participate in the research, being randomly allocated to one of three conditions (White target, Black target,

and Control Condition= no mention about the target skin color) in a single-factor design between participants. Thus, 27 participants responded to the White target condition, 23 responded to the Black target condition, and 21 responded to the control condition. Post-hoc sensitivity analysis for fixed, special, main effects, and interactions in ANOVA using G\*Power with  $\alpha = .05$ , numerator  $df = 1$ , and three groups showed that we had an 54.6 % chance of detecting a main or interaction effect as small as  $f = .25$ . Each participant answered a questionnaire individually after signing the informed consent form for research. This work conformed to all American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines for research with human participants. Like the other studies reported in this article, all ethical recommendations prescribed in resolution 510/16 of the National Health Council, CAAE: 48709015.1.0000.5188, were followed.

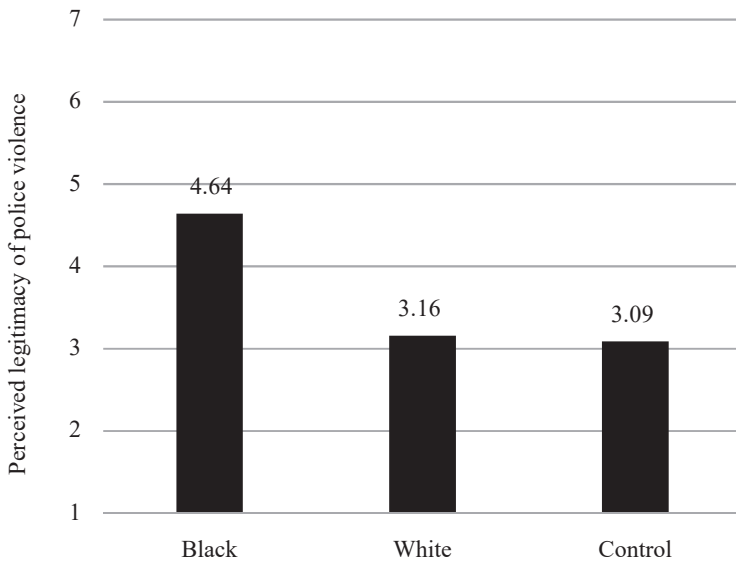
### *Instrument*

The participants' first task was to read a hypothetical story regarding the kidnapping of a child in which one of the kidnappers was captured by the police, but refused to reveal the location of the captivity. To get the information, the police used torture to obtain the information. Along with the story there was a picture of the kidnapper, who depending on the experimental condition, was either White (White condition), or Black (Black condition), or had no photo (control condition).

Then the participants responded to a set of six items related to the situation presented, such as: To what extent do you agree with the police action in this case? - To what extent do you agree that the police action was fair? To what extent do you agree that the police action was legitimate? Each item was answered on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree. The items were grouped into an indicator of perceived legitimacy of police violence ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Finally, the participants answered a sociodemographic questionnaire, containing questions regarding age, sex, and skin color.

### Results and discussion

We did an ANOVA (One-way) to check whether the participants varied in their responses regarding the perceived legitimacy of police violence, depending on the skin color of the target of that violence. The homogeneity of variance test proved to be non-significant, indicating that there was equality of variance between the groups  $F(2, 68) = .02$ ;  $p < .982$ . The results showed that the means for the participants regarding the perceived legitimacy of the police action varied according to the experimental conditions  $F(3, 67) = 5.91$ ;  $p < .01$ ;  $\eta^2 = .20$ , controlling the effect of the skin color of the participant  $F(1, 69) = 5.77$ ;  $p < .05$ . There was a significant difference between the White and Black condition (Mean Difference = 1.47;  $p < .01$ ), and between the Black and the control condition (Mean Difference = 1.54;  $p < .01$ ), however there was no significant difference between the White and control conditions (Mean Difference = .07;  $p < .99$ ) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Average perceived legitimacy of police violence as a function of the target's skin color

We can therefore state that the experimental manipulation was successful, presenting results that support our hypothesis that the perceived legitimacy of police violence varies according to the color of its target. Thus, we observed that violence against Blacks was perceived as more legitimate when compared to the White and control conditions. This result is in line with the studies that show that race / skin color influences decisions in the police and criminal justice domains, highlighting the aspect of racial prejudice and discrimination in the context of police violence (Álvaro et al., 2015; Bryant-Davis et al., 2017; Da Costa-Silva et al., 2018; Dukes & Gaither, 2017; Kahn & Martin, 2016; Scott et al., 2017).

### **Study 3**

This study aimed to test the hypothesis that the relationship between the skin color of the target of police violence and the perceived legitimacy of this violence, verified in study 2, is moderated by moral judgment (H3). Then we test the hypotheses that: a) police violence is perceived as more legitimate when the target of the violence is Black, compared to a White target, and the conventional type of morality accentuates this perceived legitimacy (H3a); b) police violence is perceived as more legitimate when the target of the violence is Black compared to a White target, and post-conventional morality reduces the difference between Whites and Blacks in relation to the perceived legitimacy of this violence (H3b).

#### ***Method***

##### ***Participants***

A total of 129 individuals from the general population participated in this study, with a mean age of 29.16 years;  $SD = 11.45$ , being 31% male and 69% female. Regarding skin color, 39.1% were White, 52.3% were Brown, and 8.6% were Black. Participants were



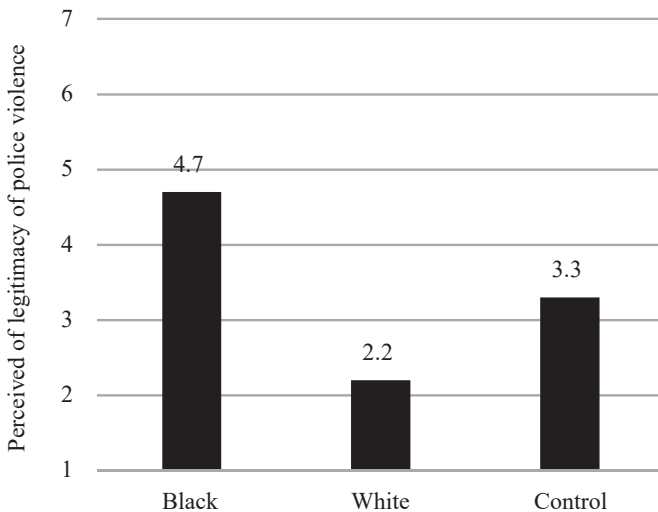
approached in public places, such as squares and shopping malls, and asked to participate in the research, being randomly allocated to one of three conditions (White target, Black target, and control) in a single-factor design between participants. Thus, 43 participants responded to the White target condition, 40 responded to the Black condition, and 46 responded to the control condition. The study was done using paper and pencil. Post-hoc sensitivity analysis for fixed, special, main effects, and interactions in ANOVA using G\*Power with  $\alpha = .05$ , numerator  $df = 1$ , and four groups showed that we had an 80% chance of detecting a main or interaction effect as small as  $f = .25$ . Each participant answered a questionnaire individually after signing the informed consent form for research. This work conformed to all American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines for research with human participants. Like the other studies reported in this article, all ethical recommendations prescribed in resolution 510/16 of the National Health Council, CAAE: 48709015.1.0000.5188, were followed.

### *Instrument*

Following the procedures of study 2, the participants' first task was to read the vignette presented (see study 2). Then the participants answered a set of 6 items grouped into an indicator of perceived legitimacy of police violence ( $\alpha = .98$ ), the dependent variable, similar to Study 2. Subsequently, the participants answered the Defining Issues Test - DIT ( $\alpha = .73$ ), similar to Study 1. The measure of moral judgment was computed in a similar way to study one, however, instead of coding the levels into one categorical variable, to improve the accuracy of the analysis, we analyzed the conventional and post-conventional moral judgment indicator at the interval level. Finally, the participants completed a sociodemographic questionnaire, containing questions regarding age, sex, and color.

### Results and Discussion

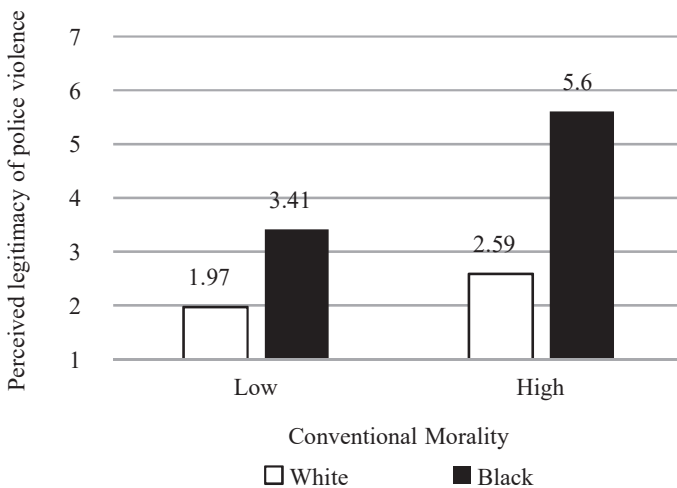
First, an ANOVA (One-way) was done out to check whether the participants varied in their responses regarding the perceived legitimacy of police violence, depending on the skin color of the target of that violence. The results showed that the means for the participants regarding the perceived legitimacy of police violence varied according to the experimental conditions  $F(3, 125) = 17.867; p < .001; \eta^2 = .22$ , controlling the effect of the skin color of the participant  $F(1, 126) = 2.70; p < .103$ . There was a significant difference between the White and Black condition (Mean Difference = 2.45;  $p < .001$ ), between the White and the control condition (Mean Difference = 1.06;  $p < .05$ ), and between Black and control (Mean Difference = 1.39;  $p < .01$ ) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Average perceived legitimacy of police violence as a function of the target's skin color

Next, we tested the hypothesis that the relationship between the skin color of the target of police violence and the perceived legitimacy of that violence is moderated by moral judgment. First, we checked the

moderating effect of conventional morality. We ran a regression analysis with the perceived legitimacy of police violence as the dependent variable and the skin color of the target of the violence, conventional moral judgment, and the interaction term as independent variables,  $F(3, 79) = 28.04; p < .001; R^2 = .45; \eta^2 = .45$ . The skin color of the target of police violence was dummy coded as 0= Black and 1= White. The results showed a significant main effect of the target's skin color on the perceived legitimacy of police violence,  $b = -2.22, t = -5.80, p < .001$ . Conventional moral judgment also had a significant main effect on the dependent variable  $b = .17, t = 3.90, p < .001$ . There was a significant interaction between the target's skin color and conventional moral judgment,  $b = -.19, t = -2.20, p < .05$ , confirming our hypothesis H3a. This means that conventional moral judgment moderates the relationship between the target's skin color and the perceived legitimacy of police violence. As can be seen in Figure 4, as the level of conventional moral judgment increases, and when the target of violence is Black, the greater the perceived legitimacy of police violence.

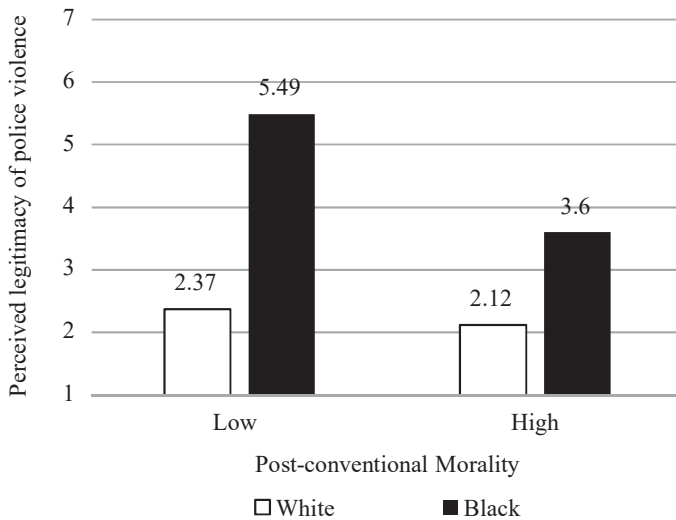


**Figure 4.** Interaction between conventional moral judgment and the color of the target of violence on the perceived legitimacy of police violence

We then verified the moderating effect of post-conventional moral judgment on the relationship between the target's skin color and the perceived legitimacy of police violence. We ran a regression analysis with the perceived legitimacy of police violence as the dependent variable and the skin color of the target of the violence, post-conventional moral judgment, and the interaction term as independent variables  $F(3, 79) = 24.30$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = .42$ ;  $\eta^2 = .43$ . The results showed a significant main effect of the target's skin color on the perceived legitimacy of police violence,  $b = -2.30$ ,  $t = -5.86$ ,  $p < .001$ . Post-conventional moral judgment also had a significant main effect on the dependent variable  $b = -.18$ ,  $t = -2.80$ ,  $p < .01$ . There was a significant interaction between the target's skin color and post-conventional moral judgment,  $b = .21$ ,  $t = 2.18$ ,  $p < .05$ . This means that post-conventional moral judgment moderates the relationship between the target's skin color and the perceived legitimacy of police violence. As can be seen in Figure 5, as the level of post-conventional moral judgment increases, the lower the perceived legitimacy of police violence and the lower the perceived difference between Whites and Blacks, confirming our hypothesis H3b. So, both conventional and post-conventional moral judgment moderated the relationship between the target's skin color and the perceived legitimacy of police violence, confirming H3.

This study aimed to test the hypothesis that the relationship between the skin color of the target of police violence and the perceived legitimacy of that violence is moderated by moral judgment. The results showed that the perceived legitimacy of police violence varied according to the color of its target, corroborating the results of Study 2, and are in line with studies that have shown that, depending on some characteristics of the victim, support for this type of violence can decrease or increase (Álvarez et al., 2015; da Costa-Silva et al., 2018).

From the analyses of moderation, we found that moral judgment moderates the relationship between the target's color and the perceived legitimacy of police violence. This means that depending on the type of moral reasoning predominantly used, whether conventional or post-conventional, the pattern of the relationship between the variables skin color of the target of police violence and perceived legitimacy of that violence varies.



**Figure 5.** Interaction between post-conventional moral judgment and the color of the target of violence on the perceived legitimacy of police violence

In fact, the perceived legitimacy of police violence increases as adherence to conventional justice reasoning also increases (Figure 4). Whereas this judgment tends to reduce the perceived legitimacy when the justice reasoning is post-conventional (Figure 5). However, this change does not occur only depending on the type of morality. There is a system behind these assessments. Conventional morality increases the perceived legitimacy of police violence, but this increase is accentuated when the target of this violence is Black. Likewise, post-conventional morality reduces this perception, but only when the target of violence is Black.

In this regard, as conventional moral judgment is related to respect for law and authority, even though people perceive situations of injustice, they do not aim for social change (Kohlberg, 1984), but for the maintenance of social order by means of legality, conservative ideals, and obedience to group norms (Moreira & Rique, 2019; Narvaez

et al., 1999). When the violence is judged through conventional reasoning and interacts with information about the Black category, the perceived legitimacy of police violence increases, because in general, social minorities are perceived as dangerous and a threat to society, requiring an ostensible response to contain the danger (Bittner, 2003; Dukes & Gaither, 2017; Staub, 2007). It is in this sense that Killen & Rutland (2011) emphasize that group exclusion is often justified on the basis of social conventions favoring the legitimization of this exclusion and maintaining prejudice.

In contrast, the use of post-conventional reasoning goes beyond legal aspects and is not necessarily based on the interests of specific groups, but on the preservation of universal rights. However, when police violence is judged through post-conventional reasoning and interacts with information about the Black category, there is a reduction in the perceived legitimacy of this violence. This inversion is based on principles of justice that consider equality (all human beings have the same intrinsic value regardless of skin color, sex, etc.) and equity (which implies making people who are different equal, taking into consideration the situation of each one) in the resolution of conflicts (Kohlberg, 1984; La Taille, 2006).

This indicates that when individuals evaluate a situation that is in accordance with the norms and values of their group, in this case according to a conventional morality, and when there is a justification, they feel more comfortable to express what they think about certain social groups (Barros et al., 2017; Pereira & Vala, 2010, Souza et al., 2016). But this logic starts to come undone when the individual leaves a conventional justice level of reasoning for a post-conventional one. Thus, perceiving the legitimacy of police violence in conventional terms would lead to the tendency to confirm stereotypes tied to Blacks, since racial prejudice is a form of social reasoning that develops within intergroup relationships (Lins et al., 2014); while perceiving this violence based on a post-conventional morality would lead to an attitude of disapproval of racial discrimination behaviors, reducing perceived inequalities between Whites and Blacks.

## Final Considerations

This study aimed to verify the moderating role of moral judgment in the relationship between the target's color and the perceived legitimacy of police violence. The data from this study indicate recurrent support for the use of police violence against Black people. These results are similar to other investigations that are also consistent in identifying support for this type of police violence against minority groups, already identified in previous studies (Álvaro et al., 2015; Costa-Silva et al., 2018; da Costa Silva et al., 2018; Dukes & Gaither, 2017). Therefore, this research clearly shows how the context of police violence expresses the persistence of prejudice and racial discrimination against Black people in Brazil. Support for this type of procedure endorses the inequality between Whites and Blacks in the structure of Brazilian society, giving Blacks a position of disadvantage and, at the same time, of exclusion, since the practice of police violence consists of a violation of fundamental rights, insofar as it involves the use of violence by the state against ordinary citizens.

The results obtained here, however, show not only that racial prejudice is at the root of the perception about police violence, but also that police violence is perceived as more legitimate when its target is Black and when the percipient makes use of conventional morality. However, this pattern changes when morality passes from the conventional to the post-conventional level, a condition in which we verified a tendency for Blacks to be assessed at a level close to that at which Whites were assessed.

The positive relationship between conventional moral judgment and the perceived legitimacy of police violence is partly due to the fact that social rules and laws in general do not favor discussion about equity and reciprocity. Thus, assessments of social inequalities are not necessarily judged by principles of justice, but by compliance with rules and laws. Especially when underlying these judgments there is a set of negative stereotypes tied to the group to which the target of the judgment belongs, and is considered one of the factors in this assessment, as is the case with police violence.

In fact, in the social categorization process, the differentiation of groups in social interactions marks out the relationships between these groups and influences the position taken in judging social situations. For this reason, prejudice is an essential factor in the analysis of social judgments, since it presupposes negative assessments of certain social groups, constructed from psychosocial processes. Nevertheless, post-conventional reasoning that is based on universal values and fundamental human rights, compatible with the values of self-transcendence, makes it possible to judge social situations and their long-term consequences for the well-being of each person, reducing the action of intergroup bias. In this regard, these results are similar to those of Álvaro et al. (2015) and show how adherence to the principles of equality and justice serves to reduce support for discriminatory conduct against social minorities. In view of this, we can conclude that the moral judgment perspective in the analysis of prejudice and discrimination helps to reduce inequalities historically constructed in our society.

These results were derived from a combination of correlational and experimental studies, with samples from the general population. However, the generality of these results must be put into perspective, because the sample was composed of participants from one Brazilian state, which leads us to question whether these results would be found in other social contexts, involving another interaction scenario and other social minorities. Another limitation of this research was the use of the questionnaire (DIT) by Rest et al. (1974), which does not assess the individual's exact morality level, but only identifies the type of reasoning chosen by the participant as most appropriate to the moral dilemma. However, this type of measure, despite presenting this limit, is less susceptible to private interpretations by the evaluators as to the morality level of the participants, presenting more objectivity in the measure. Future studies must be carried out to overcome these limitations.



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