

Public Protest and Police Violence

Moral disengagement and its role in police repression of public demonstrations in Portugal

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Abstract

In recent years, in Portugal, public demonstrations of movements such as '*Que se Lixe a Troika: Queremos as Nossas Vidas de Volta*' and '*Geração à Rasca*' have led to police repression highly scrutinized by mass media. However, a specific understanding is still lacking as to how police officers and civil society are construing the repression of this kind of event and also as to how moral agency is thereof inhibited. To police officers (as 'power-holders') and to civil society in general, this analysis is equally important in understanding the cognitive patterns supporting the resort and appeal to police violence. Drawing upon a qualitative research design developed in Portugal during 2011 and 2013, this paper discusses the processes of moral disengagement in regard to the repression exercised during social demonstrations, considering both the accounts of common citizens (group 1) and police officers (group 2). Results and discussion are centered on the main processes of moral disengagement, namely moral justification (behavior locus), displacement of responsibility (agency locus), dehumanization and blame attribution (recipient locus). If to a certain extent the moral values (e.g., protection, public order) are aligned in both groups in order to justify violence, their mobilizations seem to emerge in quite different ways when it comes to social protest. Displacement of authority is a usual mechanism amongst police officers, but it is to a great extent contested by common citizens. Dehumanization and blame attribution emerged also as a major mechanism of moral disengagement mainly amongst police officers' group. However, empathy may reconfigure the support of these mechanisms, specifically when it comes to social protest. Strengths and weaknesses of the power of 'empathy' towards agency activation are discussed. We conclude with research implications and prospects.

Key-words: police violence; moral disengagement; legitimacy; social demonstrations; qualitative research

1. Introduction

The use of force is a very complex, ambiguous and controversial phenomena within the modern, westernized and capitalist societies once it implies the use of coercion against its own citizens under the ideals of civility and equality before the law (Lawrence, 2000). Specifically, when public space is occupied and the normative social order is threatened by social demonstrations, law enforcement agencies are quickly called upon to intervene due to their assigned role of safeguarding public security and order (Della Porta & Reiter 1998; Reiner, 1998). More often than not, the use of force employed by police officers may culminate in police repression or violence by taking the form of police charges against demonstrators. This work starts by analyzing the differences and discrepant power dynamics between police officers (internal versions) and civil society (external versions) in their accounts of such events. Therefore, it calls attention to the need for a socio-moral and psychological-driven approach in this respect. To such an end, the protests linked to the last wave of anti-austerity protest in Portugal are the backdrop of this study.

1.1 Internal and external versions of police violence: Divergences and power dynamics

Notions of legitimacy and coercive power are pervasive in both internal and external versions on police violence. Although united by aligned standpoints on state powers and politically motivated assessments, they are separated by divergent, non-static and non-unanimous positions (e.g., their expectations on State's roles and functions) and by different dynamics of power (Bradford et al., 2014; Taylor, Wyant, & Lockwood, 2015). First, these divergences can be assumed within both inter-groups (i.e., differences between police officers and civil society) and intra-groups (i.e., changing perspectives within the same group). In respect of inter-group differences, internal versions are too often entrenched in "self-affirming" positions of legal, ethical and professional justifiability of police forces

(Fassin, 2011; Soares et al., 2017b). Within this perspective, police violence is most of the times seen as objectively foreseeable, legally justified, and proportional. This is the view that runs through most of the so-called ‘official’ versions of police intervention and through public approval when it is the case (Bradford, Jackson, & Hough, 2014). Even so, crisis of legitimacy emerge more frequently from the outside (Jackson et al., 2012). These ‘non-official critics’ usually pose police violence as a problem, and their conducts as systematic damages towards citizens and communities (Lawrence, 2000). For them, the (il)legitimacy ascribed to police action cannot be understood only on the basis of the concrete legal substrate which is authorizing or forbidding it.

In an in-depth review of the social constructions about police brutality in the Media in the United States, it has been showed how the same events of police use of force can be portrayed as systematic brutality for racial minority communities and as routinely use of force by police officers (or, when violence is accepted as “individualized” use of force employed by some police officers who lose control) (Lawrence, 2000). Keeping in mind the scenarios of social demonstrations, one can argue while demonstrations’ organizers may see a police charge as a disproportional, repressive, and violent response to peaceful and legitimate demonstrations, the police and the state may see a police charge as a legitimate use of force to restore the public order disturbed by the demonstrators. This was clearly the case of Portugal when anti-austerity protest has gained media attention. Multiple claims of (il)legitimacy escalated in the most important newspapers of the country.

In the same way, even assuming an isolated social audience, intra-group fluctuations can be tracked. The legitimacy attributed to police action is permanently subject to negotiation and redefinition given the complex relationship among policing, conflict, and violence (Reiner, 2006). Over the course of this fluid process, the questions about policing

the protest take specific forms (cf. Della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Reiner, 1998; Schrader, 2013) as they imply the development of concrete interactions between citizens and police officers which determine the form in which legitimacy is constructed (Tyler, 2011). Noteworthy, this dynamism and the corresponding fluctuations in the rationales used as normative justifications will afterwards determine and restrict the form in which these may be contested within social audiences accounts (Tyler, 2011).

Overall, different social audiences (e.g., civil society, state's representatives) have fluid perspectives about what constitutes legitimate or illegitimate police violence (Bradford, Jackson, & Hough, 2014; Reiner, 2006; Taylor, Wyant, & Lockwood, 2015). Internal and external versions of police violence are intersected by different (yet interwoven) legal visions, institutional boundaries, particular interests, among other factors (Soares et al., 2017a; 2017b). As a consequence, for both common citizens and police officers, the socio-ethical and psychological spheres must be also interrogated when it comes to make sense of police violence (cf. Bradford et al., 2014; Bradford, Huq, Jackson, & Roberts, 2014).

1.2 Legitimacy and moral disengagement: Major contributions to a socio-moral and psychologically-driven perspective on police violence

A small but growing number of studies are interested in a socio-moral and psychological-driven perspective that focuses a micro-level understanding of the legitimacy ascribed to collective violence exercised in the name of the State. One may point to the relevant work and contributions of Stanley Cohen (2001; 2003) in addressing negation; of Albert Bandura (1990; 1999; 2004) and the theory of moral disengagement; and of Phillip Zimbardo (2007) and his collaborators in the discussion of situational characteristics associated with the perpetration of collective and/or institutional violence.

This perspective is relevant because while paying attention to the cognitive and socio-moral strategies used to construct the legitimacy of police action, it recognizes at the same time that these are not isolated from the political, legal, institutional, and cultural matrices, which are containing individual readings in regard to police violence, providing broader structures of meaning, and restricting the construction of subjectivity. In practice, the inhibition of moral agency is associated with redefining the harmful nature of violent actions through mechanisms described at length, such as negation (Cohen, 2001; 2003) or moral disengagement (Bandura, 1990; 1999; 2004). For instance, according to Bandura's theory (1990), several socio-cognitive and emotional conditions allow subjects to disable self-condemnations pertaining detrimental behaviors without ever shifting their moral standards. Several psychological processes can be involved in moral agency's suspension, concretely at the level of the action itself (i.e. reconstructing the behavioral locus for moral justification, euphemistic language, and advantageous comparisons; denying or minimizing the detrimental consequences in the outcome locus) or the actors involved (i.e. distorting the agency of the perpetrator by agency's displacement or diffusion; and by blaming or dehumanizing at the recipient locus) (Bandura, 1990; 1999; 2004). Only by integrating this socio-moral and psychological-driven framework is it possible to highlight and to deconstruct the way in which police violence is normalized, uncritically assimilated and also (possibly) challenged.

Previous studies have addressed how moral disengagement is constructed within police forces and citizens in general (e.g. Barbosa & Machado, 2010; Barbosa, Machado, Matos & Barbeiro, 2012; Malley-Morrison, 2009; Soares, Barbosa & Matos, 2017a, 2017b). However, the concrete specificities of moral disengagement in regard to the repression employed during social demonstrations have not so far being explored. Moreover, an analysis that helps to contrast both the perspectives of internal and external versions to

police violence is likewise missing. In light of these theoretical considerations, the main goal of this article is to map and to discuss the moral disengagement processes which play a primary role in the legitimizing accounts of police action in the setting of social demonstrations. To this end, the accounts of Portuguese police officers and citizens will be critically analyzed side-by-side.

1.3 The present study: Bringing together police violence on demonstrations, competing perspectives (internal and external) and moral disengagement in Portugal

The dictatorship period established in Portugal between 1933 and 1974 – usually known as the ‘New State’ (*‘Estado Novo’*) – was a major emblem of the social and political repression of all kinds of protest (for a detailed review see Cerezales, 2011). After the revolution of 1974 – the ‘Carnation Revolution’ (*‘A Revolução dos Cravos’*) – police repression has come to be seen as irreconcilable with the constitution of a ‘democratic state of rights’. Since then, police repression of social protest, even if far from the lethality of the ‘New State’, has been still presented in intermittent periods of social mobilization and strikes under the values of public order and protection (Accornero & Pinto, 2015; Cerezales, 2011). For example, during 1992 and 2002, Mendes and Seixas (2005) have reported intense waves of social and educative protest (e.g., claims on the right to housing, education) although the most substantial had municipal or regional projection rather than a national one. Police repression occurred mainly during long-lasting demonstrations. However, most of the times they did not gained a central place for public debate.

In turn, occasional nationwide protests have been developed by labor-initiatives, for example, by the ‘Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses (‘General Confederation of Portuguese Workers’ – CGTP) and by the ‘União Geral dos Trabalhadores’ (‘Workers’ General Union’ – UGT). In 2010, at the early signs of the rise of

the following social movements, the capacity for mobilization of these entities has escalated while the use of the general strike as a protest tactic has been vulgarized (Accornero & Pinto, 2015). In this scenario, one of the fiercest debates regarding police repression was about to begin. Between 2011 and 2013, in the context of the waves of public demonstrations led by organized social movements such as ‘The Desperate Generation’ (*‘Geração à Rasca’*) and ‘F*** the Troika: We Want Our Lives Back’ (*‘Que se Lixe a Troika: Queremos as Nossas Vidas de Volta’*) have organized several mass demonstrations. These large-scale public demonstrations (along with many episodes of repression) have captured media attention and put a temporary end to what many critical voices had described as a widespread de-politicization of Portuguese civil society and its inability to organize nationwide collective protests (Baumgarten, 2013; Duarte & Baumgarten, 2015)¹.

Aligned with movements such as *Indignados*, *15M* and *Occupy*, the Portuguese movements cited above provided a denunciation of economic austerity and financial actors’ control over public policy and a demand for new forms of democracy. These claims have been sparked by high unemployment rates (especially among young people); by medium class labor precariousness and rights suppression (mainly associated with the social fragmentation of wage labor); and also by a series of crises that brought the legitimacy of traditional political institutions into question (Estanque, 2014; Soeiro, 2014). The economic and social austerity policies being applied in countries such as Portugal, Spain, and Greece had in fact mobilized different segments of civil society and given rise to the reinvention of different forms, spaces, and dynamics of protest, which came to be represented by the idea of the anti-austerity protest (cf. Dufour, Nez & Ancelovici, 2016). In this context, the public demonstrations organized by ‘grassroots’ movements played up the powers of the state and

¹For a well-systematized chronological alignment of the anti-austerity protest wave developed in Portugal during the beginning of the current decade see Accornero and Pinto (2015) and Estanque (2014).

its central role, specifically, in the repressive showdown against anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal demonstrations (Schrader, 2013).

Based on data gathered in the course of a broader research on ‘Perspectives on state violence and legitimacy’ (cf. Barbosa & Machado, 2010; Barbosa, Machado, Matos & Barbeiro, 2012; Soares et al., 2017b), the present study focuses on and explores the legitimacy of police action in the setting of these social demonstrations at Portugal. To this end, the specific objectives are:

- To map the main mechanisms of moral disengagement among Portuguese police officers in the setting of social demonstrations;
- To map the main mechanisms of moral disengagement among common Portuguese citizens in the context of social demonstrations;
- To contrast the divergences pertaining the mechanisms of moral disengagement between the two different groups.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

To achieve these different objectives, 40 in-depth interviews were conducted: 36 with ordinary citizens and four with police officers. Ordinary citizens are Portuguese citizens ranged from 18 to 70 years of age. Still within this group, 19 participants are female while 17 are male. In order to include as many different viewpoints as possible in group 1, the study sought to access a heterogeneous sample with participants who were generally in agreement and in disagreement with police violence. Also in this group, the sample was

representative in terms of age and sex. In group 2, due the several limitations encountered to access police officers, it was not possible to satisfy the same criteria of heterogeneity and representativeness. In this case, participants were selected through gatekeepers. In order to guarantee a specialized set of experiences, only those participants who had been assigned at some point in their careers to units deployed to contain or repress civil occupations and demonstrations were selected. They were also on active duty at the time of this research. These participants are considered as ‘first-hand experts’ capable of providing detailed perspectives on the use of force employed in social demonstrations.

The police officers interviewed were all male, with two officers belonging to the Public Security Police (PSP) and two to the National Republican Guard (NRG). They were between 30 and 59 years of age. The PSP is a national, domestic security force tasked with maintaining public order, administrative duties, and crime prevention. The NRG is a domestic military force active throughout the country and in Portuguese waters. Both security forces are involved in containing social demonstrations because their assigned duties are the maintenance of public order and security within Portuguese jurisdiction.

The extensive media coverage of repression and police violence between 2011 and 2013 presented numerous obstacles to the sampling process. Several police officers who were contacted by the research team refused to participate in this study, which accounts for the small number of participants from law enforcement agencies. As a result, we were not able to guarantee a heterogeneous sample of police officers in terms of age and rank. Many of the units deployed to intervene in social demonstrations are composed largely of officers in the beginning of their careers. Thus, the inclusion of younger participants would have allowed a broader analysis. However, as in previous studies (cf. Soares, Barbosa, & Matos, 2017b), the inclusion of police officers with an advanced and diverse field experience was

understood to be a compensatory methodological advantage. In fact, the participants were able to analyze, express opinions, and broadly discuss different professional aspects of the use of police force and its legitimacy in social demonstrations.

Because of their reluctance to be identified publicly and in order to ensure anonymity, all police officers interviewed requested that specific identifying information, such as their units (past and present) and current rank remain absolutely anonymous. Therefore, their professional information cannot be displayed. This procedure was applied not only to the interviews that make up this study, but to all the interviews conducted in the broader research project.

2.2 Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide called ‘Perspectives on Police Violence’ was used (for a more detailed description see also Soares et al., 2017b). This guide covers seven scenarios that represent typical problematic situations encountered in daily policing. For the purposes of this study, only the scenario dealing with public demonstrations has been taken into account. This scenario is divided into two mini-scenarios, designated normative cause and non-normative cause. Each scenario evaluates, respectively, the different responses to demonstrations arising from what are considered ‘foreseeable’ political and civic causes (such as student demonstrations, public service cutbacks) and ‘deviant’ causes (such as neo-Nazi demonstrations).

Throughout both scenarios, participants were asked to judge the legitimacy of police action. This guide also posits a group of variables for each mini-scenario aimed at examining how the moral legitimacy of police action is perceived differently under varying circumstances. For example, different hypothetical behaviors (e.g., civil disobedience,

vandalism, or threats of harm to police officers or third parties), and information regarding demonstrators' backgrounds (e.g., dangerousness) are posed to see how they perceive police response.

The social demonstrations organized by the above-mentioned movements were brought up and discussed over the course of the interview, whether the subject was raised by the interviewer or by the participants. Thus, the positions and perspectives held by the participants were informed by and developed in light of the events that were the focus of intense public and media scrutiny at the time of this study.

2.3 Procedures: Data collection and analysis

The in-depth interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2013 as part of a broader research project which respects the procedures for data collection and analysis described elsewhere (for a more detailed description, see also Soares et al., 2017b). For this concrete empirical analysis, data were examined in accordance to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) model for content analysis. Principles such as reflexivity and multiple coding were ensured. The system of categories was validated by all researchers involved and two external evaluators have been invited to read two different interviews and to give feedback on the system of categories. Interviews have been progressively coded as soon as they were conducted. Specifically, the content analysis had underwent three coding levels—open, axial, and selective (see Saldaña, 2009). Once the system of categories was established, these were sorted according to their frequency, used as the counting rule. Data analysis was carried out with the assistance of Nvivo 9 computer software.

Taking into account specific procedures for the implementation of this study, the data were organized and will be presented by different groups of participants: Group 1 (ordinary

citizens, n = 36) and Group 2 (police officers, n = 4). Ordinary citizens and police officers were established as the main first-level conceptual categories in order to map the processes of moral disengagement within each group. To ensure comparability among the two groups, for each one of them, second-level categories were equally established. This interpretative process was based on Bandura's approach (1990; 1999; 2004). The second-level of categories have become then: a) 'behavioral locus – moral values'; b) 'agency locus – role of the State'; and c) 'recipient locus – construction of 'otherness' (represented in the different subheadings of this work). The outcome locus developed in Bandura's theorization has not incorporated in our analysis once few participants have reported to such mechanism of moral reconstruction. Not all data has been coded. Some of them were irrelevant for the goals proposed and other were not clearly related with processes of violence legitimacy. This data was marked 'for further analyses'.

A second phase of analysis returned to much of the material marked 'for further analyses' during the free-floating reading and in the previous interpretative process. During the first phase previously described, the research team sought primarily to map the mechanisms of moral disengagement. In contrast, this later phase aimed at examining the accounts oriented to delegitimize the use of police violence in the eyes of both police officers and ordinary citizens. As a result, the differences between the two groups have been analyzed in terms of the accounts in which moral agency is activated. Thus, this theoretical sensitivity to the data allowed not only to perceive participants' legitimacy on police repression exercised at public demonstrations, but also to account for the circumstances that brought the legitimacy of police violence into doubt. For each second-level category, a new third-level category was created to make sense of the perspectives which put in question the respectively processes of moral disengagement.

3. Results and Discussion

In the following subheadings, the most significant mechanisms of moral disengagement are presented and discussed. In accordance, the first subheading – ‘Street protests as morally illegitimate or legitimate’ – develops around moral justifications as behavior locus mechanisms. The next subheading – ‘The agentic state as police or citizens’ – describes mechanisms of agency displacement. Finally, in the section ‘(De)humanization through blame or empathy’ recipient locus is taken into account. In each of them, differences between and within groups are distinguished in terms of moral agency inhibition (and activation) in the setting of social demonstrations.

3.1 Street protests as morally illegitimate or legitimate

In Bandura’s terminology (1990; 1999; 2004), one of the principal loci of moral disengagement is the use of mechanisms such as moral justifications, euphemistic language, and advantageous comparisons to justify the harmful action. In the category of moral justifications (the mechanism most commonly used by participants), several ‘supreme values’ were mentioned by participants to legitimize police repression. Protection of society is one of the most common, also associated with the need to maintain public order. More than half of the participants in this group (21/36) made the protection of society a focus of their remarks, in which the principles of minimal intervention, proportionality, and appropriate response are governing the inhibition of moral agency, always forearming a need to respond to an actual or potential serious situations:

“(…) it is important for the use of force to be proportional, if a person is not being violent, the police can’t hit him with a club, but the opposite is obviously true, too,

isn't it? (...) In order to protect us, the police have to have the right tools for the job, don't they? They can't use unnecessary force, but they have to use what's necessary to protect society.”

Our current data on social demonstration scenarios is compatible with the more general views of Portuguese citizens towards police violence acceptability. A previous study (Barbosa et al., 2012) has showed how police violence tends to be generally accepted by the participants (79% of the cases) in order to protect police officers themselves, citizens or even the state as an authority. However, even if recognizing the importance of public order, a significant part of the participants (22/36) from the common citizens' group have further problematized other principles or ideals making the exercise of moral agency more complex but also more fluctuant. For them, the right to protest overrides any other interest or desire:

“If the demonstration is orderly...the police have to pretend they don't hear, the chants might be the most offensive imaginable, but they just have to turn a deaf ear.”

The right to protest is understood as one of the most important democratic rights, associated with liberty of expression. In this respect, it would be a 'common sense' contradiction for the state's apparatus to repress these same legally consecrated liberties. Among the group of police officers, on the other hand, a different reading and prioritization of rights holds sway, in which the legally consecrated values of public order and 'liberty' are valorized to justify resorting to a police charge. The 'right to protest' is not so regularly prioritized.

According to the police officers' perspective, any refusal to obey police orders or any deviation from the authorized demonstration route can be characterized as unlawful. From a officer's point of view, a public order's defiance is not just about violence or conflict

amongst demonstrators or between demonstrators and police officers. Disobedience and insubordination in the midst of the demonstration is similarly punishable by police intervention, which is viewed as proportional and reasonable—an argument similar to the one used by common citizens under the notion of ‘protecting society’ but much more entrenched on internal notions of lawfully jurisdiction. Since charging the crowd is one of the tactics available to police, its use is constructed by the police officers (4/4) as normative and expectable under some conditions:

“We have to, it’s like I told you, and we have to make sure the law is upheld, no matter who gets hurt!”

“Now, the police should intervene (...) usually it’s through a tougher action, with force, breaking up the crowd and sometimes this might mean using force against the demonstrators who are hurting themselves too.”

Seen from this perspective, carrying out harmful actions is not understood as violence, but as a legitimate exercise of the police force’s authority, drawing together the legal rights and duties represented by preserving public order (4/4) or liberty (2/4):

“Although persons have a right to demonstrate, their rights don’t take priority over the right of another person to use that room, or that space. From that perspective, we understand very well and accept very well that if we have to use force, in that case, we would use force because there is a conflict of interests (...)”

In terms of the ‘moral economy’ of police work (i.e. ‘higher’ values that are mobilized to justify violent action) (Fassin, 2011), public order and liberty are the focus of police action

at public demonstrations². In contrast, by using a perspective much more influenced by socioeconomic tensions than by the defense of a professional intervention, the majority of common citizens tends to see the ‘right to protest’ as a way to delegitimize police charges against a crowd even if acknowledging public order as primary importance. However, remarkably, the notions of ‘public order’ or of the ‘right to protest’ will be inevitably fluid between (and within) these audiences. The social idea of ‘the right to protest’ will always come up as a challenge to law enforcement agencies. The ‘right to protest’ cannot ever be fully regulated because it aims to contest instituted rules; otherwise, it would not be protest at all. Uprisings cannot simply be fully regulated because they rest upon claims “which are not being heard” and which are directed to the state and possibly to other hegemonic actors. Surely, this is one of the most antagonist points between the internal and external versions on police violence during social demonstrations.

Police officers are constructing the ‘right to protest’ as one right among others, one that must be subjected to institutional and legal appraisals of priority, regulation and public order. However, in turn, demonstrators are plumbing desires for social transformation, strong emotional feelings, ethical considerations on more broader phenomena of social injustice and, frequently also bringing creative schemes of protest (cf. Jasper, 2008). All of these elements may escape, in a given moment, to the foreknown, lawfully and institutional approved plan for the demonstration, which is usually the central point of reference used by law enforcement agencies. Instead, demonstrators are not following a strictly legal-based and institutional notion of the ‘right to protest’ or of ‘public order’. They are exhibiting supreme values and the language of rights in order to emphasize frustrations, inequalities, claims, better lives, a better world, and the need for peaceful demonstrations (that does not

²We strongly believe that other values could be emphasized if a large number of participants would be included. In truth, the reduced number of participants has not made possible to reach data saturation.

necessarily mean non-rebellion demonstrations). Proportional and reasonable force can also rest in completely different appraisals regarding the “amount” of violence needed to contain or to deter conflicts.

In sum, police officers may use the same values and languages but in a complete different social and ethical plan. In this sense, police violence may be at once apparently congruent and antagonistic because both perspectives rest on absent signifiers (cf. Laclau, 2007) such as the ‘proportional and reasonable’, the ‘right to protest’ and ‘state of rights’. The latter one is also usually employed in concrete ways to make sense of agency within social demonstrations. State works as an abstract and maximum identity who ‘must take accountability’ for what happens within social demonstrations. We are now at the level of agency and responsibility. But the perspectives on responsibility and how these are used to (in)validate violence are also unlike between police officers and civil society.

3.2 The agentic state as police or citizens

Although police officers are seen as having ample discretionary power in how they act on the spot (Green & Ward, 2004), the fact is that once an order is given down to charge a crowd at a public demonstration, the police officers see it as a foregone conclusion (4/4):

“Okay, here we have an example. There was a demonstration down there in Lisbon, at the National Assembly, in which the negotiations went on for about two and a half hours. The problem arises when the mechanism of negotiation doesn’t get anywhere (...) [The demonstrators] are there, motivated shall we say, by their interests, by their beliefs, whether they are right or wrong, legitimate or not. When negotiating doesn’t lead anywhere, then we have to forcibly resort to, shall we say, coercive intervention.”

The police charge is associated with a superior order that clearly expresses the ultimate power of the state to restore public order and allows police officers to exempt themselves from moral responsibility for harmful and morally reprehensible action. The state agent's ability to re-define himself by attributing responsibility for harmful actions to a higher authority (Bandura, 1990; 1999; 2004) is a crucial element for police repression to occur. This displacement of responsibility must be understood in light of the professionalization of police violence, as an integral part of a supreme state. To question the legitimacy of police intervention, would be tantamount to questioning their professional duties and forsaking their professional career (Huggins et al., 2002). In truth, while at the same time these characteristics facilitate the inhibition of moral agency, they strengthen and disguise the coercive power of the state. Thus, the responsibility for repressing a public demonstration becomes diffuse; police officers do not see themselves as responsible for its causes, nor for its consequences.

In contrast, the majority of participants in the group of common citizens (22/36) argues that police repression cannot be equated by simply following orders, because it fails to take into account the complex form in which the state's power is constituted. In this case, violence is not considered legitimate, even if people are committing vandalism or destroying objects during the demonstration:

“(...)the police can never forget that the State is the people, a government that doesn't respect democracy is a government like... not respecting democracy is the same as not respecting the people ... if the government is against the people, the police's obligation is to oppose the government and support the people.”

Nevertheless, the participants believe this idea is mistakenly set aside by most of the police officers who, even when socioeconomic tensions are running high, feel bound by the

hierarchical structures that circumscribe them rather than by the ‘people’ who surround them at demonstrations. In the discussion on police illegitimacy, common citizens thus appear to be more conscious of the hierarchical conditions that make it impossible to activate moral agency among police officers. The last set of moral disengagement mechanisms that can help to understand the difficulties in moral agency activation are located in the recipient locus. Specifically, dehumanization and attribution of blame will be debated.

3.3 (De)humanization through blame or empathy

In the accounts of all of the police officers (4/4), police violence is seen as retaliatory and fair in public demonstrations. Even when it becomes more intense, it is understood to be reactive, proportional, and necessary. In the theory of moral disengagement, this mechanism is termed as attribution of blame (Bandura, 1990; 1999). During a public demonstration, police agencies make use of a series of procedures escalating from negotiations to police charges. The gradual escalation of the use of force and violence is a necessary condition for desensitizing police officers at the moment of the police charge:

“Now what does proportional mean? I usually give this example (...) in a police charge, if you get hit once with a club and then get out of the way, we don’t have to hit you twice, you see? If he doesn’t move, we hit him. If he moves, we don’t need to proceed...”

When the police charge takes place, the responsibility is ascribed to the demonstrators since they did not heed multiple warnings that the repression would follow if they kept up their defiant behavior. Starting from this assumption, and following a logic of power, the domination of the side understood as the ‘conflict’s origin’ (i.e., ‘the demonstrators’, targets) aims at maximizing the benefits for the side which exercises power (i.e. ‘the police’, power

holders), and this process can be balanced and achieved by the use of violence (Summy, 2009). Resorting to the police charge is also facilitated by constructing the ‘adversary’ figure, which happens when various confrontations and insults occurring in the midst of the demonstration are understood as being directed against police officers or the police as an arm of state power. According to the police officers, this can even incite officers to act more violently, overstepping the bounds of expected behavior (2/4):

“We’re all in the same boat. But one thing I can guarantee you. At the demonstrations, the challenges and attacks directed specifically at the police are the ones we take most to heart. We take it as a greater offence (...) when the provocations are directed more against the police than in favor of their cause; that gets under the skin of the police and causes more, shall we say, a ... if I can say so, a gut reaction to treat them like adversaries.”

These kinds of conflicts between demonstrators and police forces are not just based on ongoing confrontations during the development of demonstrations. They rely on past knowledge about previous events and they formulate expectations about demonstrators’ attacks towards police. The Portuguese National Agency of News (LUSA) (2012), through the journal “*O Público*” (16 October), evokes in the launch of the anti-austerity wave of protests, episodes of violence near the Portuguese Parliament towards police forces. These have resulted in the injury of eleven police officers, among other damages. On this topic, a police officer revealed the following:

“They know we go out there in helmets, they use bleach so as to ruin our uniforms, and they use syringes and other things that escape to the public view. “Oh they are just throwing water to police”. Maybe it is not just water. Perhaps they use strategies that most people do not notice.”

By blaming the target, the experience of victimization is denied, and the suffering of the recipients is no longer a moral concern (Haslam, Bastian, Laham, & Loughnan, 2012). Based on these judgments, the escalation of violence in succeeding events is thus justified within a socio-moral point of view. On the other hand, the activation of moral agency will require a judgment about the humanity attributed to the demonstrators whether the demonstrators are considered members of the police officers' 'moral community' or not. This element is likewise clear in the minds of the common citizens who were interviewed. For some participants, police violence is considered legitimate when it is seen as a response to the demands of groups known for their violence (15/36), or groups like neo-Nazis opposed to the supreme values of democracy (10/36). But police violence is not considered legitimate when it is directed towards targets regarded as equals. It is believed that even police officers should conform to broader social expectations with regard to 'moral communities' like students and workers (7/36):

“(...) if I turn on the television and I see the police beating some sort of hooligans, that doesn't shock me, they probably deserve it, but if it's a student, now hold it right there!”

Along the same lines, the data collected in interviews with police officers show that when demonstrators are seen as 'equal' and 'humanized' human beings, moral engagement can be fostered by empathy (2/4). 'Moral communities' like 'workers' are part of this group, especially if the demonstrators are themselves police officers:

“(...) we're not going to beat a police officer when he's not doing anything but shouting for rights that also affect me, are we?”

Two observations should be highlighted with regard to this process of humanization through empathy. First, this continues to represent a dividing line in the creation of the police officers' moral community. There is an implicit distinction between 'good demonstrators' (i.e. those who are protesting for an understandable cause) and 'bad demonstrators' (i.e. those whose demands are unclear or irrelevant), based on a subjectively constructed conception of what constitutes a legitimate protest and how this should be carried out (Della Porta & Reiter, 1998).

Second, in spite of this, the element of identification (i.e. 'that could be me') related to the presence of causes with which the subject can identify (e.g. workers' movements, police officers demanding their rights) can significantly influence the perspectives about the legitimacy of the action. Empathy, defined as an individual response in which the other's situation or condition is perceived as potentially similar to one's own (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Champion, 2004), can lead to a questioning of the role of 'police officer', thus reconfiguring the officer's willingness to intervene with the use of force and coercion.

When people or groups find themselves in similar social conditions, they are more likely to be interested in seeing the other person's perspective, which is an essential condition for (re)humanization (Halpern & Weinstein, 2000). This judgment is the first step in considering the suffering and interests of others, in which "the demonstrators are seen not as criminals, but as citizens participating in a political process" (Waddington, 1998, p. 129). In fact, some authors (e.g. Della Porta, 1998; Jaime-Jiménez & Reinaris, 1998) have shown, based on studies conducted in Italy and Spain, that when demonstrators are seen as equals, police repression tends to be seen as less exaggerated. However, this argument is rather imperfect, as it applies to its real effects in the practical action of police. To quote one example, the demonstration of March 6, 2014, in Portugal (cf. Fontes, Marcelino, &

Meireles, 2014) saw some episodes of tension and violent conflict between police officers assigned to the intervention unit and police officers demonstrating in front of the Republic Assembly.

Before change occurs at the level of action, humanization seems to make possible a change in the perspective which takes into account the moral ambiguity and the emerging dissonance. This process should not be underestimated because it makes possible to open critical spaces for analyzing the perspectives of police officers regarding the meaning of repressing demonstration and, in general, about the use of police force. These are precisely the reflections able to promote moral agency's activation in combination with a break with authority. To be clear, moral disengagement refers to processes, and processes are not immutable. Empathy can foster moral engagement and the questioning of authority, which may come to be realized as unjust (Bocchiaro & Zimbardo, 2008; MacNair, 2003). Humanizing the other could thus lead to questioning acritical obedience to the hierarchical structure, although this may be psychologically challenging among police officers who see themselves as professionally obliged to follow hierarchical rules. This aspect emerges frequently in the accounts of the police officers interviewed, in which disagreement with authority and identification with the demonstrators are competing elements that create a state of emotional ambivalence and discrepancy.

4. Conclusion

The accounts of both police officers and common citizens constructed about the (il)legitimacy of police action in public demonstrations reflect the moral and legal ambiguity raised within these scenarios. The maintenance of values such as protection, public order, and liberty has figured in both groups' accounts, but with different meanings. The idea of a higher authority responsible for police repression dominates the perspectives of police

officers, but is highly contested by common citizens. The attribution of blame and dehumanization of the demonstrators are also basic to understanding police repression for both groups. On the other hand, the humanization of the demonstrators through empathy also seems to be one of the elements carrying the most weight in activating moral agency. Still, some precautions should be kept in mind. Once police violence is inculcated in a highly authoritarian and top-down system, these conditions are not understood as sufficient conditions to disrupt the resort to police repression. Still they generate relevant reflections and with moral 'grey areas' that, taken together, can question the ambiguity of 'supreme values', the acritical obedience to authority, and the experience of otherness.

The aim of this study has been to present an exploratory analysis of police violence at social demonstrations. Bringing to the fore the concrete case of Portugal, we have highlighted the cognitive processes of moral disengagement by presenting both police officers' and civil society's accounts of the violent conflicts that have been a central feature of anti-austerity protest. For psychologists and activists, this socio-moral and psychological exploratory analysis has emphasized the ambiguities and contradictions on the accounts about violence and repression of protest, concretely social protest. It leads us to question how it is possible to diminish the resort to violent repression and the antagonisms between multiple social audiences. This dialogue is, in our view, one of the most important aspects towards the psychology of social transformation. But firstly, as this work shows, the cognitive processes of moral disengagement need to be understood in themselves as obstacles to solve conflicts of direct violence (cf. Christie, Tint, Wagner & Winter, 2008; Cohrs & Boehnke, 2008; Mayton, 2009). If an effective, constructive and non-naïve dialogue is to be shaped, the cognitive (des)articulations of these perspectives are of paramount importance in order to reduce the resort to direct violence within social

demonstrations. The benefits of this urgent dialogue between different social sectors can be undermined if the competing standpoints, moral tenets and vocabularies of legitimacy are not widely deconstructed in a context and audience-sensitive manner.

Future contributions are needed to construct robust theoretical models and respond to the limitations of this study (e.g., the absence of a representative sample of police officers in terms of age). The perspective of other actors who play a more significant role in social demonstrations, such as leaders of the civic/social movements in Portugal, is still missing. On the other hand, it is relevant to understand how the data presented in this paper can be compared with other countries (such as Spain and Greece), which have experienced anti-austerity protest waves in recent years. In this case, the accounts of different audiences such as police officers, civic organizations involved in demonstrations, and civil society in general should continue to be analyzed. Finally, more police officers with more diverse socio-demographic characteristics in terms of age, gender, and rank should be a point worth improving.

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