Adolescents' perceptions of police: Acknowledging racial and gender bias

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Abstract (analytical)

This study explores the importance of gender norms and racial dynamics in understanding interactions with the police. Drawing from in-depth interviews with 9 Brazilian adolescents aged 16 years old, we analyze how gender expectations influence female adolescents' negative perceptions of the police, despite their limited experience with this institution. Our findings reveal a complex interplay between idealized perceptions of the police and the realities of police conduct, often characterized by violence, racism, and sexism. The study shows that vicarious experiences are also teachable moments since adolescents acknowledge the difference in treatment offered by police in encounters with racialized youth. The findings have implications for policymakers aiming to foster more equitable and just police-community relations.

Keywords

Police; gender; racism; socialization.

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Percepciones de los adolescentes sobre la policía: reconociendo prejuicios raciales y de género

Resumen (analítico)

Este estudio explora la importancia de las normas de género y la dinámica racial para comprender las interacciones con la policía. A través de entrevistas en profundidad con 9 adolescentes brasileños de 16 años, analizamos cómo las expectativas de género influyen en las percepciones negativas de las adolescentes sobre la policía, a pesar de su limitada experiencia con esta institución. Nuestros hallazgos revelan la compleja interacción entre las percepciones idealizadas de la policía y las realidades de la conducta policial, caracterizada por la violencia, el racismo y el sexismo. El estudio demuestra que las experiencias indirectas también son momentos de enseñanza, ya que evidencian la diferencia en el trato policial en los encuentros con jóvenes racializados. Las discusiones tienen implicaciones para las políticas públicas centradas en relaciones más justas entre la policía y la comunidad.

Keywords

Policía; género; racismo; socialización.

As percepções dos adolescentes sobre a polícia: reconhecendo o viés racial e de gênero

Resumo (analítico)

Este estudo explora a importância das normas de gênero e das dinâmicas raciais para compreender as interações com a polícia. A partir de entrevistas em profundidade com 9 adolescentes brasileiros de 16 anos, exploramos como as expectativas de gênero influenciam as percepções negativas das adolescentes sobre a polícia, apesar de sua pouca experiência com essa instituição. Os resultados revelam uma complexa relação entre percepções idealizadas sobre a polícia e a realidade das práticas policiais, frequentemente caracterizadas como violentas, racistas e machistas. O estudo mostra que as experiências indiretas também são momentos de aprendizado para os adolescentes, uma vez evidenciam a diferença de tratamento oferecido pela polícia no encontro com jovens racializados. Os resultados trazem implicações para políticas públicas focadas em uma relação mais justa entre polícia e público.

Palavras-chave

Polícia; gênero; racismo; socialização.

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Introduction

Understanding how individuals develop beliefs, dispositions, and behaviors, aligned with social norms and expectations, has been sought across diverse fields of knowledge, particularly within studies on socialization. Legal socialization has emerged as an interdisciplinary research area dedicated to understanding the development of attitudes, values, and behaviors associated with the legal world, with particular attention to the interactions of adolescents with legal authorities such as the police (Nivette *et al.*, 2019; Piccirillo *et al.*, 2021; Trinkner & Cohn, 2014).

Research in the field of sociology of violence and criminology has emphasized the importance of the legal socialization process in building the legitimacy of democratic institutions, particularly in the United States (Tyler & Trinkner, 2018), but also, more recently, in Brazil (Piccirillo *et al.*, 2021; Piccirillo *et al.*, 2022). As the population recognizes these institutions as legitimate, i.e., entitled to perform designated roles, there is a higher likelihood of cooperation with both the institutions and the law. Instead of seeking blind obedience or fear-based compliance, researchers aim to identify the types of behaviors by authorities that promote a perception of legitimacy, deserving obedience, and cooperation (Pósch *et al.*, 2021). Notably, the procedural justice theory has been used to assess the impact of fair and respectful treatment on the relationship between the public and the institutions (Tyler *et al.*, 2014; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018).

The procedural justice theory posits that when authorities perform their roles in a fair, respectful, transparent, and neutral manner, direct contact with the population serves as a *teachable moment*. During these interactions, public institutions convey messages to citizens about how the legal world functions and how society perceives the social groups to which they belong. This helps establish a trustworthy relationship and enhances the legitimacy of institutions (Justice & Meares, 2014; Tyler *et al.*, 2014). By treating citizens fairly, respectfully, and neutrally, police officers signal that they are valued members of society and that the social groups to which they belong are also treasured by authorities.

However, in practice, police officers often do not act neutrally. Racialized and gendered attitudes about their duties play an important role (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Hernández & Vinuto, 2022; Schlittler, 2016). Studies on Brazilian police enforcement have addressed this issue, focusing primarily on racial profiling due to the disproportionate victimization of black individuals by police violence (Oliveira *et al.*, 2023; Ramos *et al.*, 2022; Sinhoretto, 2020). According to Schlittler (2016), racialization can be understood as the process of categorizing or *othering* social groups based on their racial background, attributing social meanings to individuals according to their perceived race. This includes not only skin color and physical features but also cultural markers such as music styles, hairstyles, and so on. Studies show how police use racialized definitions of suspects to justify stop-and-frisk decisions, consistently framing black males as the typical suspect[1] (Ramos *et al.*, 2022; Rocha, 2019; Schlittler, 2016; Simões-Gomes, 2018; Sinhoretto, 2020). The racialization of the suspect means that officers will frame manifestations of black culture as *suspicious*, *delinquent*, or *criminal* to justify over-policing this group.

In international literature, studies have begun to adopt an intersectional approach, i.e., considering how various social markers such as race, gender, age, and class interact to produce inequalities and vulnerabilities. These studies show that the suspect is not only depicted as a black or Latino but specifically as a black or Latino male performing specific forms of masculinities (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Rios, 2011). Those studies, however, remain relatively scarce.

In Brazil, it is widely recognized that the Military Police, responsible for patrolling and overt policing, targets disproportionately black individuals, especially males. Data from 2022 shows that 53 % of the fatal victims of police violence are young people up to 24 years old, and 83.1 % are black (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2023). In 2023, 95.8 % of people killed by the police in Brazil were male (Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública, 2024).

In the legal socialization field, issues related to race and gender are often treated as control variables in quantitative studies, with limited exploration of what it means to be male or black and how this affects one's attitudes toward the police or the legal world. Through this approach, most studies tend to find a trend where males hold more negative

[1] The expressions *suspicion individual* or *suspicious situation* are terminologies used by police institutions to describe someone or a situation that appears atypical and thus requires further investigation. When employing these terms, officers and even the general population tend to invoke the notion of a person acting as if they have committed some wrongdoing, regardless of the specific crime or infraction they are suspected of (Risso, 2018).

evaluations of the police than females, and black individuals have more unfavorable perceptions of the police than white individuals. The primary explanation for this trend is that male and black adolescents are, historically, the main targets of police actions. Therefore, they are more likely to experience more frequent direct contact with the police, exposing them to negative interactions with officers, which, in turn, negatively influence their views of the institution (Slocum & Wiley, 2018). However, a finding from the Brazilian context challenged this trend: despite having fewer interactions with the police, female adolescents hold more negative views of the institution than their male counterparts (Trinkner *et al.*, 2019). This divergence calls for a deeper understanding of gender in legal socialization.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the role of gender-based performance in police work, the gendered perceptions of the police, and adolescents' gender expectations in shaping attitudes toward legal authorities. Moreover, it delves into adolescents' perceptions of police racial bias, while also exploring their racialized experiences with law enforcement. We hope to better understand the meaning adolescents attribute to police encounters and explore how gender and race may frame adolescents' direct and indirect experiences with the police.

Legal socialization, police prerogatives, and the Brazilian case

Legal socialization studies have been conducted worldwide, primarily exploring how adolescents' values, beliefs, and behaviors regarding the legal world are shaped by their experiences and interactions with legal and non-legal authorities. However, most of this research has been conducted in the Global North, in regions with stable democratic institutions where the rule of law is more broadly ingrained in both the institutions and the public (Trinkner & Cohn, 2014).

Even when studies are conducted in developing countries, the primary focus tends to be testing the procedural justice model of legal socialization. This model posits that the quality of treatment delivered by authorities during encounters with citizens is the most critical factor in shaping perceptions about the institution (Akinlabi, 2017; Piccirillo *et al.*, 2021; Trinkner *et al.*, 2019).

Despite the emphasis on fair and procedurally just encounters, scholars have largely overlooked the importance of gender-based perspectives, both within the institutions and in interactions between authorities and the public. Most studies assume that direct

contact and its evaluation are the key elements in forming perceptions about the police. Consequently, these studies are often conducted with populations that are more likely to have such experiences, such as males, individuals living in violent neighborhoods, or court-involved youth (Shook *et al.*, 2021; Tyler *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, when studies do include a gender-balanced sample, they typically find that males (whether adults or adolescents) hold more negative attitudes toward the legal world and are less likely to see the police as legitimate authorities, particularly if their interactions with the institution were perceived as procedurally unfair (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Geller & Fagan, 2019).

However, a study conducted in Brazil with a representative sample of adolescents living in São Paulo revealed a different trend. Trinkner *et al.* (2019) found substantial support for the procedural justice hypothesis in the case of São Paulo. Still, they also discovered that female adolescents were less likely to see the police as a legitimate authority, even though they had less direct contact with the institution. In this case, the contact thesis alone did not sufficiently explain adolescents' willingness to perceive the police as a legitimate institution.

The fact that the effects of gender on perceptions of police legitimacy vary depending on the sample used or the study context underscores the need for a deeper and more focused examination of the gendered aspects of the legal socialization process. Current literature suggests that gender is more than just a demographic variable that needs to be controlled for in quantitative studies; it must be regarded as a qualitative element in framing the individuals' experiences. However, studies explicitly centered on the gender dimensions of police contact remain scarce (Lennox, 2021).

In alignment with existing literature, we contend that interaction between adolescents and the police significantly influences their attitudes about the institution. Nevertheless, we recognize the need to qualify the meaning of these interactions, especially since there is a historically tense relationship between youth and police, mostly to the categorization of a *dangerous youth* (Andrés-Candelas, 2016; Piccirillo *et al.*, 2023; Zavaleta *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, we propose examining police stops as specific interactions between authorities and citizens influenced by external elements, including hierarchies between officers and citizens, adults and adolescents, and racial and gendered power relations.

In Brazil, stop-and-frisk procedures are central to policing in large cities and are conducted mainly by the Military Police.[2] It is important to highlight that the Military Police is highly hierarchical and structured through militarized training. Historically, the institution used violence to deter opponents of the Military Dictatorship (1964-1985) and, after democratization, normalized the use of force and violence as a means to deter and control marginalized social groups under the pretext of guaranteeing public safety (Mesquita, 1999). Although police stops and body searches are a prerogative of the institution, there are no official data on the number of police stops; scholars estimate that in the State of São Paulo, home to approximately 41 million residents, there were at least 11 million police stops in 2010 (Pinc, 2011).

The normative justification for police stops is to verify a *suspicious attitude*. According to articles 240 and 244 of the Brazilian Penal Process Code, officers may conduct a body search when there is a well-founded suspicion that the individual might be carrying an illegal weapon or objects related to criminal activity (Presidência da República, 1941). However, the law does not specify the cues that inform the officer about the aforementioned suspicion.

In police jargon, it is not a person per se that triggers suspicion, but rather how they behave in a particular situation. However, there are no objective criteria for defining behavior as suspicious, meaning that the officer's evaluation determines whether someone is approached on the streets (Sinhoretto, 2020). The basic argument is that when someone displays signs of nervousness or anxiety, wears inappropriate clothing for the weather, or stands in areas associated with criminal activity, there are sufficient grounds for approaching the person and conducting an investigation (Risso, 2018). This interaction can range from a simple interview where officers ask for the person's name and whereabouts to ID verification, to a body or vehicle search, or escalate to more aggressive interactions where police point their guns at citizens or use physical violence against them.

An important issue regarding how officers define a suspicious situation is that the typical characteristics considered suspicious are not solely dependent on an individual's behavior but are defined by the standards created and learned by the officers themselves. In Brazil, for instance, the typical suspect is portrayed as a young, black male residing in a low-income neighborhood (Ramos *et al.*, 2022; Schlittler, 2016; Simões-Gomes, 2018).

[2] At the state level, there are three police forces: the Civil Police, responsible for criminal investigations; the Military Police, responsible for overt policing and patrolling, and the Penal Police, responsible for the security within prisons.

These attributes are not under the control of citizens but are established as a standard pattern by law enforcement.

The social meaning of being stopped by the police may vary depending on the social group or social markers that an individual carries. Research indicates that individuals stopped by police often experience embarrassment, shame, humiliation, or even feel a victim of discrimination for their social status (Anunciação *et al.*, 2020; Sá & Santiago Neto, 2011). This is one of those moments where individuals become aware of how they are perceived by others in society or, as the legal socialization field terms it, a *teachable moment* (Tyler *et al.*, 2014).

Gender and the legal socialization process

Adolescence represents a pivotal phase in the development of legal attitudes and dispositions. It is during this period that children's known world expands, thrusting them into the public sphere and bringing them into closer contact with authorities beyond the realms of family and school, notably the police. Additionally, adolescence marks a time when individuals begin to grapple with gender patterns and expectations, actively constructing their gender identities (Connell, 2005).

The normative patterns and expectations associated with gender are acquired and refined as individuals engage in the daily enactment of gender roles in their lives, i.e., as they *do gender* (West & Zimmerman, 1987). We follow the insights of West and Zimmerman (1987) who assert that gender is an interactional work – a recurrent realization in our daily lives. In this context, social interaction plays a vital role in the learning of gender norms and the external recognition of one's gender. Even when individuals challenge or deviate from the traditional binary gender order, they still acknowledge and position themselves within the framework of this order. Importantly, an individual's behavior becomes accountable in terms of gender, i.e., becomes subject to scrutiny and evaluation through the frames of gender.

In studies exploring adolescents' perceptions and attitudes toward the police, social markers such as race and gender have often been treated as control variables, with limited exploration of how being racialized and gendered may impact the legal socialization process. In Brazil, This issue has been touched upon in the context of youth involvement in gang violence (Barros, 2020; Zaluar, 2014). When talking about gendered expectations or experiences, we are referring to patterns attributed to an individual according to their perceived gender, as is the case of the racialization explained in the earlier section.

As scholars point out, an individual's behavior and experiences become accountable through gender norms, i.e., become gendered (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

In the United States, Rios (2011) demonstrated how police labeling of specific styles and behaviors as *deviants* and the subsequent stops of young males contribute to the construction of an idealized form of masculinity among gang members. In the study, demonstrations of this type of masculinity were a trigger for police stops since officers would recognize that form of masculinity as a display of dangerousness. Rios' work sheds light on subjective processes that have remained relatively unexplored in the field, such as the influence of gender and racial dynamics in interactions with police institutions.

Given the pivotal role of interactions in gender recognition and the interpretation of behaviors and attitudes, it is imperative to consider the gendered attributions associated with social institutions and authorities that engage with the public. Studies examining police culture reveal that the institution has historically been linked to idealized notions of manhood, male power, and virility (Albuquerque & Machado, 2001). Within the police force, officers are often socialized into the values of traditional masculinity (França, 2016), contributing to the perception that the police remain a predominantly male domain even in contemporary times (Ribeiro, 2017).

This perception of masculinized police work is not confined to the institution alone; it is also shared by the public. Research indicates that women often feel that the police do not prioritize cases involving gender-based violence, such as domestic violence, rape, or feminicide (Hawkesworth, 2016). In essence, it seems as though the institution may not view these cases as central to its core mission, a sentiment also expressed by police officers themselves (Risso, 2018). Consequently, female citizens may find it challenging to place trust in an institution that does not consistently deliver fair treatment in cases of gender-based violence.

The objective of this work is to delve into how gender expectations and gendered and racialized experiences can shape adolescents' perceptions of the police. We aim to explore how male and female adolescents interpret their interactions with the police, their perspectives on the police's decision-making process during stops, and their overall evaluations of the institution itself.

Method

The study was conducted in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. São Paulo is the largest city in the country, with more than 11 million inhabitants. 53 % of its population is female; 54.3 % is white, and 43.5 % is black (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatistica, 2023). The city is also highly heterogeneous, with studies finding more than eight patterns of urban development, access to public services, and crime levels (Nery *et al.*, 2019). Approximately 7 % of the population lives in favelas, but they are not equally distributed throughout the city, with districts where up to 35 % of the population lives in favelas (Rede Nossa São Paulo, 2023).

To investigate adolescents' interpretation of their interactions with the police, we selected a sub-sample of participants from the São Paulo Legal Socialization Study,[3] a longitudinal study conducted with 800 adolescents born in 2005, living in the city of São Paulo. For the composition of the original sample, the city was divided into its five administrative regions and, adolescents were proportionately interviewed in each region.[4] For the present study, inclusion criteria for the sub-sample required adolescents to have participated in all four waves of the São Paulo Legal Socialization Study, reported at least one direct encounter with the police over the years, and provided valid email addresses (n = 153).

Initially, we sought parental consent by sending invitation emails to the parents of these adolescents. Those who received parental approval completed an online questionnaire via Google Forms (n = 26). The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions designed to capture adolescents' perceptions of the police institution, their assessments of stop-and-frisk practices, their personal experiences with the police, their perspectives on gender norms and expectations, their expectations regarding fair treatment during police stops and their perceptions of racial bias in law enforcement. Participants completed the online questionnaire between September 2021 and December 2021.

[3] The São Paulo Legal Socialization Study was developed within the project *Building Democracy in daily: Human Rights, Violence, and Institutional Trust* organized by the Center for the Study of Violence at the University of São Paulo as part of the Research, Innovation, and Dissemination Centers and funded by Fapesp (Process 2013/07923-7). Data collection for the study was conducted between May 2016 and December 2019.

[4] For greater details about sampling and procedures of data collection for the São Paulo Legal Socialization Study survey, please see Trinkner *et al.* (2010).

Subsequently, between December 2021 and February 2022, we invited the same participants to an in-depth interview, and nine accepted the invitation. Interviews were conducted through the Google Meets platform.[5] On average, the adolescents were 16 years old and beginning their senior year of high school. Of the nine adolescents interviewed, three identified as white males, two as black males, two as white females, and two as black females. Five adolescents lived in the South region, two in the East, one in the West, and one in the North. We were not able to interview adolescents living in the central area of the city.

The interviews were conducted using the episodic method (Flick, 2002). Traditionally, episodic interviews focus on an event or situation that occurred in the interviewee's life or an event with local, regional, or national significance, which individuals are aware of and may have interpretations, representations, and positions on. According to Flick (2002), it is recommended to introduce the interview's theme first, allowing the interviewee to reflect on their relationship with this theme and then elaborate on the situation. We formulated introductory general questions related to the theme and then asked the interviewee to narrate a specific situation in which this theme played a central role.

All interviews were recorded via video and later transcribed, except one due to technical issues. Participation in this study was voluntary, adolescents received no financial incentives for their involvement, and all personal information was omitted to preserve anonymity.

We employed Maxqda software for the categorization and analysis of interview data. Our objective was to identify patterns in adolescents' perspectives on the police institution and to discern any gender-related expectations and experiences within their narratives that might influence these views.

The data analysis strategy consisted of two phases. In the initial phase, we employed an inductive approach to identify recurring themes based on the interviews themselves. All interview transcripts were read and coded according to those themes. Among the main themes, we observed discussions related to police racism, differential treatment based on gender, direct or indirect experiences with police, mentions of police actions in the neighborhood or on social media, and the concept of suspicious behavior, among

[5] Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the social distancing measures, it was not possible to interview the participants face-to-face. The approach through emails may have biased the sample, as adolescents without access to the internet could not respond to the questionnaires nor participate in online interviews.

others. For this analysis, we adopted an approach that aimed to encompass both our initial research interest, such as gender-related statements, and unforeseen new themes, such as the perception of racism in police actions. In line with the guidance provided by Queiroz (1991), our objective was to conduct a more comprehensive reading of the material, with a greater focus on capturing the perceptions and information of adolescents rather than merely confirming our initial hypothesis.

In the second phase, we employed a deductive approach, grouping these themes into categories derived from the interview script questions. It's important to emphasize that interview excerpts were not recategorized; instead, the themes that had already been identified were grouped into broader categories. For example, themes such as the police should act with respect were grouped under the subcategory how the police should act, which, in turn, falls under the macro-category perceptions about the police.

The deductive approach allows us to observe the main topics and themes that emerged when we spoke with the adolescents about their relationship with the police. It is through examining the macro-categories that we identified patterns related to adolescents' gender and gender-related expectations regarding police work.

Results

Looking at these categories and the recurrence of the themes brought by adolescents, we highlight and discuss three main results. Through the in-depth interviews, we were able to understand how the participants elaborated their answers, and how they accessed real-life examples to justify some of their beliefs, making more tangible how direct and vicarious experiences help to shape adolescents' perceptions about police.

Gendered views and perceptions about the police

Overall, there is a positive perception of the police, particularly regarding their effectiveness and willingness to help when requested. However, among female participants, concerns arose about the seriousness with which female complaints were taken. Some felt that officers do not know how to deal with cases of domestic or sexual violence and even that sometimes police itself is the problem for women implying that officers might also engage in sexual assault. In this sense, some participants made clear distinctions between trust in the institution and trust in individual officers, with female officers often being perceived as more empathetic and understanding.

> If I was abused, I would choose to talk to a female officer. Because, in my mind, I think she would have the empathy to understand what I went through, that maybe a male officer wouldn't, he would think that is something I invented in my mind, that is something silly. So, in my mind, I think a female officer would have more empathy to understand my case and solve it better than a male officer, I think he would neglect this kind of case. (Female, white)

Female participants also brought up practical examples of police misconduct, emphasizing instances where officers did not adhere to procedures and exhibited violence and aggression. For them, both procedural justice (the way police treat people) and distributive justice (efficacy in resolving cases) played vital roles in shaping their views on the institution. That is, not only do some officers misbehave and abuse their power; but they also put different efforts according to the nature of the case.

For the female participants, one should always have a level of distrust in the police based on the perception that police will never prioritize female demands. Girls and women might trust the police if they have a problem, meaning that police might show up, but the outcome may not be positive for females.

In contrast, male adolescents displayed fewer concerns about the police and a greater familiarity with the institution. Some even expressed childhood aspirations to become a police officer, primarily driven by the allure of action, adrenaline, and the possibility of using weapons.

> D.: Have you ever thought about being a police officer?
> T.: Ah, yes, when I was younger. Not now, because I want to follow my dad's profession.
> D.: And what did you used to like about the idea of being a police officer?
> T.: I thought the guns and the motorbikes were cool [laughs]. (Male, black)

The notion that police work was exciting and involved danger and adrenaline resonated strongly with male participants. Interestingly, one of the participants even agreed with the idea that police need to impose themselves while dealing with the public, showing their authority through force and a type of maleness translated into body posture.

> There's no way an officer can approach an individual, a suspect, and say [in a quiet, gentle voice]: Please, sir, do you mind stopping? Please, raise your shirt, hands in your head [laughs]. No, he must be imposing, he needs to speak firmly but never lose respect. So [in a strong,

> harsh voice]: Stop! Hands in your head! And kind of pressuring the person because I think this is also valid. (Male, white)

In this statement, the adolescent points out that officers should not be soft or gentle while dealing with a suspect but need to be imposing to show authority. That is, police can be authoritative without resorting to violence. Violence or the use of force is only acceptable when the officer's own life or someone else's life is at risk.

This is another interesting finding: adolescents bring up the topic of violence and brutality without the need to be stimulated. When talking about the institutions, police actions in their neighborhoods, or what they see on social media, adolescents immediately bring up the issue of police violence. A large aspect of mistrust in the police comes from the feeling that eventually officers might lose control and resort to violence.

> [I don't feel always protected] because while some officers protect us, I see a lot of videos of officers beating people. Like, I see a lot of racism, for instance, if a black person is passing by the police just beat them without questioning first. (...) There are videos where even elderly women are beaten when trying to protect their kids, police just beat them, throw pepper spray on them. (Female, black)

Even when the participants have positive perceptions about the police or have not been direct victims of police abuse, they mention situations where police acted violently and unjustly. Some bring cases that happened to their friends, while others resort to public cases, like George Floyd's.[6] The fact is that police violence is present in adolescents' images of what police are and how officers behave. Which ultimately influences their feelings of (dis)trust in the institution.

The idea that gender also interferes with police work showed up when talking about police bias. Adolescents emphasized that men and boys are regularly stopped by police and have greater chances of suffering police violence, whereas women and girls are not usually seen as suspects. Overall, female adolescents indicate that police gender stereotypes frame their gut feeling since an officer would probably not suspect of a woman. Because

[6] The case of George Floyd was emblematic of institutional racism. Floyd was killed during a police stop in the U.S. in 2020. After immobilizing him, officers knelt on his neck, suffocating him. George Floyd tried to warn the officers that he couldn't breathe, but after nine minutes, he passed away. The case gained widespread attention and reignited the Black Lives Matter movement. Additionally, in Brazil during the same period, other cases involving public and private security officers and the abusive use of force towards black males occurred, sparking discussions on social media and within social movements (*Homem negro...*, 2020).

the criminal world is such a masculinized realm, police actions are oriented to see males as standard suspects.

> R.: Ah, a lot of friends have been stopped. They're always talking about it. I have a friend who was stopped while wearing school uniform and the officers even threw his hat on the ground.
> D.: And these friends are usually boys or the girls are also stopped?
> R.: No, I never heard about a girl being stopped. (Female, black)

Racialized experiences and police racism

A recurring theme in discussions about police work was the issue of race and racism. Participants, regardless of their racial backgrounds, commonly believed that the police were biased against black individuals and those living in marginalized areas, such as favelas. Historically, the favelas in Brazil are territories marked by the absence of positive state presence —such as health and educational facilities—, but with a strong negative state presence, such as ostensive policing. They drew from personal experiences and social media content to support their perceptions that police actions were often racist.

> [Being white] has a lot of impact [on how police treat me]. I can feel the difference in their look. When I walk near my house and when I walk with my friends who live in the favela. When I'm there, they stare, look at us with suspicion... Here, they just look, give me a thumbs up [laughs], Everything ok? [laughs]. (Male, white)

> V2.: [I think the main reason why police decide to stop someone] is racism. If I'm walking with a white friend, and I'm black, the officers will want to stop me instead of him.
> D.: I see. Do you think that police suspect more of a black person than of a white person?
> V2.: Yeh.
> D.: And why do you think this happens?
> V2.: Ah, how can I say? I think they are very racist...they think a black person does more wrong things than a white because black people live in favelas... (Female, black)

The prevailing view was that the police could do better by treating everyone equally and not discriminating based on race or social class. Despite having positive views of the police, participants believe that the institution needs improvement to protect the population. In general, the participants believe that police racism is related to a cultural setting that puts suspicion on both black and poor individuals and that it is deeply rooted in the institution.

> My sister told me that her black friend is always stopped by the police, especially at checkpoints. All her car documents are good, and everything is alright, but she is always stopped. So we were talking about this, like, that probably happens because of police prejudice. (Female, white)

Adolescents point out that sometimes the police have no other reason to stop someone except for their race or skin color. In addition, they contrast their own experiences to the ones of their friends, pointing out how their black friends or those living in poor areas of the city have much worse interactions with the police than those who are white or living in middle-class neighborhoods.

> When I was studying in a private school, where most people were middle-class, I had never heard of... how can I say? Of police abuse of authority. Whereas today, [studying in a public school where most of his friends live in a favela] there is not one single friend that hasn't suffered from this, a police abuse. They've been slapped, cursed, or something like that. Sure, there are histories of just being stopped by police and released in a normal way. But all of them have at least one history of being cursed or assaulted. (Male, white)

Having a different, more positive experience with police than their black friends makes clearer for white adolescents that the police do not treat everyone equally and that police are racially oriented to not only suspect more of black individuals but also to engage in more abusive ways of policing in areas where most of the population is black.

How boys and girls interpret police stops

Both male and female participants acknowledge police stops as a legitimate and important practice for maintaining public safety and preventing crimes. However, they criticized the way stop-and-frisk procedures were executed by the police. While they recognized the need for such measures, they believed that police should refrain from using violence or aggression during these encounters and should be open to listening to citizens' explanations: «The ideal would be that you get to tell your side of the history, and the police will simply listen. Because there are two different sides, to different points of view» (Female, white).

This is an interesting finding since the adolescents are not questioning the police itself nor its prerogative to stop and search citizens, but the way they do it. In their view, police do not need to use violence to reaffirm authority or to do their jobs, they

can treat people with respect, listen to people's side of history, and still do their job of enforcing the laws.

When discussing hypothetical stop-and-frisk situations, male adolescents typically viewed police stops as a routine aspect of life, even when they hadn't personally experienced them. They tended to perceive such encounters as normal and not something to question or fear.

> D.: How would you feel and act if you were stopped by the police?
> T.: Ah, also normal. It's going to happen someday, so I think is normal.
> D.: It will happen someday? Do you think that's something people normally experience?
> T.: Yeh. (Male, black)

One adolescent reasoned that although being stopped one time is something normal, it becomes uncomfortable and awkward if it turns frequent. This goes with the idea that police stop someone who looks suspicious, so being stopped many times translates into a message about how the police are seeing the individual.

> I think it's a boy's thing [laughs]. Boys are more used to saying I was stopped, I felt a rush, an adrenaline. Because I have heard this kind of statement. So, sometimes a boy... thinks is a good experience the first time, but from the third, or fourth onward he won't like it that much, he will understand. (Male, white)

In contrast, female adolescents expressed more concern about the possibility of being stopped by the police. They feared not only the judgment of passersby but also the potential for abuse or violence during such encounters.

Overall, for both boys and girls, the moment of a stop-and-frisk is very delicate and can turn into a violent interaction depending on how the citizen behaves. There is a general idea that everyone should know how to behave in a police stop, in order to show respect to the officer and to end the interaction safely.

Studies in the United States highlight parental strategies[7] aimed at preventing police violence, especially in racialized communities with a strong presence of Black and Hispanic populations. Acknowledging that police behave in a biased manner in those areas, parents frequently anticipate racism in interactions with the police, teaching their children about how to behave during a police stop (April *et al.*, 2023; Brunson & Weitzer, 2011; Gonzalez, 2019). I attempted to ascertain whether such strategies are also present in the participants' families by first inquiring whether they knew how to behave during a police stop, and then asking how they learned.

Overall, adolescents stated that they knew how to behave, emphasizing the importance of remaining calm, showing respect toward the officers, and obeying their orders. However, they did not recall being oriented about it by their families. Most of the participants just refer to videos on social media, such as TikTok.

Being calm, answering politely, and obeying officers' orders are the ideal behaviors during a stop. How to behave is learned through vicarious experiences, what they see on social media and in movies. The main idea is that if one does not behave properly, it may result in violence or even death: «If the individual is rude to the officer, the officer will be rude to them too, will be aggressive and it can end up with death, so that is why one should act naturally» (Male, black).

The way the citizen behaves is pivotal for the development of the interaction. There is widespread knowledge that one should be respectful, serious, and obedient to the police. Moreover, being respectful necessarily means being submissive and obedient to police orders.

> Sometimes individuals are trying to say something, then the police tell them to keep quiet, otherwise, they are committing contempt of cop.[8] But the individual is trying to explain the situation and the police don't want to hear it. And I think this is very bad, right? (Female, white)

[7] The *Police Talk* is a common mechanism in black American communities where elders converse with younger individuals regarding the police, especially the rules of interaction with law enforcement. It's a more direct and intentional socialization strategy. This transmission of etiquette for police-youth interaction aims at the safety of the youth; parents/caretakers may convey the message that one should respect the police simply because they are police officers, or because the police can be dangerous, so it's better not to do anything that could provoke a reaction, or because police officers are human and can make mistakes too (April *et al.*, 2023).

[8] In Brazil, contempt of cop is an actual criminal offense. When a person is accused of contempt of cop they might receive criminal charges, which adds up to the threat of having a record or even going to prison.

There is the perception that police do not know how to deal with the public's scrutiny of their work. The simple idea that a citizen could trigger an angry response from an officer just by asking why they are being stopped shows the adolescents they need to be concerned with their behavior around the police and that obedience is the only way to safely end an interaction with the police.

Even when adolescents believe that there are unjust situations that would allow people to disobey police orders, they don't think it is advised. In practice, disobedience has serious implications and should be avoided.

> A.: For example, I think it makes no sense this history I told you about my friends, that the officer said «You go that way, and you go to the other way». I think it's completely unnecessary because I know these two friends, I know they don't have priors, they are not wanted by the justice, and there's nothing wrong with them. So, I think the officer didn't have to say they could not hang out together anymore. Obviously, they meet again later, so this was just to make things harder for them.
> Q.: Do you think there was no justification for that order?
> A.: Yes.
> Q.: And do you think there was a way for your friends to avoid obeying that order?
> A.: No, no. [laughter] They had to obey. Something worse could have happened, especially since the officer already proved to be aggressive when he slapped them. (Male, white)

When thinking about real possibilities for disobeying we can see how the threat of violence works in controlling behavior. Disobedience engenders more abuse and the possibility of physical violence. In the end, to avoid the worst consequences in police-citizen interactions, one should just obey.

Discussion

This study sought to explore how adolescents interpret their interactions with the police, with a particular focus on the influence of gender norms and racialized experiences in framing these perceptions. The goal was to emphasize gender and race as a qualitative aspect of the legal socialization process, shedding light on the complex relationship between adolescents and law enforcement that goes beyond procedurally just encounters (Zavaleta *et al.*, 2016).

When qualifying adolescents' interactions with the police, we are better equipped with the views and perceptions of this public, the meanings they attribute to such en-

counters, and the influence these experiences exert on adolescents' overall attitudes toward law enforcement. Through in-depth interviews, we were able to delve into these meanings and gain insight into how gender and race play a significant role in shaping legal attitudes.

The research revealed that, in an idealistic sense, adolescents generally hold a positive view of the police as an institution responsible for safeguarding citizens. However, this idealized perception often clashes with the realities of police behavior, which are perceived as frequently violent, racist, and sexist. This dissonance highlights a critical gap between the expected role of the police and their actual conduct in practice.

As hypothesized, the interviews showed an enduring influence of gender norms on adolescents' perceptions of the police. The police still symbolize a cultural ideal of masculinity, which may positively influence male adolescents' views. For some boys, the allure of a police career lies in the excitement, danger, and adrenaline associated with it. Male adolescents' beliefs that authorities should assert themselves through a virile posture are aligned with the findings of Hernández and Vinuto (2022), who explored gender relations among agents working in juvenile detention facilities. They emphasized how having a posture was a way of imposing order in front of the institutionalized adolescents and that it translated into terms of courage and combativeness, elements associated with the performance of masculinity.

At the same time, this masculine performance, often characterized by the unnecessary use of force, may also contribute to girls' skepticism about the police. There is a prevailing perception that officers are untrustworthy in handling female citizens' concerns. Police are one of the most visible faces of the state due to their proximity to the population; the perception that this institution treats citizens differently based on their gender might contribute to showing youth that male and female citizens are not actually equal.

For girls, the evaluation of the police extends beyond procedural justice to efficacy. Both the way police treat people and their willingness to take all cases in seriousness are essential to shaping adolescents' beliefs and perceptions about police. This helps understand earlier findings that female adolescents hold more negative perceptions of police legitimacy, even in cases where the institution was deemed procedurally just (Trinkner *et al.*, 2019).

Our study challenged the notion that a respectful interaction with the police leads to a positive perception of the institution (Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). Adolescents de-

monstrated an acute awareness of police racism as part of a broader culture. Even white adolescents, who may feel at ease around the police, recognize that police treat their black friends differently even in routine police stops. This contrast between personal experiences and those of peers from diverse backgrounds highlights the mechanisms of discrimination and injustice within the police force and sheds light on the relevance of indirect contact with law enforcement.

The legal socialization field and the procedural justice theory argue that direct contact with the police are teachable moment for adolescents, as they teach young citizens about the way the institution works (Tyler *et al.*, 2014). Our findings suggest that such encounters, often based on racial profiling, are actually teaching adolescents that the police institution operates counter to social expectations and norms. Adolescents become aware, through their friends' experiences and social media, that police treat some individuals unjustly and violently. This unequal treatment is not based on citizens' behavior but on social markers they carry, such as belonging to one race or another, to a gender or another, to a social class or another. To adolescents, this foundation is intrinsically unfair and should not be part of policing strategies.

Importantly, our findings demonstrate that adolescents can simultaneously critique and trust the police. Having a critical view of the institution does not equate to complete distrust but signifies unmet expectations. Adolescents expect more from the police, particularly in delivering on their core mission of protecting citizens.

One of the goals of this study was to debate gender within the legal socialization field. However, there are still some limitations. The chosen data collection method might not have been the most effective in observing gender expectations and norms within this public. Due to the global pandemic, meeting the participants and their peer groups in person was not an option at the time. Moreover, the small number of participants does not allow for a generalization of the results, but they offer valuable insights into the diverse perceptions and social representations among adolescents. Future research should consider a more extensive and varied sample to broaden the scope of understanding.

To address the issues identified in our study, such as police violence and gender and racial bias, policymakers should consider implementing strategies that promote fairness, equity, and accountability within law enforcement. Our findings emphasize the need for police reforms aimed at ensuring fairness, responsiveness, and justice for all citizens, regardless of their gender, race, or social class. This includes reevaluating stop-and-frisk

strategies in policing, often driven by racial profiling and targeting young black males (Sinhoretto, 2020).

Our research contributes to the broader theoretical discussions within criminology and sociology, highlighting how important it is to consider processes of subjectivation, such as gendering and racialization when trying to understand how adolescents comprehend legal institutions and authorities. That is, to understand how adolescents relate to and evaluate the police institution it is important to consider not only the intrusiveness or fairness of police contact or adolescents' experiences of violence but also how the gender and racial order frames and gives meaning to those experiences. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for improving police-community relations and fostering a more equitable and just society.

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