

Police: professional identity and social representations in Brazil

Abstract

The article aimed to present and analyze the results of a research accomplished in the Military and Civil Policemen in the Federal District of Brazil to better understand the relation between police and society. The investigation was conducted through the Theory of Social Representations, and the data collection occurred during 2011/ 2012. It was done based on:

- i. questionnaires answered by 1.181 PM and 399 PC, from both sexes;
- ii. 11 interviews and
- iii. 06 focal groups, being 04 with the military police and 02 with the civil police.

To active the goal, the research centered the analysis in the comprehension about the way policemen constructed their own identities: a special attention was given to the construction of their social representations about their practices in the streets, their definition of occupation, their reference patterns, their ethos and identity as policemen, their proudness of being policemen or the lack of it. The study also researches how each corporation distinguished itself from the other group but also from the common citizens. Some of the results pointed out to a great tension between the two corporations, civil and military, tension that made it almost impossible for them to construct a common professional identity. At the same time, it was found a certain lack of identity in both groups but in a sharp way in the military corporation, or, in other words, they seemed to construct a negative self-recognition about themselves with negative effects in the relation between police and society.

Keywords: social representations, professional identity, police corporations, federal district

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Abbreviations: MP, military police; CP, civil police; TSR, theory of social representations; SR, social representations

Professional identities and policemen practices

The research in the beginning of these reflections had, as the main scope, the relations between professional identity and police practices aiming to understand the relation between police and society.^{1,2} It had started based on two presuppositions:

1. These practices came, in a certain sense, from the symbolic and cognitive universe in which these policemen conceive themselves with their registrations of identity;
2. The belief that this symbolic universe is not the result of a solitary thinking or doing, but it is supported by their social belonging; inside it, the ones coming from the professional way of acting.

It's also based in the hypothesis that a possible lack of identity (without defining an identity for themselves, the policemen could be given themselves a subordinated identity that comes from other people in society) could have as an effect some violent practices, in a kind of answer to what police think the population, or parts of it, could wait from them. The research has tried to find out if this gap (lack of identity) would attain in the same way both groups of policemen, the ones in the civil police and those who are in the military police. A gap

that is possibly working as a barrier to avoid the identity construction or if, on the contrary, it would attain differently the members of the two groups. In this sense, the investigation was to find out the existence of a possible difference between civil police and military police and the way both groups construct that difference. Would the gap (above mentioned) be responsible for deteriorated or submissive identities, formed by negatives contents (the misuse of the physique force or violence would be the most evident) used as usual forms of (police) action and reaction to what he would consider as the order transgression? Would the policeman have a tendency to define himself based on what he supposes the society expects from him, he designs the process of building an identity based on what someone else, besides himself, asks from him, in terms of efficiency, rapidity and punishment, as necessary conditions to reestablish order, even though this may cost the non-submission to the law?

Theoretical Context: identity, self-recognition, and methodological note

From the beginning of the investigation a question oriented this following reflection: where to localize the "who is who" from the police segments and in relation to other segments of society? Are they internal or external to the public security? Who would be the "alter" for the military policeman and vice versa? How his identity would be defined: by contrast with the civilian or with the policeman of the other corporation? The methodological path was the Social Representation analysis: the ones that were constructed by the policeman about

himself and the ones that were elaborated by him about the other (or the others) that are the object of his relation (or confrontation) during his daily practice, whatever inside or outside the professional frontiers, as a contrasting point to define his own self. It's an approach that puts the accent in language, as an analytical disposition, and inquires about the narrations produced in this context: "Common Sense" Theories or Social Representations– SR– that individuals, in most distinct socio-economic or cultural segments, elaborate about the reality that should be understood. For the social analyst, it's important to seize these so called "common sense theories" as methodological strategies to approach the social reality; a strategy that, being well conducted, would certainly permit an advance of knowledge about this same reality.

Empirical context

The Federal District was the empirical place chosen for the research. The interest in putting the focus on Brasília as the empirical 'locus' for the analysis is due to the fact that the city, being considered out of standard, as some geographical space is never, or very rarely, included in national samples.⁴⁻⁶

Data collection and the sample plan

The data collection occurred during 2011/ 2012, and it was done through

1. questionnaires (78 questions) answered by 1.181 PM and 399 PC, from both sexes
2. 11 interviews
3. 06 focal groups, being 04 with the military police and 02 with the civil police.²

Analysis of the results: MP and CP

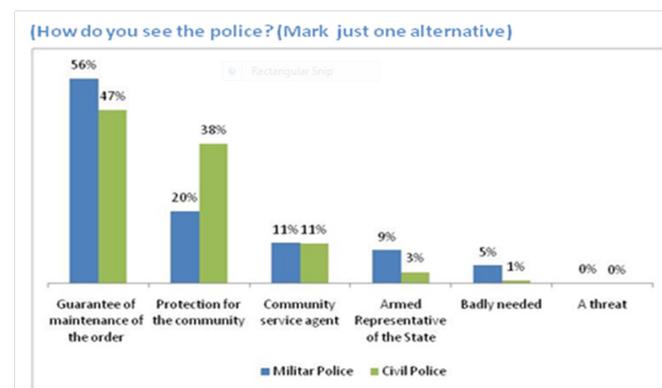
The start point of the analysis are questions related to how the policemen define the police and the way they evaluate the society defines the police. The answers suggest that for the policemen society constructs about them a more negative social representations than the ones made by themselves or by the civil forces.

Results

Results from Mp and Cp: Graph 1

In the MP, 56%, of those having answered, represents the police as a guarantee of order but only 19 % believes that society sees them in the same way; 5% understands that police could be badly need. However, 26% believes that they are seen like this by society; none of the policemen has answered that the police is a threat. Nevertheless, 3% evaluates that society sees them like that. A situation that points out a negative self recognition,⁷ but also indicates contradictions, ambiguities, and paradoxes. In the same direction, from those who have answered, 27% believe that society represents them as a 'protection' while only 20% represents themselves in the same way. Going a little deeper into the analyses and adding only the results that register, without doubts, a positive self- representation made by policemen, it's possible to find 87% among the answers that believe the police have the same role in the sense of guarantee, protection and service. Therefore, among them, only 60% believes that, for society, they fulfill this role. That is, from this type of evaluation, the policeman would live together with an 'alter', the society, which, in its representation, does not recognize, in a positive view, the police

action. Could this sensation contribute, in any way, to the existence of a deficit in the process of his social identity recognition, and could it become, as a consequence, the start point for violent practices? In summary, the reasoning is simple: the best way to find recognition and to be well evaluated is being energetic, vigorous, hard and even violent with those who are transgressors. Besides this, following the law or not, in policeman opinion, for society he will always be against the law. Of course this is not clearly expressed, but it can be understood from the SR in with, for the policeman, society sees him as a threat, or an armed representative of the state, as it was shown by data. In a more implicit than explicit narration, it's possible to see in the police saying that the war metaphor means attacking is the best way for someone to defend himself. These representations are part of the components named "the social accumulation of violence" by Misse.⁸ As SR, these statements cannot be taken as false or true: they should be considered as a very relevant subsidy for the analysis due to the fact that the way the policeman supposes the society represents himself affects the way he relates to the society. In summary, this kind of representation guides the policeman's actions and practices. SR with the characteristics suggested by data could, at the most, contribute to a defensive or even aggressive attitude from the policeman in reaction to what he believes society thinks about him. His own self would lose space in contrast with the negative representation elaborated by society which becomes bigger and bigger and, in this way, guide the policemen's actions.



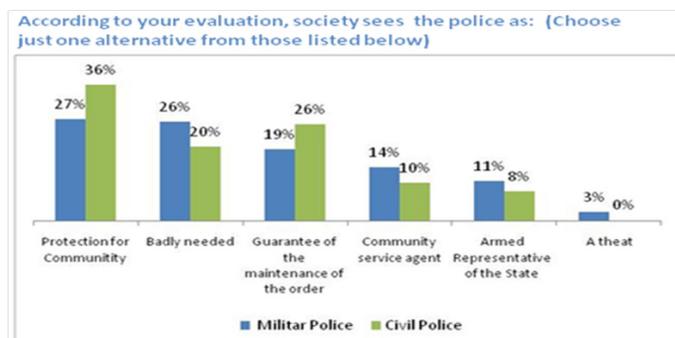
Graph 1 The percentage has been calculated from the valid answers. In the MP 9% from the sample hasn't answered; in the CP, 11% from the sample hasn't answered.

Research: professional identities and police practices.

Results from Mp and Cp: Graph 2

It's interesting to notice how this self recognition is not constructed the same way by the civil force. It's possible to suppose defining themselves as a judiciary police, as this is the case for civil force, makes all the difference: what civil policeman constructs as a SR of the society about them has nothing to do with the military bias, that is, in general, identified with the MP. For instance, "to be a guarantee of maintenance of the order and a protection for the community" would be much more associated to the legal and juridical characteristic of the civil force position (a police station is space of guarantee of order in the sense that it assures the fulfillment of law). That position is much less seen as a position which is related to prevention, repression, preservation of law and a services provision. Besides the fact that his last aspect is the only one in which the social representations of both, civil and military police reach the same percentages. When the civil

policeman tries to evaluate how the society sees himself, it's possible to identify that, for him, society doesn't represent him as a community services agent. Here again, there is a coincidence with his own social representation identified by him as one investigative worker –a task with which the civil police feel really identified–and the one formulated by society. And it's interesting to remember that we are talking about tasks that have distant contact with the population. In a situation quite different from the one that occurs with the MP. The result is that representing themselves or being represented by society as a threat is not even seen among the CP representations in the data. Or, in a different meaning definitions showing the policeman as badly need, so well known in the social representation of the PM, appears, in the CP, in pale colors. While much more space are given to the representation that the civil police formulate about themselves, in which they place themselves as guarantee of the maintenance of order and protection for the community:47%, e 38% respectively. Also, for these same aspects, they believe society formulates a quite positive representation of their practices, 26% and 36%, respectively.



Graph 2 The percentage has been calculated from the valid answers. In the MP 9% from the sample hasn't answered; in the CP, 10% from the sample hasn't answered.

Table 1 How does the policeman see society and how does he suppose he is seen by it

Pol.	Soc.→	Protection for community	Badly needed	Guarantee of maintenance of order	Community service agent	Armed representative of the state	A threat	Total
	Guarantee of maintenances of order	29%	24%	26%	11%	9%	1%	100%
	protection for the community	36%	23%	14%	16%	10%	2%	100%
	community service agent	22%	19%	8%	31%	18%	1%	100%
	Armed Representative of the state	13%	35%	4%	18%	20%	10%	100%
	Badly needed	8%	66%	5%	5%	1%	15%	100%
	A threat	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%
	Total	27%	26%	19%	14%	11%	3%	100%

Results from Cp:Table 2

In the civil forces this gap between the way the police sees themselves, and the way they believe they are seen by society is much lighter; some meaningful data can work as an illustration: within those in the CP that see themselves as a guarantee of the maintenance of order, 30% answered that society sees them in same way; 39%

The deployment to attain a new pattern in the knowledge is related to the relation between police and society: the more society formulates positive SR about policemen the more it increased the level of confidence this same society develops concerning the police work and practice. Confidence in this particular context becomes a fundamental content in the relation between police and society. Efficiency, effectiveness, agility and many other attributes that could be identified as the police work, or tasks, wouldn't have much meaning if they were not working together with this essential characteristic that, by the data, seemed that the confidence of society in the police work is missing. This absence is much bigger in the MP than in the civil one Suassuna.⁹ The crossing of these questions induces to interesting reflections.

¹To a deeper analysis concerning the meaning of confidence in M P from the F D cfr Suassuna.⁹

Results from Mp:Table 1

From those in the Military policemen who have answered that, for them, the police is a guarantee of the maintenance of order, 29% answered that society sees the police as a protection for the community, 24% as badly needed, 26% as a guarantee of the maintenance of order. On the other hand, from those having answered that they see themselves as a protection for the community, 36% answered that society sees them the same way; 23% that they are seen as badly needed and 14% as guarantee of maintenance of order by the same society. It's relevant to stand out that in the SR of those looking at themselves as badly needed, only 8% indicates that society points out police as protection. Therefore, 66% from these policemen believe that, for society, they are badly needed. The data pointed out social representations which made the self-recognition become, in a certain sense, "contaminated" by what is evaluated, by themselves, as the social recognition.¹⁰⁻¹³

that society sees them as a protection and 17% that society would represent them as badly needed. These are data that, in fact, distinguish CP from MP in what is related to social representations.¹⁰⁻¹² In a similar way, the research tried to investigate what the admission to the police academy has done to these social actors in the sense of a change in their life style. Admitting in a great majority that life has

changed, some policemen make the existence of ambiguity clear. It passes through the representations of these actors: the “yes” meaning the change, indicates the good side ‘It promotes more responsibility and discipline; brings an improvement in life; allows financial and

professional stability; but, at the same time, brings a lack of sensibility; makes the policeman become strongly brutal; provokes a lot of stress; showing the negative aspects of the change. It means: it’s an “yes” crossed by ambiguities: it includes either positive and negative poles.

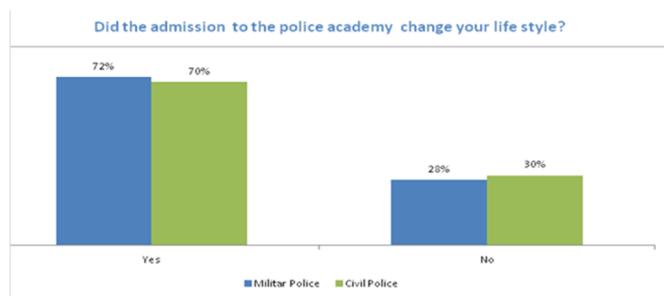
Table 2 How does the policeman see society and how does he suppose he is seen by it

Pol.	Soc→.	Protection for community	badly needed	Guarantee of maintenance of Order	community service agent	Armed representative of the state	A threat	Total
Guarantee of maintenance of order		39%	30%	17%	9%	5%	0%	100%
protection for the community		43%	22%	20%	8%	6%	1%	100%
community service agent		3%	22%	35%	22%	19%	0%	100%
Armed Representative of the state		27%	18%	18%	9%	27%	0%	100%
Badly needed		33%	0%	0%	67%	0%	0%	100%
A threat		0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Total		36%	26%	20%	10%	8%	0%	100%

Results from Mp and Cp: Graph 3

In other direction, the representation that says the admission to the police academy has no change for the policemen’s life calls the attention. Answering in a negative way, “I’m the same person”(for 51% in the CP) and “nothing has changed”(for 38% in MP), they are saying that life in the police institution has no interference in their way of being and thinking. In other words, it’s possible to believe that, for these groups of policemen, their activity in the police corporation would be a job like any other, no better nor worse, with no specificities. Another inquiry rises from the research and is related to how much the police profession is, or not, a motive of pride for those practicing it. In a great opposition to the society construction that represents police in a negative way , the answers state the pride about the profession in a proportion of 93% and 95% respectively for Military and Civil polices. According to the data, in the first moment it would be, perhaps, viable to deduce the existence of a possible professional identity between the corporations, maybe even more suitable than the one existing (if it is the case) inside each one of them: in this question CP and MP recognize themselves by the pride they have to be policemen in a list of four answers, which allow the analyst to take the risk of saying that there is a certain kind of bias defining a common identity between both police. A group identity, probably, is stronger than an identity in each group.^{14,15} However, this possibility/hypothesis, becomes more and more pale when the reasons for this so called pride is analyzed in deeper details. Tree among them (believes and likes what he does, helps and serves the others, has a profession that is relevant and worthy) has nothing that specifies the police activity and they are, on the contrary, attributes that apply to different professions and participate in the common sense of a majority of the qualities that are admired by many others professions. Inside each one of both corporations these contents become even more troublesome: the idea that the so called pride could be a synonym of homogeneity in the content of the answers, due to a shared identity, is put at risk. From an explicative perspective, in the Civil and in the Military police, the

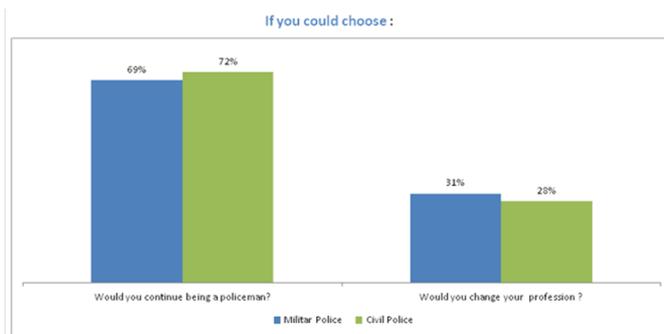
reasons presented for being proud are not or rarely related to the characteristics that would really distinguish police tasks, despite a few and non relevant nuances. It’s possible to observe a great dispersion in the motives withdrawn from the answers. Sometimes these answers approach a kind of vicious circle: ‘he is proud because he likes t and believes in the profession’(49% MP and 38%CP). Other times the answer is vague like the answers given by the MP: ‘it helps and serves the others’ (39%). There are contents in which PC and PM’s SR are very similar, in their representations such as: ‘it’s a profession that is relevant and worthy’ (30%MP and 33%CP) but then, at the same time, they are not only characteristics about what the police work is, but also they have little to do with the professional profile. Finally, the contents that could be directly related to the policemen work and practices, like ‘guarantee of security and peace’, (20% MP and 29%CP) and ‘democracy and justice promotion’ (17%MP and 13%CP) are in a second plan when analyzed comparatively.¹⁰⁻¹³ However, in contrast, the reasons for the non–existence of pride are directly linked to police work conditions: 81% of the MP justifies the lack of pride because of the ‘absence of recognition’; 22% by ‘the lack of support from higher administration’; 20% ‘to the risk they face which is due to their work’; 18% is related to the ‘lack of professional perspectives’; and 18% also believes there is ‘no effectiveness in the work.’ These data refer to MP police only due to the fact that CP failed to express their reasons not to be proud of their work (only 10 individuals answered the question). Paradoxes appeared when the same categories or reasons are used to justify either the feeling of being proud of the police condition or the lack of pride to encourage their children to follow the police career. The same paradoxes are found when policemen express their social representations about the desire of changing their profession. When the policemen were asked if they would change their profession or not, it’s significant to verify that 69% of the MP and 72% of the CP have answered negatively Even so, the proportion from those ready to moved towards a new profession is not too small. In this case, there is a big burden in the high level of risk linked to the job, and the consequent stress that comes from it.



Graph 3 The percentage has been calculated from the valid answers. In the MP 4.5 % from the sample hasn't answered; in the CP, 2.0 % from the sample hasn't answered.

Results from Mp and Cp: Graph 4

These percentages conduct to some reflections and inquiring, from a simple intersection of information. For instance, if we cross the variable 'Proud of being policeman' with 'Change or not the profession', it's possible to remark that in the CP, from those being proud of being policeman, 24% would change the profession, while from those having answered not being proud of the profession, 15% would continue in it.



Graph 4 The percentage has been calculated from the valid answers. In the MP 6 % from the sample hasn't answered; in the CP, 4 % from the sample hasn't answered.

Results from Mp and Cp: Tables 3 & 4

As it's shown, these numbers are extremely similar for both polices: even being proud, 26% of the policemen would be willing to change for other kinds of job, while from those not being proud of their profession, 13%, would continue in it. Those results seemed to express a tendency not to represent the police as a job choice for life. Consequently, this will not be a definitive position to stay for the rest of their lives. It's worthy to remember that, as already seen before, with these data there are others pointing out that for less than 30% of those who answered, the entrance for the military police has meant no change at all in their way of living. Another important aspect to mention: for nearly 50% of those taking part in the research, the stimulation or encouragement presented to their children to follow the police carrier are not in their perspectives. On the contrary, they are ready to think about more promising occupations, less stressful, more rewarding. These reasons also appear in the FG and in the interviews. By the way, both the interviews and the GF reinforced these questions linking them to police practice which is experienced and reported as fear, stress, and insecurity. Situation that suggests that the police condition turns the individual into someone suspicious always attentive, someone who disbelieves everybody and everything;

someone who lives under a continuous pressure; being this situation caused by the real risk of the work or for its representation. With all the evidences, data have shown until this point of the explanation, it's doubtful to talk in terms of a total deficit of identity, like it was the starting point of the research. In fact, it's true that there have been many situations expressed in the SR showing an absence of belongings (in the police corporation). Some of those absences were much more seized by the silence than by what has been expressed in words. Meanings that have been also seized by some negative signals, maybe deteriorated or conflicting identities. Identities, in the process of going up and down, with empty space, ask for recognition contents which could be positively accomplished by the confidence they suppose they could deserve from society. Everything mixed and put together, the same contents, in a moment, assume a negative view related to a characteristic from the professional situation. They would appear, in another moment, with a distinct meaning, expressing either the motives to be proud of the professional task or the indications, sometime ahead, about the reasoning, discredit, lack of recognition or negative recognition. It's a context that requires, from the analyst, the initial hypothesis that has to be placed in a relative way.

Table 3 Proud of being policeman x change or not the Profession: Civil police

Proud	Change.→	Continue being policeman	Change the profession	Total
Yes		76%	24%	100%
No		15%	85%	100%
Total		73%	27%	100%

Table 4 Proud of being policeman x change or not the Profession: Militar police

Proud	Change.→	Continue being policeman	Change the profession	Total
Yes		73%	26%	100%
No		13%	86%	100%
Total		67%	30%	100%

Making hypothesis relative as a conclusion

Working on the question related to identity, and putting the focus on the socialization process, Dubar¹⁶ invites the readers to decrease the focus given to the relation on professional identity versus individual identity, in favor of what he calls the social identity. For the author, it's an 'articulation between two transactions: one "internal" to the individual itself and the other "external", between the individual and the institutions with which he interacts.¹⁶ Thinking about the policeman, this identity is multiple: it's for himself and for the others. "Others" that could be the policemen from their own corporation, from the corporation in opposition to theirs in the same level of hierarchy or another, 'others' also meaning the civil society in its multiple dimensions: socio-economic, cultural and political. Reasoning this way, adding individual and collective; objective and subjective; biography and structure, the author tells that the identity notion 'tries to bring in the subjective, experienced and psychic dimension to the heart of the sociological analysis'.¹⁶ The internal division of identity, meant by Dubar, gains it's expression through ambiguity and tension which are present in many of the representations shown in the questionnaires. Some evidences highlighted the conflictive

inter– relation between the self– identity and the identity for the other; between the group identity and identity in the group and also between the Civil policeman and the Military policeman. And we returned to the idea of uncertainty between what policeman thinks about what society thinks and what he constructs as his identification. This comparison highlights a lot of statements. It would be possible to admit that a negotiation for identity prevails, in Dubar terms, between an identity for himself and an identity for the other. This process goes, sometimes, in the direction of a positive recognition and, in other times, a negative one. This movement that activates ‘identity ‘strategies’ intended to reduce the distance between both identities’.¹⁶ Under this angle, the paradox, uncertainty and contradictions acquire a new view: from this perspective, the ‘other’ that guides the policemen representations and practices would not only be his colleague, from his own corporation or from the other corporation (civil x military policeman relation) and not only the common citizen (delinquent, offender , criminal, or a good citizen), but also his family, the neighbor, the friends which are equal or even more important references for them than his chief or colleague in this intricate, problematical and frequently a conflicting process of identity construction. In other words, it’s assumed that there is no singular professional identity but a social identity. The interaction between the others and me, from now on with multiple identities, will be negotiated to permit to talk about much more inclusive contexts. In these contexts a lot of dimensions of everyday life are present. Being constructed under these principles, the identity would take into consideration the values and the ethos of the group, without, therefore, eliminating from the individual the possibility of making choices and participating subjectively. This presentation was limited to think about questions related to identity and their relations to police violence. Many other contents presented in the research weren’t discussed here. In any way, there is a need to present, in a more relative perspective, those initial hypotheses. They place the deficit from identity and police violence in a clear relation. According to the authors that consider identity as fight, negotiation, plurality, it’s also necessary to think about it without any kind of essentialism in order to permit its historicity and fluidity to take place. It would be a big burden for identity to put, in its shoulder, all the responsibility for violence practices when it’s known that there are many other things happening. Even if they are from the institutional context or the conjectural one, either material or symbolic range: all of them are in conflict and in negotiation.^{17–20} So, there is much more in question: the organizational culture, the ethos informing it’s ‘modus operandi’ and the aspects that may condition the police practice to interfere in the way they deal with criminality. There is also the idea on how to face human rights, how to see policies and the social control and, above all, the way all this process produces ambiguities. These aspects make, in a sense, the talk about linear logics of identity construction impossible. That’s the reason why identity can’t be seen as something finished, ready but must be conceived as a process in construction, with negotiated contents between what the actors themselves would represent as their own activity (police case) (something that hasn’t been well clarified during the investigation) and what they suppose would be the demand the society has related to their activity. Besides this, as a kind of data analysis split makes clear how the stress plays an important role in a very significant part of contexts of police violence. Stress that is, in its turn, a result of the insecurity and even of the fear. Both sensations can be read by some of the testimony that certifies the police condition turns the individual into a suspicious person, always watchful, distrusting everything and everybody. The consequence is that his practice is always done under a great amount of pressure.^{21,22} The image would be the one of a knife –edge, being more and more

sharp: society doesn’t trusts the police, this lack of confidence generates a sensation of insecurity which, in turn, provokes tensions and a quest for self–protection, having, frequently the shape of more weapons, private security, and the demand for a more reactive police, agile, able to transmit confidence. From the police point of view, answering these societies’ aspirations ends up being a possibility or a need (unconscious more than conscious) of building an affirmative image for himself: as far as the self –recognition is a condition to achieve the social recognition, this construction may, eventually, employs multiples resources, including (and here again, probably in an unconscious way) violent practices to cut down the long road until the social recognition occurs.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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