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Accountability and Police Violence: a Research on Accounts to Cope with Excessive Use of Force in Italy

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Abstract Accountability is a vital element of policing. Over time, the public has demanded more control over police activities, while policing has attracted a good deal of controversy, such as the discriminatory and violent manner in which police officers treat individuals. In this paper, we explore Italian police accountability when faced with violent actions following the articulation at two levels: a micro-level—the communication strategies adopted by the police unions to account for their actions—and a macro-level—the understanding of the political and social system in which the police act, namely the Italian system. The results of the thematic analysis highlighted the recourse to excuses, justifications, and apologies. In terms of the effects on the audience, the unions divide into two groups: the first made exclusive use of defensive accountability strategies (excuses and justifications) and the second used reconciling accountability strategies (apologies). We discuss these findings regarding the interaction between the police and the public in Italy.

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Introduction

In democratic societies, the consensus of public opinion, about the fairness and legitimacy of the worth of the various organizations, passes through social communication. As with other organizations, the police also devote great effort to protecting its public image and building a good reputation through mass media (Loader, 1997; Maguire & Wells, 2002). Several studies have highlighted the close interdependence between police and mass media (Boyle, 1999; Chermark & Weiss, 2005; Chibnall, 1977; Cooke & Sturges, 2009; Ericson et al., 1991; Reiner, 2008); the media depend on the police in order to obtain information about the crimes and the police depend on the media for their help in crime prevention and in the promotion of a positive image of policing work. As Boyle (1999) argues, this interdependent relationship has undergone a period of change as a result of a "crisis of legitimacy" in which the police have had to transform themselves into an accountable organization, increasingly called to answer for their actions toward citizens. This cultural shift has led to an increase in the professionalization of police management of the media (Leishman & Mason, 2003; Mawby, 2002). Today, almost all the major police forces have departments with specific responsibility for media relations, with communications experts and skilled builders of positive images available to public opinion (Chermak, 1995).

The ability of the police to strengthen and protect their public image depends on the type of story that is told or silenced. For example, the police support some stories that promote the target of the police because they describe achievements in the fight against crime. However, for other stories,

the police are able to exercise control on them, spending time and resources in order to maintain a positive portrait and prestige of the corps minimizing the damaging information for their reputation (Ericson et al., 1991; Kasinsky, 1994). Very often, this second type of story relates cases of power abuse and brutality committed by the police, easily and regularly documented by mass media and social networks. Thus, the gap widens between citizens' expectations on how the police should behave and the behavior actually implemented (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Walker & Archbold, 2014). Hence, the increasingly frequent appeal to accountability as a possibility of calling police officers to account for their actions. Accountability is a relational term and it is closely related to the power relationships existing in a given society. In this paper, we explore Italian police accountability when faced with violent and brutal actions following the articulation of two levels of analysis. One is a micro-level—the communication strategies adopted by the police to account for their actions—and a macro-level—the understanding of the broader political and social system in which the police act, namely the Italian system.

The Social Accountability of Action

Generally, the concept of "accountability" refers to the obligation of an individual or organization to answer to an audience for its activities or performance on the basis of certain standards. There are two constitutive aspects of accountability: (1) the need to explain a behavior to others and (2) the explanations produced are evaluated on the basis of precise norms or values. Therefore, accountability is considered a crucial element for the organization of living together (Semin & Manstead, 1983; Schlenker et al., 1991; Tetlock, 1985). In fact, accountability would generate in people the expectation that others can judge their behavior in reference to standards of conduct, and punishments and rewards will be distributed accordingly; this point is important because it puts a limit on the freedom of individual action, allowing other people to exercise legitimate control. A consciousness that induces the person to practice a self-regulatory process: even when it is not explicitly required, individuals can take account of how their behavior can be assessed in the light of certain norms and values (Simonson, 1989).

People would be invited or they would offer voluntarily reports about their behavior in the event of problematic actions, that is, if they violated certain rules or conventions. Schlenker (1986) suggested that accountability plays a fundamental role when we meet "difficult situations", in other words, situations in which events have undesirable implications for the identity and reputation of the actor in front of a real or imagined audience. Tetlock (1985) said that people are generally motivated to maintain the approval and respect from those for whom they are responsible. Specific types of accountability are generated from the type of relationship between people (Stryker & Gottlieb, 1981); thus, the way we respond to other people depends on the type of accountability and the cognitive and motivational predispositions of the individual who makes a decision.

Schlenker and colleagues (Schlenker et al., 1994) elaborated a pyramid model of accountability that specifies the conditions on the basis of the perception of accountability and its strength. Under this model, a person's degree of accountability is proposed to derive from the strength of the links between three primary components. They include prescription (standards that should guide behavior and by which performance will be judged); the event (action against which the prescription is compared); and identity and images (central characteristics of an actor's role, value, qualities). These three components are connected to each other and form three linkages: prescription-event refers to a set of standards that is applied to an event; prescription-identity requires the actor's sense of perceived obligation; lastly, identity-event which refers to the extent to which the actor is connected to the event. The strength of these three links captures different aspects of the accountability because it changes in relation to different social contexts. The link prescription-event is strong when standards are well defined with no alternative interpretations and are clearly related to the considered event. The link prescription-identity comes from the fact that prescriptions are applied to the actor on the basis of specific characteristics. Lastly, the link event-identity is strengthened when the actor is considered as having control over circumstances.

When an individual is responsible for a questionable behavior and he feels obliged, or is obliged by others, to give an account of what happened, he uses a set of subjects aimed at repairing the "fracture" between expectations and conduct. The account-makers would establish a discursive circuit to cope with the attributed responsibility, prevent any penalties, and protect their reputation (Antaki, 1994, 2006; Bies et al., 1988; Buttny, 1993; Cody & McLaughlin, 1990; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherall & Potter, 1989).

Several studies analyzed exemption strategies from responsibility (Goffman, 1971; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Sykes & Matza, 1957). For example, among the main discursive forms, there is a classic distinction between two types of accounts: excuses and justifications. Excuses would be used when the defendant admits to having caused damage but denies being fully responsible. With justifications, the actor accepts full responsibility for the committed act but denies that the qualities of the act in question are inappropriate or negative. Further studies clarified the nature of excuses and justifications highlighting that excuses can point to either unforeseen consequences or extenuating circumstances, while justifications can draw on relevant social comparison or higher order goals (Schlenker, 1980; Shaw et al., 2003). Furthermore, Tedeschi

and Reiss (1981) argued that excuses can point to the author's lack of intention, planning, capacity, or will, and justification can appeal to a higher authority, ideology, norms, or loyalties through which the actor provides a socially acceptable description of an action otherwise perceived as immoral, not conforming to ethics, or unexpected. In addition to the excuses and justifications, Schönbach (1990) proposed a fuller and more developed list of strategies available to the account-givers including two new discursive forms: apologies and denials. With apologies the actor admits responsibility and advancing feelings of remorse, with denials the actor denies any responsibility, does not recognize the prosecutor's authority or even the situation of a transgression/offense.

Based on their specific functions in social interaction and in social communication, this four-party typology of accounts can be divided into "reconciling strategies," for instance, apologies (Schumann, 2012, 2014; Zechmeister et al., 2004) and "defensive strategies," namely excuses, justifications and denials (Cody & McLaughlin, 1990; Itoi et al., 1996; McLaughlin et al., 1983).

Accountability about Police Use of Force

For the police, the use of force is a central issue (Lersch & Mieczkowski, 2005). In fact, the police officer's work is characterized by constant exposure to danger and the need to use force and authority to exercise control over threatening situations (Micucci, Gomme, 2005). Reuss-Ianni (1983) identified the presence of two distinct police subcultures: a street cop subculture and a management cop subculture. The street cop subculture supports the belief that the use of force, even excessive, is appropriate to contrast threatening or disrespectful actions of certain human groups in order to maintain social order. The belief that the legal system is too weak and inefficient to effectively solve the problems of crime and social disorder is an inherent part of the street cop subculture (Brown, 1981). Furthermore, over time, street police officers tend to become cynical and hard (Van Maanen, 1995). Finally, since they lead a separate life from the ordinary citizens, mainly by establishing friendly relations within the police force, the police tend to perceive themselves as a group distinct from the rest of society. In addition to the police subculture factor, other research has shown that there are more specific factors that influence the decisions of using force, legitimately and illegitimately, including the level of suspected resistance (Garner et al., 2002) and the level of crime in the neighborhood (Lee et al., 2014).

However, most of the research shows that it is possible to reduce the use of force by the police guaranteeing correctness through a respectful organizational culture and an appropriate professional supervision. The controls exercised by the superiors have a strong effect on the attitudes and performance of subordinates, therefore, an adequate training and a work supervision of police officers can prevent the inappropriate use of force (Engel & Worden, 2003; Klinger, 2009; Lee et al., 2010; Lee & Vaughn, 2010; Lim et al., 2014; Paoline & Terrill, 2007). Moreover, unnecessary use of force by police officers often occurs when those who occupy positions of power fail to take appropriate measures to contrast and stop it (Wilson & McLaren, 1977). In summary, an effective control of the use of force by the police depends largely on the fact that the supervisors should have suitable knowledge of the constitutional limits of the police force, and the capacity to transfer this knowledge to their subordinates (Lim & Lee, 2015).

Not only are the police trained to use force, how to use it, in what case, with what intensity and against whom, but they are also trained to learn a series of statements to legitimize their conduct of coercion as normal acts, especially those that seem questionable as standards of society. As Hunt (1985) said, the excessive use of force would be normalized through two types of account: excuses and justifications. Excuses refer to an emotional state or a particular physiological activation due to special circumstances typical of police work. On these occasions, the use of force is presented as a normal human reaction to cope with extreme situations. Regarding justification, Hunt divided this into two categories: situational and abstract. The first is used when the police force has to justify the use of force as a normal practice in reference to situations in which their authority is physically or symbolically threatened. In such cases, the use of force would be justified as a means to immediately regain control of the situation. The second is used when police have to justify the use of coercive actions against certain categories of people. For instance, the use of aggressive force would be motivated as an appropriate response to cope with particularly dangerous individuals and the more reprehensible the act committed by them is, the more likely violence can be justified.

Ultimately, the police would become experts in the use of techniques of moral neutralization regarding the use of force. In addition, the use of these techniques allows them to preserve a positive image of themselves as agents of order and provides ways by which the police can solve their personal doubts about the moral status of their actions and those of their colleagues (Hunt, 1985).

The Importance of Police Accountability in Modern Democracies: the Italian Case

Over time, every society has given greater attention to police behavior and its legitimacy. Despite the fact that police accountability differs from one state to another (Stone, 2007), accountability has become an important element in public discourse about the rules of governance in society. Citizens

are constantly concerned about control and surveillance, institutional constraints, and the exercise of power by authority. These issues are especially felt by Italian society where the police force, from its origins back in 1852 and its transformation into an autonomous body in 1945, in 1981 underwent a profound reorganization. The need to reform the police force was the result of major changes in the 60s and 70s. In particular, Italian political parties demanded a "new police force," less subservient to power and citizens asked to move from the status of "citizens under surveillance" to the status of "citizens guaranteed" by the police. The push towards the democratization of the police led to the recognition of the police as a category of workers. Indeed, the most significant and considerable innovation of state police was their demilitarization. This provides them with civil status with the right to organize trade unions, although with some limitations such as the prohibition of the right to strike.

At the same time, police officers are not even allowed to join unions other than those internal to the category of police workers. In addition, members of police unions need to be trained, directed and represented by the personnel of the corps; furthermore, it has been established that the police unions cannot support, affiliate or entertain relations with other union associations external to the police. In summary, police officers are only allowed to join police force unions, and only a police representative belonging to the union can lead them. The reform establishing the unionization of the police force has produced over time a proliferation and fragmentation of internal trade unions. One of the most important consequences is that unions have acquired a closed and bureaucratic structure, becoming rigid organizations, often competing with each other with the purpose of assuming the role of "true" representatives of this category of workers (see Palidda, 2000).

During the years after the reform, at least in terms of public opinion, there were no particular cases of abuse of power or force by police against individuals or citizen groups. The management of public order, for example in the case of demonstrations, showed a progressive decrease of coercive control strategies in favor of those of a persuasive nature, the latter characterized by discursive contact with the police force and activists, demonstrators and organizers in order to avoid and prevent violent events (della Porta & Reiter, 2003). Therefore, we can assume that during that period, there has been a rapprochement with police and citizens.

This type of "honeymoon" between citizens and the police force was rudely interrupted during the G8 Summit held in Genoa in 2001. On that occasion, the police force, politically supported by the Berlusconi government, managed public order with repressive measures; the use of force by police caused deep wounds and untold suffering in many unarmed citizens (Zamperini & Menegatto, 2013, 2015). In those days, Italy discovered fragile management by the police. It is as if the democratization process which had started with the reform in 1981 had stopped and was compromised. The recent judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, which defines the torture that took place in the Diaz school during the G8 in 2001, has helped to create further anxiety in public opinion (Zamperini et al., 2016). In fact, for the Italian police, the events of Genoa G8 represented a crucial turning point. Since then, in Italy, incidents of power abuse and brutality committed by the police against citizens has increased. For the first time in the history of Italy, victims' families formed committees to demand justice and an independent organization named ACAD (Associazione Contro gli Abusi in Divisa—Association Against Uniform Abuses) was created to protect citizens from police abuses. As a result, an operation of accountability has intensified on the part of police unions assuming the role of spokesperson for the union members. This function of communication is addressed both to the inner world of the police and to the whole of Italian society.

Method

In Italy, the National Authority for Public Security is the Minister of the Interior, responsible for public order and security, and the coordination of police forces. The enforcement of public order and security policies is entrusted to the Department of Public Security through the State Police. The Department of Public Security coordinates police force operations, and manages and organizes the State Police. The Penitentiary Police Force is subordinate to the Italian Ministry of Justice and is responsible for the operations of the Italian prison system. It ensures security inside prisons, maintaining order, keeping unauthorized people out, protecting prisoners (in prison or during transfer and also medical facilities), and preventing escape.

The present study is based on a qualitative analysis of the written accounts produced by the Italian Police unions and starts from a thematic analysis method. Currently, the State Police boast 100,000 members and the Penitentiary Police 39,000. Members of both police forces are grouped into numerous union organizations. In view of a large number of police personnel and their numerous organizations, it has proved necessary to use specific criteria to identify which union organizations to consider in this research into the accountability of the Italian police.

Data Set

The data set was obtained by applying the following criteria for inclusion: (a) the written accounts had to be made by the unions of the State Police and the Penitentiary Police; (b) the written accounts had to be made as press releases or published articles in police union magazines (these magazines can be freely consulted on the Internet and are often used by the mass

media); and (c) the written accounts had to be about at least one of four significant cases that have spurred heated debate in Italian public opinion during the past decade, that is the death of four citizens: Federico Aldrovandi, Giuseppe Uva, Michele Ferrulli, Stefano Cucchi.

The 18-year-old student Federico Aldrovandi died on the night of 25th September 2005, in a street in Ferrara, after being stopped by a State Police patrol car for a routine check, following a violent struggle with four agents that caused him asphyxia due to excessive force used in handcuffing him. On 21st June 2012 the Court of Cassation closed the case confirming the sentence passed in the first and second instances: the four policemen were definitively judged guilty of "manslaughter through excessive use of force."

Giuseppe Uva was a worker, 43 years old. He died on the morning of 14th June 2008 in the psychiatric department of Varese hospital. Twelve hours before on the evening of 13th June, he was with a friend and flatmate Alberto Biggiogero, when they were stopped, drunk, in the street by a Carabinieri patrol car (the Carabinieri is a military police force with both military responsibilities and general responsibility for maintaining civilian public order). After spending the night in the police station, he was subjected to a compulsory treatment order and hospitalized in a psychiatric section where a few hours later he died. On the basis of Biggiogero's testimony, the Uva family is convinced that the death of their loved one was caused by violent beatings inflicted by the agents who held him in custody. Conversely, agents claimed that the arrested man was drunk, performed acts of self-harm and was completely out of control. The jury acquitted the two Carabinieri and six policemen involved in the case, with the final verdict of not guilty of abuse of authority and murder.

Michele Ferrulli, aged 51, died on 30th June 2011. The cause of his death was an acute cardiac circulatory failure which occurred when four policemen threw him to the ground, immobilizing him by beating and handcuffing him. The reason for this police intervention was a disturbance complaint. In fact, Michele had been listening to music on his van stereo with two friends near his home in Milan and the music, according to some neighbors, was too loud. A sentence pronounced in May 2016 by the Court of Assizes of Appeal of Milan confirmed the absolution of all four policemen involved: they were acquitted of the crime of voluntary manslaughter.

Stefano Cucchi died aged 31 on 22nd October 2009. Six days after his arrest for being in possession of small amounts of drugs, he was transferred with urgency to the hospital. An examination showed that the young man had ecchymosis on his body, his face covered with bruises, and had difficulty in ambulation. An autopsy revealed that he was severely dehydrated, had two broken vertebrae and internal organ damage. His family was denied permission to see him throughout this period. A first judicial process acquitted all defendants: the three prison officers accused of beating because of insufficient evidence, and also the nurses and the doctors involved. But the final verdict did not convince the Cucchi family who insisted on reopening the case, and at present, with new evidence, some agents involved risk a charge of perjury.

The study focused on materials gathered for the period from October 2005 to September 2014. Applying these criteria, the following unions are included: (a) for the State Police, COISP, CONSAP, SAP, SIAP, SILP, SIULP, UGL[1]; b) for the Penitentiary Police, SAPPE, SINAPPE, OSAPP.[2] We extracted 71 written accounts and put them in specific groups; finally, we numbered and classified them on the basis of the type of written material: press released (PR) and magazine articles (MA) (see Table 1).

Procedure

The data has been analyzed using thematic analysis (Starks and Trinidad 2007) a qualitative method used for analyzing data by identifying patterns and organizing them into themes. The analysis process was in line with the phases of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). Primarily familiarization with the data, by reading and re-reading the text, allowed the creation of initial codes through the selection of text parts, named quotations; then codes were grouped into categories and categories into themes. The coding scheme was developed both deductively and inductively to allow for the inclusion of several patterns suggested by the literature and to take into account specific elements present in the data. The data was analyzed using two independent codifiers and a third external codifier. Lastly, the use of qualitative analysis software program Atlas-ti facilitated the management and retrieval and synthesis of information. Table 2 lists the themes and categories with their respective occurrence data.

Results

The initial results of the thematic analysis highlighted the absence of denial as a strategy of accountability and a

[1] Extended meaning of the abbreviated labels: COISP: Coordinamento per l'indipendenza sindacale delle Forze di Polizia—Coordination for trade union independence of the Police Force; CONSAP: Confederazione sindacale autonoma di Polizia—Independent union confederation of Police; SAP: Sindacato autonomo di Polizia – Independent Police union; SIAP: Sindacato italiano appartenenti di Polizia—Italian union of Police members; SILP: Sindacato dei lavoratori di Polizia—Union of Police workers; SIULP: Sindacato italiano dei lavoratori della Polizia di Stato—Italian union of State Police workers; UGL: Unione generale del lavoro—General union of work.

[2] SAPPE: Sindacato autonomo Polizia Penitenziaria—Independent union of Penitentiary Police; SINAPPE: Sindacato nazionale autonomo Polizia Penitenziaria—National independent union of Penitentiary Police; OSAPP: Organizzazione sindacale autonoma Polizia Penitenziaria—Independent Penitentiary Police union organization.

Table 1 Description of the data set

Police unions	Press releases (PR)	Magazine articles (MA)	Total accounts
COISP	16	17	33
SAPPE	10	–	10
SAP	1	5	6
SILP	3	2	5
SIULP	4	–	4
SIAP	3	–	3
CONSAP	1	2	3
UGL	3	–	3
SINAPPE	2	–	2
OSAPP	2	–	2
Totals	45	26	71

recourse to excuses, justifications, and apologies. Furthermore, when one considers the strategies of accountability in terms of the effects on the audience (defensive strategies vs. reconciling strategies), the unions divide into two groups: the first group (comprised of the following unions: COISP, CONSAP, OSAPP, SAP, SAPPE, SINAPPE, UGL, with an overall contribution of 59 accounts, equal to 83 % of the total) made exclusive use of defensive accountability strategies (excuses and justifications); the second group (including the following unions: SIAP, SILP, SIULP, with an overall contribution of 12 accounts, or 17 % of the total), used reconciling accountability strategies (apologies). To distinguish this thematic differentiation, the first group was labeled the "defensive group" and the second group "reconciling group" (see Table 3). In support of the identified strategies, we present some text parts (quotations) selected by a code: the first part is the union abbreviation; the second part describes the number of the document (press released: PR, or magazine articles: MA) from which the quotation is extracted. For example, a quotation marked with the code COISP-1PR, indicates an account expressed by the COIPS union, through a (the) press release (PR) number 1 and for the four cases in this article considered.

Table 2 Accountability strategies by themes and categories in order by instances of occurrence

Themes	Categories	Instances of occurrence	Totals
Excuses	Appeal to mitigating circumstances	47	
	Denial of intent	19	
	Negation of responsibility	8	74
Justifications	Competitive victimhood	45	
	Minimization of injury	44	
	Reputation building	37	
	Social comparison	26	
	Discrediting	15	
	Institutional rules stipulated	11	
	Reciprocity	9	187
Apologies	Image restoration	11	
	Taking responsibility	10	
	Conveying emotions	10	
	Naming the offense	8	
	Admitting fault	7	
	Rejecting the behavior as offensive	6	
	Promising forbearance	4	56

Defensive Group

Excuses

The issue of excuses develops through two principal types of excuses: the "appeal to mitigating circumstances" and the "denial of intent". Accounts referring to mitigating circumstances constitute the main category of accountability used by police unions. The gravity of the act and the responsibility of the agent (the death of a citizen at the hands of a police officer) are attenuated by appealing primarily to a deficiency of resources available in guaranteeing public order.

> Basically, police officers are forced to choose between shooting or using their bare hands in any form of intervention whenever it involves a threat to themselves or to other citizens (COISP-8MA).

Table 3 Police unions grouped by accountability strategies and arranged account

Police unions	Members at 12/31/2013	Strategies used	Accounts	
			n.	%
SAP	18,535	Defensive group		
SAPPE	9339	(excuses and justifications)		
UGL	8144			
COISP	7355			
CONSAP	6219			
OSAPP	4352			
SINAPPE	3883		59	83
SIULP	25,186	Reconciling group		
SIAP	11,140	(apologies)		
SILP	8958		12	17
Totals	103,111		71	100

> The daily strain of service (…) due to chronic problems of resources, means and personnel (SAP-1MA).

Along with the shortage of resources, unions refer to precarious working conditions, encompassing low pay coupled with the necessity to carry out extraordinary tasks in difficult and hostile social conditions.

> Police officers are expected to stay on the street 24 hours a day and to combat the crime of all kinds. Despite these demands, overtime pay is suspended and career advancement is not economically compensated (CONSAP-3PR).
> [Police officers are] forced to do difficult work for little more than 1,000 euros a month (SAPPE-10PR).

The second form of excuse is the police officer's denial of having intended to participate in a morally questionable act.

> None of the unfortunate police officers involved in the dramatic passing of Federico Aldrovandi ever intended (…) to bring about the young man's death (COISP-23PR).
> Unfortunately the possibility of going beyond what is allowed, for a number of contextual and psychological factors, can happen (UGL-2PR).

The use of these excuses conveys the difficult working conditions of police officers. More importantly, the offering of excuses rejects the idea that police officers tend to use force excessively and denies any intentional harming of innocent citizens as the police officers deal with the variety of situations that arise in maintaining law and order.

Finally, the third category of excuses is the "negation of responsibility"; with this form of communication, police officers are explicitly exonerated from any individual responsibility. These excuses refer to factors such as the delicate health of the arrested individual or point toward the responsibility of actors other than the police, such as health personnel who should have evaluated the condition of the arrested individual.

> The judicial inquiry will certainly prove that the death did not happen for causes attributable to our colleagues (SAP-4 MA).
> As the penitentiary police union we have always maintained that for the death of Stefano Cucchi, the members of the body have no responsibility (OSAPP-1PR).

Justifications

The issue of justification proves particularly common in these communications. The category most regularly employed is that of "competitive victimhood." This phenomenon refers primarily to conflict among social groups, where members of the ingroup and the outgroup are engaged in a conflict-oriented communication as each group seeks to legitimize its members as the victims of a given situation (Nadler, 2002; Nadler & Saguy, 2003; Noor et al., 2012). In this research, recourse to this form of expression serves to present police officers as the "real victims" of the event, offering the image of individual police officers and their families as suffering for what has occurred—as individuals and families who have become targets for social aggression and moralizing campaigns directed by the mass media. Such conflictual accounts manifest a real and significant competition between the deceased citizens and the police who caused their deaths. In these following accounts, it seems crucial to identify who is the real victim. In fact, the stake for the victims it's their supremacy, through which generate positive emotions, empathy, with the consequent justification of one's behavior.

> Now we have become the ideal targets for people to vent their rage, frustration, and violence, on any occasion and wherever and we are the ideal scapegoats every time something goes wrong (COISP-4MA).
> Who thought about the incredible discomfort, pain, and shame felt by the members of the penitentiary police involved and their families who have been painted by public opinion (…) as ruthless aggressors and torturers? (SAPPE-10PR).
> (The death of Federico Aldrovandi) is an emblematic case where the true victims are our colleagues (SAP-6PR).

In terms of frequency, the second category of justification is the "minimization of injury." As the death of the citizen is undeniable, interpretive work draws on legal language regarding various forms of crime, transforming the killing by beating that occurred at the hands of a person into an event that is "comparable to a road accident" (SAP-5MA), and claiming that there was a misrepresentation of the effects, at most explainable as a "case of excess" (UGL-2PR) in carrying out one's duties. These types of expression reshape the reprehensible act by making it appear less important and, above all, as ordinary (as one of many road accidents that occur on a daily basis in any country) and thereby lessen the seriousness of the incident.

The third category of justification aims to valorize the police officers professional identity through a discursive process of "reputation building." The union accounts present the police officers as conscientious, responsible, loyal to their duties, respectful of the law, and possessing moral rectitude as public servants with years of distinguished service.

> Police officers who over the years have distinguished themselves for their seriousness, thoughtfulness and sense of professionalism and balance (SAP-4MA).
> These police officers have served for 7 years and carried out their duties without garnering any form of criticism (UGL-1PR).
> In a single year, the male and female penitentiary officers (…) intervened timely in 683 cases of attempted suicide and have further ensured that 4,928 acts of self-harm did not lead to more serious consequences (SAPPE-1PR).

In this form of justification, one attempts to remove the negativity from the action by projecting a positive image of the police officers.

Research also discovered a substantial appeal to the use of "social comparison," exemplified by expressions designed to compare the original, blameworthy act with more serious events, conduct, and crimes which merit greater moral punishments. A further type of justification is the reference to "institutional rules stipulated": the causes and consequences of the police officers' controversial actions are attributed to insufficient instruction that does not clearly indicate what police officers should and should not do in particular situations of public order.

> The problem is the lack of operational protocols that tell the police exactly what to do and what not to do, how and when to do it (COISP-14MA).

In this way, reprehensible conduct is explained as the outcome of a poorly disciplined action governed by the orders of superiors and codified in vague, normative protocols that police officers have been instructed to follow when immobilizing citizens resisting arrest.

Through the category of "reciprocity," a form of justification intended to make the victim appear guilty for the damage caused by his or her own actions, the use of excessive force is explained as resulting from the victim's behavior during the encounter with police, as seen in the following example:

> A young man (…) in the throes of an attack of hysterical rage and, therefore, physical restraint proved necessary (COISP-26MA).

Some justifications are linked not only to the victim based on his or her conduct but also to aspects of identity. Through "discrediting", the identity of the victim is characterized by negative personalogical traits: for example the victim is described as having relational problems, as being psychologically disturbed, having a difficult personality, or being an alcoholic or drug addict.

> Nevertheless, during the trial, the boy (Federico Aldrovandi) was defined a drug user (COISP-21PR).

In being painted with social and psychological pathology, the image of the deceased citizen thus acquires pejorative moral qualities, making them appear less respectable than other citizens. This devalued identity is then employed to help justify the negative actions that were carried out by the police officers.

Reconciling Group

Apologies

The statements expressing apologies are numerically inferior to those offering excuses and giving justifications. The primary category within this group consists in "image restoration": expressions of embarrassment concerning the behavior of fellow police officers that is clearly inconsistent with the desired professional identity, and which focus on the public image of what the police officer should be:

> We must draw a distinct and impassable line between those responsible for these deeds and almost all those other police officers who not only sacrifice themselves daily but also their loved ones and their families in order to make sure that these kinds of things do not happen (SIULP-3PR).
> In the end, it significantly delegitimizes the efforts of all those who work in silence alongside people who live in difficult situations managing the most difficult of situations with equilibrium and responsibility (SIAP-3PR).

Another category of apology is "taking responsibility," by which the actions committed by individual police officers are explained through a rejection of the "bad apple theory" and instead interpret death as a problem involving the entire police organization:

> Recognizing what has been done is a way for us to look inward, even if we won't like what we might see. It is the way to assume our responsibilities and our guilt with dignity. It is the path that leads us away from committing the same mistakes again (SIAP-2PR).

Closeness with the victims is observed through "conveying emotions," with expressions of solidarity toward their family members and distress and regret for what has happened:

> The pain of a mother who loses her child (…) is the worst pain that exists, it is an inconsolable pain (SIAP-2PR).

> A mother's desperation and feelings of humiliation, to whom we give our solidarity and send our most sincere affection (SILP-1PR).

In employing the communication pattern of "naming the offense" and "admitting fault," the events are described as dramas, openly declaring that the actions of the police officers involved in the deaths were brutal and coercive because they violated the norms of behavior. This discursive manner is associated with the category of "rejecting the behavior as offensive" and is expressed through condemnation of the police officers responsible:

> This has nothing to do with our culture and throughout this entire dramatic event, we strongly condemn these actions which are in contrast to the ethics and the correct exercising of the duties of anyone who wears our uniform (SILP-4MA).

Finally, with "promising forbearance," a promise summarized in the statement that these tragedies "must never happen again" (SIULP-4PR), police organizations communicate they hope and will endeavor to avoid similar situations in the future.

Discussion

In order to operate within a democratic system, the police require the support of public opinion (Sklansky 2008). Given this requirement, citizens must believe that the police use their power and force legitimately. Without legitimacy, the police are unable to function democratically or to serve the community. When people perceive a breakdown in legitimacy, they no longer feel protected and respected as citizens. The cases of the Italian citizens who died following police intervention that is considered in our study are account episodes (Schönbach, 1990) which openly call into question this legitimacy and prompted the police officers to engage in strategies of accountability.

On the level of micro-analysis (the communicative strategies adopted by the police to respond to their own actions), our results demonstrate the prevalence of two forms of accounts: excuses and justifications. By definition, an excuse aims to achieve the exoneration of responsibility for what has been committed, while a justification serves to render the action less negative (at times even positive). Among the various police unions, there is a clear propensity to defend the negative behavior of the police officers through categories of excuses and justifications that are confirmed by the theories of accountability (Cody & McLaughlin, 1990; Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Semin & Manstead, 1983; Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981).

In addition to the literal negation of responsibility, the issue of excuses allows for the disengagement from the core aspects of the self (denial of intent) and the minimization of attention to the self (recourse to mitigating circumstances). The objective is to convince public opinion, including the police officers themselves, that these questionable events cannot be attributed only to the actors who are directly involved in particular incidents (Schlenker et al. 2001).

Resorting to justification involves an attempt on the part of police unions to reframe the contentious episodes. This reframing, as emphasized by Scott and Lyman (1968), entails a negation of identities; in our research, this negation occurs both for the identities of the perpetrators and those of the victims. Indeed, the discursive construction of the ideal image of police officers corresponds to a delegitimizing of the identity of the victims, who somehow are characterized as having induced the "good police officers" to react (the category of reciprocity) to their negative conduct. This pattern of communication is linked with the idea that police officers have always acted following the protocols of action (appeal to institutional rules stipulated), despite a lack of clear operational information. Furthermore, this pattern demonstrates that the way in which we see and evaluate certain changes in behavior in relation to their consequences (here the highly common recourse to the minimization of damage) and in terms of what we compare it with (see the category of social comparison).

In regards to the above-mentioned traditional categories of justification, our study has shed light on another particular category (the main one in terms of frequency) that can be traced back in the literature to notable group processes such as competitive victimhood (Noor et al., 2012). Competitive victimhood generally refers to the communicative efforts made by each group to claim a greater degree of suffering than the group with which they are in conflict, thereby winning the exclusive position of victim in the eyes of the projected audience (Pilecki & Hammack, 2013). This effort occurs within intergroup processes, with the acquisition of victim status being used to justify violent actions against the outgroup. Within the discursive strategies of the police unions, recourse to this interpretive category serves as justification for an action that is no longer considered negative (the transgression of the standards of conduct) and instead becomes an almost positive and legitimate reaction to a process of victimization to which one is subjected. It is a form of accountability that also signals a discursive positioning of "us" (police) versus "them" (the deceased citizens, their supporters, and above all their family members).

Numerically speaking, both in terms of the unions as well as in the numbers of such accounts, apologies prove to be marginal in comparison to excuses and justification. In addition to confirming the theories of accountability that have

already been mentioned, our research brought to light a variety of categories identified by Kirchhoff and collaborators (Kirchhoff et al., 2009; Kirchhoff et al., 2012). Essentially, the use of apologies communicates assuming responsibility for the negative behavior and its consequences, with the pledge of an endeavor to avoid similar episodes in the future. Through an attempt to restore a positive social image, distance is taken from the police officers in question, and we see a rejection of any sort of violent conduct toward citizens. Furthermore, an apology communicates the necessity that the police force, in general, views these episodes as a problem in its organization and in the training of its members. Lastly, the expression of emotions such as shame and remorse conveys a closeness to the victims' families, empathy with their pain, in an attempt to offer a form of mitigation to their suffering.

Our research analyzed the communicative strategies of the unions based on the components of their accounts that are on record. Taking into consideration the functions of the accounts as well as their particular details, that is, considering their potential effect on a projected audience, the results have allowed us to distinguish between two groups of account-givers: the defensive group and the reconciling group. This exclusive membership within one group or another (the unions that employ excuses and justifications do not use apologies and vice-versa) can be understood by passing from a level of micro-analysis to one of macro-analysis, to situate these communicative practices within Italian society. Only recently (in the 1980s) did Italian police put aside their military status and assume a civil posture: in effect, to function as civilian workers among other civilian workers (Bernardi, 1979). In a later period, this process of bringing the police closer to the people was interrupted and has even undergone a regression. In essence, Italy has not fully achieved the project of having a community-oriented police force (modeled on those of other European nations) and rather has returned to a military police force governed by an ideology of control and of "zero tolerance" (Associazione giuristi democratici, 2014). On the basis of our research, these two modes of understanding the police profession (in terms of a military model or a civilian model)—which coexist in a rather conflictual way—can be observed within Italian society by examining union communications as these assessments represent account episodes.

In fact, the three unions who use apologies (SIAP, SILP, SIULIP) are those most oriented to achieving a community police force. In particular, SIULP is the historical union that has fought for police reform and today it continues to have the most members (at 12/31/2013 there were 25,186). The unions that identify themselves as parts of a community police force are those that do not defend themselves from citizen demands for accountability, adopt forms of communication that recognize their own errors and strive for reconciliation with aggrieved parties, their families, and the general public.

By contrast, unions which make use of excuses and offer justifications (COISP, CONSAP, OSAPP, SAP, SAPPE, SINAPPE, UGL) doggedly hold to the idea that the police force must control. It is significant to note that they adopt a justifying strategy of competitive victimhood, which presupposes the contrast of ingroup vs. outgroup between citizens of the same society, almost as if the police corps were an independent "body," a body that is not only independent but also counterpoised to the rest of society. In addition, the four citizens' death cases represent ordinary work situations and regular interventions of public order that are common in the activities of any policeman. Therefore, from the side of the policemen, a union communication characterized by defensive strategies shows a body solidarity, which results in a double preventive absolution: before the current legal processes and before similar future incidents happen again. In fact, following the argumentative logic of these specific unions the result is: if today some colleagues of theirs are involved, tomorrow other colleagues could be in a similar situation; but if today these same colleagues are absolved a priori of any responsibility, those who have the misfortune to be involved in the future will be acquitted. In short at the discursive level, we can argue: "You (indicted policemen) are like us (your colleagues), so we are all innocent." At a psychological level, this represents an emotional and cognitive condition that can weaken the internal accountability of each individual police officer with the consequence of a relatively minor exercise of self-control (Shmeer, 2009). Finally, it is noteworthy that in contrast to the reconciling unions, the defensive unions are more active in social communication regarding these episodes so their position can easily be perceived by public opinion as "the" police position, rather than "one" of the many positions.

Conclusion

The role of public opinion in a democratic society is fundamental because it can influence government action in facing a variety of social problems (Page et al., 1987). The problem of the legitimate or illegitimate use of police force is one of these problems. With that in mind, we hope that this work has shed light on specific, selected aspects of social communication when multiple explanations are offered to address police actions that have produced negative consequences. Naturally, this study has its limits: coverage of these account episodes is limited to four events. We have not considered those distortions that invariably affect the union accounts when events are covered by newspapers and television. We have not analyzed the concrete effects of similar communicative strategies on citizen audiences. Nonetheless, the research outcomes obtained do cast light on a troubling tendency: the prevalence of

defensive accountability on the part of police unions and a return to an institutional expression that the police are a distinct "body" within Italian society. Such a "body" is conceived as an impermeable and autarchic system, whereas a community-oriented institution is more likely to be an open and responsive system. In the condition of "body," an organization closes itself off from the outside world and shows itself to be unavailable toward the citizens who demand transparency and accountability.

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