ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Police subjectivities in South Africa: a discourse analysis of police officers' talk on protest

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Abstract

Police officers in the South African Police Service (SAPS) undertake their police work within national, institutional, and personal discourses. Together, these discourses create different, often contradictory, police subjectivities. Resultantly, research on policing in South Africa is increasingly concerned with these subjectivities and the contexts in which they are constructed. However, despite this growing interest in discourse and subjectivities, scholars of policing have not typically employed a discourse analysis to examine these processes. Through a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, we examine two discourses, *violence as an internal malignancy of protest* and *protest as legitimate*. The subjectivities enabled through these discourses both sympathised with and demonised the struggles of protesters, reflecting a broader contradiction in South African society, namely that protest is discursively reified in the Constitution but must be exercised within the discursive-material parameters set by the state.

Keywords Policing · South Africa · South African Police Service (SAPS) · Subjectivity · Discourse · Protests · Violence

Introduction

Police officers in South Africa navigate contradictory subject positions, that is to say, the positions within power and discourse that delimitate the "historical limits of what can be written, said or practiced" by subjects (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017, p. 118). Although the South African Police Service (SAPS) as an institution

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represents corporatist and state interests, police officers themselves do not embody an elite class, and thus their material interests are starkly opposed to those that they are employed to enforce (Brooks 2019, 2020; Faull 2017a, b). These conflicting subject positions are thus forged through an intersection of national, institutional, and personal discourses (Faull 2017a, b). Accordingly, scholarship on policing has become increasingly concerned with the dynamics of SAPS officers' identities (see Altbeker 2005; Brooks 2019, 2020; Faull 2017a, b; Hornberger 2010; Marks 2005; Steinberg 2008). Curiously, though, such scholarship has been hesitant to take up critical discourse analysis. Moreover, although some scholars have illustrated the value of Foucault's theories for policing research (e.g. Murphy 2020), Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA), with its sensitivity towards the subject positions and subjectivities made available via discourse, is virtually absent in the literature. Therefore, in this article, we rely on FDA to examine how 22 SAPS police officers whose mandate is to respond to protest, construct policing in three focus group discussions, focussing specifically on the policing of protest, an especially pertinent and violent form of policing in South Africa (Duncan 2016). In our analysis, we examine what police subjectivities are rendered (im)possible through the officers' talk, thereby gaining insight into the increasingly violent patterns of policing in South Africa (see Bruce 2020; Lamb 2018; Steinberg 2014). In this, we address police violence in a manner that is attendant to the discursive logics employed by SAPS officers themselves.

Dominant policing discourses in South Africa

In order to understand police subjectivities in South Africa, we must first map out the dominant national and organisational policing discourses within and against which these subjectivities emerge. In South Africa, the national police force, the South African Police (SAP), was established in 1913. During apartheid, SAP was characterised by a military ethos, violently suppressing anti-apartheid protests and insurrections (Lamb 2018; Steinberg 2014). As such, SAP officers acted as "frontline enforcers" of racist apartheid ideology and discourse (Kynoch 2016, p. 71). With the dismantling of the apartheid regime in 1994, a new national police organisation, the SAPS, was established. The SAP military rank structure was abolished and the title 'Police Force' was replaced with 'Police Service' (Lamb 2018; Steinberg 2014), implying its public, rather than statist, functioning. Despite these changes, however, SAPS was born out of an uncomfortable merger of liberation movement military wings and existing apartheid-era SAP bodies and structures. Consequently, in the early 1990s, SAPS retained the rigid, hierarchical, patriarchal, and militarised institutional culture of the SAP (Lamb 2018; Marks 2008).

From the mid-1990s, in order to counteract the apartheid legacies within SAPS, South Africa's new democratic government, led by the African National Congress, began drawing on human-rights-centred and community-oriented discourses of policing in an attempt to demilitarise the police and promote democratic, collaborative, and community-oriented policing (Brooks 2020; Jensen 2014; Lamb 2018; Marks et al. 2009). Community policing discourses were thus integral to

the development of SAPS policy documents and police basic training (Marks et al. 2009). However, with increasing concerns around rising crime rates and a general panic that police were underperforming, politicians began to call for tougher stances on crime (Brooks 2020; Jensen 2014; Kynoch 2016; Lamb 2018).

Today, SAPS is highly centralised, meaning that it is especially subject to political manipulation, with police autonomy and accountability being increasingly eroded at a local level (Duncan 2016). New militarised, aggressive police discourses have in recent times emerged. These discourses remain in tension with, and have even at times overshadowed, human rights and community-focussed policing discourses, as well as support for counterhegemonic policing initiatives (Brooks 2020; Jensen 2014; Marks et al. 2009; Steinberg 2014). As Marks et al. (2009, p. 147) suggest, "what we have witnessed is a remilitarisation of police discourse", which Steinberg (2014) proposes is indicative of a return to apartheid policing traditions and practices. This remilitarisation discourse reflects in part, the "ethos of punitivism within the South African political elite with regards to how ordinary South Africans should be governed" (Lamb 2018, p. 939). However, as Brooks (2020) contends, the re-emergence of aggressive, militarised discourses is also reflective of a broader demand for harsher policing and punishment by much of the South African public.

Resultantly, when the SAPS' National Crime Combating Strategy (NCCS) was launched in 2000, it drew explicitly on a 'war on crime' discourse, wherein criminals were constructed as enemies (Lamb 2018). Crime was said to be combatted most effectively with aggressive policing. Thus, in drawing on this 'war on crime' discourse, police commissioners and ministers employed increasingly aggressive language and strategies (Marks et al. 2009), and SAPS—as an institution—came to subscribe to a doctrine of maximum force (Duncan 2016). This punitive discourse (which sought to other criminals) found expression in more active displays of police militarisation, an increase in police budgets and numbers, and a focus on numbers of arrests and weapons seized as indicators of police performance (Lamb 2018; Marks et al. 2009). As Lamb (2018, p. 940) contends, "the overt perpetuation of the 'war on crime' discourse has possibly contributed to the further validation of overly aggressive behaviour by police personnel, and the SAPS has been encouraged by cabinet ministers and the senior SAPS leadership to 'shoot to kill', 'fight fire with fire', and 'show no mercy' towards dangerous criminals". Indeed, as Bruce (2020, p. 40) suggests "the abuse of force remains a systemic feature of policing…Ongoing police violence is a reflection of the limitations of police transformation in South Africa since 1994".

Protest and policing in South Africa

Public protests are a core feature of South African civic society (von Holdt et al 2011). Protest was integral to the dismantling of apartheid, and in the post-1994 democratic dispensation, public protests continue to play a central role in the South African social and political landscape (Duncan 2016; von Holdt et al 2011; Yende 2024). Indeed, South Africa has variously been described as a 'protest nation'

(Duncan 2016); the 'protest capital of the world' (Alexander 2012) and a 'land of protest' (Bekker 2022, p. 227). Principally, these protests are a response to ineffective levels of service delivery and a lack of accountability by local government (Mbazira 2013; Netswera and Kgalane 2014). Protestors express dissatisfaction with inadequate housing, electricity, water and sanitation, and other basic public services; lack of jobs and community demarcation issues; as well as workers and students protesting for better working and learning conditions (Mottiar and Bond 2012; von Holdt et al 2011). However, some researchers suggest that these public protests cannot only be attributed to dissatisfaction with service delivery alone (Mchunu and Theron 2013), and that there are complex political issues underlying them (Mbazira 2013; von Holdt et al. 2011). Pithouse (2011) argues that these protests are about citizenship, social inclusion, and the rights of individuals in these marginalised communities. As Yende (2024, p. 396) suggests, "protests are a critical participatory mechanism and a tool to hold the government to account".

Over the last two decades, the policing of protest in South Africa has assumed an especially violent character, with police often ignoring the procedures and principles of the Regulations of Gathering Act (RGA)[1] (Alexander 2010; Dixon 2015; Tait and Marks 2011). Many protests start in a peaceful manner, for example, with public meetings and peaceful marches, but escalate into violence. Theorists suggest that this may be due to the dominance of the 'war on crime' discourse that has resulted in the establishment of paramilitary policing bodies such as the Public Order Police (POP) and Tactical Response Team (TRT) which, among others, are deployed as a state response to protest (Lamb 2018). Police brutality and the death of protestors are common, and often trigger counter-violence from protesters (Alexander 2010; Tait and Marks 2011). One of the most significant examples of this is the Marikana Massacre in which 34 Lonmin miners who were striking for higher wages were killed by the police on 16 August 2012.

The hard-line, strong-arm tactics that police have adopted towards protest policing suggests that the South African public's democratic right to protest peacefully is at risk and that protests have been criminalised (see Royeppen 2016; Stuurman 2020; Tait and Marks 2011). Marks et al. (2009, p. 151) propose that the remilitarised, 'war on crime' discourse connects with police officer's idealised police subjectivity, that is " 'real police' who can intervene effectively to combat crime, to restore public disorder, and to hold (at least symbolically) the 'big gun'". After the Marikana Massacre, there was significant public backlash to the remilitarisation of the police and discourses of militarisation were identified by the subsequent commission of enquiry as key contributing factors in the massacre (Duncan 2021). Resultantly, as Duncan (2021) describes, SAPS has increasingly also turned to other discourses of policing, specifically intelligence-led policing. This model of policing comprises "less visible forms of social control" which relies on surveillance techniques used in the "assessment and management of risk, and the targeting of these risks by the police" (Duncan 2021, p. 181). This approach nonetheless still

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[1] The RGA was passed in the aftermath of the apartheid dispensation to regulate public demonstrations by reconstituting them as a democratic right, and to reinscribe the role of the police (Duncan 2016).

involves the criminalisation of protests and can lead to abuse of power within the police (Duncan 2021).

Police subjectivities in South Africa

Despite SAPS serving elite interests, police officers are, themselves, usually from working-class backgrounds, and do not embody an elite class (Faull 2017a). Nonetheless, because SAPS represents corporatist and state interests, police officers remain susceptible to overarching national and institutional discourses which impact the identities and subjectivities that are made available and/or legitimised (Altbeker 2005). It is clear that socio-historical context and personal identity intersect in the enactment of police work in South Africa (see Altbeker 2005; Brooks 2019, 2020; Faull 2017a, b; Hornberger 2010; Marks 2005; Steinberg 2008). Police subjectivities are formulated within and against SAPS as an institution, as well as South Africa as a country.

Brooks' (2019) research, for example, found that police officer subjectivities are not ideologically consistent. While some officers claimed to support the protesters that they were policing (which was especially the case when police officers lived in the same communities as protesters), others proclaimed that they (the protesters) were taking democracy 'too far'. Many of these police officers noted that they would intervene when they believed that a protest was becoming violent (see Brooks 2019). They also noted that they were offered very little in the way of psychological support (see also Perkins et al 2019). Therefore, on the one hand, police embody a law enforcement subjectivity, and on the other, they represent citizens whose interests oftentimes align with those of the protests that they are called upon to suppress. It would seem that police officers were regarded by many in South Africa as indicative of a failing democracy that was, at the same time, failing them. Brooks (2020, p. 166) further argues that with regard to perceptions of democracy, for example, police officers' subjectivities "are shaped by their experience and observations of the exercise of freedom and by the value placed by post-1994 South Africa on the protection of individual rights". We might say then that in feeling sympathies towards grassroots struggle, but being required to carry out a state-centric mandate, police officers experience tensions that lay at the intersection of the public, the personal, and the institutional.

Faull (2017a) has similarly demonstrated how policing performances, along with personal identity, shape and are shaped by the history and culture of SAPS, as well as the contexts and material realities of officers' personal lives. Faull found that, in the context of South Africa's high unemployment rate, people joined SAPS to support themselves and their families. Most of the police officers with whom he engaged did not want to be police officers, and indeed grew up feeling animosity towards the police. Many were, themselves, involved in illegal activity, towing SAPS' ideological line for purposes of convenience rather than loyalty. Police practice, Faull (2017a) insists, is forged within this complex nexus of identity, sociopolitical systems, and policing culture, meaning that SAPS officers' shifting subjectivities are central to their enactments of policing.

Although this emerging body of work has offered valuable insights into the dynamics of police officers' subjectivities, we seek in this article to elucidate, in more detail, the interplay of police subjectivities and discourses. Indeed, it seems remarkable that examinations into how personal, organisational, and national discourses are intertwined in the making of SAPS police officer subjectivities have not employed a critical discourse analysis of some kind. Such an analysis, and FDA in particular, can offer insight into the subjective-systemic dialectic in which SAPS officers find themselves. A better understanding of this dialectic, we maintain, can assist us in addressing police violence in relevant ways.

Method

Applying Foucauldian discourse analysis to understand police subjectivities

In examining discourses that surround the ever-shifting nature of human subjectivity and the influence of broader institutional discourses, FDA has proven to be an especially useful and critical theoretical orientation and mode of analysis (Parker 1999; Willig 2008). This particular version of discourse analysis is concerned with how language relates to issues of subjectivity, power, and institutions (Parker 1999). It should be noted that FDA is inspired by the work of Foucault and Foucauldian scholars. As such, FDA does not seek to represent the breadth of Foucault's thought (e.g. Foucault 1979, 1988), but instead draws on select aspects of his thought as interpreted by other discourse scholars (e.g. Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017; Willig 2008).

Discourses, which are groups of statements that construct discursive objects and allow for a range of subject positions (Willig 2008), are understood in FDA as enabling and legitimising different versions of reality. Subjects (re)produce themselves in accordance with the discursive norms within which they are situated (Foucault 1979). As such, discourses are intimately connected to, co-constituted through, and bound up, with power (both dominant and counterhegemonic) as well as institutional practices (Willig 2008; Parker 1994). In turn, institutional arrangements reinforce and validate discourses, while discourses are, themselves, implicated in sustaining institutional structures (Willig 2008). In short, FDA concerns itself with the relationship between discourses and subjectivity; attends to the role that discourse plays in the reification of social power; and pays particular attention to the connection between discourses and institutions (Parker 1999; Willig 2008).

As noted earlier, the discourses on which police draw shape policing practices and, in turn, the identities and subjectivities of police officers and the communities within which they live and work (Faull 2017a, b). As such, within this article, we employ FDA as a 'theory-method' concerned with the ideological and material power of language in constructing policing realities, contexts, and subjectivities (see Potter 1997). Accordingly, we mapped FDA onto Faull's (2017a, b) conceptual framework for understanding police work in South Africa. Faull (2017a, b) holds that scholarship should seek to locate South African policing at an intersection of personal, institutional, and national narratives. Specifically, he argues that

the personal narratives of police officers relate to the stories which they tell themselves about themselves in pursuit of financial security. For example, where SAPS' institutional discourses are underpinned by a crime-focussed constitutional mandate as well as a dominant policing culture of machismo, suspicion and solidarity, dominant national discourses in South Africa rely on legacies of structural violence and oppression, and high levels of unemployment. It is within and through these broader national and institutional discourses that individual SAPS officers construct their own subjectivities (Faull 2017a). Accordingly, in our analysis, we paid particular attention to the subject positions that were made available to SAPS officers as they moved within and between personal, institutional, and national narratives when describing protest policing. The point here was not to draw neat distinctions between these narratives, but to engage critically with how each informed, bolstered, and co-constructed the others in relation to subjectivity.

Data collection and participants

In this study, we conducted three focus group discussions with SAPS officers whose mandate is to respond to protest. Most of the participants were officers from non-commissioned ranks. The perspectives of these rank-and-file police officers were considered to be important because even though they constitute the majority of SAPS personnel, they represent a relatively unexamined set of voices (Brooks 2020). Specifically, officers from the following ranks: 4 captains, 3 warrant officers, 4 sergeants, and 11 constables took part (see Faull 2017a, p. xxviii for an overview of SAPS rank structure).

The first focus group was conducted with seven officers and the second with nine officers stationed at a police station in a suburb in Johannesburg. Although officers working at this station are not formally mandated to respond to protests, they are frequently called upon to respond to protests in a nearby community that is characterised by high levels of protest which, at times, have been met with a violent response from the police. The final focus group was conducted with six Public Order Policing (POP) officers from a Gauteng Province platoon. Although rank-and-file SAPS officers can assist in the policing of protests, POP is SAPS' dedicated crowd-management unit responsible for policing protests, demonstrations, sports events, and incidents of spontaneous crowd disorder (Kinnis 2019). The focus groups were conducted primarily in English, with some officers speaking, at times, in isiZulu and Sotho. Transcripts of the focus group discussions were translated into English and subsequently back-translated into their original language to ensure translation quality. The back-translations were then compared with the original, untranslated transcripts for accuracy and consistency.

Ethics and consent

This study, as a component of a larger research project on public protests, received ethical clearance from the University of South Africa. We also received permission to conduct research in the police service from the Research Division at SAPS.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they participated in the study.

Analysis

In our analysis, we examined two discourses, namely, *violence as an internal malignancy of protest* and *protest as legitimate*, both of which emerged out of how officers' personal identity discourses engaged, refuted, and reconstituted broader national and institutional discourses (Faull 2017a, b). Within these two discourses, we explored the different police subject positions that were made available, specifically *reactive policing subjectivities* and *ambivalent policing subjectivities*, and examined how they influenced the officers' social and psychological realities and ways of being while, simultaneously, opening or foreclosing particular opportunities and actions for both police officers and protesters (see Willig 2008).

Violence as an internal malignancy of protest

Unlike many newspaper reports (Duncan 2016), in our analysis, very few police officers characterised whole protests as violent. Indeed, violence was typically constructed by SAPS officers as representing a small current within a given protest that nonetheless came to define the protest as a whole. Constructing violence as a small—but ultimately definitional feature of protest (i.e. a malignancy within protest)—in this way allowed police officers to employ a veneer of nuance in how they represented protest, while still conforming to SAPS' statist and institutional discursive logic.

Much of the rhetorical power of the *violence as an internal malignancy of protest* discourse depends on its seeming political sympathies with protesters. Indeed, once such a political alignment is established, the critique of protest is made to appear as if it is at one with the subject position of protesters, rather than the subject position of the police (which, because of its association with violence, has been largely delegitimised). In seeing to this discursive goal, police officers inferred an undefined notion of 'protest' as noble, yet contaminated by nefarious internal elements which necessitated a (sometimes violent) response from police. P1 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station) remarks that

> Some of them [protesters] ... are now using that element of rights whereby you have a right to do whatever. You have a right to strike. You have a right to go wherever you want to go. But not understanding ... there is no right which is absolute in this world. All in all, you might be abusing or either exceeding the powers you've been given by the government.

Here, the rights of protesters are constructed as determined by state legislation rather than the people who are to exercise these rights, which is to say that protesting subjects may exercise their rights only in accordance with statist discursive parameters. Noting that "some" protesters abuse the right to protest by "not

understanding … there is no right which is absolute in this world" emphasises that this right is inherently prone to abuse when it is determined by those who are to exercise this right. The limits of protesters' rights are thus given discursive salience, with the "right to strike" and the "right to go wherever you want to go" made to appear as sufficient freedoms in and of themselves. The individual subject "abusing or either exceeding" is discursively established as the source of violent protest to which police must respond. The vagueness of P1's speech ("there is no right which is absolute in this world") obscures how a subject might exercise these rights. However, by proclaiming in the very next sentence that one cannot exceed "the powers you've been given by the government", SAPS is constructed as being required to enforce a statist agenda that is, ultimately, irreconcilable with protest politics.

Like P1, other police officers constructed the contradictory nature of their institutional subject position (and thus, encouraged a potentially sympathetic audience reaction) by placing the discursive accent on the 'bad' elements of protest. Where P2 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station) notes that "this is not actually the protest for the service delivery. It's also the other people [who] are using that [protest] to loot the shops", P1 asserts that protest "turns … violent because their [the protesters] theme was to provoke the government [to address] the issue of say sanitation. But sanitation is sort of a slang to stand on top of the broader plan [of violence]". Thus, in a seemingly paradoxical move, both P2 and P1 premise their critique of protest on the apparent legitimacy of protest. Indeed, those who use protest to advance a sinister agenda (e.g. looting or violence) discredit protest as a whole. When P2 notes that it is "other people" who use protest to loot, he appears to attribute the destructive elements of protest to outside forces, yet these forces become indistinguishable from a protest. In other words, he characterises a protest event by forces which are adjacent to this event, and co-opt it, and it is because these "other people" are willed towards violence that protest, despite the intentions of most protesters, comes to embody violence. P1 similarly recounts that protesters' demands for sanitation (and the implications therein of dignity) are used as a kind of Trojan horse to smuggle in an agenda of violence (which carries with it an implication of immorality). Following this discursive logic, police officers are able to react violently to protesters while apparently revering an undefined nonviolent protest ideal.

A number of the SAPS officers constructed protest's inherent violence in essentialising terms. P6 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station), for instance, proclaimed that protesters are always "later joined by the criminals and then those criminals are the ones who vandalised the properties, the municipal properties and stuff…". Protests are constructed not as containing actors who commit crimes. Rather, in relying on the label of "criminal", these actors *are* their crimes, which once again establishes violent crime as an inevitable consequence of the deviant elements which act on and corrupt protest. Later in P6's speech, these criminals are described as exhibiting "laziness" and acting on a premise of "whatever I can get for free, then I will go for it". Thus, the criminal is also one who is driven by a kind of entitlement which coheres with a statist narrative that defines the subject as making its own history, regardless of structural barriers. This construction of the criminal aligns with P1's talk above, wherein protesters cross over into criminality when state-allocated rights are "abused". The contradictory subject position of

police officers is therefore discursively resolved in each case by placing such contradiction onto protests and protesters.

By constructing protest events as holding within them nefarious elements (that result in, for instance, looting, violence and damage to property), police officers were able to establish a subject position for the protester that—despite being a minority within a particular protest—came to define a protest. It was against this subject position, then, that a particular kind of reactionary police subjectivity is experienced by some officers as not only legitimate, but entirely necessary if a protest's apparent violence and destruction were to be sufficiently abated.

Reactive police subjectivities

By attributing violence to minority elements which come to characterise a protest as a whole, police officers embody and legitimise a number of police subjectivities that seek to render a forceful mode of policing as necessary. In other words, if protest is constructed as always containing the seeds of violence, strong—often violent—police work is, in turn, made to seem an imperative of peacekeeping. We see this in P3's (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station) speech, in which he explains why police fire rubber bullets at protesters:

> If you don't want to disperse now, this is the time we are going to force you to disperse. That's where the rubber bullet comes in. Those rubber bullets are not going to be fired if you are not retaliating, the stones and everything and you are damaging the property looting and all of those nearby, yeah. Because that's where, now, the teargas comes in. Remember the point which we are raising: we are there to secure and to prevent.

Police violence, in this extract, is constructed as the product and responsibility of the protester who does not disperse, as demanded by the police. This demand seeks to control the protest in accordance with the requirements of the state, rather than the demands of protesters, thereby denuding the political potential of the protest. Police responsibility for the actions taken against protesters is further obscured when P3 proclaims "That's where the rubber bullet comes in" and "that's where, now, the teargas comes in". By placing the subject-less phrase "rubber bullets are not going to be fired if you are not retaliating" beside the phrase "you are damaging the property looting"—which includes the subject "you"—protester action is emphasised over police reaction. Police subjectivity, and therefore police agency, is disavowed by personifying the actions taken by police officers so that these actions can exist without the police officer appearing as a subject.

It is noteworthy that P3 chooses to conclude his speech by declaring that the function of the police is to "to secure and to prevent", a slight turn on the well-known policing slogan "to serve and protect". This misquote appears to decentre the citizen, who is to be served and protected, and instead prioritises a statist social order that is to be secured, with any challenge to this order to be quelled. This was echoed by a number of police officers, such as P17 (Public Order Policing officer) who, in referring to protest action, notes that "You'll have to control it, because otherwise

you will just run away. You learn to control it". The emphasis on control once again highlights that forceful policing is necessary for controlling and directing protest, and thus establishing peace.

Many police officers established the reactive police subjectivity in highly prescriptive ways. This is to say, police violence was constructed as forming a reaction, which matched perfectly the intensity of protest violence. Exemplary here was P17's speech, in which he notes that

> if the protest is already violent and they are starting to throw ... stones, you will obviously start using the minimum violence that you can, you will start with the least amount of violence that you can possibly use in that situation ... sometimes you have to start first shooting before you start talking, in order to start talking, you'll have to stabilise.

Although police officers constructed the violent elements within protest as unwieldy, violence as exercised by police officers is discursively positioned rather differently. For P17, proclaiming that a police officer will, in every instance, "obviously start using the minimum violence" required to maintain peace implies that for police, unlike protesters, violence is an easily scalable, utilitarian measure. Within this extract, police violence is confined to the "minimum" and "the least" possible. When police officers "have to start shooting", it is only to ensure that protesters will start "talking" (implying that only violence can be used for this seemingly 'rational' and 'nonviolent' purpose). Once again, by concluding his speech with an emphasis on the police's role in stabilising conflict, P17 highlights the apparent peaceful motivations of reactive police subjectivities.

Emphasising the supposed fairness and peaceful intentions of reactive policing allowed a number of police officers to embody a subjectivity characterised by victimhood. For instance, in emphasising victimhood in order to absolve SAPS officers from taking responsibility for police violence, P11 (Public Order Policing officer) notes that "The police can never be right. We're always wrong. We do nothing, we're wrong". P12 (Public Order Policing officer) similarly recounts that "At the end of the day, it's like we as police we can just be crucified, do anything it's fine. I mean police are supposed to die. The only thing we're asking for is just respect…". Thus, where P11 constructs police officers as occupying an entirely harmless subjectivity whose existence garners undue criticism, P12 seems to go further than this. He evokes the sacrificial nature of policing ("police are supposed to die") and appears to demand that because of its inherent noble vocation, police subjectivity as such should be respected.

The reactive police subjectivity was constructed by participants as one that is always secondary to that of protesters. This was achieved through a number of discursive manoeuvres, namely, minimising the agency of police officers, emphasising protester action, maintaining that all police violence directly correlates to the violence of protesters, and that the police officer, whose social role demands respect, embodies a subject position marked by victimhood. Therefore, if protest inevitably leads to violence, as is proclaimed by most of the police officers, it logically follows that SAPS officers, if they are to undertake their duties, should respond with violence. Thus, reactive police subjectivities are discursively set up in a manner that

justifies their purely responsive ontology. At the same time, discursive attention falls on a minority of protesters who, if not for their violence, would not incite violence from police officers.

Protest as legitimate

In addition to the above discourse, which served to delegitimise protest action and demonise protesters, a number of police officers drew on a discourse which constructed protest as a public's legitimate plea for social justice from a disinterested government. Within the *protest as legitimate* discourse, protesters were not blamed or made responsible for the injustices to which they are reacting. Rather, it is an unresponsive government that is established as giving rise to the necessity of such protests. For instance, as indicated by P3 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station), "the government, it's failing us a lot. If their [protesters] voices were heard, then none of this [violent protests] would happen", as well as P1 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station): "We don't communicate with our people. We just keep quiet and that's the problem". The officers switched between acknowledgement of their subject position as agents of this disinterested, uncaring state ("We don't communicate") and dissatisfied citizens in their own right ("it's failing us a lot"). The pronouns "us", "we", and "our" connect police officers to the struggles of protesters, further highlighting the tensions inherent to the police subjectivity.

Throughout this discourse, the government—rather than police or protesters—was repeatedly made salient in constructions of protest. Speaking of politicians, P3 proclaims that "They fill up the pockets of themselves. They are sucking us … Now we on the other side, from the grassroots level that is where now we embark on strikes". Here, police officers—despite being representatives of the state—align their subject positions with that of grassroots-level activists whose politically dissident activity they are to contain, even employing a first-person personal pronoun in the description of strike action ("we embark on strikes"). Similarly, protest violence, rather than an act of baseless criminality on the part of the protesters, is constructed as a rationally emotive response to continued service delivery failure. As P5 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station) remarks, "They [the protesters] try all the means to invite them [politicians]… but they don't come. At the end of the day they say, 'For them [politicians] to listen to us we must be violent then the media will come to us'". Violence is here established as liberatory, serving as a kind of last resort in ensuring state accountability and the dignity of people from the grassroots level. Protests, rather than representing the actions of a criminal few (as was the case in the *violence as an internal malignancy of protest* discourse), are considered the will of *entire* communities, and even some police officers. Within this understanding of protests, protests (including protest violence) become framed within a human rights discourse, rather than the 'war on crime' discourse.

A number of police officers constructed protest violence as a direct result of structural violence, thereby drawing attention to the systemic origins of protest. In this way, protest is established as a socially embedded consequence of structural violence, rather than the product of a few individuals with criminal intent. P3 (officer

stationed at a Johannesburg station) recalls that protests "won't be peaceful now that people are sitting there with an empty stomach. If we can fight the issue of poverty … with job creation then those guys who are robbers or murderers, there won't be so many". The very function of policing is called into question here, whereby peace is understood as built from below, rather than enabled by the state's reaction to protesters. The image of the "empty stomach" centralises how protest is linked to material depravity, and that treating protest as a symptom does little to address its structural basis (whereas "job creation" as a positive response to poverty is constructed as more likely to do so). A similar construction was noted in P2's (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station) speech, which notes that "if the human rights commissions … could just visit people who are living below the poverty line, if they could just go into the squatter camps … go deeper into those issues and address them with the government, we will have a handle of these things of the protests … the protest would be minimal". Once again, it is poverty that is positioned as the root cause of protest. However, it is not that the "robbers" and "murderers" of P1's speech will disappear if poverty is addressed, but rather that "there won't be so many", meaning that the contradictory tensions of the police subjectivity may begin to dissipate to some extent. Thus, criminality is still fixed to the subject through labelling but, in this instance, a system-focussed interpretation is discursively employed.

For police officers drawing on the *protest as legitimate* discourse, the related police subject position then comprises the somewhat contradictory task of controlling and/or managing protesters who are engaging in legitimate, even liberatory, social action. Rather than placing blame on protesters, however, those drawing from this discourse appeared to construct protest as a reaction to an ineffectual state and an unequal economic system.

Ambivalent police subjectivities

Those drawing on the *protest as legitimate* discourse presented policing as at odds with the 'war on crime' discourse that dominates national and institutional policing culture (Lamb 2018). It is from within this understanding of protest that police subjectivities are poised ambivalently: officially aligned with a state mandate that is opposed to those fighting for justice. However, this ambivalence is exacerbated when protests emerge within the communities in which police officers reside, and in whose material progress they are invested (see also Brooks 2019, 2020; Faull 2017a). As P8 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station) remarks, "We are also part of the community, and we also feel what they [the protesters] are feeling … what they [the protesters] go through because we also go through it even though we don't protest". Here, "they" (protesters) become discursively linked to and made a part of "we" (police officers) through a mutual concern with material justice. As P10 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station) insists, "Some of us, we are staying with them [the protesters] … It's just that at that point in time I am at work. So, whatever they are striking for they are also striking for me". The ambivalent police subjectivity thus embodies the competing positionalities of sympathetic community

resistance politics and the—oftentimes violent—mandate of the state actor (Brooks 2019).

Enacting violence against communities that mirror their own appeared to elicit uneasy affective reactions within the SAPS officers who were straddling such incompatible subject positions. P2 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station), for example, says that "we are obliged to go there and do whatever that we need to do. What is even sadder is when you have to arrest them [protesters], sometimes you find the old, old people … are getting shot at. That one is overwhelming". Unlike the subject positions facilitated by the *violence as an internal malignancy of protest* discourse, the subject position made available from this discourse generates not only political affiliations with protesters, but also connects with their humanity (noted here through the evocations of vulnerable "old people" being hurt). It is thus more difficult for police officers to justify violence here, than it is for those who constructed protesters as "looters" and "criminals". Added to this, and perhaps in an attempt to consolidate the ambivalent police subjectivity, P2 uses a second pronoun when discussing arresting protesters ("you have to arrest them"), implying a lack of choice or agency in the matter ("have to"). When discussing the more direct use of violence against elderly protesters, P2 switches to a passive, subject-free nominalisation ("Senior people are getting shot at") which works to obfuscate responsibility for the shooting (see Fairclough 2003), and to detach psychologically from these kinds of violent police action.

Other SAPS officers emphasised the hierarchical organisation within SAPS and their obligation as police officers to follow orders:

> P3 (officer stationed at a Johannesburg station): The majority of the people who are residing in squatter camps, you find that they are poverty-stricken ... At times when they talk to you as the law enforcement agent you feel that you know that there is nothing that I can do because I'm obliged because of the contract that I've signed. I said I would serve and protect
>
> P1 (officer stationed at Johannesburg station)**:** We understand everything was formulated under certain rules and regulations and then once you get inside you were ready [to follow] the rules of that organisation … some of us, we never joined the police as a call, we joined the police because of the hunger. When we are in uniform, we now abide with some certain rules [from] which you cannot [be] divergent. Once you're divergent you are going to be in for it. So, now we work according to the word of command … even though we know the truth, understand this, we are wearing the same uniform, but our mind is not on the same channel.

Police violence is constructed here as state violence. Resultantly, even though individual police officers carry out this violence, they are constructed as being somewhat distanced from it. Phrases such as "I'm obliged", which emphasise the signing of contracts and the chain of command, seek to evoke punishment for nonconformity to SAPS' institutional culture and official mandate ("you are going to be in for it"). Indeed, this—along with mentions of structural violence ("some of us we never joined the police as a call we joined the police because of the hunger")—acts to displace the police officer, as a subject, from police violence. The police "uniform"

thus becomes a metaphorical and literal description of the conflicting positions that the individual officer must embody when taking on a police subjectivity wherein one's "mind is not on the same channel". This police subjectivity (which officers claimed to enter into out of necessity rather than choice) thus becomes attached to malevolent state apparatuses against which, it is claimed, individual officers' are unable to dissent.

The ambivalent police subjectivity engendered via the *protest as legitimate* discourse renders policing a job which, because of South Africa's high unemployment, police officers may not have any kind of ideological affiliation. To the contrary, they may harbour feelings that are antithetical to the statist mandate of SAPS, with their sympathies lying with the marginalised protesters whom they are required to control. This is especially the case when protesters are campaigning on behalf of the low-income communities in which SAPS officers live.

Concluding thoughts

In this article, through a FDA of SAPS officers' talk on protest, we explore how within the discourse of *violence as an internal malignancy of protest*, violence was established as a small, but ultimately definitional, feature of protest. This discourse opened up what we understand to be a reactive police subjectivity, wherein police violence was discursively established by police officers as a necessary kind of mirror to protest violence. Protesters' subject positions were, in this way, made salient so that police officers' responsibility for violent policing was debased. In the second discourse, *protest as legitimate*, police officers connected police subjectivities to those of protesters, whose plight and relation to structural and material violence was shared by many police officers. This opened up ambivalent police subjectivities, whereby police officers did not appear to subscribe ideologically to their subject position as a state actor but, out of employment necessity, were required to suppress the grassroots struggles to which their material interests are aligned.

The two discourses identified in this study should not be understood as always operating on separate discursive plains. There were many instances where each bolstered and operated alongside the other. This, of course, gives rise to contradictory police subjectivities that move through and between the personal, institutional, and national narratives that surround and shape SAPS. For example, P1, P2, and P3 all constructed protest as legitimate while also maligning the violence that they claimed was inherent to protest. Such contradictions appeared to exist between different police officers, and within individual officers.

It would appear that the ebbs and flows of power that occur between and within police-protester interactions are psychological inasmuch as they are material. The contradictory subject positions occupied by SAPS officers, and the resultant conflicting police subjectivities, draw attention to a broader contradiction in South African society today, namely that protest is discursively reified in the country's constitution as a democratic right, and yet such a right must be exercised within the discursive-material parameters set by the state. These parameters are, themselves, structured by dominant discourses (e.g. the 'war on crime' discourse). With respect

to the popular grievances that underpin protests, as well as the demands made by protesters, these statist parameters are by and large antithetical to the interests of the majority of the country's population. Accordingly, we posit that policing becomes a functionary of neither police officers nor the people of South Africa, but of the state and its elite affiliates.

Protesters and protest police in South Africa operate within a capitalist system of racialised poverty. In our analysis, we found that there were moments when police officers were candid about how this system affects their lives, and there were moments when they aligned with the violent ideological dictates of this system—dictates for which policing is, by and large, designed to defend. Therefore, even though police officers' subjective and discursive tensions highlight the challenges of policing in South Africa today, more presciently, these tensions point towards the racial capitalist order—a structural legacy of colonialism and apartheid—under which the majority of those living in South Africa continue to suffer (see Clarno and Vally 2023). Directly addressing these legacies—rather than merely implementing police reforms—is fundamental to building social justice in South Africa.

The conflicting ways that police justify and critique their varied police subjectivities need not be ignored, but instead taken into account in reconstructing this state institution that works for minority interests. Police may serve to advance the material interests of protesters (which are, oftentimes, their own interests) by, for example, ensuring that protesters are protected and that their stated political goals and strategies materialise in accordance to a mandate that protesters, themselves, define. It is in this regard that may begin to reconceptualise policing protest, whereby police officers do not seek to quell, neuter or disperse protest action, but are instead able to ensure that the democratic ideals of protest are upheld.

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