

Perceptions of Violence in Universities: Contextual Panoramas

Percepciones de la violencia en las universidades: Panoramas contextuales

  Julyana Sueme Winkler Oshiro Galindo¹

  Christian Muleka Mwewa²

¹ Curso de Psicología, Campus Campo Grande, Universidade Estadual de Mato Grosso do Sul/UEMS, Campo Grande-Brasil

² Curso de Pedagogia, Campus Três Lagoas, Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul, Campo Grande-Brasil

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Autor de correspondencia: Julyana Sueme Winkler Oshiro Galindo

Abstract

This paper aimed to present some theoretical-methodological reflections on perceptions of violence in the university context as indicated by the 202 participants enrolled in the III National Seminar and I International Seminar on Education and Culture for Teacher Training, which took place between May 18-28 and June 9, 2021. The data presented come from a survey collected through a questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The discussions were based on the theoretical framework of Critical Theory of Society. Considering ethical concerns, the information disclosed is organized as general data, without identifying individuals. Results indicated that the majority of participants were women; among those who self-identified as belonging to a social minority, the categories include: non-white women, immigrants, poor individuals, and residents of peripheral areas. Participants stated that they had witnessed or experienced violence within the university, often due to their minority status. The reported forms of violence included racism (22%), homophobia (18%), sexism (11%), age-related violence (11%), economic violence (10%), xenophobia (9%), violence against people with disabilities (7%), lesbophobia (6%), transphobia (3%), social violence (2%), and biphobia (1%).

Key words: Teacher training, violence in universities, participant profile.

Resumen

Este trabajo tuvo como objetivo presentar algunas reflexiones teórico-metodológicas sobre las percepciones de violencia en el contexto universitario señaladas por los 202 participantes inscritos en el III Seminario Nacional y I Seminario Internacional de Educación y Cultura para la Formación de Profesores, que tuvo lugar entre los días 18 y 28 de mayo y 9 de junio de 2021. Los datos presentados provienen de una encuesta recogida a través de un cuestionario administrado a través de Google Forms. Las discusiones se basaron en el marco teórico de la Teoría Crítica de la Sociedad. Teniendo en cuenta las preocupaciones éticas, la información divulgada se organiza como datos generales, sin identificar a los individuos. Los resultados indicaron que la mayoría de los participantes eran mujeres; entre los que se autoidentificaron como pertenecientes a una minoría social, las categorías incluyen: mujeres no blancas, inmigrantes, personas pobres y residentes en zonas periféricas. Los participantes declararon haber sido testigos o haber sufrido violencia dentro de la universidad, a menudo debido a su condición de minoría. Las formas de violencia denunciadas incluían el racismo (22%), la homofobia (18%), el sexismo (11%), la violencia relacionada con la edad (11%), la violencia económica (10%), la xenofobia (9%), la violencia contra las personas con discapacidad (7%), la lesbofobia (6%), la transfobia (3%), la violencia social (2%) y la libofobia (1%).

Palabras clave: Formación del profesorado, violencia en las universidades, perfil de los participantes.

INTRODUCCIÓN

The present work aimed to present some theoretical-methodological reflections on the manifestations of violence that occur within the university space. For this, the responses collected from the registration forms of participants in the III National Seminar and I International Seminar on Education and Culture for Teacher Training, which took place online from May 18-28 and June 9, 2021, were used. This seminar included the participation of national and international researchers from the following countries: Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina, Mozambique, Australia, Portugal, and Spain, where there were rich exchanges of knowledge and diverse methodological procedures in the area of education, specifically on art.

The event was conducted online, and registration and data collection were carried out via an electronic form made available through Google Forms. The program included participants from the aforementioned countries, in addition to Brazil, which was interesting to observe how the phenomenon of violence occurs in institutions in various ways.

In order to investigate violence in the context of training, research should be considered that thematizes certain types of violence, such as, Bull (2023), Bull & Page (2022), Pehlivan (2024), Sulistyawan et al. (2022), Achilleos et al. (2021), Adonis & Silinda (2021) e Gallardo-Nieto et al. (2021).

The choice of the theoretical approach, Critical Theory of Society, to discuss violence in universities becomes relevant because, even though society is technologically advanced and capable of ending human suffering, it can still perpetuate violence, barbarism, prejudice, and social discrimination. The rationality of order and progress has not solved humanity's problems and, in particular, has not freed people from the harsh penalty that exists in human relations and work. Mastering nature and having clarity about what mystical forces represented did not prevent people's suffering.

The mythology of Ulysses portrays the prototype of the bourgeois self that is constituted through work. He was devoid of the mythical forces conceived by the gods, and his figure illustrates

the transition from using reason over the impulses of desires. To deal with reality, he had to suppress his desires and paid a high price to adapt to the world. As in the passage with the Cyclops, foreseeing the looming danger, he called himself "Nobody," which made him the sole survivor. Denying one's own existence in exchange for staying alive becomes a barbaric and violent act, as one denies impulses, denies one's essence. His reward is nothing more than the submission to a life devoid of freedom and autonomy.

To survive and save his crew from the trap of the sirens' song, Ulysses had to renounce his desires to survive, and this survival cost him dearly, as he could not fulfill the promises of happiness that had been made to him. "But the hero destined for seduction emancipated himself through suffering" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1985, p. 38). "Humanity had to undergo terrible trials before the self, the identical, determined, and virile character of man, was formed, and all childhood is still in some way a repetition of this" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1985, p. 39). The ability to differentiate oneself from others, obtaining control over one's impulses, while also differentiating between self and nature, allowed the individual to think about their existence. The domination Ulysses imposed over the rowers became an example of this differentiation and domination.

Ulysses' effort to stay alive was to deny happiness by dominating his own nature, that is, his desires. The fear of losing the self and of suppressing the boundary between oneself and another life, the fear of death and destruction, is intertwined with a promise of happiness, which constantly threatened civilization (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1985, p. 39).

In this way, civilization developed through obedience and work, and satisfaction comes from mere appearance, like beauty devoid of power. Ulysses feared death, and, in his pursuit of happiness, sought ways to escape the trap of the sirens' song. Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer (1985) say that workers, alert and focused, must look ahead and forget what was left behind; they need to sublimate and make practical any distractions. They must dance to the rhythm of production because any misstep renders them disposable and unproductive for the system. Ulysses listened to the sirens' song while tied to the mast, similar to the bourgeois who relinquished happiness with the increase

of their power. The workers did not know the beauty of the song, only its danger, and even if Ulysses nodded for them to untie him, they did not hear him, for they only knew of the song's danger, not its beauty.

The objective conditions of society enforce conformity and impotence in the face of the logical rationality of industrial society. Such rationality, endorsed by existing irrationality, according to Marcuse (2015), calls for the practice of sacrifices, of renunciations, in a society that no longer needs them. It can be inferred here that this irrationality reveals the need for a society without opposition. Technological rationality reveals its political nature as it becomes "the great vehicle of the most perfect domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body, are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of the universe" (Marcuse, 2015, p. 54).

To strengthen the existing ideology, there is a weakening of psychic processes, as individuals reflect little on social determinants. Thus, the fragility of the self's constitution is revealed. In the process of alienation, individuals are isolated from each other and pitted against one another. They are more connected by the commodities they exchange than by their own people, and if everything revolves around commodities, which have a useful life, human life and objects/commodities become disposable and indifferent. Indifference permeates the relationships between things and people.

Therefore, researching the phenomenon of violence is never exhausted; on the contrary, throughout the historical process, it finds fertile ground to propagate more than ever in this society. This happens because violence is a constitutive phenomenon of the human being. Dominating nature and one's own human nature required renunciations and violent acts; however, it is necessary to understand that violence is regression, as Freud's psychoanalysis discusses, because violent behavior is a denial of humanity itself. Thus, bringing psychoanalysis into the discussion becomes necessary, as despite its theoretical limitations, it allows us to understand the constitution and dynamics of the functioning of the psyche. From this understanding, Critical Theory of Society problematizes how, given the objective conditions of society with an irrational ideology, the formation of the individual becomes

impossible, and the weakened psyche becomes incapable of leading to the emancipation of thought, resulting in constant barbarism.

Therefore, the history of humanity, with regard to its organization, has been marked by violence and domination since the early days of society, initially through killing an enemy, hunting, or fighting a predator, for example. Colonialism as a projection of domination, power, and interest in subjugating other groups considered inferior. Human relations have been and continue to be based on the logic of violence. The treatment of slaves, the rape of women, and the murder of children with some form of violence occurred in other cultures considered part of the "underworld" of civilization in subjugated countries. However, when the Third Reich took power in Germany and used colonial torture techniques, it mobilized people not only because of the barbarity but also because it occurred right under the Eurocentric and white civilization. If the justification for such acts only applied to "barbaric" and "soulless" populations, how can we explain these acts being committed by white and Christian populations?

Thinking about what happened in Nazi Germany against the Jews without considering the historical context is dangerous because the violence that occurred against the victims could fall into the subjectivism of "Hitler's madness," as if the event were isolated. However, this fact becomes a manifest lie, as even today, we see how anti-Semitism, racism, and other prejudiced attitudes become the rule for conduct, criteria for selection processes, and the classification of social groups. It is no wonder that the type of violence that seminar participants declared witnessing was racism.

(...) the concept of racism, it is useful to explore descriptions of the phenomenon to attempt to understand some of its connotations. There are varying definitions for racism. It encompasses a complex system that affects people in multiple ways (Achilleos et al., 2021, p. 1).

The social hierarchy organized by the capitalist system separates people into superiors and inferiors, where the latter must submit to a relationship of inferiority with the former; it uses the logic that the few must command the many, naturalizing a violent and discriminatory way of

relating. Thus, for Adorno (1995), the objective conditions conducive to the persecution of minorities have never ceased to exist, and therefore, we must think that the formation of individuals motivated by persecution and aggression continues to occur.

For Adorno & Horkheimer (1985), the type of personality suited to expressing a society structured in hierarchies and contributing to its reproduction is the sadomasochist, who associates pleasure with superiority—what it allows in terms of domination over those below in the hierarchy—and inferiority, due to the pleasure obtained in obeying, made possible by identification with the aggressor.

The relationship between personality type and type of violence, the authoritarian personality, which has sadomasochistic needs at its base, can still identify with those who destroy, meaning they are more prone to developing prejudices because they recognize in the target something they cannot acknowledge in themselves. Thus, it is important to uncover the psychic constitution of the individual who fosters and practices violence in order to understand its dynamics and create strategies to combat violent behavior through education.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative and quantitative study using Jasp software (free access), which allowed quantitative analysis to obtain accurate and reliable data, as well as helping to analyze large data sets and generalize results in order to systematically test our hypotheses for the benefit of our research in the humanities and social sciences. In order to better analyze the qualitative and quantitative data, we used the Iramuteq software (free access), which is one of the tools for analyzing qualitative data, as it allows us to identify themes and patterns in large sets of textual data, as well as presenting quantitative occurrences that can be analyzed.

The data analyzed were taken from the registration forms of the 202 participants of the mentioned event. The questions aimed to gather information such as age, gender,

ethnicity, academic degree, field of study, affiliated institution, sexual orientation, whether the participant considered themselves to belong to a minority group, and if so, which one; whether they had experienced violence within the university; if the response was affirmative, what type of violence; whether they had witnessed violent acts within the university; and if affirmative, what type. In the end, the participant was asked to describe the violence situation. This approach allowed the participant to be in a protagonist position, narrating the experienced situation.

Sexual violence is an act that refers to sexual matters with unilateral treatment and is not expected by the victim, who is the target. This action often causes negative responses in victims, such as psychological disorders, irritability, trauma, and even suicide. Sexual violence can occur anywhere, private and public, and can be committed by anyone, from strangers to even the closest people (Sulistyawan *et al.*, 2022, p. 121).

Regarding ethnic or “racial” self-perception, participants were given only two options: to consider themselves either white or non-white. The justification for this choice stems from the process of ethnic and “racial” hierarchy in Brazil, where whites, Blacks, and Indigenous peoples exist in a stratified social order, with whites enjoying a self-imposed superior hierarchical position. Therefore, those not belonging to this hierarchical place are discriminated against as a group, with small variations depending on skin tone, which always depends on the interlocutor. In other words, the hierarchical position varies according to the chromatic aspect of the individuals involved in the discriminatory process under the influence of the one who ‘whitens’ themselves. Additionally, this binary classification is justified by the fact that when a non-white person is discriminated against (violated), it does not matter if they are Indigenous, Black, brown (cardboard color), or mulatto (mule descendant); from an ethnic or “racial” perspective, they do not belong to the group that has self-recognized as hegemonic.

Thus, it becomes a false issue to focus on skin tone when addressing ethnic or “racial” discrimination in Brazil, as non-whites are subdivided to be better dominated, struggling

for the leftovers in the hope of ‘whitening’ themselves. ‘Whitening’ differs from ‘Whiteness’. The former refers to a process of non-whites adhering to ethnic or “racial” violence in Brazil, while the latter refers to a perception of those not occupying hierarchical positions, legitimating the chromatic conception in the treatment of racism in Brazil. To disclose and tabulate the registered participants’ information, an email authorization was sent, and to maintain confidentiality, the information was not personalized. In other words, people were not identified; only their responses to the questions were recorded. Additionally, from an ethical standpoint, personal information, such as name, CPF (Brazilian personal ID), and email were not used—only general data.

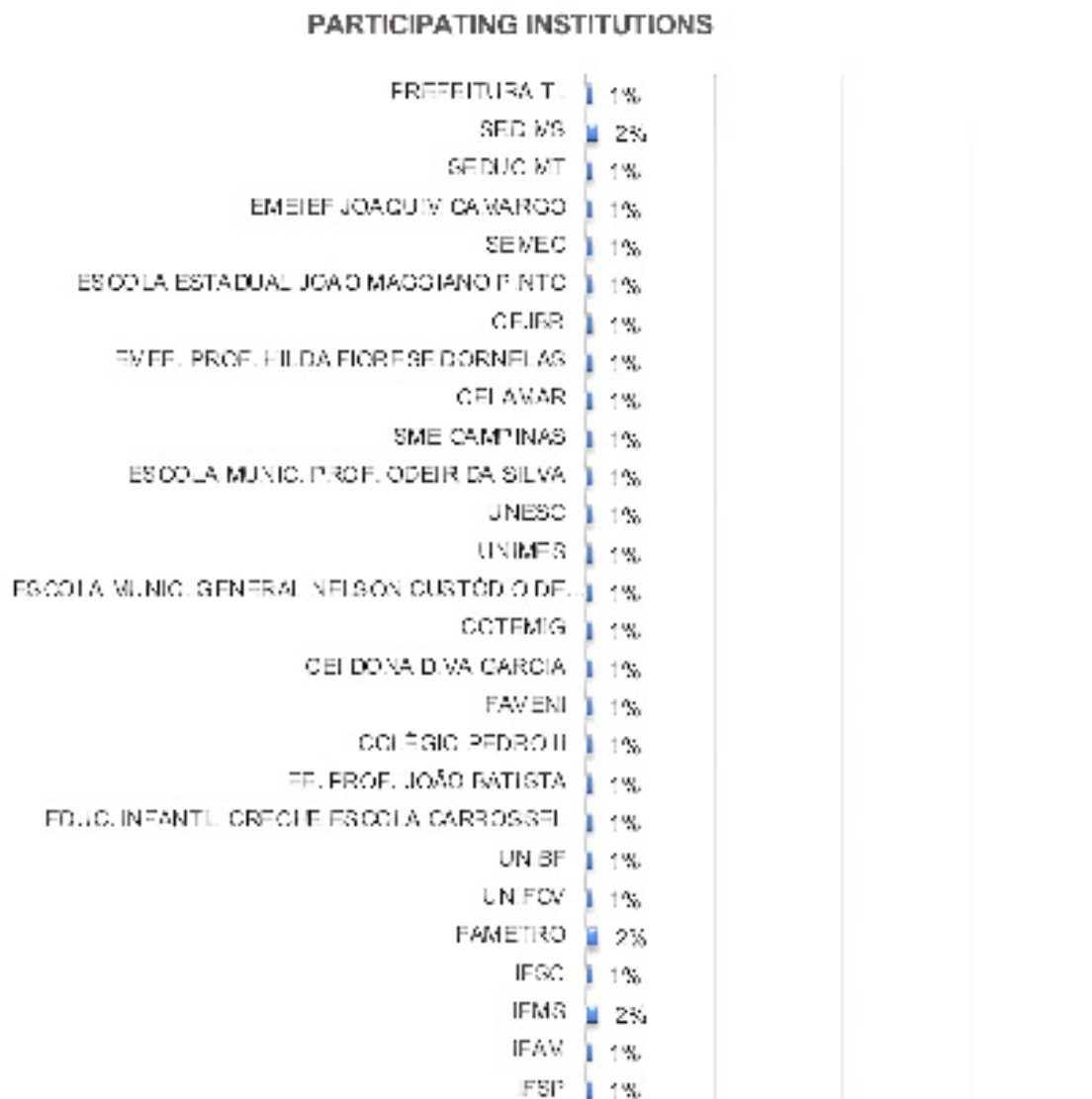
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

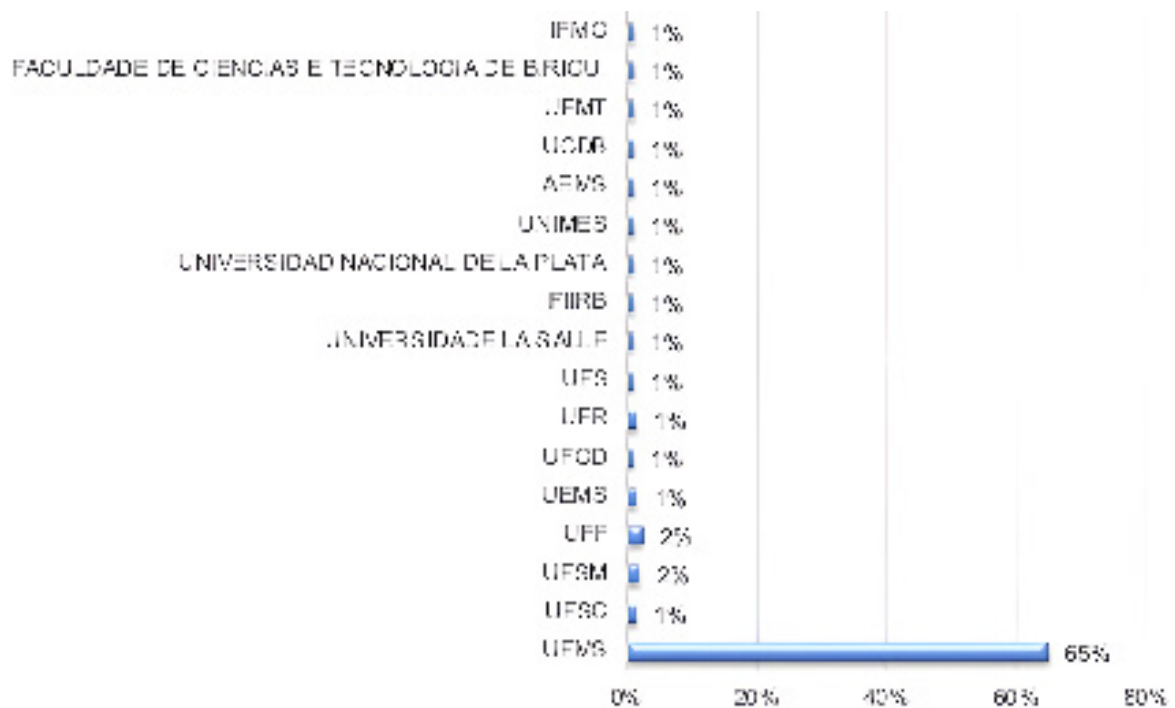
Below are some relevant data regarding the profile of the participants in the event, as well as the situations of violence experienced within the university to which they are affiliated.

Profile of Participants:

Of the 202 participants, 79% were women, and 21% were men. Regarding ethnicity, 55% of the participants self-identified as white, and 45% as non-white. Concerning the highest academic degree, 51% held undergraduate degrees, 25% were specialists, 20% held master’s degrees, and 4% held doctoral degrees. The institutions to which they belong are represented in the following graph:

Figure 1.
Participating Institutions.

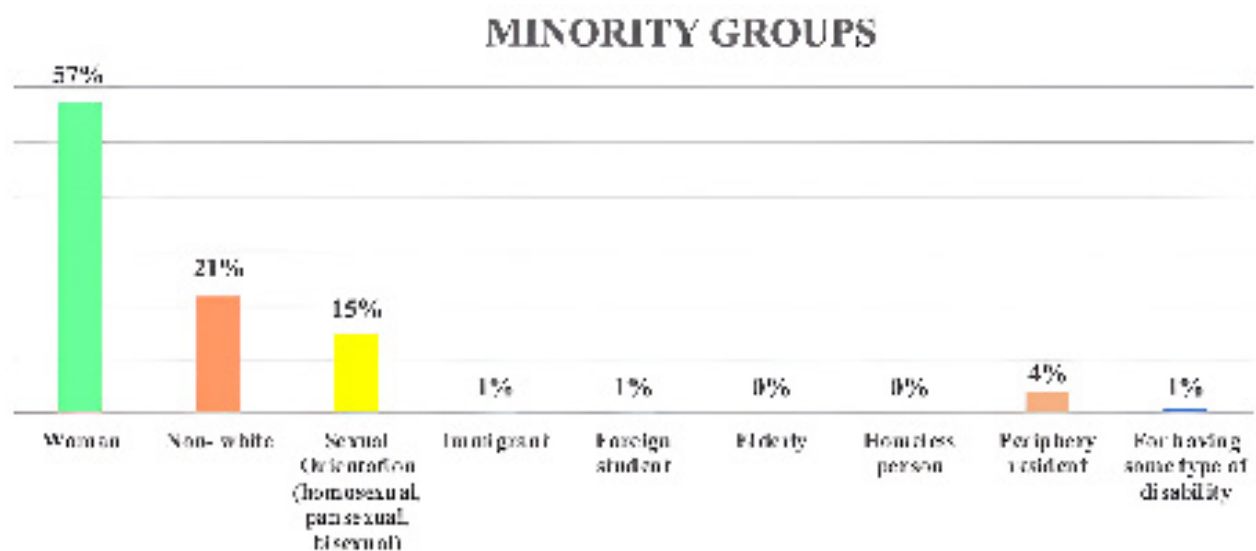




According to age group: 19% were between 18 and 24 years old, 24% were between 25 and 31 years old, 24% were between 32 and 38 years old, 15% were between 39 and 44 years old, 12% were between 45 and 50 years old, and 5% were over 51 years old. Regarding sexual orientation: 83% identified as heterosexual; 7% self-identified as gay; 5% stated they were bisexual;

1% stated they were lesbian; 1% stated they were pansexual; only 1% of the participants said they had no defined sexual orientation, and 1% of the participants said their sexual orientation was not a matter of public knowledge. Regarding belonging to a social minority group, 43% said no and 57% said yes.

Figure 2.
Social Minorities of the Participants.



According to the graph above, it was found that the minority groups with which the participants identify were: being women (57%), non-white (21%), having a non-heteronormative sexual orientation (15%), and being residents of peripheral areas (4%).

Violence Reported by Participants

With regard to violence present in the academic environment, it is assumed that the history of humanity is marked by violence, domination, subjugation, negotiations, adaptations, etc. The capitalist system hierarchizes and organizes society into classes and stimulates power relations among people. The university space is not isolated from society and, being embedded in this societal dynamic, violence is also present within it. The contradiction arises because the university is meant to be a space for the construction of scientific knowledge and democratic discussions; however, violence often manifests subtly, causing suffering among the individuals involved, who, weakened by the context, may not find ways to report it or seek help. Therefore, understanding how violence occurs, the types of violence, and its contexts is crucial for developing actions to combat it, and the data from this research supports this effort.

People who self-identified as belonging to a minority group were asked whether they had been victims of violence within the university—75% said no, and 25% said yes. The types of violence they suffered included Moral Harassment, which encompasses psychological, physical, and sexual harassment; Xenophobia; Sexism; and Prejudice.

According to Oshiro Galindo (2017), in a study conducted with military police officers on moral harassment, it is necessary to first consider the contradictions still present in today's society and the weight of ideology in workers' lives to discuss such violent behaviors. The ideology of technological rationality organizes society and personal relationships based on capitalist values, interfering with the pseudo-formation of individuals and, consequently, the construction of their subjectivities. Thus, society has considered work as a central category in people's lives, forcing them to live according to the belief that their success or failure, or luck and/or misfortune, depends solely on them, as if life were reduced to a probabilistic calculation, like in a game of chance.

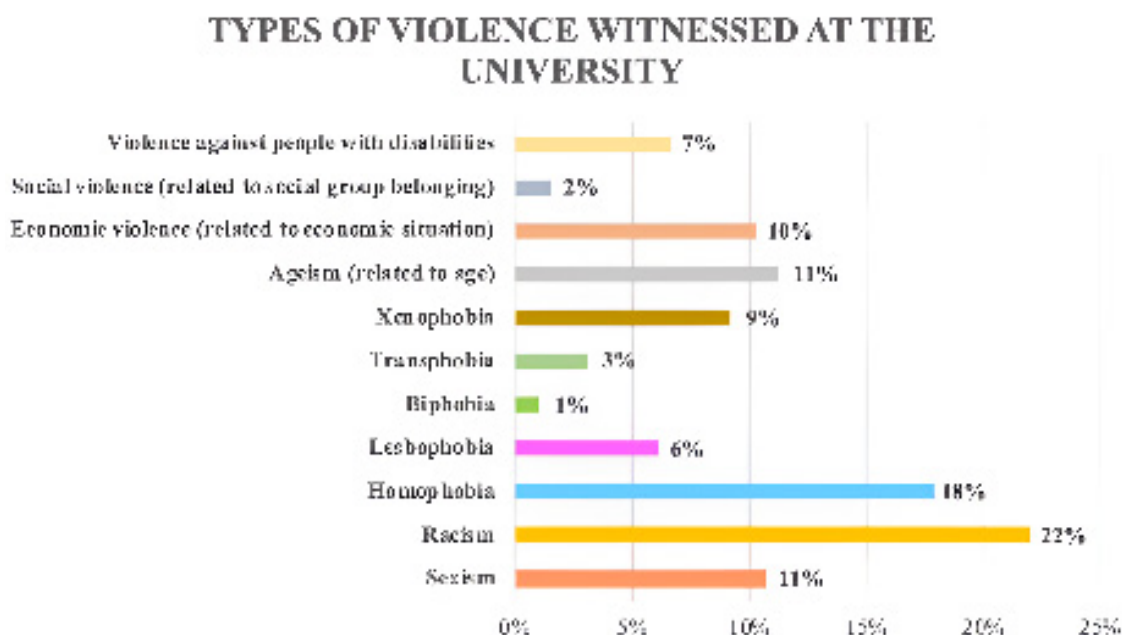
The constant pressure in the production process and the accumulation of tasks are part of the work organization, and ideologically, these are presented as natural in the workers' lives, who fail to perceive the existing contradictions. Therefore, we see the ideological veil that makes this reality seem necessary for the individual's life, or, in other words, that there are no other ways to perform work or organize society.

According to Freitas *et al.* (2011), in the work environment, violence does not become repressive but instead becomes psychic, directly related to the demands imposed by this form of work organization. Individuals feel pressured to maintain continuous learning, the well-known "retraining," because their knowledge is no longer sufficient for the pace of updates required by the market. In other words, the time for acquiring knowledge is no longer valued; what matters is immediate and technical information that aligns with the production pace of the capitalist system.

If violence has been part of labor relations throughout the historical process of society, in its current organization, it takes on different contours, as workers are fully co-opted by the productive process. This form of violence is being termed moral harassment. In other words, this manifestation of violence is increasingly present in interpersonal relationships, as society's dynamics permit and authorize violent actions in favor of production.

As for witnessing acts of violence within the university, 42% said yes, and 58% said no.

Figure 3.
Types of Violence Witnessed in the University.



As indicated by the participants of the event, the types of violence witnessed in the university were: racism (22%); homophobia (18%); sexism (11%); age-related violence (11%); economic violence (10%); xenophobia (9%); violence against people with disabilities (7%); lesbophobia (6%); transphobia (3%); social violence (2%); and biphobia (1%).

Racism stands out as the most witnessed form of violence in the university environment, according to the responses of the event participants. Therefore, it is important to reflect on it and the weight of this term for non-whites in a society where white supremacy and the process of domination over groups considered minorities or subjugated persists to this day, as reflected in the finding that racism is the most prevalent form of violence according to the research. For this reason, the reflections of Almeida (2019) on racism being a structural problem in the organization of society become essential for the discussion of the topic.

In the post-Apartheid context, for example, it can be said that racism prevailed in university institutions, according to Adonis & Silinda (2021, p. 78), “Racism inherited from apartheid policies and beliefs imbues this white-dominant institutional culture with assumptions that

white dominance equates with excellence and deservingness, whereas blackness is consciously or unconsciously associated with mediocrity or failure.”

According to the author, the Enlightenment project of liberty, equality, and fraternity ended up becoming a reason for liberal revolutions that, under the pretext of liberating the world from darkness, motivated great wars, which reorganized the world for the transition from a system where the nobility and the church dominated power and knowledge to a system where power came to be controlled by a small social group. In this system, “the philosophical composition of universal man, of universal rights, and of universal reason proved to be fundamental to the victory of civilization” (Almeida, 2019, p. 26). It was with this justification—of bringing civilization to the primitive peoples of the newly explored lands—that destruction and domination were justified. “Thus, the classification of human beings served, more than for philosophical knowledge, as one of the technologies of European colonialism for the submission and destruction of populations in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania” (Almeida, 2019, p. 28). In the 20th century, Hegel’s dialectical ideas emerged, and although they are important and became the epistemological foundation of the

human sciences, he also expressed prejudiced judgments about Africans, stating that they were primitive, without history, beastly, and surrounded by ferocity and superstition.

As referências a “bestialidade” e “ferocidade” demonstram como a associação entre seres humanos de determinadas culturas, incluindo suas características físicas, e animais ou mesmo insetos é uma tônica muito comum do racismo e, portanto, do processo de *desumanização* que antecede práticas discriminatórias ou genocídios até os dias de hoje (Almeida, 2019, pp. 28-29).

Also in the same century, anthropology and biology presented, through studies, that there is nothing that differentiates human beings except for cultural differences, and thus indicated the absence of biological or cultural determinations capable of hierarchizing morality, culture, religion, and political systems. In other words, there is no evidence to justify the use of the concept of race. The use of this term is a choice with political interests, as evidenced by what happened in Nazi Germany with the Holocaust against Jews, Blacks, and homosexuals, for example. For this reason, discussing race becomes an important factor, used to “naturalize inequalities and legitimize the segregation and genocide of groups sociologically considered minorities” (Almeida, 2019, p. 31).

CONCLUSIONS

The eleven days of the seminar organized by the EduForp study and research group aimed to discuss the theme of art in education, focusing on different theoretical-methodological procedures and the exchange of knowledge between national and international researchers. In dark times, where violence is normalized in interpersonal relationships and lives are abruptly lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, artistic expression becomes a breath of life and hope for better times. To imagine a fair and egalitarian human world for people without discrimination based on skin color, race, ethnicity, or religion is a challenge in a world governed and organized by coldness and indifference. However, it can be a possible project for humanity through education, which can lead to the emancipation of thought and a qualitative change in human relations.

Since the event participants were mostly educators, students, and professionals in the field of education, the registration form aimed to raise some questions about belonging to a social minority group; whether, by belonging to a minority, they had been targets of violence and/or had witnessed any form of violence in the academic environment. It was found that their answers were affirmative, indicating that there are indeed manifestations of violence in universities. Among these, racism stands out, highlighting the importance of discussing ethnic-racial relations, especially considering that in higher education spaces, Black and Indigenous students are still in the minority.

Since violence is present in human relations and societal organization, neither schools nor universities—the research setting—can be immune to its manifestations. The difference lies in how these institutions confront or reproduce it. We live in a society where success or failure depends entirely and exclusively on the individual, according to the dominant ideology of the Cultural Industry. Schools and universities end up being organized in such a way that the division between the best and worst students occurs “naturally.” As this division between people increases, so does the distance between them, maintaining the foundational hierarchy and preventing individuals from recognizing themselves in others, that is, from identifying with their fellow humans. Consequently, interpersonal relationships become based on indifference and competitiveness.

These types of violent attitudes align with individual needs, as imposed by the current society, because the formation of the subject is shaped by their life experiences. In this way, the formation of subjectivity occurs with the aim of adapting the individual to the existing system and reinforcing “the hardness, coldness, and not what humanity presupposes: the sensitivity for perceiving and combating suffering and for identification” (Crochík, 2011, p. 123). The existing technological rationality in this society is used to co-opt individuals, offering not only the coldness and hardness it demands but also desires for destruction, cruelty, sadism, masochism, and the elimination of the adversary. Thus, understanding the functional dynamics of the constitution of the aggressor is as important as understanding the one who suffers violence, as at some point, the victim may also become the aggressor, and vice versa.

For this reason, the research on *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno *et al.* (1950) provides better insight into the type of formation that occurs in individuals and the types of personalities that were most prevalent in American society at the time. The central objective of the authors was to identify whether there were antisemitic and prejudiced ideas in a society considered to be the most advanced and democratic in the post-war period, in this case, the United States. The research methodology included several instruments such as interviews, questionnaires, Likert scales, life history surveys, and psychological tests. The results indicated that antisemitism or prejudice against minority groups was not exclusive to Nazi Germany, but rather, that antidemocratic and violent ideas were present.

Regarding the cold and conforming formation of society's organization, Crochík (2011) states that the subjective constitution of the manipulative type, pointed out by Adorno *et al.* (1950), is similar to the contemporary "desk murderer" type. Crochík (2011) clarifies that the individual who expresses this psychological type lacks moral conscience.

[...] não se identifica com os homens, mas com as máquinas, com a produção [...] desloca seus afetos dos indivíduos para „fazer coisas“, sente prazer em manipular objetos e homens para cumprir seus objetivos, sem se perguntar acerca das implicações do que faz (Crochík, 2011, p. 12).

This type, as pointed out by the author, becomes important in today's society because it works towards the development and maintenance of technology, which leads to the strengthening of man's domination over man. In order to develop, the manipulator requires coldness and the denial of affection directed towards others. Affection, however, does not cease to exist; it is displaced (Crochík, 2011, p.12). In this research, the manipulative type did not appear on a large scale, but "considering the needs of the administered society, its frequency must have increased in the population" (Crochík, 2011, p.12). These are individuals shaped by the ideology of technological rationality, who have constructed their subjectivity to be cold, individualistic, without empathy and compassion, as there is no identification with the other. Therefore, this other can be destroyed and subjected to their narcissistic will. With this, moral harassment can be consolidated.

The results gathered in this research are only the tip of the iceberg for other studies to come. For now, these preliminary data indicate that discussing violence in and from the university is relevant for raising awareness and creating mechanisms to combat it.

Knowledge contribution

Limitations

Julyana Sueme Winkler Oshiro Galindo: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Christian Muleka Mwewa: Data curation, Funding acquisition, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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