

Ethnic minority youths' encounters with private security guards: Unwelcome in the city space

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Abstract

An increasing amount of literature is suggesting that ethnic minorities perceive their relations with the police as negative and procedurally unjust. There is, however, a distinctive lack of research on the relations between ethnic minorities and private security agents. This study uses the qualitative interviews of 30 ethnic minority youths living in Finland to explore their interactions with security guards. The findings suggest that perceptions of discrimination, suspicion, being moved on and exclusion from city space were common. The study advances the theorizations of the changes in policing and procedural justice and incorporates these into the discussions on the policing the city space. It argues that net-widening of policing means that city spaces are becoming more unwelcoming for ethnic minority youths in particular, limiting their opportunities to use city spaces.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, private security, procedural justice, urban space, young people

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Introduction

Background

Interest in studying police-citizen relations is growing, and more focus is being drawn to ethnic minorities' perceptions of the public police. Prior research has highlighted intensive, disproportionate policing of ethnic minorities and subsequent negative relations and low trust among them and the police (Feinstein, 2015; Fine et al., 2003; Flacks, 2018; Madon, Murphy & Sargeant, 2017; Murphy & Mazerolle, 2016; Keskinen et al., 2018; Van Craen, 2012; Wästerfors & Burcar, 2019). There is, however, an urgent need to pay more attention to ethnic minorities' perceptions of security agents because recent years have witnessed a global growth in the private security sector. Scholars have pointed out that the rise in private security indicates a radical shift from a criminal justice system monopolized by the state and its police to a pluralized policing system in which the private sector also participates in delivering security (e.g. Bayley & Shearing, 1996; Jones & Newburn, 1999; O'Neill & Fyfe, 2017; Paek, Nalla, & Lee, 2018; Sjøgaard, 2017; White & Gill, 2013).

Prior research has focused on the theoretical debates on the changes in policing and there is a paucity of empirical research from the perspective of those who are the targets of private policing (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016; Saarikkomäki 2018; Schuilenburg, 2015). For instance, Crawford and Hutchinson (2016, p. 1186) have pointed out the importance of studying the everyday experiences of policing practices as well as the differences and inequalities in how security is experienced by different groups in order to understand security governance. Bayley and Shearing's (2001, p. 36) call for research on the societal impact of changes in policing is still relevant today.

This study focuses on ethnic minority youths' encounters with security guards and it offers findings from a fresh context. Finland, although a Nordic welfare state, has not avoided the rise of private security and privatization of policing. Another contextual character is that, compared with Western Europe and the US, the number of immigrants is relatively low in Finland, despite a recent increase. A context in which the majority of citizens belong to one ethnic group and religion can be unwelcoming for immigrants, and ethnicity can be a striking marker of belonging (Christensen, 2009). Both the public and private policing systems in the Nordic countries have been accused of ethnic profiling and disproportionate policing (Keskinen et al., 2018; Löfstrand, 2015; Sjøgaard, 2017; Wästerfors & Burcar, 2019).

This study: objectives

This study scrutinizes the day-to-day interactions between private security guards and ethnic minority youths in city spaces. It studies the kinds of situations and spaces in which youths encounter security guards and whether these encounters are perceived as procedurally just and fair. The data consists of qualitative in-depth-interviews of 30 youths with immigrant backgrounds living in Finland. Drawing on studies of procedural justice on the one hand, and the changing nature of policing in urban spaces on the other we focus on exploring how the changes in policing are visible in ethnic minority youths' lives. We argue that the net-widening of policing means that city spaces are becoming more policed and thus unwelcoming for ethnic minority youths in particular, whose opportunities to use city spaces and spend unstructured time are limited.

We first examine how the presence of security guards in city spaces creates situations in which ethnic minority youths are constantly moved on. After this, we examine how the participants feel as if they are under suspicion when they conduct their daily errands in grocery stores. Finally, we show how the youth also challenge control. We conclude by discussing the changing nature of policing and urban spaces as well as on notions of procedural unfairness and biased treatment, and we suggest that these young people feel disproportionately policed and objects of discriminatory treatment.

Policing the city space

In this article we focus on the city spaces in which the participants of the study spend their free time and where they have encountered private policing agents. Typically, these encounters have taken place in private stores (private space), stations or public transport (public space) and shopping malls (quasi-public space). We recognize that these city spaces do not have normative definitions for space usage, but are constituted by social processes, social relations, norms and regulations (e.g. Cresswell, 2009). The constructive nature of city space means that the public/private nature of a space also impacts the way that the space is re-defined and policed. Shopping malls, for example, are spaces that blur the boundaries of public and private: they are privately owned and privately policed, but they also host public services, such as public transport (von Hirsch & Shearing 2000).

One example of constructing and re-defining space is the way in which private policing has extended from mainly private spaces (with the mandate of corporate and commercial

interests) to public ones as well (with a public mandate), thus taking over tasks traditionally belonging to the police. Security guards can operate with a private or public mandate. For instance, public entities can hire private security guards to public spaces (e.g. public transport) (Bayley & Shearing, 2001) and rationalities of public and private policing have been mixed (White & Gill, 2013).³ The blurring of boundaries between public and private policing is under active discussion (e.g. Bayley & Shearing, 2001; Jones & Newburn, 1999; O'Neill & Fyfe, 2017; White & Gill, 2013; Zedner, 2009). According to the 'mass private property' thesis, this new policing context is crucially linked to an increasing number of quasi-public spaces that are policed as private spaces but used as public spaces (Shearing & Stenning, 1981). This has led to city spaces becoming more intensively policed and less open than before (Atkinson, 2003; von Hirsch & Shearing, 2000). For instance, the powers of private security prioritize the right of property owners to decide whom to exclude (von Hirsch & Shearing, 2000; Wakefield, 2003). Private policing has led to a stronger connection between control and consent and choice, amounting to the individualization of control, which is extended to everyone when they enter a public and most private and quasi-public urban spaces (e.g. Button, 2007; White, 2011).

The commercialization of city spaces, combined with their intensive policing, has stirred discussions on citizens' rights to use city spaces. Young people, ethnic minorities and marginalized groups are often seen as unwelcome, defined as a threat, and their 'hanging out' is usually viewed as unacceptable 'loitering' or as being a nuisance (Atkinson, 2003; Crawford, 2009; Matthews et al., 2000; Wakefield, 2003). Citizens' rights to use city spaces are increasingly based on consumption, and not consuming, although tolerated, can be seen as a form of deviance (Atkinson, 2003; von Hirsch & Shearing, 2000). When hanging out at commercial spaces, young people are expected to demonstrate their viability as consumers to be rightfully present (Pyry 2015, p. 26). However, young people typically have fewer abilities to consume. Furthermore, hanging out in city spaces is an important social event for youth and does not always involve consumption (Pyry, 2015; Wilson et al., 2010). As the inclusiveness of city space has diminished and control has increased due to the rise of private security, we ask how equal access to the city has changed, and how these changes have affected ethnic minority youths' daily lives and their rights to occupy urban spaces.

³ Even though the private security field is fundamentally private, in the Finnish context it is not completely distant from the state, as security guards can operate together with the police, fulfil a public mandate of order maintenance and use legal powers issued by the state (Saarikkomäki 2018).

Prior research

Young people and private security

Overall, research on citizens' experiences and perceptions of private security is scarce. Existing research includes a few qualitative studies that have focused on the perceptions of individuals, typically young people, who have experienced private policing (Keskinen et al., 2018; Matthews et al., 2000; Morey, 1999; Saarikkomäki 2016, 2018; Wilson et al., 2010) as well as surveys on young people's experiences of security guards and citizen's general perceptions of private security (e.g. Brands & Doorn, 2018; Fine et al., 2003; Matthews et al., 2000; Moreira, Cardoso & Nalla, 2015; Saarikkomäki & Kivivuori 2016; van Steden & Nalla, 2010). In addition, ethnographic studies have investigated security guards' work in shopping malls (Manzo, 2004; Wakefield, 2003).

Studies on the encounters between security guards and young people have demonstrated that these are frequent, negative and focus on moving young people on (Matthews et al., 2000; Morey, 1999; Saarikkomäki 2016, 2018; Wilson et al., 2010). However, the intensity of policing varies in different malls (Manzo, 2004; Wakefield, 2003). Recent research based on focus group interviews conducted in Finland suggests that young people regard police officers as more trustworthy and procedurally fair than security guards, who they often perceived as acting unfairly and disrespectfully and as only moving young people on from city spaces (Saarikkomäki 2018).

Despite much research regarding ethnic minorities and public police (e.g. Feinstein, 2015; Flacks, 2018; Madon et al., 2017; Van Craen, 2012; Wästerfors & Burcar, 2019), research on private policing is lacking. A few studies have examined how security guards and bouncers justify excluding ethnic minorities (Löfstrand, 2015; Sjøgaard, 2017). Researchers have pointed out that marginalized groups, such as young people and racialized minorities, are typical subjects of securitization and private policing, which may further marginalize and exclude these people who are already in vulnerable positions in society (Keskinen et al., 2018; Sjøgaard, 2017; Wakefield, 2003; Zedner, 2009). Scholars suggest that private policing can be biased and socially selective because it focuses on characteristics such as young age, low socioeconomic status and minority ethnic status (von Hirsch & Shearing, 2000; Manzo, 2004; Saarikkomäki & Kivivuori 2016).

Keskinen and colleagues (2018), who interviewed ethnic minorities living in Finland about their experiences of ethnic profiling by the police, found that people also shared experiences of being frequently stopped and discriminated against by security guards.

Furthermore, a survey indicated that young people of Somalian and Middle Eastern backgrounds reported of security guard interventions more often than the Finnish majority youth, for no apparent reason (Keskinen et al., 2018). As earlier research suggests that young people's encounters with security guards are frequent and negative, and the exclusion of ethnic minorities has been discussed, ethnic minority youths' perceptions of private policing and whether they see it as procedurally fair, neutral or unfair needs more attention.

Procedural justice

Procedural justice-based research has focused on police-citizen relations and on the importance of fair treatment. The procedural justice theory stresses that citizens' perceptions of whether legal authorities treat them fairly, neutrally or in a procedurally just manner is the primary influencer on trust in the legitimacy of the system (e.g. Bradford & Jackson, 2015; Murphy & Mazerolle, 2016; Schaap, 2018; Tyler, 1990). The procedural justice model is often contrasted with an instrumental perspective, according to which trust is based mainly on police effectiveness (e.g. Bradford & Jackson, 2015). Tyler (1990) suggests that the crucial elements that create perceptions of procedural justice and legitimacy are, first, neutral and unselective criminal justice processes and, second, the view that policing agents treat people with politeness, respect and fairness. Furthermore, the theory encompasses perceptions of the trustworthiness of policing agents' motives, as well as citizens' ability to participate in decision-making processes (Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Lind, 1992). According to Tyler and Lind (1992), legitimacy is a justification for power, and legitimate power depends on people obeying voluntarily. Voluntary compliance and accepting decisions against one's own interest depend on the belief that the authority views one as a full member of society, as well as on trust in the authority's ethics and neutrality (Tyler & Lind, 1992). People care about the motives behind policing agents' use of power and expect to be treated fairly and respectfully, regardless of ethnicity, class or gender (Tyler 1990).

Issues regarding procedural justice remain underexplored in plural policing literature (O'Neill & Fyfe, 2017, 5; Paek et al., 2018). Perceived fairness and trust in private security has received little research attention, despite indications that youths' perceptions of procedural fairness and their trust in private security are poorer than their perceptions of the public police (Brands & Doorn, 2018; Saarikkomäki 2016, 2018). In addition, studies on ethnic minorities' perceptions of procedural justice are scarce. Those focusing on ethnic minorities indicated that the perception of discrimination is a significant explanatory factor in undermining trust in the

police, and that procedurally just policing increases views of police legitimacy (Madon et al., 2017; Murphy & Mazerolle, 2016; Pettersson, 2013; Van Craen, 2012).

Data and methods

The first author conducted interviews with 30 youths in 2016–2017 (total 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews, 12 individual interviews and 6 focus group interviews). The participants were from 15 to 23 years of age, 23 were male and 7 were female. The interviewees were born outside European and western countries, but had lived in Finland for at least five years, or their parents were born abroad. A total of 23 participants were born in Finland and 7 abroad. Twenty-one participants identified themselves as having an African ethnic background, three had Asian backgrounds, and two had Eastern European backgrounds (four had other backgrounds). To guarantee anonymity, we have chosen to withhold specific information regarding ethnic and immigrant backgrounds and places.

The participants were recruited from urban environments in Helsinki (capital of Finland) through youth clubs. Most of the participants were either at school or working. They varied from those who possessed a more ‘troubled’ background, including frequent contact with the police and security guards, to those with only some encounters. Our selection of methodology was biased to some extent, as it excluded youths who did not spend time in urban locations and youth clubs, which may actually represent the most marginalized groups.

The interview questions focused on personal and peer experiences of the police and perceptions of general trust in the police. Specific questions about the private security guards were at the end of the interviews. However, the participants brought up their experiences with private security guards even before they were asked, highlighting how important this aspect was. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, and they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We asked the participants whether they wished to be interviewed alone or in groups and conducted the interviews accordingly. Additionally, we kept the size of the focus groups small. No apparent differences were found between the information learned from the focus groups and in individual interviews.

The data in this study were analysed thematically; following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) definition, we considered a patterned response that captured crucial points in relation to the research aim a theme. Thus, we identified recurrent patterns of argumentation and classified principal points of view. We used NVivo 10 for coding, with an inductive approach. The first step was to categorize the kinds of situations and spaces in which these encounters occurred.

These themes were divided into negative and positive encounters. In this article, we focus on the negative encounters. We specified them into being moved on from city spaces, suspicion in stores and challenging control. The analysis continues by examining the narratives on procedurally unfair and fair treatment in these situations.

Results: private policing of ethnic minority youths in city spaces

Over the next three sections we explore how the interviewees typically described their experiences of security guards in public, private and quasi-public spaces.

Being moved on

The most common encounter that nearly all the interviewees raised was security guards asking them to move on. Shopping malls were a key location at which these encounters took place, but they also occurred in stores and in metro or train stations. The youths usually described the situations as annoying and as limiting their abilities to hang out and use spaces. If the youths perceived they had been doing something disturbing they sometimes understood the intervention. However, when they were just hanging out or doing errands, they interpreted the situations as unfair. Interventions were perceived as unnecessary ‘over-control’ of youth activities, sometimes unjustly targeting ethnic minorities.

In the example below (H8), the interviewer first asks about encounters with the police, but the young female starts to talk about security guards. This is interesting as such, as it was typical to share narratives about security guards when asked about the police, which proposes that for most of these young people, encounters with security guards were meaningful and frequent. Accordingly, the changes in policing urban spaces were visible in these young people’s daily lives. Public and private policing agents were perceived to have somewhat similar roles in maintaining order in city spaces.

E: Are you often approached by the police when you are downtown?

D: No. The cops haven’t approached us much. Security guards do come and nag at us. Like, that we have our music on too loud. But we really don’t.

E: It’s security guards who-?

D: Yeah, they always drive us away, from one place to another. (...) Like, say, we've just sat down, then suddenly security guard comes and nags at us to leave.
(H8, 1 female)

Many of the participants described situations where they were asked to move on from shopping malls. The typical reasons for being moved on were rather trivial: playing music too loud, chatting too loudly, or simply being in the wrong place. There was distrust in the motives of private security guards when the youths felt they had done nothing disturbing, although sometimes they understood the reasons for the interventions. These types of situations prevented youths from accessing shopping malls and made free time activities and hanging out with friends more difficult. The participants also shared experiences of being denied access to public transport. Intensive private policing made daily life difficult and city spaces unwelcoming.

The interviewees perceived some of these situations as biased and discriminatory. This was the case if they felt the interventions focused unfairly on their group but not on ethnic majority people hanging out in the same space. The young people were sensitive towards how they were treated in comparison to other people in similar circumstances.

H1: They're usually a little racist. (...)

H1: Yeah. They always drive us away as soon as we come in. Even if some other Finnish kids are there alone from morning till night. Still we're driven away as soon as we come in. (L12, 2 males)

H: If you see Finnish people making a lot of noise, they might sometimes not say anything. But when we make some noise, they usually come and tell us off more.
(F6, 1 male)

All but a couple of our participants had experienced security guard-initiated contact. The few who had no personal experiences reflected on their friends' experiences. In the next example the participant shared an unfairly experienced situation his friends had encountered.

E: Have you seen the police act in a discriminatory way?

S: Not the police, but security guards maybe. Like, there are quite a few cases, like my friends had been sitting around, waiting for the train, and one came to

accuse them of peeing in the elevator. They immediately accused them, because their skin colour was darker. Then an underage boy with a beer in his hand came over and they asked whether he did it, he said no, and they let him go. And they forced the others to stay there and made one of them walk to another train station. They wouldn't let him get on the train there. (G7, 1 male)

Although it was common to talk about experiences of discrimination, it should be pointed out that the interviews also revealed some deviating views. A few young people expressed the opinion that security guards treated everyone similarly or that they had not experienced encounters that they considered discriminatory.

Suspicious consumers

Many of the interviewees felt that they were sometimes targeted because of their ethnic minority background, as illustrated in the previous examples of being moved on. This type of suspicion was particularly obvious when they went to grocery stores. In half of the interviews, the participants brought up being frequently suspected and followed in stores, which made them feel unwelcome in private locations. They felt a sense of discrimination and injustice, and their daily life and shopping were interrupted or disturbed.

YM: (...) Security guards are always like-, sometimes I go to the store, don't buy anything and leave. Then they check whether you took something. I'm used to it. (...) TM: Security guards more than the police, it depends where you are. Security guards usually at malls and stuff. In other places, like outside, the police are always right behind you.

(... ...)

SM: We were in a store a few years back. They thought we'd stolen something; they came, caught us, and took us to the back room. Then they searched us. We got no compensation.

JM: We went to a grocery store once and he was looking for something to buy and the security guard came to watch-

YM: I decided to test him and asked him what his problem was. Not like I wanted to-.

TM: Fight. He just said you look suspicious. (B2, 4 males)

In the previous extract (B2), the young male mentions that he was taken to the ‘back’ and felt unjustly treated because this action was based on mere suspicion. This type of intervention, being taken to a detention room because of suspected shoplifting or being caught shoplifting, was mentioned in five interviews. The restriction of access and physical space was very clear in these situations. The youths also discussed that they had experienced unfair treatment, such as shouting or physically grabbing their arm or other physical contact.

In the next example (K11), a young male describes typical situations of being followed, stared at and clothes being searched. He felt these encounters were embarrassing and labelling. He was worried about what other people thought of him when he was being stopped.

B2: I had an incident (at a grocery store). I was there with a friend for quite a long time and when I came out, the security guard thought I had nicked something and suddenly asked me to empty my pockets, and I was like why. (...) It’s embarrassing when it happens in a public area. I’m talking to a security guard where someone might see me and wonder if I really did do something wrong. Even if I hadn’t, it put me in a bad light. Word can spread. (K11, 3 males)

Challenging control

Being moved on and being under suspicion produced different reactions, from accepting the interventions and seeing them as daily life in the city, to opposing them in different ways. This type of control produces interaction between young people and security guards, a cat-and-mouse game of sorts. When young people are asked to move on, they obey first, but come back later.

E: Have security guards come to drive you away from places?

H: Yeah, we always sit around the elevator aisles there (at the mall). ... We always go there, then the security guard comes to drive us away. Then we go down to the second floor. Sometimes they drive us away from there too, then we go even further down.

E: How do the security guards usually behave in these situations?

H: Well, when they drive us away for the first time, they’re pretty calm. The second time we start getting on their nerves and the third time they start yelling.

(...)

H: ... Being a security guard is just, like, standing around at a mall and seeing that nothing happens. But the police go around the city and see that people don't do stupid things. Police are respected, or I myself have respect for them. (M13, 1 male)

The interviewees' reactions to these demands were sometimes to criticize the importance of the security guards' work role. As indicated in the previous extract (M13), the security guards' actions of moving young people on for no apparent reason challenged the youths' trust in them. The participants described situations in which everyone nearby was moved on, even if only some were involved in a fight, for instance. Asking everyone to go outside where the fight could continue was not seen as a good way of breaking up fights.

Sometimes the youths obeyed the orders, but at other times they challenged them. Furthermore, the security guards were described as annoying or as provoking people on purpose. The young people also described losing their tempers sometimes and acting provokingly or shouting, as in the example below, where the young female did not understand the reason she was denied access to a toilet. Some situations escalated to aggressive or violent treatment of young people.

G: Yes. Okay, like a year back, me and my friends were going to the toilet at the train station, and this security guard wouldn't let us go because there were too many of us. I started yelling at him, saying that I'm fucking going in and so are my friends. He started lashing out at me and I lashed back, we were on the stairs and he pushed me right off so that I hit my head on some glass. (N14, 2 females, 1 male)

Experiencing suspicion in grocery stores as a part of daily life also led to creative coping strategies and even finding amusement in the situations. In the next extract, a young female challenged a security guard who was following her around the store. She tried to cope with being the target of suspicion by making light of the situation:

G: I once had a grocery basket and said 'oh I have my own servant, a really handsome security guard right there, you wouldn't mind taking this for me, would you?'. He looked at me like, what? I was like, be a gentleman and take this for

me? He was like, just finish your shopping. I dumped it on him, and he carried it. I could tell he was getting irritated and maybe had other things to do, but he started it. I went through all the aisles, and was like, I wonder what this is, would you mind reading this for me? He did, and I was like, no I won't take it. I took him to the register, gave him money, made him pay, made him pack up the things. Then I was like, I think that's all, talk to you later. That security guard hasn't followed me in that store since. (N14, 2 females, 1 male)

Discussion

In this article, our aim was to produce information on a previously neglected area of ethnic minority youths' experiences of security guards. The expanding private security sector is important to consider when examining perceptions of discriminatory and procedurally unfair policing practices. Our results suggest that security guards are significant policing agents in ethnic minority youths' lives in city spaces. It was revealing that, when asked about the police, many of the interviewees began spontaneously sharing experiences of security guards. Firstly, we found the situations in which security guards intervened were considered rather trivial and being moved on from shopping malls was a common experience that made hanging out with friends difficult. Secondly, several interviewees felt they were targets of suspicion in grocery stores which disturbed daily life. These experiences made ethnic minority youth feel unwelcome and excluded in public, private and quasi-public spaces and the encounters were inconvenient, and sometimes stigmatizing and embarrassing. Thirdly, we found that the young people challenged control and developed strategies to cope and even find amusement in these situations developing cat and mouse games (see also Crawford, 2009; McAra & McVie, 2012, p. 359).

As us, Keskinen and colleagues (2018) found that ethnic minority people are followed in stores and being under suspicion which interrupted their daily lives. Our findings correspond with prior studies suggesting that young people feel their presence is problematic for security guards, they are more intensively policed than adults, and they are removed from city spaces (Fine et al., 2003; Matthews et al., 2000; Saarikkomäki 2018). Similarly, ethnographic studies suggest that security guards participate in the exclusion of ethnic minorities (Löfstrand, 2015; Sjøgaard, 2017; Wakefield, 2003). Security guards used 'risk profiles' to define shopping mall

visitors who would be likely to behave in a criminal or anti-social way (Wakefield, 2003). These included people whose behaviour, such as loitering, was perceived as being suspicious and people who were seen as likely to be criminals, for example, young people, those wearing ‘scruffy’ clothes and marginal groups (Wakefield, 2003, pp. 172-174).

Since policing has moved from predominantly public toward a mix of public and private actors (e.g. Shearing & Stenning, 1983; South, 1988), and private security companies have been active in re-defining access to spaces, it is crucial to recognize that the way in which city spaces are policed is one element of how spaces are constructed and how open or exclusive they are. Wakefield (2003, pp. 233–236) suggests that since policing agents’ roles and the spaces they patrol are becoming blurred, it is important to scrutinize policing practices in order to preserve citizens’ rights and equal access to urban spaces. Privatization of city space has been suggested to lead to the exclusion of marginal groups and those who cannot consume, as well as to the net-widening of policing (Atkinson 2003; von Hirsch & Shearing, 2000). According to our findings, privatization can make the city space less welcoming to ethnic minority youth through intensive private policing. However, the young people also challenged control. We found that in shopping malls, the youths did not always comply when they were hanging out and asked to move on, and thus they rebelled against the normative definitions of space as merely a place for consumption (Atkinson, 2003; Cresswell, 2009). It is important that youth have places where they are free from the surveillance that they are subject to at home or at school, and can spend unstructured free time (Pyry, 2015; Wilson et al. 2010).

Our participants often interpreted security guards’ motives for intervening as discriminatory. For instance, suspecting ethnic minorities, but not ethnic majorities, eroded belief in the neutrality of control agents (also Wästerfors & Burcar, 2019). Moreover, targeting rather trivial incidents challenged the trustworthiness of security guards’ motives (see Bradford & Jackson, 2015; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Similar findings of discrimination and suspicion are found in police literature (e.g. Feinstein, 2015; Keskinen et al., 2018; Solhjell et al. 2019; Wästerfors & Burcar, 2019). Perceptions of procedural injustice were clear if the participants had faced excessive use of force and escalating conflicts. Procedural justice studies have found that perceptions of unfair encounters can lower trust in policing and make people feel disrespected (e.g. Pettersson, 2013; Saarikomäki 2016; Tyler & Lind, 1992), and ultimately result in alienation, criminalization and non-compliance (e.g. Bradford & Jackson, 2015; Tyler, 1990). Non-compliance is usually viewed as negative, but challenging unfairly experienced orders can be also seen as a way to challenge discrimination and exclusion.

Our study generated questions for future research. It focused on negative encounters, however, the participants shared some situations in which they felt treated fairly. Positive encounters could be further studied. Another issue to study is how private policing compares with public police. There are indications that security guards are perceived as more discriminatory and less professional and legitimate than the police (Keskinen et al. 2018; Saarikkomäki 2018). Finally, it would be important to study whether the perception of security guards differ according to, for instance, the ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or neighborhood of the youth. It is documented in police research that these factors play a part in determining who the likely subjects of policing are (e.g. McAra & McVie, 2005; 2012; Pettersson, 2013; Solhjell et al. 2019; Wästerfors & Burcar 2019).

Conclusions

To conclude, our findings can serve to inform policy debates on how security guards should engage with young people. This article seeks to advance equal policing by paying attention to the perspectives of youths with immigrant backgrounds in order to enhance their relations with policing agents and promote their integration. Our findings suggest that more attention must be paid to perceptions of procedurally unjust and biased private policing, which has remained underexplored in private policing literature (O'Neill & Fyfe, 2017; Paek et al., 2018; Saarikkomäki 2018). Practical inputs of our findings suggest that security guards may benefit from longer training that highlights the importance of fair and neutral policing. Amending the relations can be beneficial for both parties. Furthermore, shopping mall managers and youth workers could engage young people in developing spaces to spend time without consuming and to organize places for discussion between youth and security guards. Ethnic minority youths feel unwelcome in city spaces in many ways: they are moved on; their activities are controlled; they are suspected, searched and followed and are subject to unfair, discriminatory treatment. These measures, we suggest, may produce exactly the unwanted behaviour they are supposed to prevent. We argue that instead of deterring delinquency, excessive or unfair policing may lower young people's willingness to comply with rules, cause spatial displacement and produce side-effects. Our study suggests that the net-widening of policing, through the private/public mix, means that these spaces are becoming more policed and unwelcoming for ethnic minority youths in particular, and are limiting their opportunities to spend unstructured time and use city spaces.

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