Dealing with police stops: How young people with ethnic minority backgrounds narrate their ways of managing over-policing in the Nordic countries

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Abstract

Research shows that young people within ethnic minorities are subjected to police control more often than others, which seems to have a damaging effect on their trust in the police as well as on their wider sense of belonging. What is less often researched is how these young people deal with being over-policed. This article explores narratives of over-policing from those targeted by the police in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. By highlighting the patterns in these narratives in cross-national interview data, we seek to understand how young people manage interactions with the police and being stigmatised and ethnically profiled. The article distinguishes between three categories of narratives, (a) practical (b) emotional and (c) analytical, which the young people invoke and employ when they discuss their experiences and assessments of the police. The article concludes that we need a more dynamic perspective to understand and analyse how targeted groups constitute agency, resistance and active responses to ethnic profiling or labelling. Being young and belonging to an ethnic minority in the Nordic countries means developing and employing everyday tactics to both manage and account for the risk of police encounters.

Keywords: ethnic profiling, narrative, police, young people

Introduction

Frequent police stops of targeted segments of the population, defined by ethnicity, typically make the relations between minorities and the police tense (Feinstein, 2014; Haller et al., 2020; Keskinen, 2018; Pettersson, 2013). The use of ethnic profiling by the police can be understood as certain groups being targeted based on their assumed ethnicity, either as a deliberate policy of stop and search or as an embedded routine described as 'institutional racism' (Bowling & Phillips, 2007). Any police act experienced as discriminatory may create feelings of fear, anger, embarrassment, humiliation and of being labelled a criminal (Deakin et al., 2020; Goldson, 2013; Himanen, 2019; McAra & McVie, 2012; Parmar, 2011). Characteristics like young age, minority status, racialised identity, or residence in a disadvantaged neighbourhood are linked to over-policing (Goldson, 2013; Lemert, 1967; McAra & McVie, 2012). A paradox commonly experienced by ethnic minorities, is the feeling of being construed and treated as a risk to national security, while also having one's own security compromised by, for instance, islamophobia, overzealous policing and the risk of verbal assault and physical attacks (Mythen & Walklate, 2016).

Over-policing and ethnic profiling have been studied for a long time in Anglo-American and, increasingly, in continental European contexts (Bowling & Phillips, 2007; Brunson, 2007; de Maillard et al., 2018; Deakin et al., 2020; Oberwittler & Roché, 2018; Schwarzenbach, 2020). For instance, qualitative studies of banlieue suburbs in France have pointed to the hostile relations between ethnic minorities and the police (Roux & Roché, 2016), and to the police's violent control of ethnic minorities (Fassin, 2013; Jobard, 2020). Hunold et al. (2016) find, in their study of two German cities, that police-adolescent relations were positive overall. In exploring interactions between police and often streetwise young men, informality and striking the right tone appeared most relevant to fostering police legitimacy (p. 603). Surveys have found that perceptions of police unfairness diminish police legitimacy and trust among ethnic minorities (MacQueen & Bradford, 2017; Madon et al., 2017; Tyler, 2005). Cross-national studies are somewhat rare, but some indicate that young people with a migration background in Germany display, on average, more positive attitudes toward the police than their peers in France do (de Maillard et al., 2018; Schwarzenbach, 2020). The need for more studies has now been raised in the Nordic countries, where the level of trust in the police is generally high in comparison to other European countries (Kääriäinen, 2007).Researchers have nonetheless found pockets of mistrust, such as mistrust in the ability of the police to provide safety and security for citizens with immigrant backgrounds (Ugelvik, 2016). In the Nordic countries, policing has been found to be disproportionate, and police officers' relations with people from ethnic minorities often negative (Holmberg & Kyvsgaard, 2003; Keskinen, 2018; Pettersson, 2013; Solhjell et al., 2019; Sollund, 2006; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). Peterson (2008, p. 110) argues that the police in Sweden 'walk a narrow line' when they encounter young people from ethnic minorities. On the one hand, they are directed to certain neighbourhoods to gather information about criminal activity, register suspicious individuals and 'bring as many of these youth (sic) as possible either under arrest or off the streets into the care of the social services', but on the other, they create the risk of increasing mistrust by engaging in actions defined as discriminatory and disrespectful (ibid). A cross-national Nordic study found that relations between young people from ethnic minorities and the police varied from negative to positive, reflecting the underlying high level of trust (Saarikkomäki et al.,

2020). Even if we focus, in this article, on over-policing and contacts initiated by the police, it is good to keep in mind that people are also helped by the police, and overall, many encounters are initiated by young people (Oberwittler & Roché, 2022).

People's responses to policing and their agency, the focus of this article, are less often researched. Earlier studies have focused mainly on reporting experiences of policing, or on demonstrating that ethnic or racial profiling and over-policing exist. These have produced important knowledge, but we argue that it is necessary to go further. Our study adds to earlier research by using a narrative approach to analyse agency and how youths actively react to, and manage, being over-policed. A few studies on resistance have suggested that confrontative strategies on the part of the police are at risk of becoming counter-productive, as they might end up energising some young people's 'fuck the police' image, or even encourage a 'gangster' identity (Peterson, 2008, p. 110). Recent research also points to a tendency of young people to become the target of increasingly punitive and controlling practices. Young people's confrontative strategies against, and responses to, these interventions can serve to amplify and reproduce the stigma these young people already experience, and eventually lead to conflicts between the authorities and young people labelled as "risky" (Deakin et al., 2020). This line of research also shows how young migrant men, against a backdrop of increasing hostility towards migrants in many European contexts, have to engage in self-limiting behaviour and employ strategies to avoid or control interactions with authorities, such as the police (Fox et al., 2020).

In this article, we combine the insights of policing studies and narrative criminology, to examine agency and resistance in the oral accounts of the targets of policing. We ask how young people with ethnic minority backgrounds manage and deal with over-policing, as it is narrated in research interviews. Our participants are young people who identified themselves as having an ethnic minority background and a migration background (their own or their parents'), but who have lived their whole lives or several years in the countries studied. In a cross-national data set consisting of qualitative interviews from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (N=203), we found recurring categories of narratives in which the interviewees describe how they deal with and respond to being over-policed.

We argue that there is a need to focus on how young people from ethnic minorities actively manage policing and labelled positions. The paper focuses on young people's agency in dealing with, avoiding, and navigating over-policing, which they see as unfair and discriminatory. We find that the ways in which young people from ethnic minorities narrate how they resist and deal with labelling police stops and over-policing can be divided into three main categories: 1) practical, 2) emotional and 3) analytical. These were invoked, drawn upon and elaborated when young people shared stories of their everyday life experiences of policing in our interviews. These narratives indicate the many ways in which young people try to avoid or make sense of over-policing. Focusing on everyday life experiences can also produce knowledge of how policing has many effects on people's lives, as noted also in earlier research.

Existing studies in the Nordic context

In our previous work, we interviewed young people from ethnic minorities with immigrant backgrounds in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (Saarikkomäki et al., 2020; Solhjell et

al., 2019; Haller et al., 2018). The results revealed that young people report that they experience police suspicion, but that they occasionally also find themselves protected by the police, indicating positive and multisided, even ambiguous, relations and points of contact in addition to negative ones (Saarikkomäki et al., 2020). They portrayed some positive police encounters and understanding of police officers' work, indicating a generally high level of trust in the Nordic context (ibid). Additionally, when comparing the police with those of their or their parents' country of origin, they assessed the police of the Nordic countries quite positively (Wästerfors and Burcar Alm, 2019). The young people spoke of being targeted when they compared police operations in different residential areas, or how the police treated them and their peers in the ethnic majority (ibid). Experiences of discriminatory policing can reinforce a sense of not belonging to the majority community and diminish trust (Saarikkomäki et al., 2020; Solhjell et al., 2019). In our earlier research, we found that being defined as a typical suspect is based not only on ethnicity but also on young age and male gender, clothing styles, time of the day, and gathering in groups as well as in disadvantaged residential areas (Solhjell et al., 2019). Harassment by the police is the recurring experience of some youths, including occasional reports of the police using insulting language, sometimes with racist connotations (Haller et al., 2018).

In the Nordic countries, there is limited statistical knowledge due to legal barriers to collecting such data and registering ethnicity. A few surveys suggest that ethnic minorities are policed more intensively than ethnic majorities (Holmberg & Kyvsgaard, 2003; Keskinen et al., 2018). Other qualitative Nordic studies have noted that police encounters create feelings of not belonging, humiliation or fear (Himanen, 2019; Pettersson, 2013). Studies of the police have found the use of racist language and police officers mentioning skin colour as a 'a selection criterion in certain situations', despite ethnic profiling being illegal (Keskinen et al., 2018; Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020; Sollund, 2007; Uhnoo, 2015). Although research in Iceland is scarce, a few studies suggest that minority groups tend to be perceived as criminals by the police (Loftsdóttir, 2017).

Even if research in Nordic countries has only recently started to increase, the question of labelling, biases and over-policing is not entirely new there (Holmberg, 1999; Holmberg & Kyvsgaard, 2003). Discussion around unselective crime-control systems has, however, been a focus longer, in Anglo-American contexts in particular, at least since the 1950s, when research drew attention to labelling and how the police disproportionately targeted marginalised groups (Lemert, 1967). Since the 1980s, issues of over-policing, ethnic profiling, and differential treatment have also been current in continental European countries (e.g. Schwarzenbach, 2020).

The Nordic countries offer an interesting context in which to advance the study of the potentially harmful effects of policing and the ways in which these are resisted. In the Nordic countries, with a historical backdrop of racial discrimination (Barker, 2012; Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020), discussions on immigration in the media and in political debates are occasionally harsh (Eyþórsdóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019; Høigård, 2011; Rytter & Pedersen, 2014). The Nordic countries have some differences in immigration policies, Sweden being more liberal than the other Nordic countries, and Finland having the smallest number of immigrants. While Nordic policing systems have some differences (Høigård, 2011; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020; Ugelvik, 2016), there are interesting similarities. First, Nordic policy

has aimed to keep young people out of the criminal justice system, although some studies have found tendencies towards more harsh control and net-widened policing here as well (e.g. Harrikari, 2013). Second, this context is typically described as 'Nordic exceptionalism', and although Nordic citizens report a high level of trust in the police (Kääriäinen, 2007), which would suggest less repressive policing, a closer look reveals that racialised minorities experience being singled out (e.g. Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020).

The concept of 'race' is often seen as a taboo subject in the Nordic context (McIntosh, 2015; Svendsen, 2014), although 'whiteness' remains a strong indicator of national belonging as in continental Europe (Goldberg, 2006). As Loftsdóttir and Jensen (2012) argue, whiteness in the Nordic region represents "interwoven racial, gendered and nationalistic ideologies originating from the colonial project that have formed a part of contemporary Nordic identities." Schclarek Mulinari and Keskinen (2020) use the terms 'racial welfare state' and 'racialising police gaze' to describe the historical continuum of the state mistrust and social control of racialised people, defined as 'others' in the Nordic welfare states (Barker, 2018).

Theorising agency of the over-policed

As described, there is a long history of studying police-minority relations in different parts of the world, although it varies in magnitude. Currently, the procedural justice approach is perhaps the one most typically used to study citizens' perceptions of the fairness of policing in US and European contexts (Schaap & Saarikkomäki, 2022). Only a few studies have, however, focused on marginalised people. Studies suggest that people from ethnic minorities typically have less trust in the police as compared to ethnic majorities and that procedurally just policing, e.g. fair and neutral treatment, is important for creating trust and belonging (e.g. Bradford et al., 2015; Madon et al., 2017; Pettersson, 2013; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020; Tyler, 2005). However, we did not use the procedural justice framework, as it does not focus on agency and lacks a deeper understanding of structural context and how citizens construct meaning (Oberwittler & Roché, 2018; Roché & Roux, 2017; Schaap & Saarikkomäki, 2022; Wästerfors & Burcar Alm, 2019). Indeed, the agency of those being controlled has seldom been in the limelight, especially their personal narratives of police encounters (Saarikkomäki, 2015) or ways of practicing everyday resistance (Scott, 1985). Accordingly, our study can provide new insights into agency and the meaning of these interactions, the lack of which has been stressed recently (Schaap & Saarikkomäki, 2022). We wish to challenge static views of these encounters as well as perspectives where the focus is merely on explaining trust in the police, and to highlight the agency of the targets of policing.

In this article, we also draw inspiration from everyday resistance literature. Scott (1985, p. 33) argues that resistance refers to both a more 'open defiance' and a 'quiet, piecemeal process' challenging dominance or authority. In the US context of heavy policing in poorer neighbourhoods, Stuart (2016, p. 280) used the term 'copwise' which refers to 'creative and circumspect tactics for evading, deflecting, and subverting criminal justice interventions.' We understand the term resistance as 'social actions that involve agency; and that the act is carried out in oppositional relation to power' (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016, p. 2).

To analyse forms of agency and resistance, we have used a narrative approach that seems well suited to our qualitative interviews. Narrative criminology has expanded rapidly, focusing on the narratives of offenders, and recently also on those of social control agents

(Fleetwood et al., 2019; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016), but the targets of policing remain largely unexplored (Saarikkomäki, 2015). By looking at what Presser and Sandberg (2015a, p. 86) call 'subject and verb choices that represent agency', i.e. the various linguistic choices of the interviewees when they talk about their experiences in terms of what they do, perform, accomplish or conclude, we wish to highlight young people as active respondents to policing. Our ambition is to study how these young people 'navigate and negotiate the impact of stereotypes' (Mythen & Walklate, 2016, p. 1116) and practice 'everyday resistance' when experiencing stigma and hostility (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2021), but also how they deal with the ethnically informed or allegedly racist police gaze directed at them. We focus on resistance and agency both as direct action and as a more subtle form of resistance. We find that the ways the interviewees analyse these situations, and link them to structural context, is a form of resistance to the given label or status. Analysing shared narrative formats can emphasise narrators' activity and agency, but also reveals patterns and the way in which stories reflect and depend on cultural context (Presser & Sandberg, 2015a; Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013).

In our interviews, the young people shared stories about their own personal as well as their friends' and families' encounters with the police. This highlights the importance of other people's stories too (Wästerfors & Burcar Alm, 2019). We are interested in narratives because they ascribe meaning to experiences, discuss and formulate aspirations and identities, and help people to deal with difficult experiences (Presser & Sandberg, 2015a; Riessman, 2008; Saarikkomäki, 2015; Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013). We aim to consider how young people can deal with experiences of over-policing by telling these stories.

Data and method

This study combines data collected in 2016 and in 2017. In total, 121 young people from ethnic minorities, with a migration background, aged 15 to 26, participated in either individual or group in-depth interviews (number of participants: Denmark 42, Finland 30, Norway 29, and Sweden 20). The data consist of a total 85 of interviews (64 individual and 21 group interviews). Our inclusion criteria were that the participants had lived in the country at least around five years. A majority had been born in one of the Nordic countries. A follow-up study was conducted in Denmark, and this additional data on 82 participants is included. The participants were from various multicultural backgrounds, a vast majority identified with African or Asian origin. Some identified with Eastern Europe and Latin America origin. Of the original interviewees, 97 participants were male and 24 female. In the Danish additional data 76 were male, 6 female.[i]

We conducted the interviews in urban settings in Aarhus (Denmark), Helsinki (Finland), Oslo (Norway), Malmö and Växjö (Sweden). The location of the additional Danish data is anonymous, but the participants lived in a deprived neighbourhood. We recruited interviewees mainly from socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods where there is a large number of immigrants. We recruited at different places such as youth and community clubs, schools, shopping centres, and through youth and social workers. Most of the interviewees had personal experiences of police-initiated adversarial encounters and all had friends who had encountered the police. The participants varied from those with a more 'troubled' background to those who could be defined as high achievers, having only

occasionally experienced police contacts. The study has limitations, as our recruitment excluded rural youths, those who do not spend time in the chosen locations, or who had recently migrated, and, likely, the most marginalised youths. Interviewing the police or ethnographic research would have provided a broader data set.

The initial focus in designing the interview questions was *not* on studying resistance or managing over-policing. The semi-structured open-ended interview questions focused overall on background information, experiences, perceptions of, and general trust in, the police. The interviews were conducted in the main official language of the country, recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. In-depth interviews generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers and general statements, so when listening to the stories about the police we let the participants take the lead and raise issues of interest (Riessman, 2008, pp. 23-24). In this way, even though it was not our initial purpose, we were able to explore how youths situated themselves in relation to the police by telling stories in which – despite being subordinated and controlled – they played the roles of protagonists. Some of these stories were 'bounded', i.e. had clear beginnings and ends, whereas others were more extensive, vague, short, implicatory or complex (Riessman, 2008, p. 41). Inspired by Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) analytic bracketing, we alternated between highlighting the content of the stories – what was being reported – and their form, for instance, specific wording or phrases (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, pp. 55-59). In Riessman's (2008) terms, we applied a combination of thematic and performance analysis.

Conducting the analysis for this article, we first looked for passages in which the participants talked about police stops that labelled them as being typical suspects. We also included aspects of biases in policing, sanctions, identity and self-reflection. After this, we started to look for narratives of how these young people dealt with labels and police stops. We started to see activity in these stories. We worked inductively, by reading and re-reading the transcripts, but also deductively, since we had established interests, based on the lack of prior research, to focus on the young people's narrative agency. To highlight that our participants were not passive objects of policing, we aimed to read the transcripts with an eye for charged incidents, turning points and performances of tactics or resistance in the police encounters, emphasised by the narrators themselves (Riessman, 2008, p. 24). We wanted to explore the passages in which the young people invoked, drew on or exemplified ways of dealing with being over-policed. In this analysis, we have focused on narratives about the contacts where the interviewees perceived themselves as over-policed and labelled, and we have studied their agency and how they managed these encounters. Overall, based on our data, the contact points between young people and the police are neither always police-initiated nor over-policing. In our earlier work, we analysed these nuanced, sometimes positive encounters, and, accordingly, will not focus on them here (see Haller et al., 2018; Solhjell et al., 2019; Saarikkomäki et al., 2020).

Analysis: Managing being over-policed

We found three categories of narrative in which participants managed and resisted police stops: practical, emotional and analytical. As will become apparent, these narratives may overlap, but can be understood as a continuum from more immediate (practical) reactions to emotional and self-reflective and relational understandings.

Practical narratives: Talking back, running away, fighting, and exonerating oneself

If we look at how young people narrated how they handled police sanctions, we see some practical ways of managing over-policing. The interview participants mentioned that the police frequently ask for their ID, write down their names, take photos, ask them to go home or leave, search their bags and pockets, sometimes arrest them for alleged crimes and impose fines, and engage in official crime recording or unofficial reporting. The interviewees did not just accept these police measures, but opposed and resisted them in different practical ways. When they reflected on how they dealt with different sanctions, one concern raised was that if the police recorded their names, this could lead to police stops in the future. The participants described stops and sanctions as unfair when they had done nothing wrong, for instance they were just going to their hobbies. These thoughts and feelings could be directly expressed to the police. The young people sometimes told us about their experiences in the form of a story, enabling them to imitate what the police said. In the following excerpt, a 17-year-old man in Denmark aims to manage police stops by talking back to the police, although he realises he cannot win. The police eventually register his name. Like the other interviewees, he links the police gaze toward him to the fact that he looks different to the majority in Nordic countries.

> … and because you look a bit different. You have dark hair and suchlike. They know the types, who does what, and if you have the same style as them. (...) Then you're searched. That's why they register my name and then they [imitating the police] say: 'go home'. I say: 'I don't want to go home'. [the police:] 'Then you have to go away from here'. [Interviewee:] 'But I haven't done anything. I want to stand there. I live here'. Then he just walks away because he doesn't want to talk to you. And you don't win the discussion. He just walks away. He's registered your name and then he adds 'caused public disturbance'. They write that.

'But I haven't done anything', 'I live here', were frequent rejoinders that the interviewees exemplified as ways of talking back to police officers, thereby countering over-policing by articulating non-suspicious intentions and by questioning the legitimacy of the police officer's presence. In the excerpt above, the young man tries to dismiss the basis of the police officer's control, which he clearly associates with his ethnicity. Even though the police officer 'wins' the situation, as he registers his name, the young man does not simply accept being controlled. In this short narrative, he enacts a sharp dialogue with the police and does not portray himself as passive.

Similarly, a young man in Sweden (16) portrayed the police as 'cheeky' and said that this made him 'cheeky back'. Again, an active response is indicated. He relates a tense narrative dialogue: 'What are you doing here', 'You've got nowhere else to be?', the police ask.

> Then I say, like: 'What? I can't be here? You can't decide that!' and so on. So, there is some fuss, some fuss and mostly they say: 'I'm the police, I'm above you in society', and that's just fucking stupid.

A closely related way is to ask the police explicitly to explain and give a reason for their stops, implied in this group interview excerpt from Norway:

> Man (16): We go to football training, [youth club], school ... The police stop you and ask: 'Where have you been?' And we answer: 'Yes, we have been to school, training ...' They just start making a report, we wonder why they are making reports about us [the interviewee implies that he asks the police this during the encounter].
>
> Man (17): That's why many run when they see the police. You get into trouble if you are taken in for questioning, then they can see that you are already registered on their database. They don't tell you the truth. The next time they return, they are even angrier.

This interviewee (16) questioned the police officer's reasons for stopping him, and phrases like 'they just make a report' indicate a mindless routine, portrayed as absurd in relation to his law-abiding activities such as football and school. The excerpt also exemplifies running away, another practical response sometimes narrated by the interviewees. The logic seems clear: if the police have no reason to stop you, there are good reasons to run.

Along with running away, some youths mentioned aggression, although to withdraw from public places seemed to be the more common response. In another interview in Norway, a young man (20) associated these responses with one another; on one occasion, his aggressive response made him eventually withdraw.

> One evening after hanging out at a nightclub, and I was pretty drunk, suddenly somebody grabbed me when I was coming out [of the club]. I didn't know who it was, they didn't show me a badge. I reacted by defending myself, it's what you do when you are under attack? So, when what turned out to be a police officer grabbed my arm and held me, I twisted loose and pushed him. I've been doing [martial arts] you know, so I know how to defend myself. When they said they were from the police, the other officer pushed me to the ground and took me to the station. He arrested me because he thought I was aggressive. But I need to defend myself? I knew it was because of my skin colour. After that, I stopped going to nightclubs. I don't want to destroy my future. Instead, I stay at home with friends drinking rather than going out at the weekend.

The interviewee defended himself with the help of his martial art skills, and eventually decided to stay out of nightclubs so as not to 'destroy my future', implying that police encounters could damage his future. Thus, he ends up renegotiating his presence in the public space (see also Stuart, 2016, pp. 296-300). He carefully accounts for his violence by blaming the unidentifiable and unanticipated police officer and underlines that the action must have been ethnically motivated. The incident builds up resignation – from now on, no nightclubs – but even though the story ends quite meekly, it still combines practical ways to deal with the police.

Other young people expressed more defiant reactions when confronting false accusations, as they were concerned about receiving sanctions and being registered. An interviewee in Sweden referred to a situation when he was in his 20s and grouped together with others who had challenged the police and taken to the station, despite not even knowing the others (he was quickly released when this transpired). 'He talks too much', this police officer said, with reference to the interviewee, but he responded: 'I'm not talking too much, I'm just telling it like it is'. 'Talk with me normally, I won't fly away, I'll be here'. The police said: 'This is my work' and the interviewee replied: 'This is not the way to work. Am I not a human?'

A young man from Finland walks into the police station to clear his name after having been accused of selling drugs when a police officer visited his school. His friend encourages him to tell the interviewer about it:

> Woman (17): I remember when [name] was like: 'Really, they think I'm selling cannabis!' and he walks straight to the police station and: 'Now I want to make this clear.'
>
> Man (18): I could not sleep until. … I forced myself to the police station, I walked through the doors, I went to the info desk, they looked at me like I was crazy. I said: 'I don't sell weed, I don't sell weed, they are accusing me of selling weed.'
>
> Woman (17): He couldn't eat, drink, no sleep, no nothing.
>
> Interviewer: How was the situation resolved?
>
> Man (18): I went there and they did a drug test on me, urine test, I don't even use drugs.

This story is not typical but illustrative of many interviewees attempts to resist labels. If they knew how to do it practically, many would like to exonerate themselves, and then never be in adversarial contact with the police again. In these narratives, the young people animated their dialogues with the police and portrayed themselves as denying accusations. What made exoneration possible for this Finnish man seemed to be his pro-activeness in resolving the situation himself and the fact that it was a specific, testable accusation (drugs), while most other suspicions in our data were vague. The message that the interviewee must be seen as innocent was narratively underlined by the help of his friend's testimony: he was in shock and took the false accusation very seriously.

Emotional narratives: Feeling embarrassed, resentful or provoked

We found that being constantly targeted by the police evoke strong feelings and the need to manage emotions, which again indicates a far from passive stance. By narrating emotional states and dramas, the young people underlined how they interpreted and acted on their experiences to carve out an understanding of what was happening.

A typical feeling was embarrassment. The young people were aware of the stigma and stereotype of 'immigrants committing many crimes', and being stopped in front of others was therefore a concern for them, as this attaches and amplifies this label. Although they felt that in some situations there could not be any other real reason for the stop than their assumed migration or minority background, they pointed out that passers-by easily start looking at them as criminals. To have police check, interrogate, search or bring one to the police station in front of others can lead to feelings of shame and reinforced label, as the two subsequent examples illustrate:

> There was one incident, at the railway station, we were surrounded (by the police), for no reason, some sort of suspicion that we had been fighting with someone. (...) Cops here, and cops there, and we were left in the middle. (…) Someone had been fighting. They thought that we had been involved. It was very embarrassing. (Man, 18, Finland)

> Then they keep searching us in front of 40–50 people. What impression does that give of us to others? (Man, 20, Sweden)

Sometimes relatives or family members appeared as an audience in the narratives, as in this excerpt from a Norwegian man (18):

> When they [the police] stop us, they want to check out our car and search us. It's not nice when you are right in the middle of [his neighbourhood] and the whole family lives nearby and you must walk out of your car and get searched because you are a Pakistani.

The main point here is 'right in the middle of [his neighbourhood]'. This situation was portrayed as shaming and humiliating as the scene was in his immediate neighbourhood. 'It's not nice', he says as an understatement, implicating a struggle to deal with biased treatment and maintain self-respect.

The young people narrate their need to manage their feelings and thoughts about what other people might think. Their narratives dramatise a range of humiliating situations (see also Deakin et al., 2020; Haller et al., 2020; Himanen, 2019) in which they either took the role of significant others (viewing their police encounter), or acted out the vicarious embarrassment of others – close to them – being stopped. Interviewees in Finland and Sweden also expressed concern about children who witnessed their parents being stopped by the police in a humiliating way, saw the police use their batons and pepper spray against an unruly group in their neighbourhood, or saw police forcing people to lie down on the ground, 'for no reason'. 'Everybody was there' to see. This suggests that these young people have to deal with both being stopped themselves (including their families) and with the imagined emotions of others

around them (see also Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020). This demonstrates shaming as a social, and potentially strategic, procedure. Many narratives portray the police as socially clumsy – sometimes not knowing how to handle people without embarrassing them in public – *and* as deliberately shaming them to tighten, or symbolise, control in the area.

Anger was also narrated as a way in which to deal with and resist over-policing. They were disgusted at being grouped in the same category as those suspected of being involved in crime just because they looked and dressed 'the same' or hung out at certain spots and shared their minority status. Our recordings contained numerous variants of anger being communicated, also in artful rhetoric, using jokes and indirect references. For instance, 'hanging around here', gave you a criminal reputation, a 16-year-old boy in Sweden said, referring to his neighbourhood and how he is stopped and searched repeatedly: 'Police officers have searched me about five times because they think I carry drugs or weapons, and they have never found anything. Why should they do this for the sixth time?' 'Well, what the fuck, you can't just walk around believing [as the police do] that everybody [around here] is selling drugs and carrying a weapon.' In the previous example, anger is indirectly expressed by using strong words. The criticism for stopping people for no reason, which one interviewee stresses by saying: 'Why should they do this for the sixth time?', can be interpreted as managing or even challenging police stops and a labelled position.

Tied closely to the indignant criticism of the police were sometimes rebellious motivations: to give up the law-abiding life and live up to the stereotypes. In these narratives, we found oral versions of labelling theory: difficulties getting rid of ascribed identities and a limited choice of identity formation in the future (Deakin et al., 2020; Lemert, 1967; McAra & McVie, 2012). In the excerpt below, a man (19) from Sweden (one of the few indicating that he had been involved in criminality) ascribes an implicit criminal motivation from 'these eyes on you,' i.e. the discriminatory police gaze:

> ... this was when I really started to behave, you know really conduct myself, and then you feel 'why?', sort of, what's the difference whether I do something or not. I will still have these eyes on me you know, the police against me, sort of, what image I have of the police or, it gets harder to sort of quit everything.

Stories like these convey feelings of hopelessness and bitterness; you might as well stop 'behaving' (or stop 'avoiding' criminal activities) as the police will always watch you more than others. The fact that these young people frequently experience being over-policed may lead to indifference to being law-abiding. In the above excerpt, the man felt that the police 'still' zoomed in on him, even though he had started to 'behave'. Other interviewees presented fully fledged theories of the emotional underpinnings of searching for an alternative sense of belonging (Bucerius, 2014) when dealing with being rejected by conventional society (here: under police suspicion):

> Man 1 (19): (…) If you believe in recognition theory, then you search for recognition through social networks and you have to contribute to a community. So, if you only feel accepted in a community where people commit crimes and

> smoke joints – then you have to contribute with something criminal to be part of the group.
>
> Man 2 (19): It's the only place you're accepted. Young people need and look for acceptance. They are looking to be part of something and to belong somewhere. So, when the only place you're welcome is among criminals, then … (Two men, both 19, Denmark)

Feeling accepted is at the core of this account – these young people articulated an understanding of criminal activities motivated by a wish to belong to a community. They pointed to the emotional consequences of over-policing: the feeling of being rejected, shamed and disregarded. This reasoning can be compared to Bucerius's (2014) study of young immigrant men, which found that although marginalisation was internalised, it was also sometimes resisted: when opportunities to participate in conventional society were limited, these men were able to gain success, respect and feelings of inclusion in drug-dealing gangs.

Many were eager to show that they possessed more nuanced of seeing the police. This also means nuanced emotions, so that anger, for instance, should ideally be saved for illegitimate policing, not legitimate policing. Below, a woman (18) from Denmark indicates a feeling of getting 'a bit angry' when she hears about the police's racial discrimination, but she qualifies her approach by saying 'on the other hand …', when asked about how hearing stories of discriminatory police interaction affects her:

> I get a bit angry because I think that he shouldn't be stopped just because he [her friend] has dark skin. On the other hand, if he has some characteristics that are similar to [a suspect], then it's understandable that they stop people. However, they shouldn't stop every single person who is dark-skinned.

The woman cited above finds it justifiable to be upset when her friends are stopped 'just because' of their dark skin (see also Solhjell et al., 2019), but she would not worry if the police reacted to only precise signals. Anger and indignation over local police work was not linked to all the police encounters, but reserved for particular circumstances, that could be interpreted as examples of racializing or generalising police gaze (Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020, p. 8).

Analytical narratives: Finding patterns, logics and competing worldviews

Many interviewees illustrated how they carefully observed and analysed how the police worked: they tried to analyse and explain police encounters. The moral distinctions in the narratives, and instances like the one mentioning recognition theory (cited earlier, Denmark, Man1), lead us to this third category of narrative. It often included a search for patterns in the police work. If the police could be found to be looking for certain characteristics or behaviour in a structured way, the young people could possibly benefit from this knowledge to avoid being stopped all the time, and displace police attention (Stuart, 2016, p. 296). Again, this portrays the young people in an active role.

The interviewees identified certain clothes as attracting the police gaze, and some said they deliberately chose to 'dress up a bit' to get away from the police. Certain locations were also mentioned as suspicious for the police gaze, such as more deprived neighbourhoods, as were certain times of the day, vehicles, young age, male gender and social relations, such as being in a large group or hanging out with friends known to the police (see also McAra & McVie, 2012; Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020, p. 12; Solhjell et al., 2019). The interviewees also considered their neighbourhoods as labelled and stigmatised in the eyes of the police, media and non-residents. Interviewees from all Nordic cities voiced feeling targeted by the police based on their ethnicity as well as their neighbourhood (see also Kammersgaard et al., 2023; Pettersson, 2013; Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020; Sollund, 2006).

The label of immigrant and racialised minority linked to being a suspect of crime seemed the most persistent one in the narratives. Interviewees from Finland and Denmark discussed the importance of speaking the language well and walking in a particular way to avoid police attention (see also Anderson, 2022). Many underlined the value of acting in a quieter manner in the streets and not standing out, for example, sober even if under the influence of alcohol, and responding politely. These accounts emphasised the importance of conveying decency through the performance of what Stuart (2016, pp. 293-296) calls 'innocence signals'. A similar resistance tactic is to involve members of the ethnic majority, so that one's minority status is less marked. For instance, to walk or drive with 'Norwegian women' as an interviewee from Norway mentioned. These stories indicate the many forms of action, reasoning and analytical resistance the young people have to try to use to avoid contact with the police, in situations that could be interpreted as ethnic profiling, and which can be interpreted as being close to what Stuart (2016) identifies as becoming 'copwise'.

The narratives of dealing with and resisting being over-policed were based on the youths' analyses of police behaviour, such as identifying a pattern and not falling into it as another suspicious act or actor. The analytical narratives were often slightly more downplayed and less rebellious than the practical and emotional narratives, even though they may have been implicitly antagonistic. They were articulated as well-reasoned and as resulting from 'seeing through' what the police were doing. The narrators presented themselves as capable of disclosing the logic behind local police work, and capable of gaining knowledge and skills from the experiences of discrimination, which we consider 'quiet' resistance (Scott, 1985, p. 33).

Occasionally, narrators took the police officers' generalising gaze as an example of a wider politicised debate, where a range of institutions and professionals acted similarly, as the two excerpts below illustrate:

> It's because of the identity politics in Danish politics. In all of Europe. Immigrants are [said to be] dangerous and criminal. Then there's just extra focus put on it. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Man, 19, Denmark)

> They talk about it a lot, all the guys with immigrant backgrounds. (…) The police have a stereotype for them. A lot of the guys feel they have to prove something, it's a biased image of them that has no basis in reality. It matters that boys with immigrant backgrounds tend to more easily fall into bad groups, but that makes it seem like the

> majority of guys with immigrant backgrounds are part of bad groups and that's a misrepresentation. It's wrong to show only part of the statistics because it gives a mistaken image. How something is framed, it's always a source of conflict. (Woman, 17, Norway)

In the excerpt above, the woman analyses Norwegian police work in terms of ethnicity, age and gender, arguing that it is based on a stereotype. 'It matters that …', the woman said and explained that some do get involved in crimes, but not all. So, one needs to analyse and account for criminality in terms other than those used by the police.

Others engaged in debunking the generalising gaze of the police by pointing out the absurdity that 'every single person', must be a criminal in 'their' ethnically labelled category just because 'some' are. The importance of being treated as an individual was repeatedly underlined. The young people also engaged in 'seeing the individual' among the police, i.e. the deviant ones. Many found differences between police officers: if the police did not group people together, then we should not do it either when we talk about the police, as one woman (16) from Finland analysed.

> It's not like the police are always bad (…) it always depends on the person. But if the police directly approach a foreign person it feels like discrimination, that you're the foreigner. It becomes automatic because my background is somewhere else and you always experience racism, nearly every day, so it feels that everything is that these days. When a white person looks at you, it always feels racist, that this person doesn't like you because your skin colour is different to theirs.

Many distinguished between different police officers or situations and did not take the view that every single encounter would be over-policing linked to their assumed immigrant background. However, the extract suggests that this interviewee, like many others, was still convinced that everyday racism and ethnic profiling was widespread. Based on her narrative, any gaze of a white person can easily feel racist, so we interpret that she links the policing issues of a racialising gaze to wider issues in society. In these ways, the interviewees balanced their eye for distinguishing individuals and situations with a more structural view, which must take discrimination and everyday resistance into account (see also Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2021).

Analytical narratives of dealing with being over-policed provided room for nuanced, while still critical, stances. Occasionally, the interviewees cooperated with police stops, i.e. not resisting, and accepting (reasoned) police measures, 'as long as they give a good reason, I will show my ID …', as a young man from Finland said, but first and foremost he would like accountable police work. The young people articulated various explanations of police behaviour and requested better explanations from the police than those usually received. We interpret these narratives as a way of resisting over-policing through producing (analytical) knowledge about how policing works, such as thinking how to act to avoid control. The interviewees do not elaborate on direct resistance, but on shared critical and cognitive approaches to distinguish the logic and patterns behind their experiences of racism.

Discussion and conclusion

Inspired by narrative criminology (Fleetwood et al., 2019; Presser & Sandberg, 2015b; Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013), we have identified how young people from ethnic minorities with immigrant backgrounds narrate how they manage being over-policed in the Nordic countries. We observed that the young people did not merely report discrimination, over-policing or enforced exclusion, as importantly observed in earlier studies (e.g. Feinstein, 2014; Pettersson, 2013; Solhjell et al., 2019); they also exemplified, illustrated and theorised on how to deal with these phenomena in various ways. They aimed to actively resist or avoid over-policing and labelling (see also Deakin et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2020). We analysed how the three categories of narratives we found – practical, emotional and analytical – were invoked, drawn upon and elaborated in our research interviews.

Although we focus on agency here, this takes place in contexts that are linked to the structural issues of resisting everyday racism in general (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2021; Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020). Taking into account the structural inequalities that initially place these young people in difficult positions, i.e. the context of a racial welfare state where the police operates (Barker, 2012; Branteryd et al., 2021; Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020), we highlighted how the interview participants actively deal with over-policing and ethnic profiling, by focusing on both the content and the form of their narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, pp. 118-122, 129-132). The issues are not solely related to police encounters, but to general structural inequalities that the young people resist with their efforts to avoid the interlinked labels of "other", "immigrant" and "criminal".

Our analysis revealed three interconnected ways of dealing with policing, namely a) practical b) emotional and c) analytical. The young people underlined how they sometimes talk back to the police, run away, hide, or try to avoid sanctions or exonerate themselves when the encounter happened or is about to happen. They felt embarrassed by the police singling them out in front of others, as well as angry and rebellious when looking back, analysing and narrating these encounters afterwards. They also felt resentful about discriminatory treatment and sometimes even argued that it made them live up to criminal stereotypes (Deakin et al., 2020). They analysed local police work and articulated the useful patterns they had experienced over time as targets of the racializing police gaze – close to what Stuart (2016) identifies as becoming 'copwise' – and worked out distinctions, nuances and competing worldviews in contrast to what they defined as the police perspective. Implicit versions of labelling theory, self-fulfilling prophecies and intersectional analyses were drawn upon in these narratives, which were quite close to folk versions of academic criminology (Deakin et al., 2020; Lemert, 1967; Sasson, 1989; Stuart, 2016).

We argue that in these different narratives, the young people were enacting everyday resistance toward (police and structural) racism and discrimination (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2021). By paying attention to how they resisted over-policing practically, in the encounters or afterwards, and how they resisted with their stories by making over-policing visible, we addressed the criticism of researchers underestimating the importance of social structures, history and local communities when studying police-citizen relations (Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020; Wästerfors & Burcar Alm, 2019). Sometimes, for instance, they placed their view of the police in a wider pattern of generalisations and racism encountered in society and

provided the interviewer with personal dramas of how the police gaze works in everyday-life practices. They presented 'bounded stories', with clear beginnings and endings, as well as extended stories organised in more complex ways, with episodes borrowed from others (Riessman, 2008, pp. 101-102). The narrators used their personal experiences to substantiate their arguments, but also, vicariously, the experiences of others (Saarikkomäki, 2015).

Combining insights of narrative criminology, resistance and policing studies, our study shows the competence, agency and analytic capability of these young people. We argue that in these stories they did not portray themselves as passive recipients, but as attentive and thoughtful observers who artfully laid out a range of ways to deal with being over-policed and profiled. Even though they presented themselves as subordinated, where they must accept the police order and the structural inequality in society, they still found room for manoeuvres, rebuttals and sharp interpretations; they indicated their actions in the scenes they depicted, and by doing so, represented their 'doing' (Riessman, 2008, p. 109).

Thus, our study leads us to argue that to reach a more dynamic perspective for studying experiences of policing and police-citizen relations, we must listen carefully to the stories told in the field. Overall, the stories revealed an articulated need among these young people to analyse these encounters, to actively resist over-policing and to express feelings about their stigmatised position, as well as to consider situations practically: where to go, what to wear, how to speak and act, or who to spend free time with to avoid contact with the police. Accordingly, a need to manage over-policing suggests that their daily lives and the way they see themselves were characterised by over-policing in many ways. Occasionally, labelled status may produce self-fulfilling prophecy or deviance if a person feels that "stigma management" becomes impossible and they are targeted no matter what they do. These stories showed how the young people from ethnic minorities are forced to manage and deal with the stereotypes of bystanders, neighbours, social control agents and media that enforce labels of assumed immigrant and criminal interlinks. Crucially, our approach means bracketing the question of proving ethnic profiling and accepting that we already know that it occurs – also in this 'Nordic exceptionalism' and 'high trust' context (Barker, 2012). To further pursue a better understanding, we must continue to listen to the actors who report and experience it in their capacity as skillful and critical subjects.

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[i] Participation was based on voluntary and informed consent of the participant. A formal approval was not required according to the national guidelines. However, giving the sensitivity of the topic, the institutions that offered such services, ethical review was obtained. The project obtained formal approvals from independent ethics committees of The Ethics Committee for Human Sciences at the University of Turku (EPEN30112015), Regionala etikprövningsnämnden i Lund (DNR 2017/45) and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (50543 / 3 / AGL).