



Article

# Minor harassments: Ethnic minority youth in the Nordic countries and their perceptions of the police

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## Abstract

As different social groups are directly and indirectly confronted with diverse forms of police practices, different sectors of the population accumulate different experiences and respond differently to the police. This study focuses on the everyday experiences of the police among ethnic minority young people in the Nordic countries. The data for the article are based on

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semi-structured interviews with 121 young people in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark. In these interviews, many of the participants refer to experiences of “minor harassments” – police interactions characterized by low-level reciprocal intimidations and subtle provocations, exhibited in specific forms of body language, attitudes and a range of expressions to convey derogatory views. We argue that “minor harassments” can be viewed as a mode of conflictual communication which is inscribed in everyday involuntary interactions between the police and ethnic minority youth and which, over time, can develop an almost ritualized character. Consequently, minority youth are more likely to hold shared experiences that influence their perceptions of procedural justice, notions of legitimacy and the extent to which they comply with law enforcement representatives.

### **Keywords**

Ethnic minority youth, micro-aggressions, minor harassments, Nordic policing, procedural justice

## **Introduction**

In most societies, certain disadvantaged population groups are discursively constructed as social problems, criminalized and subjected to a distinct police gaze (Finstad, 2000). Consequently, people with certain social characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, gender and neighborhood affiliation – especially politically defined “ghettos” or other socially characterized areas – are directly and indirectly confronted with different facets of police work that other more privileged groups are not (Feinstein, 2015; Holmberg and Kyvsgaard, 2003; Pettersson, 2013). Consequently, different sectors of the population may react differently and accumulate different experiences of law enforcement. In this article, we hope to contribute to the growing research on ethnic minorities’ experiences of police practices in the Nordic countries.

Today, in many western countries members of immigrant and ethnic minority communities are often constructed as social problems (Fassin, 2013). Researchers, particularly in the USA and the UK, have highlighted the often conflictual relations between the police and ethnic minorities (Carr et al., 2007; Delsol and Shiner, 2015; Fine et al., 2003). Some of this literature adopts a “procedural justice” approach, which argues that citizens’ perceptions of being treated with trust, participation, respect and fairness in the criminal justice process promote both compliance with law enforcement representatives and a sense of being generally respected within the society (Tyler, 1990). According to researchers, ethnic minorities, especially those in disadvantaged neighborhoods, are more likely to experience incidences of procedural *injustice* (Carr et al., 2007; Fine et al., 2003; Gau and Brunson, 2015). Furthermore, researchers have highlighted the extent to which members of ethnic minority communities are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement (e.g. Brunson, 2007; Gau and Brunson, 2015; White, 2015) partly because of residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods, leading to arrests and subsequent convictions. Such disproportional policing practices toward “problem groups” are enhanced by processes of institutional racism and structural exclusion. For example, the absence of economic opportunities in the labor market,

lack of educational opportunities, inadequate housing and an absence of leisure facilities may all exacerbate their marginalized position.

These processes of structural exclusion of ethnic minority communities also exist in the Nordic countries, and have been well documented (Fangen et al., 2011; Gilliam, 2009; Jensen and Christensen, 2012; Slot, 2011). In conjunction with these processes, especially over the last 15 years, increasing concerns have been voiced in both the media and within political policy debates on immigration and related problems of integration (Eide, 2010; Mouritsen and Olsen, 2013; Rytter and Pedersen, 2014). Within the contemporary political climate, the tone of these debates has become increasingly harsh (Bangstad, 2013; Høigård, 2011) and there has been a tendency to accompany these debates with an “Islamophobic attitude” (Høigård, 2011: 288) and a widespread portrayal of the Muslim population as a potentially dangerous “enemy from within” (Rytter and Pedersen, 2014). Within such debates, young ethnic minority men, especially those of Muslim backgrounds, are portrayed as being particularly problematic “others”, partly because of their seeming involvement in crime, drug dealing and gang activities (Jensen, 2011).

Researchers in the Nordic countries have begun to examine the extent to which these discursive developments are becoming increasingly reflected in the everyday practices of police officers. For example, researchers, such as Holmberg and Kyvsgaard (2003) and Honkatukia and Suurpää (2014) have highlighted the often antagonistic relations between ethnic minorities and the police and the extent to which police practices are disproportionately directed at people from ethnic minority backgrounds (Pettersson, 2013; Sollund, 2006, 2007). Disparaging language about ethnic minority young people has become increasingly common within police environments, reflecting police officers’ view of “immigrants” as “social problems” (Uhnnoo, 2015). Such developments have led to an increasing number of young ethnic minority men reporting experiences of discriminatory policing (Ansel-Henry and Jespersen, 2003).

While such developments have been noted, researchers have also emphasized the extent to which the police in the Nordic countries are renowned for emphasizing “soft policing” based on notions of prevention, social inclusion and an equal relationship between members of the civil society and the police (Balvig and Holmberg, 2005; Lie, 2011). In general, Nordic police are endowed with a high level of public trust and a general perception by the public that discrimination and differential treatment rarely exist (Høigård, 2011: 265; Ipsos, 2016; Kääriäinen, 2008).

It is therefore against this background, that we will examine the perceptions and experiences of the police among ethnic minority youth in the Nordic countries: Denmark; Finland; Norway; and Sweden.<sup>1</sup> The reason for comparing these four countries is that they have many similarities in their criminal justice systems (Høigård, 2011); for example the police are unified and state-organized and each country is divided into police districts with a considerable degree of independence (Høigård, 2011). However, there also exist several differences, such as different ways of organizing prosecution, the number of residents per police and slightly different regulations concerning resources, such as pepper spray and firearms.

Based on data from in-depth interviews with 121 ethnic minority young people, we examine how these young people experience their everyday interactions with the police. In examining the narratives, we wish to reach a more nuanced understanding of the small

and often invisible issues that take place between ethnic minority youth and the police, that constitute the background for how and why our participants relate and respond to the police in particular ways.

In this article, we specifically focus on the impact and significance of what we are calling “minor harassments”, which we characterize as the experiences of young people to low-level intimidation and subtle provocations from the police. In tracing these interactions with the police, we will examine first those incidents in which the youth experience minor harassments; second, we will explore our participants’ actual experiences of discriminatory treatment; and third, we will examine the extent to which such minor harassments can be viewed as part of a shared language of insults inscribed in everyday interactions between the police and ethnic minority youth in the Nordic countries. Finally, we conclude that minor harassments are embedded in a shared, often ritualized, language of insults between the youth and the police. This reinforcement in the experiences of discrimination and social exclusion can negatively affect young people’s experiences of procedural justice. In so doing, we hope to contribute to the field of procedural justice and legitimacy by exploring the significance of communication and interactional practices taking place between the ethnic minority youth and the police.

## **Background**

There is a long research tradition in the USA for examining the often conflictual relations between law enforcement and ethnic minority groups (Bass, 2001; Delsol and Shiner, 2015; Du Bois, 1904). Recently, researchers have started to examine in more detail the nature of specific micro-interactions in contacts between the police and citizens especially focusing on the seemingly minor experiences of police provocations and harassments (Gray and Manning, 2014; Peterson, 2008; Pettersson, 2013). They have stressed that the study of subjective experiences of less explicit police practices (minor insults, slights and other indignities) are important in understanding the legitimization and perpetuation of racial and gender inequality (Rengifo and Pater, 2017: 338). In this article, we use the term “minor harassments” in order to examine ethnic minority young people’s experiences of seemingly less significant police provocations and transgressions. These experiences are not necessarily linked to direct infringements of the law, rather, minor harassments by the police are subtle, indirect and idiosyncratic. Moreover, as citizens’ perceptions of police legitimacy are dependent on the type of police encounters and the context in which these encounters take place (Novich and Hunt, 2017), experiences of what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable use of police power are context dependent and subjectively perceived. Nevertheless, and as highlighted by the growing literature on procedural justice, experience of fair treatment by policing agents is highly important in order for citizens to feel respected and to trust the legitimacy of the juridical system (Tyler, 1990). Experiences of respectful treatment in everyday interactions with the police is essential for citizens’ compliance with law enforcement and also for their experiences of inclusion, belonging and a sense of citizenship (Bradford, 2014; Pettersson, 2013).

However, in using the term minor harassments we do not wish to imply that such interactions are “minor” in the sense of insignificant or negligible. Rather, minor harassments refer to what Sue and colleagues (2007: 271), in writing about “racial micro-aggressions”,

define as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color”. The authors continue by noting that: “perpetrators of micro-aggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities” (2007: 271). Nevertheless, we have decided to use the term “minor harassments” instead of “racial micro-aggressions” (Sue et al., 2007) in order to refer to experiences of police interactions that induce feelings of discrimination and differential treatment among the youths, but cannot per se be interpreted in the framework of race or racism. Instead, our point of departure is to apply an empirically sensitive approach to consider how our participants themselves define and perceive ethnicity (or identity more generally) in the context of everyday encounters with the police. Analytically, we therefore adhere to a social and situational understanding of ethnicity (Jenkins, 2008) and we focus on how ethnic relations emerge and how they are maintained, changed and contested in concrete social encounters and situational contexts; in this case in encounters between ethnic minority youth and the police (Easthope, 2009).

Rengifo and Pater (2017: 338) have suggested that low-level intimidations and subtle provocations can be analyzed as general institutionalized police techniques used in order to “maintain domination and perpetuate inequality”. In other words, more subtle forms of non-corporal power have become a substitute for physical violence because they are less easily identifiable and hence unlikely to be considered in the same way as more overt forms of social control. Hence, such forms are more difficult to identify, acknowledge and potentially subjected to legal sanction (Fassin, 2013: 130; Sue et al., 2007). However, these subtle forms of power still entail elements of humiliation thereby undermining an individual’s sense of self-worth, dignity and integrity (Embrick et al., 2017: 194; Fassin, 2013; Zoetl, 2017). Moreover, their harmful and insidious effects lie precisely in their apparent invisibility and subtle discrimination and control (Sue et al., 2007).

## Method and Approach

Data were collected from in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews as well as focus groups with 121 ethnic minority young people (97 male) between the ages of 15 and 26 (with one exception of a 30-year-old informant in Sweden). We also interviewed 24 young women, who in general had experienced less direct encounters with the police compared with the young men. Sixty-four interviews were conducted individually and an additional 21 took place in focus groups. The interviews were conducted between October 2016 and June 2017. With a few exceptions, the interviewees were born in Nordic countries or had lived most of their lives there. All interviews took place in the respective national languages of the four countries and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The interviewers used an interview guide ensuring that general areas of inquiry were consistent between interviews and common for the entire project. However, the timing and elaborations of specific themes differed according to the context and experiences of the individual participants. Also, the interviewees were given the opportunity to raise issues of interest or concern as they arose during the interview process. All interviews began with a number of closed-ended socio-demographic questions, including age, civil status, area

of residence, family background, ethnic background, place of birth, educational level and employment. These were followed by open-ended questions on the following topics: participants' background and family life; personal experiences with the police including their interaction and involvement and the situations in which these interactions took place; the overall presence of the police in their local areas; perceptions of the police by other significant including friends and family members; and the extent to which issues of ethnicity were significant in police encounters. The participants were selected from urban environments in Oslo (Norway), Aarhus (Denmark), Helsinki (Finland) and Växjö, Malmö and Ljungby (Sweden). While our participants differed in terms of their different ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds and in terms of their frequency of contacts with the police, most of them had attended or were attending school, were in the process of looking for jobs and/or had job experience, and most of them attempted to avoid situations where potentially they could encounter the police.

Participants were recruited using multi-tiered methods, including the use of: advertisements and leaflets distributed at youth clubs and schools; contacts through social workers or individuals engaged in their neighborhoods or working for community-based organizations; respondent referrals and contacts of project staff. All participants were given a gift card for their involvement. The interviews took place at youth clubs, offices at the university, educational institutions or public settings including cafes or library meeting rooms. All interviews were digitally recorded and answers to the open-ended questions were transcribed verbatim. Data were then coded using agreed on coding categories analyzed with the data analysis software program NVivo 11. All procedures in this project are approved accordingly to the national ethnical research guidelines in each of the four countries. All the information used was rendered anonymous and any specific information that might identify individual participants has been altered to ensure anonymity.

## **Findings**

In order to understand the impact of minor harassments in our participants' experiences, we focus first on the young people's concrete experiences of police harassments; second on how these individual experiences link to their general perceptions of ethnic discrimination; and finally we discuss the extent to which such experiences are part of a shared language of insult between the young people and the police.

### *Experiences of police harassments*

When discussing their general assessment of the police, many of our interviewees spoke negatively about the attitudes of the police in general and of specific individual police officers. They described how minor conflicts with the police had significantly impacted on their perceptions of the police and their general trust in them. When encounters with the police were described, even small gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice were found to be important. For example, some of the young people mentioned how minor insinuations and behaviors from the police officers could make them feel insecure or even frightened, and also make them realize that they were being dealt with in a different

way from other ethnic majority young people. A feeling that can be seen in the following quote from two girls of Somali background. Although the girls had not been involved in the crime that they were questioned about, they nevertheless felt that they had been targeted because they were associated with the criminals and thus approached by the police in a rough manner.

- R1: It is a bit scary to talk with the police officers, because of the way they appear. If they ask about something [...] they ask in a way as if they want to force some information out of you even if you do not know anything.
- I: You have that kind of experience?
- R2: Yeah. We were outside around 10 o'clock, somewhere a bit away from our neighborhood. Someone had apparently thrown rocks at adults and then the police was called. Then they came and asked: "Have you seen a person who looks like that?" The police looked as if they wanted to force information from us although we didn't know anything. The police came very close. They looked so serious and it was frightening [...].
- I: Did you feel they suspected you?
- R2: Yeah. It is like that. You notice that the person has that kind of blaming face: "You know something about this." So, it was a bit scary.
- I: Did it affect your perceptions of the police?
- R1: Yes [...]. You [the police] can ask in a more friendly manner. I know that the police don't really like us young people because we are always those in trouble, but we are not all the same. (Interview, girl 15 and girl 16, East Helsinki, Finland)

Simple interactions with the police can, as seen above, induce feelings of insecurity, and result in young people wishing to distance themselves from the police. These feelings of insecurity were brought about mainly by what the young people saw as subtle insinuations including facial expressions, the tenor of their voices and the ways they looked at them while passing by. Such experiences could reinforce these young people's feelings of being disliked and knowing instinctively that they were seen as belonging to a "suspicious" and suspected group.

Feelings of being more severely harassed related to experiences of being intimidated, embarrassed or even humiliated. In fact, some of our participants believed that this was a deliberate police strategy. More specifically, they were preoccupied with how other people perceived their being stopped and questioned by the police. They viewed these occurrences as deeply embarrassing, clearly illustrated in the quote below, where these young men argue that the strategy of stop and search in public places is used primarily to intimidate them.

- R1: If we sit together they sometimes point one of us out and say they want to talk to us. Then they frisk us. In our socks and such things.
- I: And have you been checked many times?
- R2: Many times. I've been frisked in front of a whole bunch of people. In the city, they took off my clothes [...] They took off my pants and underpants

and frisked me in front of everyone [...]. I asked if he had to check and I said something about whether they could frisk me in a place with no people. Then they said: "Come to the station." I said: "No, I can't go to the station. Then arrest me and then I'll go there." Then they said: "Are you sure you have nothing on you?" "Yes, of course I have nothing on me" [...] Then they frisked me in my mouth, my ass and everywhere.

I: And that was in front of the shopping center?

R2: Yeah, man. There was a group of people around me. (Interview, man 17, man 16, man 17, Western Aarhus, Denmark)

Experiences of being publicly humiliated had the effect that some of our participants avoided going to the shopping centers, because they found it embarrassing, not only to be strip-searched, but even to be approached and questioned by the police or by security officers in public, and on occasion to be escorted out of shopping centers or train stations. They therefore decided that it was safer to remain away from inner city public places. Many of our participants experienced inner cities as places where there was a high risk of being targeted by the police and subsequently humiliated.

Experiences of humiliation and embarrassment however, did not necessarily have to involve outside observers as some of our participants described how being stopped for seemingly no good reason also made them feel powerless. In addition, many of the young people described how the police arrested them and brought them to the police station for incidents that were trivial, such as walking against red lights or traveling on public transport without a ticket. According to our participants, a feeling of not understanding what the police officers were up to, and that the sanctions imposed were out of all proportion to the suspected offense, which provoked feelings of embarrassment and inferiority. Such experiences are clear in the following quote from an interview with a Norwegian student of Somali background:

One day I was on my way out to a nightclub and I had had a bit too much to drink [...]. While crossing the street the lights changed to red. It was here in [neighborhood]. The police stopped me and said: "You disturb others. You were crossing the red light." They said a lot I didn't understand. They checked my pockets and found a package of Paracetamol. They claimed it was not Paracet, but I know it was. "You see what it says on the package, that's Paracet!" Then they forced my arms behind my back and searched me. It was very embarrassing. It's like as if someone was pissing you in the face. They brought me to the station and I had to take off all my clothes. It was very embarrassing and they put me in the cell. It lasted from 2 in the evening to 11 in the morning. They spoke in a way I did not understand: "You're making disturbances." But they do not know what I felt inside here [taking his hand to the heart]. (Interview, man 20, Oslo, Norway)

Experiences of disempowerment, embarrassment and having your personal integrity transgressed were recurrent themes in the young people's recollections of encounters with the police.

Finally, it is important to remember that experiences of humiliation and intimidation could also have consequences for the families of the young people if, for instance,



neighbors began to gossip about interactions with the police. Such gossiping can lead to the parents getting a reputation that they have a criminal child. According to some of the young participants in Denmark, for instance, the police would sometimes intentionally stop them in places which were clearly visible from other apartments in the neighborhood, thereby increasing the visibility of the stop-and-search tactic, which in turn could impact the reputation of their families.

- R1: Think what bother [the young] people the most is that we know many families out here. And then when we're stopped [by the police] many parents notice it. Then they probably think: "Now it's him again" or something like that.
- R2: And then they think something bad.
- R1: And the families out here, they are very preoccupied with the reputation of the family. So if their son is caught by the police, then [...]. (Interview, man 18, man 17, man 17, man 17, Western Aarhus, Denmark)

In fact, some of our participants highlighted the importance of not involving their families with the police in order to avoid their private realms being violated by the police. This is illustrated in the following example, where the police search the private family home of the interviewee:

A guy had an address at our place, but he didn't live with us [...]. He has a psychic disease and had a lot of appointments with the doctor. He didn't go to these and they [the police] came home to us because his address is at our place. They came at 4 in the afternoon. I had come home from school, mum from work. My brother and I were sleeping. Then they [the police] were knocking, like a devil, really hard on the door. Mum woke up and I woke up, "What the hell is happening? Everybody [in the family] is home, who is gone?" [...]. There were three, four police officers. My mum hates police officers, she is afraid of them. My mum couldn't open the door, she was fucking scared, she just: "What happens? What have I done?" Then I was the one who opened the door. If I hadn't opened the door it would have been broken, they knocked as if somebody had died in here. I opened, they stamped on me and passed me – with their shoes – into the apartment. They opened every closet, opened, teared up every bed; nobody can hide in a bed. They checked under the bed and everywhere without talking. I was fucking scared, my mum was fucking scared, my dad and I ran after them: "We don't understand." They checked the toilet and everything. I was fucking scared. They didn't find anything, mum was fucking angry: "This is my home you're inside now, pay respect to me living here, you have to ask me what you're looking for." "We're looking for this guy." "What the fuck, can't you ask me? He doesn't live here." (Interview, woman 23, woman 20, Växjö, Sweden)

This example illustrates a situation in which both the young woman and his relatives accumulate very negative perceptions of the police based on such bad experiences where the police engage in behaviors that are disrespectful of the individual's personal realm. Often, the families of the young people had already had bad experiences with the police and consequently distrusted them. For that reason, many young people were very protective of their families and did not want them to have further confrontations with the police.

### *Experiences of ethnic discrimination*

When the young people described their negative experiences with the police, as in the examples above, they often linked these experiences of being treated differently from other citizens. These experiences of discrimination ranged from the explicit use of patronizing and discriminatory language to more implicit insinuations. It should be noted that it was primarily research participants from the two deprived neighborhoods in Denmark and Sweden who discussed the use of discriminatory and racist language by the police officers. Participants from Norway and Finland mostly emphasized how the police used more subtle insinuations, for instance reflected in their tone of voice or what they felt was a suspicious look.

An example of the latter is clear in the following in which a young man with a Norwegian-Eritrean background links the experience of being considered a criminal to the fact that he and his friends have a non-Norwegian ethnic background. This ties in with our point earlier about the connection between being seen as a criminal and being a member of an ethnic minority group. As in several other cases, such experiences were felt most strongly in cases where the young people could directly compare the attitude of the police toward them with their attitudes and behaviors toward non-ethnic minority youth:

Once outside the [shopping] center two policemen came [...]. He [one of the policemen] was stricter. In the way he approached us, he already considered us criminals. Even if we hadn't done anything, it's not like we're criminals 24/7, we can be left alone. There were many young people around who were ethnic Norwegians and they were left alone. It was annoying that they came after us. (Interview, man 23, Oslo, Norway)

The experience of being treated differently because of their ethnicity is also clear in the following example in which two young men discuss how the police talk to them in a different way, and in a different tone of voice, than they would normally use in dealing with ethnic Swedes. We also see how subtle forms of preferential treatment can have important consequences on our participants and consolidate the stereotypical negative image that most of these youth already have of the police.

- R1: [...] One who has another background, who is not Swedish meets the police, the police themselves treat them as if they're idiots. Do you understand? But if you're Swedish and did something wrong and the police come and talk to you in a peaceful way and say: "Why have you done that?"
- R2: Have you seen any police officer raising their voice to somebody?
- I: I haven't seen that anywhere else but here in [neighborhood]. The police can raise their voice [...]. When they talk to somebody downtown [in the city center dominated by ethnic Swedes], what do they do? Peaceful and quiet, you know. Here they raise their voices! Then I'm just thinking that hate is growing against them [the police]. (Interview, woman 23, woman 20, Växjö, Sweden)

As can be seen, our participants were very observant and sensitive to the police officers' ways of communicating with them, and they interpreted, for instance a special tone of

voice, as a sign of discrimination. However, it is not only the police officers' tone of voice that can ignite experiences of being discriminated and criminalized, the look or the gaze of the police can also have similar consequences.

- R: When I'm hanging around in the streets they [police] look awry at me.  
 I: How do they look?  
 R: They give me that look. As if they ask me with their eyes if I've done something [criminal] again. (Interview, man 18, Western Aarhus, Denmark)

Some participants, especially those interviewed in Denmark and Sweden, described how the police were, at times, much more explicitly racist in their approach. In the following example, a participant, who was often stopped and had continuous conflicts with the police, described how the police tried to provoke him by using racist terminology: "I experienced it many times, 'You're a black bastard' and such things. That we are 'Perkere'<sup>2</sup> and such things. 'You should just shut up, Perk.' I heard that many times" (Interview, man 24, Western Aarhus, Denmark).

Importantly, the young men also describe how they themselves respond to the racist comments and thus engage in mutual exchanges of harassments. An examination of this shared language of insult is the final point that we will consider.

### *A shared language of insults*

The language of shared insults refers to situations in which the young people and the police engage in interchanges of assaults, provocations or even violence. In this way, a ritualized way of communicating negatively may develop between young people and police officers. Such exchanges can take place between young people and particular police officers, who have known each other for some time. This can be seen in the following example in which a young man who was often involved in criminal activity described an escalating verbal exchange of provocations with one particular officer:

So there was this police officer I was always bickering with. We didn't like each other at all. It's always the police from the dog patrol who are fucked-up officers. And then I had a quarrel with him. He said to me: "You know what? I'm looking forward to the day where I can really catch you – when you do something. Then I promise you that you'll get all I've got." Then I told him: "Yeah, I'm looking forward to the day I see you all alone. Then we'll take it there." Then he said something, then I answered, and then he just answered again. Then he said: "You're a black bastard", and then I answered: "You're a fucking Danish pig." All that shit. Then he said something like: "You sell hash. You are good for no shit." Then I told him: "That's fine. I just sell hash and then I get your tax money." Then after that sentence, he got really angry. Then he told me: "You're arrested for harassing the police." Then I just told him: "Yeah, it's just a couple of hours, then I'm out again." (Interview, man 22, Western Aarhus, Denmark)

The situation then escalates from the exchange of minor harassment into a violent incident. Interactions between the police and the young people were often described as emotionally tense, in which both parties express emotions, and it appears that seemingly trivial cases can escalate if one of the parties cannot handle their emotions. In the

example above, the police officer and the young man have had a continuous personal conflictual relationship built up over several years. According to the young people, many of the police officers had worked for several years in the areas where the young men have grown up and thus several of the young people had in similar ways built up a shared language of harassment with officers.

The exchange of insults between the young people and officers is further illustrated in the following example in which a young man recounts how recurring incidents of bad experiences with the police created stereotypical images of the officers. Consequently, the young man employed a less respectful approach:

There are many experiences about how the police are talking to those who have ethnic [minority] backgrounds and those with normal Norwegian backgrounds. But then you also see how people with ethnic backgrounds speak to the police and how ordinary Norwegians speak to the police. Ordinary Norwegians speak to the police with much more respect than those with ethnic backgrounds, who begin to swear and get angry. That's how people are, when you get stuck all the time and bothered by the police, when you feel the police are nasty to you without any good reason... He [the police officer] doesn't know who you are and you don't know who he is, he's just a policeman, and he's using it just to give you an unnecessary ticket. That's the image the police themselves are creating. (Interview, man 20, Stovner, Norway)

Also, it indicates that some young people and some police officers used a shared language of insults, which, according to this participant, existed exclusively between the young people with ethnic minority backgrounds, not with the ethnic majority youth. Even though forms of communication often work in an automatic way, many young people were very conscious about these forms of communication, especially from being in situations where it was obvious that this form of communication was symptomatic of the way the police interacted with them. The example further illustrates how negative ways of interacting with the "generalized" police officer refer back to previous bad experiences of disrespectful treatment. Some of these interactions based on shared codes of attitudes, language and transgressive actions could turn into standardized and almost ritualized ways of communicating. This in turn generated further experiences of minor harassments from the police and created a spiral of mutually negative stereotypes. Also, this tendency is connected to the risk that groups of young people gradually and unconsciously normalize ways of communicating which by police officers are interpreted as risky and threatening and thus legitimize additional police measures. Consequently, minority youth are more likely to possess such shared experiences that have implications for their perceptions of procedural justice (Tyler, 1990), notions of legitimacy (Tankebe and Liebling, 2013; Tyler, 1990) and consequently the extent to which they comply with law enforcement representatives (Tyler, 1990).

This section has illustrated the bi-directional nature of conflict and tension between the police and the young people and shown how even small everyday negative gestures and provocations taking place in the interaction between the youth and the police can result in spirals of negative communication. Often, the youth recognized their own involvement in the exchange of provocations they, however, regarded this as a response to the disrespectful behavior of the police. Though this article focuses on minor harassments and the youths' negative interactions with the police, we want to emphasize that

many participants also described positive interactions with the police. Just as the young people were very sensitive to small indications of disrespect, they also remembered and responded to small signs of respect in the gestures, behaviors and attitudes of the officers. In addition, many participants expressed a general understanding for the work of the police and highlighted the importance of their function. Some participants referred to and even knew the name of particular officers, often both male and female local police officers, who always talked respectfully to them, made fun and took the time to chat. Also, youth who had broken the law appreciated how respectful officers acted calmly and took time to explain the reason for the arrest. To mention a few examples one participant recalled an officer who, out of consideration, had given him a glass of water when he was in the police station. Another young man told about an incident where he was standing with a police officer after being arrested. The police officer had chatted nicely with him and they had made fun. "I did not feel I was standing with an officer", the young man (18, Western Aarhus, Denmark) explained, "I feel I was standing with a friend." These examples show how even small indications of respect in the police's everyday interactions with the youth can break the spirals of negative interaction between the youth and police and improve their relation. Further research could pursue the function of these small gestures of respect in everyday police work.

## Discussion and Conclusion

A main aim of this article has been to highlight the ways in which young people's experiences of everyday indignities and differential treatment are contained and promoted in everyday interactions between ethnic minority youth and the police. Our findings indicate that experiences of discrimination and social exclusion are established in everyday encounters with the police, and often operate at an unconscious and cultural level. Because of the subtle and implicit nature of these forms of interactions, they can be invisible and difficult to acknowledge by decision-makers and the majority of the population (see also Embrick et al., 2017; Sue et al., 2007). Researchers even argue that the negative consequences among minorities may be exacerbated precisely because of the hidden nature of this kind of discrimination (Embrick et al., 2017). Thus, there is an urgent need to increase awareness and understanding of the workings and consequences of the occurrences of everyday discrimination. In so doing we can also reach a more a nuanced understanding of how and why different population groups have different perceptions of law enforcement officers and act accordingly.

In this article, we have especially focused on what we term "minor harassments" defined as experiences of low-level intimidation and subtle provocations that can undermine an individual's integrity and create feelings of anxiety, humiliation, frustration and even fear. Minor harassments were often linked to incidents where the intentions of the police were perceived as unclear such as when the youth were repeatedly stopped for seemingly no good reason, when the young people were addressed in a way that made it clear they were being blamed and especially when they were singled out from other non-ethnic minority youth. Incidents that took place in public places could create feelings of discomfort and humiliation. Moreover, experiences of minor harassment could also involve and potentially impact the families of the young people. Importantly, minor

harassments included experiences of derogatory racial and ethnic expressions, which substantiate experiences of ethnic marginalization. Finally, we have documented how minor harassments at times are embedded in a shared language of insults and provocations, which can further spiral into a series of mutual stereotypes between the ethnic minority youth and the police. These experiences of minor harassments may leave deep emotional traces in the minds of these young people and consequently affect their general view of the police as well as their views of society, and their sense of belonging to the national community (Solhjell et al., in press). Here it is also important to note that these negatively experienced police interactions are not only affected by the attitudes and behaviors taking place in the actual interactions between the youth and the police but in addition they are influenced by previous experiences of disrespectful treatment. Consequently, negative police interactions can have far-reaching consequences far beyond the actual event itself.

We wish to emphasize that this study of ethnic minority youth's perceptions of police encounters provides just *one* perspective on these interactions. While their subjective *experiences* of police encounters do not necessarily correspond to observations of actual incidents (see also Sollund, 2006), it is an essential conclusion that youths' experiences of discrimination and indignities – whether visible or not – are actualized, confirmed and even reinforced in their everyday encounters with the police. However, it is also important to emphasize that we, as researchers, have to be aware of influences outside the context of actual interactions between the youth and the police, which might have an effect on perceived discrimination among ethnic minority youth. In this study, the young people related negative police encounters to experiences of discrimination in other life situations and contexts. For example, they related to personal and vicarious (e.g. friends', families') experiences of indignities taking place in their everyday lives, media stories and representations on social media (e.g. YouTube clips from incidents of police violence from the USA). In addition, many were concerned with political and societal rhetoric problematizing “ghettos”, “parallel societies” and people with immigrant backgrounds. Methodologically and analytically, we therefore have to be aware of the past and present experiences as well as specific social conditions against which our participants interpret their experiences. Given that the study did not entail multiple methods, we are not in a position to check the accuracy of the participants' information and our data thus reflect their subjective and retrospective perspectives on the police. In future studies it would be relevant to make use of multiple methods to develop both quantitative and qualitative (such as participant observation) data on how youth with ethnic minority backgrounds are dealt with by the police. There are several other future important research potentials, which this study has not covered. For example, it would be interesting to investigate how subjective experiences and interpretations of reality are connected to societal forces and structural conditions. Further research on ethnic minority youth and the police in the Nordic countries could also benefit from investigating more specifically, how ethnic minority youths' experiences of specific police encounters and their notions of procedural justice more generally are connected to the contemporary societal and political discursive landscape portraying them as “problematic others”. Also, it is worth studying the multiple discourses that allow the kinds of interactions that take place between ethnic minority youth and the police, to occur.

Having emphasized the significance and negative consequences of seemingly minor harassments but also more severe incidents, such as public humiliation practices, taking place in small-scale interactions between youth and the police, we also highlight that everyday experiences of fair treatment during interactions with the police are essential for ethnic minority youth to comply with law enforcement and develop a sense of citizenship. It does not necessarily require large reforms to prevent conflicts from escalating and preventing young people of ethnic minority backgrounds, who potentially possess life experiences of discrimination and marginalization, to have these negative experiences confirmed in their daily interactions with the police. With this article, we emphasize the importance of small indications of respect and consideration in the everyday work of the police in order to facilitate alternative patterns of behavior and to break the spirals of negative interactions between the police and particular groups of the population. Especially, when encountering this particular category of young people, the police have to perform a high degree of professionalism and ensure that this group, whether subject to police suspicion or not, are treated in a procedurally just manner with legitimacy, fairness and transparency.

We hope that this study may also be relevant for policy-makers, police authorities and lay police officers in order to prevent such invisible processes leading to greater structural inequality and social exclusion. Methods and strategies have to be developed in order to break this vicious circle, where experiences of procedural injustice among already marginalized parts of the population erode their notions of police legitimacy and encourage them to engage in criminal and self-protective behaviors that can increase their risk of becoming targets of further police scrutiny (see Gau and Brunson, 2015).

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### **Notes**

1. We have not included the less populated Nordic countries – Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands – in this study as their criminal justice systems and immigration patterns vary significantly from the more populated Nordic countries, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland.
2. In Denmark, “perker” is a racist and derogatory term roughly equivalent to the British “Paki”, the Swedish “svartskalla” (lit. black head) or the American “Nigger”. (According to the Danish dictionary, “perker” is an amalgam of Persian/perser and Turk/tyrker.) In a Danish context, “perker” mostly refers to people originating from North Africa or the Middle East, but also it is used toward persons who are perceived to break with Danish social norms.

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