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Suspected or protected? Perceptions of procedural justice in ethnic minority youth's descriptions of police relations

Research has highlighted the harmful effects of targeted police practices and the subsequent low trust in the police among ethnic minorities. However in spite of this research, there still exists a relative lack of knowledge on the day-to-day relations between ethnic minority youth and the police and on the perceptions that ethnic minorities have of procedural justice. Furthermore, comparative and cross-nation research is needed. This study, using data from 121 in-depth interviews, investigates how ethnic minority youth living in Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden describe policing practices. Our findings indicate that descriptions were quite similar in each of the four Nordic countries. While on the one hand, ethnic minority youth felt suspected by the police for no justifiable reason, thereby creating strong feelings of procedural injustice and unfairness, on the other hand, they described encounters, where they felt protected by the police and in general trusted the institution of the police. As such ambiguity has often been neglected, this article highlights the positive perceptions of the police but also argues that targeted police practices can undermine notions of procedural justice, trust in policing and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: ethnic minorities; Nordic countries; procedural justice; youth

Introduction

A growing body of research, particularly in the US and the UK, has highlighted the prevalence of ethnic minority profiling by the police and the resulting antagonistic relations between ethnic minorities and law enforcement (e.g. Brown and Benedict 2002; Carr et al. 2007; Sharp and Atherton 2007; Morrow et al. 2017; Novich and Hunt 2017; Ulmer 2017). In addition, researchers have paid increasing attention to the harmful effects of targeted police practices on relationships between ethnic minority youth and the police, and studies have documented that these youths are policed more intensively than their ethnic majority counterparts (e.g. Fine et al. 2003; Pettersson 2013; Ariza 2014; Feinstein 2015; Flacks 2017). While research within the Nordic countries is relatively small, the results do suggest that policing of ethnic minorities, while occurring in a social context where trust in the police is exceptionally high, is both disproportionate and relations with the police are often negative (e.g. Holmberg and Kyvsgaard

2003; Honkatukia and Suurpää 2007; Sollund 2007; Pettersson 2013, 2014; Kääriäinen and Niemi 2014; Keskinen et al. 2018; Solhjell et al. 2019; Haller et al. 2020).

Procedural justice research has raised awareness of the harmful effects that unfairly perceived treatment by policing agents has on the legitimacy of and trust in the policing system (e.g. Tyler 1990, 2005; Bradford and Jackson 2015; Pettersson 2014; Saarikkomäki 2016; Schaap 2018). A few of the surveys that focused on ethnic minorities indicated that the perception of discrimination is a significant explanatory factor in undermining trust in policing (Van Craen and Skogan 2015) and that procedurally just policing increases views of police legitimacy (Tyler 2005; Van Craen 2012; Murphy and Mazerolle 2016; Madon et al. 2017). Murphy and Mazerolle (2016) found that procedural justice has a more positive effect on immigrants – especially immigrant youth – than it does on non-immigrants. Researchers (Schaap and Scheepers 2014; Kääriäinen 2018; Roché and Oberwittler 2018) suggests that a procedural justice framework may have under-estimated the impact of structural, contextual and cultural factors influencing trust in policing and that perceptions of trust may not necessarily extend uniformly to different groups in society. Consequently, studies on ethnic minority groups, within a comparative cross national setting, may provide some important insights. Although the procedural justice literature has offered important findings in understanding relations between citizens and the police, gaps still exist within the existing literature. This study aims to contribute to the existing research gap in the following ways: First, by adopting a qualitative approach to studying ethnic minority youth's perceptions of procedural justice in their relations with the police, our study provides new perspectives in a research field dominated by survey research (see also Pettersson 2014; Saarikkomäki 2016). Second, this study adds to a small number of procedural justice studies that focus specifically on young people (e.g. Murphy 2015; Saarikkomäki 2016) and ethnic minorities (e.g. Van Craen 2012; Pettersson 2014; Van Craen and Skogan 2015; Murphy and Mazerolle 2016). Thirdly, both Nordic and comparative national research on this topic are scarce, and this study contributes to the Anglo-American research dominated field by examining these issues both within a different demographic context and from a comparative perspective.

Many researchers have pointed out that the culminated effects of over-policing and under-protection have undermined ethnic minorities' trust in the police (e.g. McLaughlin 2007, 148). Understandings of ethnic minorities' attitudes toward the police have been based primarily on research conducted in the USA. For instance, a review of surveys and meta-analysis of citizen-police interactions suggest that African Americans and Latinos have more negative attitudes towards the police than Whites (e.g. Brown and Benedict 2002; Alberton and Gorey 2018). Although the bulk of research has revealed that relations between ethnic minorities and the police are generally negative, researchers have also provided a more nuanced examination of these relations. Qualitative studies from different countries draw attention to the fact that ethnic minority youths' views of the police are more complex than either survey data or a procedural justice approach have tended to indicate (e.g. Carr et al. 2007; Pettersson 2013, 2014; Feinstein 2015; Novich and Hunt 2017; Keskinen et al. 2018; Haller et al. 2020). For example, Carr and colleagues (2007), in their study on ethnic minority youth in high-crime neighbourhoods in the US, found that young people viewed the police negatively, mainly because of their individual encounters, some of which involved either excessive force or police approaching them for no apparent reason. However, they simultaneously held positive views

of the role of the police in relation to crime control and distinguished between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ officers (Carr et al. 2007). Similarly, in the Nordic countries, while ethnic minority men defined the police as useful and only ‘doing their job’, they also recounted experiences of unfair policing (Honkatukia and Suurpää 2007; Pettersson 2013). Keskinen and colleagues (2018) found that in Finland, being stopped by the police, interrupted daily journeys to school or work, made ethnic minorities feel like they were viewed as “others.” However, some did not care about being stopped or normalised their experiences, whilst others felt they were treated respectfully (Keskinen et al. 2018, 73– 74). Although not focusing specifically on ethnic minorities, Gormally and Deuchar (2012) interestingly use the term ‘proprietary ambivalence’ to stress ambivalent views in youths’ accounts of the police. On the one hand, they held negative views and had experiences of unfair policing and police violence, while on the other hand, they welcomed the procedurally just police to protect them and their families.

Our research poses the question of how encounters with police officers are perceived by ethnic minority youth and how the youth describe procedurally just and unjust policing within a Nordic context. More specifically, this article examines the extent to which potential ambiguities can be found in their narratives. The study provides additional information on the day-to-day interactions between ethnic minority youth and the police and it aims at highlighting the views of groups that are often both hard-to-reach and whose voices are rarely heard. We used qualitative methods and analysed interviews with ethnic minority youth in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Overall, our findings indicate similarities in how ethnic minority youth described their relations with the police in Nordic countries. Based on our findings, this paper argues that the ethnic minority youth felt paradoxically both suspected and protected by the police.

Procedural justice and belonging

According to the procedural justice model, citizens’ perceptions of legal authorities treating them fairly and in a procedurally just manner are the primary influence on how the system is experienced as legitimate and trustworthy (e.g. Tyler 1990; Jackson et al. 2012; Bradford 2014; Bradford and Jackson 2015; Murphy 2015). Moreover, co-operation with the police, and seeking help from them, are suggested to be indicators of perceived legitimacy (ibid.). In understanding notions of procedural justice, it is important to consider different elements: (a) citizens’ perceptions of neutral, impartial, and unselective criminal justice processes, (b) perceptions of policing agents treating people with politeness, respect and fairness, (c) trustworthy motives and (d) involving citizens in decision-making processes (Tyler 1990). The procedural justice model is often contrasted to an instrumental perspective, in which trust is based on efficacy and effectiveness of the police and less so on perceptions of how the police treat people (e.g. Jackson et al. 2012; Kääriäinen 2018). Trust in policing can be divided into ‘trust’ based on personal face-to-face experiences with police officers and into ‘confidence’ based on general views of the police institution, which does not necessarily require personal experiences (Bradford et al. 2008; Schaap 2018, 33-41). Regarding minority groups, it is suggested that their perceptions of trust in policing are driven both by their relations to the host societies and to their countries of origin (Roché and Oberwittler 2018).

Along with procedural justice, issues of belonging are therefore crucial. Although not being a systematic focus of prior research, examination of procedural justice reveals that a sense of belonging and feeling accepted as a member of a group is crucial. As Blader and Tyler (2009) argue, experiences of fair treatment by the police can foster a sense of connection to the majority social group, which the police represent. This has also been termed the Group Engagement Model (Tyler and Blader 2003), which argues that people's readiness to cooperate with their group (also an extended group like a nation) is very much dependent on the identity information they receive from central group members (like the police). Moreover, a central part of such identity information relates to the feeling of respect and evaluations of procedural justice in the group. As Tyler and Blader states: 'identity evaluations and concerns mediate the relationship between justice judgments and group engagement' (Tyler and Blader 2003, 353). More specifically, relations with the police (as representatives of societal norms and values) can communicate (or threaten) a sense of local and/or national belonging. In the words of Bradford and colleagues (2014), police officers are 'mirrors' of the superordinate group. In a similar way, Loader defines policing as 'a social institution whose routine ordering and cultural work communicates authoritative meanings to individuals and groups about who they are, about whether their voices are heard and claims recognised, and about where and in what ways they belong' (2006, 204). Ideal crime control should be conducted in a way that supports the involved citizens' 'sense of belonging to a democratic political community' (ibid.).

Consequently, many ethnic minority youth question the relationship between themselves and the broader society in terms of belonging, and experiences of discriminatory policing can add to and reinforce a sense of not belonging to the majority community (Christensen 2009). Furthermore, as Pettersson (2013) argues, such experiences are often directly linked to the everyday interactions between the police and youth and the sense of belonging and not belonging can change during the course of such encounters, as a result of police behaviour. Finally, feelings of unjust policing and, as a consequence, an increased sense of un-belonging can also add to young immigrants' constructions of counter-images or street cultures of resistance within their neighbourhoods as a way of resisting or transcending "inferior images" ascribed to them by the wider society (Young 1999; Lalander 2008), including the police. Street cultures can provide alternative definitions of identity, especially for young men, who live in communities marked by social exclusion and who have little access to masculine status in the formal economy (Bourgois 2003).

Nordic context

Ugelvik (2016) argues that trends relating to policing in Nordic countries are often parallel and Nordic police forces have common characteristics: they have been described as largely unitary, centralised and highly educated. The police in the Nordic countries are heavily influenced by the Scandinavian welfare model (Høigård 2011). However, researchers have also suggested that, in the absence of conclusive Nordic comparative research, the claim of resemblance cannot be fully supported (Høigård 2011; Holmberg 2015). Furthermore, there are differences, for example in education levels, Norway and Finland having the highest level, and in juridical frameworks (Björk 2005). Another common character is that, compared with Europe, the degree of trust is the highest in the four Nordic countries (Kääriäinen 2007). However, there are some differences in the level of trust towards the police (scale 0-10), where the highest trust

is found in Finland and Denmark (nearly 8), followed by Norway (around 7), and the lowest in Sweden (over 6) (Kääriäinen, 2007, 419).

It is also important to note here another Nordic contextual characteristic: Compared with Western European countries and the US, the number of immigrants is relatively low, although there has been a recent increase. However, the Nordic countries have dissimilar immigration policies (Brochmann and Hagelund 2011, 13). Sweden is often regarded as the most liberal, accepting large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, whereas Finland has the smallest number of immigrants. Norway and Denmark share a similar strict immigration policy with fewer immigrants than Sweden. A context in which the majority of citizens belong to one ethnic group and religion can be viewed as unwelcoming for immigrants. Indeed, in all of the Nordic countries, given the dominance of the white populations, ethnicity and ethnic identity can be a striking characteristic of either belonging or not belonging (Christensen 2009). The current development towards less cohesive Nordic societies may be challenging for the police, as they are accustomed to policing uniform, high-trust populations (Ugelvik 2016), and law enforcement in the Nordic countries have not avoided accusations of ethnic profiling and disproportionate policing (e.g. Holmberg and Kyvsgaard 2003; Keskinen et al. 2018). Research in this high trust context also provides valuable knowledge for non-Nordic scholars, although contemporary shifts are evident, international scholars' assessments of Nordic approaches to crime prevention and policing still find them simultaneously praiseworthy (see e.g. Høigård 2011; Helminen and Alvesalo-Kuusi 2017).

Data and methods: interviews with ethnic minority youth

We interviewed 121 ethnic minority youth and young adults with immigrant background aged 15 to 25 (one participant from Sweden was 30 but talked about his experiences as a younger man). Mean age of the participants was: Denmark 17; Finland 17; Norway 18 and Sweden 20. We conducted a total of 85 in depth-interviews, of which 64 were individual interviews and 21 focus group interviews (this means that a total of 57 individuals were interviewed in focus groups). Data was collected between 2016 and 2017. Our sample size was determined by our overall aim of having a sufficient number of participants in each country to facilitate a country comparative analysis. We conducted a minimum of 17 interviews in each country (number of individual participants: Denmark 42, Finland 30, Norway 29, and Sweden 20). We reached a saturation point, when we began to hear similar stories from our respondents across all the four Nordic countries, as well as interesting comparative differences. Eighty percent of the participants were male (97 participants) and twenty percent were female (24 participants). Seventy percent (85 participants) were born in the Nordic countries and 30 percent (36 participants) had been born abroad. Nearly all of them had lived in the Nordic countries for five or more years. Fifty-nine participants identified themselves as possessing an African ethnic background, 52 Asian backgrounds, and five an East European background.

We conducted interviews in the city centres, as well as in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Aarhus (Denmark), Helsinki (Finland), Oslo (Norway), Malmö and Växjö (Sweden). The participants were recruited from these large cities and urban environments for two main reasons: First, socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods and city centres provided a context of more intensive day-to-day interaction with the police and, second, most ethnic

minorities reside within these areas. Most of the interviewees lived in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods. However, a couple lived in wealthier neighborhoods. Participants were contacted at different places such as in youth and community clubs, and through social workers. Leaflets were also used to advertise the project and the participants and youth workers were asked to distribute information through their various networks including social media. The most effective way for recruiting was to ask youth directly and to conduct interviews immediately; distributing leaflets and information only worked in a few cases. Nearly all of those participants, when asked directly, were willing to participate, a couple of them, however, did decline. It also occasionally occurred that the youth workers or young people themselves recommended someone to participate. As our topic was sensitive, we asked whether the participants wished to be interviewed alone or in groups and conducted the interviews accordingly. Differences in the information collected in the focus groups versus information from individual interviews was not apparent.

All but a few of our participants had had experience of police-initiated contact. Most of the participants were either still at school or working. They varied from those who possessed a more 'troubled' background, including frequent contact with the police, to those who could be defined as high achievers and had only occasionally experienced police contact. For reasons of sensitivity, we did not usually ask whether the youth had a criminal background nor did we ask about their school achievements, if these topics arose, it was the interviewee who started the discussion. To guarantee anonymity, we have chosen to withhold specific information regarding ethnic background, police encounters and places. There is an obvious bias in our selection of participants resulting from the type of methodology we adopted. For example, our recruitment practices excluded rural youth and those, who do not spend time in certain urban locations and youth clubs. Using this strategy can exclude the most marginalised groups. Since we have interviewed people from quite similar areas it is possible that they agree in their views whereas youth living in other areas, or spending time in other locations, might have presented alternative perspectives. Nevertheless, the experiences described in this paper derive from youth who live in different countries and in different neighborhoods in the same city. Another limitation is that the study did not select participants from the majority population and/or in wealthier neighbourhoods. This could be of interest to future studies. In addition, we have not interviewed police officers, who in turn could provide alternative narratives describing similar encounters.

The interview questions focused on personal and peers' experiences, perceptions of and general trust in the police as well as relations with the majority society and their families of origin. While the interviews followed a similar pattern, the schedule was designed to promote a conversation-style format, as opposed to a strictly rigid interview format. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Because ethnic minority youth can experience feelings of being 'othered' in comparison with the majority population, and may feel that they are only heard as representatives of minority groups, our aim was to be sensitive in listening to how the participants talked about their identities and their experiences.

The data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's method (2006), following their definition, we counted as a theme something that captures crucial points in relation to our research aims and something that is a patterned response in the data set. All the data was recorded and transcribed verbatim, and we read the transcripts several times. After

this, initial codes were coded across the entire data set and collated into potential main themes and sub-themes following the research questions (by using NVivo). Themes were reviewed for consistency and some were removed if there was not enough data to support them. We also paid attention to compelling and rare issues, and alternative voices (Braun and Clarke 2006, 95). In conducting our analysis, we started to notice that themes reflecting ambiguity in views of policing began to emerge and consequently we started to focus more deeply on these findings (see also Gormally and Deuchar 2012). Our aim was then to explore narratives that the youth recounted in order to gain insights into ambiguity and multifaceted negotiations (Sandberg et al. 2015). We created two main themes, suspicion and protection, and we identified three sub-themes for each (presented in the next section). A disadvantage of thematic analysis is, however, that it does not follow one interviewee's narrative from the beginning to its conclusion (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Projects involving many researchers, and as in this case involving four countries, can be methodologically challenging. Therefore, from the start of the project, we have been careful to continuously use researcher triangulation, i.e. we organised meetings in order to critically discuss data collection, initial coding and analytical themes. The primary researcher in each country first did an initial coding and then coded the relevant themes and topics specified by the first author. These sections were translated in English. After receiving translated data, the first author re-classified and checked the consistency of the themes and then checked the analysis with the other authors. In comparing data from the different countries provides data triangulation possibilities to check for credibility as opposed to having data only from one context. Data from all the countries highlighted issues of suspicion and protection, which suggested that these reflect shared perceptions of policing among ethnic minority youth living in Nordic countries.

Suspected but protected by the police

Two major themes emerged from our analysis of the interview narratives: Participants felt both suspected and protected by the police. Consequently, typical narratives indicated that participants' perceptions of the police lay somewhere between these two dimensions. Only rarely did they discuss either solely negative views of the police or solely positive views.

Being suspected

We found that in all the four Nordic countries, ethnic minority youth felt that the police often suspected them of criminal activities. The youth were the focus of police attention in their public everyday activities, even when merely hanging out in city spaces or in their own neighbourhoods, or on their way home from school. Some had experienced these day-to-day encounters many times and were therefore more prone to describing negative feelings about the police. In examining this overall theme of being suspected, three inter-connected sub-themes can be identified: 1) suspicious police gaze, 2) being approached for no reason and 3) being labelled as a criminal.

Suspicious police gaze

Similar ways of describing a suspicious ‘police gaze’ (Finstad 2000; Høigård 2011) could be found in the narratives from all four countries: the police keeping an eye on them was something the participants experienced as intimidating and they mentioned the ‘police gaze’ regularly in their interviews. Participants described how police officers looked at them suspiciously when they passed by in a police car or while patrolling the streets. For instance, participants in a Danish focus group described how they felt when being watched by the police:

R1: The police never pass without harassing us

Interviewer: Can you give an example?

R1: They keep staring at you. They point at you.

(...)

R2: I’ve never seen them passing by without staring at you. (Denmark, Focus group, two males aged 17 and 15 years, Int. id. 28)

Police keeping an eye on them was perceived as unjust and a biased police practice. From the youths’ accounts, it was evident that these ephemeral interactions enforced feelings of being targeted and suspected. A young woman from Finland interpreted how police behaviour can be an expression of underlying racism and she noted how ‘active’ young men of a different skin colour were specifically given ‘that police look’.

C: They [the police] are pretty decent overall. They have their formal expressions on, but you also see covert racism. Some of my friends can be pretty hyperactive, and the police stop to look at them. But it’s not like they immediately accuse you of stealing something, if you stand in the same spot for a long time. But they will look at you. (...) But if a guy who looks at all foreign is being hyperactive, they will keep an eye on him. Because they assume things, but then they see he’s just being hyperactive and leave. (Finland, Individual interview, female aged 17, Int. id. C3)

Being approached or stopped for no reason

This second sub-theme, mentioned in nearly all the interviews, includes incidents in which police ask for a youth’s ID or incidents in which youths are regularly approached, stopped or checked. Being approached or stopped for no apparent reason created a strong sense of procedural injustice and also a sense of biased treatment. For some of the participants, this was a common, regular and even normalised occurrence in their lives, which often occurred either walking in public spaces or while driving. For most, it had happened once or twice, being something they recalled well. A very few participants, who did not describe this type of interventions still discussed their friends’ or family members’ experiences. We also found that our participants compared how the police treated them and how they treated non-ethnic minority youth. This suggests that procedurally just or unjust treatment is contextual and defined in comparison with how other non-ethnic minority individuals are treated in a similar situation. The participants were particularly sensitive about this differential treatment, as illustrated in the quote below:

R: Like two days ago when I came from fitness training. I was just walking and then they stop me, just because I have my hood up. Then they tell me: ‘Can we have your name?’ There was a [ethnic] Danish guy next to me but he wasn’t stopped, of course. (Denmark, Individual interview, male aged 17, Int. id. 25)

Contradictory feelings towards police interactions were sometimes present in situations where the youth were stopped. Views of procedural justice and instrumental views were also mixed in the accounts. For instance, an illuminating example of ambiguity is presented in the next example, where an ID check was perceived as both discriminatory but also an understandable aspect of police work. This young woman appears to accept that the fact that the police need to control foreign nationals in Finland (see Keskinen et al. 2018, 15-18) and appears to understand the rationale for such police practices. Nevertheless, she emphasises that being regularly approached felt racist:

Interviewer: Have they (the police) asked you for ID?

A: Well yeah ... Sometimes it feels like racism, but it’s understandable if you want to know if a person is in Finland legally.

...

A: They came up to me [while standing together with ethnic Finnish friends] and wanted to check that I’m from Finland.

Interviewer: How did that feel?

A: Racist. It’s understandable in a way, but then again I don’t know. I’ve never thought of myself as Finnish, but I was born here, so I don’t really know how to deal with it. But it’s a bit awkward. ... My friends are always like ‘You are Finnish’ and I’m like ‘How?’ ‘Because you have a Finnish social security number and you are Finnish’. I’m like ‘Yes that’s what my passport says, but I wouldn’t say so’. (Finland, Focus group, 2 females aged 15 and 16 years, Int. id. J10)

While only very few of the participants expressed an understanding for such practices, it is worth noting the occurrence of such opposing views. In fact, our participants’ acceptance of this unfair treatment may suggest that these young people use rationalization techniques to make sense of the differential approach of the police officers (see Keskinen et al. 2018). Normalising these events may work as a coping mechanism to deal with unpleasant experiences. While recalling these experiences, this young woman expressed a general feeling of not belonging, indicating a possible connection between targeted police practices and a sense of belonging.

Moreover, such experiences can also challenge not only a sense of belonging to a specific country but also to a specific residential area or community, a connection that some researchers have called ‘neighbourhood nationalism’ (Back 1996). This connection is well illustrated in the following example in which a young Swedish man describes being stopped because he lived in a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood. While narratives of being stopped and having their ID’s checked, challenging their sense of national belonging and citizenship could be found in the interviews from all four countries, descriptions of over-policing in their

specific neighbourhoods, challenging a sense of local belonging, were more common in the Swedish and Danish interviews. In this example from Sweden, being stopped for no reason is linked to area “stigmatization,” which means the neighbourhood is viewed as being more aggressively policed.

H: Honestly, the police don't do this kind of thing in Trelleborg [Swedish city]. ... But when it comes to Araby, the police are more aggressive. It shouldn't be like that. We are all of equally value.

[...]

H: Then you drive your car. You get stopped immediately cause you're here in Araby. 'Aa, what are you doing here in Araby?' Hello? This is my area, I have always been here in Araby. ... (Sweden, Focus group, two males aged 23, Int. id. 9).

Being labelled as a criminal

Being approached by the police is closely linked with the third sub-theme, that of being labelled as a criminal. In our analysis, we were particularly mindful of noting the emotions expressed. When participants described how the police stop them even when doing nothing, they described feeling that they were identified and labelled as potential criminals simply because of their ethnic minority background, which in turn made them feel discriminated against and humiliated. For instance, participants worried that when other people saw them being apprehended, they would perceive them as criminals enforcing labels.

R: That's also un-cool, because people get that feeling. They form an image, a first impression. Because when they suddenly see that someone has been stopped, they think: 'That guy is a criminal. That guy did something.' That's really un-cool. (Denmark, Individual interview, male aged 17, Int. id. 25)

This sense of procedurally biased treatment of being disproportionately targeted because of their neighbourhood or their 'obvious' ethnic minority appearance, whether in terms of skin colour or style of dress, can be seen in the following example from Norway:

Interviewer: If there was a group that consisted of people like me [ethnic Norwegian women], would they [the police] do the same?

S: No, because you don't seem intimidating to people or threatening. Common people wouldn't think such a group was scary. ... We get more stigmatised, labelled as criminals and deviants. It may be the way we dress, this also matters. But also that we are people from many nationalities, that plays a role. And that [the neighbourhood] in itself has always had a reputation. (Norway, Individual interview, male aged 23, Int. id.13)

Participants believed that police suspicion and their process of labelling was mainly linked to their ethnic minority background, however occasionally, they also linked it to issues of age and appearance (e.g. McAra and McVie 2005; Pettersson 2014; Feinstein 2015; Solhjell et al.

2019). In examining this issue more deeply, we discovered some differences between the four countries. While subtle forms of suspicion linked to ethnicity were described in all the four countries, specific descriptions of the police using racist names were only discussed in Denmark. Additionally, there were some reports of police violence in the interviews in Denmark and Sweden, such reports were uncommon in the Finnish and Norwegian interviews.

To conclude, being approached for no apparent reason and being labelled as a criminal seems to produce a sense of being suspected rather than feeling protected. Such interactions, which can be interpreted as procedurally unfair and biased (Tyler 1990; Bradford and Jackson 2015), also seem to encourage a sense of not belonging. Although such negative feelings about police interactions occurred in most of the interviews in all the Nordic countries, some of the participants did express an opposing view that questioned the belief that they had been singled out because of their ethnic origin. In these few cases from each country, the youth either expressed not experiencing any suspicion about ethnic bias or maybe they had rationalized their experiences of being unfairly perceived as a normal and acceptable practice.

Being protected

Although descriptions of being typical targets for police suspicion were common, most participants shared their experiences of being protected by the police and expressed, at least to some extent, a sense of general trust. In the following, we outline three partly interconnected sub-themes: 1) respectful and fair treatment during interventions; 2) relying on the police for help; and 3) the police doing their job well. Whereas the first sub-theme reflects personal experiences of procedural justice, the latter two reflect general attitudes about the police as an institution. Here, a sense of ambiguity is apparent between the three themes, and on occasion some of the participants felt, for example, that the police, while generally doing their job well, were at the same time behaving in a way that encouraged feelings of racism. In addition, opposing views were reflected by some of the youth, who rarely expressed any positive views of being protected by or trusting the police.

Respectful and fair treatment

This sub-theme examines the experiences of our participants with individual police officers, who have treated ethnic minority youth in a respectful and friendly manner. Elements of procedurally just policing and fair treatment enhanced positive views and such experiences were remembered by the youth. The participants noticed differences between the officers and identified these as 'good' or 'bad,' which resulted in their feeling either suspected or protected. In fact, the majority of the participants emphasised that the specific behaviours of police officers were crucial for generating good relations. In fact, it could be very small gestures of the police which made them appear trustworthy to the young people and demonstrated their neutrality. The police communicating in a friendly and relaxed tone, taking time to explain the reason for why they checked or arrested the young person and what would happen next, listening patiently and letting young people talk and explain how they perceive the situation, showing respect and treating them in the same way as any other person, created a sense of fair

treatment (see also Pettersson 2013; Saarikkomäki 2016). A calm approach in situations that could be frightening was appreciated, as can be seen in the following quote:

R: There are some officers that I like.

Interviewer: What kind of officers?

R: Those who are calm and quiet. They talk to you in the proper way and then you talk to them in the proper way. They're doing a good job. And then there are a few that I just can't stand. (Denmark, Focus group, four males aged 17 to 18 years, Int. id. 5)

In addition to highlighting the positive effect of the police chatting, greeting, and speaking nicely, our participants emphasised the significance of the police making small gestures, for example, giving water to a person, who had been arrested. The young people also appreciated when police officers showed their human side, for instance by being humorous or showing a sincere interest in the young people's lives. Such experiences of seemingly trivial but positive behaviour, even if it only occurred once or twice, helped to create a sense of feeling protected despite other negative experiences that the participants might have had. The importance of fair treatment and small positive actions is illustrated in the following quote in which a young man first explains his views of the police as being tougher in their approach towards ethnic minorities, but then recalling one incident when the police were respectful when he had skipped school many times and they came to his home. The young man described small gestures of, for example, parking the car further away (perhaps to avoid labelling), asking their mother for permission to come in, and speaking in a respectful way:

I: Then he spoke to us as an elder brother or father. That 'It's important to stay straight' and 'It's important to listen to your mother'. And that was good, but it was a one-time experience. (Norway, Individual interview, male aged 23, Int. id. 13)

Relying on the police for help

The second sub-theme about relying on the police for help alludes to a different aspect of police work than previously described police-initiated encounters. The young people discussed their attitudes about the ability of the police to protect them and their communities. Furthermore, some shared also personal experiences of getting help and whether they perceived police acting fairly. The responses varied, recounting where they did not call for help very easily, or at all, to being very eager to call the police for help.

Boy1: I wouldn't be the first to call the police, you know.

(...)

Girl2: I would, because I haven't experienced any bad episodes with the police before, so I think I would call them first.

Boy2: We can sit here and say we wouldn't call them, but eventually you would call them anyway. Because you have no other choice. You wouldn't call your mother and ask her to come. You'd have to call the police and it takes time, but

they will come eventually. (Norway, Focus group, two males and two females aged 15–18 years, Int. id. 8–11)

The young woman from Norway explained that she could call the police because she had no bad experiences herself, indicating that the effects of unfair experiences could affect willingness to call the police. Moreover, another example of ambiguity was that even in some of the disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where the participants typically felt targeted by the police, a few of them also expressed the view that the police were able to help and protect them:

N: It can be like fights. Like getting weapons. I don't know. But I've seen a lot of this sort of thing. Then the police have done their job I think. I feel really safe. People have a lot to say about Rosengård, but I've never been afraid or I don't know, I think mostly because the police, they are handling the situation. (Sweden, Individual interview, female aged 18, Int. id. 4)

A sense of ambivalence was also evident in the participants' narratives when they discussed concrete situations of being helped by the police (see also Gormally and Deuchar 2012). A couple of the interviewees discussed experiences of violence or racist insults in public spaces while having positive experiences of receiving help from the police. However, some of these same participants also perceived their treatment as unfair, in situations in which they were victims of crime and had expected to be protected, but instead were treated as potential suspects. Furthermore, some youth held opposing views, such as feeling not protected, indicating either that the police did not help them enough or were slow to respond when they had to confront racist insults. In some cases our participants expressed the belief that if they called the police they would not come at all. This reflects an aspect of procedural justice of police listening to them and taking their problems seriously.

The police doing their job well

The third sub-theme indicated a general confidence in the police, not always connected to our participants' personal experiences, but more to the perception of 'the police doing their job well'. Although aspects of procedurally unfair treatment stirred more discussions than police role in crime prevention, instrumental aspects of police efficacy were occasionally discussed. Despite experiences of suspicion, the participants in all four countries viewed the police as doing important work. This was particularly apparent when the participants contrasted their perceptions of the Nordic police to the police in their parents' countries of origin. In these comparisons, they argued that the police in the Nordic countries were more professional, less corrupt, and less coercive than in other countries. In the next example from Finland, although these young men discussed unfairly experienced encounters and being suspected by the police, they nevertheless did trust the police in general:

Interviewer: How would you describe your relationship with the police?

TM: The police are good, really safe here in Finland. The safest police in the world.

M: The Finnish police is good. (Finland, Focus group, four males aged 15 to 17 years, Int. id. B2).

In the next quote, our participant suggests that viewing the police as legitimate can mean that people are ready to accept negative outcomes, a theme discussed in procedural justice research (e.g. Tyler 1990; Jackson et al. 2012). General confidence in the police might have led some of the participants to even accept unfair treatment and being approached for no good reason, while expressing a sense that the police were ‘just doing their job.’ Being stopped and singled out by the police was *not* necessarily viewed as affecting their daily lives.

M: They’re doing their job. I don’t mind being singled out if a security guard or a police officer stops me and wants to check if I have something, it doesn’t affect me at all. Cause they’re doing their job and want to check if I’ve got something or not. (Sweden, Focus group, two males aged 17, Int. id. 2)

A good indicator of the ambiguity of feelings toward the police is that in spite of feeling generally suspected, most of the participants in each country noted that the presence of the police in their neighbourhoods made them feel protected and safe, as illustrated in the extracts above and below. Again, some opposing notions were presented, as a few of the participants expressed the view that the police ultimately created a sense of danger rather than safety. A sense of general trust in the police was also evident in that most of the participants emphasised not wanting to generalise that all the police are unprofessional on the basis of their individual experiences, but that they often had something positive to say about the police.

Interviewer: So, generally, would you say that your view of the police is more positive or negative?

R1: Mostly positive, because they do their job and it’s important that they stop illegal things and people who get into fights and such. Because the people living here can’t do anything about it. (Denmark, Focus group, two males aged 15, Int. id. 12)

To conclude, a sense of ambiguity was present throughout the interviews, and the police were described both positively and negatively by the same participants. While not necessarily obvious from the interviews, one might speculate as to whether such positive experiences made the youth feel protected and cared for, thereby generating trust in the police and a sense of belonging to the wider society.

Discussion

Prior research has highlighted disproportionate policing of ethnic minorities, and subsequent negative relations between minority youth and the police (e.g. Holmberg and Kyvsgaard 2003; Sharp and Atherton 2007; Pettersson 2013; Feinstein 2015; Flacks 2017; Alberton and Gorey 2018; Keskinen et al. 2018). Survey-based procedural justice studies found procedurally just policing particularly important for ethnic minorities (Van Craen and Skogan 2015; Murphy and

Mazerolle 2016; Madon et al. 2017). In our view, the qualitative examination of issues related to procedural justice is essential for making sense of the everyday life experiences of ethnic minority youth in dealing with the police. Our findings suggest that a more complex understanding of procedural justice is needed where notions of belonging are considered. Furthermore, our findings propose a more complete approach where ambiguity and multi-sided evaluations are noted. Although unfairly experienced treatment and suspicion were reoccurring themes, ethnic minority youth's relations with the police were nevertheless ambiguous, including both positive and negative perceptions, and an understanding for police work and a trust in the police organizations. The relations are, at the same time, shaped and influenced by feelings of being both suspected and protected.

The themes of being suspected consisted of feelings that the police kept an eye on them, approaching or stopping them for no apparent reason, asking for ID's, and labelling them. Such encounters embarrassed our participants and made them doubt the impartiality of the police. We found that when the police communicated in a friendly, respectful, relaxed manner, greeting, chatting, and listening to youth such encounters were important for improving our participants' sense of procedural justice (see also Pettersson 2013; Saarikkomäki 2016). This form of inclusive communication, we would argue, created a sense of trust and fairness even in situations where they were being suspected.

However, in an opposite way, the police staring or looking at them from the car or in the streets, because they looked different, was considered biased and racist, which ultimately diminished their sense of trust in the police. The police asking information of them created distrust in police motivations, which is another important element of procedural justice. Furthermore, being stopped in front of other people reinforced the image of ethnic minorities as 'the usual suspects' (McAra and McVie 2005). A more procedurally just option was to be discrete (e.g. not to accuse them right away, or talking to them away from the eyes of onlookers). Procedural fairness was found to be contextual, the youth compared their treatment as compared to ethnic majority citizens in similar situations. Finally, distrust in police motivations was also linked to specifically geographical areas such as disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

However, despite the various negative encounters, the youth had positive experiences of fair and caring police conduct and they felt protected if they could rely on the police as victims of crime. However in highlighting ambiguity in discussions of similar situations, procedural unfairness and suspicion were present if the police did not take them seriously, listened, or suspected them or being the offender not the victim. Finally, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, our participants' overall perceptions of the police institution reflected the general Nordic sense of high trust in the police, particularly when compared to the police in their parents' countries of origin (Kääriäinen 2007; Ugelvik 2016). Regardless of feeling unfairly targeted, fundamental trust in the police seemed unblemished. These findings deviate from those studies conducted outside Nordic countries which describe the relations between the police and ethnic minorities as being more solely negative, lacking trust, and a sense of being unprotected (e.g. Brown and Benedict 2002; McLaughlin 2007; Sharp and Atherton 2007; Feinstein 2015).

Our findings are consistent with previous qualitative examinations on young people's views of procedural justice in highlighting the multi-sided views and the importance of fair

treatment (e.g. Tyler 2005; Gormally and Deuchar 2012; Pettersson 2014; Novich and Hunt 2017). In a similar way to Carr and colleagues (2007), we found that while youth can perceive police encounters negatively, they can still maintain an idealised view of the police protecting them from crime. Furthermore, like Gormally and Deuchar (2012), we found that the youth adhered to an ambivalent view of the police: rather than viewing the police solely in a negative light, they reflected sympathy for many aspects of policing. In interpreting police behavior, our participants also noted, along with issues of ethnicity, the effects of issues of age. Research conducted in a similar setting (Saarikkomäki 2016) found that many non-ethnic minority underaged Finns felt targeted because of being young. This prior study did not find narratives of ID checks, being regularly stopped, and being such a common target of suspicion as our current study did (Saarikkomäki 2016), indicating there can be differences in experiences of ethnic majority versus minority groups.

Similar to our findings, prior research indicates that police attention or “gaze” is often directed to ethnic minorities (e.g. Holmberg 2000; Pettersson 2014; Feinstein 2015; Solhjell et al. 2019). The police “gaze” (Finstad 2000) is described as the ways in which the police are trained to look for deviations from the norm in situations and contexts where the police decide to act, based both on experience and on police culture. Holmberg (2000), for example, uses the concept of typological guilt to indicate how the police use discretion to define assumptions about suspicious types of people. Most of the police stops are not related to police detecting crime, but based on the police looking for people defined as suspicious (Holmberg 2000). In turn, the police “gaze” and suspicion can also be understood in how extra-legal factors such as ethnicity, neighborhood and gender also play a role in selective policing. This goes beyond physical markers of otherness, such as ethnicity and clothing, and instead describes how being under suspicion or looking suspicious, leads to differential treatment (see also Solhjell et al. 2019). Accordingly, it is crucial to understand how the police “gaze” can lead to racial discrimination which in turn can produce a sense of unbelonging.

This study also shows support for the Group Engagement Model in procedural justice theory (Tyler and Blader 2003). We found that procedurally unfair policing could negatively affect feelings of belonging among marginalised groups. Biased treatment, such as stopping and checking ID’s and a sense of disproportionate policing, can communicate to ethnic minority groups that they are different from the majority population, their national identity is questioned, or the area in which they live is labelled as problematic. Notions of procedural justice and a sense of belonging is therefore interlinked (Blader and Tyler 2009; Pettersson 2013; Bradford 2014; Bradford et al. 2014). Police encounters generate feelings as to whether you are respected in society (Pettersson 2013; Loader 2006). Hence, it is important to address the ways in which the symbolic power of the police (Loader and Mulcahy 2003) influence feelings of belonging and the extent to which feelings of unbelonging can fuel the creation of a counter-culture. If ethnic minorities feel rejected by society, including by the police, they may develop cultures of resistance which can offer them an alternative status and recognition (e.g. Young 1999; Jensen 2011; Kolind et al. 2017). It is exactly because of the symbolic power of the police, that we emphasize the importance of gestures of respect and inclusion in the police’ everyday interactions with ethnic minority young people.

Our study, however, also raises a critical remark for procedural justice theory. According to our findings, trusting the institution of the police and perceiving policing as

procedurally just, which are both positive elements, might paradoxically result in the acceptance of procedurally unfair or discriminatory policing practices. We found that a high sense of trust in the Nordic police might have contributed to some of the participants' willingness to accept unjust and selective treatment, such as being approached for no apparent reason. Being stopped and singled out was occasionally conceptualised as police just doing their job. In ways similar to the work of Keskinen and colleagues (2018, 73–74), some of our participants seemed to normalise their experiences and accept differential treatment, perhaps in order to deal with experiences of being singled out. These findings can be viewed as critique of the procedural justice theory, and recent literature highlights that blind trust in the police should not always be pursued (Schaap 2018). Procedural justice literature suggests that people can accept negative outcomes if the processes are fair (e.g. Tyler 1990; Jackson et al. 2012), however, we found that people can accept even unfairly perceived processes and view them as legitimate. Consequently, our findings suggest that trust in the police is not automatically a good thing as such and that critical reflections are needed even in the Nordic context, where a high sense of trust is the norm.

Finally, comparative national studies of ethnic minority youth and their experiences and perceptions of police practices are relatively scarce. According to Roché and Oberwittler (2018), procedural justice has lacked structural, cultural or contextual understanding, which are important to consider when studying issues linked to ethnic minorities. We discovered similarities in policing experiences in all the four Nordic countries. However, there were also minor differences. For example, using racist names emerged only in Denmark and reports of police violence only in Denmark and Sweden. Descriptions of over-policing in specific neighbourhoods were more common in Denmark and Sweden, which might be due to these countries having segregated neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants. These differences could be explained through differences between the Nordic countries that can affect police-minority relationships. This may also include the juridical framework, such as the discretionary autonomy for Danish police versus the legalistic Swedish police, where the Swedish system can lead to frustration and in turn aggression towards conflictual situations (Björk 2005, 309). Another difference that may influence is education. In Norway and Finland, police recruits undertake a bachelor degree at a police university/college. In Sweden, the recruits receive theoretical and vocational training starting with first-cycle education in three different police academies (Umeå, Linnaeus and Södertörn) situated at university level and recruits are then enrolled as trainees in the police. The Danish police education, in comparison with Norway and Finland, is in-between that of a police college and vocational training. In turn, the legal and educational practices can affect differences in how the police view and deal with ethnic minority youth. Higher education can provide more tools for procedurally fair policing. Moreover, differences in the level of trust towards the police can also potentially explain differences, where the highest levels exist in Finland followed by Denmark and Norway, respectively, and the lowest in Sweden (Kääriäinen 2007). However, given the relatively small number of interviews in each country, and the absence of other Nordic comparative research, we need to remain cautious in attempting to draw firm comparative conclusions (see also Holmberg 2015, 54). Lastly, one could also speculate as to whether differences in strategies of policing influence not only the amount of encounters but also the experiences of fairness. In Denmark, for instance, one has recently witnessed targeted gang

suppression strategies in certain areas aimed at transforming Danish nightlife into a no-go zone for gang-related individuals including presumed ethnic minority gang related individuals (Søgaard and Houborg 2018).

To conclude, findings from all four Nordic countries highlight issues of suspicion and protection among ethnic minority youths' perceptions of the police. Disrespectful treatment from a police officer can communicate an attitude of 'out group' status, a sense of not belonging, which can result in a feeling of distance between a minority individual and the wider society (Madon et al. 2017). Our results also highlight the fact that policing activities which might appear routine (see e.g. Holmberg 2000) can have an important impact on trust in policing and a sense of belonging. These findings can give voice to the experiences of ethnic minorities and potentially raise attention to issues of unfairly perceived treatment. The findings may also potentially offer some practical implications for the police organizations and the training of officers. Indeed, perhaps policing officers do not always recognise that subtle interactions, such as a police officer talking in a certain tone of voice, greeting, staring or asking for one's information, can carry a strong and potentially threatening message. There is an urgent need continuously to pay attention to procedurally just policing from the perspective of marginalised groups in order to further promote integration, as well as a need for more critical analyses assessing the elements of procedural justice.

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