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"We are Seen as a Threat": Police Stops of Young Ethnic Minorities in the Nordic Countries

Randi Solhjell[1] · Elsa Saarikkomäki[2] · Mie Birk Haller[3] · David Wästerfors[4] · Torsten Kolind[3]

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Abstract
This article focuses on the perspectives of young ethnic minorities in the Nordic countries who have experienced various forms of "police stops", i.e. situations where the police stop them without any reference to a specific event of which the youth are aware. Analytically, the debate is positioned through an intersectionality approach of (un)belonging to majority societies. Across the Nordic countries, we found that the young people described five social markers as reasons for being stopped, namely clothing, hanging out in groups, ethnicity, neighbourhoods and gender. We argue that the police stops explicate how the young men in particular are often forced to think about themselves in terms of "a threat" to the majority and the attributes they have that make them seem like criminals.

✉ Randi Solhjell
ransol@phs.no

Elsa Saarikkomäki
elsa.saarikkomaki@helsinki.fi

Mie Birk Haller
mbh.crf@psy.au.dk

David Wästerfors
david.wasterfors@soc.lu.se

Torsten Kolind
tk.crf@psy.au.dk

1 Research Department, The Police University College and the Centre for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo, Postboks 5027, Majorstuen, 0301 Oslo, Norway

2 Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 3, 00014 Helsinki, Finland

3 Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Aarhus University, Bartholins Allé 10 building 1322, 216 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

4 Department of Sociology, Lund University, Box 114, 221 00 Lund, Sweden

Introduction

Young men with ethnic minority backgrounds are persons who are disproportionality stopped and questioned by the police in the western world (see e.g. Brunson 2007; Gau and Brunson 2015; Pettersson 2013; Sollund 2006, 2007a, b; White 2015). This article looks into Nordic contexts of policing experiences among minorities of non-Western background, namely in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. In all the Nordic countries, there is a majority white population, and ethnicity can be seen as the most striking marker of belonging (Christensen 2009, p. 22)—in close interplay with other categories, such as gender, age and class.

The article discusses a particular type of policing experienced among ethnic minority youth, namely what we call 'police stops'. Police stops are defined here as incidents where young people are stopped by the police but where the intention of the police is unclear for the young person and the encounters are unnecessary or excessive in the eyes of the young people. The police stops do not refer to any specific police work character or legal frames but summarizes the various encounters the young people have with the police. The young people in the study, who problematized these stops, told different stories about similar experiences of being overly controlled based on a combination of ethnic and sociocultural expressions. We have chosen to see the young peoples' perspectives through these particular encounters as they highlight an interrelation between the intensity around the young peoples' social identities (who they are entitled to be) and status in society (why they are controlled).

We are inspired by an intersectionality approach of belonging and unbelonging (Yuval-Davis 2006a, 2011), to discuss the interaction between different identities, on one hand, and experiences of exclusion from majority communities in relation to majority citizen groups when it comes to these stops on the other. Moreover, we use the concept of "ethnicity" rather than "race", to imply a broader understanding of identities such as culture, religion, language and national identity of a group (Hunt and Kolind 2017; Potter 2015, p. 10). This is useful as both the study objective and the empirical findings focus on the plurality of identities that are not limited to physical appearance.

This article is structured as follows. First, we provide a framework on intersectionality and belonging. Second, a discussion on methods, background and "police stops" is provided. Third, we present the empirical data on (a) accounts on identity and belonging among the Nordic young people, (b) narrated experiences of being stopped by the police and (c) how these two preceding issues interrelate. Fourth, we discuss and review these themes connected to a wider literature. Finally, we conclude that police stops explicate how the young people are somehow forced to think about themselves in terms of the policing gaze, namely as a threat to the majority, and try to grasp what attributes they have that make them seem like criminals.

Intersectionality and Belonging

An intersectionality approach derives from Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) work on African American women's experiences and struggles in society, where social categories concerning both gender and race interact. Since then, feminist scholars have pursued this approach from different angles by studying not only gender and race but also other social

categories of differences to understand the outcomes of their interaction in terms of power and insider/outsider issues (Davis 2008; McCall 2005; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006b, 2011). Overall, the intersectionality approach seeks "to explore intersecting patterns between different structures of power and how people are simultaneously positioned—and position themselves—in multiple [social] categories" (Christensen and Jensen 2012, p. 110). These social categories, such as gender, class, and ethnicity, mutually constitute each other and construct differences and systems of oppressions (ibid).

Yuval-Davis' (2011) approach to intersectionality is of particular interest because she does not reduce experiences based on how social markers affect social behaviour but rather broaden the analysis to people's own perspectives of where they belong and their normative positions. As she (p. 7) points out, the social markers of difference, e.g. ethnicity, gender and class, may not have any direct, causal influence on people's emotional or cognitive experiences in life. Individuals born into the same families, time and environmental contexts may experience widely different belongings, identities and political views.

This is also true for our study, where the young people may identify a number of similar social markers (e.g. neighbourhood, ethnicity, age, education, class) but can and will have different experiences and attitudes in their daily lives. Here, the intersectional approach is particularly useful when studying the young peoples' daily lives as rich descriptions of personal situations rarely or ever fits into one or separate social categories, but rather constitute a multitude of social processes (Christensen and Jensen 2012, p. 117).

Moreover, Yuval-Davis (2006a, p. 197) makes an analytical distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging. Belonging is about emotional attachment, such as the feeling of being "home" or being "safe". These emotions tend to become naturalized and taken for granted but becomes politicized when under threat. The politics of belonging, on the other hand, is seen as political projects of "us" and "them". In practice, these two types of belonging interact and influence each other but for analytical purposes, it is useful to distinguish these levels. In this article, the focus is especially on the former. That is, on the young people's taken for granted experiences of belonging. However, we are well aware that these seemingly naturalized experiences unknowingly can be 'comments' on political representations of identity.

Method

The study follows an interpretive approach both in the "reality" of the topic being studied and its "know-ability" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, pp. 3–4). The research focuses on the experiences, interpretations and discourses in the young people's descriptions of their encounters with the police with a specific focus on their perceptions about belonging. The researchers followed a shared semi-structured interview guide for all four Nordic countries. Interview questions were thematically focused on the participants' immigration background, everyday life in the local area, personal and peers' experiences with the police, and social perceptions and narratives of the police more broadly.

The coding of the interviews was conducted using these overall themes, but with an inductive approach to the data where we identified similar narratives told from different youth and context. In this article, we focus mainly on three main sub-themes: (1) The way youth describe themselves in relation to their minority background, (2) their descriptions of why they are stopped by the police and (3) their ascribed meanings about these police encounters.

In total, we interviewed 121 young people (age 16–25), with a majority male (n = 97), and conducted 64 individual interviews and 21 focus groups. The ethnic backgrounds of our research participants varied with a majority with Asian, including Middle East, (n = 52) and African (n = 59) origin. The informants were selected from urban environments with relatively large immigrant populations and socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Oslo (Norway), Aarhus (Denmark), Helsinki (Finland) and Växjö and Malmö (Sweden). The inclusion criteria were age (15–25), having lived in the Nordic countries for at least 5 years, an ethno-national background outside Europe, and previous contact with the police. The researchers approached young people in public places and youth clubs and asked if they wanted to participate in the research and distributed leaflets. In addition, the researchers used indirect contacts including snowballing method, via social workers at the schools, and via services working together with young people with ethnic minority background. All research participants are anonymized as we have also withheld any information that could identify research participants.

In our data, we identified three types of police encounters as seen from the young people's experiences. The first we term "friendly policing", where the young people experienced largely either positive or neutral encounters often with familiar police officers. The second is "situation policing" when the young people were witnessing or involved in incidents (for instance, a fight, a sexual assault, or theft) and the police was responding to the event. Third, "police stops" refer to situations where the police stop and check the young people without any reference to a specific event that the youth would know of. That is, the police might have good reasons to stop the youth but these reasons were not communicated in the eyes of the youth. Reasons for being stopped could be, for instance, drug possession, their IDs, and whereabouts in certain neighbourhoods. 'Police stops', where the young people typically do not understand why they are stopped, were the most problematic encounters in the eyes of the young people and the ones we focus on in this article.

Narratives on (un)belonging

In order to understand 'police stops', and the issues of identity at play in such encounters, it is important to first get a sense of the general feelings of belonging and unbelonging of the young people. As will become clear, our research participants' experiences of the police are very much entangled with these often ambiguous feelings of belonging.

In all the interviews, the young people were asked questions about their ethnic minority status and their relation to both majority society and their families' origin. These questions could often lead to deep reflections on markers of belonging and unbelonging. For instance, it appeared that different situations and social contexts triggered the young people's sense of belonging and unbelonging. As Yuval-Davis (2006b, p. 199) argues "belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity". Often, the young people had ambiguous feelings of identity to both the majority society and to the origin of their parents. This is clear in this extract from a focus group interview in which the young people explained how they identify themselves differently depending on where, when and who they were with (Danish informant 29, 04 January 2017. Two males aged 16 and 17):

Int: [D]o you feel Danish?

A: I don't know. It depends where I am and who I am with.
Int: So if you are together with your friends?

A: Then I feel more like “Paki” [perker].
B: Then you are a stupid Paki, but when you are with your mother, then you are a civilized man.
A: Ssshh. That’s right. But when it’s Christmas, you go to see your grandmother out in… I don’t know. So you can speak on both sides. I speak Danish, Arabic, Swedish, English.

In Finland, with fewer immigrants of Asian and African origin compared to the other Nordic countries, the issue of ethnicity can be the key marker of belonging and unbelonging to a majority society such as this young woman explains, who identified as a foreigner even when born in Finland and spoke fluent Finnish (Finland informant J10, focus group, 13 April 2017. Two females aged 15–16):

A: It is weird to have a coloured person say ‘I’m Finnish’. If you see someone who looks different from a Finn, like an Arab, someone with lighter skin than mine. I don’t think he’s Finnish, I think he’s a foreigner.

Int: Do you feel you are Somalian?
A: Just a foreigner, I don’t think of myself as from a specific country. Just that I’m foreign. (…) Like, I’ve not even seen my own country [Somalia].

The experience of not being part of their families’ country of origin, e.g. Somalia in this case, was felt strongly by many of the young people who only rarely had visited their families’ countries. In Norway, a young man explains his struggle with feeling attached to the Norwegian majority society and also of his belonging to a minority ethnic group. His understanding of what identifies him as a Norwegian is language, values and attitudes but his skin colour and family history made him question if he “really” belonged in a Norwegian identity. It is also interesting to note that he started questioning his belonging as a young adult and not as a child (Norwegian informant 13, 15 December 2016. Male aged 23):

I have actually thought a lot about it the last year. As I child, I always saw myself as half Norwegian, half Eritrean. I didn’t [question] “am I really that?” (…) But now that I started working in [neighbouring county of Oslo], there are almost only ethnic Norwegians there and that gives me a strange feeling. Actually a little creepy. I was born and raised in Norway but I felt somehow foreign when I stood knocking at people’s houses [sales person job]. Then I didn’t feel entirely Norwegian anymore. Then I started thinking that I wasn’t quite Norwegian and at the same time not quite Eritrean. They [Eritreans] don’t see me as one of them. People see me as Norwegian, I speak Norwegian, I behave Norwegian, I have the same values and attitudes. But it is still the skin colour, I don’t feel [entirely] Norwegian after all.

In Sweden, a young man who was born and raised in Sweden in a context of ethnic Swedes explained his feelings of unbelonging and of being a second class citizen (Swedish informant “Christian”, 3 February 2017. Male aged 21):

A: (…) I felt that no matter what I do (…) I will always be seen as a second-class citizen.(…) I grew up in [neighbourhood], I went to [school], we were three children with immigrant background and the rest were just Swedish completely Swedish [helsvenskar]. I mean I felt so fucking outsider that you could feel.

Int: what other background do you have?

A: Latino, I am Chilean. And the thing is, I would speak pure Swedish, I was born and raised in Sweden, but I was always treated differently than the others and that made be bitter, it made me angry.

Across the Nordic countries, the young people had feelings of not belonging to the majority society and often referred to themselves as foreigners even when they were born in the Nordic country. The majority belonging was seen unachievable due to their ethnicity and a sense of always being treated differently (see also Christensen 2009; Deuchar 2011; Jensen 2011; Pettersson 2013). In the next section we discuss how policing is linked to these experiences of the young people.

Perceptions of Selective Police Stops

In this section, we discuss the young people's perceptions of police stops and we give examples of some of the reasons for why they believe they are more controlled by the police. Especially the following five reasons for being stopped were highlighted across the Nordic countries. First, clothing was seen as a marker of suspicion, such as wearing "gangster clothes". Second, hanging out in groups in public spaces such as shopping malls. Third, ethnicity played a role in being seen as suspicious, and potentially involved in a criminal activity. Fourth, specific neighbourhoods where the young people lived exposed the young to police stops; the young talked about discredited areas. Fifth, gender plays a role in the way that men were more often stopped by the police compared to young women, as well as women and men of majority background.

These findings connects well with other scholarly work on the police itself, such as what Finstad (2000) has called "the police gaze", namely that the police are trained to look for something that deviates from the norm. Similarly, Holmberg's (1999) typology on Danish community policing describes a particular gaze towards a group termed the "clientele", namely those who might be criminal based on their look, social status and other markers. Also, as found in Sollund's study (2007b), typical for these encounters was that the police are often not able to spot the difference between people of same ethnic background.

The reasons for being stopped also correspond well to related research on "stop and search" experiences among young people with minority background (see e.g. Clayman and Skinns 2012; Deuchar and Bhopal 2017; Flacks 2017; McAra and McVie 2005; Murray 2015; Sanders et al. 2010; Weisburd et al. 2016). For instance, McAra and McVie (2005) found that social class such as socio-economic status, neighbourhood and street-life aspects rather than legal issues determines the type of interaction children and young adults have with the police. Or the importance of neighbourhood, lifestyle and role models for determining the legitimacy of and trust towards the police among youth in East London (Clayman and Skinns 2012). Although selective policing is highly debated and documented through extra-legal factors such as class, neighbourhood, gender and ethnicity (e.g. Feinstein 2014; Holmberg 1999; Holmberg and Kyvsgaard 2003; McAra and McVie 2005, 2007; Pettersson 2013, 2014), we are particularly interested in how young people themselves negotiate these factors their perceptions about (un)belonging.

Moreover, we argue that the intersections between clothing, ethnicity, hanging out in groups, neighbourhood and ethnicity work to establish our research participants as 'suspicious', 'scary' or 'frightening' in the eyes of the majority population (see also Flacks 2017), which in turn can expose these young people to future police stops. In particular, the

young people sensed that their clothing and looks in general appeared threatening to the police and was the reason for why they were stopped.

Many of the young people described the importance of clothing and the intersection with ethnicity. In our research, we found that the young people described in detail the type of popular clothing that identified them and their friends, such as hoodies, black bomber jackets with fur-trimmed hoods and baggy pants. The young people would associate themselves in these styles and complain about how the police stopped them due to theirs looks and style and how these police encounters were stigmatizing and resulted in the young people not being treated as other citizens (see also Deuchar 2011; Sharkey and Shields 2008). Others, in turn, saw this as "gangster" style attracting unnecessary attention in the combination with the ethnic status, but when they wore more common clothes they were more "invisible". In the quote below, a Finnish male describe how "they" in fact have themselves to blame when they dress in a typical "gangster style" with their background from Arabic culture (Finland informant I9, 13 April 2017. Male aged 17):

> A: […] I don't blame stereotypes, except some racial stereotypes. Like if you're black and smartly dressed and suddenly they just call you a thief or think you're worse than others. But I don't blame anyone if you're black and dressed really stereotypically in a big jumper, big pants. That's your own fault. You can't say he's wrong, if someone dressed in typical Arabian culture clothes, holding a purse and yelling Allah Akbar. You can't be like 'why are you running away, you're racist'.
>
> Int: You look suspicious wearing a jumper?
> A: That's your own fault. I can't explain it, but in choosing what you wear you should consider what other people think about you.

In this way, one could argue, the young male has internalized the majority gaze and use it to judge his own appearance.

Many of the young people lived in areas with high rates of socioeconomic problems, such as poverty and concentration of social housing. In these marginalized areas, there can be intense confrontations between police and ethnic minority young people, what Peterson (2008, p. 102) has called the "micro-drama of respect, a battle over recognition and respect". Such micro-dramas of respect can also intersect with gender relations where young men with minority background meet male police officers with majority status. In the citation below, a young man describes his ambivalence with the neighbourhood where he lives and where he feels that the police often look suspiciously at the young people, such as being a group of young minority men. Further, his perception of their dress style and skin colour is interpreted as "a scary look" (Norwegian informant 28, 27 January 2017. Male aged 17):

> Int: Do you feel [neighbourhood] is your home?
>
> A: No, this is not where I want to live (…). There's a lot of police here. Once some friends of mine were playing football and the police show up and write their names down. I thought 'wow, they are playing football, what's going on here?' You play football and you get logged [loggført, documentation in the police local orderly book]. I've asked what they are doing with their logs but I don't get any answer.
> (…)
> Int: What do your friends think about the police?
> A: They're also against them, because they log everyone. A friend of mine got logged at least ten times. He really hates them.

> Int: Why do you think he gets logged all the time?
> A: I don't know, but maybe it's because his skin colour is darker. At least that's what he said once (…). Then I thought that too, that it's because my skin is darker and I dress the way I do. Then the police come and think that I'm coloured and scary and they write down my name.
> Int: Do you think that's what the police think as well?
> A: When two foreigners pass by and two Norwegians, they [the police] will stop the foreigners, because they are the most frightening. The day I was stopped, two young people passed by who were Norwegian and I said 'aren't you gonna stop them?' and then they [the police] said 'no, they haven't done anything.' So then I said 'but I haven't done anything either' and they said 'yes, you have been a part of a fight'.
> Int: Have you ever been approached by the police when you are together, like a group of friends?
> A: Yes, the police will come over to us then; we are seen as a threat. They come over and ask for our names. We say 'hi' to them if they say 'hi' to us. We only answer what they ask for and then they leave.

This quote illustrates how young people try to interpret the reasons for why the police see them as a threat in light of ethnicity and appearance.

Furthermore, a so-called "criminal look" or "looking suspicious" was highlighted by several of the young people as a reason for being treated differently by the police than the majority population. This issue of suspicion intersects with the aspect of public places. Public spaces are "sites of regulation for (particularly) young people" and often negotiated on a daily basis, as Gray and Manning (2014, p. 642) argue. At the same time, young people can experience not only exclusion but also important forms of belonging and the creation of subcultures among youth groups in such places. In this citation, the informant explains how he and his friends were perceived by the public, and why they often were approached by the police (Norwegian informant 13, 15 December 2016. Male aged 23):

> I think [the police] don't want us to hang out like a youth gang at a public space because it can scare people, people might feel unsafe, and maybe they pass us and wonder what we're up to. So I think that's why they [the police] want us to hang out in places like youth clubs and not public places like a gang. Because it looks like we are a gang, it might scare someone. (…) We get more stigmatized, labelled like criminals and deviants. It may be the way we dress, it also has significance. But also that we are people from many nationalities, it plays a role. And that [the neighbourhood] in itself has always had a reputation like satellite area [*drabantby*][1] and the older youth (…), they were well known to the police. And many of them were in a gang and have a lot on their [criminal] record. (…) [S]o we often get labelled [as criminals] and that's why the police often are after us.

As we see, a range of social markers, such as ethnicity, dress, young age, and neighbourhood, are involved in "determining" the suspicion towards these young people. As exemplified above, the young people view that not only one aspect but a combination of these creates the "usual suspects" (McAra and McVie 2005). The way the young people discusses how the police make assumptions about people in their neighbourhood and their

[1] In Norwegian *drabantby* is associated with a state policy of building affordable housing arrangements for the working class post-WW2.

style, we argue, demonstrate the intersectionality between socioeconomic factors and perceptions of being treated differently by the police and the majority community. That is, the othering process of being stopped due to looks, clothing and neighbourhood seems to make the young people question their identity and sense of belonging, which they already questioned prior to being stopped. This brings us to the next topic, namely issues of (un) belonging in these encounters.

Perceptions on Police Stops and (un)belonging

In the discourse on the intersections related to being a young man with an ethnic minority background, several of our informants felt discriminated and offended by what they saw as the police stopping and controlling them for no good reason other than social markers (ethnicity, gender, looks, hanging out in groups) and context (place, neighbourhood). Especially, feelings of unbelonging to the majority society were significant during police interactions. As one young Danish man explained, he felt that these encounters were questioning the identity of himself and his friends, who already took up a difficult position in the society, namely as young minority men (Danish informant 21, 8 December 2016. Two males aged 15 and 18):

> I mean, I think being a boy is a bit difficult. Especially when it comes to issues such as criminality. Because even though you may be innocent, you will still be looked down on. I know, I mean my friend, at one point he was stopped by the police, where he was (…) body-searched. Being checked. He was just on his way home from school, and yet he was stopped and just checked if everything was alright and then he was allowed to move on. Even though he was just heading home… (…) Those who are stopped for no reason, even if they are completely innocent. I think they get another perception of the police, and maybe start to hate them a little.

Such vicarious experiences and discourses around the police targeting young men with ethnic minority background symbolize a distance between them and the police officer(s) (see also Rosenbaum et al. 2005).

Such sentiments were also discussed among the Finnish youth, where these three young men question the police legitimacy and the reluctance to ask the police for help (Finland informant O15, 24 April 2017. Male aged 17):

> Int: How is the relationship between the police and ethnic minorities?
>
> A: We hate them, no offense.
> Int: Hate the police?
> A: Yes.
> (…)
> Int: How?
> A: Just experience. An experience can scar you permanently.
> Int: Do your friends' experiences have an effect?
> B: Yes, they always bad mouth them. Well we don't really talk about the police usually.
> Int: Would you ask the police for help?
> A: Never.
> B: I guess we would have to if we were in danger.

> C: We would have to trust them; I don't want to label everyone. I'm sure there are good police, who just want to protect the law. Then there are the racists and covert racists…

The youths' perceptions in this discussion corresponds to a growing body of research that ethnic minority youth may not experience the police conduct in a procedurally just manner (see e.g. Brown and Benedict 2002; Brunson 2007; Gau and Brunson 2015; Miller 2007; Novich and Hunt 2017; Tyler 2006; Weitzer and Tuch 2004) The youth in our study often challenged perceptions about police neutrality, especially fairness and respect, which are central to the experience of procedural justice (Tyler 2006). As the citation above exemplifies, the young people view some of the police officers as racist and their experiences left a "scar" in their trust in the police. Overall, this type of experiences of being seen as a threat is narrated in a way that can challenge ethnic minorities' trust in the police.

In another conversation with a group of Norwegian young males who felt particularly targeted by the police, the issue of being ignored when it came to what mattered to them and feelings of subordination in relation to the Norwegian 'other' was emphasized (Norwegian informants 19–25, 15 January 2017. All male aged 17–25):

> D: But when they [the police] come for us, they don't ask 'how's it going, what do you want to do [with your life], when are you finishing high school?' Instead they ask 'where have you been, what have you been doing today, when are you going home?' Things that doesn't interest us. We are more interested in questions about school, what we are working on, what we want to be when we get older. But we don't get asked such questions.
>
> G: It's more like 'have you smoked weed?'
> [Everyone agrees]
> D: Yes, when we wear our hoodies because it's cold and we're walking home from the mall then the [police] police stop us and they ask if you have been smoking. They check your eyes… What can I do to make them not stop me?
> Int: Could you have told this to the police what you just told me?
> B: No, that's way too heavy [everyone laughs]
> A: They speak Norwegian better than us, they will run us over.

In similar ways, a young man from Sweden explained how he felt disappointment about how he was treated by the police. In his view, the treatment by the police did not reflect what they taught at school, namely that all were to be treated as equal citizens (Swedish informant "Haider", 03 February 2017. Male aged 23):

> A: I've never had anything to do with the police and I don't want to either. As I said, just being here [in informant's neighbourhood], you are at the wrong place. It shouldn't have to be like that. (…) Honestly, the police would never do such things in A [ethnic majority area]. They don't do those things in B [ethnic majority area]. But when it comes to [informant's neighbourhood] the police are more aggressive. It shouldn't have to be like that. We are all equal. That's what we were taught at school. When we went to school they told us 'everyone is equal, everyone is different but equally good'. When you then enter society, it's something else.
>
> (…)
> Int: What do you expect from Sweden?
> B: I mean, I expect more than that. I expect the police to be nice towards those who are nice; they can be aggressive towards those who are aggressive against the police.

> If I threw a rock at the police, they have the right to lock me up directly. But if I'm walking slowly, the police have nothing to do with that. I shouldn't have to bike with my own bicycle and the police stop and say 'where have you stolen that one?' ey, come on, it's just because I was biking in [informant's neighbourhood]."

What is significant in this section is that young peoples' encounters with the police made them explicate their sense of identity, which then triggered personal reflections of (un) belonging. Common to all the situations referre to above, from the perspective of the young people, is the illegibility of the police and the young people's uncertainty as to why they were stopped and seen as threats and potential criminals. Most important, the police stops generated feeling of exclusion; of not belonging to the law-abiding majority population in the Nordic countries.

Discussion

The young peoples' descriptions of encounters with the police highlight the issue of (un) belonging to different communities. As citations above illustrate, the young people feel in many circumstances looked at with suspicion intersecting with a number of social markers and context, such as ethnicity, clothing, hanging out in groups, neighbourhood and gender. In particular, we would like to discuss four interrelated topics. First, the young people felt unfairly targeted and made suspect by the police because of their looks and ethnicity. Here, the issue of suspicion relates a process of othering, namely that the young people feel a lack of integration with the Nordic majority society. Second, the young people struggle to get recognition and respect, which is furthermore related to gender positions. Third, being seen as "a gang" in public places is understood as accounting for frequent police stops. At the same time, these public places contexts were important bonds are made and subcultures and various forms of belonging are created. The young people's sense of belonging to their local neighbourhood may be challenged by recurrent police attention. When these public spaces become restricted for young people with ethnic minority background, their sense of local identity are under threat. Fourth, the aspect of (un)belonging to society are also put into question in experiences where the young people may not feel entirely Swedish, for instance, even though that is what they learn at school. We found that encounters with the police officers may reinforce such kind of unbelonging when they feel targeted as a group because they are singled and labelled as a threat or scary looking individuals.

The issue of suspicion and relatedly othering is a key debate within studies of young people's experiences of police stops. Also, discourses of othering are debated in post-colonial studies (see e.g. Said 2003; Spivak 1988), where powerful groups construct the other (the non-Western, the subaltern) as pathologically and morally inferior. Importantly however, Jensen (2011) also found that othering, was met by agency by young ethnic men in Denmark in the form of resistance and reproduction. That is, "[o]thering can be capitalized upon or disidentified from" (2011, p. 73). In fact, young men can even choose to style themselves as "dangerous" to gain street capital (Sandberg 2008) and thus contribute to their own stereotyping and attention from the public and the police. Others, such as what the young Finnish man explained above, see these styles as attracting unnecessary attention.

Intersecting with the othering process is the gendered struggle for recognition and respect (Deuchar 2011; Lalander 2017; Peterson 2008). As one of the focus group discussions revealed in a citation above, the young people are looking for other type of bonds

with the police such as questions of how they are doing, what they want to do in life and so on rather than questions about whether or not they have smoked weed. Yet, there are also other interpretations of these struggles for respect in this study. Namely, some of our research participants described how other young men in certain “hyper-territorial” neighbourhoods (see also Peterson 2008) were confronting the police with a rude and antagonistic attitude, hence, they fully understood why the police took a tough approach to certain young men. This example shows the micro-dynamics and complexity related to respect and even othering among the young people; episodes can be interpreted differently depending on the young people’s own experiences.

Moreover, the topic of public space is also of relevance to understand belonging and unbelonging for the young people. Many men described how hanging out around local urban centres served as key everyday social arenas for friendship. Simultaneously, the young men in our study explained what they saw as posting a threat in public because they resembled a “gang” (see also Poynting, Noble, and Tabar 2001). A gang, as Deuchar (2010, p. 262) rightly points out, is a highly disputed term. In many cases, researchers have found that gangs should rather be described as youth gatherings and friendships in public arenas (Crawford 2009; Deuchar 2010; Hunt, Mackenzie, and Joe-Laidler 2000; Nayak 2003). Relatedly, some of the youth expressed feelings of second-class citizenship or never being “fully” accepted by the majority community as could be seen by their frequent experiences of police stops. In similar ways, Sharkey and Shields (2008), for instance, found that urban youth in disadvantaged positions who formally have full citizenship privileges experience what they term “abject citizenship”; being othered by the majority population and simultaneously placed inside a marginalized group. In our study, young people described a restriction of their movements or restrictions on how they behaved in the public, which, we argued, can be seen as reflecting a larger struggle of belonging in the Nordic societies (see also Bangstad 2013; Crawford 2009; Rytter 2010; Soei 2016).

In sum, an intersectionality approach demonstrates how multiple identity markers intersect depending on context. For instance, the young people in our study, in their interactions with the police, experienced rather categorical treatment being criminal/non-criminal or belonging/unbelonging to the majority society. Thus, the intersectionality of various identity markers, i.e. ethnicity, age, clothing, neighbourhood, attitudes and so forth, place these young people in uniform categories of, e.g. criminal, suspicious, and ethnic otherness when it comes to the issue of police stops.

Conclusion

In this article, we have approached the topic of police stops of ethnic minority young people through an intersectionality approach with a special focus on belonging. Analytically, this approach serves as a useful lens when aiming at understanding the way young people perceive themselves and how they experience being perceived by the police and the majority society. We have also argued that the young peoples’ narratives are not uniform. Rather, they depend on context, previous experiences and individual strategies. In this way our research participants narratives of police stops are in continual process (Yuval-Davis 2011, p. 15). Moreover, the policing of the young people illustrates certain power relations that question and contest the young people’s subjective experiences of citizenship, feelings of ‘us’/’them’ as well as other relational aspects of belonging and unbelonging.

We argue that the police stops substantiate existing societal discourses on ethnicity and persons who constitute “societal threats” (see e.g. Alexander 2004; Bangstad 2013; Jacobsen 2002; Karim 1997; Rytter and Pedersen 2014; Soei 2016; Wren 2001). These situations, i.e. police stops, explicate how the young people are somehow forced to present themselves in terms of the policing gaze, namely as a threat to the majority, and try to account for what attributes they have that make them seem like criminals or even unwanted (Bucerius 2014). Future research in this field is needed. In particular, new research can investigate also police officers’ accounts about police stop in relevant neighbourhoods, and/or focus groups with both young people and the police. This could include comparative, intersectional research on how ethnic minority youth and the police relate and perceive each other in the light of social and societal categories. What some see as police discrimination of ethnic minority youth is also structural and socio-economic problem because many live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with a higher frequency of crime and police intervention. Thus, more research is needed on the meso-micro interactions of structures, context and everyday issues of belonging.

Finally, the research demonstrates that police behaviour is being carefully watched by young people in targeted areas and Nordic police officers are met with high expectations when it comes to fair and equal treatment. Hence, seemingly minor or trivial things said and done by the police in these areas may be remembered as proof of discrimination. A policy advice is that communication is key in these meetings between police and minority youth in targeted areas, especially the importance of informing people why they are stopped. The police should always have a solid reason for stopping people that are not be based on social typologies. Another advice is that the police should explicitly show that they check the majority population. Otherwise, minorities will continue feeling stigmatized and made into an object for continual suspicion.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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