Guest editorial: Police encounters

Waddington (1999) argued that police officers define key aspects of what it is to be a citizen. Those most subject to police attention experience citizenship differently to those for whom police encounters are a rare event. These encounters, and in particular those stop and search/frisk interactions initiated by police officers, have been studied in detail in the USA (for example: Epp *et al.*, 2014; White and Fradella, 2016; Ross, 2020) and in England and Wales (for example: Miller *et al.*, 2001; Quinton, 2011; Bradford, 2017). At the heart of the interest has been the use of policing powers disproportionately against Black and minority communities, and particularly young men. Similar attention has emerged more recently in Scotland (Murray, 2014), Northern Ireland (Bradford and Topping, 2020) and beyond the English-speaking world (Delsol and Shiner, 2015; Oberwittler and Roché, 2018; de Maillard *et al.*, 2018). However, in many countries, the issue is not one that has prompted sustained interest.

The papers in this Special Issue have emerged from an EU COST-funded Action on Police Stops (Police Stops, 2022). Our aim has been to raise the use of powers to stop citizens, to check their identity and, in some circumstances, to conduct a search as an issue of academic and public concern. We have sought to understand, in countries beyond the USA and the UK, how these powers are experienced, how policing practitioners are held accountable and the politics surrounding the use of these powers. This Special Issue reflects our additional concern to understand how police officers themselves understand and use their power to stop citizens.

Historically, understanding the ways police make judgements and apply the law has been explored through ethnographic work, principally in the USA and the UK (Bittner, 1967; Cain, 1973; Holdaway, 1983; Manning and van Maanen, 1978). Ethnography is a powerful tool in the study of policing, albeit one that can be difficult to implement due to the heavy demands it can place on time and resources for the researcher, as well as the intricacies of negotiating access to active police practitioners. Once these obstacles are overcome, however, police ethnographies can reveal rich data on the nuances of face-to-face encounters with members of the public. Statistical assessments of the number of searches conducted and the demographics of those searched are important, though these are not routinely available beyond England, Wales and Scotland. These assessments reveal the disproportionate use of powers, particularly on young Black men (e.g. Home Office, 2021). What these data cannot reveal are the context in which an encounter takes place. How does an officer decide to stop a person? What is it that arouses suspicion? How does an interaction develop? What are the words exchanged, the facial expressions, the body language and the tone of voice? These, amongst other observations, are also powerful data to deepen our understanding of what "stops" mean in a particular jurisdiction and to the people involved. These insights can be employed to seek a better and more equitable use of the power, taking into account local context and social relationships.

Overview of Special Issue

The papers included in this Special Issue are rich accounts of policing and police stops. They concern police encounters in Belgium, Germany, Italy, India, Australia and New Zealand, offering the potential for fresh ethnographic perspectives from beyond the UK and USA.

They consider: processes by which "suspicion" is determined (which may be grounds for a stop); the role that stereotyping plays in these suspicions; the "norms" of police street encounters; considerations of context and space at both individual, institutional and national levels and how internal frameworks in policing can either enable problematic behaviour or actively discourage community-focussed methods. We will consider each of these papers and their contribution to this area in more detail below.

Research by Saudelli *et al.* explores the process by which police officers in Belgium develop sufficient "suspicion" to stop a member of the public. Through extensive ethnographic work and interviews, they found that whilst there are a variety of factors at play in this decision, the role of occupational culture cannot be dismissed. Stereotypes in relation to ethnicity, gender and clothing are used to decide if a person does not fit the "norm" and should, therefore, be stopped. Some of these stereotypes stem from an individual's own life experience and some from the professional culture of their department which sets certain expectations and images of what is and is not "normal".

The outcome of the unequal nature of power relations in police stops in Germany is the focus of the paper from Aden *et al.* Continuing the theme of the origins and expressions of stereotypes in street policing, they highlight the prominence of personal experiences and attitudes over that of police training in these encounters. Despite a relatively well-developed legal framework, officers exercise discretion in ways that appear unhindered by those laws. The paper considers the "micro-politics" of stops and how these are expressed in methods of communication and the assumptions made about the person being stopped. This, therefore, scopes for discriminatory practices and substantial variability from one officer to another.

In a similar vein to Saudelli *et al.*, the process by which officers conclude that a person or a situation is "suspicious" is also the focus of the paper from Hendy who reports on ethnographic research in New Zealand and Australia. Hendy's particular concern is the process by which suspicion is decided prior to *informal* "stop and chat" encounters rather than prior to formal police stops. Hendy found that officers will make a judgement based on the measure of perceived harm, the legality of the behaviour and whether it is socially acceptable before deciding to initiate an encounter, which is a process labelled "suspicioning". Unlike other research, there was not as much evidence in Hendy's research regarding bias on grounds of ethnicity, although other social groupings did seem to attract disproportionate attention (such as "students" or "revellers"). These would be specific to the local context.

The topics of ethnicity and context are brought together in Brauer *et al.*, which examines the role that space plays in policing urban areas in Germany, both in terms of institutional perceptions of urban space and in terms of how these influence the work of individual police officers. Brauer examines the social processes, including gender and ethnicity, that are involved in the institutional constructions of space and which influence police systems of inclusion and exclusion in these spaces. These processes of "doing space" whilst "doing ethnicity and gender" allow for differentiated yet legitimised police practices in the distribution of security measures in diverse communities.

The importance of considering the broader context of police and citizen encounters is highlighted at a more macro-level by Varghese (2022) through research conducted in India. As a post-colonial state, the nature of street-level interactions here cannot be assumed to be similar to those in an Anglophone world because of difference in political and institutional systems as well as different accountability structures. For Varghese, these create a particular frame for police–citizen encounters that mean legal procedures are enacted selectively and with little risk of accountability for the police. This is also evident at a local scale through the ethnographic data taken from two different police regions which show further diversification in their relationships with local publics.

The last two papers in the Special Issue have a particular focus on these internal policing frameworks; but in these cases, one is particularly enabling of police brutality, whereas the

other is disabling of engagement-based policing. First, in the paper by Scalia, there is a detailed analysis of the circumstances and subsequent trial surrounding the death of Riccardo Magherini in 2014 after being stopped by the Corpo dei Carabinieri in Italy. The way in which the police agents involved make sense of the case is a particular focus. Magherini died of asphyxiation during the stop and the police account of the event differed from that of video footage taken by a bystander. The case has been taken to the European Court of Human Rights. Scalia argues that the police felt they were justified in their treatment of Magherini because he fitted their stereotype as a member of the "dangerous classes" from whom others needed to be protected. In addition, and as the military branch of the Italian police, the officers felt entitled to use force considering Magherini's perceived law-breaking. Scalia highlights the role of *police knowledge* in this sense-making process, which is guided more by occupational culture than by formal procedure. Scallia also uses a particular approach, examining witness statements and other evidence as sources for an ethnographic analysis inspired also in part by a micro-historical approach (Sullivan, 2012; Darnton, 1984).

In relation to the internal disabling of engagement-based policing, action research conducted by Van Praet in Belgium found an important connection between internal organisational justice within the police organisation and the use of procedural justice methods when on patrol. She reports that officers who did not feel supported by their managers to do community policing work or who were not allocated time to reflect on their practice were more likely to execute their tasks quickly. These officers felt that they were under pressure to appease the caller to have "satisfied customers" rather than to seek the best possible outcome in a particular situation. This led to frequent use of formal police stops rather than a less formal engagement with the member of the public to fully understand the context of a situation.

Conclusion
Beyond the central theme of the Special Issue, the papers make for interesting reading. They open up the world of policing in different jurisdictions to reveal much that is familiar across them. Those who have observed officers will recognise the "police radar" that Saudelli *et al.* discuss. How is it that officers can spot a false car licence plate at a distance or that an ATM has been tampered with? To the ethnographic observer, these levels of acuity are to be admired. What is it about the microscopic detail in a scene that draws attention? For all the crude stereotypes to be found in the decisions to stop some citizens, there is a sophistication to other aspects of policing.

However, the detailed observations reported in this Special Issue raise some further and deeper questions, ones we can only point to in this editorial. As ethnographers of policing, the detail in these seven papers is recognisable across jurisdictions. That is not to dismiss this evidence as merely repeating and echoing the existing and largely Anglophone ethnographic studies. These texts add detail and nuance, bringing different lenses to the scrutiny of familiar practices. Instead, the point is that the practice of police stops appears to be a universal feature of contemporary policing. In one sense, that is to be expected. We would expect officers, who see something they believe to be wrong, to be able to intervene to prevent harm or criminality. What constitutes evidence for such beliefs, however, appears also to be broadly familiar across jurisdictions. Despite the different legal codes governing stops in Belgium, Germany, India, Australia, New Zealand and Italy, we recognise policing we have observed elsewhere. This raises further questions. If the law appears to play only a limited role in directing and constraining police stops, what other tools or levers of influence will we need to use if we are to reform those aspects of the practice that lead to disproportionate use and attention on young and particularly minority men.

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