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Editorial: Perspectives on Police Interactions
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Corresponding Author:	Mike Rowe, PhD University of Liverpool UNITED KINGDOM
First Author:	Mike Rowe, PhD
Order of Authors:	Mike Rowe, PhD
	Sofie De Kimpe
	Sharda Murria
	Vincenzo Scalia
Abstract:	

Editorial: Perspectives on Police Interactions

Mike Rowe, University of Liverpool

Sofie De Kimpe, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Sharda Murria, Birmingham City University

Vincenzo Scalia, University of Florence

Interpretive researchers, in different ways, seek to see and to understand the world as their collaborators do. We observe and interview others with experience and knowledge in order to present our interpretation of that learning to a wider audience. However, we are always cognizant of the fact that one person's perspective is partial – in the two senses of that word. It is partial because it is incomplete and cannot reflect the perspectives and experiences of others, particularly in contested encounters. But it is also partial in that research participants will tend to want to convey an impression of themselves and of their experiences. They have something to say and a point to get across. We can choose to focus on one such partial perspective – perhaps the one we find most familiar or legitimate. Or we can bring these different perspectives into dialogue with each other.

As editors, we bring together three papers in this special issue in order to open up these different viewpoints and to bring them into dialogue. We do so because, for more than four years, we have been engaged in an EU Collaboration on Science and Technology (EU COST) Action on Police Stops (CA17102).¹ From the outset, we intended to start conversations that recognized different experiences, of the police on the one hand, and of the policed on the other. In the UK and the US, in particular, the two perspectives were often presented separately, with few opportunities to exchange opinions and begin to form some shared sense of the practice we call police stops. Across Europe, there was very little discussion of the problem at all. The lack of evidence, whether in the form of police data, legal challenges, or civil society campaigns, meant that the practice of police stops was largely unquestioned and unchallenged.

What we have learned, during the four and more years of the EU COST Action, is that for all the legal and institutional differences, the practice and experience of police stops is a very familiar one, from one country to the next. We heard, repeatedly, that the law was different in Hungary or Poland, for example. And this is undoubtedly the case. However, from the evidence we have gathered - from the media, from civil society organizations and elsewhere (de Maillard et al., 2023) - we find that the law is only a part of the issue. Officers in every country pay more attention to young men, to working class young men and to young men of colour. They are associated with criminality and with risk. For those subject to police attention, the experience is also largely common. It is one of humiliation and trauma. It is the exercise of coercive power, even where cooperation with the police is voluntary, formally at least. Controlling the practice of police stops is, then, about more than the law. Improving governance also requires better data, training and supervision. And we should not overlook the potential contribution of new technologies, such as body worn cameras, to police oversight (Aston et al., 2023; Murria, this volume).

Part of our EU COST Action included Training Schools. While these were much hampered by the pandemic, we did gather together early career researchers with a shared interest in police stops as

¹ For further details, see <https://polstops.eu/>.

encounters. In these fora, participants shared their work, comparing and contrasting police stops across Europe, and learnt from each other. It is with great delight, then, that we present here three angles on the same phenomenon that exemplify the very purpose of our EU COST Action. Each takes a different perspective. Each draws on different evidence using different methods. Together, they develop our understanding of what an encounter, known as a police stop, is – though, we hesitate to say “is”. From a police perspective, it makes no sense to suspect someone and to be unable to stop them to test that suspicion. From a citizen’s perspective, this interruption to their lawful activities can feel like a violation, both of their rights and of their body. Where there are grounds to believe that such interactions are racially motivated, this sense of violation becomes the greater (Ross 2020). A community, on the other hand, might share some of the concerns about crime while also being friends, fathers and mothers of those subjected to police attention. There is no “is” in police stops – it is all a matter of perspective. Recognizing this, can we begin to move towards an understanding that minimizes trauma, that safeguards the vulnerable and allows the police to act on reasonable grounds?

This is no small challenge. And we do not claim that the three papers presented here have come close to such an understanding. Instead, we present them as one of the contributions from the COST Action that is the basis upon which to begin to move conversations away from the hostile and adversarial ones with which many of us are familiar.

Three perspectives

Liridona Gashi (‘Four Interactional Styles in Crime and Preventive Policing’) presents work that explored the ways in which police officers in one team in Oslo, Norway sought to engage with young people in low income neighborhoods. Observing a specialist team for more than 900 hours, Gashi does not rely on the concept of police culture to explain the patterns she observes. Instead, turning to another long-established tradition in Anglo-Saxon research on policing (e.g. Muir, 1977; Brown, 1988), she identifies the different styles that emerged from her fieldwork and through interviews with officers. Because she focuses on interactions with young people, the styles that Gashi discusses characterize the ways in which officers talk and relate to others. The four are: relational; distant; emotional; and paternalistic. But this is not a simple model that suggests officers fall clearly into one of the categories. Some adopt different styles as encounters develop and response to the interactional work of the young people. Others draw upon a blend of two of the styles. Perhaps more surprisingly, Gashi draws attention to the role that parents play in encounters, mediating and moderating behaviors. It is, perhaps, an insight that needs further exploration.

From a second perspective, Bisola Akintoye (‘Policing Suspect Communities: Intergenerational Black British Experiences’) presents the accounts and experiences of young Black people, their parents and of Black community workers. She brings out an intergenerational dimension that, again, is underplayed. Others have spoken of this as ‘hauntology’ (Lea 2020), referring to the way efforts to change the present need to take account of the echoes of past endeavors that are still felt in the present. In this case, while the detail of the experiences have changed, the stories of police encounters told by parents and elders are part of growing up as a young Black man. Drawing on critical realism and Critical Race Theory, Akintoye draws out the ways this intergenerational dimension will continue to affect the experiences of and stories told about police stops into the

future, almost regardless of attempts at reform. Collective memories and experiences, including ones gained vicariously through social media, persist.

If these first two perspectives can be seen to be somewhat at odds, Sharda Murria ('The Use of Body-Worn Videos in Community Stop and Search Scrutiny Panels') offers an insight in to recent efforts to open up encounters to external scrutiny. Scrutiny panels review the use of police stops in England and Wales. They review the records kept and the video that should now be recorded of each interaction. She raises questions about the ways these panels work, their membership and training. But crucially the question of partiality arises. The video is recorded from the police officer's perspective. It doesn't capture the minutes before a stop. And it can present only a limited view of what then occurs. For all the hope invested in body-worn video as offering greater transparency and accountability, there remain questions about the way it is used. Do panels ensure legality or legitimacy? Or do they legitimize a practice that is largely unchanged by their deliberations?

We bring these papers together from three early career researchers as a contribution to developing discussions that cross some deep-seated divides between police and their detractors. Together with other contributions from the COST Action (O'Neill et al., 2022; de Maillard et al., 2023; Aston et al., 2023), these represent steps towards that better understanding.

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