


Many disorderly youths, few serious incidents: Patrol officers, community officers, and their interactions with ethnic minorities in Amsterdam

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Ronald Van Steden

VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Jolijn Broekhuizen

Verwey-Jonker Institute, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Abstract

This paper presents fieldwork on police–citizen interactions in a setting of (latent) friction with ethnically diverse populations. Often, the police are frustrated with disorderly youngsters hanging out on streets and squares. Contrary to what was anticipated, however, escalation occurred only sporadically. Patrol officers were most keen on traffic control and order maintenance and, in so doing, dealt most frequently with youngsters from minority groups. Community officers played a more socially engaged role, but were less willing and able to gain access to such groups. Taken together, both types of officers managed to preserve sensible contacts with ethnic minority populations due to their professionalism in regulating emotions and their realisation that overly harsh police action would make things worse.

Keywords

Community policing, law enforcement, ethnic minorities, multicultural society, Dutch tolerance

Corresponding author:

Ronald van Steden, VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: r.van.steden@vu.nl

Introduction

Where police officers and members of ethnic minorities interact, troubles are never far away. Although brutal violence like that which recently occurred in Ferguson, USA, is not very common in Western Europe, the police and people whose ancestry lies in developing countries frequently experience (covert) tensions and difficulties on both sides. International research over the past 20 years suggests that public perceptions and attitudes to the police correlate negatively with respondents' race and ethnicity (for example, Bowling and Philips, 2003; Brunson, 2007; Frank et al., 2005; Lai and Zhao, 2010; Webb and Marshall, 1995). Even though some studies give a nuanced view of such observations (such as Correia et al., 1996; Jesilow et al., 1996), most scholars are inclined to agree that in particular people from 'black' and, to a lesser degree, 'Hispanic' and 'Asian' communities are less happy with the police than representatives of 'white', 'middle-class' groups. Not unexpectedly, these findings are mediated through variables such as age, gender, socioeconomic class, income, neighbourhood characteristics and the density of migrant groups in urban areas (see, for example, Carr et al., 2007; Piper and Piper, 1999; Schafer et al., 2003; Schuck et al., 2008; Sharp and Atherton, 2007). Adolescent, non-white males from disadvantaged areas of the city may be presumed to rank lowest in their satisfaction with the police.

Negative public perceptions of the police mainly emerge as lower trust and confidence in both individual officers and their institutions (Jackson and Bradford, 2009). In this respect, citizens' overall support for policing is explained not only by trust in police officers' effectiveness in dealing with crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour, but also by trust in equal and respectful treatment during police–citizen interactions (Tyler, 1990). In addition to their coercive – crime-fighting and order maintenance – side, the police are imbued with symbolic meaning. As Terpstra notes:

Normative legitimacy is based on the rationality of law and order and other formal principles. The main assumption of normative police legitimacy is a (potential) adverse relation between the police and the citizenry, a relation characterised by mutual distrust. [...] In contrast, [...] social legitimacy refers to common values shared between the police and the citizens and presumes a different relation between the state and the citizenry. [...] Social legitimacy is situationally bound and has to be produced and reproduced in permanently changing relations between the police and the citizens. Social legitimacy requires police and citizens to (re)create a mutual relationship and try to cooperate (2011: 8–9).

Specifically, if (black) minorities believe that the police are treating them unfairly – for example by means of discrimination, racial profiling and disproportionate 'stop and search' actions – then they are likely to be less willing to cooperate voluntarily with the constables they meet (see, for example, Murphy and Cherney, 2011; Tyler, 2005; Van Craen, 2012). Furthermore, and in a more abstract way, how people judge the work of police officers is strongly mediated by public sensibilities about shared norms and morals – a shared identity (Jackson and Bradford, 2010). Following Loader:

the idea of policing also brings to mind (and stomach) sensations of order, authority and protection; it makes it possible for people to believe that a powerful force for good stands between them and an anarchic world, that the state is willing to defend its citizens (1997: 8).

Thus, if people feel they are not treated with dignity and respect, for example because police officers classify them on the basis of their race and colour, they most probably will not agree that the police are ‘one of them’ and ‘doing a good job’. Even worse, ethnic minority groups may not report crime any more and may start to question the institutional and legal legitimacy of states as a whole (Murphy and Cherney, 2012). Enduring police misdemeanour, especially towards migrant populations, may thus undermine democratic societies in the long run.

From the above it can be concluded that the delivery of policing in a multicultural society has a great influence on how the police build relationships with minority communities. With this in mind, in the following pages we investigate the interactions between street constables and the multi-ethnic citizenry they face in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Adopting a police perspective, the paper explores three questions:

1. What difficulties do officers run up against in the borough they serve?
2. How do police–citizen interactions develop?
3. How can officers’ own behaviours during such interactions be explained?

This endeavour has a dual relevance. First, hitherto the majority of research on how ethnic minorities perceive, (mis)trust and (fail to) cooperate with the police has been limited to the views of citizens themselves. It is through their eyes that ethnic populations give opinions about, among other things, police officers’ (alleged) disrespect towards them, dormant racism within the force, and unpleasant encounters on the street. The police perspective of their routine interactions with citizens, or, more exactly, ethnically diverse groups, has remained relatively unconsidered in the literature (see, for example, Mastrofski et al., 2002 and Dixon et al., 2008, which are notable exceptions). By taking the police as our focus, we try to describe what transpires during officers’ interactions with the public, and why they act as they do. Our results may provide input to improved policy-making in relation to opening up the police force to all kinds of people in society (and vice versa).

Second, most recent research on the influence of race on police–community relationships has taken place in North America, Australia and Britain, and concentrates heavily on the ‘colour lines’ that divide these nations. As outlined above, our paper draws on an empirical study in the Netherlands, which Downes (1988) famously portrayed as a tolerant nation. However, since the turn of the new millennium, popular discourses on ethnic minority groups have changed dramatically, whereby it is not so much colour, but rather religious and cultural divisions that play an important role (Coenders et al., 2008). Contemporary tensions prominently circle around Islam, and specifically the (mostly Moroccan) Muslim communities. To be more precise, the nationalistic movement of Pim Fortuyn (who was killed by a crazed – non-Muslim – animal rights activists in 2002), the murder of Theo van Gogh (a cinematographer who was very critical of Islam) by a fanatic Muslim in 2004, and the rise of the populist right-wing Party for

Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*) headed by Geert Wilders, have reinforced a negative social climate around the ‘problem migrant’ (Vasta, 2007) who resides outside mainstream society. Moreover, as official government policies stipulate, the Dutch police must be more tough on crime and disorder. This, in turn, may lead to dysfunctional relationships between officers and the Muslim inhabitants of Amsterdam, especially in the Western borough with high concentrations of youth of Moroccan origin. Before presenting our empirical results, we first outline the theoretical and methodological background to the study.

Police work in a multi-ethnic society

The following section examines the literature on police street work, including police–citizen interaction, within the context of a multicultural society. It presents the theoretical backbone to our empirical research on what street constables do in their regular contacts with the ethnically diverse citizenry of an Amsterdam borough. We furthermore sketch the explanatory contours of why these officers behave as they do.

Police–citizen interactions

A glance at the history of police studies reveals that, in contrast to what many people think and politicians like to communicate, most policemen (and women) are neither harsh law enforcers nor reckless crime fighters. Seminal North American-based studies have shown that they can be characterised as ‘peace officers’ (Banton, 1964) and ‘reproducers of order’ (Ericson, 1982), who, much like other members of the local communities they work in, exercise social control and assist citizens to solve problems, both minor and major. Rather than constantly chasing criminals, the service function of the police accounts for an important part of their responsibilities. Specifically, the policeman’s social interaction with people regularly consists of ‘dirty work’ (Westley, 1970) such as dealing with drunks, drug addicts and (mentally) ill persons. Furthermore, traffic offences and unruly youth displaying anti-social behaviour are important areas of police concern. Law enforcement and the legal use of force might be required when responding to contingencies and restoring public order (Bittner, 1990 [1974]), but the police only turn to this last resort under extreme and rare circumstances. Street constables’ authority to intervene forcefully in (crisis) situations alone is enough to keep most people in their place (Waddington, 1999). As an example, think of the way drivers automatically slow down when a patrol vehicle passes.

Viewed in these terms, the police struggle with an ‘impossible mandate’ (Manning, 1978). On the one hand, they are expected to uphold an adventurous image of ‘catching the crooks’, while on the other, reality shows that police work can be quite mundane. As one internationally oriented publication demonstrates, preventing problems and maintaining the status quo by visibly patrolling the public domain lie at the core of what street constables do (Bayley, 1994). In practice, during these patrols, either police officers or citizens can instigate encounters, which prominently converge around three themes. First, officers provide service and assist those in need. They engage in ‘small talk’ with people, but also respond to emergencies and handle minor issues such as bringing home a

lost elderly person. Second, the police have a broad regulatory and order maintenance function. They warn people, mediate in conflicts and direct behaviour by talking, persuasion and consensus formation. Law enforcement is the final stage of this interactive process. Finally, together with detectives, street constables investigate crime and disorder. They collect (physical) evidence, interrogate witnesses about what they saw and isolate the scene of crime. Again, in so doing, the 'narrow' no-nonsense, crime-fighting role of the officers emphasises no more than a limited set of police objectives. Policing, in everyday practice, is much 'wider' (Millie, 2013) as it encompasses duties like social work, disciplining problematic but non-criminal conduct and risk management.

This may not come as too much of a surprise. As Kinsey et al. (1986) point out, in a democratic society police actions should ideally be at the request and in the interest of the public – and this assumes a mentality of improving relationships with the wider community and self-restraint when it comes to matters of law enforcement. Moreover, and relatedly, there is much pragmatic wisdom to condoning minor offences, keeping chaos contained and friendly cooperation with individuals. Excessively punitive police interference simply makes problems worse and is detrimental to citizens' respect for, and trust in, street constables (Bittner, 1967). Street constables can therefore be considered 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980), who enjoy great individual autonomy in their decision-making vis-à-vis the citizenry. They embody the public face of the police, and are typically confronted in their daily work with non-voluntary interactions (and hence unwilling persons) that require empathy, flexibility and improvisation. In a world full of policy targets, performance measures and time constraints, this means that street police officers must constantly exercise their discretion when balancing between strict interventions and lenient ones. Below we discuss the possible factors that are of influence here.

Explaining police–citizen interaction

In police–citizen encounters on the street, constables can take the initiative to assist citizens, correct their behaviour or interrogate them about a crime. However, there are also occasions when citizens demand that the police undertake action. Either way, the nature of such interactions ranges from routine and civilised to escalating and explosive. Most research is concerned with the latter category and tries to identify the factors that drive contacts between police officers and citizens that result in force (for example Alpert et al., 2004; Wolf et al., 2009). These include: (1) environmental influences; (2) occupational culture; and (3) police officers' personal skills. On each level, dimensions of race, ethnicity and minority status show correlations with police–citizen interactions getting out of hand (Dunham et al., 2005). We point out the three factors in turn below.

First, the scenario in which interactions take place has a major impact on how police officers perceive situations. A commonplace variable is day versus night. It is likely that officers are more stressed after dark, especially when people are under the influence of alcohol and drugs. In addition, there is evidence for the hypothesis that low-class and high-crime neighbourhoods are at a higher risk of police violence than middle-class areas. The importance of ethnicity is typically significant when people make nonverbal communication errors by acting nervously and not looking officers in the eyes (Alpert

et al., 2005). Also, the number and appearance of people and the language they use matter in the way citizens and police respond to each other. Aside from loud voices, disrespect and insults that escalate conflicts (Terrill and Mastrofski, 2002), language barriers may negatively affect the delivery of police services (Herbst and Walker, 2001). If members of ethnic minorities do not speak proper English or Dutch, this has the potential to lead to misunderstanding, frustration and conflict on both sides.

Second, scholars have underlined the importance of police occupational culture in affecting how street constables go along their business. The body of knowledge on this topic prompts a fairly pessimistic appraisal of the culturally determined mental framework that guides the police's orientation to society. Importantly, the craft of policing is not done by the book, but is shaped by stories, anecdotes and tropes that centre around 'the conception of citizens as helpless, stupid, demanding and exploitative without saying so in so many words' (Shearing and Ericson, 1991: 499; Shearing, 1995). Even worse, external stress factors may spark feelings of risk and danger, social isolation and distrust of the outside world, machismo and strong mutual solidarity among colleagues ('the blue wall of silence') in the rank-and-file of police forces (Reiner, 2010 [1984]). As Loftus concludes after conducting ethnographic research in the UK:

[P]olice culture arises from the common tensions that are inherently associated with the job of being a police officer. These are the potential danger that officers face in their day-to-day encounters with the public, the authority they bear in such encounters, and the pressure to be efficient. [...] [O]fficers continue to derive their self-identity from their work and the basic challenges of that work [...]. In other words, the durable occupational and organisational demands create and sustain the culture today (2010: 17).

Translated into the policing of an ethnically super-diverse society, such a conservative occupational culture may feed a kind of 'institutionalised racism' (Chan, 1997) among officers in directing disproportionate suspicion onto minority groups. Accusations of racial profiling and targeted police stop and search actions are telling signals in this respect.

Finally, attention must be paid to the personal skills police officers exhibit in their contacts with citizens. Personal experience and education are obviously significant here. For example, Paoline and Terrill (2007) find that there is less verbal and physical coercion by officers who have long working experiences and have attained higher levels of education than their junior peers. The counterargument to this finding is that organisational socialisation and professional deformation – cynicism, dogmatism – may have a stronger impact than education and training on officers' behavioural manifestations in their contacts with populations (Van Maanen, 1975). Policing can only be learned 'on the job', where attentiveness to risk and danger leads to suspicion as a central element of the police working personality (Skolnick, 2011 [1966]). Such suspicion, in turn, easily fuels the labelling and stigmatisation of certain persons – not least juveniles of non-Western origin – as 'assholes' (Van Maanen, 1978): a class of people with whom officers regularly deal. Thus, in line with long-running debates about police culture, stereotypes, prejudices and (latent) racism arguably lie at the heart of street police work, which has ramifications for the interactions between officers and citizens.

Methodology

The information presented in the remainder of this paper forms part of a more comprehensive project on improving the contacts between ethnic minorities and street constables in the economically and socially relatively disadvantaged Western borough of Amsterdam (Dijkstra, 2014).¹ Officers openly acknowledged their own shortcomings in accessing hard-to-reach groups such as male adolescents roaming the streets. In grasping how the police perceive social problems in their working environment, how they interact with the citizenry and how they explain their own behaviour, we combined academic and practitioner orientations. This allowed action-oriented participatory research, ensuring:

a mechanism for practitioners and academics to open themselves to real dialogue, to interpersonal conflict, and to struggling (personally and professionally) to achieve shared outcomes (Marks et al., 2009: 114).

Both police and researchers met regularly to exchange ideas, present results and discuss conclusions.

The research took place in three phases carried out between August and November 2012. First, we interviewed 10 police officers (nine male, one female) about their ideas and concerns regarding the multi-ethnic environment of Amsterdam-West, and compared their subjective views with numerical data gathered by the municipality's Research, Information and Statistics Bureau (*Onderzoek en Statistiek*).² The police selected these respondents for us, which may have caused a bias in the end results. However, our 10 respondents drew quite an accurate picture of the neighbourhood situation. Statistical information matched their narratives.

Second, a team of eight researchers systematically observed 252 police–citizen encounters in the public arena.³ They examined the occasion and time frame of interactions and, in line with the literature review, classified these in one of the three following categories: (1) service and assistance; (2) order maintenance; and (3) investigation. During each interaction, depending on their own verdicts and in consultation with the police officers under scrutiny, the researchers estimated whether or not the interactions were multicultural in nature. The team further noted environmental influences (day/night, setting, number of people involved, who took the initiative to make contact: police or citizens?) and asked for the officers' backgrounds (gender, age, rank, years of service/seniority, ethnic background, education level) to give a context to their observations.

In addition, the team put its findings in an observational form that consisted of a continuum ranging from 'mere presence' to 'verbal' and 'physical' aggression. On the lowest level, police officers and citizens had a reasonable conversation devoid of loud voices and emotional expressions. As tensions move higher, encounters may derail into verbal abuse and physical force. The research team checked its data with the officers followed to validate the observations. Their judgements confirm a close correspondence with the officers' experiences: both agreed that 93% (observers) to 95% (police) of all police–citizen contacts went well – that is, without noticeable trouble.

Third, the research team held an extra round of in-depth interviews with another 10 police officers about their interactions with local inhabitants of the Amsterdam-West borough. We selected these respondents based on their gender, age, function and ethnicity to give a representative reflection of the team. The goal of our interviews was to add more depth to their occupational culture – the ‘scripts for action’ (Shearing, 1995) – police officers use when dealing with ethnic minority groups. Over the course of our research, we met two types of police respondents: ‘patrol officers’ and ‘community officers’. The first are traditional beat officers who patrol in their cars and quickly respond to emergency calls, whereas the latter engage more closely with local inhabitants (they usually patrol on foot or by bike), have longer-term agendas and adopt a service-oriented stance towards citizens. Our analysis of the results acknowledges this distinction, which allowed us to draw similarities and differences between the two types of officers.

Research findings

The main empirical research findings are presented below. We delineate the police perspective of social problems with a multicultural citizenry in Amsterdam-West, reveal observational information on how police–citizen interactions have evolved, and discuss how officers’ behaviour towards minority populations can be explained.

Police perceptions and statistics on the Amsterdam-West borough

It was obvious from the outset that, in the police’s view, disorderly youngsters are the main issue in Amsterdam-West. In particular, youth of Moroccan origin are said to be thorns in the flesh of both police officers and local residents. Some 36% of the total borough population aged 0–18 is born to Moroccan parents. This group is overrepresented in crime statistics and causes persistent trouble in neighbourhoods and smaller areas (‘hot spots’) in the borough. As one police officer said: ‘a relatively small group of loitering youth has been consuming a disproportionate amount of our energy’. When it comes to their parents, many of the older generations are reluctant to report crimes to the police and act with some suspicion towards public authorities. For our respondents, this is due to language barriers and the fact that ‘police’ means something different to them. Moroccan migrants do not necessarily see officers as friendly faces on the street.

Whether or not the Islamic – Middle Eastern – culture is an autonomous factor in explaining disorderly and even criminal behaviour remains a moot and politically sensitive point. For some officers, young ethnically Moroccan males’ close involvement in shaping deviance and crime can be determined culturally by a way of life that encourages bravery, intimidation, honour-related violence, and disdain for – in their eyes – an excessively mild police force. The incompatibility between their parents’ traditional norms and values and the dominant Western lifestyle might cause difficulties that affect children of first-generation immigrants. However, without completely dismissing such an interpretation, for others, the fact that relatively large numbers of young ‘Moroccan’ males (who hold Dutch passports) commit criminal offences also relates to deeper social and economic problems. Youngsters from non-Western groups, in general, seem more vulnerable to social problems than their Dutch peers.

Following from this, police respondents point at a combination of ‘criminogenic’ factors that increase the probability of crime and disorder problems in the Amsterdam-West borough. On an abstract level, there is a poor degree of social cohesion. Possibly due to geographical segregation between groups of inhabitants – original residents, people of Moroccan, Turkish and Antillean backgrounds, and youthful newcomers who buy and renovate properties – municipal survey information produces evidence of ‘lacking trust among neighbours’ and ‘not feeling at home in the neighbourhood’. Furthermore, police officers relate how ‘poor’ and ‘crowded’ housing has detrimental effects on public order. Mostly large Moroccan families (55% have three or more children) occupy 90% of the small and deprived rental blocks. About 75% of such households live in houses with fewer rooms than tenants – a situation that may increase conflicts at home. According to the police, families can also be dysfunctional: because relatively old fathers – on average they are almost 40 years older than their (youngest) son – appear slightly detached from their offspring, they drive teenagers onto the streets, where parental supervision is even less apparent. This, in turn, creates further temptations to deviate.

Relatedly, Amsterdam-West is among the poorest boroughs of Amsterdam. The average total annual income lies approximately €5,200 below the mean of €30,600, and unemployment rates of non-Western migrants (circa 11.5%) are generally higher than elsewhere in the city (10.5%). With respect to adolescents aged over 15, 38% of them are poorly educated (30% on average), while school dropout is slightly more frequent (hovering around 15%) compared with the rest of Amsterdam (13%). In police officers’ eyes, it is precisely these youth with low competence and poor skills who cause most trouble on the street. Overall, community officers were best able to review what is happening in Amsterdam-West. Unlike patrol officers, they work in confined beat areas – sometimes just a few blocks large – and maintain close contacts with local key players like imams, youth workers and ‘neighbourhood burgomasters’ (i.e. active citizens with extensive informal networks). Community officers have thus built up an excellent information position by constantly supervising the neighbourhood, signalling problems and keeping contacts with their stakeholders.

Finally, and somewhat unforeseen given the police’s own worries about the Western borough, an online survey (the ‘Safety Monitor’ (*Veiligheidsmonitor*)) reveals that judgements of police performance do not necessarily diverge much from the rest of Amsterdam. For example, about 34% of the inhabitants agree that ‘the police are not visible on the streets’ (38% in other boroughs) while 26% declare that ‘the police are accessible enough’ (24% in other boroughs). This may be explained by an underrepresentation of Moroccan residents in the survey data. The elderly commonly do not speak Dutch, which makes it hard to complete an internet questionnaire. If we highlight responses from the Moroccan community, they are indeed slightly less positive – a 43% and 32% score, respectively – about the foregoing two statements.

Police–citizen interaction on the street

The question now is how police–citizen interaction looks and how it develops. To give an overall impression we briefly sketch three everyday situations along the lines of ‘service and assistance’, ‘order maintenance’ and ‘investigation’:

Table 1. Types of contact.

		Service and assistance	Order maintenance	Investigation	Total
Community officers	Absolute	67	40	15	122
	Percentage	55%	33%	12%	100%
Patrol officers	Absolute	33	83	14	130
	Percentage	25%	64%	11%	100%
Total	Absolute	100	123	29	252
	Percentage	40%	49%	11%	100%

A community officer walking his beat stops to talk to a market stallholder. He asks how the man is doing and whether his children are fine too. A little later the community officer visits a shopkeeper and chats about the weather and the bad economy. Keeping good relations with the neighbourhood is crucial for his legitimacy and information position [observation 'service and assistance'].

Two patrol officers pull over alongside a badly parked car. They lower the window and ask the male motorist to move on. The square is packed with other traffic so the man's action creates a potentially dangerous situation. His response is friendly, he understands the request, and drives off. The officers could have fined him for illegal parking, but decide to issue a warning only [observation 'order maintenance'].

The police receive a call from a supermarket manager. One of his customers has been the victim of pickpocketing. Luckily, CCTV footage of this incident is available. Two patrol officers arrive at the scene and enter the manager's office. A few minutes later they return with the footage copied on a DVD. The detective squad will use the evidence for further investigation [observation 'investigation'].

As reported above, in total, we were present at 252 police–citizen encounters. The majority of these encounters were very brief – sometimes lasting less than a minute – and initiated by the police. About 40% of the contacts observed related to people in the 18–30 age bracket; 75% of them were male.

As Table 1 illustrates, half of all contacts consisted of 'order maintenance', 40% cover 'service and assistance' and 11% came under 'investigation'. Interestingly, community officers put a great deal of effort into 'service and assistance' contacts (55%), while patrol officers were busiest with 'order maintenance' (64%). The first group put much of their time into things like performing foot patrols, 'chit-chat', signalling and gaining information about neighbourhood problems, conflict mediation and offering aftercare to victims of crime. Patrol officers, on the other hand, were primarily busy with traffic control. They went out on the streets in vehicles and had fleeting contacts with, for example, illegal parkers and boys on motor scooters. Investigation is a minor category for both community and patrol officers, and mostly covers the gathering of information and evidence after a crime or incident has been reported.

With regard to 'cross-cultural communication', patrol officers score higher than their community-oriented colleagues (Table 2). Put differently, there may be something of a

Table 2. Cross-cultural police–citizen contact.⁴

		Cross-cultural communication		Total
		no	yes	
Community officers	Absolute	66	55	121
	Percentage	55%	45%	100%
Patrol officers	Absolute	52	77	129
	Percentage	40%	60%	100%
Total	Absolute	118	132	250
	Percentage	47%	53%	100%

Table 3. Cross-cultural types of police–citizen contacts.

	Community officers	Patrol officers
Service and assistance	35% (19)	23% (18)
Order maintenance	47% (26)	68% (52)
Investigation	18% (10)	9% (7)
Total	100% (55)	100% (77)

gap between how patrol officers and community officers operate in Amsterdam-West. The latter tended to stay more in their cultural comfort zone when making social contacts with people. Patrol officers had closer interactions with ethnic minorities, although differences with community officers are not that large.

Within the category ‘cross-cultural contact’ (Table 3), patrol officers were indeed more geared towards ‘order maintenance’ than community officers. In so far as patrol officers did get involved in cross-cultural ‘service and assistance’, most of their work related to help and care after (traffic) accidents, not to informal community-oriented conversations with the citizenry. If community officers dealt with ethnic minorities they put more time and effort into law enforcement than into social contacts.

As touched upon earlier, hardly any escalation has been observed on the part of either police officers or citizens. Apart from making a few arrests, for instance in a case of domestic violence, the rare tensions that occurred were limited to verbal abuse and harassment. Citizens and officers, in general, peacefully went their separate ways.

Explanatory interpretations

In summary, police respondents agree that especially anti-social youth behaviour and language barriers in the Amsterdam-West borough present challenges to how they deal with people. Interactions between police staff and citizens, in overall terms, went rather well, albeit patrol officers and community officers have developed divergent routines. Patrol officers devote a greater share of their work to cross-cultural order maintenance than their community-oriented colleagues who are keener on mono-cultural service and assistance. Admittedly, our research gives no more than a snapshot of what can occur on

the streets of Amsterdam-West. Outcomes are nevertheless surprising, since expected conflicts between police and ethnic minorities were not overtly present. How can outcomes in terms of police behaviour be explained? We construct an interpretation along the lines of 'environmental influences', 'occupational culture' and 'police officers' personal skills'.

According to our observations, environmental influences on police-citizen encounters related to dimensions of space, not so much of time. Regardless of day versus night, patrol officers especially committed themselves to driving the main streets, thereby concentrating on (young) traffic offenders drawn from miscellaneous groups, including many Dutch Moroccans. This might be a sign of disciplinary 'securitisation' techniques (Schuilenburg, 2015) targeting ethnic minorities, with potentially adverse side-effects of exclusion and stigmatisation. On an alternative, but not necessarily conflicting, reading, their approach might also be influenced by managerial and performance-oriented rationalities that seek to produce 'easy outcomes' and 'box ticking'. It is unlikely that citizens' trust in the police will blossom in such an atmosphere (cf. Terpstra and Trommel, 2009). Nevertheless, as we discovered, the vast bulk of police-citizen contacts ended with no further action or a warning rather than issuing fines and making arrests. Officers demonstrated good judgement in using their discretionary powers to prevent punitive measures.

In their paper on police culture in the Netherlands, Terpstra and Schaap conclude that conservatism and mistrust of strangers is less widespread among Dutch rank-and-file officers than what is known from the Anglo-Saxon literature: 'the overall image of [...] Dutch police culture is less negative than US studies often suggest' (2013: 70). For instance, hostile and racist excesses such as those that occur in North America are unheard of in Amsterdam. Having said that, we still found elements of 'us' versus 'them' thinking in our interviews:

Okay, after five days of work, you feel fed up with disorderly groups of youngsters. I can imagine that colleagues start to talk negatively about them. Yet, it is better to take it out on each other instead of against those boys [interview #1, patrol officer].

I see colleagues embrace a tunnel vision of youth groups. [...] We were checking on scooter drivers last week. You see a guy, coloured, wearing a hoodie and a fur collar, driving a scooter. He is in the target group. Colleagues may fine him more easily for minor speeding or not having his ID-card on him [interview #4, patrol officer].

On the other hand, police respondents underlined their professionalism in being respectful and exercising restraint, even when youngsters exhibit hostility towards them. They fear that an overly authoritarian stance may backfire. A few officers have managed to build up cautious contacts with individual youth group members, which should not be spoiled. Moreover, there are different styles in how police operate (cf. Muir, 1977). In particular, community officers' core activities seem to consist of service delivery, information exchange and support, not public order maintenance. These officers walk their beat and cycle around to be accessible to citizens' complaints about crime, disorder and neighbourhood deterioration. Nevertheless, genuine cross-cultural communication was less apparent, perhaps due to language barriers and cultural discomfort. In common with

the native Dutch officers, their colleagues of Moroccan or Turkish decent also had most contact with ethnically similar groups.

Finally, explanations on the level of personal skills mirror our findings in the previous section. Asked about their training in the police academy and in the workplace, respondents praise the abilities they have learned to take the lead in and, if necessary, de-escalate situations. Police officers hardly issue fines and sporadically make arrests. In this respect, they perform 'emotional labour' (Martin, 1999) to a greater or lesser degree when dealing with danger and tragedy on the job. Virtually all respondents acknowledge the problem of professional deformation over the course of their careers. They may have internalised 'suspicion', 'alertness' and 'mistrust' in their contacts with youngsters: 'I have to be careful of developing too narrow an image of the world' [interview #9, patrol officer]. In response, the Amsterdam police force has invested heavily in educational courses such as 'multicultural craftsmanship' (*multicultureel vakmanschap*) aimed at responding effectively to super-diverse lifestyles in society. Opinions differ about the usefulness of those programmes. On one side of the spectrum, officers appreciate the extra knowledge they have gained of foreign habits and customs. On the other hand, critics assert that 'these unruly youngsters are Dutch kids', so 'they must abide by our rules and values'. From this vantage point, cross-cultural communication must by no means result in unequal treatment of populations across Amsterdam. Youth problems are primarily urban problems, not ethnic ones.

Conclusion and discussion

The Netherlands is well known for its pragmatic and tolerant distaste for 'anything that smacks of militarism' (Wintle, 1996: 194). However, since around 2002, Dutch politicians have shown a tendency to drift towards the opposite side of this previously progressive ideal. In particular, influential right-wing populist voices have adopted a xenophobic 'moral panic' about immigration and ethnic minorities by pronouncing the multicultural society dead in the face of daunting financial and security problems. Attitudes have changed from a mostly liberal to a more conservative stance against 'newcomers' from far-away countries (Pakes, 2006). On top of this, the Ministry of Safety and Justice's budget has risen sensationally, with policies assigning higher priority to crime fighting, increasing legal competencies for the police, and a more centrally governed force. An intriguing question is how such trends translate into the practice of police encounters with ethnically diverse minority groups.

We have investigated how police constables interact with inhabitants of a multicultural borough in Amsterdam-West. What difficulties do officers encounter on the streets, how do their interactions with citizens develop, and what reasonable explanations might there be? In answer to these questions, police officers identified unruly youth as the major threat to public order. However, contrary to what was believed, our research indicates visible apprehension between the police and youth groups, without matters getting out of hand. There were barely any signs of grave escalation. Although there are indications that patrol officers immerse themselves in law enforcement in the thoroughfares, thereby making contact with young males of ethnic minorities, they do not issue many fines, let alone make many arrests. Community officers are the social, service-oriented,

face of the police close to the citizens, but they experience problems reaching minority groups. Taken together, both categories of police endeavour to strike a correct balance between their normative function of order maintenance (up to the point of using force) and their moral-symbolic function of keeping pleasant contacts with citizens, regulating emotions and building trust. Adolescent men from ethnic minorities are most often the target of law enforcement operations, which, sooner or later, may lead to feelings of stigmatisation and exclusion.

As our research points out, policing a multicultural borough assumes enduring co-operation between patrol officers and community officers, and their respective modes of action, to uphold and restore public order. This is easier said than done. Ever since the introduction of community officers during the 1990s and 2000s, they have been typified as 'loners' within the force, and are accused of not being 'real police', busy as they are with 'soft' and 'caring' methods (Punch et al., 2002). Subsequently, community officers' social mandate to intermingle with residents and shopkeepers in local neighbourhoods is likely to conflict with patrol officers' appetite for order maintenance. One rude act on the part of their colleagues may spoil months of investment in trust building. So far, community-oriented policing continues to be an important pillar for staying in touch with the diversified populations of Amsterdam. Future research will tell whether this strategy can resist and survive the pressures of centralisation and penalisation to which the Dutch police force is now subject. If not, there is a pronounced risk of weakening public trust and confidence in the police in such a way as to undermine the present precarious relations between officers and youngsters from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Notes

1. We wish to express our enthusiastic thanks to Henk Greven, Rogier van der Groep and Josca Boers for their contributions to this project.
2. See: <http://www.os.amsterdam.nl/english/>
3. Including a special police action, we observed 280 interactions. These observations have been omitted here for reasons of representativeness.
4. Two observations are missing as their cross-cultural dimension was unclear.

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