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*Police Vulnerabilities, Thought Styles and Rituals*

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# CULTURAL PROCESSES SHAPING STOP-AND-CHECK PRACTICES AND INTERACTION DYNAMICS IN A LARGE DUTCH CITY: POLICE VULNERABILITIES, THOUGHT STYLES AND RITUALS

PATRICK BROWN and NATHALIE VAN EIJK\*

*Existing scholarship on police decision-making notes the importance of categories and ‘governing mentalities’ in shaping front-line discretionary practices. Much of this work explores categories of race and ethnicity. Important questions remain regarding how micro-level practices connect to organizational dynamics and why ethnic profiling endures despite attempts to counter such practices. Drawing on critical approaches to uncertainty and risk, not least Mary Douglas’s cultural theory, we analyse data drawn from an ethnographic study of police work in a large city in the Netherlands. Our analysis emphasizes the multiple lines of accountability that render officers vulnerable in different ways, officers’ combining of different rationalities of decision-making and the influence of everyday rituals that cultivate and reinforce particular organizational thought styles and discretionary practices.*

Key Words: culture, Douglas, policing, risk, rituals, uncertainty

## Introduction

Public awareness and scrutiny of how police officers (POs) handle stop-and-check activities have increased significantly. Camera phone footage shared on social media, alongside other evidence of unequal treatment and disproportional escalation of interactions with individuals from some ethnic minority groups, has driven demands for greater accountability (see [Dunham and Petersen 2017](#) on ‘black lives matter’ debates in the United States or Amnesty International’s highly publicized 2013 report on the Netherlands—see [Mutsaers 2014](#)). Over a longer time period, criminologists and other social scientists have been contributing to critical understandings of how POs and other security and criminal justice professionals intervene on the front line, and the decision logics that underpin discretionary practices (e.g. [Goldstein 1960](#); [Alpert et al. 2005](#); [James 2006](#); [Weenink 2009](#); [Weber and Bowling 2012](#); [Côté-Boucher 2016](#); [Çankaya 2020](#)).

Drawing on ethnographic research into policing activities in a large city in the Netherlands, we seek to contribute to this literature along three interrelated avenues. First, we seek to draw attention to the numerous lines of accountability that curtail and configure POs’ discretionary space. While it is common to depict POs’ powers in these circumstances (e.g. [Mutsaers 2014](#)), we also emphasize lived experiences of

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vulnerability in everyday policing, which are vital to grasping decision-making practices. Second, this emphasis connects our analysis to a body of literature exploring how individuals make decisions under conditions of vulnerability, uncertainty and risk (Zinn 2008). Third, this latter literature includes the work of Mary Douglas, which we use to analyse ‘thought styles’ at the micro-level in relation to underlying forms of social organization and the everyday rituals through which these are reproduced (Douglas 1986; 6 and Richards 2017).

Combined, these three analytical threads help us understand enduring practices, categories and outcomes in POs’ work—not least in terms of race and ethnicity—despite ongoing criticism, concerns around public trust, shifts in policy and moves towards diversification in the race and ethnicity of some police forces. The aim of the study was not specifically to investigate ethnic profiling, however, but, in a wider sense, the ways in which uncertainties are negotiated in everyday police stop-and-checks. Our Findings section is structured around the three threads introduced above. But, first, we move to provide an overview of relevant work in the police, criminological and wider social science literatures, followed by our conceptual framework and our methods.

*Discretionary space, categories and race—key foci in studying the decision-making of criminal justice professionals*

The processes and outcomes of decision-making by criminal justice professionals have been studied through quantitative analyses of survey data assessing classifications and outcomes (e.g. Alpert *et al.* 2005; Hong 2017), qualitative ethnographic approaches often exploring how discretionary space is used (e.g. Holmberg 2000; Côté-Boucher 2016), socio-legal studies of changing legal and policy frameworks and their inherent tensions (e.g. Eijkman 2010) and documentary analyses that highlight the influence of ethnic and racial categories and stereotypes (e.g. Weenink 2009; Ariel and Tankebe 2018). Located at the intersection of policy and policing, several studies have followed classic approaches to ‘street-level’ work amid organizations (Lipsky 1980) in analysing how policies are interpreted on the ground, paying particular attention to the ‘discretionary space’ afforded to professionals and how this is exercised (Mutsaers 2014; Hogg and Butler 2017).

Organizational policies, alongside limits to personnel, time and technology, push the exercising of discretion—particularly discretion ‘not to enforce the law’ (Goldstein 1960: 558–8)—in different and often contrasting directions. Côté-Boucher’s (2016) ethnographic account describes changing dynamics over time in Canadian border policing, where authorities have gradually removed various tasks from border POs’ daily work, facilitated by technology. This reduces the extent to which POs can exercise discretion in interpreting and enforcing various regulations (Côté-Boucher 2016: 64), yet Côté-Boucher also shows how technology and policy can ‘potentially extend the time during which suspicions can be acted upon—when an officer senses that “something does not feel right”, or when she “has a knot in her stomach”, as interviewees described these moments of doubt’ (Côté-Boucher 2016: 58). Thus, technology and other factors can lead to ‘paradoxes’ or tensions whereby discretionary space is simultaneously curtailed *and* extended (Côté-Boucher 2016).

Tensions around discretionary space, its extent and shifting dynamics are also apparent in research in the Netherlands. Dutch POs are encouraged to police proactively and, in doing so, can undertake ‘stop-and-checks’ on reasonable grounds, whereby they can ask for identification in relation to traffic infractions, in maintaining public order and in investigating specific criminal offenses. Preventative searches of a person’s clothes, bags and vehicle are only allowed in zones designated as at high risk of gun or knife crime. In late 2020, there was much debate over mooted plans to introduce such zones in Amsterdam, while several zones exist in Rotterdam. The Road Traffic Act enables POs to stop and identify drivers of vehicles in relation to the safety of the vehicle or traffic infractions, though [Amnesty International \(2013: 7\)](#) has described an increased blurring of traffic powers and criminal investigation.

[Gowricharn and Çankaya \(2015: 1106\)](#) describe ‘a large degree of discretion’ afforded to Dutch POs, partly due to their ‘poor visibility’ to their superiors (following [Goldstein 1960](#)). Yet, alongside ‘conditions of discretionary power, power differentials and informality’, these authors also denote the norms which govern and are reproduced through the relatively informal interactions, whereby culture and deeply embedded moral assumptions function to define boundaries of discretionary space ([Gowricharn and Çankaya 2015: 1106](#)).

Elsewhere in northern Europe, [Holmberg \(2000\)](#) found discrimination to be a basic tool by which Danish POs negotiate discretion amid proactive policing approaches—with discriminatory tendencies often developing into self-fulfilling criminological prophecies (see also [James 2006](#) on the policing of traveller communities in England). Decision-making tools for reducing or shortcutting complexity and uncertainty are, thus, of importance, with key findings in this literature describing the use of categories, stereotypes and profiling (e.g. [Bonnet and Caillaut 2015](#); [Hong 2017](#); [Çankaya 2020](#)) in overcoming too much information (complexity—see [Côté-Boucher 2016](#)) or ‘a lack of complete information’ (uncertainty—see [Weenink 2009: 222](#))—amid limited time and resources ([Goldstein 1960](#)).

Among studies of categories and their use, [Weenink’s \(2009\)](#) research is archetypal in indicating the prominence of ‘perceptual shorthands’, which are found to be ‘collectively constructed’ within organizations. ‘Stereotypical categorisations’ may be seen by decision-makers as ‘proven’ among their fellow professionals, thus legitimizing and even obliging their use in everyday practice ([Weenink 2009: 222](#)). This focus on colleagues, in explaining the reproduction of stereotypes and their application in practice, is supported by [Hong’s \(2017\)](#) research in England, which found that more diverse police forces were less likely to stop-and-check citizens of minority ethnic backgrounds. Yet, this is by no means a common finding, with other studies noting the enduring presence, or even increasing practices, of ethnic profiling among diversifying police forces ([Alpert et al. 2005](#); [Wilkins and Williams 2008](#)). Beyond the organization, [Bonnet and Caillaut \(2015\)](#) comparative study of how police ‘talk’ about minority ethnic groups points to the importance of national public spheres in shaping everyday language use and categories and related normative frameworks governing interactions (see also [Warren and Tomaskovic-Devey 2009: 343](#)).

Recent work ([Bonnet and Caillaut 2015](#); [Leser 2020: 26](#)) criticizes policing studies for paying little attention to how underlying categories, gut feelings, heuristics and other forms of decision-making influence one another in everyday policing practices. This oversight may relate to the limited observational research into how policing and

decision-making unfolds at the frontline (Holmberg 2000), which, in turn, leads to continuing ambiguity regarding the causal processes shaping stereotypical categories, with the precise nature of agency in these interactions remaining contested (see Mutsaers 2014). The wider literature on the handling of uncertainty and complexity in everyday decision-making emphasizes the role of ‘gut feelings’ (e.g. Gigerenzer 2007; Zinn 2008). Yet, if we take Gerd Gigerenzer’s work as one core basis of this field, we see various criminological studies of offending drawing on such frameworks, yet very few studies citing or developing this work in analysing police work. This neglect is glaring given the emic expressions of ‘knots in stomachs’, or gut instincts, among officers themselves, which surface in various studies (see quotation from Côté-Boucher 2016 above, for example).

Warren and Tomaskovic-Devey (2009) problematize the use of gut instincts as a pathway through which pejorative stereotypes warp and distort police practices in contrast to a more ‘legalistic reasoning’, which, they argue, is less prone to racial bias. As one important form of intuition or heuristics (see next section), however, gut feelings are not necessarily ‘irrational’ and have been argued elsewhere in the criminological literature to be compatible with, and an important form of, effective decision-making (Snook *et al.* 2005). The danger to ‘good’ decision-making would, therefore, seem to lie not so much in the use of emotions *per se* (affect is seen as an inescapable feature of decision-making—Gigerenzer 2007) but rather the deeper categories and understandings that underpin gut feelings and other decision-making shortcuts (Holmberg 2000; Reis 2019).

Returning to the Netherlands, Mutsaers’s (2014: 844) analysis highlights a ‘web of relations that is spun by a wide range of [public, semi-public and private] agencies’, with national policies, local by-laws and individual political interventions all pertinent in pushing POs’ practices in particular directions and configuring various spatial categories in everyday policing of minority groups (c.f. James 2006). This attentiveness to the interweaving of space and race in policing bodies is echoed by Çankaya (2020) whose work stresses the multiple categories of location, ethnicity, gender, age, vehicle type and attitude to the police in individual POs’ stop-and-check considerations (see also Terrill and Mastrofski’s (2002) US study), alongside a disproportionate attentiveness to ‘hypermasculinity, as performed by parts of the white working class and/or racialised youth’ (Çankaya 2020: 709). Incongruence between different categories—age, ethnicity and vehicle, for example—drive considerations of what is outside the norm or ‘out of place’ (Douglas 1966; Çankaya 2020). This observation was echoed on our own data and became an important starting point for our analytical framework, which we develop further in the next section.

### *Conceptual Framework*

As with many of the studies noted in the preceding section, Çankaya (2020) and Mutsaers (2014) both locate individual Dutch POs’ handling of categories within wider policy and politician discourses, which (1) impose pressure to police proactively while (2) reproducing and emphasizing some (ethnicized) categories and not others. However, the precise processes by which these two analytical levels—meso-organizational and micro-behavioural—connect to one another remain neglected in much of the literature and,

therefore, the nature of agency and possibilities for organizational change remain unclear.

Campeau's (2015) study of police culture considers discretionary decision-making as a form of reasoning, with POs often drawing on particular 'repertoires' or logics, which, in turn, are understood in terms of their situational, interactional and hierarchical (more distant or more proximal) dynamics. Informed by cultural sociology (Lamont 1992), the approach is useful in emphasizing that professionals are members of multiple 'organisations' and hierarchies that shape the moral and norm-based logics, categories and sense-making of their decision-making. This relational and narrative account echoes work on other professional groups (Harrits and Møller 2014: 450) and studies of police 'talk' and narrative construction (Turner and Rowe 2017). Yet, these approaches can be criticized as overly cognitivist, acknowledging intuition yet paying limited attention to the more emotional bases of how professionals act in decision-making contexts where more instantaneous reactions are called for and where professionals may experience multiple forms of vulnerability; as in police work.

Zinn (2008) synthesizes a wide body of research to illuminate how citizens and professionals share a common tendency to combine multiple approaches—emotions, hope, use of calculative risk knowledge and trust—in their everyday handling of uncertainty amid vulnerability. Campeau (2015) shows how organizational culture shapes which categories, repertoires and risks are available and ring 'true' for POs in making sense of complex situations. Meanwhile wider work in cultural criminology (e.g. Ferrell 1999; Hayward 2002: 91) shows how emotions, practices and uses of different forms of knowledge and affect are configured and (il)legitimated within social networks. In this sense, cultural processes involve normative structures of accountability (Douglas 1992), which, in turn, shape professional and private identities, by which particular ways of acting and thinking 'feel' authentic (Brown and Gale 2018).

This multidimensionality of POs' socio-cultural lifeworlds—involving multiple webs of socio-organizational norms and different sense-making repertoires, which shape POs thinking, emotions, identity and practices—helps us understand different cultural groupings of POs (c.f. Paoline 2004) and why more racially diverse police forces do not necessarily enact less racial profiling (c.f. Hong 2017). As Wacquant (2001: 106) has shown, pervasive cultural categories and insidious socio-political norms and pressures may combine to compel selected members of minority groups to perform as prejudiced 'custodians' of fellow members of their own 'community' as seemingly reflected in studies of policing in the United States (Alpert *et al.* 2005).

A further gap in the existing policing literature pertains to how dominant cultural 'repertoires' become legitimated through multiple forms of social organizations and networks, as underlying patterns of thinking and feeling, to be drawn upon as authentic 'gut instincts', intuitions or rationalizations in everyday policing work. While recent work points importantly to the role of socialization and training (Charman 2017) and accountability structures (Campeau 2015), there remain a number of gaps in understanding 'how organisations think' and feel (Douglas 1986). These gaps represent a problem for policing and criminological theorizing and include a specifying of the relationship between individual practices and socio-cultural structures, alongside a fuller recognition of the role of emotions in policing. More practically, there remains a need to explain the intractability of racial profiling over time despite growing criticism and to grasp how police organizations might reform themselves more effectively.

of institutionalized ways of perceiving, thinking and feeling, not least their relationship to micro-interactions and ways of acting amid uncertainty and risk, that our framework comes to centre around the work of Mary Douglas (1986; 1992; see 6 and Richards's (2017) overview). Our deepening of cultural lifeworlds from meaning making to include social legitimation, identity (see Habermas 1987) and emotions leads us to use Douglas's account of institutional 'thought styles'. When synthesized with her earlier work on social processes of categorization (Douglas 1966) and later work on risk (Douglas 1992), Douglas's approach hinges upon a feedback loop (see 6 and Richards 2017), which, with reference to policing, we summarize as:

- (1) underlying group dynamics and hierarchies of the police organization are 'enacted' through POs' daily interaction rituals, which help 'cultivate' particular categories and logics for handling uncertainties and anomalies (6 and Richards 2017: 127);
- (2) these 'thought styles', in turn, perpetuate the underlying forms and hierarchies of police organization, amid which POs are held accountable and potentially become vulnerable—and so the loop continues;
- (3) zooming out, 'rival' thought styles 'encounter each other as generators of anomalies' (6 and Richards 2017:178)—an example would be where POs encounter members of a different group (e.g. citizens from marginalized communities);
- (4) this handling of anomalies is 'central to the mechanisms by which thought styles are cultivated, sustained, reinforced or undermined' (6 and Richards 2017: 144), which, in turn, reinforces or undermines group dynamics and hierarchies; return to (1).

The emergence of anomalies—people, objects and processes—can, thus, affirm existing categories but can also stimulate new ways of thinking (Douglas 1986) as taken-for-granted lifeworlds are opened up to scrutiny and challenge (Habermas 1987) as we see with the use of camera phones (see Findings). Within the wider sociological literature on uncertainty, vulnerability and social change, as well as criminological literature on professional work (e.g. Côté-Boucher 2016), new technologies are seen as potent cultural objects, shaping new forms of sociality and interactions, with new identities and practices emerging as a result. Encounters with anomalous people or objects may, therefore, challenge, reinforce or intensify thought styles (Douglas 1986). Alongside considerations of how different forms of vulnerability become interwoven with uncertainty amid exercise of discretion, the findings we present below focus on how uncertainty and vulnerability were handled in everyday POs' stop-and-check practices and interactions. In our analysis, we consider how thought styles are useful in linking these practices to wider organizational dynamics.

### *The Study*

The conceptual framework outlined above and refined in the Findings section was developed in response to the data emerging within a quasi-ethnographic case study undertaken in 2017 in a large city in the Netherlands. The police organization within this city is divided into a number of main districts, each with different numbers of police stations. The study featured a combination of in-depth interviews with POs from four districts, as well as semi-participant observations within two districts.

Access into this organizational context was negotiated through a key informant. It is important to bear in mind that this route of access, and association with this gatekeeper, shapes what a researcher is told, not told, shown and allowed to see. Similarly, the researcher's individual characteristics—a young, female, non-police researcher—will inevitably have shaped the way various members of the organization behaved and spoke in observations (both in organizational meetings and 'on the beat') and during interviews (Richards and Emslie 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), as well as who was willing to be interviewed or accompanied on 'ride-alongs'. In light of our own conceptual framework above, our backgrounds inevitably shape our own particular lifeworlds, which have led us to interpret and categorize the data in particular ways as reflected in the analysis presented below. As far as possible, however, we have sought to use the contrasting structures of our two individual lifeworlds as a basis for reflexively examining our assumptions through ongoing critical discussions regarding the 'fit' of coding and 'plausibility' of theorizing (Tavory and Timmermans 2014: 105).

Attempts at a more systematic purposive sampling approach were less successful, hindered by limits in access to the police organization and the impact of large public events on shift patterns. Consequently, snowball and convenience sampling resulted in 17 interview participants—of which 5 were women and 2 were of minority ethnic background (approximately reflecting the local force), alongside a more even range of ages (28–60), experience (2–40 years), rank (including an operational coordinator, a team supervisor, a victim support worker and a detective) and geographical location in the city (nine worked in central districts, eight in more 'suburban' districts). These interviews were combined with and informed by ten separate days of observations, including three ride-along shifts, access to daily briefings within the local organization and a number of official meetings arranged by the national police organization (including meetings on tackling ethnic profiling).

The interviews were semi-structured, oriented around central themes of uncertainty and how this was negotiated in everyday work. All of the participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity; hence, we avoid using names and identifiable characteristics (including rank). Ethnic profiling was not specifically asked about though was raised by POs in every interview and then followed up on. Observations during ride-alongs, briefing meetings and official meetings with outside agencies paid special attention to the ways in which the participants understood and categorized the social world (Douglas 1966; Lipsky 1980) and other ways in which uncertainty was handled and overcome (Zinn 2008).

Transcripts of the interview recordings and field notes were coded through open, axial and selective phases. The later phases followed an abductive approach, characterized by iteratively moving back and forth between data and theory, while remaining especially attentive to unexpected findings (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Douglas's work became more central to our later abductive analyses, following earlier coding, which highlighted POs' narratives of stop-and-check work in terms of hunting anomalies in relation to categories and the salience of rituals within the observational data. The data presented below are verbatim interview quotes and edited field notes, selected to capture typical responses and to illuminate our abductive framework.



### Findings

#### *Interwoven processes of discretion and vulnerability*

Above, we have reviewed literature that notes how the formal and informal authority of POs, combined with their distance from (and invisibility to) managers, has commonly been considered as granting them relatively large amounts of discretionary space and power. Our data lead us to challenge and qualify this broad assessment in several senses. In contrast to other street-level bureaucrats referred to in the literature (c.f. [Harrits and Møller 2014](#)), POs' work was often described (in interviews) and observed as requiring rather immediate discretionary decision-making, the results of which could potentially be confrontational or even directly physically damaging and for which they were subject to stringent forms of accountability:

The suspect ran into the park so we demarcated the entire park. I was there, knowing this guy was somewhere around. I was working with an unfamiliar colleague and after 2,5 hours we saw this guy stumbling. He came out of the bushes and was bleeding and limping. It was confusing though, because when I came to the park, I was filled with adrenaline, but after 2,5 hours it settles down and you start small talk, you know: 'so how was your weekend?' Anyway, I recognised this guy right away as he fitted the suspect description perfectly. So we pulled our weapons. But that's scary you know? It was the first time I had to pull my weapon and you just get such a big rush of adrenaline. And I knew this guy had a gun. And he grabbed it too! But look, when we get our gun, we grab it with our entire hand, but this guy grabbed his gun with two fingers. I was so happy I saw it because it seemed like he was grabbing it with two fingers to throw it away. But if I had missed that, I would have shot him. It's a scary thought... (*Police officer, female, white-Dutch, age-30s*).

POs in our study described facing multiple and sometimes heightened forms of vulnerability while simultaneously observing stringent protocols—e.g. around weapon use. Different forms of vulnerability amid these contexts—towards violence or amid accountability frameworks regarding (not) following procedures—and the uncertainty characterizing their decision-making must also be understood as complex and highly dynamic ([Perrow 1984](#)), with outcomes quickly feeding back so as to attenuate or amplify existing vulnerabilities and uncertainties.

With more specific regard to everyday stop-and-checks, these were commonly described as giving rise to interwoven processes of vulnerability and discretion:

Uh, this is not going to the Public Prosecution Service, right?? I have bluffed my way through a stop-and-check. Not often but, it has happened... I stopped a car because his car lights weren't working. There were three [Dutch] Moroccans in the car. Well, that can happen. I always try to stay nice but these guys started right away: 'How dare you, it's because we are Moroccan'. But because the other two [Dutch] Moroccans in the passenger seats were swearing too, I asked them for their IDs as well. But legally, I'm only allowed to ask for the driver's ID. Well, actually, I can also check people for their IDs if they hinder me in my work or insult me, but it's a vague situation, because I stopped the car according to the Road Traffic Act. But this is exactly what I mean, officers often just ask for the information that they want and they'll make damn sure that they get it too! (*Police Officer, male, Dutch-Moroccan, age-20s*).

This PO described how challenges to his informal situational authority led him to respond in a manner that placed him in a more 'vague' position in relation to his formal-legal powers, hence his concern that those higher up within the system (prosecutors)

would hear about his conduct. This handling of one form of vulnerability to ‘losing face’ in the midst of interactions (Goffman 1955: 224), alongside vulnerability to accountability pressures within the organization in terms of two different protocols (traffic related and wider stop-and-check), can be seen as creating important tensions, with these tensions themselves rendering POs vulnerable. This PO went on to describe that, when there are internal inquiries, ‘you start already one-nil behind [...] so there is a sort of anxiety that your job comes under threat...’. Worries about procedural errors or complaints coming to threaten one’s job were expressed by several participants.

In contrast to some accounts depicting POs as distant from and invisible to higher authorities (e.g. Mutsaers 2014), recent technological changes can be understood as heightening visibility and related forms of accountability—whether this be the immediate reporting of ethnic profiling through social media by high-profile public figures or the recording of frontline policing work, which could be placed on various media platforms:

We live in a digital era in which we capture everything. Have you seen all the movies of the Dutch police on YouTube?! The downside is that they edit these movies and you only see a part of the story, which often gives the police a bad reputation. It’s a relatively new phenomenon. But it changes your role and makes you even more transparent; nothing I can do about it though, I just try to stay calm and say: ‘Go ahead, put it on the internet, but you just ran a red light so the joke is on you’ (*Police Officer-Detective, male, white-Dutch, age-50s*).

In light of such interview data, alongside observational data, we understand mobile phone technology as in some ways enhancing POs’ ability to run instantaneous checks on individuals (using identification cards, car licence plates, etc), extending their powers and knowledge amid interactions, while, in other senses (as in the excerpt above), making them more visible and accountable, less autonomous (see also Côté-Boucher 2016) and more vulnerable to criticism. What both these tendencies share is an acceleration of decision-making and its consequences.

Where POs’ discretionary work is intensified in terms of dynamic risks with the potential to escalate very quickly, so can accidents and mistakes become more likely (Perrow 1984), at a time when POs are facing heightened forms of accountability and critique. One response amid these pressures is the use of emotions or gut feelings as tools for acting at speed amid uncertainty and vulnerability (see Gigerenzer 2007; Zinn 2008; Côté-Boucher 2016). While protocols (on weapon use or traffic stops, for example) can be seen as guiding and easing decision-making amid discretionary space (Kendall and Frank 2018), these decision tools nevertheless need to be integrated with other logics (briefings from colleagues on suspects and interactional dynamics) in swiftly unfolding contexts. In such contexts, the role of emotions and other less rational-calculative bases of handling uncertainty becomes crucial (Zinn 2008):

Interviewer: Can you tell me something about the last time you successfully arrested somebody?

PO: I was on my motorcycle. I was driving in this neighbourhood on a Friday night, which is known for its ethnic diversity. I saw this white guy wearing shiny Nike shoes and a ski-jacket. It wasn’t right.

I: Why?

PO: Because of the composition of the [neighbourhood] population. You expect to run into people with a [Dutch] Moroccan, Turkish, Albanian or Surinamese background. Not a [white Dutch] person.

I: But how did you know he was a criminal? What was he doing?

PO: Because I’ve been working as a police officer for 30 years. I know all the people from my area. I know who belongs here, so I just knew this guy did not belong here. He ended up being a criminal

too. But the judge wanted to know why he got my attention. It was so hard to explain. It really has to do with gut feelings. You just feel when something is not right. So the judge asked me: 'Ok, but what wasn't right?' and that's just really difficult to explain. As a police officer, you just look at social life in a completely different way (*Police Officer-team supervisor, male, white-Dutch, age-50s*)

In the latter part of this interview excerpt, and as described by several participants, we see evidence of underlying emotional tendencies shaped by socialization in the role. One PO described a particular emotional habitus whereby 'nothing [such as violence] ever affects me any more' (PO, male, Dutch-Turkish, age 30s). A more common finding was POs describing the development of particular instincts or intuition after many years of working in their role and organization (Lam 2000). These affective tendencies, as a form of gut instinct or 'tacit knowledge' (Lam 2000), were used in this instance to handle a dynamic and complex decision-making context. While studies of expert and professional decision-making denote the efficacy and necessity of these approaches (Crandall and Getchell-Reiter 1993; Zinn 2008), their use was described by POs as rendering them vulnerable amid the demands of prosecutors and judges for formal-rational accounting. We further explore the nature of this decision-making—and particularly how it is shaped by different experiences of vulnerability, accountability and uncertainty—in the next section.

#### *Coping with vulnerability and uncertainty in everyday police work*

In the preceding section, we described the role of emotions in POs' negotiating of uncertainty and related forms of vulnerability, given the nature of the formal legal frameworks within which POs were held accountable for their work. Amid these challenges, one common approach referred to by most POs, and also clearly apparent within observations, was that of 'plussing'. In the account below, we see that this PO noted how working with gut feelings made things 'difficult' but that he sought to develop an 'objective' check-list (commonly referred to as plussing):

Well, it's difficult. You just know when something is not right. Last week, I was working in the middle of the night. I was driving in a neighbourhood and I see a youngster with a hoody hanging on a porch, my gut feeling is the first to respond. Why would a youngster be hanging on a porch in the middle of the night? But I try to stay objective by plussing. Maybe he is walking his dog? No, he doesn't have a dog. Maybe his grandma is sick and he is helping her? No, because there are no seniors living in this neighbourhood. Ok, well, maybe he is lost? No, because when you are lost, you go to a big street instead of hanging on a porch. Ok, well what kind of neighbourhood is this? Oh, there have been a lot of robberies in the last month. Check, check, check. Well, and then I just walk up to him and I start asking him questions (*Police Officer, male, white-Dutch, age-30s*).

Plussing, as had become a common local practice, was a clear attempt to rationalize POs' gut feelings into more formal-rational reasoning. We have noted above why this was vital from a legal perspective but plussing can also be understood as a basic sense-making repertoire, in seeking to work with the gut feelings which, by their nature, are initial and pre-cognitive 'hunches' (Gigerenzer 2007: 15). While the interview account above was more explicit in the shift from gut feelings to plussing, more implicit forms of plussing through the use of various categories were commonly apparent within the observational data:

It was 11:00 a.m. and we were walking through the city centre. Participant M told me that his ‘wijk’ (neighbourhood) is mostly known for drug dealing, bicycle theft, and pick-pockets. The weather was beautiful, and the streets were filled with people drinking beers on terraces and browsing by the shop windows. As we were walking, I remember asking many questions, so I did not notice so much what was happening around me... While he was answering all my questions, he whispered to hop in to the hotel to the left. He had seen something suspicious. Through the window of the hotel, he pointed towards a man standing on the corner of a small street. I did not understand why. I asked him why we were staring at him. He said he didn’t know exactly but that he felt this man could be a drug dealer. ‘Why?’-was my response. He told me the circumstances just felt wrong. I felt none-the-wiser and said: ‘Isn’t this man just trying to enjoy the sun for a bit?’ He tried his best to explain why we rushed into the hotel. He said something like: ‘Ok, I noticed this man because his attitude seems off. First of all, it’s 27 degrees outside and this guy is wearing a leather jacket, that’s weird, don’t you think? I might be ethnically profiling but he looks [Dutch-]Antillean and in this neighbourhood, they are known for drug dealing. Also, he looks like he is just hanging there so his body language stands out to me’. He suggested to wait for a bit and said: ‘You see those tourists over there? They are going to pass this guy and I will bet you the man will start talking to them, watch his lips. Amazingly to me, he was right. And indeed, 20 minutes later, we witnessed a transaction’ (*Field notes, Observation 4*).

In this account, we see a similar shift from something having ‘felt wrong’ to a more reason-oriented repertoire involving various categories of clothing (hoody or leather jacket), context (the time of day or the weather), embodied characteristics (age and ethnicity) and various ways in which these categories are understood and related to one another. This PO also anticipates criticism that ‘I might be ethnically profiling’, demonstrating that this is a narrative being produced with a wider audience in mind yet, nevertheless, provides important insights into considerations of objects being ‘out of place’ (Douglas 1966) alongside wider stereotypes related to individual categories—such as linking ethnic background to criminal behaviour in this locality.

In some of the interviews, this accounting strategy was referred to in terms of a particular, highly rationalized, thought style:

Your mind is like a computer. When I roam through a neighbourhood, my mind picks up on everything. For instance: It’s a neighbourhood known for its senior citizens. Hey, this is a very nice car. Who is in it? A youngster? That’s strange, because he should be sleeping, as it’s the middle of the night? How can a young person afford such an expensive car? Or, perhaps he is visiting his grandma and has borrowed his father’s car? No his grandma should be sleeping in the middle of the night, as should he. He has no reason to be here. Perhaps he is lost? Well, no, because if you were lost, you would look for the main streets and wouldn’t roam through the side streets. So a logical step in this case is to check his license plate. Oh, the car is not registered to a person but to a lease-company. Hey, this lease company is known for lending cars to criminals. So yes, then I stop him (*Police Officer, male, white-Dutch, age-50s*).

We do not interpret these interview data as straightforward descriptions of police work in that all interview data must be understood within the context within which they are elicited (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). Accounts of police work as presentations-of-self (Goffman 1955) within interview dynamics may have led to a heightened emphasis on the rational efficiency of the PO as seen above and when compared to practices apparent within observations. Yet, when ‘corroborated’ (Bryman 2006) with the observational data, these accounts nevertheless appear to give us important insights into

underlying ‘thought styles’ of these POs—in terms of the logics and categories typically employed. This strategy led us to identify four common category types, also visible in the data fragments presented thus far, that were seemingly central to POs’ rationalizations during and after ‘stop-and-check’ work:

- (1) Location and neighbourhood;
- (2) Appearance—pertaining to age, behaviour, attire/dress, ethnicity and gender;
- (3) Type of vehicle—bike, scooter or (lease) car and brand;
- (4) Timing—including time of day, time of year/weather.

Within these broader types of category, specific categories and related stereotypes were clearly apparent. In relation to appearance for example, people categorized as of white-Dutch ethnic background, as senior citizens or young children, as women, who dressed more formally and/or whose behaviour was considered confident (e.g. maintaining eye contact) were less likely to be seen as suspicious. But two important qualifications are necessary in understanding these categories of ‘appearance’ and their role in PO stop-and-check practices: First, stereotyped categorizations of race and ethnicity were more apparent in the observational data than in the interview data. This could be explainable due to the presence of the researcher and sensitivities around ethnic profiling within the Dutch public sphere at the time, yet, as seen in the example above, the POs participating in the research did not seem too reticent to discuss ethnicity as a key feature of their decision-making. We suggest furthermore that tensions between what research participants say and what they do can usefully indicate underlying patterns of thinking, categorizing and knowing, which are employed in a more taken-for-granted manner (Brown *et al.* 2018; Douglas 1986; Habermas 1987). Second, across the interview and observational data, there were no examples of POs employing single categories on their own when describing their gut feelings or when accounting for stopping someone. Ethnicity was a commonly used category but always in relation to other categories and a resulting consideration of dissonance or anomaly (Douglas 1986; 6 and Richards 2017):

Walking in the city centre, we passed a man trying to fix his car, the police officer asked me if I noticed anything. I hadn’t noticed anything suspicious or abnormal and replied: ‘I just saw a man who was trying to fix his car’. The police officer laughed and said: ‘I just saw a man with an Eastern-European appearance, wearing a 1500 euro jacket who was either fixing his car or stealing someone else’s’. He further explained that these ‘facts’ were prompts for him to search the license plate. I said: ‘But won’t it be odd if we walk back to the car to retrieve his license plate?’ The police officer laughed, proudly rhyming the letters and numbers of the license plate that he had already memorised (*Field notes, Observation 1*).

So, while recognizing, again, that these interview excerpts are partially contrived presentations-of-self (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018), when triangulated with observational data, they give us important glimpses into underlying affective reactions, as well as how POs narrate their work in relation to broader social norms, cultural repertoires and organizational pressures (Bonnet and Caillaut 2015; Campeau 2015; Turner and Rowe 2017). Following our Douglasian framework, in the next section, we go further to locate these thought styles amid wider socio-organizational dynamics and rituals.

*Linking micro-decision-making to thought styles and wider organizational and cultural dynamics: the importance of rituals*

As noted above, Douglas's theory orients researchers to consider the organizational rituals that generate thought styles, with the mutually reinforcing relationship between rituals and thought styles denoted as central to the cultural dynamics of any organization (6 and Richards 2017). Durkheim considered rituals more in terms of organized public events with sacred significance, but Douglas expands this understanding of the ritual and the sacred to include the more daily, mundane interactions (see also Goffman 1955: 238), which similarly have important symbolic, socializing, meaning-making and group-binding functions. We focus here on three rituals related to everyday police work, which, in our data analysis, appeared to bear importantly upon how POs thought and felt: rituals of the courtroom, of daily briefings and of interactions within stop-and-checks themselves.

We have already noted how courtroom interactions appeared to impact on how POs understood their work as reported above: 'the judge wanted to know why he got my attention. It was so hard to explain'. While accountability pressures regarding prosecution service demands were apparent more generally, we understand the heightened symbolic and emotional significances of courtroom rituals—as experienced first-hand or indirectly through hearsay—as importantly shaping a certain defensive logic within police work regarding stop-and-checks. These rituals can be seen as encouraging a form of defensive proceduralism, which was apparent in our data in several instances (Warner's (2006) study similarly notes the effects of suicide and homicide inquiries in encouraging defensive and bureaucratic tendencies among social workers):

I always act according to the Road Traffic Act. It just saves me a lot of trouble so it's just easier. Because when you stop someone without a specific reason, you hear: it's because I'm [Dutch] Moroccan or [Dutch] Turkish or whatever. But when you act according to the Road Traffic Act, you can just say: 'No, I'm stopping you because you aren't wearing your seatbelt. It gives you the immediate right to ask for somebody's ID'.

*(Police Officer, male, white-Dutch, age-30s)*

As in an earlier data fragment, we see challenges to the informal legitimacy of the PO being handled and, to a certain degree, disregarded through a defensive recourse to legalism. This juridification of the communicative dynamics of the interaction (Habermas 1987) seemingly served to reassure the PO, yet simultaneously impaired possibilities for mutual understanding and explanation. The informal accountability of the PO to those being stopped and concerns regarding ethnic profiling were correspondingly overlooked, making experiences of harassment—and future antagonistic interactions—more likely.

The data fragment above is, thus, also an example of a second type of everyday policing ritual—the stop-and-check encounter itself. These interactions—rich in symbolic significance and in many cases imbued with heightened emotion—were described in terms of characteristics which we see as ritually potent to the affirming and reproducing of organizational categories. One unusual but powerful insight into this process was provided by a highly ranked PO regarding his own experience being stopped:

Well, [several years earlier] the police stopped me in my own neighbourhood. I still had a beard back then, I was wearing a bomber jacket and I was wearing this Rasta toque. To be fair, I'm sure I looked

like a troublemaker... I was just coming out of an alley near my house and this police car stops. This older police officer comes to me and I guess he [the other officer] was a student who stayed in the background. The officer said: 'I want to know who you are'. I say: 'You want to know who I am? Why?' He replies: 'Are you being smart with me?' I say: 'No, but you ask me a question, I asked you a question and I want an answer'. He says again: 'I just want to know who you are' I say: 'I know, you have told me that but I want to know why'. So then, he tries to intimidate me and grabs me by the shoulder and says: 'Don't we understand each other?' Well, then I said: 'This is not how we do things, is it? You want to know who I am? Are you sure?' So then, I grabbed my police identification and I say: 'This is me, [senior position in the] police, I am your colleague and what you just did... is wrong. You are with a young colleague of ours and I see you are teaching him the wrong things. Maybe you should explain to him what you just did wrong in this situation?' [laughs] He blushed and started stuttering, but yeah, unfortunately there will always be good cops and bad cops (*PO and detective, male, white-Dutch, age-50s*).

While this detective concluded his narrative of this experience in terms of 'bad cops', apparent here was an interaction, implicitly experienced in terms of appearance-based stereotypes, where antagonisms were intensified in the absence of a clear justification for the stop-and-check.

Regardless of the specific emotions, categories and decision logics employed by POs within specific stop-and-checks, data from our small study echo many wider findings (Amnesty International 2013; van der Leun *et al.* 2013; Mutsaers 2014; Gowricharn and Çankaya 2015) that Dutch citizens whose appearance may mark them as different within mainstream Dutch society—be this due to dress, skin colour or behaviour—were more likely to have more negative experiences of 'the police'. This background of past experiences and the underlying understandings (thought styles) shaped by this, we understand as giving rise to interactive dynamics more likely to be characterized by defensiveness and/or nervousness (e.g. avoiding eye contact) in light of negative past experiences and wider community mistrust (van der Leun *et al.* 2013). Defensive, antagonistic and/or nervous reactions may, in turn, reinforce POs' stereotyped thinking and categories.

Very limited progress in recruiting a more ethnically diverse police force does not help here—in 2019, 13 per cent of the Dutch population had at least one parent born outside of Europe, North America and Oceania; among police employees, this figure was 6 per cent (CBS 2020) compared with 6.8 per cent in 2009; large city police forces are slightly more diverse.

We understand opposing thought styles (of POs and of some groups of citizens), rooted in past ritual experiences, as perpetuating ritual dynamics for POs via mechanisms, as sketched here, through which organizational categories and stereotypes become self-reinforcing in everyday interactions (Garfinkel 1967):

I'm not saying [white] Dutch people are always friendly to the police, but when we are insulted [by this group], it's usually an understandable argument. You don't want to know how many times I've heard that I'm getting paid from their tax-paying money. But I can understand that argument, [laughs] cause it's true too! But I've had so many nasty experiences with [Dutch] Moroccans and they just cross the line. They can say awful and intolerable things you know. And I think that's also because they have different perceptions of the police in their culture (*Police Officer, male, white-Dutch, age-30s*).

Such PO narratives, which essentialized antipathy to the police in terms of cultural differences in ‘perceptions’ were rather common (also noted by [Bonnet and Caillaut 2015](#) in comparative perspective), as were other culture-based discourses relating behaviour to ethno-cultural differences in parenting (a common narrative within Dutch media discourses). Largely missing in our data, other than in interviews with POs of minority ethnic backgrounds, were understandings that some citizens’ antipathy or defensiveness could be related to earlier and ongoing negative experiences of ‘the police’ in youth and adulthood, especially for young men of colour.

It was observing the format and content of one further ritual—everyday briefing meetings—that first alerted us to the potential salience of rituals for our analysis, in their shaping and reinforcing of thought styles across and beyond the police organization. Both our observational and interview data indicated that the explicitly ethnicized dimensions of these meetings, alongside their distinctive organizational features—timed at the start of the working day, a rare moment where many POs are gathered together—elevated their organizational and symbolic importance in framing the police work on the shift which followed:

After a small speech regarding Liberation Day (the day before), the chief continued by naming a list of suspects. This was a long list with approximately sixty names with photos and a description of the possible ethnicity of the suspects... (*Field notes; Obs 2*).

These briefings often included discussions of ‘target’ groups—specific ethnic minority groups that frequently ‘came into contact’ with the police: ‘Eastern European’, ‘Moroccan’, ‘Surinamese’, ‘Antillean’ and ‘Turkish’ were common categories referred to and these, implicitly or explicitly, were important in framing POs’ understandings of their work:

You might want to have a look at our arrest-board. In these briefings, we get endless lists of foreign names that our team manager can hardly pronounce.... when you continually hear these foreign names from North-African descent, you become used to it, you just start linking that group of people to criminal activity (*Police Officer, woman, white-Dutch, age-30s*).

POs were of course embedded within wider Dutch society and its public sphere in which an ethnicized understanding of criminality and delinquency has been prominent for many years ([Bonnet and Caillaut 2015](#)). But above we see one of several data fragments that specifically denoted how, at an organizational level, briefing meetings shaped the categories considered and used by POs:

When people say I’m racist, I say, ‘no’. Nine out of ten names on our board are not ‘Miss van Eijk’, they are all Moroccan or Eastern-European names, so yes, I might stop them more often, but then they are just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and yes, then quite often, they are actually criminal so... (*Police office, male, Dutch-Moroccan, age-20s*).

Somewhat more defensive in tone, this latter PO appeared to legitimize his use of ethnicity as a central category explicitly in reference to the briefing meetings and, correspondingly, the practice of disproportionately stopping people of particular ethnic backgrounds.



*Discussion*

Police stop-and-check practices remain highly scrutinized and debated (Ariel and Tankebe 2018; Solhjell *et al.* 2019), not least in the Netherlands (e.g. Thijssen 2019). Central to these debates are continuing concerns regarding ethnic profiling, as recently highlighted by the municipal government of Amsterdam (Koops 2019) and protests in 2020 connected to the wider Black Lives Matter movement. Suggested counter-measures include less proactive forms of policing (Koops 2019; Holmberg 2000) and recruiting more diverse police forces. Literature reviewed above shows that more diverse police forces are not necessarily less prone to ethnic profiling. Above we have outlined a number of empirical observations and analytical considerations that are salient to this debate and a more effective grasp of police practices more widely:

- POs' vulnerability amid dynamic situations;
- the combining of emotions and more 'rational-cognitive' modes of handling uncertainty;
- and the configuring of these through organisational rituals.

While shocking footage of police conduct would render this an unlikely finding, our study of police work in the Netherlands follows wider research in considering vulnerabilities as an important part of grasping the experiences and outcomes of professional work (Warner 2006; Authors). Exploring ways in which POs' vulnerability intertwines with their discretionary power may not only capture the lived experience of police work more accurately but is salient, we argue, for grasping its underlying dynamics (Horlick-Jones 2005). POs face multiple forms of vulnerability, including tensions between informal-interactional vulnerabilities—to losing face, heightened aggression or violence where informal authority is lost—and formal-procedural accountability frameworks by which POs are vulnerable to disciplinary procedures, sanctions or job loss. The speed by which decision-making can unfold, with immediate and potentially grave consequences of these decisions, is distinctive of stop-and-check decisions and interactions.

As with some other professions whose work is characterized by quickly unfolding decision-making contexts (Crandall and Getchell-Reiter 1993), the role of intuition, tacit knowledge and emotions were important for how participants negotiated uncertainty and vulnerability in their everyday stop-and-check work. POs described, and were observed, acting on their 'gut feelings' or a sense that something was 'out of place' or anomalous. Although the use of emotions and intuition was important in responding to anomalies, given the dynamic nature of their decision-making contexts and the further acceleration of these dynamics through mobile phone technologies, these 'decision-making' logics were not recognized as legitimate within the organization and legal system.

'Plussing' was the most common response to this vulnerability to formal reporting and accountability, by which POs rationalized 'back' their hunches and emotions through repertoires of checking and procedures (Gigerenzer 2007: 8). This formed an important mechanism by which wider organizational logics and categories were instilled within the everyday practices of individual POs. Plussing appeared to encourage and legitimate a complex interweaving of categories. Such use of multiple categories has been observed in studies of policing practices in the Netherlands (Cankaya 2020) and the United States (Terrill and Mastrofski's 2002), recent studies of young people's experiences of the police (in Norway—Solhjell *et al.* 2019), across a large body of police

reports (in the United Kingdom—[Ariel and Tankebe 2018](#)) and in studies of police socialization through training ([Charman 2017](#)).

The utility of gut feelings in negotiating this complexity ([Gigerenzer 2007](#)) helps us understand some empirical evidence suggesting the effectiveness of intuition-based stop-and-checks (see [Holmberg 2000](#): 183 and [Snook et al. 2005](#)). Decision-making becomes dysfunctional, however, when one category becomes overly defining, thus warping decision outcomes ([Velkamp and Brown 2017](#)). The POs' ostensibly ubiquitous use of multiple categories—particularly location, appearance, vehicle and timing—suggested, therefore, the apparent absence of stopping citizens *purely* on grounds of race. And yet, race and ethnicity were particularly common ways by which bodies and neighbourhoods were categorized. These categorizations also led to 'white Dutch' men being deemed out of place too—albeit far less commonly.

Following Douglas, we understand this elevated role of categories, various stereotypes and emotions pertaining to race and ethnicity as 'gut feelings of self-evident truth [which] are produced not by external stimuli but by the way our classification system is set' ([Reis 2019](#): 2) through organizational dynamics and ritual ([Douglas 1992](#); 6 and [Richards 2017](#)). These rituals included briefing meetings, interactions with citizens, storytelling among colleagues, trainee/superior interactions and court room processes of evidence giving and questioning. Briefing meetings appeared to be especially influential in inculcating particular ethnicized categories and gut feelings, augmented by their organizational significance, group audience and timing. The potential for categories and emotions to be confirmed, reproduced and intensified by awkward encounters between disparate groups and to lead to institutional breakdown and mistrust ([Douglas 1986](#); 6 and [Richards 2017](#)) emphasizes the importance of reflecting critically upon these rituals.

Our findings suggest that attempts to reform policing practices purely through recruitment and training, while ignoring organizational dynamics and rituals, will do little to change fundamentally 'institutional' thought styles and practices ([6 and Richards 2017](#)). Cultural criminologists have long noted the role of symbolic rituals and culturally embedded emotions ([Ferrell 1999](#); [Hayward 2002](#)) in understanding the doing of crime, but these concepts receive much less attention in studies of policing culture. Mary Douglas's cultural theory represents a rich and apposite framework through which to analyse these processes and to connect macro- and meso-organizational dynamics to micro-interactions. This approach would lead us to consider the communicative style and core narratives of everyday rituals as important foci for reform ([6 and Richards 2017](#)).

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