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Microaggression within the patrol service – a barrier against ethnic representation?

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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing body of research on experiences of discrimination and racism within the police, literature showing how these experiences impact on ethnic representation remains scarce. In this article, I explore which forms of microaggression ethnic minority officers in Norway experience 'behind the scenes', from colleagues, and how these experiences affect ethnic representation in the patrol service. A crucial test of whether passive representation translates into active representation is whether police officers make use of their cultural and linguistic competence during police work. Fieldwork observations of and narratives from ethnic minority police officers show that minority officers, on their own initiative, make use of their cultural and linguistic skills in specific situations. Thus, experiences of microaggression impact the use of cultural and linguistic competence among minority officers in a less negative manner than expected.

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Introduction

A common characteristic of police organisations in advanced multicultural democracies is the ambition to increase diversity among employees is a common characteristic of police organisations in advanced multicultural democracies. Representative bureaucracy theory argues that bureaucratic organisations such as the police will be more responsive to the communities they serve if they are representative of the citizens in that community (Hong, 2016). As regards the police, it was for instance, assumed that greater ethnic diversity would reduce racial profiling, or that ethnic diversity as a source of competence could lead to more equal treatment of ethnic minorities. Police services in many countries are implementing a variety of strategies for recruiting, promoting and retaining ethnic minority police officers in order to better reflect the populations they police (see e.g., Cashmore, 2001; Holdaway, 1997; McLaughlin, 2007; Peterson & Uhnoo, 2012). Norway is no exception; more diversity has been an educational and political goal for the Norwegian Police University College (NPUC) and the Norwegian Police Service (NPS) since the early 2000s (Bjørkelo et al., 2015, 2021).

Internationally, several studies have focused on ethnic minorities within the police. Researchers have identified a host of factors that work against minority representation. A racialised police culture, for example, bias and prejudice from colleagues and supervisors due to being targeted as 'different' (see, Zempi, 2020) or ethnic minorities being rigorously tested (see, Peterson & Uhnoo, 2012), might constitute such a barrier. The literature presents racism as a barrier to both

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recruitment, retention and serving the community (Cashmore, 2001; Holdaway, 1997; Jaeger & Vitalis, 2005; McMurray et al., 2010). However, studies show that racism has become more covert and subtle, and that overt forms of racism are less visible, both in society (Hervik, 2019) and in the police force (Loftus, 2008).

Despite a growing body of research on experiences of discrimination and racism in the police, literature showing how these experiences impact ethnic representation is still scarce. For instance, Fekjær and Alecu (2021) call for more research on officers' experiences to understand the backdrop to higher attrition rates among police officers with immigrant backgrounds. By focusing on more subtle forms of racism, through the concept of microaggression and on the implication of such aggression for ethnic representation, the article will contribute to this strand of research. Knowledge on how microaggression might impact active representation may be important for reaching the full potential of recruiting ethnic minorities. Such knowledge is especially relevant for police practitioners, especially leaders. Based on interviews and fieldwork observations, I will explore the following research questions in this article: 1) What kind of microaggression do ethnic minority officers experience 'behind the scenes' (e.g., in the car, at the police station, etc) from colleagues? and 2) How do these experiences affect ethnic representation in the police?

The Norwegian context

As in the other Scandinavian countries, the Norwegian police have roots in the Scandinavian welfare regime, which includes high recognition of the importance of democratic and humanistic values (Inzunza & Wikström, 2020). The education of Norwegian police, the only police training system in the Nordic countries that is accredited as a full three-year bachelor programme, is designed to promote these values (Hove & Vallès, 2020). The police education consists of a mixture of vocational training and more theoretical subjects (Fekjær & Alecu, 2021), ranging from digital and tactical forensics and crime prevention to communication, ethics and social sciences. For instance, the basic training includes training aimed at enhancing awareness of social inequality in society and reducing prejudice. Tension exists between the police and members of ethnic minorities, and issues such as ethnic profiling, racial microaggression and migration control are publicly debated and explored in research. However, compared to the UK and the USA, the relationship between the police and ethnic minority communities is less strained. Although ethnic minority youths in the Nordic countries experience being subjected to suspicion and overcontrol, they also feel protected by the police (Saarrikkomäki et al., 2020). These characteristics could indicate less racialised practices in the police in Norway and Nordic countries, not only towards ethnic minorities in the population but also among colleagues. As such, Norway is an interesting case for exploring the existence of racism as a barrier to beneficial outcomes of minority representation.

In the Nordic countries, all the police functions are gathered in one organisation (Hove & Vallès, 2020). The Norwegian Police Service is organised in 12 districts and specialist agencies. Within each district there is several police stations (Hove & Vallès, 2020). Since the 2000s, the strategy has been to work for increased diversity at the Police University College and in the Police Service in Norway (Bjørkelo et al., 2015). Despite such efforts, Norway's police education is far from representative. The Norwegian population (5.4 million) includes 18.5% immigrants and Norwegians born to immigrant parents (Statistics Norway, 2021a, 2021b). According to an admission survey from 2018, students with an immigrant background (immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents) comprise 4.2% of admissions. The percentage for police-educated employees in the police service is as low as 2.6% (Bjørkelo et al., 2021). Research show that ethnic minority students have experienced marginalisation and exclusion in the Norwegian police education system in the past

(Bjørkelo et al., 2015). Such processes were also found in the Norwegian Police Service. According to an internal report from the Norwegian Police Directorate (2005), ethnic minorities experienced negative attitudes, scepticism and distrust from colleagues and leaders.

Previous research and theoretical framework

Research on the outcomes of increased minority representation in the police has largely drawn on the theory of representative bureaucracy, also referred to as community accountability (Saltzstein, 1979, see also, Davies et al., 2020). The literature distinguishes between passive and active representation. Passive representation means 'statistical' matching of population characteristics, i.e., the extent to which police employees within a force or district mirror the society they serve (Shjarback et al., 2017). Active representation refers to how representation shapes policy through purposeful decision-making on behalf of the group, advocacy and positive outcomes for the segment of the population represented (Bjørkelo et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2020; Lim, 2006). In addition to being directly beneficial, active representation may also have indirect benefits, for example, if minority bureaucrats influence the behaviour of other bureaucrats (see, Lim, 2006), for instance, by challenging stereotypical thinking or prejudice.

Early scholars assumed that passive representation would naturally translate into active representation. In recent decades, studies have identified the conditions that are necessary for this to occur and conditions that could hinder such a translation. For instance, previous research has shown that organisational culture overrides any impact of minority representation because organisational socialisation strips away the racial identity of black officers and replaces it with an organisational identity (Wilkins & Williams, 2008).

Among other explanations, the literature presents racism as a barrier to recruitment, retention and serving the community (Cashmore, 2001; Jaeger & Vitalis, 2005; McMurray et al., 2010). In a recent study, Fekjær and Alecu (2021) highlight that recruiting officers with immigrant backgrounds will have limited effect if many of them leave the profession. In their study, they find that individuals with immigrant backgrounds, especially those with a non-western immigrant background, have a higher probability of leaving the police force. They explain these findings by the psychosocial costs of belonging to a numerical minority. Such belonging can, for instance, result in insensitive remarks and inappropriate jokes, which members of the minority are expected to put up with (Fekjær & Alecu, 2021).

Although the literature presents racism as a barrier to active representation, few studies explicitly explore how racism practices impact active representation. The main focus in the literature has been on how racism have a negative impact on recruitment and retention. Some studies also focus on how to change the organisation to make the police force more inclusive (Metz & Kulik, 2008). For instance, a work group's perception of diversity is highlighted as influencing the way in which people express and manage tension within the group and its functioning (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Several studies have also been conducted of ethnic relations within police organisations, some of which touch on the issue of ethnic representation. In the last two decades, several studies have been conducted in Britain (See, Cashmore, 2001; Holdaway, 1997; Holdaway & O'Neill, 2006; Loftus, 2008; McLaughlin, 2007; Zempi, 2020), and there have also been a few studies in other European countries (See, Görtz, 2015; Heijes, 2007; Peterson & Uhnoo, 2012; Uhnoo, 2013; Wieslander, 2018).

Previous research shows that racism is a routine feature of the life of an ethnic minority police officer (Cashmore, 2001; Holdaway, 1997). In a study of black and Asian police officers, Holdaway (1997) show that minority officers who have resigned tell a story of exclusion from full membership of the occupational culture. Cashmore (2001) explores why ethnic minority officers do not challenge the racism that occurs in the line of duty and racial profiling. Firstly, ethnic minorities suspect that their career prospects will be harmed if they challenge such issues. Secondly, it is imperative that colleagues, even those who are known to hold racist views, can be trusted for back

up. Other studies indicate that ethnic minority police officers are not unconditionally included in the police force. For example, colleagues may question their loyalty towards the police force because of their ethnic background (Cashmore, 2001; Finstad, 2000; Peterson & Uhnoo, 2012). The police authorities demand undivided loyalty, and ethnic minority officers are rigorously tested (Peterson & Uhnoo, 2012, also see, Gustafson, 2008). Officers with a minority background frequently experience jokes or comments about ethnicity (Cashmore, 2001; Peterson & Uhnoo, 2012). This type of jargon is explained and legitimised by ethnic minority officers as canteen banter and humour, or as mirroring the ‘facts’ as regards criminal activity among immigrants, or as emotional labour (‘blowing off steam’) used to handle emotionally trying situations police officers encounter in their line of work (Uhnoo, 2013). Although the coping strategies of officers with a minority background differ, many officers perceive such comments and jokes as something they must endure (Cashmore, 2001; Peterson & Uhnoo, 2012; Uhnoo, 2013). Some officers have ‘given in’ and the jargon has become part of ‘normal life’, while others confront the jargon and show a lack of acceptance, avoid social gatherings, or even withdraw completely by changing their line of work altogether (Uhnoo, 2013).

There is still considerable resistance to and resentment of the institutionalisation of diversity, mainly articulated by white, heterosexual, male officers. Officers expressed resentment of minority groups who seemingly exploited their new status for personal gain (Loftus, 2008). Thus, the exclusion of minorities still takes place: ‘Minority ethnic, female and lesbian and gay officers stand forth as visible emblems of the new diversity paradigm and, for the most part, continue to be repositioned as “outsiders” within . . .’ (Loftus, 2008, p. 769, see also, Peterson & Uhnoo, 2012, p. 355).

There are several different theoretical perspectives on racism, especially in American and British research. These perspectives are becoming more influential in Nordic research on racism, but the applicability of these concepts and theories in a Nordic context is also debated (Andersson, 2022; Brekke, 2021). In a presentation of theories of racism and research on racism, Andersson (2022) argues that it is more advantageous to speak of different forms of racism, rather than finding a general definition. However, to be able to define racism some minimum requirements must be fulfilled. According to Andersson (2022, p. 24) racism refers to discriminating and demeaning behaviour towards people because of their skin colour, (ascribed) ethnicity and/or culture, and that these broad categories are assumed to determine who people ‘really are’ and how they will behave.

Much of the racial microaggression scholarship since the early 2000s has been dominated by the works of Sue and colleagues, who in turn were inspired by the works of Pierce in 1970 on microaggression and the research of Essed on everyday racism (Dominguez & Embrick, 2020). Sue et al. (2007) define incidents of racial microaggression as ‘brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignity, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group’ (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Such experiences are often perceived as harmless by perpetrators or those not directly affected; for example, an individual may ask a sincere question that unintentionally belittles or demeans an individual. When someone points out the problem with such statements or actions, they are often dismissed as trivial, while those affected are accused of overreacting. The social impact of incidents of microaggression is harmful since targeted individuals may internalise negative messages about themselves (Sue et al., 2007). When referring to microaggression in this study, I do not refer to all sorts of microaggressions, for example, related to gender and sexuality, but microaggression related to people’s ethnicity, culture, religion or skin-colour or stereotypical perceptions about these (ascribed) traits. Dominguez and Embrick (2020, p. 2) criticise previous research on racial microaggression for not emphasising the cumulative nature of ‘daily racial violence’. Such a critique is useful, as viewing incidents in isolation will diminish the magnitude of ethnic minority police officers’ experiences, as these experiences represent ‘layers’ of experiences.

The concept of microaggression originates in the field of psychology, which implies a focus on the individual. Research on racial microaggression has therefore been criticised for neglecting the larger structural forces that shape microaggressions (Ballinas 2017). In recent years, scholars have elaborated on the theory of racial microaggression by linking the microlevel dynamics with systemic racism or racialisation (for instance, see, Dominguez & Embrick, 2020). Such a connection is important, but it will be beyond the scope of this article to examine the link between microlevel dynamics and systemic racism here. My focus will be on the impact of racial microaggression on ethnic representation.

Active representation may involve ethnic minority officers using their cultural and linguistic competence in their daily policing encounters with ethnic minorities, transferring some of this competence to their majority colleagues, or challenging how policing is done, for instance, by being critical to ethnic profiling. However, trying to reduce their 'visibility' to avoid or decrease being targets of microaggression, might reduce advocacy or their use of cultural and linguistic competence. As such, experiencing microaggressions may function as a barrier for translating passive into active representation, and in this study, I will explore if and how active representation is impacted by microaggression performed by colleagues.

Method

The analysis in this study is based on interviews and field observations conducted in 2017.¹ Supplementing interview data with field observations is beneficial because it provides more nuanced accounts of people's practices (see, Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). Both field observations and interview data shed light on experiences with microaggression and how ethnic minorities use their linguistic and cultural competence. However, the interview data is more extensively used, since they represent more variety in experiences in both regards. In the analysis, the field notes are used to supplement the interpretation of the interviews, and to include perspectives from ethnic majority officers and leaders.

I carried out fieldwork on the patrol services at two urban police stations in the eastern part of Norway. Five ethnic minority participants were followed during two dayshifts, ten evening shifts, and seven nightshifts. These five participants were recruited by the leader of the patrol service at two police stations. The main focus of the fieldwork was on observing how they made use of their cultural and linguistic competence. Apart from these observations, the fieldwork also included descriptions of incidents and how they were handled, and descriptions of field conversations with the five ethnic minority officers and their partners. The minority officers had a total of 18 ethnic Norwegian partners (10 men, 8 women) during the shifts studied. The fieldwork also included field conversations with other police personnel I encountered during the shifts (e.g., ethnic majority police officers and leaders).

After completion of the fieldwork, I interviewed the five ethnic minority participants, and two of their ethnic Norwegian partners. Using snowball recruitment, I conducted an additional seven interviews with ethnic minority employees currently or previously working in patrol services in the urban eastern part of Norway. Hence, the interview data are taken from interviews with fourteen interviewees, twelve of whom have a minority background and two have a majority background. The fourteen interviewees work in seven different patrol services, where the share of immigrants or Norwegian-born to immigrant parents in the patrol service varies from 2 to 6%. Whether this is typical is hard to tell, due to lack of data. There is however reason to suspect the numbers to be even lower in some police districts, especially in less ethnically diverse areas, as the average percentage for police-educated is as low as 2,6% (Bjørkelo et al., 2021).

Due to the low number of ethnic minority police personnel, I have been vigilant about preserving participants' anonymity. When narratives and excerpts from interviews or fieldnotes are used, I never provide information about name, age, parents'/own country of birth, police rank or place of work. Among the twelve ethnic minority officers aged from 25 to 37 years old, ten are men and two

women. Ten participants are Norwegian-born to immigrant parents, whose parents migrated from seven different countries in Asia, Africa, and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.² The parents came to Norway as labour migrants or refugees from the 1970s to the 1990s. In addition to Norwegian and English, the participants have a command of eleven different languages. The last two ethnic minority officers have mixed backgrounds, one is internationally adopted while the other has a Norwegian-born father and a foreign-born mother.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for two hours on average. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by hand. The data were then sorted into a data matrix. Next, a thematic analysis was carried out to identify patterns and variation. In this article, I analyse and present data from interview codes such as ethnicity as a resource; the utilisation of ethnic competencies; comments related to ethnicity; loyalty; images of ethnic minority officers etc. I took field notes during and after each shift.

Asking someone about racism could be considered sensitive, and for this reason I chose to ask them on experiences with being regarded as 'different' in their childhood and in the police. The goal of the research project was to explore in what ways ethnic minorities use their cultural and linguistic competence while policing, and a large part of the interviews revolved around this topic. This could of course lead to an impression among the interviewees that refraining from using such competence was perceived as failing to do their jobs properly. Such a perception could potentially have an impact on the conclusions. I do, however, believe that the interviews were structured to reduce such a bias. Firstly, the interviews covered more general questions on policing capabilities, making it possible for the interviewees to present themselves as 'proper' police officers even if they refrained from using cultural and linguistic competence. Secondly, I asked questions on the upsides and downsides of using such a competence. Thirdly, I did not use the word 'competence', but asked the interviewees to reflect on if and how their ethnicity made a difference in policing.

Canteen banter

In the interviews, all the ethnic minority police officers state that they enjoy working as police officers. They are passionate when discussing work-related matters, they enjoy their work in general and thrive. The interviewees often stressed the companionship with colleagues as one of their most positive experiences at work. The overall impression is that they feel included in the force. However, there are also narratives showing that they are subjected to microaggression.

Ethnicity seems to be part of everyday interaction, through humorous comments and witticisms among police officers 'behind the scenes'. In general, humorous comments that police officers make to each other are cheeky and sarcastic, with the police officers finding weak spots in each other's personality or physical appearance etc.

One of the interviewees, Marco, gave several examples of the kinds of comments made to him by colleagues. When returning from a holiday, a male colleague commented that he did not know that Marco could become even more tanned. Besides comments on skin colour, religion was another prevalent topic. For instance, every time Marco and a colleague bumped into each other, his colleague greeted him with 'Allahu akbar' and raised his forefinger in the air, in imitation of an IS warrior. At first Marco found this funny, but when the colleague repeated it every day, Marco stopped smiling and even started ignoring the colleague. Even though Marco finds some of the comments annoying, such as in the previous example, he explains that he does not dwell much on ethnicity-related comments. Rather than interpreting such comments as racism, Marco argues that they are a result of poor social skills. Marco contrasts his experiences with his uncle, who used to work as a police officer and, according to Marco, was subjected to racism. Compared to the incidents his uncle was exposed to, Marco's experiences are less severe. As a result, Marco argues that his experiences cannot be termed racism. There are several other ethnic minority police officers who express similar views about their experiences and are reluctant to describe incidents involving close colleagues as racism, but instead find other reasons for this kind of behaviour.

In a conversation about how her colleagues see her, Aidah explains that they mostly define her as Norwegian, but she does experience ‘othering’, especially from older colleagues. She says:

People perceive me as being rather Norwegian, but then there’s always that question, I get it all the time: Are you a Muslim? It’s a bit laughable really, I’ll give you an example. When we were planning to participate in Birken [a cross-country ski race], we were a group of women planning to participate together, and I was a bit late with the registration, because I wasn’t sure if I was free. And one day in the canteen, we were talking about my participation, and then a female colleague, I believe she is 50, she turned around and said: Then you’ll have to buy skis. And I was like, no I don’t, because I already own a pair. People do assume, the older people, they assume that I’ve never done cross-country skiing, that my family and I don’t celebrate Christmas, and that we don’t drink alcohol, and that I’m already married.

Aidah’s interpretations of incidents like these are that her colleagues mean no harm, and she laughs when talking about it. Most of all she feels that situations like this are odd or absurd. As we can see, she also sees being older as an explanation for this kind of odd behaviour.

Some of the ethnic minority officers are more critical of ethnicity-related comments/humour. Nadya dislikes it when some of her colleagues make fun of people who do not speak Norwegian fluently. When she reprimands her colleagues for making such jokes, they tend to say that the comments do not apply to her, indicating that she is Norwegian enough, that she is one of them. For Nadya, these incidents are nonetheless problematic on two levels. Nadya perceives these conversations as inappropriate for police officers because they signal an inherent hierarchical order related to ethnicity, where her majority colleagues see themselves as better: ‘It’s like, we are positioned here [high up] while they are here [down below]. I think it’s a bit nasty.’ Secondly, her colleagues’ comments are also offensive on a personal level: ‘It doesn’t apply to people like you. That’s really frustrating, because I might not speak broken Norwegian, but my parents do. They could easily fit the category they are talking about.’

One of the interviewees represents an even more pronounced stance. Elliot, who has been working in the patrol service for several years, clearly disapproves of ethnicity-related jokes among colleagues. He explains that he no longer has patience with comments or practical jokes about ethnicity, and that he perceives them as racist. He argues that women and ethnic minority police officers are easy targets for comments or practical jokes. Elliot finds this humour tiresome and has expressed this to his colleagues. Elliot says that his present colleagues seldom make jokes at his expense.

The data material shows that ethnicity-related comments and jokes directed at ethnic minority police officers are part of the everyday interaction ‘behind the scenes’. There is variation in the material as regards how such comments and jokes are interpreted. A few interviewees explicitly state that they are offended or that they perceive such comments as racist. However, the main impression is that such comments are regarded as benign or absurd. In addition to ethnicity-related comments and jokes, ethnicity seems to come into play in several different ways.

The burden of proving oneself

A common theme among the ethnic minority police officers is the fear of becoming ‘a subject of gossip’ in the police force. According to the minority officers, the chances of becoming a subject of gossip are much higher if an officer has an ethnic minority background. Vinnie argues that the visibility of ethnic minorities results in them being at greater risk of receiving negative attention: ‘At this police station, for instance, only two of us in the patrol service are dark skinned, two or three, and I believe that if I made a mistake, it would be much more likely to become a talking point.’ Marco’s uncle, who used to work as a police officer, has encouraged Marco to be ‘on his best behaviour’ because of his visibility, and Marco’s own experiences have also made him emphasise this: ‘Among the blue shirts, a person with dark skin attracts attention. And if he makes a fool of himself, it’s easier to notice.’ As one of the other interviewees explained, this visibility entails a feeling that you need to compensate by doing the job particularly well: ‘It’s a burden, because you

have to prove yourself all the time.’ In Vinnie’s opinion, people with a minority background tend to overperform in all lines of work where the majority are ethnic Norwegians, but, for him, the urge to overperform has been particularly strong within the police force. He suggests that this is due to informal social control within the organisation. Like several other interviewees, Vinnie portrays the police organisation as being characterised by gossiping and rumours, and visibility makes it easier to become the one who is talked about. Vinnie further argues that, if an ethnic minority police officer makes a mistake, this does not just affect the person in question. Such mistakes will also affect the perception of other people with a minority background in the police force. Similarly, Elliot explains that, when a police division has previous experience of an ethnic minority student or officer who lacked important policing skills, they are reluctant to employ other ethnic minority officers.

Aidah believes that her colleagues gossip more frequently about ethnic minority police officers in instances where previous acquaintances or acquaintances of their family have engaged in criminal activity (ranging from petty crime to more organised crime) than about majority officers with such acquaintances. Both Aidah and Nadya, who are light skinned, have experienced comments about being infiltrators, expressed in a humoristic manner, but nonetheless signalling a certain mistrust. Aidah does not believe that her colleagues distrust her, but based on how her colleagues talk about other ethnic minority police personnel, she argues that people are more suspicious of their acquaintances than in the case of ethnic Norwegians:

I do overhear how people talk about others. The police officer who is a foreigner, he has a brother who is super criminal, and there are rumours about them being collaborators (. . .). If the person concerned has a minority background and has a dubious or criminal brother, people are more suspicious than they would be if it was an ethnic Norwegian who had a dubious or criminal brother.

The narrative also shows that ‘less visible’ ethnic minority officers may also be subjected to scrutiny and distrust. However, whether ethnicity is seen as a reason for distrust varies among majority officers. Nadya believes that those who are prejudiced or officers who are older may think her unfit to work on assignments involving people of the same ethnicity as her, fearing that her loyalty will be with her ‘own people’. Conversely, others see her ethnicity as a resource that can be utilised in assignments involving people of the same ethnicity, and they do not question her loyalty at all. Like Nadya, several of the interviewees argue that younger colleagues are more open-minded, and that this has brought about a change where being distrusted is not as common as it used to be. However, such issues are not absent, as Misha illustrates. He explains that he was asked about his loyalty in a job interview, to which he responded, ‘the uniform and work come first, religion second’. The data material clearly shows that ethnic minorities are subjected to scrutiny. Majority officers also seem to treat ethnic minorities as a group, where the mistake of one ethnic minority officer affects how ethnic minorities in general are perceived.

Scepticism, resistance and appraisal

Despite several formal admission requirements to the NPUC, colleagues seem to use additional informal criteria to evaluate ethnic minority officers in the patrol service. A consistent finding across the interviews is that proficiency in Norwegian functions as a strong signifier of inclusion or exclusion. Aidah, who came to Norway as a refugee when she was a child, says that she believes that colleagues see her as Norwegian because she speaks Norwegian fluently. She also highlights her familiarity with Norwegian culture as something that results in acceptance. Rafiq, who also came to Norway as a child, reflects on the consequences of inadequate language proficiency or perceived inadequacy. He argues that speaking imperfect Norwegian or Norwegian with an accent equates with being defined as a foreigner, and that such a position will result in exclusion. He says: ‘People [within the police] don’t care about your skin colour when they’re working by your side. The thing people are really concerned with, I believe, is your language proficiency, which defines you as a foreigner, not skin colour, that doesn’t matter, and maybe religion.’ He says that, when he first

started working, his vocabulary was not as sophisticated as it is today, and he experienced this as a barrier to fulfilling his role as a police officer. However, he points out that speaking with an accent does not necessarily indicate the level of language proficiency, implying that this is a common misconception among majority police officers. At the beginning of his police career, he believed that his colleagues thought less of him, that he was not good enough. He felt that the others badmouthed him, he felt excluded, and he felt that he had to prove himself to be accepted. He says that this has been a burden to him. He also believes it is harder to make a career in the police because, as he sees it, ethnic minorities are judged by different standards. His personal experience has made him critical about accepting ethnic minorities into the police who do not master the Norwegian language perfectly. He believes that the personal costs are too high, and that it is the individuals who carry the burden.

One of the interviewees, Adil, says that he never experienced being viewed as different or foreign during adolescence. Adil lived in a multi-ethnic residential area, and he spent some of his leisure time in that area. However, playing sports with mainly ethnic Norwegians, he also spent a lot of his spare time outside the neighbourhood. He felt accepted in both these settings. His first experience of being treated as different took place during his police training. As he sees it, there is scepticism towards ethnic minorities, both at the police college and in the police force. The scepticism is primarily related to language proficiency. The following narrative shows that there is an inherent scepticism. In the second year of his education, when receiving practical training in a patrol unit, he received positive feedback on his language skills, something he regarded as peculiar. He did not speak up, but remembers that he found it bizarre that someone made a comment on his Norwegian language proficiency:

I was born in Norway, had my adolescence in Norway, I speak Norwegian, I have attended schools in Norway, and when I got the feedback – wow, you write Norwegian really well – I thought to myself, why should you tell me that my Norwegian writing skills are good, when it should be taken for granted that my Norwegian skills are good. I am a Norwegian, right. Things like this make me wonder if there is something else behind it, that there is scepticism behind it all.

The incident happened several years ago, but Adil says that these perceptions about Norwegian language proficiency and ethnic minorities still exist, and especially in relation to students. When they receive students in the autumn, the collegium always discusses the language proficiency of ethnic minority students. The students' supervisors report to colleagues about whether a student manages to write a report properly or communicate through the digital radio system. I ask him if there are any differences among the ethnic Norwegian officers, for instance, related to age. He replies: 'Most people do it, when a person of mino[rity], foreign origin, a student for instance, it is the first thing they comment on; he actually writes Norwegian well, his writing skills are good, the report is well written, and this and that is good. It's kind of a topic for discussion.'

This narrative is interesting in several ways. First, it demonstrates a scepticism or lack of confidence in ethnic minority police officers, where the assessment of skills is strongly associated with stereotyped images. Both oral and written language skills are regarded as important policing capabilities. Students are trained in these skills, and, regardless of ethnicity, some students struggle to master them.³ In Adil's workplace, they have had some previous experience of ethnic minority students lacking the necessary language skills. Adil relates that some majority students lacking such skills. However, while there might occasionally be a discussion about a majority student's language skills, all the ethnic minority students' language skills are discussed. It therefore seems that ethnic minority students are met with pre-defined expectations; they are expected to lack important 'policing capabilities', and when they do not, the police officers are surprised.

Secondly, the narrative shows an institutionalised practice that may lead to othering and exclusion. To become 'one of us', ethnic minority officers must convince majority colleagues of their worthiness. If they master the Norwegian language perfectly, they are more likely to be included. Adil is considered an insider, he seems to be well liked, some of his colleagues appreciate his cultural competence, and he has a noticeable and humorous voice within his work group, within

the police community. However, the institutionalised practice of discussing the language proficiency of ethnic minority police students affects his overall inclusion in the group. He is clearly part of the work group, an insider, but, at the same time, the institutionalised practice of assessing ethnic minority students more harshly and based on pre-defined expectations also affects the overall inclusion of Adil and other ethnic minorities.

In the fieldwork, I also noticed signs of resistance to ethnic diversity among some majority police officers and even one leader⁴. In the patrol services where I carried out fieldwork, I met police personnel who rejected the idea that the patrol service needs ethnic diversity. The response from several police officers when they asked me about the subject of my research project, was to reject the idea that ethnic minority police officers bring diversity competence to the service. When I further asked what kind of resources they might bring, rather than giving examples of such resources, they talked about previous challenges with ethnic minority officers; that they struggle with Norwegian language proficiency and are unfamiliar with Norwegian society and culture. Alongside such perceptions, an appreciation of the diversity competence ethnic minorities bring to the service does exist. This is, for instance, illustrated by Marco:

One of my colleagues, whom I often pair up with, finds it really interesting that I'm so knowledgeable. He previously worked in [a deprived area with a high percentage of ethnic minorities], and I have a lot of information about these individuals, from my adolescence, and he finds this really cool. He also finds it interesting to discuss my culture and traditions, he likes to talk about it. And I also know that my employer thinks that diversity and differences in competence and social skills are important.

Marco's colleague seems to be eager to learn from Marco, both about cultural skills and knowledge of persons of interest to the police. This, in turn, is positive both in terms of Marco's eagerness to share knowledge and to make use of his linguistic and cultural skills. Like Marco, Emir explains that his colleagues are appreciative of his competence. In Emir's case, his colleagues especially appreciate his familiarity with 'street-language': 'The things they appreciate in this regard are the street words, I know almost every one of them, and when they don't understand what this or that means, I explain it to them, and then it's like "that's really good, and thanks for sharing" and stuff like that.'

Using or downplaying diversity competence?

A crucial test of whether passive representation translates into active representation is whether police officers make use of their cultural and linguistic competence during police work. The above descriptions suggest that certain attitudes in the patrol service may hamper the translation of passive representation into active representation. The current research shows that minority officers on their own initiative make use of their cultural and linguistic skills in specific situations (see also, Bjørkelo et al., 2021, Leirvik and Ellefsen 2021 for descriptions of these skills).

Cultural competence entails understanding cultural scripts and codes, i.e., understanding cultural variations in the expression of emotions and practices, a competence transferred or internalised through socialisation, from parents, extended family, the ethnic community, and through neighbourhood socialisation. Cultural competence also includes non-verbal cultural competence, that is understanding and enacting culturally relevant gestures. Those with knowledge of street- and multicultural youth culture spent their childhood in a deprived area, that is socioeconomically and ethnically segregated area. Through socialisation they have learned ways of walking, standing, talking, greeting and several expressions in different languages. They are familiar with the multicultural youth culture, resulting in a repertoire of acts and a mental framework of understanding and acting in the world that can be activated and brought into play. For instance, Emir explains that his 'street-knowledge' has been helpful when communicating with minority youths; it has enabled him to avoid meeting them as a 'commandeering police officer', but rather ensuring that they do not 'lose face', and he believes that he is able to do this because of spending his adolescence in a deprived area:

My childhood experiences and the way I talk have definitively been helpful out in the streets. (...) I throw some small words to those boys, then they know that he knows how the game works, or that he is from one of the deprived areas, so just a little word can give them an indication that, alright, he knows what it's like.

Emir further explains that such an approach is helpful for communication, but also for the information he can gain, and his understanding of 'what's going on' in a situation. He exemplifies this by referring to an incident where he overheard a person speaking Urdu telling another person to hit a third person while the patrol officers were nearby. Due to Emir's knowledge of words or phrases in several languages, he was able to stop the attack. Such internalised understandings can also include experience of being economically deprived or having previously been subjected to racism.

Language competence refers to speaking a specific or several specific languages in addition to Norwegian and English, and making use of this language proficiency while policing, or translating text messages and other documents that are part of criminal investigations. It also entails understanding 'broken Norwegian', i.e., speaking with an accent, grammatically misconstructured sentences or choosing wrong words to explain something. Such skills are the result of familiarity with parents or other acquaintances speaking broken Norwegian or familiarity with the language structure in the speaker's region of origin. Vasili illustrates how a specific language competence might be helpful for understanding broken Norwegian:

When I hear the person concerned talking badly in Norwegian, I easily understand what he is trying to communicate because I have knowledge of the sentence structure in languages from that region (...), it's easy for me to rearrange the words to make out what he is really thinking [in the mother tongue].

There is variation among the ethnic minority officers in the study as regards which elements that are most prominent. For instance, some of the minority police officers know more about the street- and multicultural youth culture, while others have more country-specific cultural competence. Based on the narratives of the ethnic minority officers, it seems that they sometimes deliberately use this repertoire, while at other times they do so more unconsciously.

The cultural and linguistic skills used in interactions with ethnic minority citizens indicate that their passive representation translates into more active representation. In addition, several interviewees also explain that they try to influence their colleagues by sharing their knowledge or challenging stereotypical associations between minority youths and gang-related crime that some colleagues display. For instance, Marco is very concerned with the symbolic association between skin colour and crime.⁵ He says:

I have noticed that some of my partners are a bit like, they see young boys with dark skin, and they say 'Oops, this is a gang [of criminals]'. I am interested in what constitutes a gang, and sometimes I ask them, 'Do you know these guys?' 'No, they just look like a gang'. (...) I have told them that Young guns or the B-gang,⁶ they are gangs, but boys buying kebab at two o'clock in the morning are not a gang. Even though two or three of them are fighting, they do not constitute a gang. They don't do crime together.

Marco tries to untangle why they have these stereotyped images and challenge the way they think, for instance, by referring to the definition of gangs used by the National Criminal Investigation Service (Kripas), probably because this is perceived as credible information that makes it easier to convince colleagues. Like Marco, Emir tries to enlighten his colleagues. Emir says that he chooses to be open with colleagues about previous acquaintances of his who are engaged in criminal activity. He believes such a strategy is helpful for not being mistrusted, but also that it enhances his colleagues' understanding of the connection between social inequality and criminal activity: 'So that they understand this ... try to put themselves in his situation, that it's not that easy, that he didn't grow up in Bærum [a prosperous area], where everything went well and the parents were rich, and got a lot of help and all that, no that's not the way things work.'

Elliot, who has worked in the patrol service for several years, is well respected, both for his policing skills and for his linguistic and cultural competence. In the early days of his career, he was the only ethnic minority officer at the police station, and he describes the hardship he has

experienced, for instance, being subjected to ethnicity-related practical jokes, having to prove himself as a competent police officer, and his loyalty to the force being questioned. As a result of this hardship, he has withdrawn socially from his colleagues. He is still professionally attached, but his feelings of belonging are related to his professional role as police officer, and not bonding on a more social level. Although he has withdrawn from the more social aspects of his job, his experiences of microaggression have not made him downplay his linguistic and cultural competence, not even in situations where there is a potential risk for being mistrusted. Elliot has endured the hardship of being treated as different because he sees himself as sort of a pioneer, as someone who is supposed to ‘pave the way’ for the acceptance of ethnic minority officers. As I see it, Elliot’s continued use of his linguistic and cultural competence can be explained by his perception of himself as a pioneer, and because his colleagues and leaders appreciate his use of linguistic and cultural skills in policing.

As previously shown, Adil’s narrative demonstrates an institutional practice of discussing the Norwegian language proficiency of ethnic minority officers in his workplace. Such a practice, combined with other forms of microaggression, could have psychosocial costs, and lead officers to contemplate leaving the force. Adil explains that he is hesitant about starting afresh in another police district. He has proven his worth in his current place of work, and he would rather quit working as a police officer, than start from scratch and have to rebuild his reputation elsewhere.

In several interviews, we discuss the phrase ‘bro’ [brother], an informal, respectful way of greeting one another, mostly used by youths and young adults with a minority background. This is a phrase several interviewees have experienced being used in encounters with ethnic minorities. In rapport-building communication or for crime prevention purposes, they might also respond to the greeting by using the phrase themselves. A few ethnic minority officers argue that use of the phrase could give rise to mistrust on colleagues’ part. Misha explains that some of his majority colleagues might react negatively if someone calls him ‘bro’, and doubt where his loyalty lies. The potential for being mistrusted makes Misha limit his use of specific language skills, especially with colleagues he is not familiar with:

If there’s a colleague I am not well acquainted with, I am not quite as confident, and when we’re on an assignment and they [ethnic minorities] start speaking another language, then I feel uncomfortable, because the colleague feels left out of the conversation, so I try to avoid it and instead conduct the conversation in bad Norwegian or bad English, so that he will at least keep up with what is being said.

Misha explains that conversations in his mother tongue may give rise to distrust among his colleagues, because they become more suspicious if they do not understand the ongoing communication. Although Misha uses his linguistic and cultural skills in specific situations, he clearly downplays these skills to avoid his loyalty being questioned. The examples he gives might seem small and insignificant, but they clearly show how experiences of microaggression can constitute an obstacle to translating passive representation into active representation. Firstly, Misha restrains from using his linguistic and cultural skills in situations where the skills could have been useful to ensure equal treatment and to ‘resolve the situation’ in an efficient manner. Secondly, and as a result of downplaying his competence, the potential for transferring important knowledge is limited. Although Misha’s experiences can be seen as an exception to the main findings, his experiences show that microaggression may constitute a barrier in some workplaces, especially when majority colleagues are sceptical or display distrust in ethnic minority officers.

Conclusion

Previous research indicates that racism is a routine feature of the lives of ethnic minority police officers (Cashmore, 2001), and that ethnic minority police officers do not feel unconditionally included in the police force. Their loyalty is tested, they frequently experience jokes or comments

about ethnicity, and they more often report performance pressure (Cashmore, 2001; Finstad, 2000; Gustafson, 2008; Peterson & Uhnnoo, 2012). There is still considerable resistance and resentment towards the institutionalisation of diversity (Loftus, 2008). Exclusion of minorities still exists, and they continue to be repositioned as 'outsiders within' (Loftus, 2008; Peterson & Uhnnoo, 2012). The findings in this study are in line with previous research.

The ethnic minority officers enjoy working as police officers, and they often stressed companionship with colleagues as one of the most important factors for their well-being at work. Despite these accounts of inclusion, other narratives clearly indicate that ethnic minorities are subjected to exclusion. Among the interviewees, there is only one who uses the word racism to describe some of his experiences, and the term is only used to describe ethnicity-related comments and jokes. In general, the ethnic minority officers do not interpret their experiences as racism. Such a hesitance to label experiences as racism or downplaying experiences as discrimination or racial microaggressions among ethnic minorities is also found in other studies (for instance, see, Führer, 2021, on ethnic minorities in Norway; Ballinas, 2017, on US Mexicans). However, some interviewees talk about scepticism towards ethnic minority officers, while others point to the existence of prejudice towards or a condescending attitude to ethnic minorities in the population. The narratives clearly show that ethnicity raises its head in several ways in the everyday lives of ethnic minority officers.

The experiences I have presented show that ethnic minority officers repeatedly are exposed to a variety of microaggressions. Some microaggressions seem to constitute practices in the collegium, while others are performed more randomly by a few colleagues. Still, when seen in conjunction, these experiences indicate the everyday and cumulative nature of the microaggression. The microaggressions targeted towards ethnic minority officers are clearly based on skin colour and/or ascribed cultural and religious traits or stereotypes and can therefore be considered as a form of racism. Although not intentional, the underlying messages of the insults and invalidations, indicate that ethnic minority officers experience being treated as aliens in own land, less capable and more criminally inclined.

Experiencing microaggression is a problem for the individual, and Zempi (2020) shows that minority officers (women, ethnic minority and LGB) who are targeted because of a perceived 'difference' experience a negative impact on their emotional, psychological, and physical well-being. The findings indicate a need to address these issues in the Norwegian Police Service. In addition to being a problem in relation to equal treatment and the well-being of ethnic minorities, microaggression may also constitute a barrier to active representation, as suggested by previous research (Cashmore, 2001; Holdaway, 1997; Jaeger & Vitalis, 2005; McMurray et al., 2010). As the above presentation has shown, ethnic representation appeared to translate into active representation. Several of the ethnic minority officers in this study made use of different cultural and linguistic skills in specific situations, and they transferred knowledge to majority officers to some (although limited) extent.

Contrary to expectations, experiencing microaggressions do not seem to have a negative impact on the use of cultural and linguistic competence among minority officers. Thus, microaggression and diversity competence exist side by side in the everyday life of police officers. To some extent, minority officers reduce the significance of ethnicity-related jokes, scepticism, and the burden of proving themselves when they do not interpret such experiences as racism. This may be one explanation for why microaggression appears to have a less negative impact on active representation than expected. In addition, the ethnic minority officers state that several colleagues and leaders show appreciation of the diversity competence they bring with them. This appreciation may function as a counter-mechanism, motivating the use of their competence, even in situations where there is a potential risk for being mistrusted. There are some exceptions to this pattern, however. For example, the narrative of one of the ethnic minority officers shows how microaggression could constitute a barrier to translating passive into active representation because such experiences can result in ethnic minorities downplaying their diversity competence. This, in turn, could reduce the potential for transferring knowledge or impacting colleagues.

The findings in this study are especially important for police leaders and educators. Working for a more inclusive police organisation is beneficial for the well-being of ethnic police officers as well as reaching the full potential of recruiting ethnic minorities. However, a narrow focus on the importance of diversity competence alone could be counterproductive, as such a focus could enhance the ‘visibility’ of ethnic minorities, potentially increasing microaggression from colleagues. Wieslander (2018) show how recruitment for diversity may lead to such counterproductive results. Hence, a preferable approach to increase active representation would be to focus on different types of relevant competencies (both formal and informal) among police officers in general, including cultural and linguistic competence. The police organisation could also benefit from a heightened awareness of microaggression and especially the cumulative nature of microaggression.

The present study is based on a small number of interviews and fieldwork observations, where I have shown some mechanisms which are in play. Generalising from these findings should be done with caution. Future research should further explore how microaggression affects active representation, especially in a comparative context. It would be particularly interesting to include countries where the share of ethnic minority police officers varies. It would also be interesting to include a more intersectional perspective both on experiences with microaggression and on how these experiences impact ethnic representation. Finally, it would be interesting to explore whether microaggressions in the workplace have an impact on the way officers interact with citizens.

Notes

1. The interviews and the fieldwork were approved by the Data Protection Services at the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (project number 49,021) and by the Norwegian Police Directorate and are based on informed consent.
2. Some of the participants did migrate together with their parents, but due to their young age at the time, they are defined as Norwegian-born to immigrant parents in Norwegian statistics.
3. This statement is based on both my own and my colleagues’ experiences when teaching the bachelor’s degree program at the Norwegian Police University College.
4. Descriptions of this resistance is also presented in (Bjørkelo et al., 2021).
5. See, also (Leirvik & Ellefsen, 2020) for a description of this example.
6. Young guns and the B-gang [B-gjengen] are known for organised crime in the Norwegian context.

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