



# Police Racism in France and Germany: Occupational Socialisation and Institutional Guidelines

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Jérémie Gauthier, Jacques de Maillard. Police Racism in France and Germany: Occupational Socialisation and Institutional Guidelines. Jan Beek; Thomas Bierschenk; Annalena Kolloch; Bernd Meyer. Policing race, ethnicity and culture. Ethnographic perspectives across Europe, Manchester University Press, pp.31-52, 2023, 978-1-5261-6558-9. halshs-04070503

**HAL Id: halshs-04070503**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04070503>**

Submitted on 15 Apr 2023

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## **Police Racism in France and Germany: Occupational Socialisation and Institutional Guidelines<sup>1</sup>**

In J. Beek, T. Bierschenk, A. Kolloch, B. Meyer (eds), *Policing race, ethnicity and culture. Ethnographic perspectives across Europe*, Manchester University Press, 2023, p. 31-52).

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### **Abstract**

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<sup>1</sup> The translation from French into English has benefited from the support of the IdEx (Initiative of Excellence) of the University of Strasbourg.

Our article aims to contribute to the topic of police racism by showing how the dynamics of racialization and racism are rooted both in the occupational experiences of French and German police officers and in their ways of describing reality. Based on data collected through several observational and/or interview-based studies conducted among police forces in France and Germany, our chapter follows the footsteps of a body of research that considers police occupational socialisation as the main variable explaining how police officers may embrace and pass on racialized patterns of perception. We make a distinction between racialization, whose underlying logic is the production of racial hierarchies and the attribution of social and behavioural features to certain categories of the population (in the present case ethnic/racial minorities), and racism, defined as one specific instance of racialization characterised by the hostile stereotyping of said categories, what we call the “temptation of racism”. Despite these shared patterns, the practices of police forces differ, as German police officers tend to be less prone to discrimination than their French counterparts. To explain this discrepancy, we shall see that institutional authorities differ significantly in terms of how they address the question of racism, both in their discourse and in their management methods, or even in the prioritisation of police tasks.

**Keywords:** racism, racialization, police socialisation, cross-national comparison, discrimination.

On the night of 25 to 26 April 2020, in the greater Paris area, a police patrol was filmed by a local hurling racist abuse at an Arab individual they were pulling out of the Seine river, and subsequently beating him, once he was inside their car. A few days later, several cases emerged of police officers exchanging views suffused with ideological racism (i.e., claims of White supremacy) on WhatsApp and Facebook, while in September 2020, a policeman of North-African origin filed a complaint against the French *Police*

*nationale*, denouncing the racist behaviour he had had to put up with on the part of his colleagues<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, in Germany, several officers from the North Rhine-Westphalia force were suspended when it transpired that they were involved in far-right Internet forums, one more in a such a long series of revelations (in the Bavaria and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern *Länder*) over the preceding months that the idea of a national investigation into the links between the police and the far-right has become a fairly urgent one<sup>3</sup>. In France and Germany, the issue of police racism is now a staple of the public debate, as is the case in many other Western countries, a case in point being the international wave of protest movements triggered by the death of George Floyd in the spring of 2020 in the USA. Our article aims to contribute to this topic by showing how the dynamics of racialization and racism are rooted both in the occupational experiences of French and German police officers and in their ways of describing reality.

US sociologists of policing were the first to address this issue. As early as the 1960s, following a spate of major race riots triggered by police interventions, the earliest published works focused on describing a set of representations common to police officers that constitute the building blocks of what Anglo-American sociologists have dubbed the “police occupational culture”, in which racism featured prominently (Bayley and Mendelsohn, 1969 ; Westley, 1970 ; Black and Reiss, 1967). According to these studies, within the social world of the police, structured as it is along “ethnic lines”, race stereotypes become the norm (Skolnick, 1966: 80–81). In France, where sociologists did not start dealing with this issue until much later, research initially focused on the relationships between racist dispositions and occupational socialisation, suggesting that police forces are pervaded by a “general racist discourse”, a “veritable standard which the rank-and-file police officer can hardly escape, let alone oppose” (Wieviorka *et al.*,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/racisme-un-policier-de-strasbourg-va-porter-plainte-contre-la-police-nationale-19-09-2020-8388036.php>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.france24.com/fr/20200918-le-spectre-d-un-problème-systémique-de-racisme-dans-la-police-hante-l-allemande>

1992). These insights generally concur with the findings of most studies conducted in other countries: police racism is reactive and linked to occupational socialisation (Zauberman and Lévy, 1998). Furthermore, the transmission of racist dispositions through occupational culture was one of the findings of a longitudinal survey initiated in 1992 among a class of student police officers: police socialisation implies “gradual and massive adherence to a handful of stereotypes” (Monjardet, 1994: 399). More recently, two field surveys carried out among crime-fighting units to assess the daily impact of racism, and whether it was linked to discriminatory practices, reached different conclusions. One was conducted by Fabien Jobard, who noted that racism functions as what he called an “emic category of police work” (*“catégorie indigène du travail policier”*, 2006: 272), whereas for the police themselves, whether someone can be assigned to a “dangerous class” matters more than any specific ethnic characterisation. Racist orientations, therefore, might not weigh in as much on the value system of the police as was previously thought, this dimension being only one among many components of their occupational ethics. However, the second study, by Didier Fassin, does assign a vital role to racism and discriminatory practices as far as police-population relations are concerned. Based on participant observation of an anti-crime night patrol (BAC) in the greater Paris area, the author argues that racism and discrimination “easily mix” in the context of policing practices, even though “it is often possible to have intentionally discriminatory, and therefore legally reprehensible, decisions pass for a mere consequence of statistical logic” (Fassin, 2013: 232). Racial discrimination appears as both “individual and systemic”, insofar as it is tolerated by management in a context where police activity in large public housing estates is indicative of a “post-colonial” situation. Finally, one of the authors of the present chapter has shown, based on a study in French and German police stations, that racism is also pervasive within the force, as the professional legitimacy of minority officers tends to be tested by their colleagues from the majority. The former are

then forced by their “minority condition” to deploy tactical and strategic ploys to cope with the racial assignments aimed at them (Gauthier, 2011).

Our chapter follows in the footsteps of a body of research that considers police occupational socialisation as the main variable explaining how police officers may embrace and pass on racialized patterns of perception<sup>4</sup>. Leaving aside the most militant, ideological forms of racism, described by Didier Fassin, we focus instead on more routine dynamics of racialization that are rooted in the practicalities of police work. We make a distinction between racialization, whose underlying logic is the production of racial hierarchies and the attribution of social and behavioural features to certain categories of the population (in the present case ethnic/racial minorities), and racism, defined as one specific instance of racialization characterised by the belittling/hostile stereotyping of said categories. Furthermore, comparing the respective national situations in Germany and France – both as a methodology and a problem-setting strategy – will enable us to understand the whys and wherefores of both the similarities and the differences identified by our field surveys, whether in terms of police categories, organisational structures, or practices. Based on data collected through several observational and/or interview-based studies conducted among police forces in France and Germany (see Note on Methodology), we shall endeavour to describe how police officers frame the question of race and what journey/thought processes lead them to embrace—or distance themselves from—racialized representations of the social world. Although neglected by most of the research on this issue, this comprehensive, dynamic approach of the racialization of police representations makes it possible to realise not only how enduring and structural police racism can be, but also how inextricably linked its individual and institutional dimensions are.

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<sup>4</sup> Introduced by US sociologist W.E.B Dubois and first used in French by Franz Fanon, the word “racialization” can be defined both as “the logics whereby race hierarchies are produced in a given society” and “the production of groups subjected to race attribution processes” (Mazouz, 2020: 48-49, our translation).

Because police work frequently involves describing, identifying, and qualifying individuals, the police world has many categories for alterity. The former is easy enough to understand: when officers are sent on an assignment, the main resource available to them is describing an individual or a group. They may also need to qualify the persons they cross paths with, i.e. make a value judgement about them. This may be dictated by the necessities of the job (“discretion”), as they are indeed expected to assess situations and people to decide on a course of action (intervening or not, arresting or not, helping out or not...). The remainder of our argumentation will hinge on this distinction between describing and qualifying. In the first section, we focus on how people and places are described, highlighting the logics of racialization at work in these processes. The second section deals with how qualification and judgement take place and reveals what we call the “racist temptation.” Despite these shared patterns, the practices of French and German police forces do differ, especially as far as stop and search is concerned: German police officers tend to be less prone to discrimination than their French counterparts. Most of our third section will focus on explaining this discrepancy, and we shall see that in each case, institutional authorities differ significantly in terms of how they address the question of racism, both in their discourse and in their management methods, or even in the prioritisation of police tasks.

#### **Note on Methodology**

This chapter revisits comparative studies on France and Germany conducted simultaneously by the authors. Jérémie Gauthier carried out his interviews (N=58) and observations (about 400 hours in each country) in the Paris banlieue – the disadvantaged suburbs – and in Berlin, as part of his doctoral thesis research in Sociology, from 2005-2010. Jacques de Maillard was involved in the Polis research project, supported by the French-German National Research Agency from 2010-2014 (directed by D. Oberwittler

and S. Roché). Field work was performed from 2010-2012 in two German *Länder* and two major provincial French cities (400 hours in each country and 115 interviews). Therefore, the surveys we have carried out mostly deal with police forces intervening in an urban context. While most of the empirical data was collected more than a decade ago, we do not consider these to be outdated. In both countries, recent and current events are a stark reminder of how prevalent the issue of police racism remains in these organisations. Most importantly, the police practices identified in section three have not changed significantly: in France, racism and discriminatory practices remain virtually unaddressed by institutional authorities.

### **1. Racializing Police Representations and Professional Experiences**

*“Personally, I was subjected to racism at the police station [at the beginning of my career]. And I was accused of being a racist myself. I know I shouldn’t say what I’m going to say, but I can’t find the proper words. It’s true that when you [...] patrol certain neighbourhoods, say about 90% of the youth who are going to stand out by insulting you, looking for trouble, are young Blacks or Arabs. And I’m an Arab myself, mind you! [...] Not that I approve of this, far from it! Still, I kind of see how you can find some mitigating circumstances [for colleagues who become racist]”.*

Samia, 31, uniformed police officer, Paris *banlieue*, 20/12/2008.

The first thing one notices when conducting field research among police forces is that both in France and in Germany, racism is a day-to-day, recurrent issue, not only when dealing with “customers”, but also among colleagues (Gauthier, 2011). In the above quote, the interviewed female police officer – a French national of Tunisian origin – voiced the utter complexity of the dynamics of racialization in the policing world: the experience of racism, which prompts the officer to take an ethical stand (“not that I



approve”), is rooted in the relationships with both the co-workers and the public. The officer also mentions how irrepressible the temptation is, among her colleagues, to racialize “Blacks and Arabs” by making sweeping generalisations about their criminal nature, based on allegedly empirical observations “showing” them to be over-represented in the criminal population and proving their hostility towards the police. Subjectivities, ethics, and police occupational experiences therefore appear to be intricately linked when it comes to understanding how police officers frame the question of race.

### **1.1. Racialized Readings of Urban Areas and Delinquency**

In France and Germany alike, how the police perceive their relationships with racialized groups is first and foremost determined by their own local professional experiences and the issues they have to cope with in their respective jurisdictions (Bezirk): possessing an extensive knowledge of one’s territory is a valued skill among law enforcement officers, and one that partly overlaps with an “ethnic mapping” approach whereby some areas—where practices considered as deviant tend to take place—end up being associated with certain types of population.

In the Paris *banlieue*, police officers tend to focus on so-called “difficult” public housing estates—places where the likelihood of working a “case” is higher than elsewhere—as well as on squats inhabited by migrants from Eastern Europe (called “Moldovan squats”, since most dwellers tend to originate from there) and the “African hostel”, an overcrowded squat that houses Black Africans from various countries. The insecure, sometimes illegal situation of the dwellers may involve illegal means of economic subsistence, including vehicle trafficking. These populations, as well as the Roma, are an ongoing concern for both the *Police Nationale* and the town council, who keep trying to count and evict them.

In Berlin, when describing their jurisdiction, police officers often start out by mentioning the high number of migrants and Muslims, and the high delinquency rate among youths of migrant origin. The deterioration of the neighbourhood's atmosphere is often attributed to migrant populations, dubbed "difficult customers". As an example, one officer mentions youths from Russia and "southern countries", who share a "natural" dislike for the police. These happen to be the same youths who exhibit behaviours of "solidarity" with their friends in the context of routine stop and searches. In addition, crime hotspots in these neighbourhoods are often defined in relation to types of criminality that are associated with foreign or migrant populations. For instance, one microneighbourhood in Antonkiez<sup>5</sup> has the reputation of harbouring two "large Lebanese criminal families", and one of the parks, with its Black dealers, is considered to be the "Bermuda triangle" of the neighbourhood, not far from bars and brothels where "one doesn't get in if German". Some schools in Antonkiez and Spreeheim are under particular scrutiny from police forces, 90%-100% of their students being "of migrant origin". Finally, Internet cafes are also under particular scrutiny from the local anti-crime units because they have the reputation of harbouring a number of small-scale trafficking activities and brawls among young men of migrant origin. Some of these areas, such as the Spreeheim park, have been labelled "dangerous zones"<sup>6</sup> by the authorities.

These racialized readings of territories and populations are compounded by (in)famous interventions that have left a mark on the occupational socialisation of police officers, whether experienced directly or vicariously through colleagues. In the Paris *banlieue*, police forces were particularly affected by several violent episodes and even riots, not least the urban rebellion of 2005, which the racialized youths from public housing estates are inextricably associated with in the minds of the police. In Berlin,

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<sup>5</sup> Neighbourhoods have been anonymised: Antonkiez and Spreeheim are two migrant neighbourhoods located in what used to be West-Berlin.

<sup>6</sup> The "dangerous zones" (*gefährliche Orte*) are areas, defined by police authorities, where the police may stop and search individuals at their discretion.

activists from the radical left, though still considered “natural” adversaries, have ceased to be identified as a “problem”, contrary to youths of migrant origin, who in many respects are perceived as problematic customers: depoliticised, irrational, associated with degraded securitarian, moral (violent behaviours, lack of “respect” for the uniform), and economic conditions—all of which can supposedly be explained by a singularly different “mentality”.

These racialized perceptions of territories and populations feed a body of emic police knowledge (Beek and Bierschenk, 2020; see chapters by *Mutsaers*, *Van Neunen*, and *Nafstad* in this volume) of which the officers consider themselves to be the custodians and which they legitimate by emphasising their day-to-day experience of the street in its most sordid and contentious aspects.

*“[...] Ethnic groups failing to get along is something that happens very frequently. Multiculturalism (Multikulti) is always put forward as an ideal. It might be ideal for educated people with a job... then it does work indeed. But here [in Antonkiez], it’s not working. Those who pretend otherwise, it means they don’t live here, they’re explaining things from the outside, they’re social-romantics (Sozialromantiker). They know nothing, they have no idea what’s going on here.”*  
(Hermann, Sergeant, Antonkiez, 28/09/07)

This “truth from the street”, which according to many a police officer opposes the politically correct discourse of “know-it-alls” and “social-romantics”, is at the very core of how of minority issues are framed by the police. Moreover, this way of organising territories, deviances, and populations (often described in terms of their perceived origin or outward appearance) ultimately forms the foundation of a body of knowledge which in turn acquires the status of a proper skill set to be passed on to beginners by seasoned veterans (see *Borrelli* in the present volume).

## **1.2. Describing, Qualifying, and Identifying Individuals**

*“Typically, [a stop and search] will be linked to an offence, a call on the radio, some guy*

*smoking a joint, some guy who sees us and runs. You need some legal framework. You can't just stop someone because of their mug, that's illegal, racial profiling is not a thing. Even though we might rely on it to pick up something initially, this is not determined by law."*

Ben, 37, Sergeant, Greater Paris area, 24/03/09.

This sergeant's comment clearly shows how ambivalent appearance-based categories can be ("mug", "racial profiling"): on the one hand, banned by a set of standards, and on the other, used as a police identification technique. In this respect, racial profiling is often ambiguously considered by police officers as both morally condemnable and a routine tool of the trade. For all practical purposes, appearance-based categories, although banned by a set of legal standards, are therefore an integral part of a skills base that patrol officers unapologetically call their own, and a component of their relationship to "the street," which has to do with the "nose"—"flair" and "*Fingerspitzengefühl*" in French and German respectively (Feest and Blankenburg, 1972).

The categories used by police officers to physically describe individuals are more or less codified according to the situation they are in and the discourse register they are using. Everyday conversations are peppered with such commonplace terms as "*blanc/weiss*" (White), "*rebeu/südländisch*" (Arab), "*renoi ou black/schwarz*" (Black) as well as "*asiat*" (Asian). Some phrases are more derogatory, for instance "Hassan" as a generic name for Arabs, "Chinese" as a generic term for Asians, "Roums" as a generic name for gypsies, "Kanak" as a generic term for non-White suspects (German: *Kanaken*), "Mamadou" as a generic name for Blacks, and "Moldovan" as a generic moniker for Eastern Europeans. Finally, some designations are racist insults pure and simple, for

instance “*bicot*”<sup>7</sup> (a derogatory term for Arabs), “*bamboula*”<sup>8</sup> (a derogatory term for Blacks), “*sale nègre*”<sup>9</sup> (“f...g nigger”).

*“While racial profiling is not on, you do have some categories of persons who are into such or such type of crime. This is something you learn. You’ve got in particular your pickpockets, they’re often “blédards”<sup>10</sup> as we call them, people from North-Africa, these guys are usually illegals[...] Those who sell drugs, we call them “Modous”, they’re Blacks usually: Senegalese, Ivorians, Zaireans [...] Then there’s bag snatchers, for example kids from the estates, 15 to 18, who specialise in cell phone and purse snatching [...] Basically, from your point of view, it means that when you see things like that on the street, you go ‘this guy’s maybe a pickpocket’, ‘this one maybe a burglar’. This kind of stuff you learn by doing.”* (François, 32, Sergeant, Paris, 12/05/04)

What the officer is voicing here is a contradiction between standards that reject the use of appearance as a category of action and policing practices that draw liberally from it, suggesting that racializing categories constitute the tools of this trade and that this body of practical knowledge makes up the foundation of police work (Lévy, 1987: 31). This interview extract is also revealing in terms of other dimensions of police reliance on such categories as appearances and origins, namely their being linked to certain types of offences on the one hand, and their status of acquired knowledge on the other. Finally, François emphasises an important aspect of the police/minorities relationship, i.e. how highly “visible” certain populations are in the public space.

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.leparisien.fr/hautes-de-seine-92/un-bicot-ca-ne-nage-pas-les-deux-videastes-de-l-ile-saint-denis-portent-plainte-a-leur-tour-29-04-2020-8308218.php>

<sup>8</sup> Statement made by a police union member on TV talk-show “*C dans l’air*”, 9 Feb. 2017. See Slaouti and Jobard, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Insult uttered as a Black man was being beaten by three police officers on 21 November 2020 in Paris. <https://www.today24.news/en/2020/11/france-two-of-the-police-officers-having-beaten-michel-zecler-placed-in-detention.html>

<sup>10</sup> The term „blédard“ refers to the individuals perceived as originally coming from villages of North-African countries.

Appearance-based categories may sometimes escape the sphere of clandestine, informal police usages and gain admittance in the circle of the trade's legitimate categories, those that are used when officers exchange information about suspects, "wanted individuals", or "cases". They are most frequently used when officers attempt to "describe" a person to their management, on the radio, or in reports. Beside gender, estimated age, stature, and clothing, five categories ("types") are routinely used by the French police: "European", "North African", "African", "Eastern European", and "Asian". Therefore, these practical categories used by agents are mainly visual (see *Khodzhaeva* chapter in the present volume) and supposed to suggest both suspicions and a course of action against one specific individual among the many who are present in the public space. Hence, when police intervention is triggered, police judgement will be at least in part based on the physical appearance of people (skin colour, facial features, hair). These "types" will also be used by officers on the radio, in reports, and even in police files, thereby morphing into institutionalised categories to be used in day-to-day occupational practices. Whether belonging to clandestine or occupational categories, therefore, appearance and origin may be understood as "emic categories of police work" (Jobard, 2008: 272).

## **2. The Dynamics of Police Racism**

All of this brings about a number of forms of racialization that are not only typical of the police, but all the more legitimate in their eyes since they are rooted in work experience and expertise. In this respect, the individual perceptions of police officers cannot be separated from their occupational socialisation. Therefore, the opposition between "individual" and "systemic" begins to fade, and one starts to clearly see why the police profession is especially susceptible to racism, understood as essentialising and hierarchising individuals and social groups in terms of their looks, place of origin, or

culture. How can the drift from racialization to racism (more about this distinction in the introduction) be explained?

In the interviews, given the moral stigma associated with racism, police officers often tend to blame “true racism” on the previous generation or, as is sometimes the case in Berlin, on colleagues from the former East-Berlin force, the *Volkspolizei*. Some “young” officers, however, do admit diagnosing in themselves or their colleagues a peculiar disorder that they insist should be distinguished from racism, calling it “frustration” instead.

## **2.1. Occupational Frustration**

The word “frustration” is frequently chosen by Paris and Berlin police officers with reference to the disenchantment induced by their professional situation. The term is a regular guest in interviews when it comes to qualifying a state of dissatisfaction with their working conditions and the agonistic relationships they entertain with certain social groups.

Although not confined to the police profession, this feeling of frustration refers to the dissonance between the idealised perceptions of the job and its actual practice, which is considered unrewarding and disqualifying, with a bleak future ahead. Deciding to become a police officer, taking and passing the competitive recruitment exam, undergoing training, completing internships, being assigned to a given police station are as many milestones in a career journey over the course of which their expectations tend to be thwarted and re-examined. It should be noted, however, that both in Berlin and in the Greater Paris area, it is often the racialized officers who problematize this state of “frustration” that they identify in themselves and/or their colleagues and turn into both an explanation and a euphemisation of police racism.

In Berlin, police officers make a distinction between the “true racist” and the “frustrated guy”, while emphasising the link between frustration stemming from work experience and racism *per se*.

*“Over the course of your professional experience, have you ever witnessed what you would described as ‘racism’?”*

*I wouldn’t define this directly as “racism”. However, professional practice may naturally cause one to lose sight of the universal and tend to label certain people. I wouldn’t say this is racist, but rather that through this job and life experience, some... say for instance that all African Blacks are drug dealers. At the end of the day, this has more to do with frustration than the fact that they are African Blacks [...] It’s this typical police mindset according to which those who misbehave should do it in their own country as opposed to coming here and enjoying the benefits of law [...] It’s this rise of generalization: if one single individual misbehaves, the whole lot of them gets labelled.”*

*Milan, 36, Uniformed police officer, Integration and Migration Unit, 13/04/08.*

Generated as it is by the specific work experiences of front-line police officers, “frustration” involves giving up on reflexive distance and, as a result, associating migrant populations with delinquency and therefore insisting that they should be treated more severely. Hence, as police perceptions shift towards ordinary racism, daily experiences tend to be problematized in ways that depreciate complexity, and reflexive positions on the constellation of events that make up the daily work experience tend to get tougher. A by-product of frustration, ordinary police racism is part and parcel of a general feeling of pessimism: from migrants to politicians through management, justice, and the media, everyone, in their own way, seems to be bent on discrediting police work. The strength of this phenomenon is evidenced by a keen awareness of this shift among police officers, particularly visible-minority ones, and by how irresistible it is perceived to be. The discrepancy between idealised representations of the job and the test of reality is fertile ground for what we call the “temptation of racism” of the police.



## 2.2. The Temptation of Racism

Over the course of our surveys, we never had to deal with officers unanimously voicing any form of militant racism, even though the latter seems to flourish in police units where recruitment by co-optation makes it possible for commanding officers to surround themselves with like-minded colleagues (Fassin, 2013). In our case, it can be assumed that these officers stayed under the radar of the ethnographic survey. Few, however, manage to escape feeling “fed up with the Blacks and the Arabs” – even among police officers from African and North-African minorities. In this respect, quite a few male and female officers have described for us the effects of police occupational socialisation on the gradual adoption of racialized representations whereby certain groups in the populations might be naturally prone to deviance (see *Sausdal* chapter in this volume). Therefore, militant, ideological racism should be distinguished from ordinary racism (see *Khodzhaeva* chapter).

*“There’s the true racist, and there’s the professional quirk [...] The true racists are those who will never change their minds, who say “go home, you have no business being here.” And there’s your professional quirk in the sense that 80% of the people we bring here are Blacks or Arabs [...] With them, you can talk. In my presence and that of other colleagues of foreign extraction, they can see we are no animals. These people may adjust somehow. Your basic racist, though, will always remain.”*

Djamel, 32, uniformed police officer, greater Paris area, 23/03/09.

The temptation of racism is rooted in the antagonistic relationship maintained by the police with foreigners or members of visible minorities, which transpires during interactions considered by the former to be demeaning or problematic:

*“Have you ever witnessed colleagues who, while not really racist, developed a form of hostility [towards minorities]?”*

*I never personally witnessed any racism, and I wouldn’t have accepted it anyway. What*

*does happen is a frustration or an exasperation towards the youths who live here. It's also because they're the ones that make us work the hardest: offences against the persons, insults, threats. Yes, they are more or less our customers. Frustration might be even bigger among colleagues than in me, maybe because I am of foreign extraction myself and I have a slightly different perspective, because I take into account their family life and I have an awareness of their problems and I can understand them."*

Ayda, 31, uniformed police officer, Antonkiez, 03/11/07.

This female police officer from Berlin is making a key point as far as understanding the shift towards a state of frustration is concerned: youths of migrant origin generate what is perceived as overwork, either in terms of dirty work that forces the police to handle antagonistic situations involving individuals who challenge their authority (insults and threats), or in terms of the most morally condemnable crimes (offences against the persons).

*"You end up making sweeping assumptions, conflating everyone. You know that in order to distinguish, you need to stand back. However, the context leaves no room for perspective. Sometimes, you just blurt out something and that's it [...] After so much time on the beat, I do realize there's a huge number of Whites, but it feels as though we only see Blacks and Arabs because we, the police, so often confront them."*

Nadir, 29, uniformed police officer, greater Paris area, 26/03/09.

Feeling "as though [they] only see Blacks and Arabs" is a key perception to grasp if we are to understand the mechanisms whereby the police symbolically hierarchise populations. Nadir blames a context that "leaves no room for perspective", which is consistent with the aforementioned notion of a reflexivity rooted in the specific social experience generated by police work. In this respect, the officer clearly formulates the dilemma found in the discourse of many a colleague, but in a particularly acute form as

far as officers from racialized groups are concerned: how to resist the temptation of racism?

More generally, when the chief constable (*chef de service*) of the police station in the greater Paris area glances at the daily logs of persons taken in custody and observes that “80% of the names sound foreign”, when criminal investigation police officers (*Officiers de Police Judiciaire*) refer to a “constant pouring “ of migrants and descendants thereof, and when beat patrol officers complain of “always being bothered by the same people”, they all reach the same conclusion: “it’s always the same people who are messing around”, namely “the Blacks and the Arabs”. The line of reasoning is similar in Berlin, where the police often mention the teenagers and young adults involved in the young “repeat offender” monitoring program (*Intensivtäter*) which, according to them, includes a majority of “migrants”. This idea that minorities are overrepresented in the populations that tend to be stop-and-searched, arrested, and put in police custody is widely shared throughout the policing community and may constitute the strongest catalyst for racist stereotypes. So powerful is this line of reasoning, which stems from targeting practices used by the police, that it also causes officers from social-racial minorities to embrace its conclusions: this is what we refer to here as the “temptation of racism” of police officers.

The temptation of racism works in the manner of a doxic experience of the social world, i.e. one that is an integral part of the set of self-evident assumptions shared within the professional group (Bourdieu, 1980). These arguments are strong – strong enough to sometimes be embraced even by police officers of migrant origin – because they are difficult to refute without standing back to gain some distance and perspective. As a result, this vision is often presented irresistible since interpreting reality otherwise proves too difficult. At the end of the day, ordinary police racism stems from a range of reasonings aiming to lend meaning to the job and make sense of the daily routine (Waddington, 1999). The findings presented here therefore follow on from Waddington’s, who interprets the abusive and often racist disparagement of minorities as a means to

neutralize the officers' moral dilemma on a daily basis. In this perspective, the individual and systemic dimensions of racism appear inextricably linked: the decisive factor is not the personality of police officers, but the convergence between their occupational culture and the circumstances in which they perform their duties (Waddington, 1999).

Where does the connection between the temptation of racism, which pertains to a perceptual system rooted in occupational socialisation, and concrete policing practices lie? The temptation of racism, as a body of emic knowledge perceived as legitimate, functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as defined by Robert Merton based on the work of sociologist Isaac Thomas, of the University of Chicago: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Merton, 1948). In the case of police officers, their beliefs will determine and legitimise their actions, which in turn will contribute to bolstering their beliefs.

### **2.3. The Question of Discrimination Due to Stop and Searches**

A comparison of the respective practices of French and German police, however, does question the link we just established between representations and practices (see also Waddington, 1999). While in both forces the temptation of racism seems to work in a comparable way, there are significant variations in terms of how discriminatory<sup>11</sup> certain practices turn out to be—especially as far as the practical rationale of stop and searches (or ID checks as they are called in France) is concerned. Whereas in France, either in the Paris *banlieue* or in our two cities, ID checks seem to be targeted along racialized lines, it does not appear to be the case in Germany at all (see Gauthier, 2015; de Maillard et al. 2018). In other words, German police officers discriminate less than their French colleagues.

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<sup>11</sup> What is meant here by "discriminatory" is a "pattern of exercise of police powers which results in some social categories being overrepresented as targets of police action even when legally relevant variables (especially the pattern of offending) are held constant" (Reiner, 2010: 160).

The Polis study drew two conclusions from its observation of police stop and searches (see table 1, de Maillard et al. 2018). First, the share of discretionary stops is much higher in France than in Germany (27.3%, i.e. 80 discretionary stops out of 293 interactions, versus 12.6%, i.e. 31 discretionary stops for 247 interactions in Germany), indicating a much more proactive and offensive conception of street policing work in France (see above). Next, in Germany, the share of stops targeting minorities is not higher<sup>12</sup> (12.3%) than it is for the “majority” (12.2%), whereas in France, “visible minorities” account for more than twice (31.2%) the share of the “majority” (14.1%).

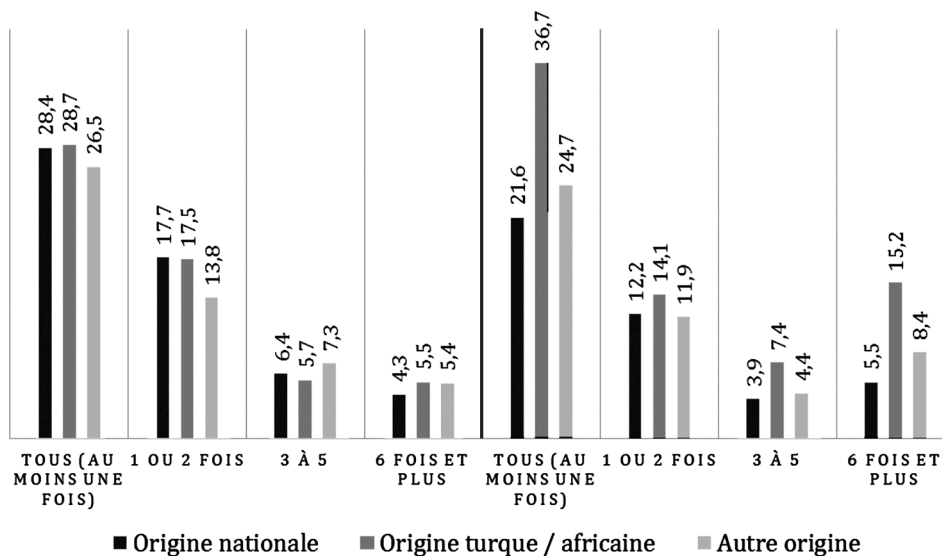
Table 1. Distribution of Discretionary Checks (based on appearance)

	N	Proportion of discretionary checks in total number of
<i>France</i>		
Total	293	27.3
Native Appearance	71	14.1
Visible Minorities	205	31.2
Mixed Groups	17	35.3
<i>Germany</i>		
Total	247	12.6
Native Appearance	115	12.2
Visible Minorities	120	12.5
Mixed Groups	10	20

<sup>12</sup> We have distinguished between three groups: Whites (or majority population), visible minorities (North Africans and Africans in France; Turks, North Africans and Eastern Europeans in Germany), mixed (groups featuring both apparently White individuals and visible minorities). It should be made clear that these categories are based not on the actual ethnic affiliation of these individuals, but rather on the observers’ perception.

These findings are consistent with those of the survey carried out in high schools, also in the context of Polis. The results are shown in Graph 1, where the prevalence rate of checks initiated by the police over a 12-month period is 30% lower in Germany for all teenagers, irrespective of the group they belong to, whereas in France young natives experience a 21.6% rate, as opposed to 36.7% for youths of African origin. When examining the profiles of the youths who are stopped/checked the most often (5 times or more over the 12-month period), it turns out that there are three times as many youths of African origin (17% versus 5%), whereas no major discrepancy can be observed in German cities.

Graph 1. Prevalence of checks initiated by police (Germany on the left, France on the right, for “National Origin, Turkish/African, Other” groups)



Source: POLIS survey, boys only (N=3,460 for Germany, N=6,354 for France).

These recurrent, substantial discrepancies support the findings of previous studies that tend to establish, based on quantitative series, that the French police (Jobard et al., 2012) resort to discriminatory practices on a much more frequent basis than in Germany (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2010; Roché, 2016). In France more than in Germany, the social-racial dimension is one of the factors associated with discretionary checks, and if some of them embrace a racist interpretation, how can we explain the fact that practices differ between the two countries? We will argue that such discrepancies derive from the policing policies implemented in each country.

### **3. The Role of Institutional Authorities and Public Policies**

Binational comparison makes it possible to identify to what extent institutional and policy factors contribute to a willingness/unwillingness to recognise and curb both the discursive and practical manifestations of police racism. One key explanatory element is that, in each country, the race issue is framed differently by institutional authorities. In France, the dominant institutional discourse on this question is mainly informed by denial, when the Berlin police force tends to frame it in terms of “cultural differences”. Moreover, both their internal management methods—which in France are more permissive—and the definition of policing tasks—which in Germany revolve less around crime control—differ.

#### **3.1. The Schemes and Discourses Pushed by Policy Makers and Police Authorities**

In France, the discourse of political, administrative, and union authorities is dominated by the idea that racism in the police is not a thing, save for a few scattered cases promptly sanctioned by management. Significantly, in 2020, as the *Police Nationale* was facing accusations of racism, the French police authorities argued that the force was “republican, therefore non-racist” while simultaneously discrediting anti-racist protests, for instance in this letter sent by the Paris prefect of police to the force:

*“I know how affected you are by these accusations of violence and racism endlessly rehashed by social networks and some activist groups. For us French citizens, one accusation is not enough to make up a truth. The police force of the Paris conurbation is neither violent nor racist: it operates within the law, for the freedom of all (...) There is no race in the police, or racialized people, or racist oppressors. There are civil*

*servants engaged in the fight for liberty, equality, and fraternity, on a daily basis!” (Letter from the prefect of police to the force, June 2020).*

The tone of the discourse is in stark contrast with that of the Berlin chief of police (*Polizeipräsident*) a few years back. Whereas the former stood in denial of police racism, the latter emphasised the cultural diversity at work in German society and insisted the police were expected to take it into account:

*“In today’s society, we must learn to deal with heterogeneity, with different cultures and religions. This requires more tolerance on the one hand, and on the other that the law and the values upheld by our Constitution be recognized by anyone living here [...] so that integration may work. We do make it happen, if necessary, with the usual policing and judiciary means. However, the starting point for dialogue, networking, and trust is prevention. Ongoing dialogue feeds upon mutual communication and the knowledge of other cultures and religions, it requires the ability to recognize and take into account our differences to overcome the distance of alterity” (Dieter Glietsch, Berlin police chief, Federal conference of the police on “Migration and Integration”, 26 October 2010, quoted in Gauthier, 2016).*

This statement is in line with a culturalist framing of public policy inherited from the 1970s, which emerged as a reaction to what some considered excessively paternalist ways of treating foreigners, and gradually spread from schools, social services, and foreigners' offices towards the police. This policy resulted in particular in the creation of specialised units such as the “Integration and Migration” unit of the Berlin police, whose proclaimed mission is “intercultural prevention”. This unit favours an approach in which solving “cultural conflicts” can be achieved by gaining an understanding of “migrant cultures” (Gauthier, 2016). This way for the institution to take ownership of how the police problematize social and racial issues is one of the facets of the institutionalization of the question of minorities in the Berlin police force, and one that found its way into management practices.

### **3.2. The Role of Middle Management**

The discourse of top management and the implemented public action frameworks notwithstanding, middle management plays a considerable role in framing the practices and discourses of police officers, which may contribute to drawing a line between what can and cannot be said and done by the agents. According to studies conducted in the UK and the USA, frontline supervisors play a significant role: *“the key role of the frontline sergeant is in translating*



*vision and strategic intent into day-to-day policing reality. The quality of the leadership provided by frontline sergeants to their teams is the one key factor that makes a difference”, HMIC, 2008: 1 ; see Engel and Peterson, 2014).*

On our various French fields, however, these actors do not appear to be playing these roles as far as racism is concerned. To begin with, seldom do they mention the idea of respecting the rights of individuals: they are more prone to emphasising operational priorities, passing down instructions, or focusing on the safety of police officers. Crucially, in a more negative spirit, they care very little about keeping racist and discriminatory discourses and behaviours in check, a function that is hindered in two different ways. First—and this is typical of how operational control takes place in policing—management maintains a scant presence on the field alongside the officers, a distance that makes it difficult to observe the content of interactions and potential malpractices. The question of ID checks is a case in point. When shadowing several units, we realised that they tended to develop a variety of practices, some of which were more reliant than others on performing ID checks on minorities (see de Maillard and Zagrodzki, 2021). However, since no records of these ID checks are kept—especially when no violations are detected as a result—management cannot really monitor the activity (and identify or fix potentially deviant policing practices). To put it bluntly, this means at the police station level, management has no way of knowing what the day-to-day practices of their beat units are. The second register is the discourse used by middle management to straighten out or handle/control certain utterances. While racist speech in the presence of commanding officers was a very rare occurrence inside the police station, it did happen in one of the towns and the reaction of the commanding officer (*brigadier-major*) was an interesting one:

*“One of the officers makes no mystery of his political views: as we noticed the presence of a flag featuring a flame (the emblem of far-right party Front National) on his locker, he said ‘you can’t always hide your opinions’. During an informal chat with his major (i.e. beat patrol manager), this uniformed officer referred to some young Arabs who were hovering around some vehicles as ‘bougnoles’ (‘wogs’); His commanding officer, whom we have never heard disparage minorities, did not react.” (Field journal, 29 February 2012).*

This episode illustrates how feebly racist speech by police officers is regulated—if at all. At that point, racism becomes more than just a matter of few individual officers, and management

comes into the equation: while racialized and even racist stereotypes may be brought up individually by some, they are not always condemned by management.

In Berlin, the question of police racism has been acknowledged as serious enough for institutional authorities to intervene. A set of initiatives have been launched to analyse police racism and attempt to curb its expressions, both verbal and material. One striking example is that of a female officer who was converted to the “intercultural openness” policy of the Berlin police force and became involved in matters of “intercultural relations and training”. First of all, she considers that the police ought to get a grasp of the specific problems faced by migrants and adjust their responses, especially by introducing preventive actions and getting involved in the integration process. To achieve this, “the usual policing work” is not enough and one needs to “resort to social sciences” in order to build the “background knowledge” (*Hintergrundwissen*) required to adjust subsequent police interventions. She also pays particular attention to the recruitment and career development opportunities of police officers of migrant origin. In her police station, she holds round table discussion where these officers are encouraged to talk about potential racism from their colleagues—an important aspect of HR management. Because of this, she considers that the onus is on management to act by applying a “broken window” policy, i.e. by immediately intervening in case of a racist comment (interview with Brigitte W., Officer, Antonkiez, 17/10/07). In Berlin, but also in other *Länder*, more institutional initiatives add up to this leadership style, including training modules on “interculturalism” and the fight against racism in initial and lifelong training, partnerships with the representatives of community and/or cultural organisations, and targeted recruitments of male and female police officers from the various communities represented. From a sociological point of view, obviously one should not be too naïve about these institutional discourses and practices: this “intercultural” way of framing things tends to reify culturalist categories and does not magically dispel manifestations of racism within *Länder* police forces (as evidenced by several recent scandals). As compared with the French case, however, they show that denial is a choice rather than a foregone conclusion, and that to a certain extent, they do contribute to undo the link between the collective representations and occupational practices of police officers (Gauthier and Jobard, 2018).

### 3.3. Broader Conceptions of Policing Work

Finally, these two countries have differences in their policing practices, regardless of racism and discrimination issues. From 2002-2012, France prioritised the “fight against crime” and the “culture of performance” with a “result-oriented policy” that fostered proactive practices, since the more ID checks were performed, the greater the effectiveness of crime fighting (de Maillard and Mouhanna, 2016), whereas in the two *Länder* we studied, there was no similar policy valuing stop and searches as a key feature of street policing. In Mannheim and Cologne, police officers did not feel particularly encouraged to stop people in order to “chase the numbers” and reach targets in terms of how many individuals were sent to court (see also Gauthier and Lukas, 2011).

In Berlin, the authorities take full ownership of and responsibility for the preventive orientation. As the Berlin chief of police emphasised in the quote above, “*the starting point for dialogue, networking, and trust is prevention*”. Significantly, within general-purpose units, officers are required to perform preventive tasks – “proximity” foot patrols, interventions in schools, being part of “anti-conflict” crowd-policing teams in demonstrations and engaging in the implementation of partnerships with public institutions and associations (Darley and Dölemeyer, 2020). Prevention also defines which policing repertoires of contention are used during interventions, i.e. strategies of mediation and de-escalation will be favoured over ID checks, stop and searches, and police custody procedures.

These styles are intricately interlocked in professional ethos that are quite independent from the initiated policies. The profile of the “hunter” (a.k.a. the “new centurion” crusading against crime, Reiner, 2010: 133) is more common in France than in Germany, where representations—both in the force and in the population—are pervaded by the idea that the police officer is “your friend and helper” (*dein Freund und Helfer*) (see de Maillard et al., 2018). In France, the line between “us” and “them” has a structuring effect that can be felt in how the police refer to their relationship with the public in general; when events are described, the narrative tends to be one in which the force has been defied (Lévy, 2016), in a context where police/population relations appear to be more strained.

## Conclusion

Racism is not a common feature of all police officers, and interindividual variations can be observed. We have also shown the forms of reflexivity that officers may display. However, it seems to us that police racism remains a systemic rather than an individual feature, for two reasons. First, the production of stereotypes and negative judgements on racialized individuals is strongly informed by the actual work experience of police officers and the daily exchanges occurring within their units. This is a key finding: racialization, both in terms of description and qualification, proceeds from occupational routine. What we have dubbed the temptation of racism is to be understood in light of this “daily grind” of policing and is inseparable from the frustration generated when performing ordinary assignments. Secondly, police racism can also be considered systemic in another way, i.e. based on how police institutional authorities (understood as the organisation with its management standards and practices, its discourse of justification, its priorities) define how the policing trade should be exercised. Here, the very framing of this question in each country draws attention to starkly contrasted ways of addressing and tackling the issue.

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