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*Published in:*  
Policing and Society

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/10439463.2020.1798955](https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2020.1798955)

*Publication date:*  
2021

*Document version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Sausdal, D. (2021). Everyday policing: Toward a greater analytical appreciation of the ordinary in police research. *Policing and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2020.1798955>

# Everyday Policing

## Toward a Greater Analytical Appreciation

### of the Ordinary in Police Research<sup>1</sup>

*By David Sausdal<sup>2</sup>*

#### **Abstract**

Since its modern conception, police research has shown an interest in everyday life. This has to do with how this (sub)discipline, more than other areas of criminological thought, has been founded on ethnographic methods. Since Westley's study in the 1950s, scholars have agreed on the importance of not simply studying policing through proxies, but also observing and studying the workaday reality of police practice. This paper is written as an appreciation of this scholarly disposition. However, while applauding fellow police researchers' ethnographic engagement, the paper argues that we could do with an even greater appreciation of everyday life not only in methodological but in analytical terms. Using an ethnographic study of the Danish Police, the paper thus stresses the often-unnoticed advantage of paying better analytical attention to the many ordinary and even banal aspects of police work. In doing so, the paper follows and extends Fassin's (2015, 2017) recent contention that the many ordinary activities of the police may not have benefitted from the scholarly scrutiny they deserve. Indeed, as demonstrated through telling empirical examples, even the most everyday issues frequently have a bearing on the most essential and evocative aspects of policing.

#### **Keywords**

Policing, ethnography, everyday life, transnational crime, detective work.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a post-print version of Sausdal, D (2020) Everyday policing: toward a greater analytical appreciation of the ordinary in police research, *Policing and Society*, DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2020.1798955

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## Introduction

Allow me to start with a quirky yet, hopefully, telling vignette to explain why this paper is entitled ‘Everyday Policing’ – a vignette which stems from my recent ethnographic field study of the Danish Police. Here, I spent circa 900 hours observing the daily work of two detective units involved in policing transnational, organized forms of property crime committed by non-resident, foreign nationals (Author 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2020). As I was allowed to observe every aspect of the units’ workday, I was, for example, present when the detectives at one of the units, Task Force Pickpocketing (TFP)<sup>3</sup>, engaged in the following conversation:

‘I just had a chat with the gaffer. He reminded me that we need to register the info we gather from our stakeouts. Like, it’s critical that we get the investigation databases updated with the latest intelligence on these transnational criminals. If we don’t do that, they have a good chance of escaping our clutches. I mean, if it’s not in the computer then we only get them if we ourselves remember them or if they accidentally show up in one of our folders’, Detective Larsen<sup>4</sup> says, pointing to the shelf behind him and the several thick blue folders with surveillance footage of foreign suspects. ‘The whole thing becomes all too contingent on us as individuals. Guys, this is why we need to be serious about using our computers and spreading the intelligence to other districts and countries, so that they can recognize and arrest them,’ Detective Larsen says in conclusion, obviously rather irritated as he’s thinking about the two Romanian suspects the detectives had to let go because of a lack of evidence. The other TFP detectives agree with him.

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<sup>3</sup> TFP is a special investigations unit and part of the Copenhagen Police district. As the name suggests, the detectives who work here are involved in policing a large number of organized property crimes related to pickpocketing (incl. skimming, credit card thefts and other tricks and scams) in and around Copenhagen. The other detective unit which I was allowed to follow was Task Force Burglary (TFB) located north of Copenhagen, investigating organized forms of burglary and other large-scale property crimes committed throughout the Danish island of Zealand. Besides investigating organized forms of property crime, what empirically unites the two units is the fact that many of their suspects are foreign nationals – or, as the police themselves call them, ‘travelling’ or ‘transnational criminals’.

<sup>4</sup> All names used throughout this article are pseudonyms.

‘Yup. Couldn’t agree more!’ Detective Mikkelsen responds. ‘In this global day and age, we need to take advantage of the technologies we’re afforded. If we don’t, we stand little chance of catching these roving bastards.’

Having said those words, the detectives turn silent and stare at their computer screens. A little later, Detective Larsen gets up and prepares to leave for the day. ‘See you guys tomorrow’, he says, bidding his colleagues farewell. ‘I’m off to court a woman. Wish me luck!’ The others wish him luck yet, as he is about to exit, Detective Mikkelsen asks whether he has ‘updated the database?’ ‘Nope. Don’t have the time’, Detective Larsen answers. ‘Why don’t you do it, Mikkelsen?’ ‘I can’t’, Detective Mikkelsen replies. ‘I’m also about to leave. It’s my turn to pick up the kids.’ Detective Larsen leaves – and some few minutes later, I wave goodbye to Detective Mikkelsen. I stay for a little while together with Detective Clausen and Christensen until they also call it a day. As I put on my jacket, I recall how especially eager Detective Larsen had been to stress the importance of registering and sharing the criminal intelligence they had acquired – and, also, how his colleagues had all agreed. ‘Did you update the database now that Larsen had to go?’ I therefore ask Detective Clausen. Detective Clausen shakes his head. ‘Nah, can’t be bothered. It’s a bit too tricky and I’m not that tech-savvy. I’m sure Larsen will do it tomorrow.’

To the best of my knowledge, Detective Larsen never registered anything – and neither did any of his colleagues.

Now, what does this vignette tell us? First, it is an example of how Danish detectives seemingly agree with many politicians, pundits, police management and frontline colleagues worldwide that contemporary policing has to involve an increasing amount of electronic registering and sharing of intelligence – perhaps especially when it comes to issues such as transnational crime which demands investigative means as

itinerant as the crime itself (Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012; Lemieux, 2013; Ratcliffe, 2016). Yet, simultaneously, it is also an example of how the detectives failed to follow through – a failure which at times was more the rule than the exception as I have described and discussed elsewhere (author 2018b).

While one may read this as a case of unprofessionalism, it is, this article argues, also an example of something rather prosaic that, nevertheless, has a significant impact on policing – in this case affecting police participation in building up a more intelligence-led and itinerant police force (something the police otherwise both dream of and ask for.) Essentially, the example shows how the Danish detectives refrained from updating the database not because of some major work-related issue but because one of them had to go on a date, another had to pick up his kids and a third didn't feel sufficiently tech-savvy. Certainly, to give priority to such mundane matters seems almost ludicrous when set against the importance of fighting a worldwide increase in transnational crime. Nevertheless, to the Danish detectives, and to many policing colleagues worldwide (cf. Smith, 2009; Gundhus, 2012; Fassin, 2017b), mundane matters, at least sometimes, matter more. In reality, the pedestrian does not infrequently trump programs and principles – even when you are a highly trained police officer employed at a special detective unit investigating a growing amount of transnational crime.

Unfortunately, in the literature, this is a quotidian reality that has too often gone unnoticed. To be sure, much police research is regularly devoted to the study of everyday life in methodological terms. This has been true ever since the discipline was initiated in the 1950/60s, when a number of eminent scholars set out to study the workaday reality of police practice by ethnographic means. Yet, in analytical terms, too little police research has paid meticulous attention to the wider ebbs and flows of everyday life. This paper seeks to correct this shortcoming. In so doing, it follows and expounds upon Fassin's

contention that ordinary aspects of policing ‘may not have benefitted from all the attention [they] deserve [...] as a banal fact of life’ even though they are ‘key to [our] understanding’ (2015). To be sure, as I will demonstrate through several empirical examples, even the most everyday issues may be key to our understanding of the most essential and evocative aspects of policing. This is why a greater analytical focus on ‘everyday policing’ is needed, not as a refutation of prior research but as a complement to it.

### **Everyday yet Essential Issues of Policing**

With this purpose in mind, I will now, first, offer three examples of how a focused analytical interest in everyday life is of importance and how it has become a guiding principle in my ethnographic study of the two aforementioned Danish detective units and their policing of transnational crime (see also author 2018c). What the three examples, both individually and together, will show is how highly emblematic and even contentious issues of contemporary policing (such as police xenophobia, police surveillance and counterterrorism) can be understood through an analytical consideration of truly quotidian aspects of police work. Secondly, reflecting on these examples, I will consider how (ethnographic) police research have more generally dealt with – and failed to deal with – questions of everyday life.

#### ***Police Xenophobia and Everyday Life***

The first example relates to a discussion I have also touches upon in a recently published article of mine (author 2018a) and concerns the much-debated issue of police xenophobia. Typically, criminological explanations of xenophobia tend to highlight the cultural bias of individual police officers, the police organization as a whole or the wider society to

which the police belong (cf. Bowling et al., 2004). Alternatively, researchers may argue that xenophobia has become an integral part of a politicized point-scoring where not only the police, but politicians, media and other stakeholders engage in fearmongering, using foreigners as serviceable folk-devils (cf. Hall et al., 2013).

Although such *cultural* and *political* explanations of what also appears to be xenophobia among Danish detectives would surely be analytically workable, my ethnographic study has also suggested an additional explanation. In short, I frequently found that the Danish detectives became particularly hostile towards foreign suspects simply because they made the detectives' everyday work trickier and less gratifying. Policing foreign suspects from, for example, Romania, Poland, Morocco or Chile not only entailed much more paperwork (something we know the police don't appreciate), it also regularly hampered some of the very routine tasks that the detectives otherwise cherished.

For instance, the almost, at least to the police, jovial cat-and-mouse interactions which I would observe when the detectives interrogated Danish-speaking suspects were often stifled when interrogating a foreign suspect. As no mutual language was spoken (or spoken well), the detectives could not engage in what they saw as essential to a good and gratifying interview, namely a certain amount of chit-chat to make the suspect feel more at ease and to give the detective a better sense and control of the situation (Abbe and Brandon, 2014). Furthermore, because of the language barrier, an interpreter had to be present, which made the detectives even more frustrated. As one of them put it: 'With foreigners it becomes less like a conversation and more like a questionnaire – and then we have this interpreter whose words I can't understand or check up on. It makes me quite furious!'

Another example of how the Danish detectives experienced normally enjoyable workaday practices becoming less rewarding relates to the many hours they spent

listening to wiretaps. When they were listening to Danish-speaking suspects, they would find an investigational relevance in being able to understand what the suspects were saying during the considerable amount of time suspects talk on the phone about non-criminal matters. This gave them useful concrete as well as contextual knowledge in an investigational sense. Yet, important to the argument this article is trying to make, they also took personal pleasure in simply getting to know their suspects beyond their criminality – a sort of mundane knowledge afforded to them as the wiretaps provided a means of eavesdropping on suspects' everyday lives. As one of the detectives explained it to me:

‘Although it’s slightly boring, listening to hours of suspects talking to their mates or girlfriends about what they’re going to eat tonight, what to buy from the supermarket or whether Ronaldo or Messi is the world’s best footballer, it also provides a nice perspective. It gives us a better sense of who these people are. Also, sometimes suspects say funny things which then makes your day.’ ‘But,’ he continued, ‘if suspects are from, say, Romania we don’t understand a word they’re saying. Then the interpreter is the one who listens to the wiretap and then only translates the criminal bits. This might give us what we need for our investigation, but it makes the whole thing much more boring, and...’ he later told me, ‘it probably makes me more cynical as I only get to hear the criminal stuff’.

Hence, as I discuss at greater length in the aforementioned paper, what my time with the Danish detectives showed me was that negative attitudes towards foreign suspects not only told a story of wider cultural or political structures or sentiments. They were also, in some ways, a simpler yet significant story about a workday and its otherwise enjoyable, routine tasks becoming less gratifying and meaningful and thus more frustrating (see also

Muir, 1979; Feldman, 2019). That this was the case doesn't excuse police prejudice. It does however add to our understanding of the more quotidian workings of police xenophobia. It tells a story of xenophobia as something not only culturally produced in society at large, in a bad police organization or in the immoral psyche of individual officers (see also author 2020), but also as something produced in, and propelled by, a run-of-the-mill workday that suddenly makes less sense.

### ***Police Surveillance and Everyday Life***

In another example of how everyday life became of analytical importance, I focus on a different yet also intensely debated issue, namely that of police surveillance (cf. author 2018b). As documented in many fine studies on the matter (cf. Haggerty and Ericson, 2000; Mathiesen, 2013; Loftus et al., 2015; Gundhus and Jansen, 2019), police forces worldwide have increasingly been acquiring new surveillance and information technologies. Moreover, they are increasingly collaborating across national borders, thus building what scholars have critically discussed as an increasingly pervasive and intrusive surveillance apparatus (ibid). When asked why they believe increasing means of surveillance are needed, politicians and police often unequivocally point to how crime has become more global and complex. In other words, they maintain that evermore peripatetic means of surveillance are needed to counter similarly mobile and multifaceted forms of criminality (op cit).

While important criticisms have been made of such a simple, functionalist argument (cf. Bowling and Sheptycki 2012, Mathiesen, 2013), this was, as I often experienced, nevertheless the same argument raised by the Danish detectives and their management. Working at two special investigation units focusing on cross-border, transnational crime, the detectives were outspoken about the need to procure new and

better surveillance and information technologies in their efforts to investigate such crimes. As we have already seen, they also reminded each other of the daily need to use and update their intelligence databases to allow for other national and international colleagues to access such intelligence and, hopefully, apprehend suspected criminals if not in Denmark than elsewhere in Europe. They, in their own words, needed all these practical and technological surveillance means at their service,

because this is the only way in which we can track roaming transnational criminals and other cross-border evils. If we don't have them – if we don't surveil, analyze and collaborate with international colleagues – we will lose the battle.

However, even though the detectives enthusiastically cheered on the need for more surveillance, they frequently abstained from playing their part. The question, of course, is why they did not play their part. Elsewhere (2018b), I have outlined three distinct reasons why the Danish detectives were reluctant and sometimes even refused to participate in an efficient development of police surveillance and intelligence – three reasons I term, respectively, 'cultural', 'technological' and 'private'. While these reasons obviously differ in substance and scale, what nevertheless unites them is the fact that they are, frankly, fairly prosaic.

For example, a simple 'cultural' reason why the detectives did not fully engage with available surveillance and information technologies or foreign colleagues was that they harbored a rudimentary suspicion of the new. The detectives simply tended not to fully trust anyone or anything they had no experience of or that was outside their immediate collegial circle. Put differently, when gathering, sharing and using surveillance intelligence, they preferred to have a concrete and personal relationship to that intelligence and the people who produced it. When they did not (which is often the case

in both online and offline trans-/international police collaboration) the Danish detectives often decided not to act upon information from – nor themselves feed intelligence to – people they saw as more or less unknown colleagues. This commonplace police suspicion, and subsequent collaborative reluctance, is also something noted by other scholars researching international policing (cf. Lemieux, 2013; Franko and Gundhus, 2015).

Thirdly, the ‘technological’ reasons why the Danish detectives weren’t altogether onboard with various developments in police surveillance were perhaps even more banal. One reason here was the simple fact that most Danish police had not received the required amount of training to be able to fully use the surveillance equipment and computer programs given to them. The Danish detectives were indeed sometimes sent away for a day or two’s training in how to use a newly acquired technology, thus allowing for the record to show that they had the skills. Yet, in reality, as one detective admitted, and as it was mirrored in her workday,

we get these introductory classes, learn a little, but then forget most of it as we rarely use it. I mean, I sit there in front of the screen in good faith, but, really, it’s difficult to master a complex computer program when you only have a couple of hours’ worth of training. In our everyday work, this means that we rarely use many of the programs.

Another prosaic reason for their failure was the sheer number of computer programs they were meant to use. I, for example, once asked a detective to list the programs that were at his service in his job as a transnational crime investigator. He quickly listed more than 10 and added that several others existed. And as he said,

All the programs and registers – or at least most of them – are different from each other. They do different things and they are operated differently. You need to remember all sorts of manuals by heart. This of course makes it all very confusing. To be frank, this is also why I only use 3, 4 or maybe 5 of them. I just can't be bothered doing more. And they [the police organization] keep on introducing new ones, so there's plenty to look forward to!<sup>5</sup>

His words were followed by a satirical sigh – a sigh and sentiment of analytical importance, yet nevertheless easy to miss when weighed against the detectives' and the management's otherwise outspoken celebration of new surveillance and information technologies.

Of course, some surveillance and information technologies were used and treasured. And the detectives will certainly master more of them as time progresses. Nevertheless, in their present workday, their use of would-be Orwellian technologies is a far cry from the doctrines and discourses on surveillance often advanced by the police themselves and in the academic literature. The Danish detectives, in other words, ostensibly agreed with the headlines in terms of the need to use new technologies, yet due to rather rudimentary technological problems, they often avoided doing what needed to be done (cf. Sheptycki, 2004; Manning, 2008).

A final reason why the detectives weren't so efficiently committed to certain surveillance developments had to do with what I also touched upon in this paper's introductory vignette. As described there, the detectives were, initially, passionate about getting intelligence registered on foreign-national suspects. Yet, while passionate, and

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<sup>5</sup> Recently, however, and after ending my field study, the Danish Police have introduced a computer program [POLINTEL] able to communicate with and search multiple registers and databases. Where this has definitely made the detectives' job easier, they still report that they feel overwhelmed, undertrained and unable to use the available technologies.

even furious about the risk of the suspects escaping justice, the detectives rarely registered anything. Instead, they had personal matters to attend to. This could be, as described, something out of the ordinary like a date. Most often though, the detectives simply had to leave surveillance and intelligence-work behind because they had to pick up their kids, go grocery shopping, prepare dinner, meet a friend, go to the gym, etc. And sometimes they just couldn't be bothered as they were too tired or because they had done too much overtime. The detectives were, in other words, not like your movie detective who neglects personal and mental matters in a crazed call of duty. Most of them, like most of us, tried to be both good professionals and good partners, friends and parents and, yes, good to themselves. Such an everyday consideration – this familiar balancing act – frequently made them leave work and, hence, leave otherwise needed surveillance procedures behind. As a detective tellingly told me, 'that's how it is, no? Most of the time, nothing's more important than minding your kid. We have duties as police officers, but also many important duties at home'.

In this way, although the detectives did see the Orwellian allure of shadowing criminals across borders, more ordinary matters frequently won their attention. Truly, what this points to is the banal yet inevitable fact that in workaday life the plain often outplays the plan, the daily grind the grandiosity of a surveillance apparatus.

### ***Counterterrorism and Everyday Life***

The third and last example of why a greater focus on the everyday of policing is of importance concerns what may be described as an extracurricular aspect of the Danish detectives' work (see also Author 2019b). Like many other police units in Denmark and elsewhere, the detectives increasingly had to participate in activities beyond their official job description. In other words, the units I studied increasingly had to both investigate

transnational criminal activity as well as contribute to various forms of counterterrorism and anti-radicalization activities – the former as their principal employment, the latter as an ever-present addendum. The reason why this was demanded of them was the 2015 terrorist attack in Copenhagen by Omar El-Hussein and, more generally, the general fear and threat of terror following a number of attacks in cities within and outside Europe. Because of this, the detectives were, for example, asked always to carry their firearms (something they didn't normally do), to frequent the shooting range more often, always to wear protective vests when leaving the station and always to keep their badge visible. They were also ordered to keep an eye out for any possible signs of radicalization when interacting with suspects, witnesses, victims and the general public. And, leaving the biggest mark on their workday, they were frequently ordered to leave their caseload and to, instead, report for antiterror guard duty or border control. In this way, policing terrorism wasn't merely a minor, stress-free addendum to their investigations, it had a practical, daily presence.

That not just official counterterrorism units but all kinds of criminal justice police units have increasingly been asked to participate in the policing of terrorism has been described in other influential publications (cf. McCulloch, 2001; Stuntz, 2002; Pickering, 2004; Kraska, 2007; Deflem, 2010; Sentas, 2014). Crudely put, most of these focus on how such a spread of counterterrorism efforts is slowly but surely turning the police into a 'blue army' (McCulloch, 2001) or 'militarizing' the police (Kraska, 2007). The police, both inside and outside Denmark, have indeed been given quite extensive additional legal and material resources to fight terrorism – a militarization well captured in the term 'war on terrorism' (ibid). In this way, it makes sense to talk about how fears of terrorism have furthered a more armed, combative and often intrusive police presence in many places around the world. Furthermore, as others have argued, this has led to a

‘normalization of the exceptional’ (Flyghed, 2002) among not only police but other stakeholders such as politicians and the media. Put differently, policing actors more or less explicitly market and perhaps even exaggerate the everyday dangers of terrorism whilst simultaneously pointing to themselves as the solution (ibid). Such growing police militarization and fear-mongering obviously have a positive effect on the police as an institution as they get an increasing amount of funding and validation. Yet, as studies have also shown (cf. Pickering 2004), it often comes at a cost to already marginalized groups in society who increasingly find themselves on the receiving end of the police’s new powers.

While it would be fair to say that the Danish police – as an institution and organization – have benefited from the war on terror through public validation, increased funding, new pervasive surveillance technologies and the extensive discretionary powers that have been given to them, it would not be fair to say that these benefits are evenly distributed across the police force. For example, if you work in a designated counterterrorism unit you will probably find the war on terror to be professionally productive. But if you work in most other conventional criminal justice unit, the odds are that the increasing focus on terrorism will be seen more as a hindrance than a help. A few, somewhat marginal studies, including my own, have pointed this out (Stuntz, 2002; Deflem 2010, Author 2019), thereby critiquing the prevailing story in police research and criminology that the police (both the organization and its officers) *per se* benefit from, and even enjoy, becoming this ‘blue army’ (McCulloch, 2001). Indeed, in studies of police norms and values (or police culture) there is tendency to assume that police officers always appreciate the possibility of becoming more combative (cf. Loftus 2009, Bowling and Sheptycki 2012).

Among the Danish detectives, however, this joy hadn't manifested itself. Quite the contrary. Ostensibly, they had become more militarized. They were receiving more combat training; they were always armed, sometimes not only with handguns but with machine guns; they had been given the right to actively and intrusively seek out possible terrorist suspects and they increasingly found themselves part of a professional setting which considered certain outsiders to be dangerously lawless and certain insiders, themselves, to be the last bastion of defense. These, again, are all things that police researchers would normally expect to reinforce police officers' values and sense of worth (op cit). However, what my ethnographic study showed me was a sense among the detectives, and most of their frontline colleagues, that their job was becoming not more but less worthwhile. As I conclude in the aforementioned article, one may say that the (Danish) police were undeniably becoming a 'blue army', yet with the emphasis on the first part of the idea.

The question, of course, is why they were feeling blue and mired, rather than armed and mobilized. There are many answers to this question. Most of them are surprisingly ordinary and therefore, perhaps, largely unnoticed in the literature. For example, when increasingly sanctioned to carry weapons, protective vests and other symbols of police power, the detectives found this not only unnecessary but often at odds with their ideas about what detective work entails and how a detective should carry himself/herself (see Manning (2006)). They often preferred to look like civilians and, as one detective told me, 'I therefore remove all that shit, weapon, vest and so on, as soon as I'm out of sight. It doesn't work when you want to interact with the public that you look like a cop on steroids or the armed forces.'

It wasn't only the paramilitary paraphernalia that concerned them. It was also the many extra counterterrorist tasks that they were ordered to carry out that frustrated them. 'For example,' a detective explained,

'I came into work today, knowing that I had this case I wanted to work on only to be told to put my uniform on and go stand on some random street corner for the entire day with a machine gun, looking like a fool. I mean, just like the other day, and the day before that, this means that I won't get any real work done. No suspects will be caught, no victims will be helped, and my pile of cases just grows. This happens all the time these days. Ask any colleague of mine. This terror thing is important, of course, but it's ruining Danish police'.

It wasn't just the fact that they were asked to stand guard instead of solving cases that felt professionally disheartening. Every so often, they went onto high alert when reports about possible terror threats came in. Yet during the many hundreds of hours I spent with the Danish detectives, not a single one of these reports amounted to an act of terrorism. One case, for instance, involved shootings between two criminal groupings in a mall east of Copenhagen. Another case involved a mentally ill man who had tied himself up inside a train at Copenhagen Central Station depot, claiming he had been assaulted by two would-be terrorists who had talked about bombing the railway station. Both of these cases proved to be not cases of terrorism but "conventional" criminal justice cases. Nevertheless, 'because of the general fear of terrorism,' a TFP superintendent told me and the detectives, who had been called into his office just when they reported for work, 'we have to react to even the slightest hint of terrorism, even when we before would have used our good common sense to rule it out. This means,' he concluded, 'that you have to cancel today's activities and be ready to help out if need be'.

That the demands put on the detectives and their colleagues were experienced as largely detrimental to their profession wasn't the only cause for concern. An even bigger concern was how it troubled their personal lives. As they were repeatedly told to report for work, with little or no warning, they had a hard time holding things together at home. This led one detective to speak out in frustration, saying that 'this is a home wrecker. My wife has had it with having to carry all the weight and cancel her things just because my phone suddenly rings'. This was something I frequently heard the detectives complain about. To be sure, that they were feeling tremendously strained by the war on terror was (and still is) also reflected in the extraordinarily large amount of overtime they were amassing and a growing number of absences for illness.

What all this tells us is that the police, in this case two Danish detective units, do not unswervingly, or at least evenly, benefit from or revel in a growing mobilization against terrorism as well as other societal threats increasingly singled out by politicians, pundits and police management not only in Denmark but around the world. Quite the contrary. As Deflem (2010) has also suggested, to many frontline police officers the war on terror is not really seen as a war but as wearisome. However, this is a conclusion rarely encountered in the literature, even when it builds on ethnographic studies. The reason for this, as this article concerns itself with, has much to do with the lack of attention paid to the less extreme and evocative aspects of terrorism policing. Indeed, when we engage more directly with the quotidian lives of the police – with smaller yet significant things like their feelings about having to wear a protective vest, or endure routine interruptions to their workflow and difficulties in their domestic lives – researchers come across a different story. In this case, this is a story about a profession which, seen from the outside, is rallying against a variety of 'transnational folk devils' (Morgan and Poynting, 2012),

but really, seen from a day-to-day inside perspective, is somewhat disheartened and even disintegrating.

### **Police Ethnography and Everyday Life**

The above amply illustrates the significance of ‘the everyday’ to policing practice and perception – and hence also to police research. Indeed, as all of the three provided examples show, workaday life is not only an inert and serviceable background against which more serious instantiations of policing can be played out. Mundane matters, of both professional as well as private sorts, not only underscore larger and important aspects of policing (such as xenophobia, surveillance and counterterrorist activities), they also seep into them and shape them.

With this in mind, the following section of the paper aims to further elaborate on how the analytical-cum-theoretical significance of everyday life has/hasn’t been fully appreciated in police research. Ostensibly, police research in itself is most-certainly founded on the methodological premise of ‘being there’ (cf. Bacon et al., 2020), of indeed being part of everyday police life. It is so, because, as Van Maanen has perhaps most sharply put it,

if we are to gain insight into the police environment, researchers must penetrate the official smokescreen and observe directly the social action in social situations which, in the final analysis, represents the reality of police work. While observation of the police in naturally occurring situations is difficult, lengthy and often threatening, it is imperative (Van Maanen, 1973: 5)

This methodological imperative of *in situ* ethnographic observations has been with us for more than half a century now, during which many renowned researchers have taken to

the streets, offices, canteens and elsewhere to observe policing practice and perceptions. In this article, I'm not going to go into much detail in terms of the scope and breadth of such police ethnographies – something which has already been done excellently by others (Reiner and Newburn, 2007; Innes, 2010; Manning, 2014; Björk, 2018; Bacon et al., 2020).

Reciting some of the classics, it may however be worth noticing how, for example, Banton (1964) in his now more than 50-year-old monograph on *The policeman in the community* applied an ethnographic approach to exactly home in on the everyday functions that made the British 'bobby' such a cherished and useful part of society – and thus something Banton believed that other societal institutions could learn from (cf. Reiner, 2010). In many ways, this was a study replicated by Cain (2015: [1973]) some ten years later, yet with her asking the opposite question, namely why attitudes towards the police had changed and what this meant for the police's role in society. Similarly, "across the pond", Bittner (1970) was trying to make sense of *The functions of police in modern society*, famously concluding that they were defined by their capacity to use coercive force – a capacity also scrutinized and criticized in Skolnick's work on *Justice Without Trial* (2011: [1966]). Continuing through the 1970s, scholars, now more inspired by the Chicago School and symbolic interactionism, such as Manning (1977), Punch (1979) and Van Maanen (1978b), started to pay ethnographic attention not only to the societal function of the police but more so to the everyday encounters the police engaged in and how such daily 'drama' was scripted, played out and affected the police and the policed (an ethnographic attention to everyday encounters we will later return to).

As noted by many a policing researcher, these early ethnographies' core sociological interest in the (mal)functions and interactions of, especially, the patrolling police laid the bedrock for many ethnographies to come that also examined issues such

as frontline police discretion, culture and its consequences (see for example Westley, 1970; Reiss, 1973; Muir, 1979; Holdaway, 1983; Bayley, 1990; Finstad, 2000; Holmberg, 2003; Loader and Mulcahy, 2003; Granér, 2004; Sollund, 2007; Loftus, 2009; Garriott, 2011; Hornberger, 2011; Fassin, 2013; Jauregui, 2016; Karpiak and Garriott, 2018; Martin, 2019; Mutsaers, 2019)<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, ethnographic studies of detective work (cf. Ericson, 1981; Innes, 2003; Bacon, 2017; Fyfe et al., 2017; Feldman, 2019), covert/undercover policing (cf. Marx, 1988; Loftus et al., 2015), police management (cf. Reuss-Ianni, 1983; Fleming, 2015; Valland, 2015), and more recently, of border/migration policing (Weber, 2013; Bosworth, 2014; Andersson, 2014; 2019; Maguire et al., 2014; Loftus, 2015; Gashi et al., 2019; Franko, 2019; Gundhus and Jansen, 2019; Aliverti, 2020) as well as more inter- and transnational (cf. Sheptycki, 2000; 2002; Lemieux, 2013; Stalcup, 2013; Franko and Gundhus, 2015) and even plural forms of policing (Jones and Newburn, 2006) have also been produced through a serious ethnographic involvement in policing actors' workaday lives.

### ***An Analytical Attention to Everyday Life***

What this clearly demonstrates is that there already exist countless ethnographic and observational approaches to policing – and that these include an apparent involvement with the everyday life of policing. To be sure, this was recently confirmed in a two-part edited volume on *Ethnography and the Evocative World of Policing* (Bacon et al., 2020) – a volume which beautifully reiterates and reemphasizes the importance and productiveness of 'being there'; the researcher being present in the ebbs and flows of the police's daily doings. As its editors indeed write in their Introduction: 'Ethnography has proved to be a crucial methodology for entering and understanding the world of policing

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<sup>6</sup> A much better and bigger overview can be found in Manning's (2014) essay 'Police Ethnographies'

[...] rendering visible the everyday realities and related meanings that lie at the heart of policing life.’ (ibid: 1,2).

Bearing the existing abundance of *in situ* police ethnography in mind, it may thus seem silly for me to now argue that there has been a lack of scholarly interest in the everyday life of policing. All of the aforementioned researchers have surely spent many days and hours being part of the actual police workday. This goes without saying. Yet, being this paper’s central argument, there is a significant difference to be pointed out between ‘being there’ – of being part of everyday life – as an ethnographic method *vis-à-vis* that of also actively focusing on everyday life as its own particular reservoir of analytical reasoning.

In here pointing to and developing this difference, I follow the recent train of thought developed by Fassin in his writings on the Parisian police (Fassin, 2013; 2017b). What Fassin argues is that, while it is true that police researchers since Westley have been present in everyday policing and have taken notice of the existence of many ordinary and even banal aspects of policing, they have frequently failed to pursue more carefully the analytical importance of such trivialities (2017b). Put differently, police ethnographers have indeed ‘been there’ with their bodies, yet, with their minds, they have usually been more keenly focused on the larger rather than “smaller” run-of-the-mill issues of policing (ibid).

### ***Boredom and Other Banalities of Policing***

In the anthology entitled *Writing the World of Policing*, Fassin (2017b) thus lays out what he finds to be one of the most central criminological contributions of an ethnographic ethos, namely the ‘paradoxical discovery of the obvious’ (Fassin, 2017b) (see also Fassin 2017a: 297). As he contends, it is the ethnographers ‘commitment to the everyday and

the ordinary' (2017b) which leads her to see beyond the most evident and evocative aspects of policing (and other phenomena, for that matter).

Fassin explains this 'commitment' through his ethnographic study of the Parisian police. In particular, he does so in emphasizing the surprising theoretical importance of police 'boredom' (2017a). Although other police ethnographers have surely noticed that police work includes much downtime and many moments of ennui, none before him, he argues, have tried to engage with this finding analytically. Yet, in taking an otherwise humdrum aspect of policing such as boredom seriously as both an empirical fact and as an analytical matter, he demonstrates how the multiple hours the Parisian officers spent waiting for something to happen were in fact a key ingredient in their very aggressive ways. More specifically, given that a discrepancy existed between the official and outwardly exhilarating idea of their police work (i.e. countering urban riots and disorder) and the actual uneventfulness of their workday reality, the Parisian officers were increasingly inclined 'to take advantage of any minor event, to transform it into an engrossing expedition and try to turn it into a possible offense' (Fassin 2013:632). Like suddenly released potential energy, the seemingly banal boredom Parisian police so often felt consequently became a crucial culprit in police violence.

In this way, Fassin's demonstration of how not just an action-oriented, macho, aggressive or even xenophobic police culture, but also something as mundane as tedium, can provoke police brutality becomes a good example of what a not just methodological but *analytical* focus on everyday life may bring to the table. This 'discovery of the ordinary' obviously strongly resonates with the earlier empirical examples drawn from the Danish police. Here, I too demonstrated how regularly overlooked mundane matters – be it vocational weariness, trivial routines, ordinary technological problems, random chatter, clothing issues or largely elementary personal matters – greatly affected areas of

policing which weren't in any way mundane. In other words, I much agree with Fassin's unfortunately largely unnoticed assertion that many ordinary aspects of policing 'may not have benefitted from all the attention [they] deserve [...] as a banal fact of life' even though they are 'key to [our] understanding' (2015).

### *Other Analytical Antecedents*

While the above may be one of the most programmatic declarations, it is of course not entirely exclusive in its emphasis on the importance of a focused analytical attention to the more quotidian aspects of policing. Historically, this emphasis can also be detected in the aforementioned interactionist studies of policing carried out by researchers such as Manning (1977; 1978), Van Maanen (1978b; 1978a) and Punch (1979). Explaining the importance of grounding police research in the everyday lives and encounters of our research subjects, Manning, for instance, proposed a police ethnography principally

committed to the notion that social life is both fragile and negotiated – is built up and affirmed almost daily in interactional encounters – while at the same time appreciating the pattern in life that comes from the inertia that social structures possess and are continuously granted (Manning 1977: 29).

Punch, in his work on the Amsterdam police, similarly went a long way to emphasize the analytical importance of the workaday existence of police officers. For Punch, doing so provided a way for us researchers to fully understand not only the publicly staged rhetoric or drama of policing but, also, 'the daily dramas of policing' (1978: 258). He thus furthered a way by which to investigate policing and police officers not just as expressions of a generalizable sociological entity – as a structural representational proxy – but both

as ‘individual[s], [c]ompanion[s] and [m]ember[s] of a group’ (ibid) – as multifaceted human beings working as police rather than just being police.

An ardent analytical focus on everyday life can also be found in a few newer ethnographies. For example, it is central to Feldman’s work on the moral complexity of transnational crime investigations (2019), it is part and parcel of Jauregui’s (2016) study of police corruption in India and it lies at the heart of Martin’s (2019) analysis of Taiwanese police culture through his ethnography of something as utterly mundane as tea-drinking sessions. Similarly, Smith (2009) has excellently illustrated how issues of policing and surveillance must also be examined by looking at the actual daily practices and perceptions of seemingly Orwellian actors – a quotidian approach which often brings forth less Orwellian narratives (see also Monahan, 2011; Friesen et al., 2012).

In this way, a call for not only a methodological but a greater *analytical* attention to everyday life in policing research surely has its antecedents and associates. In the grand scheme of things, these are however few and far between. This is, in a nutshell, the unfortunate dry spot which this paper has sought to point to and quench.

## **Conclusion**

Everyday aspects of police work need to be taken seriously as an analytical object in their own right. In this paper, I have summarized and synthesized similar arguments made by a few other police ethnographers yet, first and foremost, I have provided my own empirical examples to clearly illustrate why such an analytical approach is productive. In many ways, this paper can therefore be seen as somewhat of a conceptual condensation of my ethnographic approach to policing research. Indeed, as the examples taken from my ethnographic study of the Danish Police show, an analytical attention to seemingly humdrum matters includes the surprising possibility of explaining very essential issues in

contemporary police research. For example, a careful consideration of various aspects of police officers' workaday lives – both on and off the job – may help explain why the police harbor and develop negative attitudes toward foreign nationals, how they contribute (or rather don't) to a growth in the practice and technology of surveillance as well as explaining how they (with much hesitation) relate to the widespread fear of terrorism and what this is doing to their job.

Now, what unites these explanations, beyond their theoretical genesis in everyday life, is that they all stray from predominant analytical approaches to the subject available in the literature – analyses that however also regularly stem from extensive ethnographic encounters. Therefore, if I had “merely” followed prevalent ethnographic ways of dissecting my ethnographic material – and hadn't followed the call of Fassin and others for a ‘descent into the ordinary’ (2017b) (see also Das, 2006) – I would not have been able to offer up such additional mundane explanations. This, effectively, substantiates the merits of paying better analytical attention to everyday life. Indeed, if such “quotidianism” is further developed in police research, it may, I would argue, reveal a whole new range of “ordinary” explanations of police practice and perceptions which are currently evading our scholarly inspection. And who knows, maybe this is also true for other strands of criminological thought(?) – strands which often, compared to police research, have an even scarcer ethnographic and everyday focus.

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