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Making sense of violent encounters: Exploring psychological, professional, and sociological (non-)understandings of security guard use of force

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore experiences of security guard violence in Sweden. Based on 15 in-depth interviews with citizens who have been exposed to the use of force, the analysis is guided by the following question: How are violent encounters with security guards in Sweden to be understood? The article highlights questions of race, class, and gender. It draws from the literature on police violence, transferring and developing its insights to the field of private policing. Adopting a multidimensional approach, the analysis differentiates between psychological, professional, and sociological explanations of the violence used by security guards, identifying a fourth frame: non-understandings. An argument advanced is that women in general and white women in particular grapple with their vulnerability in such situations.

Keywords

private policing, security guards, violent encounters, victim narratives, racism

Introduction

Across the globe, the private security industry has expanded its role and presence in society (Fitzgibbon & Lea, 2020). In Sweden – the empirical focus of this article – it has become normalized when shopping, traveling, and strolling in the city centre, as well as in residential areas, to see security guards on patrol (Brandén, 2023). In pace with this development, recurring public scandals have pursued the industry, with repeated accusations of violence. In this regard, the Black Lives Matter movement in Sweden has been successful in highlighting the fact that ethnic minorities and racialized groups in particular are at risk (Jämte et al., 2020).

Public safety demands have legitimized the expansion of the private security industry (Hansen Lövstrand, 2021). However, in parallel, concerns have been raised regarding the outsourcing of the ‘dirty work’ of front-line policing (Hansen Lövstrand et al., 2018). Debates have not least been focused on the duration of the training of security guards, and from January 2024 a new law doubled the 80 hours previously required in order to be granted the mandate to apprehend, dismiss, and remove people with force if perceived necessary.

Empirically, this study departs from 15 in-depth interviews with citizens who have been exposed to the use of force by security guards and have found it excessive. The following question guides the analysis: How are violent encounters with the security guards in Sweden to be understood? Theoretically, the article draws from the literature on police violence (Klockars, 1996), transferring and developing its insights to the field of private policing. Attuned to different power relations enforced by policing (Crenshaw et al., 2015), with a particular interest in questions of racism (Kelley, 2016), the focus in this article is on the violence work of security guards (Seigel, 2018). Adopting a narrative approach (Sandberg, 2022), the aim is to advance the understanding of security guards' physical violence from the perspective of those subjected to it.

The significance of this focus should be assessed in relation to the remarkable lack of studies in the Nordic region that explore the viewpoints of those policed by security guards (Saarikkomäki, 2018). The criminological relevance of this contribution – its one-sided interest in negative experiences at the hands of security guards – must also be understood against the background of the repressive turn that Sweden has taken (Tham, 2022). In a political context, where organizations such as Civil Rights Defenders (2022) have raised concerns regarding the lack of respect for basic legal principles and human rights when the state rapidly expands the powers of policing agents, it is vital for academics to critically examine the potential consequences for vulnerable populations.

In what follows, with the aim of clarifying the focus on racism, the article continues by contextualizing the Black Lives Matter movement in Sweden, showing that it mobilized partly as a reaction to Afro-Swedes' violent encounters with security guards.

Black Lives Matter and violent encounters with security guards

The Black Lives Matter movement grew as a reaction to police violence in the United States, shedding light on the suffocating nature of racism (Apata, 2020). According to critical scholars, an institutional racist system of policing was brought to the fore (Kelley, 2016). In Sweden, the murder of George Floyd also sparked protests. The demonstrations were an act of solidarity, but the ambition was also to address problems relating to policing *here*. A mobilizing factor was the widespread attention that two violent interventions attracted where security guards had targeted Afro-Swedes in Stockholm.

In January 2019, a 12-year-old boy was beaten severely by a security guard while celebrating his birthday with friends at a shopping mall (Swedish Television, 2019-01-20). Some weeks later, a pregnant woman and her young daughter were dragged out from a subway wagon (Swedish Television, 2019-02-01). Since then, an uneven stream of news reports has continued to place the topic of the violence used by security guards on the agenda. A new wave of discussion erupted in 2022 when a 47-year-old man was choked to death (Swedish Television, 2023-05-09). The lethal outcome of this tragedy is uncommon in the Swedish context. Understood as the tip of the iceberg, however, it underscores the need to explore more general, non-lethal experiences of violent encounters with security guards. So, what is known about this phenomenon?

In line with research on the traditional police, contributions show that the usual suspects exposed to disproportionate control measures used by security guards are the young, the poor, racialized groups, sexual and ethnic minorities, the socially disadvantaged in general, and particularly those with social problems, for example drug misusers (Markwick et al., 2015). Nonetheless, most international research engaging with questions of violence vis-à-vis the role of security guards begins from the perspectives of professionals. Scholars have tried to explain or contextualize the use of excessive force by security guards

as self-protective to avoid resorting to, and being exposed to, violence themselves (Koeppen & Hopkins, 2022, p. 2). Scholars have also analyzed how front-line professionals legitimize the use of force by mobilizing discursive resources in the form of neutralization techniques (Johnston & Kilty, 2016). Furthermore, they have focused on professionals' fear of crime (Paasonen & Aaltonen, 2020) and the psychological consequences for security guards of being exposed to work-related violence (Paasonen & Aaltonen, 2020).

In the Nordic countries, the research field on private security is growing in pace with the expanded use of security guards as a complement to, and sometimes as a replacement for, the traditional police (Brandén, 2023). The critical backdrop is contributions on the situational judgment of security personnel that underline that some categories of people are more at risk for control measures (Saarikkomäki & Kivivuori, 2016). On this issue, the ways in which order is enforced have been studied, mainly attuned to the 'soft' power of security guards (Kammersgaard, 2021).

When it comes to contributions engaging with problems concerning violence, Nordic scholarship on bouncers in nightlife settings has underscored the role of alcohol (Pedersen et al. 2016). Furthermore, researchers have highlighted efforts to reduce bouncer violence. It has been argued that the increased emphasis on private security personnel as providers of a service has transformed the working-class masculinity culture of the profession, demanding the development of emotional skills (Søgaard & Krause-Jensen, 2020).

While under-researched, there is a growing interest in the Nordic region in addressing problems relating to violent encounters with security guards from the perspective of those subjected to physical force. The division of labor between security guards and police creates a tension between the two professions, where the latter are only sometimes experienced at balancing the perceived overuse of force by the former (Schclarek Mulinari, 2023). In this regard, questions of race and racism play a key role. In an interview study from Finland with racialized minorities on interactions with security guards, three main types of stories are identified as part of racial profiling narratives. The most common concerns security guards following the interviewees when shopping. The second most important relates to security guards' negative behavior in the sense of being rude, aggressive, or unfair. The third typical type of story is about experiences of violent encounters (Keskinen et al., 2018).

Security guard violence and excessive force

The attempt to gain an understanding of experiences of security guard violence and its relation to perceptions of excessive use of physical force is at the heart of this study. A difficulty is that key concepts are contested. Security guards have a state-sanctioned right to use violence:

The security guard must in the first place try to talk sense into people, but may use violence if the task cannot be solved in any other way. It may not be a question of more force than is necessary to solve the task. (The Swedish Police, 2023, *my translation*)

Departing from this summary of Swedish regulation, security guard violence can be understood as legitimate up to the point that it violates necessity and proportionality, making these principles the defining criteria of excessive force. Another understanding of the phenomenon, extended in this article to the work of security guards, is that it concerns 'the use of more force than a highly skilled police officer would find necessary to use in that particular situation' (Klockars, 1996: 8). The value of this perspective, compared with those that emphasize that excessive physical force must be 'above the law' (Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993),

is that it centers on citizens' right to expect that they will be treated with the best professional practices. A difficulty with adopting this definition, nonetheless, is that it risks concealing oppressive structures inherent in policing, reducing the problem of violence to bad professionals. In contrast, if security guards are understood as part of the state 'mechanism for the distribution of situationally justified force in society', it is possible to address their violence work as part of the normalized proceedings of the current political system (Seigel, 2018, p. 26). This understanding, in turn, conflates violence and excessive violence, making it difficult to differentiate and address the nuances between the two.

The perspective adopted in this article is a triangulation of these different lines of thought. When discussing (un)necessary, (un)lawful, and/or (un)justified use of physical force, a range of causes has been identified, summarized in the following way:

It can spring from good intentions as well as bad, mistakes and misperceptions, lack of experience, overconfidence, momentary inattention, physical or mental fatigue, experimentation, inadequate or improper training, prejudice, passion, an urge to do justice or demonstrate bravery, misplaced trust, boredom, illness, a specific incompetence, or a hundred other factors that might influence an officer to behave in a particular situation in a less than expert way. (Klockars, 1996, p. 8)

These diverse factors have been categorized into three main theoretical frames: psychological, organizational, and sociological (Worden, 1996). Psychological theories of police violence and excessive use of force focus on individual matters such as behavioral predispositions, personality traits, educational background, and attitudes among officers. In this regard, General Strain Theory has been adapted to understand power abuse and violent coping strategies among officers that follow from the pressures on the job that are linked to negative emotional stimuli, for example anger, anxiety, rage, and depression (Bishop et al., 2020). While General Strain Theory underlines external forces that burden professionals, Angry Aggression Theory is occupied mainly with the internal, exclusively exploring the relation between violent responses to perceived threats among officers and their respective individual coping mechanisms to the dangers and stresses in the line of duty (Griffin & Bernard, 2003).

The second branch of perspectives are here translated to professional theories and are focused on work-related issues and the organizational context of the job. Scholars have argued that the most crucial reform to reduce police violence would be a system of incentives and disincentives with clear restrictions on the circumstances in which force is permitted, and when it must stop once it has started (Zimring, 2018). In addition, aspects related to the work environment have been pinpointed. For example, professional burnout has been identified as a predictor of aggressivity among police officers (Queirós et al., 2013). Within this type of theorization are also perspectives that emphasize that more aggressive and conflictual police strategies can lead to police brutality (Cooper, 2015). Furthermore, the role of culture has been stressed:

The street cop subculture supports the belief that excessive force can be an appropriate, or at least an understandable, response to threatening or disrespectful actions by certain groups of people. (Micucci & Gomme, 2005, p. 489)

Whether this representation of a professional subculture is adequate is a contested question. However, what has been described as the 'Dirty Harry problem' of policing – i.e., the image

of violent officers who do not respect the limits of the law – is a reminder of a strong cultural script that shapes perceptions among the public (Lawrence, 2023).

Sociological theories underline the relation between policing and power relations in society. While different views abound, these perspectives are united by their focus on political-economic relations that, in complex ways, policing enforces. The intersections between gender, race, and class are of particular interest, as well as factors such as age and functionality (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Aspects such as patriarchal structures and how these naturalize macho masculinities within policing have been discussed (Salem & Larkins, 2021). Problems of racism and class-based society have also come to occupy an absolutely central place in conversations about police violence and the excessive use of force, partly because progressive antiracist movements have a long history of organizing to combat it (Taylor, 2019). On this subject, critical scholars have linked state-sanctioned violence to a view of the state as an oppressive force where certain groups – predominantly poor, racialized working-class, and Indigenous – rather than being protected, are controlled and criminalized (Camp & Heatherton, 2016).

These three different explanatory models reflect different social understandings. However, they also shape them. For example, it has been suggested that the prominence of a discourse on racialized police violence has the consequence that ‘Whites are less likely than Blacks to label police assaults as manifestations of “brutality”, making their cases ‘less likely to attract widespread media attention’ (Russell, 2000, p. 141). The argument can be extended through a gender analysis, given that there is an androcentrism in discussions on police violence, where the experiences of black women and gender-nonconforming people have systematically been silenced (Ritchie, 2017). This accentuates the complicated relationship between what people experience, believe, say and know, and how things are narrated.

Methodology

The empirical material of this article is qualitative and based on in-depth interviews. For the project, 12 semi-structured individual interviews were carried out. In addition, one group interview was conducted with three participants. For the recruitment of the 15 research participants, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed. Six interviewees were identified through court judgments and media reports including critique of the violence used by security guards. Through calls on social media platforms and to civil society actors, five research participants were identified. In addition, four were identified through chain referral: some interviewees were helpful in connecting the researcher with others with similar experiences.

The main criterion guiding the selection process was to capture firsthand experiences of violent encounters with security guards. When recruiting participants, it was also key to take into consideration questions of race, class, and gender. Of the interviewees, nine are men, one is a transperson, four are women, and one identifies as non-binary. Their ages range from 16 to 45 years. Five of the interviewees are white, while the others are Afro-Swedes. The class position of the interviewees varies, some being well-established in their careers with high-status jobs and others belonging to the more precarious parts of the labor market.

Regarding the interviewees’ descriptions of events, their accounts are understood as victim narratives through which meaning is constructed. Thus, frames of understanding are viewed as part of discursive processes, informed by struggle and cultural scripts, rather than taken as objective fact (Sandberg, 2022). It should be noted that, when referring to the interviewees’ statements in the analysis, only general characteristics are detailed in order

to protect their anonymity. This ethical principle was communicated to the research participants before interviews were conducted, when they gave their informed consent to participate in the project. Also important to mention is that, within the scope of this research project, interviews were conducted with security guards. Because of the focus of this analysis, these interviews are not used here. However, future contributions will provide their perspectives on the matters discussed in this article, complementing and in some respects probably contrasting with the understandings advanced here.

The empirical material has been explored guided by thematic analysis. This methodology can be described as a ‘distillation process’ of extraction and reconstruction through which the researcher can both explore and then synthesize findings (Finlay, 2021, p. 103). It is a ‘family of methods’ divided by more or less interpretive descriptive approaches. The former emphasizes systematic and reliable coding procedures to minimize human subjectivity, while the latter emphasizes the role of reflexivity and creativity. The approach adopted here is pragmatic and follows the steps of ‘most qualitative researchers’ who have ‘at least a foot in each camp’ (Finlay, 2021, p. 105). The analytical work has progressed from description to interpretation with the attempt to theorize and provide solid arguments. To present excerpts from the interviews, and subsequently detail how these have been understood, is core to the reliability of the study as it allows outsiders to assess whether interpretations advanced are reasonable and relevant (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Specifically, the process of defining and naming themes has been guided theoretically. In the first instance, the interview material has been organized to show patterns, taking as its starting point the three types of understanding of police violence and excessive use of force described in previous sections: psychological, professional, and sociological (Worden, 1996). This top-down approach has strengths and limitations. On the one hand, it allows for the organization of the empirical material in a pedagogical way, enabling the analysis to deepen the understanding of experiences of the security guards’ violence. By using a tripartite theoretical lens, it is possible to make sense of the seemingly endless variety of possible causes of police violence (cf. Klockars, 1996). However, on the other hand, this approach, intended to capture a broad range of explanations that takes complexity into account, risks concealing aspects outside the theoretical frame of analysis.

Psychological understandings: ‘Please, you don’t have to take it to that’

The focus in the interviews was on the personal experiences of violent encounters with security guards. This produced detailed descriptions of events. One of the interviewees explained the following:

I was out with a couple of friends at a nightclub, all of us black. We were very happy, hyped. We had been dancing, so we just got out to get some air. You could really see that one of the guards was targeting my friend: ‘You’re too loud, you need to go.’ ... So, we started arguing with the security guard. But it was not possible to talk to him in a reasonable way. He started pushing my friend, and I begged: ‘Please, you don’t have to take it to that – we can get out of here.’ And when we’re on our way out, four security guards jump me, some fly at her. And it’s this classic ‘Don’t resist’, while they push you down. They held my hands and dragged me along the ground. ... I was abused. It was sadistic: you could really tell that one of them especially was enjoying it. (Man, 35)

A ‘hyped’ party night ends with the interviewee and his companion being ‘pushed’ and ‘dragged’. The interviewee represents the violent encounter as he and his friends being

'abused' by the security guards who demand that they do not 'resist'. The 'classic' identified is the forked tongue that is the language of power. According to the view expressed, a factor prior to the violence is the fruitless dialogue with a specific security guard: 'it was not possible to talk to him'. From that point things escalate: 'He started pushing my friend'. Revealing in the narrative advanced is that the violence experienced is portrayed as 'sadistic'. In line with psychological theories of excessive force, the understanding of the violent encounter takes hold of a personality trait. Even though the interviewee describes that he 'begged' and that they were at least partly complying, proposing that 'we can get out of here', physical interaction follows. Rather than echoing Angry Aggression Theory with its focus on violent responses as the consequence of perceived external threats (Griffin & Bernard, 2003), or studies focused on fear of crime among policing professionals as the catalyst of violence (Paasonen & Aaltonen, 2020), the driving force of the security guard, according to the interviewee, is that he is 'enjoying it'. However, because narratives can be used to represent events in a way that reinforces a positive view of oneself, obscuring negative aspects (Sandberg, 2022) an argument can be made that the interviewee is drawing from a cultural script, describing a Dirty Harry of private policing that reinforces the dichotomy between good and bad (Lawrence, 2023).

Even if psychological theories can be distilled from the empirical material, these can only be separated from professional and sociological theories of police violence and excessive use of force at an abstract level. In this narrative, several security guards are responsible for the force inflicted on the interviewee and his friend. Given that the violence first erupts when they are on their 'way out' – i.e., when they were complying with the demand of the security guard – it can be observed that the professionals are described as using more force than necessary in the situation, contrary to imperatives of best practices (Klockars, 1996). The experience of the interviewee, part of a group where all are 'black', also points toward the need to explore broader sociological processes that preceded the violence. 'You could really see that one of the guards was targeting my friend'. Although the motives for the control cannot be determined, the practices of racial profiling are described (Keskinen et al., 2018).

There is an interconnectedness of psychological, professional, and sociological theories in the narratives of the interviewees, and it is impossible to differentiate between these other than at an abstract level. The following excerpt underscores this by capturing how an interviewee, a soccer coach, understands what preceded the violent encounter with the security guard. The interaction ends with him being violently handled, and still suffering from pain more than a year later:

They'll never admit it, but I'm almost certain the trigger was them not being able to make sense of the situation. They didn't think I knew these guys when I walked up to them [at a restaurant]. ... I had just gone in and was standing at their table. I was not sitting down, because I was on the move. I just wanted to say goodbye. So, we are chatting a little. Then he [the security guard] comes up to me and orders me to leave. I didn't even have time to be in there for two minutes. (Man, 42)

The 'guys' he's talking about are players that he trains. They are all about half his age and, unlike him, they are white. The 'trigger' that precedes the interaction and the subsequent violence that follows within a timeframe of 'two minutes' is that the security guards are not 'able to make sense of the situation'. The confusion that was identified, that 'they'll never admit', occurs at the psychological level. According to the interviewee, it challenges the way that the security guards 'think' to see an older black man cross an imagined Swedish color

line. To understand why saying goodbye while black and ‘on the move’ is a risky operation, the focus must be turned toward the ways that normality is defined, and how those reacted upon as disturbers of order are handled by professionals.

Professional understandings: ‘I want to talk to you – come out’

In several accounts, the interviewees describe the use of force that would have been avoidable had the security guards chosen a different approach. An example is provided by an interviewee who suffers from a health condition that affects his behavior:

I had been with my girlfriend in [name of a city] and then my sensor had gone off. I have diabetes. So, I needed urgently to go to my place in [name of a different city], and during the train ride I don’t notice that my blood sugar is low, and that I’ve gotten confused. ... When I wake up, I’m in [name of a third city] lying on the ground with a security guard on top of me, and I feel pain in my back and that I’m bleeding along my arms. ... It is difficult to say what happened – I was not conscious; I had passed out. But I guess the security guards thought I was drunk or something because they said that I had been dancing by the boat terminal. (Man, 25)

According to the interviewee, his condition was severe. Instead of medical treatment, he wakes up ‘bleeding’, with a security guard causing him ‘pain’. Whether this violence is the consequence of bad intentions, incompetence, lack of experience, lack of training, or any other of the possible factors, cannot be clarified because the interviewee ‘was not conscious’ during the encounter with the security guards. He ‘had passed out’. Therefore, it is possible that the security guards acted in accordance with professional imperatives. Nevertheless, the ‘guess’ of the interviewee is that the security guards are orienting in the situation without proper knowledge which would have explained his behavior, and even protected him. Resembling patterns identified in the ways security guards limit the access to healthcare of drug misusers, he has been treated as a ‘drunk’ (Markwick et al., 2015). One analysis is that the source of the violence lies in a form of misrecognition, a feature that is also touched upon by another interviewee:

I was at a club and needed to go to the bathroom. ... There is a small queue. On the left, there are doors that tilt, and you can see inside. You can see that it’s a urinal, and there’s some guy there. And the regular toilets also have visibility. So, I don’t want to sit there. It would feel completely insane. ... I continue in the queue. I don’t remember exactly but [an employee says]: ‘this is the women’s section’, or something like that. ... I tell him that I [as a transperson] have the right to stand there, and like ‘mind your own’. And then he leaves, and I just think ‘nice’. ... A girl comes out of the toilet and she just: ‘the handle is a bit broken, the door can’t be locked very well’. I thank her and reply that I prefer this than no door at all. I go in and sort of perform my needs. When I am zipping my pants, the door is pulled open. And then I see that the man [the employee] is back with a guard who is shouting at me: ‘I want to talk to you – come out.’ (Transperson, 30)

At the heart of the narrative, which continues with a description of a violent altercation that leaves the interviewee with a broken arm, is the question of transgender rights. An observation, in parallel to the idea that the security guards enforce an imagined Swedish color line, is that they aid in the upholding of a binary gender system (Crenshaw et al., 2015). As with the previous example, it is not possible to deduce what exactly initiated the reaction of the security guard. Still, the interviewee describes how, during the conversation with the employee, he explains that he has ‘the right to stand there’, even if it is in the ‘women’s

section.' Even so, the employee goes to fetch the guard, who then acts on the information received. 'I want to talk to you – come out,' the security guard orders after having 'pulled open' the door to the bathroom while he is 'zipping' his pants. The sudden invasion of privacy is followed by a 'shouting' security guard. This detail is especially salient because it captures that the interviewee does not represent that the security guard just wants to 'talk' to him, following the standard procedure for security guards (The Swedish Police, 2023). Rather, he describes a conflictual policing strategy, a feature that has been identified as causing police brutality (Cooper, 2015). In several of the interviewees' accounts an unnecessary aggressiveness is described, as well as the dramatic escalation of situations. A young woman provides an example from a bar night:

Me and another girl go out and have a cigarette. And then during that time two guards have started working and are standing at the door. ... We are about to go back inside and then the security guy stops us: 'Your friend is too drunk.' I didn't want any trouble, so I'm just asking if I can go in and tell our friends that we need to go. He sneers at me and says: 'No, you can't.' And then only a few seconds pass before he starts shouting, 'She spat on me three times.' Two of them wrestle me to the ground and handcuff me. They hold me, pull my arms up, so it feels like they're about to dislocate. I panic and start screaming. Then they drag me across the street, slam me into a wall while he kind of pushes his body against me so I hit my head. (Woman, 20)

The violent encounter with the security guard is preceded in the narrative by her asking for permission to 'tell our friends that we need to go'. The security guard, rather than responding in a nice tone, 'sneers' at her. Then he comes up with a false statement, according to her: that she spat on him 'three times'. If not true, the security guard oversteps his mandate by mobilizing an illegitimate discursive resource, a mirror behavior to the self-protection skills that are developed by security guards to avoid resorting to violence (Paasonen & Aaltonen, 2020). From the perspective of the interviewee, the security guard's accusation can be understood as a neutralization technique that works by denying that there is a victim (Johnston & Kilty, 2016). The spitting turns her into a perpetrator, making it possible for the security guard to disclaim responsibility for the violence that follows and mobilize the collective violence to be used by his fellow professionals.

However, given that it is a real problem in the line of work of security guards to be spat at (Koeppen & Hopkins, 2022) and that alcohol was a factor in the situation, the accusation should be taken seriously, as alcohol has been identified as likely to escalate conflicts (Pedersen et al., 2016). If true, a question is whether the violent response is on a par with the alleged crime, or if a less conflictual approach could have been more productive. Is this violence outside the law, or within its justified confines, adhering to principles of necessity and proportionality (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993)? Either way, the interviewee describes how she enters a state of 'panic' while the security guards 'drag', 'slam', and 'push' her around. From her perspective, the non-verbal approach of the security guard resembles what has been described as a violent 'street cop subculture' that legitimizes the use of excessive force against what are considered disrespectful people (Micucci & Gomme, 2005). Analytically striking is the gendered physical power asymmetry. An interpretation is that the interviewee's narrative relies on the representation of herself as powerless victim, and on the understanding of the security guards as carriers of a macho masculinity characterized by their resorting to violence rather than to dialogue when solving problems (Salem & Larkins, 2021). Another interpretation is that there are underlying and unspoken tensions in the narrative between what can be characterized as the representation of a white middle-class femininity and a

racialized working-class masculinity given the background characters of the interviewee and the security guards (Søgaard & Krause-Jensen, 2020). From this perspective, the victim narrative can be understood as reinforcing preconceptions about gender, race, and class.

While the empirical material accentuates the significance of exploring the professional culture and the manner in which security guards manage their tasks in ways that escalate problems, the interviewees' experiences also point toward the need to engage with the overall professional context. A young man living in one of Sweden's most socially disadvantaged neighborhoods provides the following analysis:

You know what I noticed? There are different types of security guards. Those who are in the subway, they are so aggressive. They immediately resort to violence and start shouting. But the ones who work up in the square, and walk around there, they are nicer...

What do those in the square do who are 'nicer'?

They don't do much; they just stand there, and do not bother us. (Man, 18)

While some security guards 'don't do much', others 'immediately resort to violence'. The line of thought advanced here underscores the existence of 'different types' of security guards: it is not individual professionals or a general subculture among security guards that is problematized in this narrative. Rather, the interviewee evinces the importance of reflecting upon the relation between specific tasks of security guards and the violence work it produces (Seigel, 2018).

Sociological understandings: 'Why is it that you only control me so carefully?'

In the previous two sections, aspects such as age, race, and gender have been highlighted for the analysis when focusing principally on psychological and professional features of the violence used by security guards (Crenshaw et al., 2015). This section, taking as its starting point the experience of a black student, continues with that engagement, underscoring sociological understandings of the violent encounters with security guards:

I had been studying and was on my way home on the commuter train. I had blipped my card. Halfway through, the controllers came. They asked for my ticket, and I showed it: a valid student ticket. Then they started asking a lot of different questions: 'What's your name?' 'Do you have your student identity card?' But that wasn't enough; they wanted to see if my answers matched the information on my bank card. And that wasn't enough either: 'Can you spell your name?' ... Finally, they moved on. Then I started to question: 'Why is it that you only control *me* so carefully?' I felt singled out. 'Is it about how I look, my skin color?' Then a new guy comes up to me, a security guard. I keep asking my questions but got no answers. Then another guard comes and says: 'he's going out.' They grab me and I'm terrified. Really scared. They twist my arms. I scream, call for help, but they lift me out. ... If it had been a Swede, would they have acted in that way? No! Because you don't solve problems by using violence. (Man, 19 years, Falköping)

This interviewee's experience should be understood in relation to the long tradition of protests aimed at challenging racist policing practices (Taylor, 2019). 'Is it about how I look, my skin color?' His questioning is an accusation that unveils a societal pattern of discrimination. Understood through the lens of race and class, the extended control forms part of attempts to criminalize poverty where the security guards are doing the front-line work. From this perspective, it is the ambition to identify those unable to pay for

public transportation that leads to the profiling of the racialized working class (Camp & Heatherton, 2016). Analytically instructive is the response that follows the questioning by the interviewee. Rather than justifying the actions taken by providing reasonable – or, for that matter, unreasonable – arguments, the security guards suppress the aspiration of the interviewee to be treated as a fully-fledged subject with rights by refusing to engage with his attempt to dialogue. In his representation of the events, the ‘call for help’ is not acknowledged. The absence of recognition by way of reply can be understood as the silent power that allows the ‘scream’ to be suffocated (Apata, 2020). The violence that follows closes the time and space for free speech, leaving him ‘terrified’ and ‘really scared’. An interpretation is that it is a manifestation at street level of the authoritarian turn that is currently defining Swedish politics (Tham, 2022). For the interviewee, the actions taken by the security guards are a reminder that he is not ‘a Swede’. He draws a racial lesson: there are exceptions to the rule that security guards should not ‘solve problems by using violence’.

While some black interviewees clearly linked the violence used by security guards to discriminatory practices and racism, in several accounts this link was made in a more uncertain manner. The following narrative is provided by a woman whose attempt to be a good friend leads to a violent encounter:

I was out with a friend. He was very drunk – that is, very drunk. So, I was following him to the subway. Everything went fast from there. He was stopped by a guard. ‘You are not allowed to enter.’ Then I tried: ‘Can’t we get in somehow?’ There was one guard who was very kind, I remember that. The other was more aggressive. He sort of looked very angry in his eyes. I don’t know if he called them. I just remember guards coming towards us from the side, running. They pulled me to the ground and dragged me away; I was bleeding from my knees and hit my chin. I reacted with resistance because I was very scared. I was writhing around. ... It went from something quite calm to total chaos. I didn’t understand what happened. Like wow, it was very random, really. ... Of course, I was the only brown person there. (Woman, 27)

The account balances between two conflicting understandings of the events that draw from psychological, professional, and sociological perspectives on the violence used by security guards. Accordingly, there was a ‘kind’ security guard, and a ‘more aggressive’ one with angry ‘eyes’. This line of thought makes it important to highlight how individual suitability and personality traits are conceptualized in narratives of violent encounters. However, the extract ends with the interviewee expressing that she is the ‘only brown person there’. This emphasis connects her experience to sociological explorations of the role of racism for state-sanctioned violence, challenging the obscuring of racialized women as the victims of policing (Ritchie, 2017). In contrast, the interviewee classifies the eruption of violence as ‘very random, really’. According to her, she ‘didn’t understand what happened’. It went from ‘quite calm to total chaos’. The description points toward what can be labeled narratives of non-understandings of the violence used by security guards. Interestingly, several of the interviewees, particularly the white women, grappled with making sense of the physical force to which they had been subjected. For example, one interviewee reported the following:

That evening I was, as usual, dressed up and in a good mood. It was like he just wanted to put me in my place. I don’t know, I have no idea. Really no idea. It’s hard to say why he targeted me, why he set out for me. They are obviously easily provoked. But to be so triggered by a question, that cannot be it, or...? And then to use so much violence against a woman like that is completely insane. (Woman, 20)

This statement, an elaboration of the experience discussed in the ‘Professional understandings’ section, captures how the interviewee wrestles with the attempt to provide an understanding of the violence she was exposed to. For her, it is ‘completely insane’ that the security guard resorted to ‘so much violence’. Nonetheless, in her statement she provides psychological as well as professional clues: it is an individual security guard, a ‘he’ who ‘wanted’ to put her in her ‘place’, as well as a collective of professionals identified as ‘they’ who are ‘easily provoked’. Yet, these remarks do not seem to convince her: ‘that cannot be it, or...?’ The violence ‘against a woman’ leaves her struggling to make sense of what occurred, in the end leaning toward a non-understanding: ‘I don’t know, I have no idea. Really no idea. It’s hard to say why’. This uncertainty can be understood as the consequence of violent policing being a racialized and gendered phenomenon, a feature that regulates the discursive resources that white women have for understanding and representing what has happened to them (Russell, 2000). Interestingly, another white woman provided a sociological narrative possible for interviewees with this background:

The only thing I talked about after it had happened [in the mall] was that I’m white middle-class. I thought a lot about my position, that I am privileged: if this happened to me, what the fuck happens to everyone else? How does it [the violence from security guards] affect young men with immigrant background? What happens to drug addicts and alcoholics and the homeless? Since this happened to me, the situation for others must be terrible. (Woman, 33)

It is from the position of ‘white middle-class’ that this interviewee tackles the experience of having a violent encounter with security guards that left her hospitalized. She uses her subject position to critically reflect on the situation for the usual suspects (Saarikkomäki & Kivivuori, 2016): ‘young men with immigrant background’, ‘drug addicts’, ‘alcoholics’, and ‘the homeless’. By acknowledging that it happened to her, and asking ‘what the fuck happens to everyone else?’ she highlights that it is not because of, but despite, her being ‘privileged’ that she was victimized. Thereby she connects her experience to broader economic and political power relations, providing a sociological backdrop to understand the violence used by security guards.

Concluding remarks

This analysis underlines that it is possible only to distinguish in abstract terms between the three types of understandings that structure the presentation of the empirical material. Psychological, professional, and sociological perspectives on the violence used by security guards are interwoven in the accounts of the interviewees. Even so, certain aspects become more prominent when moving from descriptions to theoretically informed understandings, which are pivotal in the effort to gain a deeper knowledge of violent encounters with security guards.

The focus on the psychological and personal traits of the security guards spotlights a range of negative descriptions of these professionals. It should be noted that in the empirical material there are descriptions of ‘kind’ and ‘nicer’ security guards. Nevertheless, the analysis is focused on exploring experiences of violence, explaining the overwhelmingly negative emphasis. The security guards are described as ‘sadistic’, ‘aggressive’, and as having ‘angry’ eyes; they are ‘triggered’ and ‘easily provoked’; they cannot ‘make sense’ of situations; they are impossible to ‘talk to’ in reasonable ways; they ‘shout’ and have a personal agenda to ‘put’ people in their ‘place’. These accounts given by the interviewees need to be regarded as the

expression of cultural scripts that are part of the struggle to determine reality (Sandberg, 2022).

The exploration of professional matters indicates the collective of violence that the security guards mobilize when inflicting pain on the interviewees. While several of the interviewees identify a single professional as their protagonist, a 'they' is formed when describing the violence to which they have been subjected. This movement in the narratives is key because it reveals that violent security guards do not act in a vacuum, but within professional contexts. In this regard, the role of neutralization techniques that legitimize and mobilize violence needs to be explored further (Johnston & Kilty, 2016). In the empirical material there are accusations of the interviewees being 'too loud' and 'too drunk'. There are also descriptions of fruitless verbal attempts to dialogue with the security: 'Can't we get in somehow?' 'Why is it that you only control *me* so carefully?' That violence follows verbal communication is revealing for the way in which the interviewees narrate the events, representing themselves as innocent victims. Crucially in this regard, the interactions described by the interviewees were not in relation to crime, but at restaurants, in bars and in the public transportation system on their way home. These are, without a doubt, stressful and to some extent risky work environments for security guards, who are tasked with handling unpredictable people (Koeppen & Hopkins, 2022). The role of alcohol in several of the interviewees' portrayals of their violent encounters is a reminder of this aspect, which also shows how crucial it is to critically assess the statements of interviewees given that insobriety affects perceptions of events. Nonetheless, it is also apparent that the non-verbality and sudden escalation to violence on the part of the security guards must be explored in relation to a violent professional culture which, at least in some work settings, allows force to be used to handle perceived disrespect (Micucci & Gomme, 2005).

The focus on sociological understandings in the empirical material pinpoints the interconnectedness and relevance of aspects such as race, class, and gender, as well as age and health status (Crenshaw et al., 2015). In the violent interactions with the security guards the interviewees are given lessons on the status of democracy and their place and value in society. The time markers in the empirical material, whether it is a matter of 'only a few seconds' or 'two minutes', are revealing because they indicate the very short introduction to the lessons. What is taught is, of course, personal. However, in the analysis, examples of misrecognition and unrecognition are identified, where the latter are described as part of the problems inherent in institutional racism (Apata, 2020).

A main finding of this article is the identification of non-understandings of the violence used by the security guards. This is a topic for future research. That some of the interviewees cannot grasp why they have been subjected to physical force by the security guards is interesting, because it discloses the racialized and gendered discourse of police violence and the excessive use of force that regulates the available resources to make sense of experiences (Russell, 2000). The empirical material demonstrates that women in general and white women in particular grapple with making sense of their vulnerability. Is the violence used by security guards arbitrary, and can it affect anyone who is in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or does it indeed follow patterns related to the socio-political economic order? An understanding offered by one of the more 'privileged' interviewees is that the victims of the violence of security guards cross racial, ethnic, gender, and class lines, but that some groups are the main targets. Given that the net of policing actors has widened in society and that more people are consequently at risk of state-sanctioned violence at the hands of private security guards, this view should be given careful thought.

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