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ARTICLE



'It's easy to mistrust police when they keep on killing us': A queer exploration of police violence and LGBTQ+ Victimization

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ABSTRACT

Almost 50 years after the Stonewall riots, queer liberation and police resistance are still inextricably intertwined. International hate crime statistics around the globe show increasingly high rates of LGBTQ+ victimization and criminalization by law enforcement. This qualitative research aims at evaluating whether queer theories of visibility and performativity could serve as useful tools to investigate the problematic dynamics between police and young queer individuals. For this purpose, online interviews were carried out with a sample of 20 young queer individuals from different European countries. Findings revealed that performing non-heteronormative bodies and behaviours is associated with being perceived as risky, dangerous and deviant. The correlation between queerness and deviance leads to a number of detrimental consequences, including police over-policing and criminalizing young LGBTQ+ individuals in public spaces, queer people underreporting hate crime incidents for fear of secondary victimization, and overall scepticism and mistrust towards the criminal justice system. Thus, this research not only affirms the importance of including queer voices in criminological research, but it also reveals the insidious nature of police violence against the LGBTQ+ community, which has long been neglected in queer studies.

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Introduction

Although contemporary activism is effectively engaged in promoting social justice for LGBTQ+ people around the world, recent studies suggest that the everyday safety and well-being of queer people remain at risk (Braunstein, 2017; Russel, 2017). According to the European Union LGBT Survey from 2014, 47% of all respondents said they have felt discriminated against or harassed based on their sexual orientation in the past year (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2014). Attacks or threats to violence have been experienced by 26% of all respondents in the past five years, and this percentage rises to 35% among transgender respondents (FRA, 2014). Only one fifth of these individuals reported hate-motivated violent incidents to the police: reasons for not reporting ranged from feeling that nothing would be done to fear for homophobic or transphobic reactions from the police (FRA, 2014). These statistics contribute to shed a light on a longstanding issue, that has been frequently neglected in both academic field and public debate: the ongoing victimization and criminalization of LGBTQ+ individuals.

This paper will explore the ways in which queerness, especially among young LGBTQ+ individuals, is often associated with deviance, and how looking visibly queer can lead to problematic police interactions (Dwyer, 2009). Therefore, we will offer a 'queering' criminological framework to

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reconsider the dynamics between the non-heteronormative body and the criminal justice system, and their impact on the safety and protection of the LGBTQ+ community (Ball, 2014). Queer and post-structural theories of visibility and performativity will be applied to understand the ways in which the queer body is perceived and regulated by law enforcement (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 2003; Dwyer, 2009). As queer theorists aim at subverting the normalized notions of sex, sexuality and gender, that determine group dynamics and structural oppression, this study engages in a process of deconstruction of traditional knowledge, starting from an exploration of the queer body and its cultural and social meanings (Ball, 2014; Butler, 1990; Woods, 2014).

The aim of this exploratory study is two-fold. On the one hand, by applying queer theories to the direct experiences of young queer people, I wish to 'reorient the focus of criminological inquiry' and enrich the academic field of Queer Criminology, where research on the interaction between the LGBTQ+ community and law enforcement is expanding (Woods, 2014, p. 16). Although discrimination and injustice do not stop at this level of interaction, but they structurally permeate the whole criminal justice system, it is vital to understand where, how and why they start (Braunstein, 2017). On the other hand, this study aims to provide new insights for future research, that could promptly inform policy-makers and criminal justice institutions, including police courts, probation agencies and correctional facilities, on how to implement more inclusive and comprehensive systems that recognize the needs and rights of both queer victims and perpetrators (Braunstein, 2017).

Risk factors in queer youth

In criminological research, considerable attention has been recently dedicated to the visibility of young non-conforming bodies, and, more specifically, the ways in which youthfulness and queer-ness mediate interactions with law enforcement (Dwyer, 2009, 2014). Evidence suggests that young LGBTQ+ individuals suffer high rates of health issues, including mental health problems, suicide attempts and substance abuse (Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambrone, 2011). Furthermore, they are more prone to experience lack of support and acceptance from families and communities compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts, leaving them exposed to homelessness and survival sex (Sherriff et al., 2011; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler, & Johnson, 2004). As a result, more time spent on the streets increases the chances for victimization and contact with police (Whitbeck et al., 2004). Traditional research has focussed on the over-policing attitudes of police towards young people's activities in public spaces, demonstrated by the higher number of incidents of police harassment reported by adolescents compared to adults (Dwyer, 2011a; Al, 2006; Cammett, 2009). Instead, more recent trends have attempted to include the variables of sexual and gender non-conformity in the study of youth's interaction with police, and they have suggested that not only queer adolescents are disproportionately targeted and criminalized by the system, but they are also generally reluctant to report victimization to the authorities, usually because of mistrust and fear of homophobic and transphobic reactions (Garnette, Irvine, Reyes, & Wilber, 2011; Snapp et al., 2015; Dwyer, 2011a). The following section will explore the reasons for such problematic dynamics between young queer people and the police.

In order to comprehend how victimization and criminalization are intertwined in the experiences of young LGBTQ+ people, Queer Criminology has focussed on the intersection of gender identity and sexual orientation with the construct of youthfulness, to investigate how the young queer body is perceived and monitored by law enforcement (Dwyer, 2011b; Sherriff et al., 2011). The interaction between queer youth and police is usually considered through risk approaches, which focus on detecting structural mechanisms that could increase the chances for negative experiences, including both secondary victimization and criminalization (Dwyer, 2011c; Whitbeck et al., 2004). The

contributing factors to the involvement of young queers into the criminal justice system are 'being vulnerable and *at-risk*, being involved in *risk-taking* activities, being visibly LGBT, and hanging out in public spaces' (Dwyer, 2011a, p. 426).

First of all young LGBTQ+ people are perceived as a specific subculture, characterized by being both *at-risk* and *risky* individuals (Dwyer, 2011c, p. 1; Whitbeck et al., 2004; Jordan, 2000). Vulnerability and danger are two sides of the same coin: the consequences of victimization, often referred to as *secondary risks*, increase the likelihood of deviant behaviour, and thus of negative interactions with law enforcement (Brown, 2014; Cammett, 2009; Dwyer, 2011a, 2011c). Research has shown that familial conflicts, lack of support, economic disadvantages and frequent exposure to violence at an early age can drastically increase the chances for LGBTQ+ youth to enter the criminal justice system, especially if combined with insufficient access to formal support (Cammett, 2009).

In addition to looking *risky/at-risk*, research focuses on queer visibility, another crucial factor in determining young LGBTQ+ people's contact with police: the ways in which non-conforming bodies 'perform a discourse of "queerness" in interaction with police' can increase the likelihood of negative police reactions, ranging from verbal discrimination to profiling, physical harassment and violence (Dwyer, 2009; Amnesty International [AI], 2006). In essence, the more the body is visible and readable as queer, the higher the risks for stigmatization (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Shippee, 2011). Because in interactional settings, individuals are expected to perform gender following traditional norms on femininity and masculinity, anything that upsets them or deviates from them runs the risk of provoking unexpected, and even violent, reactions (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009).

The last factor that strongly increases the chances for young LGBTQ+ people to enter into contact with law enforcement is time spent in public spaces (Dwyer, 2011a; Whitbeck et al., 2004). Evidence shows that the majority of incidents involving the victimization and criminalization of LGBTQ+ youth occurs in public settings (Durso & Gates, 2012). Space, a crucial concept in queer and post-structural theories can be organized following heteronormative principles, thus becoming a disciplinary mechanism that dictates who can and who cannot access it (Dwyer, 2015). In certain spaces, the visibility of queer bodies is associated with a higher exposure to discrimination and aggression (Mason, 2001). Mindful of the possible risks associated with specific situations and settings, vulnerable individuals engage in the construction of so-called 'safety maps', shared abstract patterns that help them negotiate safety and navigate through public spaces (Mason, 2001, p. 29). By detecting *red flags*, individuals can perceive when they run the risk of intolerance and hostile interactions: as evidence shows that hegemonic masculinity is strongly associated with homophobia, the presence of heterosexual men represents a detectable risk for queer bodies (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Shippee, 2011). As well as being selective about where to go and whom to interact with, queer individuals undertake a continuous process of '*self-regulation*', in the ways in which they perform queerness and monitor their body (Mason, 2001; Stanko & Curry, 1997, p. 525). *Passing* is the most common strategy employed by LGBTQ+ individuals to avoid stigmatization: it involves the acts of tailoring and negotiating one's self-presentation, so as to appear 'normal' and hide the 'deviant' traits that might cause hostile reactions (Shippee, 2011, p. 29).

It is crucial to recognize that these factors are usually working simultaneously: a young queer individual, who is visibly LGBTQ+ and spends time in public spaces, is more prone to be victimized by strangers or acquaintances because they are perceived as easy targets, or to be criminalized by police officers because they are conveying some sort of danger (Brown, 2014; Dwyer, 2011a). However, in the case of young queer individuals, the constructs of youthfulness and queerness are so intertwined that it is hard to discern whether discrimination derives from the perceived young age of the individual or their perceived gender and sexual identity. Furthermore, following an intersectional approach, we should also consider the additional social and situational variables that could play a role in the victimization and criminalization of visibly queer youngsters, such as the

victim's and perpetrator's ethnicity, class, religion, and other possible identities, but also the narrow setting, as well as the larger socio-economic, political and cultural context (Nash, 2008; Styhre & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009).

Police misconduct and microaggressions

Police violence has been shown to be a rather constant, but silent, phenomenon, stemming from the institutionalized racism, homophobia and transphobia that have long been rooted within the criminal justice system (Dreyer et al., 2020). Normalized discrimination is evident in the ways in which hate crimes are processed by law enforcement. The detrimental consequences of hate crime victimization are often underestimated by law enforcement, and victims are treated with indifference and unprofessionalism, as demonstrated by international statistics and surveys on crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals (Dwyer, 2014; Nadal, Quintanilla, Goswick, & Sriken, 2015). Common are the instances in which police officers fail to recognize the seriousness of the crime, and they act to minimize the victim's experience, or even blame the victim of having 'provoked' the attack (AI, 2006, p.47; Nadal et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the under-policing of LGBTQ+ victims is worsened by a widespread and enduring pattern of police discriminatory and unlawful behaviour, ranging from microaggressions and verbal abuse, to sexual misconduct and physical violence (Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012; Tucker, Brewster, Grugan, Miller, & Mapp-Matthews, 2019; AI, 2006).

According to Sue et al. (2007), microaggressions directed towards non-heterosexual individuals include oversexualising the individual, employing heterosexist language, such as using 'faggot' or 'dyke' as derogatory terms, and assuming that homosexuality is morally wrong, or even a psychological disorder (Platt & Lenzen, 2013). On the other hand, examples of gendered microaggressions include implicit sexual objectification and subordination of women, sexist comments and misgendering of gender non-conforming individuals (AI, 2006; Nadal et al., 2012). It is hard to evaluate the frequency of police microaggressions against LGBTQ+ individuals because this type of discriminatory behaviour is generally underreported (AI, 2006; Nadal et al., 2012; Platt & Lenzen, 2013). However, victim surveys have highlighted that, for LGBTQ+ victims, contact with police too often results in them being ridiculed, laughed at, misgendered, oversexualised and belittled (AI, 2006; McCabe, Dragowski, & Rubinson, 2013; Wolff & Cokely, 2007). Unfortunately, many are also the reports of police engaging in proper verbal abuse, thus insulting, humiliating, criticizing and threatening queer individuals (AI, 2006; Fileborn, 2019).

Numerous are the reported instances in which verbal abuse has escalated into physical violence, with police officers inappropriately touching, beating, and using coercive restraining measures on LGBTQ+ people (AI, 2006; Wolff & Cokely, 2007). Excessive use of verbal and physical violence usually occurs when queer individuals are criminalized, and while some practices are enacted with the intention of humiliating and hurting, others coincide with sexual harassment. These are classified under the general term of 'police sexual misconduct': they include any action taken to sexually intimidate the victim, and they frequently target young lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, and gender non-conforming individuals (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2011; AI, 2006). Threats of sexual assault, illegal strip searches, extorting sexual favours, coercive sexual conduct and rape are among the most common forms of police sexual misconduct (AI, 2006; Braunstein, 2017).

Indeed, discrimination and violence do not only occur when LGBTQ+ individuals seek formal support from police, but they also result from police procedures aimed at over-policing queer bodies (Dwyer, 2011a). Widespread practices of profiling based on gender identity and sexual orientation are disproportionately targeting queer youth and, more specifically, young LGBTQ+ people of colour, that once entered in contact with police, are more likely to be unlawfully searched, arrested and legally sanctioned than their heterosexual and white peers (Fileborn, 2019). Law enforcement engages in profiling LGBTQ+ individuals to selectively enforce regulations on public decency.

Profiling and selective enforcement are especially problematic because they reflect obsolete and homophobic stereotypes about sexual deviancy, and, at the same time, they threaten the life chances of vulnerable individuals, that find themselves helplessly caught up within the criminal justice system (Dwyer, 2011a; Baumstein, 2017).

Materials and methods

Previous criminological research has mainly employed quantitative methods to explore the frequency of violent encounters between LGBTQ+ youth and police, usually through surveys, questionnaires and reports made by LGBTQ+ individuals to the authorities, which, as aforementioned, might fail to represent the actual issue (Al, 2006; Moran, 2004). This research aspires to gain a deeper subjective understanding of the dynamics at play in relationships between young LGBTQ+ people and the police. For this purpose, a qualitative approach seemed the most appropriate path, with one-to-one in-depth interviews as the data collection technique, so to explore perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and experiences as interpreted by the participants (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Patenaude, 2004).

Prior to the beginning of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Greenwich's Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited through social media and snowball sampling techniques. In order to take part in the study, participants had to meet two criteria: they had to identify as LGBTQ+, and they had to be from 18 to 30 years old. Interviews were arranged by asking individuals to fill in a form with their name and email address, so that they could be contacted to arrange an online meeting. All personal information was securely stored in a password-protected device, and deleted at the end of the research, in order to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality (British Society of Criminology [BSC], 2015). The final sample consisted of 20 LGBTQ+ young adults: the age range of the majority of participants was between 23 and 26 years old, two were 19 years old, and the remaining six were 27 years old. At the time of the study, most participants were residing in Italy, eight in the United Kingdom and two in Belgium. The sample was heterogeneous in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, with participants identifying as gay, lesbian, pansexual, bisexual, male, female, queer, non-binary, and transgender.

Before the interview, informed-written consent was obtained: participants were asked to read and sign a consent form, explaining the purpose of the research, together with practical information about the research ethics, consent, disclosure of sensitive information, confidentiality and data protection. Confidentiality and the 'do no harm' principle were extensively discussed with each participant prior to the interview (BSC, 2015; Kaiser, 2009). Confidentiality was upheld during the processes of 'data collection, data cleaning, and dissemination of research results', with the use of pseudonyms and the deletion of all personal information (Kaiser, 2009, p. 1634). Furthermore, in line with the ethical guidelines proposed by the British Society of Criminology, participants' psychological well-being was made a priority: individuals were reminded that they could refuse to answer certain questions, and even abandon the research, whenever, at any point, they were experiencing feelings of distress or anger (BSC, 2015; Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

Semi-structured interviews were carried out on virtual meeting platforms, such as Skype and Zoom, and they lasted approximately 1 hour. Interview questions were broad and aimed at exploring individuals' perceptions of police: participants were asked to share any direct or indirect experience with police and the criminal justice system, that could range from talking to a police officer to reporting a crime. Furthermore, questions covered topics of LGBTQ+ visibility and hate crimes: interviewees were asked whether they had experienced verbal discrimination or physical violence in the past, and whether they decided to report it to the police. For participants who had no experience with police, hypothetical questions were asked, so to encourage them to reflect on possible scenarios of interactions between them and police officers. They were also asked to explain what vulnerability means to them and how they think society, and more specifically law enforcement, sees them.

Each meeting was recorded, transcribed, and analysed using a Grounded Theory approach, an inductive method that grounds the interpretation and categorization of data to the experiences of participants (Moghaddam, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The coding process was performed using NVivo and consisted of three stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Lazar, Feng, & Hochheiser, 2017). In the open coding stage, transcripts were coded line by line and a number of concepts emerged. These concepts were then grouped into categories and explored in relation to one another in the axial coding stage. Finally, in the selective coding stage, categories were refined so as to allow the two main themes and subthemes to emerge. Once the analysis was completed and the themes finalized, I proceeded to compare the findings with the existing literature, and to discuss their implications for further research within the field of Queer Criminology.

Results

The two main themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis deal with different aspects of LGBTQ+ visibility, victimization and relationship with law enforcement. The following sections will proceed to explore each theme individually.

Invisible visibility and over-policing in public spaces

The first theme deals with the concept of queer visibility. As explained by one interviewee, the mainstream outlook on LGBTQ+ visibility is that 'they can do whatever they want, but not in public'. Interestingly, this tension was especially present among transgender and gender queer respondents. Bill (22), a transgender male from Italy, explained: 'I feel they don't know if I'm a boy or a girl and that drives them nuts, but they don't ask, they just avoid the conversation, and it's weird'. In Bill's narrative, his transgender body, that visibly 'transgresses heteronormativity', is perceived by others with uncertainty and mistrust, but any personal question regarding his gender identity is avoided, leaving him with a feeling of discomfort (Dwyer, 2011b, p. 204). Furthermore, consistent with existing research, participants noted that, within the community, transgender individuals are at higher risk of criminalization, discrimination and violence. 'For me, trans women are those who have it worst, and trans black women especially! They're always the victims 'cause they are always seen as prostitutes or junkies, but it's not true', said Alice (24), a lesbian interviewee. Indeed, public spaces can be dangerous settings for transgender people, and especially black trans women, that might have to monitor their visibility so as to avoid negative stereotyping and victimization from outsiders (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014).

The stress on freedoms and constraints in public settings refers to the conceptualization of space in queer theories, which can be organized following heterosexual and cisgender criteria (Dwyer, 2015). Interviewees highlighted that, when an individual performs a non-heteronormative body or behaviour in public, it often results in strangers staring, whispering and commenting, making them feel uncomfortable and distressed. Mary (23), an Italian non-binary interviewee, admitted: 'every time I go out I bear in mind there could be someone who might not like how I am'. Looking queer is thus embedded within a framework that includes both social control and self-monitoring (Goffman, 1963; Mason, 2001). Instead, four participants from the United Kingdom noted that being queer and being authentic in public spaces can also be a rewarding experience: 'when you're out and you're yourself and people appreciate you it feels even better'.

The LGBTQ+ representation in public settings can be defined as *invisible visibility*: this concept involves a constant tension between, on the one hand, being visible and intelligible as queer, and, on the other hand, being part of an invisible community, that is disregarded and discriminated against. In the case of LGBTQ+ adolescents, victimization in public spaces and over-policing by law enforcement can have further detrimental consequences for their emotional and mental health (Dwyer, 2011c; Fileborn, 2019). In fact, when the appropriate support system is missing, the higher are the chances that LGBTQ+ youth will avoid seeking help when they experience discrimination (Whitbeck et al., 2004; Dwyer, 2011a, 2011 c).

Stereotyping

The representation of queer bodies is still connected to problematic assumptions about deviant behaviour, that can influence the outcomes of interactions with police. First, respondents highlighted how visibility is connected to ‘appearance-related factors’ detectable also in youth subcultures, such as hairstyles, makeup, clothing, tattoos and piercings (Dwyer, 2009, p. 6). ‘I’m a woman but I like tattoos and piercings and I have short hair, so I think some people think I’m like dangerous to hang out with’, says Hannah (23). In her narrative, the body becomes a signifier of dangerousness and queerness, in the ways she appears and performs her gender and sexuality. ‘I’m a woman and I’m gay so I’m supposed to be either femme or masc’, explains Lily (24), referring to the binary categorization of gender performance to which she, as a lesbian woman, feels pressured to adhere to. Categories are used to become socially intelligible to others, but they also seem to be involved in a cycle of misrecognition, that could lead to negative stereotyping and discrimination (Pfeffer, 2014). Misrecognition has been discussed as problematic in the interview with Josh (25), as they explain: ‘I am bisexual and gender fluid, but people just assume my sexuality, that I am gay, just because of the way I look, or the way I talk’. When bodies are misread and misrecognized, they can be more easily associated with prejudices, as in the case of gay men, that, according to many participants, are usually stereotyped as ‘extreme and promiscuous’.

‘If you go to the police, they might laugh at you’

The second theme focuses on the issues associated with reporting to the police. Participants were asked to discuss about past experiences with reporting, or to reflect on whether they would report an incident to the police. Those who have had contact with police found the reporting process to be slow and counterproductive: police officers seemed uninterested, and the culprit was not found. A transgender interviewee, whose car had been vandalized with transphobic comments, said: ‘When I went to report this [...] they laughed at me, and asked me “Who are we gonna look for?”’. He further confessed that, if something else would happen in the future, he would probably avoid seeking help from law enforcement. Indeed, when reflecting on whether to report a hate crime or not, most respondents answered that it would depend on the severity of the incident: if it was something similar to a verbal aggression, or a physical attack that did not leave any body marks, then it would probably be useless. Scepticism about reporting incidents of verbal aggression to the police was explained by the fact that these episodes have alarmingly become part of the ordinary, especially when committed by strangers in public spaces. As explained by an Italian participant, ‘the homophobic attack is referred to as a simple attack, [...] they don’t understand the difference’. Thus, as hate crime violence is misrecognized by law enforcement as ordinary violence, it would not receive enough attention. Many respondents perceived that police officers would be unsympathetic and the victims would ‘feel like they have wasted police’s time, and nothing will be done’. Furthermore, reporting to the police was associated with confidence that the punishment for the attack would not be as appropriate as the harm caused. A German interviewee who recollected the episode of a lesbian friend being sexually assaulted, explained:

Because there was no penetration, she could have pressed charges but it could have only been an insult [...]. So legally this attempt to rape would be the same as calling someone an asshole, so my friend didn’t wanna go through all that if the charge would be something as minor as that.

Although the German law recognizes other forms of sexual violence that do not include penetration, the victim felt confident that the perpetration would not be appropriately punished (List, 2013).

In addition, a consistent number of respondents admitted that they would avoid interaction with police for fear of being mistreated, either because they have had negative experiences with police officers, or because they have heard stories from their peers. One non-binary respondent proposed a strong metaphor illustrate the situation of queer individuals who are confronted with law

enforcement: 'It is easy to mistrust police when they keep on killing us'. This statement should be understood in terms of the criminal justice system failing to protect queer people, to the point where it is the institution that kills them because it constantly fails to protect them. It clearly exemplifies the contradictions existing in the LGBTQ+ representation of police officers: the institution that has been established for the protection of all citizens is one of the reasons why certain citizens are victimized, and thus who should be the saviour becomes the perpetrator. In fact, common was the concern among participants that police officers might act or think exactly as their perpetrator.

Neutral perspectives on police reporting were expressed by a few participants who have never had experience with police officers of any kind, and that found it hard to imagine a possible interaction. 'I'm not sure how it would go, people are different and not all of them are bad', says Cinthia (27) from the United Kingdom.

'You don't want to be too visible'

Although expressed in different ways, performativity was very present in participants' narratives: when recollecting about incidents or imagining possible scenarios with police officers, many expressed their doubts and concerns of whether their gender expression or sexual orientation actually influenced, or would influence, interactions with law enforcement: 'I am not sure it would play a role, but I hope not' (Lily, 23); 'I don't think I look that gay, so they wouldn't know' (Adam, 27). Interestingly, a homosexual non-binary interviewee, who identified their gender expression with masculine, highlighted the existence of a hidden discriminatory and derogative logic, through which the victim does not necessarily see the actual violence that is being perpetrated by the police officer. In their recollection of events, they said:

[They would think:] "You have a girlfriend, so you are not a responsible, good citizen, so they didn't steal your wallet, you probably lost it". It seems like nothing, but if you dig deeper you discover a weird logic, because at that moment there was no actual violence ...

They added that police officers were continuously referring to them as 'lady', although they were obviously dressed in male clothes and appearing quite masculine. Furthermore, one homosexual male participants highlighted how for gay men it is important to 'look normal', to *pass as* straight when confronted with law enforcement, 'so you don't turn the lights on yourself'. This finding is in line with previous criminological research on LGBTQ+-police interaction, where victims engaged in *passing* strategies in order to appear more reliable and respectable in the eyes of police officers (Goffman, 1963; Pfeffer, 2014; Shippee, 2011).

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this exploratory research was to develop a deeper understanding of the problematic relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and law enforcement. Through a qualitative study with young queer individuals, the primary objective was to determine whether queer visibility and performativity were associated with higher risks of being victimized and criminalized by law enforcement. Indeed, the central finding that emerged from the analysis was the strong association between queerness and police misconduct in the narratives of young LGBTQ+ individuals. Consistent with previous research, the perception of deviance seems to be the key mediator between queer bodies and negative police interactions (Dwyer, 2009, 2011b, 2011c, 2014). In other words, deviance is conceptualized by outsiders, including police officers, as everything that differs from the heterosexual and cisgender: what is arguably more problematic is the fact that such discrimination can happen either consciously or unconsciously. The queer body translates into a deviant body when, in public settings, it visibly displays non-conforming appearance-related features or behaviours, that are then perceived as risky, dangerous, and immoral. However, bodies are identified and judged differently according to the intersections of ethnicity, gender identity and sexuality (Crenshaw, 2003).

From this research, it emerged that the vulnerability of this community is recognized and acknowledged by its members, who actively engage in strategies to manage their non-conforming visibility and performativity. A common strategy to 'slide under the radar' is to *pass* as heterosexual and cisgender, a practice reserved only for those who can hide their deviant traits: passing is often employed by young LGBTQ+ in interactions with police, in order to appear as respectable and trustworthy as their conforming counterparts (Fuller, Chang, & Rubin, 2009). However, when possible, LGBTQ+ individually choose to avoid any contact with law enforcement, because of a general lack of trust in the institution and a widespread fear of hate crime victimization by police officers. As a result, homophobic and transphobic discriminations remain widely unreported (Al, 2006; Wolff & Cokely, 2007).

Furthermore, the present study identified the main issues that could result from law enforcement misconduct. Firstly, police mistreatment fuels current trends of crime underreporting: avoiding contact with police after a hate crime incident, either because of scepticism or fear of secondary victimization, will result in the perpetrators not being punished. Secondly, LGBTQ+ victims will seek other forms of assistance and support, ranging from counselling to LGBTQ+ specific support groups (Nadal et al., 2015). However, in the absence of suitable support systems, existing research has shown that young queer victims will be more likely to suffer from psychological disorders, and engage in illegal activities, including drug use and sex work (Durso & Gates, 2012; Jordan, 2000). Thirdly, when police misconduct, that includes verbal microaggressions, victim-blaming and sexual misconduct, is not denounced and punished, the police institution will not implement the necessary changes for the equal protection of all individuals (Dwyer, 2011c; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). It is only when these detrimental outcomes are publicly recognized that the appropriate policies and solutions can be identified and implemented.

The association between queerness and deviance that emerged from the present research has strong implications for both the field of Queer Criminology and society at large. Firstly, although queer performativity was connected to general bodily and behavioural factors, the focus of the inquiry should now turn to identify and tackle what we, as a society, have come to associate with deviance, either consciously or unconsciously. Secondly, as in this specific sample youthfulness and queerness are strongly intertwined, it will be necessary to disentangle the two constructs, in order to comprehend what factors of each will be more likely to fuel negative police interactions, with the aim of understanding how grounded prejudices continue to affect the lives and safety of vulnerable groups, including the LGBTQ+ community. This is not a new imperative, but the extensive sociological and criminological traditions of this project should now translate into concrete actions that inform practices and policies to safeguard all citizens. How can we move forward to a fairer and more egalitarian society where public spaces are still perceived as minefields, where young queer people, women, transgender people and people of colour need to constantly engage in the negotiation of their safety? In other words, the 'institutionalised sexual terrorism' that has long haunted the queer community needs to be tackled by laws and regulations that, on the one hand, strictly punish hate crime violence and, on the other hand, engages in providing the appropriate social, medical and legal support to the victims (Jenness & Broad, 1994, p. 402).

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Notes on contributor

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