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Can dialogue help police officers and young Black adults understand each other? Key findings from a restorative process

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ABSTRACT

Relationships between the police and minority ethnic communities are often characterised by tension, mistrust and a lack of understanding. It seems unlikely that the solutions lie in traditional approaches to police-community engagement. This article outlines the key findings from the first study to use restorative practices to facilitate dialogue between police officers and young Black adults in Europe. This occurred in a part of West Dublin, Ireland, where the police recently shot and killed a Black man. Observational and interview data suggest that the process enabled participants to speak and listen respectfully to each other and to understand how each other's experiences shaped their perspectives on policing. These data suggest that restorative practices are a viable method for enabling dialogue that can play an educational role and provide a space safely to discuss and reflect upon views and experiences of belonging, policing and police-community relations. While there is sufficient evidence to justify seeking to scale-up dialogic processes, it remains unclear whether and how the contribution that dialogue can make at the individual and local level could translate into cultural change at the institutional level, or address underlying structural inequalities.

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1. Introduction

'I thought this was supposed to be diverse!' These were the words of a White, male Garda (an Irish police officer) who supported Liverpool Football Club as he realised he was sitting in a room full of Manchester United fans. He said this in jest, and the room erupted with laughter.

With him, in a circle of chairs, sat five other White Gardaí and six young Black adults. The Gardaí worked locally, in Blanchardstown, West Dublin, where the young Black adults all lived. These twelve people came together for a two-day dialogue process as part of a project that aimed to explore whether restorative practices could help facilitate dialogue and build understanding between police and young Black adults. The above scene took place thirty minutes into Day 1. After the co-facilitators (the first author, and one person from each 'side' who was trained in restorative practices) welcomed the group and introduced the purpose of the process, attendees paired up with someone from the 'other side' to get to know each other, before introducing their partners to the whole group. Football emerged as a common conversation topic. While both of the aforementioned teams are popular in Ireland, here the Liverpool-supporting officer was in a minority of one – much to his (mock) chagrin and others' amusement.

This paper contextualises and outlines key findings from a study of this work. Blanchardstown was the site of a rare (for Ireland) police shooting of a young Black adult in December 2020. This event

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and its aftermath intensified burgeoning conversations in Ireland about the police's treatment of, and relationships with, minority ethnic groups. The authors worked with An Garda Síochána (the national police force) and several NGOs to co-design, co-facilitate and research a dialogue process. Accordingly, conversations were not all trivial. Beyond sports, participants shared stories of stereotyping and racial profiling – including, but not only, by the police – and feelings of having or lacking a sense of belonging at a point in their lives. The first author led the project and co-facilitated the dialogue. The second author collected the data: 54 hours of observations and 26 interviews with project partners and participants.

The article begins by outlining the (limited) research exploring the relationship between police and minority ethnic communities in Ireland. This exposes an unremarkable situation: that institutional racism is a problem in Irish policing and, despite some actions taken, there is no reason to believe that the solutions lie in existing responses. The next section explores related efforts to improve police-community engagement internationally through restorative practices and dialogue – meaning the use of facilitated group conversations that focus on relationships and on equality in participation. This project was informed by previous work that used a restorative practice known as a 'circle process' (or 'circles'), where speaking rights revolve around participants sequentially, guided by a talking piece (Johnson and Weisberg 2021, Payne *et al*. 2021). This differs from restorative justice, which enables conversations between those directly involved in and affected by an incident to address the harm done. Rather, this project reflected Schirch and Campt's (2007, p. 6) definition of dialogue as 'a communication process that aims to build relationships between people as they share experiences, ideas and information about a common concern'. Participants were invited to share personal experiences and perspectives, but asked not to debate or seek to convince others of a particular viewpoint. Such processes are envisaged by the 2018 Council of Europe Recommendation on restorative justice, which provides for the police to use restorative practices to build relationships with communities (Marder 2020).

The paper contextualises and explains the study and project design, including its location and three phases (training, dialogue and interviews), participant recruitment, and the methodology, dataset and analytical process. It then outlines the findings in relation to research questions about participants' experiences of the project and the extent to which the process built understanding by considering what was communicated and what did or did not seem to be understood. The findings suggest that the process enabled participants to share experiences, perspectives and emotions and speak and listen respectfully. This appeared to build an understanding of how elements of each other's experiences influenced their perspectives, and to foster reflection on similarities and differences. The process seemingly educated, revealed the sources of contrasting viewpoints and illuminated participants' common humanity and the potential for a better relationship between them, indicating that restorative practices are a viable way to facilitate direct, safe and active engagement between young Black adults and police officers to address their relationship. Yet, questions remain as to the potential to address police-minority ethnic community relations at the institutional/community level, given the scale and structural nature of the change needed in policing and wider society, and that participants self-selected and were generally non-antagonistic.

2. Relationships between the police and minority ethnic communities in Ireland

The research in Ireland broadly aligns with that from other Western, White-majority countries: there are significant tensions between minority ethnic communities and the police. An Garda Síochána, the Irish national police force, is often framed as having particularly, even uniquely, strong relationships with 'the community'. For example, the 2020 Programme for Government (coalition agreement) states that An Garda Síochána has 'deep rooted connections in *every* community that enable it to carry out its work fairly and effectively' (Government of Ireland 2020, p. 84, emphasis added). Yet, research has not substantiated the assertion that police-community relations are universally strong. Hamilton and Black (2023) contested the claim that the Garda Public Attitudes Survey

indicates exceptional levels of trust and satisfaction, for example: despite its results being commonly depicted this way, when disaggregated only a minority of respondents actually select the highest ratings.

Mid-to-late twentieth Century Ireland was characterised by high levels of ethnic uniformity, relative to other Western European countries. Today, the police and many other services stand accused of failing to ensure that their professionals are fully equipped to meet diverse communities' needs following rapid diversification since the 1990s (O'Brien-Olinger 2019). For An Garda Síochána, McInerney points to a lack of 'knowledge, tact and skill [to] accommodate difference' (2020, p. 1).

In Ireland, as internationally (Bowling *et al*. 2008), the research suggests that minority ethnic communities have lower levels of trust and satisfaction than do the majority population. For example, Travellers – an indigenous minority group – have substantial mistrust in the police following decades of over-policing and under-protection (Mulcahy 2012, Joyce *et al*. 2022). Separately, a project in West Dublin used mixed methods to ask residents of African descent about their experiences with services. Community respondents did not trust the Gardaí to protect them from hate-motivated victimisation and reported police profiling and discrimination (Dhala *et al*. 2019). Garda respondents disputed the claims of differential treatment, although the report noted that the perception of discrimination alone is sufficient to affect trust. Another report by the Policing Authority, a police oversight body, found that migrants' confidence to report offences and be kept safe remains low (2021, pp. 9–10). This is concerning given Van Craen's (2012) conclusion that feelings of insecurity and experiences of discrimination are the principal indicators of lower confidence in policing in Europe (see also, Wu and Cao 2018).

We know little about Garda attitudes in relation to community diversity given limited research. Charman and Corcoran (2015, p. 500) report that the 38 Dublin-based Gardaí they interviewed 'conveyed their willingness to police a multicultural polity', indicating a police culture that 'appreciat[es] the need to recognise the message of social justice, through inclusion' (Charman and Corcoran 2015: 498). They also saw that officers did not appear intolerant towards colleagues from diverse backgrounds, albeit the gap between what the police say and what they do inhibits drawing firm conclusions about behaviour.

An Garda Síochána do not collect ethnic identifiers that would help quantify disproportionality among those subject to police powers (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission 2022). Yet, when reviewing the research on policing in Ireland, Conway (2021) observes that no independent studies find institutional racism – whereby communities receive an unequal service and outcomes based on ethnicity – is not a problem. A Garda-commissioned human rights audit found that their 'procedure and operating practices […] can lead to institutional racism' (Ioann Consulting 2004, p. 18). Also, Michael and O'Curry (2018) discuss data from iReport, a civil society-led website through which individuals can report racist incidents. The data, they argued, show 'patterns of systematic failure in An Garda Síochána in this area' including the profiling and victimisation of ethnic minorities, and the refusal to record and respond to reported offences with a hate motivation, thus 'confirm[ing] institutional racism' (Michael and O'Curry 2018, pp. 5–9). Ireland does not appear to be an international outlier by lacking any evidence of differential treatment.

While the police's mistrust by, and discrimination against, minority ethnic groups predated recent waves of immigration, tensions with the Black community have recently come to the fore. At the time of writing, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions is investigating the circumstances in which a Garda from an armed unit shot and killed 27-year-old George Nkencho in December 2020 in West Dublin. Since his shooting, there were protests outside the local police station in Blanchardstown and elsewhere, and reported incidents between Gardaí and Nkencho's family (Gallagher and Pollak 2021). One newspaper investigation alleged that police-community relationships deteriorated in the area even before the shooting, as specialist diversity officers who built relationships with young Black people by working with Nkencho's football team had moved elsewhere (Gallagher 2021). It contrasts this situation with that when another person from the team, Toyosi Shittabey, was killed in a racially motivated attack in 2010. After his death, it suggests, Gardaí who had

moved role or retired by the time Nkencho was killed had calmed tensions by engaging with and reassuring the Black community. McInerney (2020) agrees that Gardaí, specifically Ethnic Liaison Officers (ELOs), had once built strong relationships with young Black people in West Dublin due to an (ultimately, temporary) focus on the need for this work locally.

The impact of recent Garda initiatives attending to questions of diversity remains unclear. For example, there is virtually no publicly available information about the Garda National Diversity Forum, comprised of 'representatives of communities and key stakeholders' and meeting quarterly to monitor and review the implementation of the force's Diversity and Integration Strategy 2019–2021 (An Garda Síochána 2019, p. 10). Efforts to recruit more minority ethnic officers reflect a common assumption that this will improve relations, but studies exploring the impact of officer diversification on police decision-making and community perceptions yield mixed findings (Todak *et al*. 2018). The Irish Council for Civil Liberties has criticised the limited resources afforded minority liaison work and the process of its allocation: ELOs 'too often' experienced their selection as '"draw [ing] the short straw" […] hav[ing] expressed no previous interest or aptitude' in the role (Lister *et al*. 2015; Kilpatrick 2018, p. 96, argue that such appointments must consider staff suitability for this type of work).

Ireland's situation is largely unremarkable, with evidence of problematic relationships between the police and minority ethnic communities, and a lack of obvious solutions. This needs to be addressed proactively, given the ramifications for the safety of those communities and police legitimacy.

3. Dialogue, restorative practices and police-community relations

3.1. Intergroup contact and intergroup dialogue

Research on intergroup contact and intergroup dialogue shows positive results in numerous settings. Pettigrew and Tropp's meta-analysis of 515 studies (2006, p. 766) reveals that greater contact 'is generally associated with lower levels of prejudice', with robust results from research with stronger methodologies, and those using ethnicity as their unit of analysis. They concluded that the 'relationships between contact and prejudice are not artefacts of either participant selection or publication bias', and that contact can improve attitudes towards entire groups, not just towards those individuals with whom the contact occurred. Applied to our context, we might expect officers to harbour less prejudice if they engage more with minority ethnic communities. McInerney (2020) partially attributes to such exposure the Garda ELOs' more positive opinions of minority groups, compared with their generalist colleagues. At the same time, the relationship between the cynical, suspicious and conservative attributes of police culture and their adverse interactions with the public (Reiner 2010), implies that the *quality* of contact is likely to be as or more important than the volume.

Far from enhancing attitudes of each other, moreover, intergroup contact between police and young minority ethnic people often reduces police legitimacy. Piquero *et al*. (2016) found that second-generation or native-born young people with a migrant background – the groups on which the current study focuses – have substantially more cynical attitudes towards the law, and report lower legitimacy about the law and legal institutions, than do first-generation immigrants. It may be that, for the latter, police in the destination country compare favourably (e.g. lower corruption) to those in their country of origin, whereas young people grow up in a 'new' country experiencing police discrimination without experiencing the police in the country of their parents' birth (Röder and Mühlau 2011, 2012, Yuan *et al*. 2022). In Europe, Bradford and Jackson reason (2018, p. 584) that 'there is something about growing up as an immigrant child that in and of itself serves, on average, to alienate people from institutions such as the police', but that difficult relationships with the police are most likely 'generated not by the "cultural baggage" of the immigrants but by the actions and omissions of the institutions with which they interact'. Efforts to address this

relationship must thus acknowledge the role of police behaviour in reducing legitimacy, and avoid replicating the adversarial dynamics of so much police contact with young people who have a migrant background.

Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) drew on their meta-analysis to propose three ways that intergroup contact could diminish prejudice: by enhancing knowledge about other groups, reducing anxiety about intergroup contact, and increasing empathy and perspective taking. Attempts to apply this knowledge take the form of intergroup dialogue: where people from two groups participate in structured, facilitated conversations, based on agreed ground rules. One review of studies on intergroup dialogue concluded that dialogue can reduce stereotypes and prejudice, and increase understanding, empathy, perspective taking, understanding of the role of ethnicity in identity and interactions, and awareness of structural power relations (Dessel and Rogge 2008). Some studies are methodologically stronger than others, but the evidence suffices to explore the potential of dialogue in police-community contexts.

3.2. Restorative practices and dialogue between police and marginalised communities

Many projects that facilitate dialogue between police and marginalised communities are small in scale, in different contexts (e.g. in America, or with marginalised youth from a majority population), and have not been subjected to peer-reviewed research. Evaluated projects, however, commonly appear to improve participants' understandings, relationships and attitudes.

Some projects used restorative practices; others employed dialogue as their unifying concept. In relation to the former, Payne *et al*. (2021, p. 258) observed eight Police-Youth Forums in the UK, using circles and arts-based exercises with groups of around 20 police and young people with a 'relative high probability of adversarial police contact'. Researchers spoke to participants before and after the Forums to explore the impact on their perceptions of the other group. Participants reported significantly reconsidering negative preconceptions and had new intentions to interact more positively in the future, with the structured process providing ideas for how to do so. Another study in Glasgow (Deuchar *et al*. 2015) explored a restorative process, designed following ethnographic research with local young people. This was found to improve police understandings of young peoples' perspectives on local issues and distrust of police, while decreasing distrust in police among young participants.

Several researched projects based on dialogue took place in North America. Giwa *et al*. (2014) undertook pre- and post-focus groups and observed a dialogue between nine officers and 15 minority ethnic young people in Ottawa, Canada, following two highly publicised cases of racial profiling. Their research found that police and young participants shared an understanding of what was wrong in their relationship and expressed a mutual desire to increase communication and sensitivity in interactions. Yet, police officers did not accept that their force was racially biased, despite this being young peoples' interpretation. A large-scale project in six American cities used 'reconciliation discussions', alongside a training and policy change programme, to build trust in police. The evaluation found that discussions enabled 'authentic conversations to acknowledge historic tensions, harms, and misconceptions and to repair relationships' (Jannetta *et al*. 2019, p. 3). Police joined 60 'listening sessions', each with around 20 community members, including minority ethnic persons. Evaluators felt that these succeeded because the respect shown permitted an exchange of views that enabled participants to find common ground. Police leaders did not react defensively or angrily to criticism. Some even started by conceding their forces' roles in past/ongoing harms. In another project in Baltimore, pre- and post-surveys with police and young participants in 'dialogue circles' discovered significantly improved perceptions of the other group and greater mutual understanding (Williams and Crifasi 2020).

Ireland has also seen some related projects that were documented, but not subject to extensive empirical assessment. For example, from 2007 to 2010, socially engaged artist Fiona Whelan collaborated with youth workers and young people to help the latter articulate and record their

experiences of police, at the instigation of the young people (Whelan 2014, Todd 2018). These stories formed the basis of a public art exhibition, in which trainee Gardaí read them aloud to an audience including those young people, followed by discussions. Todd's analysis (2018) of this emphasised its pedagogical, aesthetic and public dimensions. More recently, the Traveller Mediation Service worked with An Garda Síochána and other partners to facilitate several 'Garda-Traveller Dialogue Days'. A feedback survey revealed an appetite for further dialogue on a regional basis, and that the use of restorative practices to structure the dialogue created an informal atmosphere, built trust and encouraged honest conversations (Walsh 2021).

While positive contact between police officers and minority ethnic communities is needed, not any form of contact will do, as both the police's culture and community mistrust emerge partially from adverse experiences of contact. Dialogue and restorative practices could provide structures that enable high quality contact that builds understanding, knowledge, trust and empathy and reduces prejudice and anxiety. Based on these ideas, we worked with Gardaí, young Black adults and NGOs in West Dublin to co-design, co-facilitate and research a restorative dialogue process.

4. Project outline and research methodology

4.1. Location and partners

Blanchardstown in West Dublin was selected as the location for this work for several reasons. Initial conversations with national policing mangers revealed a desire to improve relations with young Black adults, of whom there is a relatively high population in Blanchardstown. As noted, the area saw raised tensions following the police killing of George Nkencho in December 2020. Blanchardstown has a police station and is within the working area of several NGOs that were willing to support the project: Sport Against Racism Ireland, Insaka-Ireland, Childhood Development Initiative and Foróige. Regional police management supported the proposal; some had previous experience with restorative practices. In Blanchardstown, therefore, the project was viable, supported and had the potential for high impact.

4.2. Project phases and design

The project had three phases:

- Phase 1 (May–June 2022): five young Black adults and six Gardaí together received three days of restorative practices training, co-designed a dialogue process and identified co-facilitators.
- Phase 2 (September 2022): the first author, and a trained young Black adult and Garda from Phase 1, finalised and co-facilitated the dialogue process with ten further participants (five from each group).
- Phase 3 (September–December 2022): project partners and participants were invited to be interviewed.

Before Phases 1 and 2, groups attended separate preparation meetings held in the police station and, for young Black adults, in the local library. The training and dialogue were hosted in an accessible, neutral venue: a community centre adjacent to Blanchardstown. Gardaí attended the training and dialogue in plain clothes.

The project drew heavily on research-informed guidance that outlines how to design dialogue in challenging contexts, and between the police and young people (Schirch and Campt 2007, Johnson and Weisberg 2021). This revealed several considerations. Firstly, dialogue must seek to balance the power in the room to maximise equality and protect the participants from harm. In Blanchardstown, the preparation, training and dialogue used a talking piece to manage power imbalances.

Participants were told they could not interrupt its holder so that everyone had an equal opportunity to speak. They sat in circles without anything between them, to symbolise their equality of voice and enable them to pass the talking piece around the circle sequentially in response to questions (Wachtel 2011). Adherence to this rule was a condition of participation: the circle and talking piece were introduced in preparation meetings to ensure that participation was informed, voluntary and based on clear expectations, and they were used from the outset of the training and dialogue. In the dialogue, participants co-created ground rules and were asked (in circles) what they wanted from participation, what similarities and differences they heard in the responses, and if they had any concerns. The facilitators explained the importance of equality in participation and that their 'multi-partiality' aimed to 'raise up unheard voices' in recognition of the power imbalance.

Secondly, these processes should be participatory in their design and delivery. In Dhala *et al*. (2019), Black community members in West Dublin expressed concern that they were excluded from service design. Deuchar *et al*. (2015) credited the success of the process they researched to the involvement of local stakeholders in designing a context-sensitive approach. Interviewees in Jannetta *et al*. (2019) stated that community involvement would have improved process design. Our trainees and co-facilitators helped decide which questions to ask in the dialogue and optimised their wording. Co-facilitators agreed a plan by consensus, devising questions that empowered participants to define their conditions in their own terms. Including a co-facilitator from each group aimed to ensure that participants felt represented at all stages of process design and management (Dessel and Rogge 2008). Circles were used throughout to ensure participants had an equal opportunity to speak in the preparation meetings, training and dialogue process.

Thirdly, the project had a relational and experiential focus. In both the training and the dialogue, participants had lengthy opportunities to get to know each other and build trust, before being invited to share, listen to and reflect on (increasingly personal) experiences. The dialogue started with participants discussing, in pairs, what they liked about where they were from, before introducing each other to the group in circles. Then, in circles, they described how they ended up living or working in Blanchardstown. Subsequent circles asked about experiences of belonging and stereotyping and, on the second day, their experiences of policing and perspectives on the future. As Schirch and Campt (2007), Jannetta *et al*. (2019) and Johnson and Weisberg (2021) all advise, the group established trust, common intentions and norms, before moving to more challenging conversations on diversity, difference and policing.

4.3. Dataset and participant recruitment

The dataset the second author collected includes 54 hours of observations, and interviews with 26 of the 32 persons who were offered the opportunity for an interview. The observations include all four preparation meetings with participants, five days of training and dialogue, and meetings to launch the project and plan the training and dialogue. The launch with project partners, and one meeting of the co-facilitators, took place online; all other meetings took place face-to-face. Interviews were conducted with nine out of eleven project partners, nine of eleven trainees, and eight of ten dialogue participants, divided evenly among police and young Black adults. These data provide a reasonably comprehensive, qualitative overview of the project – albeit interviewees' views could differ from those who declined to be interviewed ($n = 1$) or did not respond ($n = 5$). When quoted below, 'P' is a young Black adult and 'G' is a Garda. A 'D' indicates participation in the dialogue (GD1 is a Garda in the dialogue, G1 is a Garda who only participated in the training, and so on).

While there is a need to ensure the anonymity of those who participated, some description of the sample is necessary to contextualise the findings. The goal was to recruit a gender-balanced group of six Gardaí and six young Black adults for each of the training and the dialogue. Ultimately, six Gardaí (one female, five male) and five young Black adults (four female, one male) were trained. One trainee from each group co-facilitated the dialogue with a further five Gardaí (one female, four male) and five young Black adults (one female, four male). While this failed to balance female and male

perspectives, at least one male and female participated from both sides in both Phases. In total, eleven Gardaí and ten young Black adults (aged 18–27, mostly at the younger end) participated across Phases 1 and 2.

Local management insisted on nominating Gardaí for the training whom they believed would be amenable to the process. Of six trainees, five were Community Gardaí; one was from the national Diversity Office. Preparation meetings emphasised voluntariness, given their nomination by local management. All participants stated a genuine desire to participate and for their data to be collected. For the dialogue, local management agreed to circulate an email seeking expressions of interest. Seven Gardaí (from a population of around 70) put themselves forward. All attended preparation, but only five could attend the dialogue. Of these, there were three Community Gardaí and two 'regular' Gardaí. Involving officers from just one rank (frontline) aimed to make them more comfortable speaking openly than if managers were present (Davis 2023). Their ages and years of service were not collected, but reportedly varied.

The project focused on young Black adults to avoid the challenges relating to the safeguarding of persons under 18, while, as noted, studies suggest young adults have worse relationships with police than older adults. We snowball sampled: the aforementioned NGOs, and participants themselves, asked people they knew to speak with the first author about the project. A public call was rejected, given the sensitivity of the work and the risk of its politicisation. Some participants tried many avenues to identify others, reporting that many declined because they held negative attitudes towards police, or could not commit the time (all young Black participants worked, studied or both). Dialogue participants received a €90 voucher, and community trainees were paid, to enable their participation.

No interviewees expressed holding strongly antagonistic views towards the other group prior to the project. This is not to say none had negative experiences: almost all young Black adults reported experiences with Gardaí that they characterised as profiling; some knew George Nkencho personally. Still, all described a desire to improve relationships and expressed optimism that this was possible. For Gardaí, both management nomination and self-selection could indicate an unrepresentative disposition towards minority community engagement, while Garda interviewees all articulated similar optimism to the young Black adult participants.

Consequently, the sample was biased towards those who believed that change was possible and desirable, dialogue was a good idea, and they could play a positive role. Interviewees described being motivated to participate to improve relationships and understand the other group better. Many called themselves 'open minded', while several Gardaí reported that learning generally, and learning about minority ethnic groups specifically, was important to them (for example, GD5 said that 'you can never develop yourself enough, particularly in my role in community policing in dealing with many different groups', and GD3 said 'I like learning about different cultures'). Mastrofski *et al*. (2002) suggest that a minority of police officers might see themselves in such terms, so we can assume that the participants were not representative of their force. Some even commented on this: G3 felt that participating colleagues were 'easy going' and 'would be quite eager to learn these sorts of things'. On the young Black adult trainees, G3 suggested that they did not 'think there was anybody there that really disliked guards'. G6 stated that the training felt somewhat 'staged' due to the lack of antagonism, although participants were from 'what we would consider tough estates'. GD3 was among many Gardaí to propose that future dialogue processes include young Black adults 'who were constantly interacting with guards'. Although, again, some had described repeated searches, GD3 appeared to mean people who have convictions.

It may be possible for future projects to enhance the diversity of viewpoints and experiences by undertaking a public call for participants, which specifies financial incentives and even directly requests participation from those with experience of arrests and convictions. Noting that persons from both sides expressed at least some uncertainty during preparations, it should be recognised that finding incentives to attend information sessions or preparation meetings – by providing food, for example – could be 'half the battle', if this helps the otherwise sceptical to hear a fuller

explanation. For police officers, too, there are challenges relating to self-selection. Perhaps a greater breadth of officers would participate if dialogue were built into their training, such as the induction and local orientation that they receive upon being assigned their posting. At the same time, both restorative practices and dialogue as fields understand voluntariness as a crucial principle and safeguard. An even greater impact may be achievable by giving a public dimension to the expression of experiences, as seen in Whelan's project outlined above (Whelan 2014, Todd 2018).

While the findings must be interpreted in light of participants' self-selection, optimism and lack of antagonism, the data still provide a rich representation of the unique experience of an intergroup dialogue.

4.4. Methodology and analytical process

The second author led the data collection and analysis, providing some (limited) independence from the project's delivery. Their background as an anthropologist and ethnographer informed the study, as they sought to obtain a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) of what happened and the implications for participants. The combination of observations and interviews aligns with similar work, already cited, highlighting the importance of interpretivist and constructivist schools of thought when exploring the dynamics of, and possible changes to, police-community relations (Payne *et al*. 2021). Observations were generally non-participatory and drew on anthropological methods by recording non-verbal data, reflections on the architecture of the spaces and periodic participation through, for example, informal conversations at breaks. Interviews were semi-structured, online and lasted about an hour. To mitigate biases, the second author kept a reflexive field diary and the authors frequently discussed together their positionalities, assumptions, interpretations and meta-ethical considerations. The highest tier of ethical approval was obtained from the Maynooth Social Research Ethics Subcommittee.

The analytical process employed inductive thematic analysis to code data using NVivo (Braun and Clarke 2006). The second author led the analysis – again, to provide some independence from the facilitation. Simultaneously, the first author read the data to get to know the dataset, highlighting any data that spoke to the research questions on respondents' experiences of the project, the extent to which restorative practices enabled dialogue and built understanding, and the implications for police-community relations. Over multiple conversations, the authors discussed the codes and agreed the themes to explore herein. This article provides a general overview and analysis of the findings.

5. Findings

5.1. Circles, talking pieces and sharing experiences

Whether involved in the project's organisation, training or dialogue (or both, in the case of co-facilitators), interviewees universally reported experiencing their involvement in the project positively and were eager for its expansion. During the training, some Gardaí expressed initial worries about the dialogue. G5 predicted: 'it'll be very negative towards Gardaí', and G6 said: 'it just takes one person to say "fuck that, I'm not doing this" and the whole thing is a mess in five minutes'. Yet, participants from both 'sides' described the dialogue as 'eye opening' and 'life changing', appreciating the opportunity to learn, listen, ask questions, articulate views and gain new knowledge. This is notable considering that many community participants reported that they, or their friends or families, had serious, previous negative experiences with police, including what they considered repeated and unwarranted stops and searches, malicious charges, and friends subjected to lethal force.

Interviewees reported that the preparation meetings made them feel as prepared as was possible in the circumstances. Participants understood that they need not arrive at a consensus and should

avoid advancing, defending or criticising specific arguments (Schirch and Campt 2007). Instead, they shared personal experiences, identified the similarities and differences, and asked questions to understand each other's perspectives and experiences. Restorative structures – relationship building, circles and talking pieces – appeared to support this. The talking piece seemed to mitigate power imbalances, discouraging participants from reacting immediately and allowing young people to tell their stories of discrimination without interruption. Only once did a facilitator need to reiterate the rules: a Garda in the dialogue once sought to reclaim the talking piece after passing it, but apologised and relented rapidly when reminded that it only moved sequentially once passed. In the training and the dialogue, participants seldom passed the talking piece without speaking, potentially signalling that they felt comfortable contributing.

Interviewees mentioned the circle and talking piece in positive terms. A community member described the circle as 'very relaxed' and said it made them feel 'automatically at ease' (PD5). Another said that it 'made it kind of more intimate' (PD1). One said that they enjoyed how everyone could see each other as this 'ke[pt] everybody attentive' (PD3), while a fourth commented that it stopped people 'shouting over each other', because everyone was 'forced to wait your turn to speak' (PD4). Gardaí likewise observed that circles meant 'everyone had the opportunity to speak [and] no one interrupted' (G6). They said it meant participants would 'listen and not cut someone off [from a] full explanation' (GD1) and it gave everyone the 'opportunity to speak' and 'time to process, rather than reacting' (GD4). One said that they would 'naturally want to challenge', but the talking piece provided an 'opportunity to stop and reflect' (GD2). As Wachtel (2011) suggests is a benefit of restorative practices, participants seemed comfortable expressing emotions, and were willing not to interrupt as others did the same.

Participants showed vulnerability by sharing feelings, identities, experiences and perspectives, from the mundane and jovial, to devastation at the hands of police in Ireland and elsewhere. With one exception – one Garda attended a dialogue process with Travellers before – none previously engaged in similar conversations. For example, GD2 described having had 'good connections' with young Black people due to their work with youth clubs, but 'never sat down in a forum to talk things out […] through a set out practice'. GD4 represented the views of their colleagues in stating:

> You got that stranger barrier gone. Me being a garda, I'd never sit down and talk to a person in the community and tell them that my favourite singer or football team is whoever, or I have a [sibling]. That would never happen on a day-to-day basis.

Participants on both sides showed exceptional vulnerability by sharing personal stories about families, childhoods and experiences of stereotyping. The latter included perceived racist treatment by Gardaí and security guards and, for Gardaí, experiences of stereotyping pertaining to gender, ethnicity, class, family history and employment. The combination of pedestrian (e.g. hobbies, travel, sport) and deeply personal (e.g. identities, stereotyping, experiences of harm) exchanges seemed to permit participants to recognise their common humanity – reducing, as GD4 said, 'that stranger barrier'.

5.2. 'It sounds like they're preparing you for war': building understanding by revealing police culture

This quote was from a community member during the dialogue, upon hearing Gardaí describe their experiences of the Irish national police training college, Templemore. On Day 1, participants were asked in the circle to share how they ended up working or living in Blanchardstown. Then, participants were asked to identify any similarities and differences in what they heard. It was observed that several Gardaí had referenced Templemore, and the young Black adults expressed surprise at the authoritarian, militaristic, dehumanising experiences Gardaí recalled. GD1 said 'they try to strip away who you were and send you out as police. […] The way we were treated was definitely

bad'. GD2 stated: 'they try to take away your personality, everything', before reflecting: 'it's actually bad when you say it out loud'. Gardaí discussed the rigid schedule, curfew, rules regarding hair, and other controls on their social life and personal expression, speculating that Templemore's severity had likely decreased since they attended.

Young people were surprised by the universally negative experience of training. PD3 held that 'it sounds like prison' and made the assertion in the subsection heading, connecting this realisation to what they perceived as the antagonistic, adversarial ways Gardaí approached community interactions. PD5 opined that it was 'crazy how they segregated you, and then sent you back to the community'. This related to what seemed a stark realisation for the young participants, who expressed dismay that Gardaí received identical training, irrespective of their subsequent posting. Gardaí agreed this was problematic. In relation to working in such diverse communities, GD2 said that the force 'never teach you to talk to people'. Upon hearing several of the young Black participants describing the importance of youth work in their lives, moreover, Gardaí expressed concern that they were not taught about this in training. GD3 stated that they could better understand why some people would see them as 'robots' – a metaphor both groups commonly used over the two days.

Templemore was raised by multiple young Black adults at the end of both days when asked, in circles, for something they wanted to learn more about (Day 1), and something they heard that surprised them or changed the way they thought (Day 2). They queried the militaristic approaches, and expressed shock at identical training irrespective of posting, and surprise that Gardaí had negative experiences of the organisation: 'since you're here, I would have thought it was a positive thing' (PD2). Three of five community interviewees from the dialogue also mentioned Templemore, mostly reiterating these same points. For example, PD3 said: 'it surprised me about their school. […] How they almost feel like they're in the army, but then they're sent out to deal with people in the community'. Here, young adults were observing something the Garda Inspectorate (2014) previously asserted: Garda training risks fostering cultural homogeneity and insularity.

5.3. 'Going to court could have affected their career, I never thought about that as a garda': building understanding by revealing experiences and consequences of being policed

Beyond a newfound recognition of the importance of youth work, Gardaí seemed to learn about the costs of police behaviour on young Black adults' lives and perceptions of policing. The quote in the subheading was GD4's reflection at the close of Day 1, after a young Black adult depicted what sounded like a discriminatory prosecution: they crossed the road at a red light with numerous White people, and a passing Garda pulled them from the crowd and charged them with obstructing traffic. The charge was ultimately dropped, but only after it nearly precluded them from undertaking the compulsory placement module during their undergraduate degree. Interviewed, GD4 continued reflecting:

> When they were speaking about different experiences they've had with Gardaí, I was like: 'Oh my God!' I never thought of it that way. […] I definitely could see, from their point of view, why they're getting agitated when they're being stopped by the guards.

As mentioned, Gardaí in the training expressed scepticism about the potential for dialogue, seemingly assuming community anger was too great. Yet, the dialogue seemed to reveal that – for the young Black adults who participated at least – their reluctance to engage with Gardaí was mostly because they feared the consequences of a malicious Garda action. This suggests that dialogue could close a feedback loop for police officers, illuminating the consequences of police behaviour for individuals (e.g. the effects of an unnecessary charge) and community perceptions (e.g. a fear of, and an aversion to, engagement).

Some police expressed developing a newfound awareness of how they were perceived. As the young people described their harassment by police and security guards, one Garda asked if they

ever challenged this. They responded that they mostly did not, out of fear of making things worse. As PD6 put it: 'there is no leeway for me'. GD1 replied: 'we don't realise the power dynamic or reflect on it as an organisation'. In their interviews, some Gardaí stated that, in recognition of this fear, they wanted to increase non-adversarial interactions. For example, GD3 said:

> I am more mindful of how they're perceiving me. I'll always be thinking, 'can I change this?' […] Like I did this [recently], stopped the car, put the window down. Just speak to people: 'how are you?' […] That's a big thing for me because I wouldn't have done that before. […] It's always in my mind now, that's the important thing. It's there and you'll always be thinking about it. And I tell people about it that I work with.

GD3 also said that they had recently asked other Gardaí who attended the dialogue to support them with community outreach, which they did. This raises the possibility that the dialogue affected their thinking and behaviour, much as Payne *et al*. (2021) found it helped police realise the need to treat young people differently and provided ideas for how to do so. GD3 reported that they did not know those other Gardaí well before the dialogue, suggesting that this helped them get to know their colleagues and enabled their collaboration on community outreach. There could also have been a 'cascading effect', with at least this participant telling others who were not there about what they had learned.

5.4. What could not be said (or heard)

This is not to say that participants felt comfortable discussing any topic. On the last day of the training, the first author worked with the eleven trainees to design the dialogue process. So that those who would facilitate the dialogue process were prepared for every eventuality (Johnson and Weisberg 2021), the first author asked the group to consider what they would do if George Nkencho were raised. This seemed to cause some observed awkwardness. A Garda asked why that example was chosen. The first author replied that he was killed locally and recently, so might be on some people's minds. Gardaí said that their colleagues could not discuss this as the investigation was ongoing; young adults felt that dialogue participants should be able to do so, if relevant to their experiences and perspectives.

During the dialogue, Nkencho was only raised explicitly during the 'caucuses', when the group was separated into Gardaí and young Black adults to discuss any questions they had for the other side. The young Black adults considered asking Gardaí why they supposed Nkencho was treated differently to a White person in another case that they understood to be similar. They elected not to ask this, but several young Black adults interviewed mentioned Nkencho's death as affecting their views of Gardaí and the relationship with Gardaí locally – despite not raising this in the dialogue.

Lukes' (2005) concept of the 'dimensions of power' suggests that power can be observed from 'inactivity' (or, what does not happen), whereby dominant parties in a relationship need not exert force to influence the behaviour of a weaker party, keeping issues off the agenda (see also, González and Mayka 2022). Participants may simply have feared souring the atmosphere by mentioning a sensitive case. Yet, this reflected a broader challenge around discussing issues of ethnicity and policing directly. Gardaí in the dialogue expressed understanding racism as an individual behaviour from those who acted wrongly due to personal (racist and generally malevolent) views. For example, they said they had never witnessed discrimination, aside from by one Garda 'who was a horrible person [and] straight up targeted a Black person in a car. I remember being shocked, [they] actually said it out loud' (GD1). GD2 stated that this person, now retired, 'was a fucking absolute wanker [and] one in a million'.

This individualisation of racism, combined with the assumption that the police's use of powers was generally justifiable, meant that Gardaí in the dialogue did not recognise institutional racism. For example, one young Black adult mentioned a disparity they observed in the number of Gardaí present at concerts attended by different ethnicities, and asked why this might be. Rather than addressing the disparity directly, the Garda presence was explained in general terms (in case

a fight or a fire happened). When young Black adults said that they and their friends were often searched for no obvious reason, Gardaí suggested that this was not because of ethnicity. Discussing how broadly 'reasonable suspicion' can be interpreted, GD3 stated that 'even walking around in the same area [as drugs are perceived to be prevalent] is reasonable', while GD1 noted: 'any suspicion is reasonable suspicion'. Following Johnson and Weisberg's advice (2021) that facilitators should connect experiences to research, the first author asked if it was discriminatory for police to circulate and search people more often in poorer areas with high minority ethnic populations, when drug consumption is similar across classes. GD2 suggested the reverse might be true: there was 'potentially more stop and search' in 'perceived nice areas' if 'people [there] want to see more action being done'.

We cannot obtain stop and search data by area in Ireland, but international research suggests an overwhelming likelihood that Gardaí conduct more searches in areas with higher working class and minority ethnic populations, than the reverse (Bowling *et al*. 2008). Gardaí called out individuals for their practices – 'one percent of Gardaí are dickheads and stop and search everyone' (GD2) – but it was unclear if the dialogue helped Gardaí understand institutional racism, mirroring Giwa *et al*. (2014). Both in interviews and in the dialogue, Gardaí pointed to news from the USA and UK as a reason why young Black people in Ireland might assume they discriminated. They also felt that Garda behaviour could be wrongly misinterpreted as racism. In their interview, GD2 said that 'the majority of participants only had positive experiences with Gardaí'. Aside from one incident, they recalled, 'the rest was all just kind of hearsay and stuff'. In fact, several participants shared negative personal experiences, which did not seem to be 'heard' by all present. GD2 also considered the one incident they recalled not to be actually discriminatory:

> I think it was coming back from training and [they] had a gym bag and were stopped. […] I think every Garda in the room understood why. And I can understand what [they] might have thought. […] We would understand why there were no racial connotations why it happened, but [they] probably felt it was because of the colour of [their] skin.

Again, this demonstrates an understanding of racism which is predicated on the conscious intent of the actor, not the disparities of treatment that emerge from institutional, unconscious patterns of behaviour and uses of police powers. This mirrors other research in which police often (Kammersgaard *et al*. 2022), and as dialogue participants specifically (Giwa *et al*. 2014), reject ethnicity as a factor influencing their behaviour.

6. Discussion: what can and cannot be achieved if dialogue creates new 'stories'?

Classically understood, police socialisation consolidates and reproduces police culture through 'stories' and 'scripts', with embedded assumptions about how to interpret and respond to reoccurring situations (Shearing and Ericson 1991). This 'knowledge' interacts with the social conditions in which the police operate (Chan 1996) to create unwritten norms or 'ways of working', reflected in patterns of behaviour and decision-making (McConville *et al*. 1991). In Ireland, O'Brien-Olinger (2019) observed that individual Garda attitudes towards minority ethnic communities were influenced more by personal experiences and colleagues' experiences, circulated via 'stories', than by organisational change efforts and policies. Meanwhile, data from iReport (Michael 2021, in Conway 2021) suggests that minority ethnic communities in Ireland also share stories to indicate which services are safe and trustworthy, and that the most common reason for a minority ethnic person not to report discrimination to Gardaí was a lack of trust in the organisation *because of a previous encounter with a Garda*. As long as many Gardaí consider minority ethnic communities primarily in terms of risk, as O'Brien-Olinger (2019) found, and negative interactions with Gardaí remain commonplace among minority ethnic communities, relations seem unlikely to improve.

Still, if interactions are so influential in determining attitudes on both sides, then increasing the quantity and quality of positive interactions could produce new 'stories' that contribute in some small way to both the Garda organisational culture and the community's experience of policing.

Charman and Corcoran's assessment of Garda culture (2015, p. 495) found that at least some officers were prepared to exercise their (exceptional) discretion to emphasise their 'human qualities and empathies with the public they serve'. To the extent that this extends to minority ethnic communities, it could be possible to work with Gardaí to help structure their community engagement accordingly. In this project, it seemed to be straightforward to build relationships between participants, who appeared rapidly to feel comfortable speaking and laughing together. Restorative practice advocates claim that these tools and values can be applied to build positive relationships across divides, which seemed to hold true here. For wider publics, this also aligns with core tenets of procedural justice, insofar as the process could enable police to make decision-making processes more transparent (notwithstanding the possibility that an honest explanation of their decisions might not be always satisfying to hear) (Donner *et al*. 2015).

As noted, it may be possible to scale up dialogue and include differently minded Gardaí, police management and justice-involved community members, as our participants believed was necessary and possible, to have a greater impact. The humanistic features of Garda culture (Charman and Corcoran 2015), in the context of exceptional police discretion in Ireland, suggest that further work is conceivable. If mainstreamed, police-community dialogue could contribute towards 'restorative policing', which, for Clamp and Paterson (2017), requires moving to a relational understanding of the fundamental objective of policing. Admittedly, to mainstream police-community dialogue would require exceptional levels of community and police goodwill, and collaboration at a scale that may not be entirely beyond the realms of possibility, but for which there is little precedent.

Martin (2000) defines 'understanding' as the process by which one is exposed to and interprets new information, and recognises one's own biases as a result. There is some evidence that the dialogue helped Gardaí become more cognisant of the role of police behaviour in affecting young Black adults' lives and perspectives. From the consequences of criminal records to the fear of police maliciousness, there is reason to interpret the dialogue as having important educational qualities for Gardaí. Crucially, it enabled officers respectfully to listen to, and reflect on, stories with racist policing overtones, alluding to institutional racism, and inspiring only limited resistance. This is significant in Ireland, where Garda leadership publicly deny institutional racism outright (Schiller 2022). Our findings suggest that Gardaí resisted explicitly recognising institutional racism in Irish policing, but that the dialogue enhanced their knowledge about young Black adults and enabled them to see their perspectives – both mechanisms by which intergroup contact can reduce prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). In line with research on intergroup dialogue (Dessel and Rogge 2008), the process seemed to help Gardaí understand the role of ethnicity and power in shaping their relationship with the Black community. This could have been aided by the restorative approach enabling participants to process their feelings, including feelings of shame, without denying others' experiences or lashing out (Wachtel 2011). For GD2, the circle was a place where Gardaí 'understood that we didn't have to be defensive'. This is a crucial finding, given the defensiveness of so many persons and organisations to accusations of prejudice or wrongdoing.

Still, our data suggest that the process may not have overcome the assumption, even among this self-selecting group, that racism was individualised and not structural. Johnson and Weisberg (2021) caution that low levels of police understanding of institutional racism justifies the inclusion of overt education on the topic, which this process omitted to do. As in similar projects (e.g. Giwa *et al*. 2014, Jannetta *et al*. 2019), police varied in their willingness to acknowledge the structural features of racism. Dialogue may not be sufficient to counteract prevailing and well-embedded bodies of police 'knowledge' (Chan 1996). Coupled with a lack of clear evidence that participating in dialogue changes police behaviour or attitudes in the medium-to-long term, and the fact that dialogue does not affect the socioeconomic and political conditions in which the police operate (Chan 1996), we cannot have high expectations that it will counteract structural problems. It would also have to attend to broader biases against, for example, place: Siegel (2020) found a strong relationship between police propensity to use fatal violence and the levels of residential segregation in the US. Attending to individual biases, choices and interpretations is insufficient when judgements of

place and group mirror the biases that pervade society and affect the administration of policing at the organisational level.

Were further projects of this nature to incorporate educational input on structural racism, these types of findings – which control for factors that could otherwise have explained discrepancies – would be important to mention. It would also be of value to provide the wider social context: structural racism is not a problem unique to policing, or to Black populations in majority White countries, but it exists in education, medicine and social work, and in countries around the world. Providing this wider understanding could reduce resistance to the concept or its application in policing in Ireland. Research on unconscious bias training has seen mixed results regarding whether immediate changes in attitudes sustain over time and affect police behaviour (e.g. Machado and Lugo 2022, Lai and Lisnek 2023). Yet, in principle, an appreciation of these concepts is essential for police officers (or for any public sector professionals) to understand that structural racism does not hinge on – explicitly, consciously and/or overtly – prejudiced individuals. For Spencer *et al*. (2016), one solution might be to combine new training with intergroup contact – 'one of the simplest, most reliable, and most powerful ways to reduce racial bias' (Spencer *et al*. 2016, p. 55) – that encourages perspective taking and induces positive emotion. As such, it may be that dialogue processes which fulfil the requirements for effective intergroup contact ('equal status between the groups in the situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authorities' [Spencer *et al*. 2016, p. 56]) could follow and complement existing bias training.

Meanwhile, between discussions of Templemore and police powers, and the denial of ethnicity as an explanatory factor for police behaviour – and, indeed, the suggestion made that 'self-preservation' explained why nobody reported the retired Garda who targeted the Black person in the car – the dialogue seemed to make certain sources and dynamics of police culture visible to community participants. They may now better understand police culture and hold more humanised views of the police, but this could be problematic if it creates a false sense of safety, or if dialogue enables propagandising that encourages compliance with power in a structurally discriminatory system (Johnson and Weisberg 2021). Despite many differences with other countries, policing in Ireland must still change fundamentally before young Black adults can assume they are secure in the police's presence.

7. Conclusion

Few researchers are given access to serving members of An Garda Síochána. Moreover, there are few studies empirically assessing a restorative approach to police-community dialogue, and none of these have taken place with young Black people in Europe. This article makes a major contribution to an important, time-sensitive and universal problem: how to respond to ever-widening fissures between the police and (young people from) minority ethnic communities in Europe. We urge researchers, civil society groups, government ministries and police forces around the world to collaborate to replicate and improve on this work, including by developing dialogue projects at scale that include a sample size, and adopt a quantitative and longitudinal methodology, that would permit the measurement of any changes in attitudes and behaviour over time. Any optimism that dialogue can repair relationships between police and minority ethnic communities – or even between the Gardaí and Black community in Dublin – must be tempered in recognition of the small scale of this project, the self-selection of the participants, and the limitations in what can be interpreted from the dataset. Still, this study provides a starting point that lends credence to the argument that dialogue and restorative practices can play some role in improving police-community relations – at least, for those individuals who participate.

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