



Overcoming 'Sheriff Syndrome'

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Overcoming ‘Sheriff Syndrome’: Exploring Young Adults’ Experiences of Policing in Northern Ireland

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journals.sagepub.com/home/yjj**Brendan Coyle** 

Abstract

This article delves into the pivotal role that police encounters play in shaping the experiences of 18- to 25-year-olds who come into contact with the criminal justice system. The study is anchored in an analysis of in-depth narrative interviews with young adults, predominantly young men, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Their accounts unveil the latent risks of police approaches that may pivot on the ‘age and/or lack of maturity’ of young adults. Introducing the concept of ‘sheriff syndrome’, the research sheds light on the detrimental effects of entrenched, antecedent expectations regarding the behaviours, attitudes and (in)capacity for change of those over the age of 18 years. Participants’ accounts underscore the need for interactions that recognise and protect subjective elements of maturity, while cultivating opportunities for open, respectful and bidirectional communication between suspect populations of young adults and the police.

Keywords

liminality, maturity, policing, transition, young adulthood

Introduction

Across a number of jurisdictions, young adults, particularly young men, are the demographic with whom the police come into most frequent contact (Borysik and Corry-Roake, 2021). In Northern Ireland (NI), while young adults make up only 8.1 per cent of the population (NISRA, 2021), they accounted for 40.1 per cent of those stopped and searched by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI, 2023) between 2022 and 2023. Not only does this disparity speak to issues of disproportionality, but it also draws attention to the point at which the transition from child-to-adult occurs in the eyes of criminal justice and law enforcement agencies. As gatekeepers to the criminal justice process, police officers play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of young adults (18–25 years of age) coming into contact with the criminal justice system (CJS), particularly given the repercussions that an arrest and criminal record can have on the convoluted transitional processes associated with young adulthood (Testa et al., 2021; Transition to Adulthood (T2A), 2014).

Corresponding author:

Brendan Coyle, Criminology and Criminal Justice, School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Ulster University, Room BC-07-107, Belfast BT15 1AP, UK.

Email: b.coyle1@ulster.ac.uk

Negative police encounters can compound the myriad challenges confronting young people making a complex transition to adult status in the face of multiple disadvantage (Bennett et al., 2021). Conversely, under the right conditions, police officers have the potential to be ‘dynamic agents of change’ in ways that might promote and support emergent processes of desistance (Schinkel et al., 2018: 15).

Despite the overrepresentation of 18-to-25-year-olds in the CJS (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2018), the frequency of police encounters with young adults (The Police Foundation, 2018) and the potential developmental impact of adversarial interactions (T2A, 2020), relatively little research has specifically focused on the policing of this age group. When it comes to issues of life course and development, much of the relevant research to date has focused ‘on the broader policing of young people, most often with a focus on those under 18’ (Graham, 2013: 5; see, for example, Ellison, 2001; Loader, 1996; McAra and McVie, 2005, 2010). Although some significant research and policy discussion has somewhat redressed this imbalance (see, for example, Bennett and Borysik, 2021; Schinkel et al., 2018; T2A, 2015; Testa et al., 2021; The Police Foundation, 2018), there remains a comparative paucity of research that draws specifically upon the narratives and perspectives of young adults in contact with the CJS.

Drawing upon the narratives of young adults from working-class communities in Belfast, NI, this article illuminates the potentially disruptive impact that interactions with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) can have on young adults living in areas characterised by multiple deprivation and shaped by the ongoing legacy of conflict. By invoking the concept of liminality (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, [1909] 1960), elaborating on the notion of ‘subjective maturity’ and its relationship to processes of desistance (Coyle, 2019), and introducing the concept of ‘sheriff syndrome’, this article delves into the potential pitfalls of focusing on young adults’ age and presumed immaturity. In doing so, it emphasises the need for policy responses and police encounters that evince an openness to recognising subjective elements of maturity, parallel to the sustained cultivation of opportunities for constructive dialogue between young adults and the police (Graham, 2013: 34).

Young Adulthood and Liminality

The socially constructed timetables for the achievement of adult status that were widely observed for over half a century have, over the course of several decades, become increasingly difficult to reconcile with contemporary socioeconomic Western realities.¹ As a result, academic and non-academic commentators have evolved several epithets in attempts to encapsulate contemporary aspects of ‘growing up’: ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2000); ‘post-adolescence’ (Jones and Wallace, 1992); ‘adulthood’ (Tyre, 2002); ‘tweenhood’ (Mary, 2006) and ‘kidulthood’ (Gooch, 2017), to name but a few. In addition, the fragmentation of the passage to adult status has led to sociologists using ‘notions of “long”, “broken”, “extended”, “protracted”, “uneasy” and “fractured” transitions’ (Billari and Liefbroer, 2010; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005: 32). Although the ongoing search for the most appropriate terminology may be futile, the trend highlights a state of flux that defines the contemporary experiential complexities associated with making a

‘successful’ transition to adulthood (Coyle, 2019; Jongbloed and Giret, 2021; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011). This complexity has been recognised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016), which notes the intensifying impact of ‘the challenges [young people] face in the transition from childhood to adulthood in an increasingly globalized and complex world’ (p. 4).

Young adults are not children, adolescents or ‘real adults’ (Arnett, 2015), and their developmental experiences are characterised by transitional ambiguity and a blurring of social, legal and cultural boundaries (Wood et al., 2018). This blurriness has implications for the rigid, age-related ‘bright lines’ that dominate social and criminal justice policies concerning normatively prescribed and proscribed behaviours (Goldson, 2009, 2019). Boundaries strictly demarcated by age often clash with prevailing research across various domains; for instance, an expanding body of research in developmental and neurological science indicates that the cognitive functions governing judgement, emotion regulation and decision-making in ‘young adults aged 18–24 years are similar in many respects to juveniles aged 15–17’ (Farrington et al., 2012: 730; see also Brewster, 2020; Monahan et al., 2013). Young adults thus bear key characteristics of liminal *personae* (Turner, 1969): existing ‘betwixt and between’ a ‘before’ and ‘after’ state, experiencing a combination of relative social invisibility, anonymity and immobility. Van Gennep’s ([1909] 1960) original conceptualisation of liminality focused on rites of passage and the movement of individuals from one social status to another. Both Van Gennep and Turner highlighted the transition from childhood to adulthood as an archetypal liminal phase, during which the liminar has a ‘physical but not social reality’ (Turner, 1969: 97). Existing in a state of suspense, on the threshold of a new state or status, those in a liminal position ‘are. . . temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them, since they have no rights over others’ (Turner, 1982: 41, 27; see also Lipska and Zagórska, 2021). This relative social ‘weakness’ is perhaps most visible in the experiences of young adults in contact with the CJS; a population variously described as ‘the invisible early twenties’ and the ‘lost generation’ (T2A, 2017).

Separated from both child and adult status by destabilising socio-cultural factors, marginalised settings and complex developmental experiences, many young adults, particularly those in contact with the CJS, are ‘embroiled in liminality without having the structure and support to reach aggregation’ and ‘full’ adult status (Beech, 2011: 302). Caught between one state of being and another necessarily ‘disrupt[s] one’s internal sense of self or place within a social system’ (Noble and Walker, 1997: 31). However, with limited access to traditional developmental rites of passage that serve to ‘constrain uncertainty in time and space, and hence lower the associated stress’ (Beech, 2011: 298) of making a successful transition to adult status and identity, disadvantaged, marginalised and frequently criminalised young adults are frequently aware of the threshold that they may not possess the social, cultural or symbolic capital to cross.

The Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A, 2020), a coalition of criminal justice, health and youth organisations, emphasises ‘the importance of getting it right’ with young adults coming into contact with the justice system, who make up an inordinate proportion of the UK criminal justice caseload each year (Grimshaw, 2017; The Police Foundation, 2018). The T2A has consistently promoted ‘the need for a distinct and radically different

approach to young adults in the criminal justice system' across a number of reports and recommendations (Heylar-Cardwell, 2009: 1). Central to this 'radically different approach' is an exhortation for the concept of 'maturity' to become central to the design and delivery of criminal justice policies and practices for young adults (T2A, 2015).

Although 'maturity' 'contains an inescapably normative dimension' and remains anchored in seemingly objective measurements (Prior et al., 2011: 2), it abounds with cultural peculiarities, fluctuating subjectivities and personal meanings (Tanner and Arnett, 2016). Both theoretical and policy considerations of maturity in relation to crime, deviance and desistance have historically failed to address 'the manner in which the concept is employed in an individual's personal outlook and philosophy' (Kyvsgaard, 2003: 241), leaving a substantial gap in the drive to 'dissect maturation into its components' (Glueck and Glueck, 1940: 270). Though influenced and shaped by socially and culturally ingrained norms, maturity is also a subjectively understood and individually experienced phenomenon that can play a significant role in the development of self and identity. Prior research has indicated that 'subjective maturity' can play a critical, active role in young adults' narratives of development and desistance (Coyle, 2019). In the context of transitional uncertainty, where certain developmental milestones and tangible expressions of maturational aggregation may be unavailable, young adults' subjective conceptions of maturity provide a ballast for their developing identities, and represent an 'adaptive narrative [means] of maintaining a positive self-concept in the face of challenging personal and structural circumstances' (Coyle, 2019: 1188). Subjective maturity thus allows young, disadvantaged liminars the opportunity to anchor their developing, pro-social identities and 'make things happen', despite difficulties in accessing the traditional, normative standards of adult status (Matza, 1964: 189). In light of the deep vein of complex subjectivities that texture 'maturity', there are inevitably difficulties in operationalising such a conceptually thick term (Rocque, 2015). Moreover, much of the ongoing policy discourse on the concept remains problematically focused upon the impact that a 'lack of maturity' may have on the outcomes of young adults encountering the CJS (T2A, 2017).

Policing Young Adulthood in NI

Following the early work of the T2A, a limited number of publications have focused specifically on the policing of young adults (Bennett et al., 2021; T2A, 2015; The Police Foundation, 2018). These have focused on adversarial contact between young adults and the police in England and Wales, highlighting negative perceptions of police authority among young adults coming into contact with the CJS. With an increased awareness of developmental complexities associated with the transition to adulthood, there have been calls for the police to 'improve responses' to young adults and develop a 'better understanding of maturity' as it impacts on the behaviour of 18- to 25-year-olds (T2A, 2014: 9). Recognising the withering effect of negative encounters with young adults on compliance, cooperation, and police legitimacy, Graham (2013) proposes that there is a need for 'more imaginative and effective ways of engaging with young adults' (p. 34). The Police Foundation (2018) similarly champions the need for 'a tailored approach' to the policing of young adults that adequately meets the 'unique needs and demands of individuals

within the 18-to-25 age group' (p. 13). As with the rest of the 'maturity agenda', articulations of these 'unique needs and demands' in current criminal justice policy discourse focus on an apparent variability in, or absence of, maturity among young adults (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2018; T2A, 2017).

In considering policy deliberations relating to young adults in contact with the police, a tension becomes apparent between a drive to respond appropriately to a group that 'may not have reached the full maturity of adults' (The Police Foundation, 2018: 2), while attempting to ensure that officers 'treat 18-to-25-year-olds with as much respect as they would those in other more senior age groups' (p. 6). Officers are also confronted with the prospect of making differentiations based on age and/or maturity in fleeting operational moments. These issues underscore the ongoing difficulty of accounting for age and development in criminal justice policy and practice, while illustrating a point of confusion regarding the concept of maturity, one that may lead to a reification of negative outcomes in police interactions with young adults. Building on previous work (see Coyle, 2019), this article reinforces the notion that any criminal justice policies, processes or practices that actively focus on the relative immaturity of 18- to 25-year-olds consequently run the risk of alienating young adults, and disrupting fragile, but important processes of identity development and desistance during an already complex developmental period.

Although the work of the T2A remains predominantly focused on criminal justice processes in England and Wales, the Northern Irish context shares critical similarities regarding the overrepresentation of young men from relatively deprived backgrounds in contact with the CJS (Department of Justice Northern Ireland, 2022). Regarding issues of criminal justice and youth development, research to date in NI has predominately focused on the views and experiences of individuals under the age of 18 years, largely due to the unique risks facing children and young people in those communities experiencing a post-ceasefire policing vacuum (Byrne and Jarman, 2011; McAlister et al., 2014; McGrellis, 2011; Walsh and Schubotz, 2020). In particular, many have noted a widespread mistrust of the PSNI among young people in communities on both sides of the traditional ethno-political divide, with 'the use of negative policing tactics, the use of force and violence, an imbalance in power relationships, and the lack of recognition of young people's interests and concerns' central to a perceived lack of legitimacy (Byrne and Jarman, 2011: 437; see also Nelson et al., 2010; Walsh, 2021).

In their examination of routine stop and search practices by the PSNI, Topping and Bradford (2018) highlight that the PSNI uses stop and search powers at the highest level across the United Kingdom. They conclude that the PSNI systematically and proactively targets stop and search against 'young, socio-economically marginal males', a practice that 'categorizes, distinguishes and excludes', to the detriment of a population that requires additional support, rather than increased control (Topping and Bradford, 2018: 105; see also Topping and Schubotz, 2018). Although Topping and Bradford particularly emphasise issues of legality and propriety around the use of stop and search in relation to children, it is worth noting that available PSNI (2023) stop and search statistics continue to indicate that 18- to 25-year-old males are the most frequently stopped group of persons by age and sex² (p. 7). Although young adults bear the brunt of powers described as both 'a product and producer of poor community relations', the views and experiences of young

adults have not yet been subjected to the same degree of scrutiny as those of individuals under the age of 18 years (Topping and Bradford, 2018: 105).

In 2016 the PSNI developed and published a Children and Young People's strategy for 13–18-year-olds, emphasising the need for officers to 'listen to', 'not speak down to' and 'not. . .form an opinion of [a young person] until they know all the facts' (PSNI, 2016). However, there remains a notable policy 'cliff edge' beyond the terminus of 18 years-of-age. The voices of the young adults in this study therefore represent an important contribution to discussions regarding both the T2A 'maturity agenda', and the PSNI's often fractious relationship with young adult liminars who could be paradoxically considered both 'a forgotten population' (HMCIP, 2009: 6) and 'the usual suspects' in NI (McAra and McVie, 2005).

Methodology

The study upon which this article is based set out to explore subjective perceptions of maturity and the maturational process among a sample of young adults making the transition to adulthood in NI. Building upon an expanding corpus of research intended to highlight the distinct needs of the 'invisible early twenties', the study was, in part, designed to explore the relationship between the subjective, experienced realities of maturity and involvement in crime and the CJS to texture discussions concerning how the concept of 'maturity' might be appropriately employed in terms of policy and practice.

Primary data for this article were gathered over the course of 2013 and 2014 via a series of in-depth narrative interviews with 20 young adults, primarily young men, aged 18–25 years in Belfast. Using an adapted version of McAdams' (1993) Life Story Interview, a narrative approach was adopted to explore the personal theories of maturity that participants held to, as well as the experiences that helped to shape these perceptions. The 'dynamic and contextually contingent quality' of the narrative approach rendered it essential to analysing the contextual subjectivities central to this research (Maruna, 2001: 43). Reflecting the over-representation of young adults from similarly deprived backgrounds in criminal justice caseloads across the United Kingdom (Department of Justice Northern Ireland, 2022; Garside, 2010), a sample of predominately working-class young men was sought via a range of cross-community youth, restorative, and criminal justice organisations throughout Belfast, including a carceral sample interviewed in Hydebank Wood YOC.³

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and subjected to a gradual and reflexive process of inductive analysis. A psychosocial position of sorts was assumed in the analysis of participants' narratives, reflecting Shaw's ([1930] 1966: 2–3) position on the treatment of narrative, with 'rationalizations, fabrications, prejudices, exaggerations. . .quite as valuable as objective descriptions'. However, rather than paying especially close attention to the 'latent or unconscious meanings embedded in offenders' narratives' (Gadd and Farrall, 2004: 148), particularly with regard to small numbers of exceptional, differential case studies, the research sought to garner cross-sectional perspective on thematic commonalities in the predominately manifest meanings in the participants' life stories.

Regarding the research setting, the legacy of the Troubles, coupled with multiple levels of deprivation, has resulted in a complex transition to adult status for many young people

living in areas of multiple deprivation across NI (McAlister et al., 2009; McGrellis, 2011). Among ‘the first generation of young people to grow up in a post-ceasefire (1994) post-Agreement (1998) [Northern Ireland]’, the participants of this study are ‘growing up’ in a society still undergoing ‘a period of significant political, economic and social transition’ (McGrellis, 2011: 7). The legacy of the conflict continues to affect the day-to-day negotiation of transitional moments and milestones, with NI still riven along socio-cultural and political fault lines (Harland and Scott-McKinley, 2018). For many young people, principally young men from working-class areas in Belfast, this manifests in an acute awareness and often firsthand experience of paramilitary activity and sectarian violence (Harland and McCready, 2015; Walsh and Cunningham, 2023). As a result, the research setting provided an opportunity to understand the relationships between maturity and experiences of criminal justice in the context of marginalisation and conflict in a transitional society. As such, the research findings reflect the social, cultural and economic specificities of the region and the communities from which the participants were drawn.⁴ In addition, although the study’s empirical data was collected between 2013 and 2014, the issues highlighted in the analysis of the young adults’ life stories remain strikingly relevant. The visible persistency of the structural conditions and transitional processes underpinning the lives and narratives of the young adult participants lends an analysis of their accounts significant contemporary currency (Walsh and Schubotz, 2020). The relevance of the findings is especially pronounced considering the historically persistent overrepresentation of 18- to 25-year-old males in available PSNI stop and search data⁵ (see PSNI, 2023; Topping and Bradford, 2018), and the continued gap in young adult-specific justice policy and practice in NI. While the specific context, including the passage of time, inevitably shape the study’s findings, this does not undermine their ongoing relevance as exploratory insights into the subjectivities that surround police encounters, nor the integrity of the underlying methodology.

In contextualising participants’ perceptions of policing in the passages below, it would be impossible to ignore the legacy of the conflict. In one respect, many of the young adults’ misgivings towards the police could be attributed to an embedded mistrust as a result of the conflict and the pervasive legacy of the PSNI’s predecessor, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, principally in nationalist and republican working-class communities (Byrne and Monaghan, 2008; Topping, 2008). Indeed, some of the participants’ early, formative experiences with the police were immediately prior to the implementation of the Patten reforms. However, expressed resentments towards the PSNI based on political or sectarian issues were notably uncommon across the interview sample.⁶ With participants drawn from a range of different community and political backgrounds, negative perceptions were most frequently framed in terms of personal interactions with police officers and based almost exclusively on issues of age or perceived class-based stereotyping. This resonates with McAlister et al.’s (2009: 9) finding that young people from various communities, and across a spectrum of political orientation, share a common ‘view that they were policed differentially and unfairly because of their age’ rather than their community background (see also Byrne et al., 2005; Byrne and Jarman, 2011). Thus, in spite of the ‘fissure’ which has existed between certain communities and the police in NI, ‘the historical antipathy towards policing is not as rigid and fixed as may be assumed, given the unfolding peace process’ (Ellison et al.,

2012: 499). In spite of the ways in which ‘segregation, sectarianism, and societal division may shape public trust in the police’ in NI (Bradford et al., 2018: 17), participants’ narratives echo the adversarial contact experienced by young suspect populations elsewhere in the United Kingdom and beyond (Dirikx et al., 2012; Fraser and Atkinson, 2014; McAra and McVie, 2005; Sindall et al., 2016).

‘They Don’t Think Anybody Can Change’: Policing, Liminality and Stasis

Consistent with prior research (see McAra and McVie, 2005, 2010; Murphy, 2015; Norman, 2009; Sindall et al., 2016), negative attitudes towards the police were particularly prevalent among those participants who had previous experiences of adversarial encounters with PSNI officers. For the majority, participants’ apparent distrust of the police is based on the perception that police stops and searches reflect both age- and class-based prejudices (McAlister et al., 2009; McAra and McVie, 2005; Topping and Schubotz, 2018):

Matthew: I’d be civil with them and all, but I . . . get stopped for no reason, stopped cos we’ve our trackies [tracksuits] and our hoods up and all, getting dirty looks. . . Like, they just keep pestering you at the same places, and there’s still nothing you’re doing wrong like.

For Matthew, the rationale for stopping and searching him, beyond his choice of apparel, is indiscernible. His perception of being persistently singled out solely on the basis of class and age highlights a notable trend: given that, ‘young adults are at the peak age for offending, and therefore easy to suspect. . . negative stereotyping by young adults of police and vice versa leads to negative encounters and outcomes’ (Graham, 2013: 16). However, there is arguably a degree of operational inevitability in the frequency of such interactions, partially resulting from the number of criminal convictions of many of the participants. In their examination of the policing of persistent offenders, Schinkel et al. (2018) note that a ‘symbiosis in the briefing room between an individual’s data-image from police intelligence systems and traditional street-based recognition’ plays a role in the way individuals are ‘routinely and proactively policed’ (p. 9). This can, in turn, have an augmentative effect on the negative perceptions of those stopped repeatedly, making it difficult to engender trust or secure compliance through procedurally just modes of policing (McVie, 2015). A perennial source of friction, police stop and search practices have historically attracted an exceptional degree of scrutiny due to their potentially disproportionate use and discriminatory outcomes (Bradford, 2017). This is now becoming increasingly true of stop and search encounters between police officers and young adults (Bennett et al., 2021; Graham, 2013; Beck and Dowling, 2020; The Police Foundation, 2018). However, these issues have rarely attracted the same kind of attention in NI (Topping and Bradford, 2018).

Echoing Matthew’s assertion of being ‘stopped for no reason’, Conor and Brian talk about their views on what they experience as a capricious and targeted phenomenon:

Conor: They just do those stop and searches now, just to bust my balls, know what I mean? Got pulled over the other day just for standin' in a burglary hot spot. I was like, you serious? I wasn't even standin' there, I was walkin' through 'til you pulled me over and that's the only reason I'm standin' here, know what I mean? Standin' in a burglary hot spot. I couldn't believe it. Isn't that wild? That's probably the only thing that really gets to me, gettin' stopped and searched. Fuckin' hate it.

Brian: Once they start getting to know you, they just get that power trip. . . I was out Friday during the day. . . and there was cops on patrol around the town and there must have been about three or four of them recognised me. And they were standing talking to me and they knew exactly what I was like when I was there five years ago and they just says, we'll be keeping an eye on you, know what I mean? That's their power trip.

Rather than perceiving stop and search as a reflection of negative police stereotyping of young people, Conor believes that the stop and searches he experiences are carried out exclusively to 'bust [his] balls'. Similarly, Brian feels that specific police officers' knowledge of him and his past behaviours results in a 'power trip', with officers using stop and searches to emphasise their capacity for 'keeping an eye' on him. Given both an oft-examined police cultural tendency towards suspicion (see Bowling et al., 2019; Kappeler et al., 1998), as well as any interactional history between an officer and an individual (Schinkel et al., 2018), it is perhaps unsurprising that individuals in Conor or Brian's circumstances might be subjected to reminders of surveillance, 'regardless of whether the individuals selected for this treatment are violating the criminal law at any given moment' (Choongh, 1998: 627).

Research has consistently demonstrated that the perceptions outlined above are far from exclusive to young adults, with negative encounters 'perceived as a standard, routine feature of policing and in particular in the way that the police treated young people'. (Byrne et al., 2013: 74, cited in Topping and Bradford, 2018: 101). The typically difficult relationship between working-class young people and the PSNI persists beyond the frontier of 18 years of age, and for many of the same reasons for which these relationships became fractured in the first place (see McAlister et al., 2009). For instance, many participants characterised stop and searches as humiliating and retributive contrivances:

Adam: I'd just be standin' there like a wee star, people starin' at you when they walk past. They just have you standin' there in the middle of the street like a fuckin' clown. They definitely just had it in for me since that last time. The fuckers. They just thought, right, 'now's our chance to get the wee bastard'.

Echoing Choongh's (1998) notion of 'reproducing social control. . . by extracting deference' (pp. 625–626), Adam portrays a 'status degradation ceremony' in a visible public space, employing a childlike simile to emphasise the humiliating aspects of the event (Garfinkel, 1955). For a young adult liminar undergoing a complex transitional process, a

public stop and search can represent an ignominious setback and an unwelcome challenge to coalescing concepts of self (see Testa et al., 2021). The accounts of the same cohort of young adults previously highlighted the important role that subjective conceptualisations of maturity can play in providing marginalised and disadvantaged young adults with an adaptive means of creating, maintaining and protecting pro-social, desisting identities (Coyle, 2019). As such, police practices that might diminish and disrupt these fragile subjectivities can lead to counter-productive results, both during and after interactions with young adults (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Schinkel et al., 2018).

With a disproportionate use of stop and search powers against young adult males in NI (PSNI, 2023), those most likely to come into adversarial contact with the PSNI are most at risk of experiencing police encounters in ways that may present a challenge to their complex transition from one identity state to another. For instance, Brian continues his account centring upon an officer's perceived unwillingness to recognise his personal development:

Brian: Just the other day, whenever I was stopped in the street by a fella [police officer] that knew me and I says, 'Well, what's the craic?'. . . Now, I never talked to a cop years ago, never ever. I would have called them the scum of the earth before I'd say hello to them, like. So, I just said hello to this one the other day and he just kept going on about the past and I just wanted to crack [hit] him there and then, you know what I mean? He was a right dickhead. They don't think anybody can change, like.

Brian's life story centred around a post-custodial transition back to his local community. Despite facing a number of significant resettlement challenges and setbacks, Brian presents this transition as the defining period during which he could mature and develop. Crucially, his perception of himself as mature was, at least in part, predicated on the avoidance of what he characterised as an infantilising behavioural regression towards 'getting into trouble with the police, doing drugs, crime, everything' via an internal and agentic imperative to 'wise up, grow up and get away from it all'. In the passage above, Brian indicates an improvement in his perception of the police, claiming that he would have 'never talked to a cop years ago', following a general trend that 'views about the police tend to improve with age' (Graham, 2013: 14). Earlier in his narrative, Brian attributed this perspective shift to a more 'calm' and 'mature' outlook, creating symbolic distance between his current identity and his former, violent behaviours. However, in the space of a single interaction with a police officer who was familiar with his former self, Brian's current self-concept is infringed by the officer 'going on about the past'. While PSNI officers are called upon 'not to form an opinion of [young people] until they know all the facts', it is worth considering that this may be particularly valuable advice for officers interacting with the 'usual suspects' and 'well-kent faces' with whom they are most familiar (Schinkel et al., 2018). Given the structural invisibility foisted on young adults by their liminal status, encounters that either uniformise or invisibilise individuals can disrupt efforts to establish a stable identity and achieve a sense of personal maturation.

Going through a complex transitional process marked by ‘false starts’ and ‘backward steps’ (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005: 35), marginalised young adults may lack the social, cultural or symbolic capital necessary to effectively signal their personal development and progress to an individual in a position of authority (Maruna, 2012). In seeking out any relative ‘lack of maturity’, police officers may entrench young adults’ developmental stasis and liminality, ascribing to them former, immature qualities from which they are actively seeking distance (Coyle, 2019). The police officer’s perceived inability or unwillingness to recognise or acknowledge Brian’s personal development since they last encountered one another results in an interaction that might have precipitated a substantial backward step in already ‘faltering, hesitant and oscillating’ processes of desistance and maturation (Bottoms et al., 2004: 383). In an attempt to reassert a sense of agency and control, a disenfranchised and invisibilised young adult may engage in what Halsey et al. (2017) describe as a ‘f*ck it moment’, regressing to an erstwhile, fatalistic, and masculine instinct of wanting to ‘crack [them] there and then’ (p. 1041). This supports Topping and Bradford’s (2018) proposal that, ‘hostile and confrontational styles of policing, such as that associated with stop and search, can actually lead to violence against the PSNI between police and children/young people’ (p. 102). Brian continues his account of the incident:

Brian: He was alright at the start, he was asking how I was and all, and what I was up to and all this. . .and then he goes, ‘Well, I’m sure I’ll see you this weekend then, won’t I? Bottle of buckfast in your hand?’, and all this, sorta’, snidey comments like. Then I just says, ‘Right, I’m away on, see you later’. I just couldn’t be dealing with it any more. . .sometimes you just get them ones. . .once they’ve got that gun in their holster like, it’s just [snaps fingers] I’m the man that runs this town, know what I mean? Pure sheriff syndrome.

With echoes of ‘street control’ styles of policing, what Brian defines as ‘sheriff syndrome’ may represent part of the broader repertoire of control strategies used to ‘demonstrate control over the streets’, particularly in officers’ encounters with young people with whom they most frequently come into contact (May et al., 2010: 39). In addition, it symbolises an experience of power and control that is exercised and expressed in a manner that is shaped by the performance and perception of masculinities during the encounter (see Bradford et al., 2022; Nowacki et al., 2022). However, set against Brian’s wider narrative of maturity and development, it is the reproduction of prior power imbalances and an adherence to previous conceptions of a younger, immature self that prompts Brian’s use of the term. The perception that some police officers with ‘sheriff syndrome’ perhaps ‘don’t think anybody can change’ is indicative of the potentially harmful ways in which the fragile identity work and subjective maturity of young adults can be impacted upon by police interactions.

The T2A (2015) note that young adults with an extended history of adversarial contact often feel that the police are ‘not open to the idea that the young person might have changed and matured over time’ (p. 15). In examining the implications of persistent offenders’ experiences of policing on processes of desistance, Schinkel et al. (2018) go

further, arguing that ‘the absence of recognition and acceptance by the police, organisationally and individually, of change-efforts plays an important role in bringing new acts of offending into being during [an] encounter’ (p. 15). This is perhaps particularly true when officers reproduce interactional ‘greatest hits’ and recall prior, problematic, youthful behaviour during interactions with young adults. In a liminal phase of development, and relying on subjective constructions of maturation and development in what might otherwise be unstable social and structural contexts (Coyle, 2019), young adults in these encounters can be confronted with dissonant ‘before’ identities that clash with their, positive, future-oriented ‘desired self’ (Schlenker, 1985; see also Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). In these circumstances, the path to developmental aggregation and incorporation can seem exponentially more inaccessible, as the young adult endures the experience of being ‘stuck in liminality’ (Szokolczai, 2000: 220). Officers are thus capable of rendering ‘usual suspects’ acutely aware of their liminal state, reminding them of their social and structural detachment in ways that can lead to substantial setbacks in fragile processes of desistance. This may suggest that conceptions regarding endemic police cultural conservatism remain salient, although further research on the perspectives of those on the other side of the adversarial divide would be necessary in exploring this further (Bowling et al., 2019). More significantly, it highlights the unique interactional and legitimisation challenges inherent in the policing of a population with whom the police most frequently come into adversarial contact.

‘Respect Is a Two-Way Street’: Policing, Respect and Maturity

During interactions with police officers, the primary concern for the vast majority of individuals is that they are treated in ‘open, respectful and transparent ways that respect the dignity of those with who police interact’ (Bradford, 2017: 8), with ‘disrespectfulness and/or impoliteness’ representing a common criticism of officers (Nelson et al., 2010). For the young adult participants, respect plays a critical role in their views on, and experiences of, the police. Several participants emphasise the importance of remaining respectful towards police officers during any encounters. For instance, Harry equates respect with an ability to behave in a polite manner during his interactions with officers, believing that this reduces the prospect of an acrimonious exchange:

Harry: I’ve never had any bother with the police, they’ve always treated me well any time I’ve dealt with them. . . I was quite polite and mild mannered with them anyway. It’s important to be polite and decent with people, it makes everything work more smoothly.

For Harry, the onus to remain respectful is on the person with whom the police are interacting, to facilitate a ‘smooth’ encounter. On one hand, from a psychosocial perspective, Harry’s account could be considered indicative of increasing responsibility and temperance (see Monahan et al., 2013), or improved decision-making and impulse control resulting from cognitive development (see Cauffman and Steinberg, 2000; Steinberg, 2008). On the other, it evidences Harry’s cognisance of the power dynamics intrinsic to

any interaction with police officers. He expresses a tacit awareness of the need to act with appropriate respect and deference to pass an ‘attitude test’, facilitating more peaceable encounters with the police (Schinkel et al., 2018). Ryan similarly expresses a necessity to maintain a respectful relationship with police officers to allow encounters to progress without antagonism:

Ryan: I’ve never really had too many negative ones [interactions with the police], like, it’s just. . .the way I see it is, if you treat the cops like a dickhead, then they’re going to treat you the same way, so if you treat them with respect, then the chances are that you’re going to get it back. Respect is a two-way street.

There is an element of bidirectionality to Ryan’s take on the attitude test; both officers and those with whom they are interacting bear responsibility for ensuring positive outcomes in any given encounter. However, Ryan’s ideal ‘two-way street’ is uneven in reality, with the imbalance of power in police interactions often being perceived as the cause of a congruent imbalance of respect between police and participants:

Conor: You’ll always get the cop who thinks he’s brilliant and he’ll slabber at you, and if you slabber back he’ll go, ‘That’s your first warnin’’, know what I mean? If you keep on slabberin’ you’re gonna get yourself lifted, but they keep on slabberin’.

Paul: I just try to be as pleasant as I can, know what I mean? Just try and keep it cool, try and be as nice as you can and then just hope for the best. Don’t get me wrong though. Sometimes it works, but if they start getting cheeky with me, I’ll get fucking cheeky with them, I’ll not back down to them, like. . .I’ll be nice to them, but if they’re going to start being cheeky to me, why should I be nice?

Rather than accept the implicit requirement to pass an attitude test, Conor and Paul are determined that any respectful relationship should be reciprocal. With any perceived lack of respect being deemed an intolerable affront, they respond in kind, leading to a downwards spiral in both the specific encounters they recount, and their future relationships with police officers. By being placed in a perceptibly subaltern role during these interactions, subjective feelings of social consequence, control or respect earned in other social arenas are diminished. For Barry, this is both inescapable and self-evident in encounters with police officers:

Barry: You’re obviously going to feel like you’re being spoke down to. You are being spoke down to, like.

Given the central role that a sense of social consequence plays in the creation of a mature identity, any appreciable lack of respect in encounters with officers can lead to a sense of injustice for participants. An intractable and unidirectional ‘attitude test’ that exacerbates the developmental complexities of constructing a mature identity in young

adulthood is potentially incompatible with the impartiality and respect expected of procedurally just modes of policing (Murray et al., 2020; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). Not only can it impact on the achievement of cooperation during encounters with young adults, it may also frustrate nascent processes of desistance among a group that is simultaneously the most likely to both commit criminal offences, and commence processes of desistance (Schinkel et al., 2018; Walters, 2018).

In marked contrast to potentially damaging interactions with the police, select police officers were singled out by participants as ‘good cops’. For some, a ‘good cop’ is defined as one who would occasionally turn a blind eye to various ‘antisocial’ activities and behaviours. However, more significantly, certain encounters with the police are hailed as noteworthy when individual police officers communicate with the participants in a respectful, relatively informal, and ultimately more effective manner:

Daniel: But there was one cop. . .he was a good cop, like, he was pretty nice. I mean, he arrested me a few times, but when he arrested me he wasn’t like. . .he didn’t, you know like, get on all serious, you know, he just goes, ‘Fuck sake Daniel, what are you at?’, know what I mean? ‘What are you doing that for?’ And he used to give me a fag in the police cell, he used to come in and sit and have a smoke with me in the cell and stuff. He was a good cop, he was the only decent cop in [that place] in my opinion, like.

Despite being arrested by the police officer on multiple occasions and only ever interacting with him during arrests or in a police cell, Daniel considers this officer to be the ‘only decent cop’ he has encountered. The most important feature of these interactions for Daniel is a levelling of hierarchies, apparent in this informal, personalised and direct interaction. With echoes of the ‘soldier ability but social work mentality’ described by Murray (2021: 100), the masculine-coded interactions described above represent moments in which boundaries, norms, and expectations are briefly set aside. These interactions create opportunities for contact that partially bypasses both the significant status discrepancy between Daniel and the officer in question, and the involuntary nature of their encounters. Where other interactions with police officers may be discordant with participants’ subjective notions of maturity and social consequence, these informal, personalised interactions have a visibilising impact, providing Daniel with a sense of equity and leaving a positive, lasting impression.

Brian provides an indication of how further efforts to engage and interact with young adults would be positively received by young adults with experience of the CJS:

Brian: When we were a bit younger, we used to go [to a PSNI training centre] and do a meeting with the police and ones that were just recruited. . .they would ask us questions about what way we would want the police to deal with things and how you’d like to be spoke to and sorta things like that there. So, we were giving our feedback on how the police were then. Like, we’d say they were dickheads and they were doing this and they were doing that and

all the rest of it, and then, it would be better if you done this and done that. So that was alright, like.

The attempt by officers and trainees to gain a textured understanding of young peoples' views on and experiences of the police service is positively received, with Brian feeling heard, heeded and integrated into the process of police training and development. Central to his positive perception of this experience, beyond being respectfully communicated with by police officers, is a sense of being listened to, and regarded as capable of making a valued, significant contribution (Tyler and Lind, 1992):

Brian: They were talking to us and we were talking to them. They were saying how it is in situations for them, how it is for them in those kind of situations and we put our point across about how we were in those situations. Like, when they had the power trip over us. . . But they all took it onboard, they were sitting there and they were listening, like. . . after the meetings and all they would come up to me and whoever else was in Hydebank and they'd really speak to us 'cos they knew where we were coming from 'cos they knew we had more dealings with cops than anybody else. So yeah, I'd say they were pretty interested in what we had to say. So that was good like. I didn't feel it was a waste of a meeting anyway, I went up a couple of times.

Where Brian previously resented what he perceived as a police 'power trip' in his interactions with officers, in this instance, the 'two way street' is in evidence, with both parties communicating their concerns, difficulties and viewpoints with respect and on seemingly equal terms. In fact, the officers' interactions with Brian and the other individuals who had spent time in Hydebank Wood YOC cultivates a perception that police officers were interested in fostering a better understanding of the young people they come into contact with. They are provided with the opportunity to tell their side of their story and have their 'voice' listened to, providing a positive 'teachable moment' in counterpoint to their prior experiences (Tyler et al., 2014: 752). Not only did this experience partially redress Brian's perception regarding any police 'power trip', the balanced processes of communication prompted a sensation of being in the integral role of an 'expert'. Where other interactions with the police might lessen feelings of social consequence, this example of reciprocal communication perhaps demonstrates a means of promoting subjective feelings of maturity and cultivating a more positive perception of police officers among young adults.

In some respects, Brian's narrative resonates with some of the core ideas underpinning Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, the idea that contact between groups under certain beneficial (if not strictly necessary) circumstances can positively impact attitudes between those groups. Contact with the police is generally associated with negative attitudes (Alberton et al., 2019), not least of all because of significant status differences, and the involuntary nature of most contact (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011). However, carefully structured interactions with police officers that emphasise equality, inclusion, respectful communication and informal personal interactions have the potential to lead to a mutual reduction in stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination in ways that may lead to improved

trust in the police (see, for example, Doak and O'Mahony, 2011). Despite the potential benefits of such engagement, the continued prevalence of adversarial contact between young people and the police carries consequences; Walsh's (2021) research into recent riots in loyalist communities in NI underscores the high incidence of antagonistic attitudes towards the PSNI among young people. As Bradford et al. (2018) note, 'in spite of far-reaching community engagement and oversight mechanisms, policing [in NI] has not been fully "gotten right"' (p. 1038).

Brian's recollection highlights an important point: while these initiatives with young people may have had a positive impact (see Burns, 2018), there is no evidence of similar mechanisms to assist officers in arriving at a nuanced and textured understanding of the issues, challenges and developmental specificities of what has remained a forgotten population in NI. For many young adults, the only time during which they will engage with police officers is via street-level adversarial contact (Graham, 2013). Drawing on Skogan's (2006) concept of 'asymmetric trust', Sindall et al. (2016) suggest that attempting to cultivate more positive interactions in the context of exercising coercive authority is difficult to achieve and potentially counter-productive (p. 4). They argue that, 'the police seem able only to damage relations with young people, with little room to promote improving views through direct contact alone' (Sindall et al., 2016: 16–17; see also Byrne et al., 2005). Topping and Bradford (2018) express similar reservations regarding the appropriateness of attempting to 'build' relationships with children and young people in the context of 'confrontational, enforcement-led practice' (p. 102). As a result, there is an evident need for the exploration of new forms of consistent engagement with young adults that harness the positivity and reciprocity of youth engagement programmes, while consciously navigating the risk of impacting on young adults' orientation and outlook through a failure to recognise their liminal status, their maturity and their ongoing capacity for change, development and desistance.

Conclusions

In the context of prevailing socioeconomic instability and transitional liminality, young adults' subjective conceptions of maturity provide a critical counterbalance to destabilising socio-cultural factors, marginalised settings and complex developmental experiences (Coyle, 2019). With notions of maturity often representing an essential element in participants' narratives of personal progress and desistance, subjective maturity is an adaptive narrative resource that requires cultivation and protection. In their capacity as gatekeepers to the CJS, the police can play a highly consequential role in meeting these requirements.

As a group with often embedded and entrenched negative views of the police, securing the cooperation and compliance of young adults during adversarial contact can be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve (Sindall et al., 2016). However, the challenge of cultivating more positive interactions between young adults and the police becomes even more profound in the face of instances of perceived persecution or age-related stereotyping. Where a young adult perceives an instance of 'sheriff syndrome', they are confronted with a range of antecedent expectations regarding their behaviours, attitudes and (in)capacity for change. They are consequently assigned to a uniquely disempowering liminal status,

afforded neither the considerations of vulnerability imparted to those under the age of 18 years, nor the recognition they crave as they attempt to navigate a fractured transition to adult status. The result is a frustrating and destabilising experience, one that can lead to hostile and potentially violent exchanges, with attendant setbacks for emergent, but brittle, processes of desistance from crime.

Citing Maruna's (2017) proposal that a belief in the possibility that 'people can change' (p. 6) represents a central organising concept of desistance research, Schinkel et al. (2018) argue in favour of desistance-focused policing practices, proposing that the 'police can be, along with partners, dynamic agents for change in recognising and nurturing "turning points" for offenders' (p. 15). Essential to this possibility is allowing for an individual, cultural, and organisational shift in recognising 'the possibility of change and an awareness of each officer's own role in perpetuating (and more positively, preventing) the cycle of reoffending' (Schinkel et al., 2018). Any modification or transformation of approach would necessitate both an institutional and individual awareness of the ways in which some experiences of policing might, albeit inadvertently, hinder emerging efforts at maintaining a crime-free existence⁷ (Halsey and Mizzi, 2023). The accounts of the young adults throughout this article demonstrate that such a change would be perhaps most crucial in relation to those at the threshold of adulthood, given their parallel susceptibilities to reoffending and potentialities for desistance (Grimshaw, 2017; Maruna et al., 2015). Although it is impossible to eliminate adversarial contact, attempts to operationally constrain the potential for 'sheriff syndrome' may prove invaluable in securing the peaceable negotiation of street-level encounters, while limiting vicissitudes of development, maturation, and desistance. This study thus aims to pave the way for the development of a maturity agenda that is tailored to the distinct needs and circumstances of young adults in contact with the justice system in NI. Additional research is required to continue to unpick the complex intersections of maturation and criminal justice processes. This exploration may extend to those on the other side of the adversarial divide; future research might also seek to understand the perspective of police officers, particularly how the maturational subjectivities of officers shape the ways in which they navigate adversarial encounters, especially with young people.

A stem of the Latin, *infāns*, the etymological root of infant means 'one unable to speak'. Whether implicitly infantilised in the development of policies and practices that give primacy to the notion that young adults are lacking or deficient in maturity, or developmentally disaggregated in their interactions with officers, 18- to 25-year-olds can be tacitly denied voice within an already asymmetric power relationship. To effectively approach the policing of individuals navigating the liminal space of young adulthood, and in a way that is fundamentally sympathetic to principles of procedural justice (The Police Foundation, 2018), police forces might consider cultivating further opportunities for open, respectful and bidirectional communication with young adults beyond the boundaries of adversarial contact and confrontational practice. The PSNI specifically, and police services more generally, have an opportunity to engage with a group that has been variously described as 'the invisible early twenties' and the 'lost generation' (T2A, 2017), give primacy to their voice, and develop a tailored approach to their policing that is sensi-

tive to their liminality, their maturational subjectivities and, most importantly, their potential for change.

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ORCID iD

Brendan Coyle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4234-8753>

Notes

1. Including, but not limited to, the expansion and increased availability of secondary and higher education; a deterioration in the availability of full-time jobs; a rise in the number of individuals simultaneously pursuing both higher education and work; a dramatic increase in the participation of women in the labour market; an increase in the number of cohabiting couples; delays in marriage and childbirth; a series of significant post-Freudian shifts in social attitudes, behaviours and institutional regulations surrounding gender and sexuality and a fluctuating series of welfare state policies and programmes (Furstenberg et al., 2005; Settersten, 2005; Smith, 2014).
2. Out of a total of 23,650 persons stopped in NI between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, 9486 were between the ages of 18 and 25 years (40.1%). Of these, 7957 were male (33.6%).
3. Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Centre was renamed Hydebank Wood Secure College in 2015.
4. For a more detailed consideration of the research setting in relation to the study at hand, see Coyle (2019).
5. Annual stop and search reports from 2013/14 to 2022/23, collated by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, indicate that 18- to 25-year-olds account for an average of 41.6 per cent of stops and searches over the past decade.
6. The recent work of Topping and Schubotz (2018) indicates that stronger resentments towards the PSNI exist in Nationalist and Republican communities. This is perhaps unsurprising in the context of recent debates on differential police practices in the use of stop and search powers in NI (Northern Ireland Policing Board, 2022). This study does not seek to challenge these findings. Rather, the findings are reflective of common narrative and thematic patterns across the present sample.
7. See, for instance, the 'reintegrative policing approach' or 'non-policing' described by Halsey and Mizzi (2023), an approach centred on respect, communication, and a judicious use of discretion, through which the 'police. . .(risk) stepping back so as not to derail moves towards desistance' (p. 142). See also the trauma and poverty-responsive policing recommended by Borysik and Corry-Roake (2021).

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Author biography

Dr Brendan Coyle is a Lecturer in Criminology and Course Director of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Ulster University, Belfast. With specialisms in young adult development and maturation, his research addresses the interface between individuals' constructions of maturity, criminal justice policies and practices, and processes of desistance from crime.