



Jonas Hansson

“Mind the Blues: Swedish Police Officers’ Mental Health and Forced Deportation of Unaccompanied Refugee Children”

Umeå University (2017)

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A few days ago, national and international media reported a story of a Swedish student who managed to board a plane at Gothenburg airport and prevented a deportation of a young Afghan asylum seeker, accompanied by two police officers, by refusing to sit down until the man was removed from the flight. The video footage of the protest spread swiftly across the Internet and, as the *Guardian* (2018) reports,

shines a spotlight on domestic opposition to Sweden’s tough asylum regime, at a time when immigration and asylum are topping the agenda of a general election campaign. /.../ Tens of thousands of deportation cases are expected to be handed over to the police as the country continues to process a backlog of asylum applications, after 163,000 people claimed asylum in Sweden in 2015. Last year, the border police deported 12,500 people, while the rate of expulsions so far this year is slightly higher.

The story serves as a good illustration of the political minefield in which the type of policing described in Jonas Hansson’s PhD thesis *Mind the Blues: Swedish Police Officers’ Mental Health and Forced Deportation of Unaccompanied Refugee Children* is conducted. Hansson’s thesis is a study of Swedish police officers in the context of deportations of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children. This is a highly timely topic on which there is a dearth of empirical research, in Scandinavia and internationally. The central dilemma addressed in the thesis outlines an important issue, namely, ‘how to interpret the seemingly contradictory demands for more deportations, that is, *efficiency*; and concerns for human rights during the deportation process, that is, *dignity*’ (p. iii).

However, the thesis is thematically innovative not only because it addresses deportation, a seldom-addressed problem in Scandinavian policing studies, but also because it does so by explicitly adopting a public health perspective. The thesis was delivered at the Department of Public Health and Clinical Medicine Epidemiology and Global Health at Umeå University and the author argues that policing should be studied within a public

health perspective. Drawing on the work of van Dijk and Crofts (2017), he suggests that both 'public health and policing are, in part, front-line organisations which intervene directly in the lives of people, with goals and missions that could sit well together but are expressed in a radically different language' (p. 2).

The study uses qualitative and quantitative methods. It consists of 14 interviews (five face-to-face and nine by telephone) with police officers to gain insight into their perceptions and experiences of deportations of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking refugee children. The quantitative part of the study uses validated questionnaires (with 714 respondents) to investigate the association between police officers' mental health and psychosocial job characteristics and coping. The questionnaire was also answered by social workers, which were used as a comparison group. The results were published in four co-authored peer-reviewed articles, which in addition to the 61-page introduction, constitute the main body of the thesis.

One of the main findings of the study is that police officers with experience of deportations of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children do not have poorer mental health than police officers with no such experience. Their mental health seems to be, in fact, far more determined by usual job stressors such as high job demands exacerbated by the rise of New Public Management regimes, low levels of discretion and of work-related social support, as well as shift work and lack of a partner in private life. A question may be asked whether it makes any difference at all to police officers that they are performing deportation rather than any other kind of work? According to Hansson, police officers 'perceive their executive role in the forced deportation process as being the same as in any other work task' (p. 34). This conclusion seems not only surprising, but also runs contrary to Hansson's observations that police officers, when possible, prioritise deportations of other groups, particularly criminal offenders, before deportations of children. Moreover, the study shows that officers performing deportation employ a number of coping mechanisms. Particularly by utilizing their discretionary powers police officers, in general, successfully manage to deal with the seemingly contradictory demands, that is, efficiency and dignity. The conclusion proposed by Hansson, put bluntly, is more police discretion.

The study shows that in all of the studied police authorities significant changes have been made in order to increase and speed up deportation proceedings, particularly the introduction of the so-called Lean-based work method (Hansson et al., 2015: 105). Hansson's interviewees do not seem to perceive the goals of efficiency and dignity in contradictory terms. This is due to the fact that the 'police officers' own interpretations of what dignity is make it cognitively possible for them to combine efficiency and dignity' (ibid. 106). The task of deporting children is, therefore, made easier through a number of cognitive maneuvers: 'somebody has to do it', believing that responsibility lies with those making deportation decisions, that 'repatriation is best for the child' and that 'good and kind treatment' of children can make deportation dignified. They create their own definitions of dignity and ways to achieve it. Officers can thus choose to make a number of gestures, such as making it possible for the child to pick up a cell phone before leaving, checking in an extra suitcase for them, or helping them to translate Swedish school grades into their mother tongue. Interestingly, these interpretations of dignity are not connected to, and rarely refer to, human rights. It is telling, Hansson et al. (2015: 106) observe, that 'the officers who pro-

posed a legal possibility to take children into custody did so without reflecting upon how custody infringes upon the children's human rights'.

Himself a police officer, Hansson is deeply attuned to the occupational hazards and mental health risks that deportations may represent for his colleagues. This is the central theme of the quantitative part of the analysis. However, this rather singular focus on deportation as a mental health risk for the police somewhat obscures the main rationale behind the introduction of policing as a public health issue, namely, that increasing attention should be paid to *vulnerable* populations from a public health perspective (p. 2). If the study acknowledged vulnerability in its multiple dimensions it could also recognize that applying a public health perspective to the subject of deportation would also entail a broader understanding of what such a measure means for the deported children. Hansson does touch upon this line of thought when he, perceptively, points out that regulation of migration, as a police task, challenges the traditional Peelian principle that 'The police are the public and the public are the police'. It raises the question: 'Who is the public?' and 'Do these children belong to the public?' (p. 33). Unfortunately, this issue is not further pursued in the thesis.

Although employing Lipsky's work on street-level bureaucracy, Hansson's approach seems to be divorced from the growing body of studies on policing of borders and mobility (Weber, 2013; Aas and Gundhus, 2015; Woude and Leun, 2017), as well as criminology and sociology of policing more generally. Drawing more actively on the large body of work on police culture would enable Hansson to address his respondents' identity as police officers and the unique characteristics that this entails. It would enable him to examine what kind of police work is deportation. What distinguishes it from other police tasks and what specific mechanisms are necessary for its execution? The interesting empirical data provided by this study leave much more room for theoretical analysis. This, however, does not diminish the value of the insights provided by the study. At a time when police forces, not only in Sweden but also in other Scandinavian and European countries, are under increased political pressures to deport more unwanted migrants, this study provides a valuable insight into the minds of police officers executing these tasks.

## REFERENCES

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