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Out of Place in Blue Space: Noticing as a Stopping Technology and the Limits of Stop and Search Reform

Conor Wilson^{*,}, Estelle Clayton^{} and Mike Rowe^{}

*C. Wilson, School of Education and Social Sciences, University of the West of Scotland, High Street, Paisley, United Kingdom; email: conor.wilson@uws.ac.uk; E. Clayton, School of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Sighthill Court, Edinburgh, United Kingdom; M. Rowe, School of Management, University of Liverpool, Chatham Street, Liverpool, United Kingdom

This paper introduces the concept of ‘blue space’ as a theoretical framework for (re)defining the boundaries of police stops. Reflecting on ethnographic research with police officers in Scotland and England, we draw on Ahmed’s concept of ‘white space’ to understand police encounters with the public in ‘blue space’. We argue that police presence in ‘blue space’ acts as a stopping technology, which renders certain bodies as noticeable and *out of place*, orientating how bodies ‘take up’ space. Being attuned to a subtle economy of bodily movements—looks, glances or even the presence of police officers—can shape *how* bodies inhabit space. We explore how officers tacitly leverage their presence to ‘stop’ certain bodies in ways not captured by focusing on recorded police stops. In doing so, we consider how blue space challenges a reform landscape that focuses predominately on formal, recorded police stops.

KEY WORDS: police stops, procedural justice, stop and search, ethnography, policing

INTRODUCTION

Police stops—including powers of stop and search—remain a prominent area of police practice and research (see [de Maillard *et al.* 2024](#); [Bradford 2017](#); [Ross 2020](#); [Bowling and Weber 2012](#)). Across the constituent nations of the United Kingdom, stop and search tactics have maintained a controversial place in public and political discourse, being embroiled in debates about disproportionality, institutional racism and over-policing in minoritized communities ([Bowling and Phillips 2007](#); [Marks and Bowling 2024](#); [Kandelina 2024](#)). Here, the (over)use of police stop and search damages police-community relations and police legitimacy ([Delsol and Shiner 2006](#); [Bradford 2017](#); [Scrase 2021](#)). In Scotland, for example, stop and search powers have remained under increased scrutiny following almost a decade of reform ([Clayton 2024](#); [Aston *et al.* 2021](#); [Murray *et al.* 2021](#)).

While a substantial literature has amassed documenting the problems and controversies surrounding stop and search, police scholarship continues to foreground the *search* over the *stop*. Indeed, the question of the stop itself, where it begins and where the boundaries of a police stop might lie has been largely unexamined in police scholarship. Rather, policy reform and academic enquiry tend to focus on police stops only when a search is also present, usually alongside statutory police powers. As such, the importance of the stop itself has been typically overlooked in police scholarship. What this elides, however, is the way in which police stops can ‘take a variety of forms, and be used for a variety of purposes’ that may not be captured by a singular focus on stop and search (Wilson *et al.* 2022: 10). From this perspective, even ‘informal’, ‘consensual’ interactions with the public carry with them the potential for violence, coercion and police power. In this sense, there is a need to understand the plurality of police encounters underpinned by the act of *stopping* and how this is experienced by the public (see Clayton 2024).

In this paper, we draw on Ahmed’s (2007) ‘phenomenology of whiteness’ to develop the concept of ‘blue space’ to explore the dynamics of police presence in public space and problematize what constitutes a ‘stop’. We argue that, in blue space, police presence operates as a technology of social control that dictates not just what certain bodies *do* but rather *what they can do*. To begin, we review the literature on police stop and search, outlining the significance of the stop itself. Building on this, we outline and develop the concept of ‘blue space’. Finally, we present evidence from two ethnographic studies conducted in Scotland and England. Our findings extend the boundaries of ‘police stops’ by considering subtler police practices, which can act as stopping technologies. We explore how the (at times, deliberate) spatial orientation of officers can, itself, work to ‘stop’ bodies by signalling that they have been noticed, thereby impeding their passage through blue space. We discuss practices such as ‘self-stopping’—the process by which those ‘noticed’ in blue space come to perform the stop themselves. We conclude by considering the consequences of (re)drawing the boundaries of police stops to include the broader practices of noticing that ‘stop’ bodies by rendering them out of place. In doing so, we argue that the broader arsenal of stopping technologies employed in blue space, beyond formal, recorded stop and search tactics which continue to dominate political debate and reform agendas, exposes the limits of reform itself. That is, the subtler economy of street-level police practices that operate beyond, or outwith, statutory powers that cannot be made visible to reform agendas.

SEPARATING THE STOP FROM THE SEARCH

While, as we argue, the boundaries of what constitutes a ‘police stop’ can be difficult to define or detach from the broader operation of police power in public interactions, there is nonetheless a need to understand the practice and politics of police stops as understood in policing and criminological scholarship. Police stops have typically been understood as a practice whereby police officers detain a person to investigate a reasonable suspicion that that person is engaged in—or intends to engage in—some form of criminal activity (see Bowling and Weber 2012; Quinton 2023; Arden *et al.* 2022; Lennon *et al.* 2023). Police powers to stop (and search) have remained, however, at the forefront of international academic and political debate as a controversial, and potentially damaging, police tactic (see de Maillard *et al.* 2024; Aston *et al.* 2024; Bowling and Weber 2011). There is, now, a wide body of evidence to demonstrate the negative impact of police stops on police-community relations and negatively impact police legitimacy in over-policed communities (Akintoye 2023; Bowling and Phillips 2007; Parmar 2014; Kyprianides *et al.* 2025).

It is unsurprising, therefore, to note that stop and search tactics have been subject to protracted periods of ‘reform’ across much of the global north including the United Kingdom (see Clayton 2024; Lennon and Murray 2018; Shiner 2010), Europe (Maillard *et al.* 2024) and the United

States (Ross 2020; Epp *et al.* 2014). This reflects what (McElhone *et al.* 2023) have termed the 'reform merry go round', or the process by which police stops, much like policing itself, seem locked in a perpetual cycle of controversy and reform. At the centre of these reforms and debates has been 'procedural justice theory' and considerations about improving police legitimacy and police-community relations (Marks and Bowling 2024; Delsol and Shiner 2006; Madon *et al.* 2017; Clayton 2024; Murray *et al.* 2021).

Procedural justice theory suggests that *how* police interactions are carried out, and personal and public perceptions of fairness, matter in shaping the legitimacy of such interactions (see Bradford 2017; Tyler 2003; Tyler *et al.* 2015). The focus, here, is on the *process*—not necessarily the product or outcome—of police stops in shaping perceptions of fairness, transparency and legitimacy. This view has, however, been criticized by myriad scholars. Indeed, Schaap and Saarikomäki (2022) note that, while procedural justice has become the dominant paradigm in thinking about police legitimacy, there are several problems. Namely, the distinction between process and outcome is blurred in reality, but also that procedural justice is orientated towards a consensus view of society that cannot account for a structural conflict between police and communities. In the context of police stops, Epp *et al.* (2014) note that procedural justice cannot, in itself, mitigate the harmful effects of over-policing or systemically harmful police tactics. Or, in other words, that polite and respectful police demeanour, while helpful to some extent, cannot fully mitigate the damaging effects of the widespread (over)use of police stops on minority communities.

It is worth noting, additionally, that much of the research evidence, and the reform agendas that spring forth, have tended to foreground the *search* at the expense of the stop itself. As Bowling and Phillips (2007) note, 'there can scarcely be any meaning to the word "stop" if it does not indicate an attempt to detain someone from continuing on his or her free passage on foot or in a vehicle'. This seems, therefore, to place an emphasis on the act of the *stop*—being that which can be used to detain a person. However, the 'stop' itself is precisely what has been largely overlooked in police scholarship, the mechanisms of police accountability and stop and search reforms. In this sense, it is significant that police accountability focuses on police stops only when an accompanying search is present (see Clayton 2024; Lennon and Murray 2021; Connolly *et al.* 2023). This leaves little room to acknowledge experiences of policing or police contact outside of the archetypal vision of a police stop and search as coded in law.

Indeed, there are a plurality of police stops that do not fit within conventional understandings of what constitutes a stop or police stop and search encounters. For example, formal police powers such as identity checks at international borders (van der Woude 2020), road traffic stops (Pearson and Rowe 2025) or police operations at sporting events such as searching supporters' vehicles for alcohol, drugs and other prohibited items (Wilson *et al.* 2022) are largely absent from broader debates on police stops. In addition to this, there are numerous forms of informal police stops such as the now-abolished practice of 'consensual' stop and search in Scotland (see Murray 2014) or the more recent development of 'Stop and Engage' (Clayton 2024). In England and Wales there has been, similarly, the practice of 'stop and account' (Pearson and Rowe 2020). The plurality of police practices initiated with a stop, therefore, suggests a need to work towards a broader understanding of police stops, which goes beyond a narrower focus on stop and search. We must, therefore, acknowledge that while every search is initiated by a stop, not every stop necessarily involves a search.

The plurality of police stops and the extent to which such practices oscillate between formal statutory police power and 'informal', 'consensual' interactions raise concerns about the capacity of individuals to differentiate between such interactions with officers and, therefore, consent to voluntary police interactions. For example, in the context of 'Stop and Engage' in Scotland, Clayton (2024) argues that the previous concerns around the capacity of a young person to consent to 'voluntary' searches extend also to the broader police practice of informal stopping or 'engagement'.

In this sense, it is unclear whether informal police interactions are *experienced* as meaningfully different from other forms of police contact—such as stop and search. This is problematic given that the majority of scholarship on police stops foregrounds the vantage point of the police—either through interrogating data on stop and search (McVie 2019; Suss and Oliveira 2022; Tiratelli *et al.* 2018) or through ethnographic research with police officers (Clayton 2024; Deuchar *et al.* 2019).

This paper proposes an alternative approach for understanding the significance of police stops and police presence by extending our understanding about what constitutes the stop to the regimes of visibility that determine who is noticed by police officers and how the act of noticing can, itself, act as a stopping technology. To do so, we develop a new theoretical framework for thinking about police stops by expanding Ahmed's (2007) phenomenology of 'white space' to explore spaces occupied by the police—what we have termed 'blue space' and the myriad forms of stopping technologies initiated by the act of noticing. That is, when certain bodies are *noticed* or made visible in blue space, they are 'stopped' as their movement through space is disrupted by the gaze of the officer.

POLICE STOPS AND 'BLUE SPACE'

This paper draws on Ahmed's (2007) concept of 'white space', developed through her 'phenomenology of whiteness' to propose an alternative way of understanding police stops. Taking Ahmed's application of Husserl's phenomenology to 'white space', phenomenology is concerned with 'orientations': 'how we begin, how we proceed from here' (Ahmed 2007: 151). The point at which orientations begin is with the perceiver, and it is from this that all other perceptions of phenomena are experienced. Ahmed (2007) draws on phenomenology to develop the notion of 'white space', whereby whiteness orientates how bodies 'take up' space and, in doing so, shapes what they can do. As such, whiteness becomes lived as a 'background to experience' (p. 150). Whiteness, therefore, shapes how bodies interact with the spaces they inhabit. White bodies, from this perspective, become habitual whereby they do not command attention insofar as white bodies do not have to encounter their whiteness. Spaces, therefore, are orientated towards some (white) bodies more than others. As Ahmed (2007: 150) reminds us 'whiteness becomes worldly through the noticeability of the arrival of some bodies more than others'. In sum, in white space some bodies are more at home in a world orientated around whiteness as a background to social action whereby space becomes an extension of the white body (Anderson 2023).

In white space, bodies that are coded as *out of place* become noticeable and are inhibited in their movement by the act of *stopping*. Ahmed (2007) discusses the 'stop' in her phenomenology of whiteness. More specifically, she reflects on how non-white bodies are othered and rendered visible through stopping:

For bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy. *Such bodies are stopped, where the stopping is an action that creates its own impressions.* Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? Each question, when asked, is a kind of *stopping device*: you are stopped by being asked the question, just as asking the question requires that you be stopped. A phenomenology of 'being stopped' might take us in a different direction than one that begins with motility, with a body that 'can do' by flowing into space... *to stop involves many meanings: to cease, to end, and also to cut off, to arrest, to check, to prevent, to block, to obstruct or to close....* Stopping is both a political economy, which is distributed unevenly between others, and an affective economy, *which leaves its impressions, affecting those bodies that are subject to its address.* (Ahmed 2007: 163, emphasis added)

It is not difficult to see how this might apply to the practice of police stops. In policing, and police stops, the spaces inhabited by the police are, therefore, not just *white spaces* but also *blue*

spaces. In this sense, blue space extends beyond the police estate itself to any space in which the police have the authority to potentially exercise their powers. Public space becomes a blue space through the presence of police officers within it, which orientates the way in which bodies 'take up' space and dictates what they can do within it. Therefore, when bodies within blue space do not conform to the bodies expected within such a space, they are rendered visible and, as such, vulnerable. Or, to return to Ahmed (2007), some bodies are more at home in blue space than others. In blue space, the gaze of a police officer operates as a panoptic lens, as a corporeal schema—disciplining the bodies subject to its address (Foucault 1981). In simpler terms, bodies become *noticeable* to police officers, while the affective economy of being 'noticed' orientates how 'othered' bodies inhabit space. The stop, therefore, cannot be reduced to the physical *stopping* or bodies, or even the verbal command 'to stop'. Rather, the stop is located within a broader affective economy of noticing that impedes the motility of bodies through space.

Blue space, however, should not be read as a fixed ontological category that exists beyond the subjectivities of the officers who (re)produce it. Rather, blue space—and the bodies rendered visible within it—is constructed according to the attitudes, values and beliefs that shape how police officers interact with the world around them. Or, to put it another way, blue space is shaped by institutional norms and values, which can in turn shape police professional practices (Loftus 2010; Chan 1996; Manning 1977). Drawing on scholarship on policing culture, we might argue that blue space is orientated towards whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity and adult bodies (see Loftus 2010; Punch 2009; Herbert 2001). Bowling *et al.* (2019) note, for example, that police culture can be, *inter alia*, characterized by racial prejudice, suspicion, isolation, machismo and conservatism. Wicks (2025) argues that police officers (re)produce a 'white racial ideology' that upholds systems of white racial domination within British policing and, in doing so, ensures that the police institution is racialized as a white space.

In our understanding of the construction and governance of blue space, police officer attitudes both shape, and are shaped by, interactions with the public. To be out of place in blue space is to 'fit a description' or a type, whether these are informed by individual experience or by police intelligence (Rowe 2023). Thus, what and who is noticed in blue space is (re)produced by both individual police subjectivities and the broader institutional epistemologies that 'make sense' of blue spatial orientations. The politics of (in)visibility in blue space cannot be reduced to, nor separated from, the individual subjectivities of officers tasked with policing blue space. As Quinton (2014) shows, the formulation of suspicion in police stops is often predicated on officer's tacit knowledge as a sense-making device that structures the actions they undertake. In what follows, we use the concept of 'blue space' to problematize the conventional understanding of what constitutes a 'stop' by locating the site of the stop itself beyond (in)formal police-public interactions, in the process by which some bodies are rendered *visible* and, therefore, out of place.

METHODS

In this paper, we draw from two ethnographic research projects carried out in both Scotland and England. The Scottish ethnographic study took place in three command areas in Scotland (East, West and North) between 2016 and late 2018. Officers in response and local policing units were observed through stop and search training and into practice for over 300 hours across urban and suburban sites. The research in England also focused on the use of stop and search and, in particular, sought to understand the disproportionate use of the powers. The research was conducted in three police forces between 2013 and 2019. Observations were of uniformed officers in response, neighbourhood, traffic and tactical aid teams and, in total, 122 shifts were observed with 52 officers, some on one occasion, others more than ten times. For the most part, we do not distinguish between the two studies in the presentation of our data in this paper.

The two studies brought together here are as a result of conversations during meetings and events over multiple years as part of an EU COST Action on Police Stops.¹ In these discussions, we compared our experiences of the ways in which stops (and searches) develop. In particular, we began to identify those encounters that did not develop into a search but that nevertheless interrupted the, to all intents and purposes, lawful activities of members of the public. The examples we discuss in this paper illustrate the different ways in which police presence affected those in the vicinity, even when there was no direct interaction. Included in some of these discussions were other researchers who explored the experience of policing practices for young people (Gashi 2023) and minority communities (Akintoye 2023). These perspectives informed our discussion of the ways in which officers do not recognize their own presence.

Thus, this paper is not the bringing together of two sets of data and the systematic analysis of that data. It is very much the product of an abductive process of discussion and debate that has taken place over a period of some years. We structure our analysis by first considering the techniques of control utilized by officers to control blue space and disrupt the bodily movement of those 'being noticed' or who appear 'out of place'. In doing so, we question the boundaries of what might constitute a 'stop', from the perspective of those being noticed, insofar as subtle acts, such as glances, looks and where officers position themselves within the spaces they inhabit limit, for all intents and purposes, the free movement of bodies through those spaces. Second, we further explore the orientation of bodies within blue space by discussing a common observation across both sets of fieldwork: the practice of 'self-stopping'. Self-stopping, we suggest, is a technology of control leveraged by police officers where, in anticipation of being formally stopped, bodies subjected to 'noticing' in blue space come to perform the stop themselves—for example, by turning out their own pockets when noticing the presence of a nearby police officer. When taken together, we conclude by considering the implications of (re)orientating research on police stops using the concept of blue space. To that end, we conclude by (re)considering the importance of understanding the process by which police stops (broadly defined) are initiated. That is, through noticing certain bodies and rendering them out of place within blue space. Being attuned to the subtler processes of noticing and how this can itself 'stop' bodies by impeding their motility through space, we consider the limits of stop and search reform, which focuses on what can be made legible to police accountability mechanisms through recording 'stops' (narrowly defined) rather than the operation of the police power to notice, disrupt or follow the movement of bodies through space.

ORIENTATING BODIES IN BLUE SPACE: MOTILITY AND TECHNOLOGIES OF INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL

Blue space, as we have defined it above, extends to the spaces and places that the police inhabit. In doing so, police presence orientates what bodies *can do* in those spaces—particularly bodies that are made visible as out of place and subject to attention from the police gaze. It is important, therefore, to consider the ways in which the bodily orientations and movements of police officers in space can act as a stopping technology. Here, we can see a broader arsenal of 'stops' that do not have the same requirement for close spatial proximity, verbal instruction or physical contact as documented in previous research on police stops. Rather, police stops can begin, and at times end, at the act of noticing that works to 'stop' bodies by disrupting their movement through blue space. Subtle movements, such as glances, looks or, more broadly, just the proximity of officers to 'out of place' bodies can orientate, structure and—at times—impede the movement of bodies through space.

¹ For more information on the COST Action on Police Stops (CA17102), see: <https://polstops.eu/>.

Firstly, it appears that the ability to disrupt the bodily movement of those 'out of place' via proximity alone—without the need for formal 'engagement'—is a tactic consciously employed by police officers to control blue space:

At 6:29 we turn a corner and watch a group of young males who are hanging around a shop. They look too young to buy alcohol and Tony is suspicious that they are trying to get adults to buy them alcohol from the shop. Although we are in an unmarked car, Tony and the other officer are wearing their uniform and high visibility yellow jackets, and the young males seem to recognise them immediately. About a minute after this, the males all leave in one group. The other officer says 'there you go, [we have] successfully disrupted criminal activity'. (Response officers undertaking 'proactive' patrol on a 'quiet' shift)

It seems, here, that [Ahmed's \(2007\)](#) use of 'motility' is a useful lens through which to view the process by which some bodies are noticed in blue spaces, and the effects this has on how certain bodies can, or cannot, proceed through space. The concept of 'motility' is the essential feature of being embodied—the ability to move within the world is fundamental to liberation within it. But, as Ahmed identifies in her application of [Fanon's \(1986\)](#) work, motility is not something that is equally free to all bodies that move through such spaces. Rather, the ability to move freely in the world is a privilege held by those who inhabit bodies that are accepted, and those who do not are 'diminished as an effect of the bodily extensions of others' ([Ahmed 2007](#): 161). Here, motility does not extend to the bodies of the young men who are noticed by the officers and, as such, they choose to exit blue space at the arrival of the officers. It is important, here, that the officers do not engage in dialogue or perform a search on the young people they notice. Rather, the presence of the officers is enough to disrupt their movement through space—a signal that they have been noticed and, as such, should leave the area to avoid further police contact.

It is clear, therefore, that the police are not unaware of the effect of their presence, of blue space. Indeed, it is a form of policing, a stopping technology, they employ regularly in various contexts, including traffic and nighttime economy operations. In this sense, the technologies and practices employed by officers in blue space represent a form of informal social control in which the subtle economy of bodily movements (glances, looks) or the broader spatial orientation of officers, orientates *what* bodies can do when subjected to 'othering' or noticing within blue space. So, too, do those with bodies oriented as 'out of place' both notice and respond to this 'othering' when they become aware that their spatial context has now shifted to become one in which the police gaze is operating:

We carry on driving and we go back up towards the nice pub at the end of the 'drug marketplace' on the same street where they seized a bike from earlier. As we drive up, we hear lots of whistles going around. The officers say that's people signalling to others that the police are near and the male officer says that indicates to them, in turn, that someone is dealing drugs here. (Plain clothes officers undertaking proactive policing)

As such, there is a need to extend the boundaries of the stop when one considers how the stopping technologies discussed above, or what we are calling blue space, extend beyond formal police powers to stop and search or even (in)formal interactions with the public. As [Ahmed \(2007\)](#) reminds us, a phenomenology of 'being stopped' leads us to consider the plurality of meaning attached to 'stop': 'to cease, to end, and also to cut off, to arrest, to prevent, to block, to obstruct, to close' (p. 163). This account of the 'stop', therefore, would lead us to a broader view of what might constitute a police stop by recognizing that there are numerous ways in which police presence in space can 'stop' by disrupting the flow of bodies through space. In sum, 'motility'

does not equally apply to all bodies. Our evidence not only indicates that not all bodies have equal opportunity of motility in blue space, but that police also intentionally deploy the affective qualities of blue space to constrict the autonomy of some within it. Police presence can, therefore, disrupt the movement of bodies through those spaces in ways not captured by focusing singularly on police–public interactions. As the fieldnote above illustrates, this can be seen in the way in which the arrival of the police into space orientates bodies—to alert, to disperse, to hide—using Ahmed’s definition, it becomes a form of stop insofar as it inhibits one’s ability to inhabit their intended place. The officers ‘on patrol’, therefore, do not need to physically stop, detain or interact with the public to disrupt their bodily movement through space.

‘SELF-STOPPING’ IN BLUE SPACE: BRINGING THE BACKGROUND TO THE FOREGROUND

Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholarship on police stops typically focuses on police *encounters* as temporally distinct events between the police and members of the public. This elides, however, the somewhat hauntological tendency (Gordon 2008) whereby previous encounters with the police shape expectations of current and future encounters with officers in blue space. As Derrida (1994) reminds us, aligning with Ahmed’s (2007) exposition of the inheritance of meanings within space, the present cannot be understood without reference to both the past and future. In blue space, those who are stopped frequently come to anticipate the stop such that they not only present themselves to be stopped but also undertake the act of stopping themselves. For example, fieldnotes from both Scotland and England indicate that examples of ‘self-stopping’ include turning out pockets, unprompted, upon seeing a police officer. In doing so, the person self-stopping seeks to demonstrate to the officer that they have nothing to hide:

I am with two proactive officers, early on a warm summer evening. The officers spot two young boys. They appear to be no more than 16. The officers approach the boys. In response to the question, ‘do you have anything on you that you shouldn’t have?’, both boys voluntarily empty their pockets. One is in possession of a small amount of cannabis. The officers dispose of it, throwing it into a drain. It is not worth their time processing the drugs as evidence. And they do not record a stop and search—they didn’t ask the boys to empty their pockets! (Proactive officers patrolling a drug and gang ‘hotspot’)

These kinds of interactions reinforce the dominance of blue space as they act to (re)affirm that the bodies of the young men are *out of place*. Their presence in blue space is—as such—more noticeable than others. If, as Ahmed (2007: 150) points out, in white space ‘whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientated bodies in specific directions, affecting how they take up space’, then in blue space the visibility, and thus stopping, of bodies reflects the ongoing and unfinished history of police contact with bodies in blue space. The practice of self-stopping, then, unfolds as an interplay of *noticing* and being *noticed* that is set against the background experience of previous encounters and present possibilities of escalating police power. What constitutes a ‘stop’ is not located within statutory police powers, nor even the explicit commands of police officers in blue space. Rather, a stop is located within the person who feels ‘out of place’—as visible and noticeable—through the actions of the officer—whether subtle or explicit—which highlight that they have been *noticed*.

Additionally, it appears the phenomena of ‘self-stopping’ is not only known to police officers but is something which is actively leveraged in place of formal powers of stop and search. Indeed, from their perspective, unrecorded and ‘voluntary’ interactions might even represent a high degree of trust and consent:

The officer says that, back when he started, around ten years ago following a career in the army, the ‘customers’, as he calls them, ‘expected to be stopped and searched’. He says this in a way that implies, to me at least, that he thinks this was a good thing ... He starts talking about the general population of people who were searched and he says that those people were ‘quite happy’ to submit to a voluntary search. (Response officer in discussion about stop and search reform)

Clayton (2024: 10) recently identified a similar tendency whereby police officers leverage ‘engaging’ the public in voluntary interactions either in place of, or to formulate suspicion for, a stop and search:

... the man who is being searched says that the police are always picking him for searches, even though he has done nothing wrong for a while. They explain to him that originally, they were not going to search him at all, just wanted a chat, but it was during the conversation that they developed their suspicions. ... Later Thomas says to me that ‘we would never have had grounds to search if we hadn’t gone up to speak to him’ and explains that just having a chat with people is valuable in building up a bigger picture and building suspicion. (Plain clothes officers undertaking proactive policing)

In this sense, police officers can operationalize blue space as a quasi-investigative technology that does not necessarily rely on either statutory search powers or, it seems, the stop itself. Rather, officers can leverage the *expectation* of a stop (or search) such that the act of stopping is performed by the person being stopped. It seems, here, that officers were resisting stop-and-search reform in blue space. This is apparent in the explicit acknowledgment that officers did not have grounds to search when they chose to engage with the man being searched. Shiner (2010) notes that the post-Macpherson move to record all police stops (or stop and accounts) was viewed as an ‘attack’ by officers that gave rise to a series of defence mechanisms and resistance, which undermined the purpose of the reform. In blue space, we can see a similar dynamic at play whereby officers can circumvent the formal process of accountability through a reliance on leveraging the power to stop without necessarily using it through noticing, observing or simply ‘chatting’ to the public. While simply ‘chatting’ may be framed as innocuous engagement on behalf of officers (see also Clayton 2024), it is clear that the result here is tantamount to a ‘stop’. As Ahmed (2007: 163) notes, questions such as ‘who are you?’ or ‘why are you here?’ are a ‘kind of stopping device: you are stopped by being asked the question, just as asking the question requires that you be stopped’.

It is worth noting, however, that despite the apparently voluntary nature of ‘self-stopping’, these encounters with blue space can still have a notable impact on police-community relations. While, as discussed above, the officers involved seem to view such interactions positively, the actions of those who ‘voluntarily self-stop’ may reflect more contempt for, rather than compliance with, the police:

A young man, dressed very casually on a warm summer evening, observes the police van approaching. He appears to notice the police before the officers spot him. When they do see him, he is walking towards the van, laughing. He raises his hands as he approaches the officers, offering himself for a search. He expects it, after all. He is well aware that he is the sort of person the officers will pay attention to. What appears to the officers to be evidence of a compliant attitude looks much more like contempt to me. The young man is challenging the officers to do their worst. It matters nothing to him. He has no respect for their authority. (Proactive officers patrolling a drug and gang ‘hotspot’)

In other encounters, a person being noticed in blue space may refuse to voluntarily engage in the practice of self-stopping. However, the result of this refusal may not be a *de facto* escalation

to statutory police power (i.e., stop and search), although the risks of non-compliance are noted by [Dixon et al. \(1990\)](#). Rather, the response might be a more subtle, quasi-investigative practice whereby officers continue to observe those who are 'out of place' within blue space:

A young man can be seen walking along the footpath ahead. It is early on a damp and cold morning. The officer pulls up alongside the young man and asks, 'What are you up to? Where are you going?' The man refuses to engage in conversation—he tells the officer that he knows he doesn't have to speak to him unless he is ordered to stop. He continues walking, shrugs and says he is going to the café. He doesn't look at the officer or show him any form of respect. Instead, he walks across some open grassland so that the police car cannot easily follow. The officer drives around the grassland, keeping the young man in sight until he can be seen reaching a small parade of shops. He does indeed go into the café. (Response officer patrolling on a quiet morning shift)

This was an oppositional stance taken by a young man in response to the implicit expectation within blue space to stop when noticed and when questioned. The continuation of movement through this space described here is an act of defiance—a refusal to stop when blue space demands it. Such examples demonstrate that police stops cannot be reduced to the *physical act* of stopping a person from their free passage ([Bowling and Phillips 2007](#)). Extending the boundaries of 'stopping' beyond bodily obstruction in physical space, as [Ahmed \(2007\)](#) does to 'being stopped' (or noticed) in blue space allows us to see the broader political and affective economies of stopping. A stop, therefore, can be extended to subtler acts of noticing, pausing, eyeballing or slowly tailing behind a person, which act to highlight that some bodies are out of place in blue space. These 'stops', that is, the subtler practices of noticing, do not formally constitute a 'stop'—something made visible when it is recorded. They cannot, therefore, be accounted for in contemporary Stop and Search reform. It is important to consider, then, how the stopping technologies employed in blue space fit within, and challenge, contemporary understanding of police legitimacy and procedural justice in recorded police encounters with the public.

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE, REFORM AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF RECORDING POLICE ENCOUNTERS IN BLUE SPACE

It seems, therefore, that recognizing the affective economies of 'being stopped' beyond formal mechanisms of police powers to stop, or even informal engagements, raises questions about the relationship between police stops (and search), police legitimacy and procedural justice. Indeed, much of the recent scholarship on police stops has been dominated by a focus on procedural justice theory, which posits that the perceived procedural fairness of an encounter shapes compliance with law and perceptions of police legitimacy ([Murray et al. 2021](#); [Bradford 2017](#); [Tyler 2003](#); [Bradford et al. 2009](#)). [Tyler et al. \(2015\)](#) argue, in the US context, that while perceptions of being viewed with 'suspicion' damage public trust (particularly in overpoliced communities), procedural fairness during stops can build trust and confidence in the police. In the Scottish context, [Clayton \(2024\)](#) illustrates that stop and search reform was driven, rhetorically at least, by a focus on the values of procedural justice. [Kyprianides et al. \(2025: 19\)](#) recently recommended, drawing from their life course analysis of the consequences of police stops, reform should aim to ensure 'police-initiated contact—if it does become necessary—is lawful, proportionate and "minimally invasive", takes account of adolescents' individual needs and circumstances, and is consistent with the principles of procedural and distributive justice'.

In contrast, drawing on the concept of blue space suggests that police power orientates how bodies take up space, even in the absence of the bodily act of stopping or police-initiated contact.

It is not at all clear how the logics and performances of procedural fairness might extend to the experience of being made visible and, as such, out of place by the police gaze. Rather, procedural justice theory appears to artificially truncate an interaction to mean two bodies co-located in the same close physical space, perhaps within reaching distance of one another, and does not extend to when that interaction may first be oriented and first felt by those within it. Indeed, as Ahmed (2007: 163) reminds us, ‘bodies are stopped, where the stopping is an action that creates its own impressions’. Here, the ‘action’ that creates its own impressions does not begin with, or even require, a verbal direction to ‘stop’, a certain spatial proximity within blue space, or bodily contact. Indeed, from our examples, this might include at-a-distance encounters such as an officer in a car on the other side of the road.

In other examples, officers did not need to engage with the public at all. Their presence alone was enough to disrupt the ‘motility’ of bodily movement through space. As our findings indicate, officers were aware of the effect of their presence in blue space, and at times deliberately leveraged it to, in their view, ‘disrupt’ criminal activity. This is significant in that, by leveraging the power to stop through noticing, or through the more nebulously defined ‘engagement’ of those being noticed (Clayton 2024), officers are provided with an avenue through which attempts at accountability and recording can be undermined by subtler practices that cannot be made legible in reform agendas. It seems, then, that extending the ‘stop’ beyond the bodily act of stopping, in turn, creates a need to (re)conceptualize the relationship between police conduct in public and police legitimacy insofar as a focus on recorded encounters obscures as much as it reveals.

Indeed, the over policing of certain communities is a longstanding focus in stop and search research (Murray 2014; Bowling and Phillips 2007; Delsol and Shiner 2006; Bowling and Weber 2011; Clayton 2024). Our findings indicate, however, that police stops do not begin at, or necessarily escalate to, recorded police contact. Rather, it is initiated by the more subtle act of *noticing* or being noticed, and this noticing need not escalate further to ‘stop’ a body’s passage through space or disrupt a person’s daily activities. In this sense, recent reforms aimed at improving police accountability in stop and search in Scotland by improved recording of police stops (O’Neill *et al.* 2015), or the post-Macpherson changes to recording police stops in England and Wales (Shiner 2010), are welcome moves towards increased accountability. They cannot, however, account for the broader practices of noticing that can be read as tantamount to a form of police intervention in the daily lives of those subject to its address. The point here is not semantic. Rather, while previous research on stop and search frequently acknowledged that the ‘unfettered power to interfere with the lives of individuals is impossible to justify in a democratic society’ (Marks and Bowling 2024: 314; see also, Tiratelli *et al.* 2018), what might constitute ‘interference’ takes on an expanded meaning in blue space. Indeed, from this perspective, interference cannot be reduced to what can be made legible to reform agendas given the relative ease with which they may be circumvented but rather encompasses the broader spectrum of practices available through the use of noticing as a stopping technology in blue space.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have advanced the concept of ‘blue space’—the spaces inhabited by the police—as a theoretical framework for understanding both the processes by which police officers notice bodies which are ‘out of place’ and the way in which this orientates the way in which these bodies ‘take up’ space—what they *can* do. In doing so, this study contributes to debates about police stop and search tactics by introducing a new theoretical framework for understanding how bodies are stopped by being made visible within blue space. We have charted, additionally, the myriad forms of stop that have not been accounted for in stop and search scholarship, and subsequent debate about reform.

Indeed, we have noted how the subtle acts of noticing can, themselves, impede (thus stop) the movement of bodies through space. We have seen, therefore, how these subtle technologies of (in)formal social control are leveraged by police officers in blue space in lieu of formal (and thus recordable) powers to stop and search. Additionally, we have also documented the practice of self-stopping, the process whereby those 'noticed' in blue space present themselves to be searched by officers on patrol or indicate that they have 'nothing to hide'. We can see a subtler economy of quasi-investigative practices that police officers can draw upon to leverage the dynamics of blue space to survey, observe and control those who are noticed, but who refuse to comply with voluntary acts of self-stopping. What these practices have in common is that they do not leverage formal police powers of stop and search, nor necessarily involve a direct interaction with the public.

Focusing on blue space, therefore, calls into question the narrow focus on the practice of police stops (and search), which has prevailed in criminological and policing scholarship. We argue, here, that greater attention should be paid not just to who is stopped (or searched) by the police (and the process by which these stops are categorized and recorded), but rather to *who is made visible*. As the findings above indicate, being made visible in blue space does not necessarily result in a formal stop or interaction with the police. This does not mean, however, that those out-of-place bodies can proceed from blue space uninhibited. Rather, as we have shown, there are a multiplicity of stopping technologies employed by police officers in blue space that cannot be captured in a narrower focus on police stops or stop and search.

There are, of course, limitations to our analysis. What is notably missing from our research is the phenomenological experience of 'being stopped' by those that are stopped, rather than those that do the stopping. However, drawing on a body of scholarship that explores the harms of being stopped and searched (Ross 2020; Akintoye 2023; Gashi 2023; Kyprianides *et al.* 2025), as well as the harms that are the consequence of being subordinated by the police, it is possible to explore the implications of the practices discussed above. In recent years, critical scholars have problematized the underpinning logics and expressions of police power itself (see Vitale 2016; McElhone *et al.* 2023). Theorizing 'blue space' as a technology of social control that orientates *how* bodies take up space could be read as an expression of the inherently problematic nature of police presence, particularly in historically over-policed communities. One might question, from this perspective, whether we are seeking to redefine police *stops* or rather *policing itself*. A tentative response might posit that our aim is to (re)orientate police scholarship towards an understanding of the symbolic power of police presence as a stopping technology in and of itself. From this perspective, it is not difficult to see the process by which practices that seem innocuous or insignificant from the perspective of a police officer are experienced as harmful by those subjected to routine forms of noticing or observation beyond formal police powers of stop and search.

As we have seen, the 'reform merry go-round' (McElhone *et al.* 2023) and the 'vicious cycle' of reform and rebound (Shiner *et al.* 2024), in the case of stop and search, tend to emphasize technocratic, procedural reforms aimed at *recording* and documenting the use of such police practices. In Scotland, for example, efforts to improve transparency around stop and search have included enhanced recording practices, including making stop and search data publicly accessible. Similarly, as we have discussed, post-Macpherson policing in England and Wales shared a similar tendency to increase the recording of police stops, including stop and account. We argue, however, that there is a limit to what reform can achieve due to the way officers shape the (blue) spaces they inhabit. It is difficult, for example, to capture, let alone record, the *experience* of being noticed and the plurality of police practices that orientate how bodies take up space. Calls for reform of stop and search are often focused too narrowly on the within-reach interaction of a legally defined 'stop and search', but, as we have shown, stop and search is only one expression of a multiplicity of stopping acts that can inhibit a person's free passage. These acts of stopping dwell in the world of 'blue space'. In this sense then, attempts to reform stop and search may similarly need to be reoriented to tackle the problem of policing and power, from which these technologies of stopping emerge.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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