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# The 'Bravo Mike Syndrome': private security culture and racial profiling in South Africa\*

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses how issues of race influence the occupational culture of the armed response sector, a particular part of the private security industry, in Durban, South Africa. In addition to analysing the racial hierarchy of the industry, this article examines the 'Bravo Mike Syndrome' – Bravo Mike meaning black male in NATO phonetic alphabet code. The 'Bravo Mike Syndrome' refers to the racialised imaginaries of criminals and the subsequent policing practices performed by armed response officers to protect clients from this racially constructed dangerous 'Other'. However, as the majority of armed response officers are 'Bravo Mikes' themselves, there is a constant element of friction in their performances. Based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this article thus analyses how racialised understandings of crime influence, and are reproduced by, private policing practices, thereby contributing to studies on private security occupational cultures and racial profiling.

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## Introduction

In November 2008, I was on day shift duty with Nick,<sup>1</sup> a senior Indian armed response officer, and we heard over the radio that we needed to look out for a 'suspicious individual' who was wearing a 'woolen jacket with red stripes'. I had not yet mastered their radio communication, so I did not quite understand what had been said. The following conversation took place:

Me: What exactly did he say?

Nick: There is a suspect we need to look out for: a black male wearing a woolen jacket with red stripes.

I became confused and started to question what I thought I had heard.

Me: Was that in the original message?

Nick: No, control<sup>2</sup> didn't say black male, I added that on, for you.

Me: Why?

Nick: To make it clearer.

Me: But why didn't control mention that?

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\*In this article, as elsewhere (Diphooorn 2015a), I will use capital letters, such as in "White" and "Black", when I am referring to how people define a group of individuals according to race. When I use these terms as adjectives, such as for a 'black armed response officer', I will not capitalise them.

Nick: Because he doesn't have to, it's already clear. When I hear about a suspect or suspicious person, I assume it's a black male. Sometimes control will mention it specifically, and say, 'suspicious Bravo Mike', but many times, it's left out. But I know what he means – we all do.

Me: And what about a suspicious Whiskey Mike? [white male]

Nick: [laughs] If that's the case, he'll mention it. But I haven't heard that said in years, maybe never. In this line of work, a suspicious Whiskey Mike doesn't exist. It's almost always a Bravo Mike, maybe sometimes India Mike [Indian male], but that's only in certain areas. A suspicious man is a Bravo Mike. And we all understand it like that.

My conversation with Nick occurred during the 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted with armed response officers, a specific type of private security officers, between 2007 and 2010 in Durban, South Africa. Armed response officers are armed private security officers that patrol communities in vehicles and react and/or respond to sources of distress from their clientele. The armed response sector emerged in South Africa in the 1980s and is one the fastest growing of the private security industry, with 4550 registered businesses (out of a total of 8144) providing armed reaction services (PSIRA Annual Report 2013–2014).<sup>3</sup> Broadly speaking, my research analysed the everyday policing practices of armed response officers and their interactions with state police officers and citizens (Diphoorn 2015a).

One of the predominant themes that habitually emerged during my fieldwork was the issue of race, which I, perhaps, could have anticipated in South Africa, a society where racial categories and imaginaries are deeply rooted. Despite the political transformation of 1994 that aimed to eradicate the racial building blocks of apartheid rule, race continues to play a profound role in everyday practices and this is also reflected in the composition and operation of the private security industry. Similar to other studies on private security in South African urban centres (Kempa and Singh 2008, Samara 2010, Clarno and Murray 2013, Paasche *et al.* 2014), this article argues that racially constructed categories, stereotypes, and acts of racial profiling are key components of private policing practices.

I coin these various racial facets of private policing practices as the 'Bravo Mike Syndrome'. In South Africa, and elsewhere, private security officers communicate with the NATO phonetic alphabet, where A is Alpha, B is Bravo, C is Charlie, and so forth. A 'Bravo Mike' stands for a black male, and as the conversation with Nick highlights, 'a suspicious man is a Bravo Mike' – a black male. The 'Bravo Mike Syndrome' thus refers to both the racialised depiction of the dangerous criminal by citizens and armed response offices, and the subsequent policing practices performed by armed response officers that reify these racial imaginaries. This article thereby aims to contribute to two fields of research: the occupational culture of the private security industry and racial profiling by private security officers.

In the first section of this article, I will briefly outline how I define and analyse the occupational culture of the private security industry and the methods I used for this research. In the second section, I will describe how race and policing have always been interconnected in South Africa and the prominent role of fear and violence in shaping and consolidating racial categories. In the third section, I will focus on the racial hierarchy in the industry and racial preferences. In the fourth section, I analyse the 'Bravo Mike Syndrome' and practices of racial profiling. In the fifth section, 'Being the Bravo Mike', I will discuss the racial identity of armed response officers, the suspicion directed against armed response officers, and the emotional experience endured in executing the 'Bravo Mike Syndrome'. I end this article with some concluding remarks and emphasise a need to further understand the intersections between race and private policing cultures.

## Occupational cultures of private security

Various studies of private security have pointed to the existence of a private security occupational culture (Rigakos 2002, Wakefield 2003, Button 2007, Singh and Kempa 2007, van Steden 2007, Loyens 2009, Berg 2010). Much of this work, similar to my own (Diphoorn 2015a), has not only

identified a growing role for the private security industry, but has primarily pointed to the increasingly reactive and punitive nature of private policing, thereby criticising the presumed distinction between public and private policing practices and logics.

Similar to concepts developed in the field of public police studies (Young 1991, Chan 1997, Reiner 2004, Loftus 2010), the notion of 'occupational culture' implies that particular practices, rules, justifications, and structures determine how policing is performed. Yet as the literature on the occupational culture of the state police highlights, the existence of various subcultures reflects differences between ranks and units. Similarly, it is problematic to speak of an occupational culture for an entire industry given the variation between officers, policing bodies, and contexts.

This is certainly the case for South Africa, where the private security industry is both vast and diverse. South Africa has the largest private security sector worldwide in terms of GDP (Abrahamsen and Williams 2007, Singh 2008). The latest annual report (2013–2014) from the PSIRA, the semi-state body that regulates the industry, accounts for 8144 registered private security businesses and 1,868,398 registered private security officers.<sup>4</sup> In addition, PSIRA distinguishes between 20 different categories, ranging from locksmiths to bodyguards. The diversity also pertains to private security officers, comprising security guards, private investigators, bodyguards, and much more. Thus, to speak of a private policing occupational culture in South Africa ignores this diversity. Following O'Neill *et al.*, I therefore use the term 'occupational culture' in a broad sense to refer to 'the way things are done around here' (2007, p. 2).

Elsewhere (Diphoorn 2015a), I have analysed the numerous structures, processes, and practices that shape the armed response sector in Durban, South Africa. More specifically, I argue that the armed reaction sector constitutes a specific niche of policing with its own distinct occupational culture, which, furthermore, is more similar to that of the state police than to other types of private security officers. Like Loyens (2009), Rigakos (2002), and Singh and Kempa (2007), I argue that these two policing bodies exhibit more similarities than differences. Elsewhere, I specifically focus on how masculinities and violence act as essential components of the occupational culture of armed response (Diphoorn 2015b). In this article, I will focus on how race shapes the occupational culture of the private security industry in South Africa: how race influences 'the way things are done'. This will complement studies on the relationship between race and state policing (Holdoway 1997, Young 1991, Cashmore 2001, Rowe 2004).

Yet let me first briefly outline my methodology to elucidate how I analysed 'how things are done'. During the 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2007 and 2010, I frequented several companies and interviewed the owners of more than 20. Yet I decided to focus on four companies for in-depth analysis and these firms were selected to reflect the diversity of the industry. The first is an internationally owned company that operates globally. The second is a Durban-based company that operates solely in this urban area. The third and fourth are community-based companies: one operates in an affluent, predominantly white area, while the other operates in a former Indian township<sup>5</sup> on the outskirts of the city. As I focused on four different companies, of which two moved throughout the city, I collected data from various types of socio-economic neighbourhoods, ranging from affluent areas to poorer townships.

To research these companies, I employed numerous qualitative methods. The first and most prominent method was participant observation with armed response officers. This entailed that I accompanied them in their vehicles during their 12-hour shifts to analyse their daily endeavours, where conversations, such as the one with Nick in the introduction, were commonplace. Although I accompanied numerous armed response officers, most of them occupied high-ranking positions (which was primarily done for safety reasons) and towards the end of my fieldwork, I increasingly joined the same armed response officers on their shifts. Additionally, I also spent a lot of time with armed response officers 'off duty', such as social gatherings, to gain further insight into how this occupation affected their personal lives. Elsewhere (Diphoorn 2013), I elaborately analyse the ethical, moral, and emotional obstacles I faced during periods of participant observation.

My second research method was conducting (recorded and unrecorded) interviews of various types: ranging from semi-structured interviews with a detailed topic list; less structured interviews that were guided by brief topic guides; and open interviews and unplanned conversations that I carried out during participant observation. When possible, I recorded interviews and during stints of participant observation, I recorded parts of conversations that I then deemed to be relevant, which I then incorporated into my elaborate field notes. It is the last type – the more informal and open interviews – that generated the majority of my data. Furthermore, I conducted several group interviews, particularly among security officers, recorded the life histories of several individuals, and conducted a small amount of data analysis, such as employee contracts.

As mentioned, there are operational and structural differences between the companies, the armed response officers, and the areas they worked in. The role of race in shaping the policing practices therefore also differed per company, officer, and area. However, in this article, I will focus on several ways in which race influences the entire occupational culture of the armed response sector in South Africa. Although some of the quotes used in the following sections do not reflect the opinions of all armed response officers in Durban, I did identify them among all the different companies. More importantly, I observed the ‘Bravo Mike Syndrome’ – the racialised depiction of the criminal and the subsequent policing of this social construction – in all of the areas that I researched. I therefore argue that although there is variation, racial hierarchies, racial imaginaries, and performances of racial profiling concern the entire sector, and perhaps even the private security industry at large.

## Race and policing in South Africa

In order to understand the role of race in contemporary South African society, we cannot avoid the racial segregation enforced under apartheid rule. Officially implemented in 1948 when the National Party (NP) came to power, apartheid had the fundamental goal of segregating races in political, economic, cultural, and social spheres to ensure that ‘the visual social landscape was racialised’ (Mare 2001, p. 85). Through various reforms and legislation, such as the Population Registration Act (1950), the Separate Amenities Act (1953), and the Group Areas Act (1950), the apartheid state legally constructed the notion of race and divided South Africans into four races: White/European, Coloured, Asian, and African/Native. The term ‘Black’ referred to all ‘non-Whites’.<sup>6</sup> In this article, when I use the term ‘Black’, I am referring to individuals who were previously labelled as ‘Native’ or ‘African’. I will also use the words ‘non-white’ and ‘Indian’ (rather than ‘Asian’). Although I recognise that by using these apartheid-based racial classifications, I am perhaps perpetuating a particular way of thinking. Yet the reality is that my informants used these categories and I want this article to reflect the ways in which they describe themselves and others.

Although race may be experienced and perceived in primordial ways, race is a social construction that is generated, moulded, and reified through social practices. It is therefore impossible to create a universal definition or analysis of race, as it encompasses and yields different meanings in different contexts (Bulmer and Solomos 1999). What might be considered ‘Black’ or ‘White’ in South Africa may be defined differently elsewhere. During apartheid, race had a strong biological basis, yet it was primarily a socio-legal construct (Posel 2001a, 2001b): it was not merely defined by one’s skin colour, but also by one’s language, general appearance, place of residence, and so forth. Besides the distribution of resources and other issues, race was primarily a political and social grouping that defined moral categories (Posel 2001b). Non-Whites were regarded as ‘a threat to white morals’ (van Zyl Smit 1989, p. 239) and segregation aimed to prevent racial mixing and protect ‘racial purity’ (Posel 2001b, p. 52). The apartheid state created racial categories to keep out the ‘dirt’, the non-Whites, from the pure and clean, the Whites. Swanson (1977, in Steinberg 2011, p. 354) has shown how ‘the notion of contagion’, where Blacks were depicted as ‘bearers of diseases’ that would bring disorder, was used to instil and maintain segregation. The image of Blacks as ‘dirt’ was an explicit

depiction used during apartheid that served as a powerful metaphor. Racial categories were highly moralised (van Zyl Smit 1989, Mare 2001).

In contemporary South Africa, racial categories continue to be highly moralised and this is linked to the country's high levels of criminal violence. South Africa is ranked ninth on the global list of homicide rates and has the third highest murder rate in the African continent (UNODC 2013). Several scholars use the term 'culture of violence' (Kynoch 2005, Altbeker 2007) to describe the pervasiveness and everyday nature of violence in South Africa. One cannot escape the ubiquity of crime stories, which are regularly visceral and horrifying, and the recurrent racial imaginaries that are central to such stories, both imagined and real. This impact of violence and fear is also reflected and visually observable in the built environments of many South African urban centres that are increasingly marked by fortified enclaves, high walls with barbed wire, electric fences, security checkpoints, boom gates, and other security measures (Bremner 2004, Landman 2006, Lemanski 2006).

These issues are key to the ripeness of fear and fear of crime, which are powerful emotions that are felt both individually and collectively and shape relationships between social groups. Research on fear and fear of crime highlight how the experience and meaning of fear is intrinsically connected to the social environment in which it is evoked (Reguillo 2002). Fear is a social construction; it is society, with its encompassing social logics, structures, and practices, that constructs fear and notions surrounding fear, such as risk, death, and danger (Merry 1981, Douglas 2002). Fear of crime creates boundaries between 'us' and 'them', with risk, evil, and the dangerous 'Other' located outside the social group. Building upon the classical works of Becker (1963) and Douglas (2002), such a categorisation creates order, structure, and 'cleanliness' in an otherwise disordered, dirty environment. To consolidate cohesion and solidarity, an external threat is required (Hartnagel 1979). Although the concept of crime is vague and abstract, the 'criminal' is much easier to pinpoint. The criminal is thus the personification of crime, and as described by Steffen Jensen in his research on policing in South Africa, 'whether particular acts are categorized as criminal depends as much as on who has the power to define it as crime as on the act itself' (2007, p. 49).

In her powerful work on Brazil, Caldeira (2000) analyses the 'talk of crime' that leads certain 'others' to be labelled as dangerous and immoral, where 'symbolic criminalization' (p. 2) is a part of everyday practices and makes distinctions between individuals that belong and do not belong. Each society has its own 'systematic ordering and classification of matter' (Douglas 2002, p. 44) that rejects elements regarded as dirty. Throughout my research, citizens and private security personnel regularly described criminals as incompetent, untrustworthy, deceitful, and inhumane individuals who lack morality. In the lines of Douglas (2002), criminals are the 'dirt' that originate from marginal places and must remain outside the moral, clean spaces (Becker 1963, Hall *et al.* 1978, Caldeira 2000, Goldstein 2004). In South Africa, race continues to play a prominent role in this ordering process as a structural element in defining social interactions and categories (Posel 2001a, 2001b, MacDonald 2006, Seekings 2008).

During apartheid, the main state body responsible for implementing apartheid was the South African Police (SAP), the coercive arm of the state that enforced segregation policies and ordered South African society (Marks 2005). Although trespassing geographical borders was permitted for economic reasons, this movement was policed and non-Whites were checked for the possession of *dom passes*, which were passbooks that all non-Whites were given in order to control their movement under the numerous Pass Laws. The police thus determined whether particular individuals were permitted to be in particular areas. According to Shaw (2002), state policing had the fundamental aim of isolating Blacks (and the violence) in their designated areas – the townships – so that it would not spread to the areas designated for Whites. Non-Whites were primarily policed to control their movement to maintain white privilege and black areas were under-policed (Shaw 2002, p. 12). Furthermore, apartheid state policing created a powerful image of black South Africans as 'criminals and threats to the state' (Brewer *et al.* 1998, p. 270, quoted in Marks 2005, p. 49), depicted as political adversaries aimed at overthrowing the state.

The private security industry supported the apartheid state apparatus in preserving white privilege. When resistance against the apartheid regime intensified during the 1970s and 1980s, state

forces were increasingly called upon to deal with political unrest throughout the country. Supplementary manpower was needed on the ground and much of this was supplied from the private security industry (Grant 1989, Shaw 2002, Cock 2005). By taking over particular policing duties, such as the guarding of key sites, the private security sector became part of the apartheid machine (Grant 1989).<sup>7</sup> Private security firms provided support to the SAP, which in return, relied on the extensive surveillance activities maintained by the private sector (Brogden and Shearing 1993).

Many individuals also transferred from the armed forces into the private sector, resulting in a range of social ties and networks between both forces, referred to as the 'old boys' network'. As a result, most owners and managers of private security firms were white men, particularly in the armed response sector, where many ex-military and police officers set up 'one-man shows' to patrol white areas. These owners operated from their own private vehicles with their own firearms to serve a handful of clients whom often lived in close proximity of one another. The armed reaction sector was thus initially a completely white domain in terms of management, operations, and the receivers (i.e. clients). By 1993, private security companies 'assumed much of the day-to-day policing of the White suburbs' (Brogden and Shearing 1993, p. 73).

When apartheid dismantled, policing in South Africa underwent a metamorphosis. The new government intended to eliminate the oppressive nature and reputation of the former police, and policing in the 'new South Africa' was reconfigured upon the principles of democratic policing, accountability, equality, and respect for human rights (Shaw 2002, Marks 2005, Hornberger 2011). The result was a guiding mantra of community policing, the implementation of a new ranking structure, changing the name from the SAP into the South African Police Service, and numerous other reforms. Racially steered policing practices were intended to be a thing of the past, racial demarcations were withdrawn, and geographical borders no longer determined policing strategies.

It was also during the time of the political transition that the private security industry experienced its largest economic boom. As influx controls broke down in the late 1980s and crime started entering the white suburbs, many Whites became fearful for their future; from their point of view, a change in government entailed a loss of economic privilege, a decline in political power, and a reduction in social status. Many feared the consequences of the 1994 national elections and demanded immediate protection that private security companies readily provided (Shaw 2002).

### **'Carrying the Indian torch'**

Primarily through the old boys' network, employment of private security has been racialised in South Africa, with Whites primarily occupying ownership and management positions of firms and non-Whites executing most of the groundwork of security. The post-apartheid government actively aimed to address the racial imbalances of the private security industry, but despite the changes of the past two decades, Whites continue to occupy the majority of the higher positions and security officers are still predominantly non-white (Abrahamsen and Williams 2007, Singh and Kempa 2007). As a former employee of the industry, now working for a non-profit organisation, once said to me was:

Private security is still a white man's world. Black people are coming in, but Whites are still running the show (...)  
And all the ones doing the dirty work, they're not white.<sup>8</sup>

Another white company owner described the hierarchy in the industry with a simple phrase: 'Whites on top and Blacks at the bottom'.<sup>9</sup> This racial hierarchy was very evident throughout my fieldwork and played a huge role in dividing management from operations (Diphoorn 2015a). Additionally, issues of racial solidarity and racial preferences are also commonplace.

On a sunny afternoon in May 2010, a ward councillor from a former Indian township took me for a drive to show me around the neighbourhood, an area that prided itself on being 'very Indian'. When we started talking about crime and policing, he described the changes that had occurred throughout



the decades: the checking of Blacks for their permits during apartheid and the then free movement of Blacks. He described how the movement of Blacks into the area coincided with a drastic increase in crime, and that many residents – predominantly Indian – made a direct association between the two: ‘many people see that when Blacks started coming into the area, so did the crime. So in their minds, there is a link, and for many: all Blacks are criminals’. He then explained how ‘the style of policing under apartheid is coming back’, in which black males are questioned by the police and private security officers. According to him, the few Indian-owned companies operating in that area were ‘carrying the Indian torch, protecting the Indians from the Blacks coming in all around us’.

Besides explicating how many residents identify crime with Blacks and discussing the re-emergence of exclusionary policing methods, this ward councillor also noted how this predominantly Indian community preferred to work with Indian companies because they were ‘carrying the Indian torch’. This highlights a certain racial solidarity between community members and policing agents. Hansen (2006) makes a similar observation in his case study on Chatsworth, another former Indian township in Durban, where the presence of the Indian police provided a sense of racial solidarity during apartheid. The Indian armed response officers whom I encountered during my research, particularly those working in this community, took pride in their work and similar to Hansen’s study, regarded themselves as ‘local warriors defending the community against attack, literally defending what they see as the border between the Indian and the African world’ (2006, p. 290).

This former Indian township was not exceptional: in South Africa, several geographical and/or socially defined areas – particularly racially homogenous ones – are known for having particular ‘racial’ preferences with regard to policing actors. Clients frequently (openly) demand that a company employs armed response officers from a particular race, and several companies match this demand and have racially steered recruitment policies. In August 2010, I spoke to the white owner of a company working in Johannesburg who only recruits white armed response officers. He explained how the community ‘wouldn’t tolerate a non-white to enter their house and protect their streets’. This resonates with Löfstrand’s (2015) work on ‘ethnic matching’ in Sweden. Although contextually different, she highlights the purposeful strategy of a private security firm to deploy particular officers to a particular place or incident as a means of ‘performing “likeness”’ (p. 165). Löfstrand argues that this strategy of ethnic matching is a form of ‘legitimation work’ (Thumala *et al.* 2011, in Löfstrand 2015, p. 150) in order to improve the reputation of the company in the eyes of the public.

Armed response officers also highlighted how particular geographical areas and clients demand armed response officers from a particular race. During a day shift in February 2009, I was talking to Anthony, a white armed response officer who had previously been stationed in an area with a majority of Muslim inhabitants. Anthony mentioned how he had been hugely popular in the area and how numerous clients had complained when he was transferred to another area. When I inquired about the source of his popularity, he first emphasised that he was simply a ‘good’ armed response officer who did his work exceptionally well, before casually adding, ‘and well, because I’m white’. When I probed further, he simply shrugged, looked at me like I was asking something stupid, and said: ‘Well, people trust me. They know I’m not corrupt. They know I’m honest and legal. They don’t think that of the other guys.’<sup>10</sup>

In his excellent research on the SAPS, Jonny Steinberg (2008) discusses this held idea that Whites are less corrupt – a ‘White is right’ mentality. He gives the example of a police officer who said to him: ‘There is a perception that it is better to deal with a white policeman than a Black one [...] The white one will not be corrupt; he is just a professional’ (p. 112). A black company owner whom I encountered during my research echoed this claim:

When it comes to policing, I would trust a white guy over a black guy, any day. Not with everything, but with security, you just know a white guy’s gonna do the job, and with Blacks, many questions can be asked.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, racial constructions of criminals not only portray the black male as the ‘dangerous other’, but also depict the white male as the incorruptible, professional policing agent. In South Africa, dichotomies of dangerous versus safe and corrupt versus honest are shaped by racial categories, and when



particular policing practices are enacted within these groupings, such understandings are consolidated.

### The 'Bravo Mike Syndrome'

Several studies (Cashmore 2001, Loftus 2007, Amar 2010, Çankaya 2015) have shown that despite the focus on diversity campaigns within the police, policing practices continue to affirm racial and ethnic distinctions. Although racial profiling has primarily been associated with the state police, growing work on private security is showing that racial profiling is also inherent to this industry (Kempa and Singh 2008, Samara 2010, Clarno and Murray 2013, Paasche *et al.* 2014, Søgaaard 2014).

During my fieldwork, I habitually witnessed the identification and apprehension of 'suspicious individuals' by armed response officers who were defined as 'Bravo Mikes' (i.e. black men) and who armed response officers were always on the lookout for. When I asked my informants how they identified suspicious individuals, they described various activities (such as a person driving erratically), but they primarily emphasised the importance of looking at *who* is conducting this activity. They highlighted the significance of context and I refer to this as 'class matching'. For example, if an apparently poor person were seen walking in an affluent area, it would be regarded as suspicious, yet if the same person were spotted in a township there would be no reason to be wary of them. Although I did not accompany armed response officers during their patrols in black townships, armed response officers state that this was how they identified suspicious individuals everywhere. Detecting suspicious individuals is thus about identifying contradictions between their appearance and manner with the context; in other words, referring back to the work of Douglas (2002), it is about identifying the 'matter out of place'. Similar to Sacks's (1972) work on the appearance of the police and identifying individuals with a 'probability of criminality' (p. 281), armed response officers must identify the 'normal members of an ecological area' (p. 286) and those that are not 'normal', which is followed by an interrogation 'as to the reason of their presence' (p. 287). Yet, in contrast to what Sacks describes with the state police, armed response officers are not thoroughly trained in identifying 'suspicious' behaviour or individuals. Furthermore, although they can exercise a small degree of judgement, they are primarily steered by leads and calls from clients and citizens to inform them on where the 'suspicious' individuals are. As a profit-making industry that operates with a mentality that the 'client is always right', clients have a great deal of purchasing power and thereby determine a lot of what armed response officers do (Diphoorn 2015a). Citizens often instigate the identification of suspicious persons and play a crucial role in constructing the 'suspicious' individuals for armed response officers and determining who they approach to question and interrogate, and eventually, 'evict' from the area.

What is also clear from my conversation with Nick is the fundamental role that race plays in defining 'matter out of place' in South Africa. During my time on duty, clients and armed response officers used a range of descriptions that cut across racial lines, yet the terms 'white female' and 'white male' were conspicuous by their absence. In many parts of the world, studies have shown that certain ethnic minorities are more likely to be labelled as suspicious, and thus stopped and searched than others, with stops and searches being the focal point of racial profiling studies (Hall *et al.* 1978, Weitzer and Tuch 2002, Rowe 2004, Bowling and Phillips 2007, Weber and Bowling 2011). A common explanation for this is that certain ethnic communities are more likely to live in areas with higher crime rates and are thus statistically more likely to be engaged in criminal activity. However, my research does not focus on men who are suspected, stopped, and searched in their own areas of residence, but on those who are regarded as suspicious outside their own neighbourhoods. I am concerned with the areas where they are not 'supposed to be', where they are 'matter out of place', and I argue that race largely defines this in South Africa. As an armed response officer once said to me: 'I know that not all Blacks are criminals, but all criminals are Blacks. So they're the ones I look out for.'<sup>12</sup> This quote is not a criminalised depiction of black people, but it is a racialised

description of criminals: the criminal is defined as the young, black male, which is also outlined by Hansen's work in Durban (2006, p. 284):

The enemy of the post-Apartheid society is conceptualized as the ordinary, under-educated and impatient young man of colour, emerging from an anomic and morally distorted township culture, armed with lethal weapons and imagined to be aligned with crime syndicates.

Although currently not supported by legislation, numerous incidents and encounters that I observed during my fieldwork indicate that black males are, once again – or continue to be – the core targets of policing, especially when found in places 'where they are not supposed to be'. In February 2009, I was talking to Johnny, a white armed response officer who had been working in the industry for over 20 years, about suspicious individuals and he said to me:

Back in the 80s and 90s, being a good security officer meant checking the Blacks – questioning them about what they're doing, making sure they've got their papers ... And then, with the new government, all of that changed, we were now told we couldn't do that anymore (...) But now, with crime being so high and people in South Africa, we're fed up, we've had enough. So we're going back again, because now I am questioning Blacks again and clients are phoning in about these suspicious black men ... I sometimes wonder what it all changed for? Or did it ever change?<sup>13</sup>

This statement from Johnny was similarly voiced by other armed response officers, who discussed a change in policing practices over the last few years, a change that referred to policing practices that indicated a return to Apartheid-style ways. I therefore argue that armed response officers engage in racial profiling, implying that they target individuals and identify them as suspicious based on their appearance, and more particularly, on their skin colour.

In looking to understand the 'Bravo Mike Syndrome', one explanation centres on racist attitudes and perceptions among armed response officers. Racist remarks, jokes, and comments were common among all of the companies I researched. When racist comments were made to colleagues, they were jokey, whereas when directed at suspects, they tended to be more serious. I clearly recall a day shift with Michael, an Indian armed response officer, in May 2010, during which he pointed to a group of black children standing outside a school and said 'What a waste of money of even educating them. It's a tragedy. They're just going to grow up to hijack or kill innocent people.'<sup>14</sup> Similarly, one afternoon in February 2009, Gayle, another Indian armed response officer, and I were talking about apartheid. The conversation started with him condemning it, but he then proceeded to say: 'But eventually, you can't mix a bunch of barbarians and criminals with civilized people. It's like putting lions loose with cats. It just doesn't go.'<sup>15</sup> Many other armed response officers made similar comments that expressed a certain disdain towards Blacks, describing them as 'barbaric' and 'criminal'. For many armed response officers, encountering crime on a daily basis for years and seeing Blacks as forming the majority of suspects has shaped many of these racialised perceptions. Gayle was astute about this:

You see, when I was in CIT [cash-in-transit]<sup>16</sup>, I saw a lot of fucked up shit. I stopped it, because I was becoming a racist. I started to think that every black man was going to shoot me. But you know, black men do kill more. They don't give a shit – they will pull the fucking trigger and end your life. Without a doubt. You see, we might have trouble sleeping at night, but these guys ... they just fucking do it. Just like that. And the next day they'll do it again.<sup>17</sup>

Besides the racism embedded in such statements, comments such as 'Blacks do kill more' show how Blacks are characterised in the same way as criminals are. In my research, armed response officers and citizens often described criminals as deceitful, inhumane, and bloodthirsty individuals who lacked morality and were guided by hate and a 'desire for revenge': they were 'animals', 'hungry beasts', 'soulless killers', and 'individuals who need to be punished'. The newsletters of community organisations aimed at combatting crime also highlight these viewpoints, with criminals portrayed as 'the scum'<sup>18</sup>, yet also as clever and deceitful individuals who 'do not hesitate to shoot to kill of need be'.<sup>19</sup> Although these descriptions are not necessarily racialised, they are never directed towards Whites and contain implicit racial categorisations. As was depicted during my first encounter

with the usage of 'Bravo Mike' in the introduction, there is an unspoken understanding that suspects are 'Bravo Mikes'.

Such depictions steer how armed response officers treat black citizens. One armed response officer explained to me that providing assistance to non-clients (citizens) depended on whether 'they looked like they needed help', indicating an assumption that suspicious individuals do not need help, as they are most probably the source of the problem.<sup>20</sup> Many armed response officers voiced similar statements and I frequently witnessed how black citizens were disregarded or refused assistance, because they were seen to be a part of the problem. For example, in May 2010, one Indian armed response officer refused to assist a black citizen for help, because 'He's probably a criminal himself anyways'. When I inquired further, it became evident that he was referring to his race: 'If he would have been Indian or white, I would have helped. But this Blackie? Hell no!'

Company owners and managers often voiced similar opinions. One Indian owner explained how his company had a strict policy of offering assistance to anyone in need, yet when I asked whether this also applied to the neighbouring black townships, he bluntly said 'no'. He initially cited safety reasons, but a while later he said: 'We wouldn't be welcome there, even if somebody called us ... It's not safe, but they also deal with things differently, and chances are, that they're involved in crime themselves, so who are we protecting?'<sup>21</sup>

This process is even more evident when intra-racial interactions occur, with black clients who form a minority of the total clients of private security services (Kempa and Singh 2008, p. 346). In my research, black clients held similar views of criminals outlined above, yet their understanding differs through an incorporation of poverty and class as defining factors, which differentiates the client from the criminal. The criminals are those who have not 'made it out of the townships' and improved their economic standing since the political transformation. Here the notion of 'economic outsiders' (Kempa and Singh 2008, p. 345) is significant; the criminals are the 'Other' due to their economic position; they are judged by 'the moral measure of success in capitalist markets' (Kempa and Singh 2008, p. 347). This highlights the link between racist security policies and broader political economies.

This supports Posel's argument that race was and continues to be defined by social standing, that is, class (2001a, 2001b). Generally speaking, black clients of private security in former white areas are not categorised as 'Bravo Mikes'. Although they may not be considered full and worthy members of the 'us', they are also not identified as the dangerous and dirty 'Other'. Rather, the 'dirt' refers to individuals who reside in certain 'marginal spaces' that are seen as dangerous, chaotic, and the source of disorder (Hall *et al.* 1978, Caldeira 2000, Douglas 2002, Goldstein 2004). This not only highlights the importance of space, but also of class, which resonates with Loftus's (2007) insightful research on how issues of class influence policing practices. However, in my research, class always seemed to be subjugated by race. For example, armed response officers may look down upon poor white South Africans, yet they are not framed as 'suspicious individuals'. This does not entail that poor Whites are not searched or questioned by private security officers in South Africa; yet I did not encounter this once during my fieldwork. As Nick stated, 'a suspicious Whiskey Mike doesn't exist', and I argue that this is despite the social standing of that Whiskey Mike. Issues of race and class are therefore unquestionably intertwined, particularly in identifying the suspicious individual, yet it seems that racial features trumped those related to class.

## Being the Bravo Mike

This issue of class becomes particularly interesting when we see that the majority of armed response officers are not white and reside in lower socio-economic areas. In 2009, the racial composition of the armed reaction officers of one armed response company that I worked with was 51% Indian, 33% black, 8.3% coloured, and 7.7% white. Most members of the industry regarded this as racially diverse; the majority of companies have armed response personnel that are 90–95% black or Indian. Thus, in contrast to some of the work on ethnic minority police officers (Cashmore 2001,

Çankaya 2015), non-white armed response officers are not a 'minority', but are the majority of the individuals engaged in daily security performances. Yet despite this, the armed response sector is regarded as the most racially diverse sector with regard to on-the-ground staff; one is more likely to encounter a white armed reaction officer than a white security guard.

This is primarily due to the history of the armed response sector, as discussed earlier. During the massive boom of the sector in the early 1990s, around the time of the political transition, the 'one-man shows' disappeared and the armed response officers started to resemble other security officers. As armed response companies grew and were forced to employ more officers, more non-Whites were recruited. One white owner explains how and why it is currently difficult to find 'good white guys':

It's very difficult to find good white guys now. Before, they were coming from the police, they were all white, but as armed reaction grew and the guys started earning less, this wasn't happening (...) So around then, you saw Blacks and Indians coming in, particularly black. It was a problem, big problem at first, with clients, they didn't want it, but it happened, because we didn't have a choice – it was difficult to find a good white reaction guy. And it still is. They're an absolute minority. It's turned around.<sup>22</sup>

The entrance of non-Whites into this occupation was initially problematic, as clients regarded them as untrustworthy and this viewpoint has not completely transformed.

Across the globe, private security officers are regularly mistrusted and ridiculed. Being a security officer is not a highly paid profession and it is therefore not an occupation reserved for the highly educated (Rigakos 2002, Wakefield 2003, Button 2007). In fact, the occupation's reputation is 'depicted as unappealing and so marginally paid that it fails to attract the cleverest workers' (van Steden 2007, p. 94). In South Africa, private security officers generally reside in the lower socio-economic areas. They are therefore seen to derive from the same marginal spaces as the criminals, with the same potential to 'pollute'. I repeatedly heard South Africans describe security officers as 'criminals in uniform'. Throughout my fieldwork, when crime occurred, security officers were habitually the first to be blamed, regarded to be the masterminds behind the 'inside-job'.

In South Africa, this association is not entirely unfounded as private security officers, of all rank and type, are regularly convicted of engagement in criminal activity, both on and off duty. Several of my informants told me about their criminal backgrounds or current engagement in criminal activity during my research. It is for this reason that PSIRA conducts a criminal record check for each prospective employee. In 2010–2011, PSIRA refused almost 12,000 applications from individuals who were guilty of a 'disqualifiable criminal offence' (p. 31). Despite PSIRA's evaluation and additional police checks conducted by the companies, there are some security officers with a criminal past who are able to enter the industry undetected and commit certain crimes after registration. Between 2010 and 2011, 168 registrations were withdrawn due to the individual concerned being convicted of a criminal offence after registration. If we compare this to the 12,000 dismissals prior to registration, we can conclude that dismissal for criminal activity after registration is uncommon.

Many armed response officers know that they are suspected; they know they are mistrusted and that clients make associations between them and criminals. Sipho, a black armed response officer, expressed this view clearly:

You see, many clients are very suspicious. They don't say that directly, but you can feel it, they way they look at you. It's so sad, really so sad. One time, I had a call out ... when I got to the premises, the suspect had just climbed over the fence and left. The client was screaming at me: 'Chase him, shoot him, there goes your brother, shoot your brother!' He was calling the suspect my brother, like I know him or something, just because we're both black. And it hurts to hear this, you know. It made me angry, so so angry ... But also just very, very sad.<sup>23</sup>

For many armed response officers, the 'Bravo Mike Syndrome' is an emotional and conflict-ridden process, as Sipho further elaborated:

It's a very big problem. Many times, the males are just walking down the street and then I have to ask them what they are doing. It feels very uncomfortable, I feel guilty, because it's none of my business to ask them what they are doing. And I would hate somebody to ask me that ... But it's my job. It makes me very sad, but I have to do it, I just have to.<sup>24</sup>

Many armed response officers define the 'Bravo Mike Syndrome' as 'white paranoia' and sympathise with the black men whom they are obliged to observe and question. On a day shift in November 2008, Gayle and I conducted a 'Bravo Mike' check at the behest of a white client who had just moved to a new neighbourhood, only to discover that the suspicious black male in question had in fact been working as a gardener in the area for the last 10 years. Afterwards, Gayle expressed his frustration:

So this new guy just doesn't know his neighbors, he doesn't take the time to think and actually know what's going on his area, so we must do it. I must ask a poor black man, who has been working here for 10 years, why he is walking on the street, all because of some lazy fuck [the client]? Their laziness, their stupidity, their ignorance ... and so the black guy must be a criminal? And I must question him?<sup>25</sup>

Gayle's expression of it being 'fucked up' both contrasts and resembles what Loftus (2007) identified in her work on the police in the UK. In her case study, she shows that despite the ethnic similarities between the policed and the police officers – both being white males – many officers 'were not sympathetic to this subject group and treated them with active disdain' (p. 190). Based on (perceived) class differences, police officers purposely distanced themselves and exacerbated the moral boundaries between themselves and the 'scrotes' that they policed. In Durban, despite the racial similarities between armed response officers and suspicious individuals, armed response officers also distanced themselves from the 'animals' that they policed. Yet, as is highlighted by both Siphos and Gayle, questioning and searching suspicious individuals is not a straightforward and emotion-free experience. This not only underlines the (emotional) difficulties in this process of social distancing, but also shows that the socially constructed borders on which they differentiate themselves are not fixed.

This also points towards an obvious element of friction in performing the 'Bravo Mike Syndrome': both the person you fear and the person you are paying to protect you from that socially constructed fear are 'Bravo Mikes'. Armed response officers are ascribed the role of 'gate-keepers', yet are simultaneously questioned about their ability and 'purity' to possess and perform that role. As Kapuściński states, 'The Other can be both of these, and that is the basis of his changeable, elusive nature, his contradictor behaviour, whose motives he himself is sometimes incapable of understanding' (2008, p. 21). The suspicion addressed towards armed response officers therefore concerns a questioning of their power and authority to react to 'moral transgressions perceived to threaten the community' (Jensen 2007, p. 49). There is an ongoing negotiation about whether they belong to the moral community. Similar to what Çankaya (2015) has identified with ethnic minority police officers in the Netherlands, armed response officers simultaneously act as 'insiders and outsiders at the same time' (p. 396) to a particular moral order.<sup>26</sup>

In this regard, armed response officers function as both anomalous and ambiguous persons; as anomalous for not fitting neatly within a given category; ambiguous for being able to fit in two different categories (i.e. the protector and the potential criminal) at the same time (Douglas 2002, p. 47). It is therefore unclear where to place them; their 'status is indefinable' (Douglas 2002, p. 118). Policing is essentially about creating 'a separation between the "good" community and the evil outsiders' (Jensen 2007, p. 65), and armed response officers are recruited to police this boundary. Yet members of the public, particularly clients, continuously call this into question. This further indicates how racial categories are not rigid and static constructions, but are constantly created and recreated.

## Concluding remarks

In this article, I have portrayed how particular racial facets shape the occupational culture of the private security industry. In addition to an existing racial hierarchy and racial preferences, I particularly focused on the exclusionary policing practices – the 'Bravo Mike Syndrome' – that is directed against the dangerous, violent criminal; the poor 'Bravo Mike'. Armed response officers are ascribed the role of protecting the (imagined) boundaries between insiders and outsiders, yet this is innately problematic and contradictory, as the locus of armed response officers along these borders is uncertain

and in flux. This further highlights the problematic process of creating such boundaries, that is, the difficulties in defining rigid notions of insiders and outsiders.

Given this, racial profiling is not simply about institutionalised racism or ‘rotten apples’ in the private security industry, but it also concerns the prevalence of race in constructing and reproducing certain social realities. As policing cultures often reflect particular social structures and norms (Hall *et al.* 1978, Reiner 2004, Rowe 2004), we can only fully grasp racially steered policing practices by analysing larger societal racist imaginaries and understandings. However, we also need to recognise that policing agencies, whether state or private, do not merely react to certain moral panics and social fears, but they are a part of the process in which these issues are consolidated. Particular policing practices consolidate racial stereotypes, and through their enactment, they strengthen exclusionary practices and perceptions. As stated by Kempa and Singh: ‘disciplinary and exclusionary policing practices such as those engaged by many streams of the private security industry (in South Africa and probably elsewhere) freeze essentialist conceptions of “race”’ (2008, p. 336). Although these roots originate from the apartheid past, they are continuously reified and given new meaning in contemporary South Africa.

It has also not been my aim to argue that everything is about race in South Africa, or even in the domain of South African policing. As mentioned, numerous other factors, such as gender, violence, and hierarchy, are also crucial in shaping the occupational culture of the armed response sector. Yet in this article I wanted to flesh out how one particular factor, namely race, affects the daily policing practices of armed response officers. And the reality is that despite the end of formal segregation in South Africa, racial imaginaries and profiling continue almost unabated. And in a country with such an enormous private security industry, it is increasingly the role of private security officers to police these social boundaries.

Additionally, although South Africa may be unique due to its notoriously racist past, I am certain that similar processes can be found elsewhere, in which we see private security personnel policing ethnic and racial borders and reproducing social divisions and inequalities. This calls for further (ethnographic) research about racial profiling in the private security industry, how race influences occupational cultures of private security, and how particular occupational cultures may encourage and reproduce particular racist policing practices.

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## Notes

1. This name and all of the others used in this article are pseudonyms in order to uphold the anonymity of my interlocutors.
2. The control room is the hub of each armed response company, where signals and calls from clients are received and then diverted to armed response officers.
3. I retrieved all of Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA)’s annual reports from the website: [www.psir.co.za](http://www.psir.co.za).
4. This figure consists of 487,058 active security officers and 1,381,340 inactive security officers. Active means that they are currently employed and working as a security officer, while inactive means that they are registered with the authority, but currently not working in the industry.
5. Township refers to the areas designated for non-Whites during the apartheid era. They currently refer to lower socio-economic areas.



6. See Posel (2001a, 2001b) for an historical account of the development of these racial categories.
7. The main legislation that facilitated the process of privatisation was the establishment of the National Key Points Act (NKPAs) 102 of 1980, which implied that the security provision (predominantly guarding) of particular strategic sites deemed crucial for national security would be taken over by the management/owners of these sites.
8. Interview: 10 September 2008.
9. Interview: 1 September 2010.
10. Interview: 17 February 2009.
11. Interview: 26 August 2010.
12. Interview: 26 November 2008.
13. Interview: 10 February 2009.
14. Interview: 15 May 2010.
15. Interview: 18 February 2009.
16. This refers to another sector in the private security industry that specialises in the transport of cash and goods.
17. Interview: 28 May 2010.
18. Newsletter distributed on 4 August 2011.
19. Newsletter distributed on 19 April 2009.
20. Interview: 25 November 2008.
21. Interview: 25 May 2010.
22. Interview: 18 September 2008.
23. Interview: 4 December 2008.
24. Interview: 4 December 2008.
25. Interview: 28 November 2008.
26. However, it is also important to note that Çankaya's (2015) research is contextualised within diversity policies of purposely recruiting ethnic minorities within the state police force. Within this context, ethnic minority police officers are 'institutionally valuable for police work *because* of the association of their physical bodies with the dirty and immoral criminal Other's body' (Çankaya 2015, p. 396, emphasis added). This contrasts with Indian and black armed response officers in South Africa, who are not minorities and are not recruited for this potentially valuable asset.

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