

Mechanisms of Institutional Discrimination: A Case Study of the Belgian Police

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Abstract

Diversity in the Belgian police force is limited. In addition, complaints about discriminatory behavior repeatedly emerge. In response, police forces take initiatives to match the composition of their forces with that of the society. However, the results of these diversity policies are modest. This research therefore asks how the lack of diversity and the prevalence of discriminatory behavior can be explained.

Following Reskin (2003), we contend that institutional mechanisms moderate the relation between our psychological biases and the actual behavior. Our study will focus on four mechanisms of institutional discrimination; administrative barriers (Moynihan, Herd, & Harvey, 2015), formalization and accountability (Mutsaers, 2015), and job socialization (Bennett & Greenstein, 1975).

We will present our research design involving a cohort study of recruits of the police force. Using a qualitative mixed methods design, we will follow these recruits during their selection, training and first year on the job.

Introduction

Diversity in the Belgian police force is limited. In the city of Antwerp, 49,2% of the labor force has an immigrant background. When we look at the officers in police force of Antwerp, this percentage is estimated to be 7%. This skewed distribution puts pressure on the ideal of being a representative bureaucracy, where the composition of the workforce must be a reflection of the composition of the society (Krislov, 1974). In addition, complaints about discriminatory behavior of Belgian police officers repeatedly emerge.

In response, the police forces in Belgium take initiatives to match the composition of their forces with that of the society. Recruitment procedures are altered to attract a more diverse group, police officers are trained on the topic of diversity and campaigns are designed to improve the image of the police officers. However, the results of these diversity policies are modest or unclear. This research therefore asks how the lack of diversity and the prevalence of discriminatory behavior can be explained.

Following Reskin (2003), we contend that institutional mechanisms moderate - reinforce or mitigate - the relation between our psychological biases and our actual behavior. We will focus on four mechanisms of institutional discrimination; administrative barriers (Moynihan et al., 2015), formalization and accountability (Mutsaers, 2015), and job socialization (Bennett & Greenstein, 1975).

These four mechanisms are expected to influence the likelihood of discriminatory behavior of officers towards citizens, and of discriminatory behavior of the police organization towards candidates, students and/or new officers. We are thus focusing on both *internal* institutional discrimination towards (prospective) employees, and *external* institutional discrimination towards citizens.

In what follows, we will first present a theoretical framework on discrimination, followed by our own causal model of institutional discrimination. We then discuss our research case: the Belgian police force.

Theoretical framework

Origins of discrimination: why do stereotypes exist and survive?

According to the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) our social identity is composed of a personal identity and multiple social identities that are based on the groups we belong to. This social identity is formed through social categorization, a basic tendency of the human mind to group self and other into categories in order to make the complex world more intelligible (Allport, 1954). The traits that are linked to these social categories, and that we see as characteristic of these social categories, are stereotypes. Stereotypes particularly consists of the traits that differentiate categories from each other (Macrae, Stangor, & Hewstone, 1996).

While categorizing, we have a strong desire to maximize the differences between categories. At the same time, individuals within the same category are seen as maximally similar. This is called the out-group homogeneity effect. Because of these two tendencies, social categorization creates biases, and, in- and out-groups are constructed (Quattrone & Jones, 1980).

Stereotypes have been proved to be persistent. This is because of three reasons. First of all, we use wrong explanations for the causes of people their behaviour. When a situation re-affirms the stereotype, the characteristics of the out-groups will be used as the explanation for the behaviour that occurred. Second, when a situation contradicts the stereotype, we will use situational factors as the explanation for the behaviour, or we toss the mismatch into a special subtype (e.g. working women) and keep the existing stereotypes untouched (e.g. women).

A third reason for the survival of stereotypes is the self-fulfilling prophecy. This means that a stereotype can cause group-members to behave in stereotype-confirming ways (Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2011). In the context of policing Harcourt (2008) states that actuarial tools, like racial profiling, create a ratchet effect, in the sense that when police use race as a risk category in their stops and searches, it will expose disproportionately more of the minority offending population compared to the majority offending population, which in turn will make the incarceration rate of the minority group disproportionately large compared to its offending rate. These incarceration statistics are used in turn to legitimize these tools, like

racial profiling. Tyler (1990) states that people only tend to obey the law if they consider it legitimate. From this perspective, racial profiling lowers the elasticity of the profiled group: they will no longer respond to police authority. If we accept these theories on police legitimacy and procedural fairness, we must conclude that using stereotypes to assess the risk-profile of a group, causes that group to act in a stereotype-confirming way.

Discrimination

Discrimination can be defined as the differential treatment of certain groups, based on the stereotypes that are linked to these groups. Stereotypes form the basis on which people discriminate, but are not the reason why people discriminate. Discrimination is a *behaviour*, stereotypes are *beliefs* (Allport, 1954).

According to Pincus (1996), there are three levels of discrimination: individual, institutional and structural discrimination. Individual discrimination refers to the behaviour of individual members of a group and is intended to have a harmful effect on the members of another group. Institutional discrimination refers to the policies of the dominant institutions and the behaviour of individuals who control these institutions and implement policies that are intended to have a harmful effect on minority groups. Finally, structural discrimination refers to policies of the dominant institutions and the behaviour of the individuals who implement these policies and control these institutions, which are neutral in intent, but which have a harmful effect on minority groups.

	Intention	Level of behaviour	Effects
Individual discrimination	To harm	Individual	Negative
Institutional discrimination	To harm	Institutional	Negative
Structural discrimination	Not to harm	Institutional	Negative

Table 1: conceptualization according to Pincus (1996)

In what follows, we use the levels of behavior (stated above) as a guideline for the levels of discrimination. This means that we see individual discrimination as individual behavior, and we see institutional and structural discrimination as institutional behavior.

Institutional discrimination

As Pincus (1996) already pointed out, discrimination differs in intention and level of behaviour. His typology is comparable with that of Feagin & Feagin (1986). Instead of the level of behaviour, Feagin and Feagin use embeddedness in the larger organization as guideline.

	Intention	Embeddedness	Effects
Social isolate actions & small group discrimination	To harm	Low – moderate	Negative
Direct institutional discrimination	To harm	high	Negative
Indirect institutional discrimination	Not to harm	High	Negative

Table 2: conceptualization according to Feagin & Feagin (1986)

Institutional discrimination thus varies between direct institutional discrimination, and indirect institutional discrimination. Direct institutional discrimination exists of organizationally (or community) prescribed actions that by *intention* have a differential and negative impact on members of a group. This sort of institutional discrimination is less visible, because is it forbidden by law. The indirect type of institutional discrimination, consists of organizationally (or community) prescribed practices that are *not motivated by prejudice*. These involves neutral practices whose negative effects derive from prior intentional discriminatory practices, or practices in one institutional area that have an adverse impact in another institutional area (Feagin & Feagin, 1986).

Mechanisms that influence the levels of discrimination

When discussing discrimination, we inevitable talk about attitudes, beliefs or motivations. Generally, the attitudes and beliefs of individuals inside an organization are mediating the organizational throughputs (Gelfand, Nishii, Raver, & Schneider, 2005). Since these individual and behavioural variables are hard to measure and to observe, this is problematic and the causal link is broken.

Therefore Reskin (2003) proposed to look at inequality as being produced by mechanisms. In her model, organizational-level mechanisms influence the levels of discrimination, by the extent to which they mediate the effects of intrapsychic or interpersonal mechanisms.

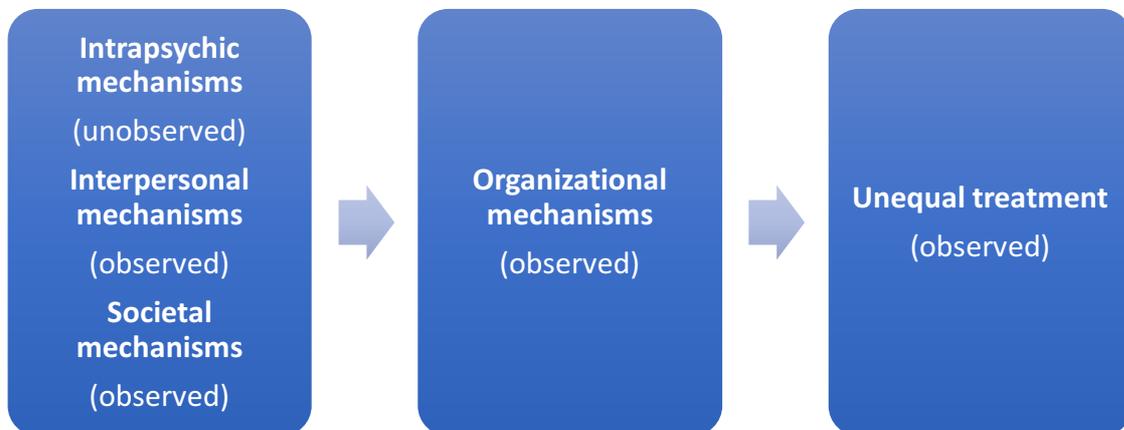


Figure 1: mechanisms that produce unequal treatment according to Reskin (2003)

Intrapsychic mechanisms refer to internal psychological or mental processes of the individual. They are hard to observe, but some of them are ‘proven’ to be automatic cognitive errors (e.g. social cognition theory, see chapter ‘origins of discrimination’). Interpersonal mechanisms refer to the mental state of a person, that influences the behavior towards another, based on the others characteristics. An example of the interpersonal mechanisms is the mechanism of homophily, that shape preferences for similar others. Societal mechanisms refer to external social and economic factors that shape the circumstances people live in.

According to Reskin (2003), there are two main organizational mechanisms that mediate the intrapsychic, interpersonal and societal mechanisms, and thus the unequal treatment: formalization and accountability. Formalization refers to bureaucratized practices such as formal rules, paperwork, processes. The more formalization, the less freedom (discretion) managers have to act based on their own stereotypes, biases, or impulses (Mutsaers, 2015). Formalization, as an institutional mechanism, thus mediates the effects of intrapsychic, interpersonal and societal mechanisms on the existence of unequal treatment.

Accountability refers to the extent to which employers anticipate having to communicate their decisions, or anticipate having to defend their decisions. When the extent to which employers are held accountable for their decisions and behavior is high, the chances of

discrimination are reduced (Tetlock, 1983). As formalization, accountability mediates the effects of intrapsychic, interpersonal and societal mechanisms on unequal treatment.

Building our research model

In our model, we do not include the intrapsychic mechanisms for two reasons. First of all, these mechanisms cannot be measured in a trustworthy way if we don't use experimental research methods, and thus cannot serve as independent variables, as the variation of them is unobservable with our preferred research method. Second, plentiful and profound experimental research, ethnographical studies and case studies already point out that people rely on stereotypes in habitual and unconscious ways (Allport, 1954). Stereotypical thinking cannot be minimized, and thus is considered to be stable and universal (Bielby, 2000). We will follow this reasoning and assume intrapsychic mechanisms to be stable.

What can be observed, are the interpersonal and societal mechanisms. The theories of homophily, homosocial reproduction and sociocultural similarity tell us that we favor similar others (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). The similarity of others, depends on who 'you' are of course. It will be interesting to see whether age, gender, ethnicity et cetera of leaders, colleagues, front-office civil servants can give us background information on institutional discrimination towards employees or citizens. The same goes for economic environment, culture, or sector labor pools.

Institutional mechanisms

When we look at the institutional mechanisms, we can identify four mechanisms. The first institutional mechanism is the mechanism of *formalization*. According to Pager & Shepherd (2008) and Reskin (2003), bureaucratization or formalization is the way in which processes are formalized. When we formalize procedures and when we create rules, we limit the individual discretion of civil servants. This means that when civil servants face little formalization, and thus are free to judge and take decisions, they can treat citizens unequally. Formalization can thus mitigate the likelihood of institutional discrimination. Mutsaers (2015) concluded the same. After several months of ethnographic research within the Dutch Police forces, he concluded that de-bureaucratization made them very susceptible to discrimination against ethnic minorities and arbitrariness in police actions.

A second mechanism that tempers for unequal treatment is the mechanism of *accountability*. With accountability, we mean the extent to which employers or managers are held accountable for their decisions (Tetlock, 1983). When employers or managers anticipate on having to communicate or defend their decisions to their superiors, the changes of discrimination are reduced (Reskin, 2003). Leaders or managers of institutions in their turn, can be held accountable in for instance a diversity program. When the top management of an institution feels the need to work on a diverse workplace, or anti-discrimination policies, the disparate impact of policies or practices will also be minimized.

A third institutional mechanism, is the mechanism of *socialization*. Bennett and Greenstein (1975) did an experiment with young police officers. They measured their preferences and prejudice after the training, and then again after one year on the job. The conclusion was that socialization on the job, changed the preferences and prejudice of young police officers. Van Maanen and Schein (1978) built a model for organizational socialization, which is defined as the process “in which teaching or learning occurs”. Organizational socialization is about learning an organizational role, the desired behaviour and perspectives. According to the authors, there various ways in which organizational socialization takes place: formal or informal, random or controlled, serial or disjunctive, et cetera. These all have an influence on what kind of role is learned by a new member of the organization. In our model, organizational socialization can influence the behaviour of new police officers in such a way that discrimination will be likely.

A fourth institutional mechanism, is the mechanism of administrative burdens. According to Moynihan, Herd and Harvey (2015), administrative burden can be defined as “an individual’s experience of policy implementation as onerous”. Administrative burdens come with three types of costs:

- Learning costs: Costs that arise when you need to find out how to access a procedure, how to apply for a procedure, et cetera. More generally said, when someone needs to search for information instead of being helped to find information.
- Psychological costs: Self-esteem costs that discourage participants from applying, stress that arises because of administrative processes, self-esteem costs when applying for a program with negative perceptions, et cetera.

- Compliance costs: General costs that arise when following administrative rules and procedures. These costs can be increased or decreased by bureaucratic discretion.

These administrative burdens can generate the feeling that you are unequally treated by an organization.

Internal and external institutional discrimination

These four institutional mechanisms all influence the likelihood of unequal treatment. In the literature, authors are not conclusive on the direction of institutional discrimination. Some look at the discriminating behaviour towards clients, others look at discriminating behaviour towards employees. Therefore, it could be interesting to talk about internal institutional discrimination, towards employees, and external institutional discrimination, towards clients or citizens.

When we talk about internal institutional discrimination, we refer to the unequal distribution of opportunities amongst individuals that are inside of the institution (employees), or want to be inside of the institution (future employees, candidates). This can be observed in work settings, employment policies and practices, informal structures, et cetera. External institutional discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of individuals that are outside of the institution (clients, citizens, et cetera.). This type can be observed in interactions between front-line civil servants and citizens, campaigns, et cetera.

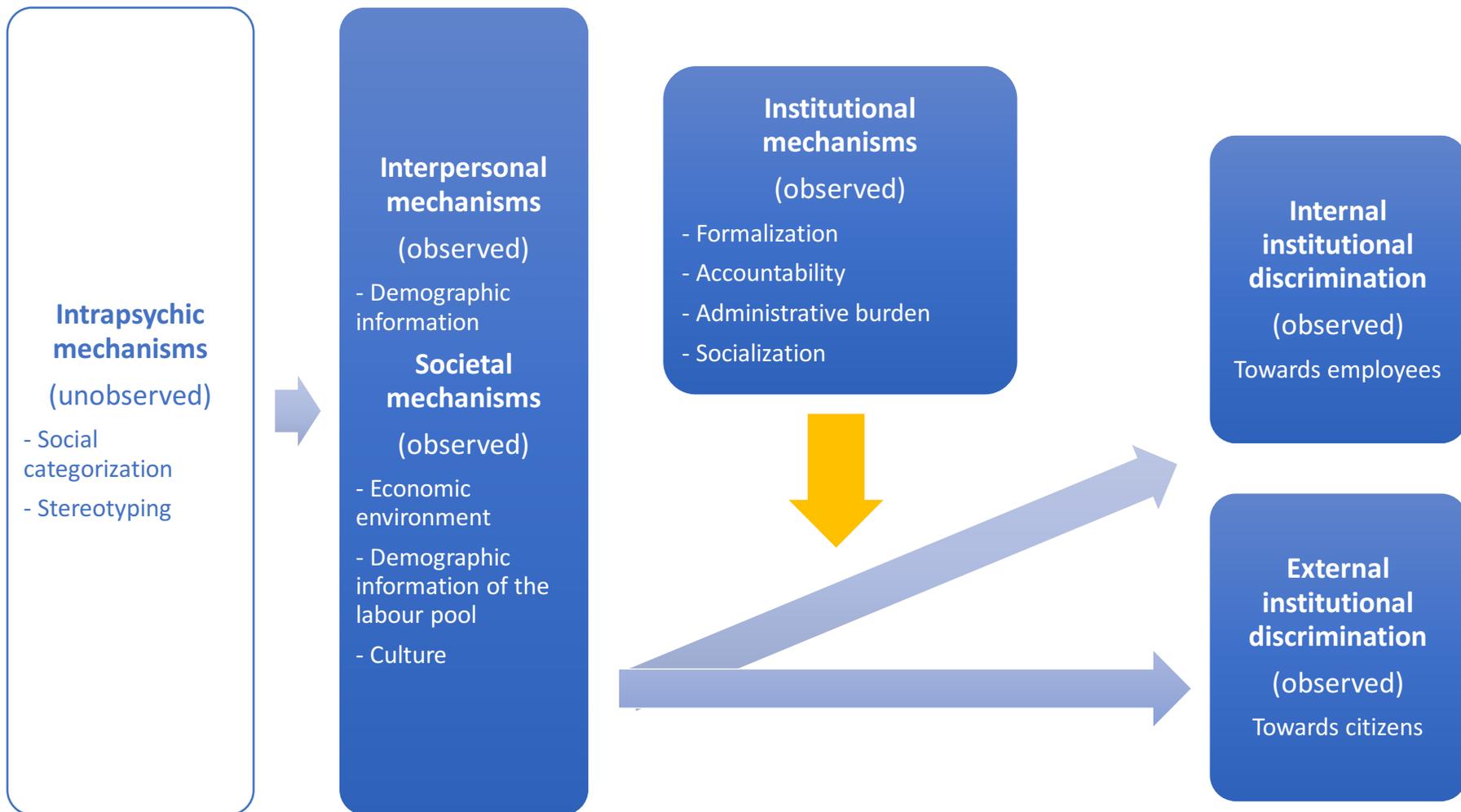


Figure 2: Our model

Research case: The Belgian Police

The Belgian Police wants to increase diversity in their police forces. The police force of Antwerp, for instance, has changed the Federal recruitment procedure to a more open procedure with 'selecting-in' as a guideline for recruiters. This means that when a candidate does not have competences that are needed, but the selecting commission decides that these competences can be acquired during the training program, they do select the candidate. When the same candidate would enter the Federal recruitment procedure, he or she would then not have been selected. The Police of Antwerp also has its own recruiters (this means that the composition of the jury, which is the final stage of the recruitment procedure, is different compared with the jury of the Federal recruitment procedure. The recruitment procedures of other police forces are still organised at the Federal level. Also at the Federal level, they are looking at ways to attract more diverse candidates.

During my PhD, I would like to focus on the Belgian Police as a research case. My research will look at the effectivity of the recruitment procedures and police training in selecting and building a diverse police force (1) and on the police forces' experiences with diversity (2).

Accountability, formalization and administrative burdens can influence the extent to which internal institutional discrimination takes place: survey

I would like to do a cohort study, and follow candidates during the recruitment procedure, training program and their first year on the job. First of all, I would like to survey the candidates of the recruitment exams (both candidates who passed (+/-10%), and who failed (+/-90%) the exams). This will give me insight into how candidates perceive the recruitment procedure, what is difficult, why they think they failed/succeeded, why they want to become a police officer, et cetera.

This will be an interesting first phase of the research for three reasons. First of all, in the survey we can really focus on *administrative burdens* by asking them why they think they failed or passed, and what was the most difficult stage of the recruitment procedure. With this information, we can identify if people with diverse background experienced administrative burdens.

Second, when we take a look at the recruitment procedure itself. When we look at the different stages of the recruitment procedure, we see an evolution from higher levels of accountability and formalization, to lower levels of the two mechanisms. The procedure starts with a timed sports test and a cognitive computer exam. It ends with a panel discussion with the other candidates to assess whether candidates have the right competences, and an interview with a jury. Exploring this recruitment procedure, can give us more insight into the effects of the mechanisms of *accountability* and *formalization* on the likelihood of internal institutional discrimination (towards the candidates).

Thirdly, as stated above, the recruitment procedure of the police force of Antwerp, differs from the Federal recruitment procedure specifically in last stages, namely the panel discussion and jury interview. Possible differences in the perception of candidates on administrative burdens of the two recruitment procedures, provide us an interesting comparison. Also, the recruitment procedure of the police force of Antwerp is designed to build a more diverse police force. This could higher the feeling of accountability of the recruiters and thus lower the likelihood of internal institutional discrimination.

Socialization ('on the job' and 'in the police force') can influence the extent to which external institutional discrimination takes place: cohort study

The candidates that passed the recruitment procedure can start their training and education. For the students that live in the province of Antwerp, this education takes place in Campus Vesta. It will be very interesting to focus on *socialization on the job*. In this stage of the PhD research we will only work with the students that follow the training program in Campus Vesta.

During their training, they learn what it is like to be a 'good police officer', how a police officer should and should not behave, and what moral and values are attached to the job. In other words, they are being socialized on the job. Every 6 month, I will interview the police officers in training. Analysing course material could help us to get a better feeling of what socialization on the job looks like and compare this with the results of the interviews, changed perspectives and values.

When the training program is finished, the students must again take exams to prove that they have enough knowledge to enter the police force. It could be interesting to take a look at the ones who passed and failed the exams and assess the role of our first three mechanisms: formalization, accountability and administrative burdens. This step resembles the first stage of the PhD (the recruitment procedure).

The police officers in training that passed the exams, start their first year on the job. It will be interesting to focus on *socialization in the police force*. During some informal conversations with the diversity department of the police of Antwerp and the diversity department of the Federal police, I found out candidates their first year on the job is a black box. The diversity department of the police of Antwerp stated that they do not know what happens with the perspective, values, the learned knowledge, et cetera of new police officers during this first year.

Former students enter a police force, where they are forced to translate the knowledge they gathered during their education into practices. They also are surrounded with police officers who have more experience, and may be tell them how it should be done. Van Maanen and Schein (1978) believe that formal organizational socialization, what happens during the education, is easy to 'unlearn' when we enter a situation of informal organizational socialization, in our case: the first year on the job. What is also interesting is that the organizational socialization of most of the Belgian police forces is organized in a serial way. This means that new officers are assigned to a veteran officer. According to Van Maanen and Schein (1978), this kind of socialization explains why organizational culture is stable throughout time.

In this stage of the PhD research, we would like to interview the new police officers every 6 months to see whether their preferences and behaviour changed. I have followed the same individuals throughout their education and first year on the job, and I hope that a certain trust is established and open conversations are possible. This could give more insight in how veteran police officers deal with diversity, socialize new police officers to deal with diversity and more generally: how a police force deals with diversity. This cohort study is a form of Social Systematic Observation, a combination of qualitative field work and quantitative analyses, which is according to Van Damme (2017) the best way to analyse interactions between police officers and citizens.

A downside of this cohort study, where I follow the same group of individuals for two and a half years, is that I may be influence their perspectives and values. To eliminate this interviewer-effect, I will analyse the 'socialization in the police force' in another group of starting police officers that I did not follow during their training and internship.

Conclusion: next steps

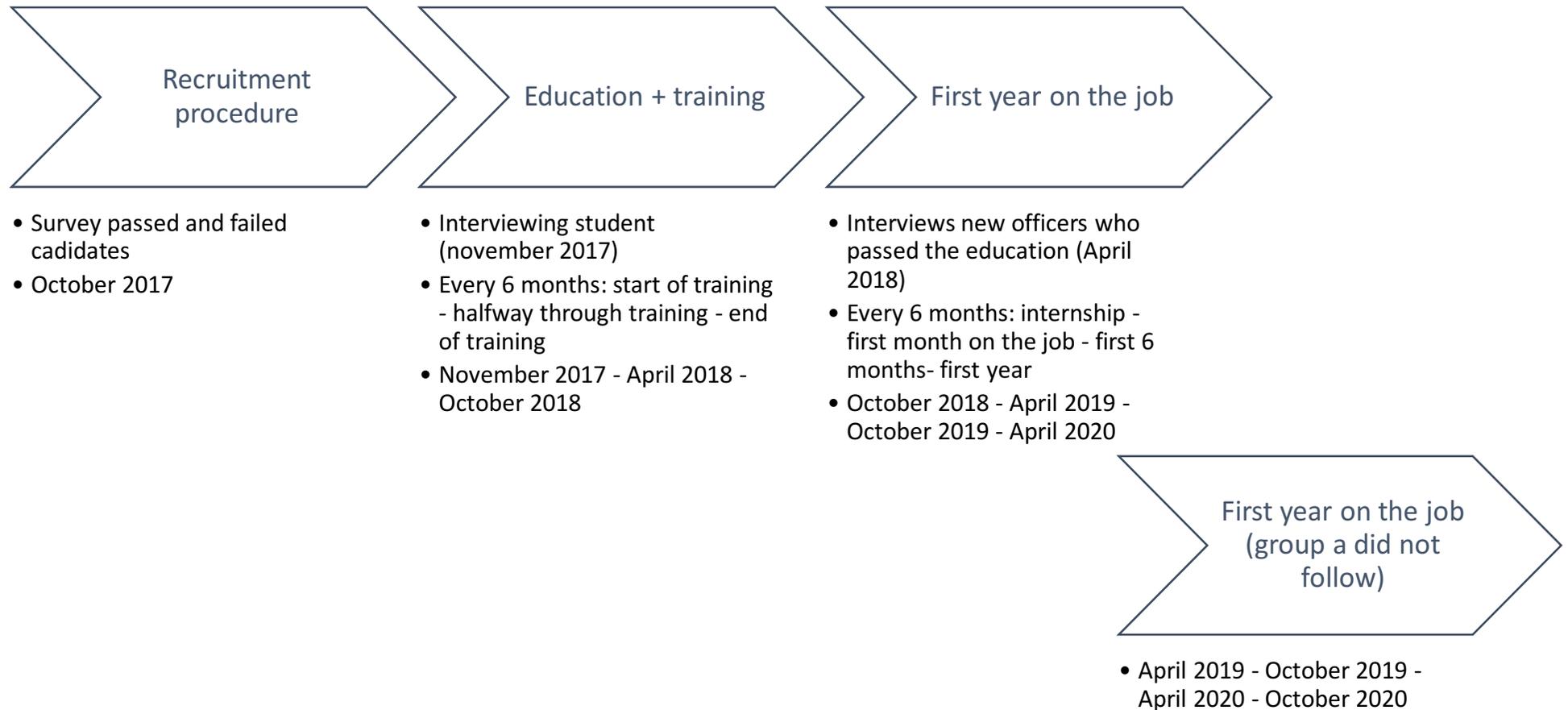
To take a look at internal and external institutional discrimination in the Belgian police force, we will use a mixed method approach. The first step consists of a more quantitative survey with candidates that enrolled in the recruitment procedure. In the second and third step, we will carry out a more qualitative cohort study where we interview students and later on starting police officers every six months. For a more detailed planning, please take a look at the page 16.

To lead the first stage (survey candidates in the recruitment procedure) in the right direction, we will start with a trial survey to assess the questions and improve the survey. We also have had informal conversations with the police force in Antwerp, the diversity department of the Federal police force and the recruitment department of the Federal police force to discuss our research plan and its feasibility. If everything goes well, we will start with the survey in the autumn of 2017.

A conversation is planned with the direction of Campus Vesta, the campus located in the province of Antwerp where students are trained and educated to be police officers. The second stage (interviewing students) will start a month after the first stage, also in the autumn of 2017.

The third stage (interviewing police officers in their first year on the job) is still in its developing stage. We are contacting several police forces, but they remain rather hesitant. This stage is planned to start in the autumn of 2018, and will be repeated in the spring of 2019. In the autumn of 2020, the process of data collection will be finished.

Planning



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