



“Policing at the speed of trust”: Interacting with trauma-impacted youth

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This article is directly related to the first global Trauma Informed Policing and Law Enforcement Conference held in Melbourne, Australia in February 2024.

ABSTRACT

Young people living on the fringes of society face heightened vulnerability and trauma that profoundly impact their ability to trust others. When trauma-impacted youth, such as those exposed to pervasive racism or with refugee backgrounds, have faced unfair treatment by authorities in the past, they often develop a deep distrust towards law enforcement officers. Consequently, interactions with police can become fraught with fear and aggression as past experiences of injustice resurface, triggering defensive and adverse reactions. Bearing these dynamics in mind, the article underscores that socially just policing requires a commitment to trauma-responsive engagement that nurtures trust by prioritizing safe interactional environments based on *tactfulness* and *co-regulation*. Trustful engagement prevents re-traumatization, promotes effective communication and addresses disparities in policing outcomes.

Key Words Trauma; policing; trust; refugees; racialized youth.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma refers to a person’s emotional and psychological response to a deeply distressing or threatening event (Herman, 1992/2015; Levine, 2015; van der Kolk, 2015). A wide range of adverse life experiences, such as abuse, neglect, violence and household dysfunction, can cause it. Renowned psychiatrist Dr Bessel van der Kolk characterizes trauma as a profound shock with lasting effects on people’s psyche, brain and body (van der Kolk, 2015). Trauma-impacted individuals may struggle to regulate their emotional responses to stressful situations such as policing interactions. Not only do they experience distressing recollections of unpleasant memories associated with traumatic experiences, but they also tend to avoid thoughts, feelings, conversations, activities and places associated with the traumatic event experienced in the past (Levine, 2015). Trauma can deeply erode an individual’s sense of trust in themselves and others, leaving them feeling vulnerable and uncertain about their own abilities and the intentions of those around them.

Trust is a fundamental element of social life (Reemtsma, 2012). It is the glue that makes mutual understanding and social cooperation possible. Trust is the silent assurance that empowers us to cross a busy street when the pedestrian light turns green, confidently place our orders in a restaurant, attend meetings with defined agendas, engage in contractual agreements, willingly adhere to the directives of law enforcement agencies or step onto an aeroplane for that eagerly anticipated vacation. In their book *The Speed of Trust*, Covey and Merrill (2006) wrote:

There is one thing that is common to every individual, relationship, team, family, organization, nation, economy and civilization throughout the world—one thing which, if removed, will destroy the most powerful government, the most successful business, the most thriving economy, the most influential leadership, the greatest friendship, the strongest character, the deepest love. On the other hand, if developed and leveraged, that one thing has the potential to create unparalleled

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success and prosperity in every dimension of life. That one thing is trust. (p. 5)

Nevertheless, not everyone finds it easy to place trust in others. For instance, trauma affects trust by erasing a sense of safety and security. The slightest hint of danger triggers anxiety in traumatized young people. Individuals whose formative years are characterized by physical and emotional abuse could be robbed of the ability to trust others both at home and in public. Young people who experienced abuse and violence perpetrated by figures of authority in the past may often find themselves in a dysregulated state when engaging with teachers or law enforcement officers. Without trust, traumatized young people find it challenging to engage in learning processes and social interactions.

Trust is also a bedrock of policing work. The notion of “policing by consent” underscores that the legitimacy of the police comes from the consent of the public, rather than coercion or the use of force (Greener, 2021). The extent to which individuals trust law enforcement agencies is intricately connected to their lived experiences and perceptions of procedural justice (Fridell, 2017). Notably, those with heightened perceptions of injustice in policing practices tend to be mistrustful towards law enforcement agencies. Likewise, traumatized young individuals often harbour anxiety regarding policing interactions. Therefore, to achieve socially just policing, it is imperative to adopt a trauma-responsive approach that acknowledges and addresses the unique needs and experiences of trauma-impacted individuals. Bearing this in mind, this article asks:

How does trauma-responsive engagement inspire trust in the context of policing interactions with racialized young people from refugee backgrounds?

In response to this question, the article makes three points: (a) visibly distinct refugee youth face the double trauma of racism and displacement, (b) trauma diminishes trust and (c) trauma-responsive policing engagement “moves at the speed of trust” in that it prioritizes tactfulness and co-regulation and is guided by such values as respect and fairness.

THE DOUBLE TRAUMA OF DISPLACEMENT AND RACISM

In two successive research projects, I investigated the educational experiences and integration outcomes of African heritage Australian youth with refugee experiences (Molla, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). I interviewed over 120 African heritage youth, focusing on their educational journeys and settlement outcomes. The findings highlight inspirational achievements and showcase their immense resilience in the face of formidable life-course trajectories. The research has also provided valuable insights into the intersectional factors of disadvantage affecting the group. African heritage children and young people with refugee experiences encounter what I call the double trauma of displacement and racism. The vast majority encountered racial stigma and discrimination across diverse public spaces and institutions. Additionally, over half of them revealed experiencing the adverse effects of intergenerational trauma.

Refugee trauma

Forced displacement is characterized by *loss and violence*. Refugees leave their homes in immense distress and arrive in host countries with considerable material losses and emotional scars. Refugee trauma refers to the psychological wound resulting from forced displacement and exposure to war, abuse and torture. According to the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT, 2018), about 25% of refugees have been physically tortured or subjected to severe psychological abuse prior to their arrival in Australia.

Trauma-impacted parents can also pass the wounds of trauma to their children through stories that recount painful experiences and events. Psychiatrist and refugee trauma expert Richard Mollica (2014) noted that intergenerational refugee trauma occurs when the directly traumatized generation passes the trauma to their offspring through stories that recount “distressing and painful personal and social events” (p. 4). Storytelling can help traumatized people cope with their emotions of humiliation, anger and despair. For the listener, trauma stories can be developmentally important. The stories connect the listener to their family history. In fact, identity development depends on sufficient access to parental *memories and narratives*.

However, factual recounts of traumatic events can usually be graphic and disturbing. After repeatedly listening to trauma stories of loss, grief, shame and humiliation, children of traumatized refugees might start unconsciously reliving their parents’ experiences. Not only does the fear of the parent become the fear of the child, but also the stories that children hear from their parents and families shape their worldviews and mediate how they carry themselves through life.

The young participants in my study, who shared accounts of trauma relayed by their parents and family members, were significantly impacted by the received narratives. It is evident in their accounts that *received trauma stories* influence their perceptions of self and others, complicating their acculturation process.

Racial trauma

Black migrant youth also face chronic racial stress, a state of emotional distress (manifested in feelings of sadness, fear and anger) arising from intense and persistent exposure to racial prejudice and discrimination that overwhelm their ordinary coping abilities.

Dealing with the daily *stress of racism can be taxing*. Racial stereotype threat (i.e., the awareness of being part of a community subjected to unjust race-based scrutiny or prejudice) has psychological and behavioural effects on individuals (Harrell, 2000; Steele, 2010). The fear of being treated with less respect, ignored or discriminated against because of one’s perceived racial identity places a significant psychological burden on individuals. People subjected to pervasive racism tend to create low self-image, feel anxious in public, resort to substance abuse, become alienated and disengage from educational and social activities (Reynolds et al., 2010). Chronic racial stress can result in shame and anxiety and diminish trust. In contexts where young people perceive a pervasive level of racial profiling (the practice of disproportionately stopping and searching individuals from racialized groups based on stereotypes rather than valid grounds (Hopkins, 2017)), policing interactions can trigger fear and stress.

Racism permeates the experiences of African heritage Australian youth at every juncture. In my study, accounts of young African heritage people from refugee backgrounds in Australia shed light on the pervasive and distressing nature of the chronic racial stress they endure. As the “African gang” narrative takes root in public discourse, the weight of racial stress becomes increasingly burdensome. The fear of being treated with less respect, ignored or discriminated against because of one’s perceived racial identity has placed a significant psychological burden on Black youth. The experience of racial stereotype threat has elicited feelings of anxiety, alienation and shame in them.

“POLICING AT THE SPEED OF TRUST”

Trust is the foundation of effective policing (Mehmi et al., 2021; Tyler, 2006). We trust others partly based on our knowledge of their past behaviour. Young people who have experienced unfair or biased treatment by law enforcement officers in the past are likely to be distrustful of this group now and in the future. The implication is that effective and socially just policing practices rest on nurturing trust in young people at risk of disengaging. In *Why People Obey the Law*, professor of Law and Psychology Tom Tyler (2006) argued:

The obligation to obey is based on the trust of authorities. Only if people can trust authorities, rules, and institutions can they believe that their own long-term interests are served by loyalty toward the organization. In other words, the social contract is based on expectations about how authorities will act. If authorities violate these expectations, the social contract is disrupted. (p. 172).

People trust law enforcement authorities based mainly on their perceptions of or interactions with them. In a *Police Chief Magazine* article entitled “Policing at the Speed of Trust,” Stephen M. R. Covey noted: “I contend that the first job of policing is to inspire trust. And the second job is to extend trust—that is, to give it to others” (Covey, 2011). The notion of policing at the speed of trust underscores the importance of instilling confidence during policing interactions through respectful engagement and transparent communication. Policing at the speed of trust is trauma-responsive in the sense that it acknowledges the vulnerabilities of young people, respects their experiences and actively works towards rebuilding trust and fostering positive outcomes.

The link between trauma and trust has significant implications for policing. For traumatized young people, the slightest hint of danger triggers anxiety and disruptive behaviours. Trauma affects trust by erasing a sense of safety and security. In the context of policing, this hypervigilance can result in tense interactions where the young person anticipates harm, impacting their ability to trust that law enforcement will act in their best interest. People who suffered at the hands of authority figures in the past are likely to distrust other adults. This initial lack of trust can set the tone for *fearful* interactions with law enforcement officers. If policing encounters lack understanding or inadvertently re-traumatize refugee youth, it can further diminish trust and perpetuate a cycle of apprehension and distrust.

Effective policing interactions with potentially traumatized young people need to be trauma-responsive; that is, it needs to be guided by a framework of action “that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment” (Hopper et al., 2010, p. 82). Effective policing interactions with potentially traumatized young people can nurture trust by creating safe interactional environments that identify vulnerabilities and develop supportive and preventive interventions.

It is imperative to note that trauma-responsive policing and trauma-informed policing, while related, are distinct approaches. Trauma-informed policing adopts a holistic perspective, aiming to prevent and mitigate the effects of trauma through systemic changes in law enforcement practices. On the other hand, trauma-responsive policing focuses on immediate and individual responses to trauma, emphasizing the importance of attentiveness to the impact of trauma on individuals’ behaviour during law enforcement interactions. Focusing on trauma-responsive policing is crucial due to the pivotal role individual law enforcement agents and police officers play in mitigating the immediate impact of trauma during interactions with individuals. Trauma-responsive policing recognizes that these officers are at the forefront of community engagement, often encountering trauma-impacted individuals in high-stress situations. Although trauma-informed policing is valuable in addressing systemic issues, it often requires time and extensive coordination to implement widespread changes. In contrast, trauma-responsive policing empowers individual officers to make a difference in their day-to-day interactions, ensuring that immediate support and understanding are provided to those who need it most.

Trauma-responsive policing engagement that moves at the speed of trust may take various forms. In the context of interacting with potentially traumatized young people, policing at the speed of trust creates safe interactional environments through (a) tactfulness and (b) co-regulation.

Tactfulness

Establishing trustful relationships is critical for people living in constant fear and mistrust. In this respect, trauma-responsive policing engagement creates safe interactional environments – *nonjudgmental spaces* of respect and trustful interactions that provide security and predictability. In policing interactions with trauma-impacted young people, safe and empathetic environments require tactfulness, which is about noticing sensitive circumstances and navigating those situations with heightened thoughtfulness and care. Tactful actors are mindful that people’s perceptions, choices and actions are profoundly shaped by what they have experienced since childhood (Sapolsky, 2023). As Canadian educator Max van Manen noted:

To exercise tact means to *see* a situation calling for sensitivity, to *understand* the meaning of what is seen, to *sense the significance* of this situation, to *know how and what to do*, and to actually *do* something right. (van Manen, 1991, p. 146, emphasis in original)

For law enforcement professionals, to be tactful is to be attuned to the emotional states of the people they interact with, display care, demonstrate trustworthiness through the communication of honourable intentions and afford individuals a voice by allowing them to express their perspectives (Fridell, 2017). Tactfulness enables law enforcement professionals to capitalize on what Desautels (2020) refers to as “touch points” or moments of intentional connection and relationship with trauma-impacted youth.

In trauma-responsive policing, tactfulness involves (a) acknowledging that individuals engaged in police interactions may have endured adverse life experiences shaping how they interact; (b) prioritizing sensitivity, dignity, fairness and patience; and (c) capitalizing on moments of intentional connections and relationships. As Jones (2021) noted, while trauma does not necessarily cause crime, many individuals involved in criminal activities often have histories of trauma. Trauma-responsive policing encourages agents to become tactful and shift their thinking from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?” (Perry and Winfrey, 2021). Tactfulness needs time, patient listening, observing bodily reactions and empathy. In policing interactions, verbal and nonverbal communication should reassure trauma-impacted young people: “You’re safe with me.” As Desautels (2020) put it: “Young people who are carrying in pain-based behaviour have a brain that is wired for fight, flight, and shutdown, and this brain has a desperate need for connection!” (p. 45). A tactful police officer uses moments of crisis and clues of dysregulation to interpret inner thoughts, feelings and desires.

Co-regulation

Trauma-impacted young people carry “pain-based behaviours” that show up in disrespectful, defiant or shutdown ways (Desautels, 2020). However, it is critical to realize that traumatized youth’s disruptive behaviours often start as “frustrated attempts to communicate distress and as misguided attempts to survive” (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 354). In other words, adapting a heightened sense of alertness and distrust as a coping mechanism is not often wilful; traumatized youth have a limited capacity for emotional self-regulation.

In this respect, the call for trauma-responsive policing and safe interactional environments is underpinned by a belief that coercive regulation of “pain-based behaviours” is likely to re-traumatize or exacerbate dysregulation. Penalizing surface behaviours does not address deep-seated senses of fear and anxiety. What is instead needed is the co-regulation of trauma-based emotional and cognitive responses. Co-regulation aims to model the behaviours we wish to see in others. In essence, coercive regulation seeks to suppress behaviours driven by distress, whereas co-regulation entails actively exemplifying desired behaviours by maintaining a state of calmness and absorbing others’ negative emotions (van der Kolk, 2015). It involves being attuned to the emotional cues of trauma, avoiding triggers that may push individuals beyond their window of tolerance, and providing clear and predictable communication.

Co-regulation helps expand people’s window of tolerance to stress by creating safe interactional environments. Trauma-impacted individuals have a narrow window of tolerance to stress – they can easily slide into the states of

hyperarousal or hypo-arousal. A window of tolerance represents the optimal range of emotional states an individual can comfortably experience without becoming overwhelmed or dissociated (van der Kolk, 2015). An expanded window of tolerance to stress enables law enforcement officers to reach the “thinking brain” and establish effective communication. In dealing with the disruptive behaviours of traumatized young people, seeking logical explanations for emotional outbursts is futile. It is critical to calm the emotional brain before trying to rationalize what is happening. Once a trauma-impacted person is calmed down enough, they can access the part of the brain that allows them to regain control over their behaviours. In other words, co-regulation helps them reach and activate the rational brain, which makes effective communication possible.

CONCLUSION

Trauma undermines the sense of safety, induces hypervigilance and inhibits positive relationships. For young people whose trust has been fractured by traumatic experiences, interactions with law enforcement can quickly escalate into hostility and violence. Similarly, policing encounters characterized by misguided aggression, racial profiling or other discriminatory practices can trigger traumatic memories and further deepen their mistrust.

Over the past decade, in Australia’s state of Victoria, significant efforts have been undertaken to address the issue of racial profiling, with a specific focus on strengthening community trust and confidence in law enforcement. Initiatives ranging from policy reforms and diversifying the police force to community engagement programs have been instrumental in acknowledging and rectifying racial disparities in policing practices. This commendable progress notwithstanding, more work is needed to inspire trust among racialized and potentially traumatized young people.

This article underscores the importance of co-regulation and tactfulness in policing interactions with trauma-impacted youth. Trauma-responsive policing moves at the speed of trust, creating safe interactional environments that nurture a sense of safety, security and confidence. Using tactfulness and co-regulation techniques, law enforcement officers can expand youths’ window of tolerance to stress, enabling more effective communication and reducing the likelihood of re-traumatization during interactions. In the long run, policing at the speed of trust can support both individual healing and community resilience.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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