

**Submission
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ASSAULTS ON MEMBERS OF THE NSW POLICE FORCE

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Inquiry into assaults on members of NSW Police Force

My name is Ken Wooden and I am a lecturer and Academic Course Advisor for the Bachelor of Policing program at Western Sydney University. Prior to this appointment, I was employed as a Senior lecturer within the School of Policing Studies, Charles Sturt University for a period of twelve years and was involved in the delivery of New South Wales Police recruit training (Associate Degree in Policing Practice). I completed my PhD in 2012 through the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice Studies, Griffith University and my area of research dealt with police perceptions of accountability and community policing. Prior to my academic career, I worked as a police officer within the New South Wales Police Force for twenty years performing duties in General Duties, Anti-Theft Squad; Police Citizens Youth Clubs and Legal Services. My research interests include; community policing, ethical orientations of police recruits and police vulnerability within the policing role with a specific focus upon the community policing context. I feel that this issue of assaults upon New South Wales Police officers speaks to the general issue of police vulnerability.

The vulnerability of certain groups within the criminal justice system has become a critical issue for policing organisations. Stanford (2012, p.20) observes that in terms of vulnerability, individuals “are at risk in some way” due to personal, experiential or environmental factors. Regarding police, it is argued that they themselves are vulnerable and in terms of the occupational environment, it has long been recognised that many factors associated with the policing role can impact adversely upon police levels of stress, attitudes and subsequent work performance. Such occupational factors include; attending critical incidents (Paton, 2006); attending domestic disturbances (Korre, Farioli, Varvarigou, Dato & Kales, 2014); interactions with suspects and offenders (Prenzler, 1997); performing duties within socially disorganised communities (Lee, Jang, Yun, Lim & Tushaus, 2010) as well as a range of organisational issues including working conditions, levels of support, lack of trust, and perceived risk of a work-related injury or illness (Jakubauskas & Wright, 2012).

During the period between June and November 2008, I interviewed twenty-seven street police and three police managers who were performing duties at the Macquarie Fields patrol. Initially this data was analysed in 2009 as part of doctoral research on community policing initiatives implemented at Macquarie Fields and whether they had altered local police perceptions of accountability to the community and enhanced police-community relations. This was reanalysed as secondary data in 2015 to consider police vulnerability arising in their work within socially disorganised communities. On secondary analysis, interviews with police participants revealed the vulnerabilities of police performing duties in the problematic work environment of Macquarie Fields. While this data is over ten years old, the processes under consideration in this submission such as police experiencing disrespect, threats of violence and problematic interactions with community members is an ongoing concern and not linked exclusively to the Macquarie Fields experience but in fact are generalizable to police performing duties in socially disorganised communities. The work related vulnerabilities suffered by police at Macquarie Fields arose from negative interactions between police and those community members with whom they had the most contact; unemployed youth from the local housing estates. The vulnerabilities which police experienced included initial shock when commencing duties for the first time at Macquarie Fields and involved officers being shocked by disrespect and physical abuse exhibited by community members towards police as well as vast perceptions of lifestyle and moral differences held by police towards those community members. In addition, police participants lacked a sense of community belonging and felt unappreciated; used

and frustrated in their attempts to assist these community members. Police also perceived vast degrees of otherness between themselves and those community members with whom they came in contact. These perceptions of difference included; ambition; care of children; morals and values; drug use; education; employment; hygiene; motivation and respect for authority and family. In particular, young, inexperienced police experienced the greatest problems in interacting with the community and tended to adopt a confrontational approach in their interactions with local youth. It is suggested these findings are significant in terms of policing not just at Macquarie Fields but policing within any community which suffers from social disadvantage.

This is significant in terms of the policing role as researchers such as Vuorensyrja and Malkia (2010) highlight that threats of violence are a significant predictor of burnout amongst officers whilst Basinska, Wiciak and Daderman (2014) argue that police occupational disengagement can result, in part, from high-arousal negative emotions triggered by problematic interpersonal interactions with community members. Furthermore, Habersaat, Geiger, Abdellaoui & Wolf (2015, p.218) found that, in terms of health outcomes of police officers, perceptions of the work environment are as “relevant as objective work structure”. This highlights that policing a community such as Macquarie Fields—and indeed, any community—is not undertaken in a perfunctory fashion; rather, it reflects the attitudes and interactions with community members, which are shaped by and shape the work environment. Although the community rightly expects a high level of accountability and professionalism, police can still be vulnerable and can experience discomfort, fear and a sense of ‘otherness’ whilst working within a problematic work environment. Although training can instil in police the need to remain professional and get the job done, it cannot direct an officer to possess a sense of belonging to a community and as was the case at Macquarie Fields, where police felt like unsupported victims, separate to and different from the community. This would tend to suggest that police are not adequately prepared to face the unique challenges posed in policing a disadvantaged community such as Macquarie Fields.

A recommendation from my research is that within the training of NSW police recruits there needs to be recognition and attention paid to the issue that police attitudes and behaviour are shaped by their daily experiences with community members. In discovering ways to assist police overcome such vulnerabilities the submission suggests practical policing strategies to assist such police. It is significant that inexperienced police arrive at socially disorganised patrols such as Macquarie Fields inadequately prepared to effectively handle the social problems in the patrol. Frightened, uncertain of their powers, members of an ‘us’ community against an alien ‘Other’, the key question becomes: do they need better preparation? Police management needs to recognise the negative impact which socially disorganised communities such as Macquarie Fields can have upon police. The accounts of new and experienced Macquarie Fields police regarding the initial shock they experienced concerning perceived lifestyle and moral differences of the community members with whom they came in contact reveals a vulnerability which needs to be addressed by police management.

One possible solution is that police are provided with opportunities to develop a better understanding and appreciation of the adverse impact of social disadvantage upon the lives of many of the residents of socially disorganised communities. Prior to the commencement of their duties, newly graduated police deployed to such patrols may need additional service learning, such as field placements (Bartkowiak-Théron & Layton, 2012) with a government/non-government service providers working within the particular community. A number of benefits are associated with new police undertaking service learning. Jacoby (1996) defines service learning as student centred activities which address societal needs as well as facilitating the learning and personal growth of

students. This would provide police with an insight into the underlying social problems experienced by many of the local residents, an appreciation of the differences of community members and the types of services available for people suffering social disadvantage (Berman, 2006). There may also be a likelihood of not blaming community members for their predicaments (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Also, field placements would provide new police with an insight into “local norms and values and individual needs” (Roberg, Novak & Cordner, 2005, p.83) which forms part of the community policing approach. It is noted that curriculum taught to NSWPF recruits during their training encompasses issues pertaining to social disadvantage; problem oriented policing and police accountability (Charles Sturt University, 2011). However, findings from this previous study indicate this has failed to be internalised and applied during day to day policing practices.

Another factor which highlighted the vulnerability of police at Macquarie Fields was their initial shock at the level of community disrespect. This is a critical issue that police management must address if, as argued by Arter (2006, p.90) “Disrespect directed towards the officer degrades the officer personally and is viewed as an attack on the legitimacy of the officer’s position”. Perhaps one possible solution to reducing the level of disrespect directed towards police working in socially disadvantaged communities is the introduction of police mentoring schemes, in which local police become mentors for ‘at risk’ youth. It is contended that mentoring would allow police and youth to interact and get to know each other in informal settings. This may bring police and some of the local youth closer and, over time, reduce the level of disrespect directed at police. Advantages of these programs include; police being provided with an insight into the issues impacting upon the youths as well as youths gaining, “...self esteem and self confidence” (Arter 2006, p.87). Another solution to address the perceived disrespect felt by police is for police management to assign more experienced police with less experienced police. This strategy, “...may help to teach the craft to less experienced peers in ways that training facilities cannot” (Paoline & Terrill, 2007, p.193).

In addition to the aforementioned strategies it is also suggested that enhancements to police communication training in which selected multidisciplinary communication skills from disciplines such as teaching, social work, and medicine are adapted and incorporated into such may assist police deal with work related stressors they encounter. In regards to the crime reduction strategies undertaken by local patrols, and in particular, those in socially disadvantaged communities, the age and experience of such officers may be a problematic issue. Police in New South Wales for instance, undertake the first three years of their employment as general duties police officers. Due to the nature of their duties, these officers have the most contact with the general public and in turn, are involved with the local area crime reduction strategies. It is contended that many of these typically younger inexperienced police would benefit from an enhancement to communication training. This is especially so for those undertaking duties within disadvantaged communities where it would appear there is a lack of sufficient communication skills to communicate effectively with community members, particularly youth. Police recruits, as part of their training for the NSWPF, learn and practice communication skills through student-centred learning. This consists of recruits participating in role plays where they are presented with complex interpersonal situations involving role players who are members of staff. Up until recently, the students were presented with difficult scenarios in which they were faced with a ‘member of the public’ who’s behaviour had been affected by factors such as anger, alcohol and drug abuse, mental illness and anxiety. (Davies & Kelly, 2014). At the completion of the role play students were provided with feedback concerning the effectiveness of their communication skills as well as being required to complete a form which entails them to reflect upon their performance. Due to staffing availability though, this initiative has currently been put on hold with the intention of re-introducing it in the future. Notwithstanding its

current suspension, it is acknowledged as a valuable communication learning experience and it is noted that students still practice communication skills through participation in police practicals. It can be argued however, there is still a possible disconnect from what is practiced within the learning environment (police academy) and its practical application in the field.

In fact, this is not an uncommon problem in other professions which like policing, strive to prepare their novice learners for the challenges of real world encounters. For instance, Cahill et al. (2016) reported trainee teachers “lacked skill and confidence about how to communicate with students” (p.308) whilst Rosenbaum and Axelson (2013) highlighted the views of medical students concerning a disconnect with clinical communication skills delivered pre-clinical learning and those skills utilised during clinical placements. In attempting to enhance trainee teachers’ communication skills Cahill et al. (2016) reported the results of a program in which school students assisted in trainee teacher education. This was facilitated through students providing feedback concerning student-teacher engagement as well as participating in role plays involving problematic classroom issues. Results from this program highlight the importance of asking the students for feedback as it showed positive outcomes for both. Specifically, both students and pre-service teachers stated that they experienced an increase in communication skills, self-esteem and confidence. In reference to the training of medical students, Davies and Lunn (2009) reported benefits to students’ communication skills when patients were involved in the formative assessment of such. This assessment process involved a “tri-partite” (p.406) interaction involving the student, tutor and patient. Student feedback indicated greater confidence in their communication skills following this initiative.

The significance of such initiatives to enhance the practical application of communication skills is supported by such authors as Bylund et al. (2008) who contend that the acquisition of relevant communication skills is of the utmost importance as knowledge by itself is not an indicator of the competent application of such. In light of research (Wooden, 2012), which indicated communication problems encountered by younger inexperienced police, it is contended that curriculum design for recruit training needs to be enhanced. One possible solution draws upon the aforementioned training programs for trainee teacher and medical students. Central to these initiatives is student learning facilitated through interactions with authentic participants as opposed to ‘role players’. This initiative could be adopted for police training in which community members, and particularly young people, participate in communication and customer service role plays as well as providing valuable feedback. This would add a significant authentic element to role plays and would enhance the confidence of police recruits in problem solving and communicating effectively with members of the public from a wide variety of age groups. To further develop this learning experience, some role play scripts should also be structured around authentic situations in which police came in problematic contact with community members. These role plays would have dual benefits in providing recruits with real life problematic situations in which they would be required to use problem solving skills as well as providing recruits greater confidence in utilising communication skills to resolve difficult and complex situations.

It is argued that training delivered to and used by police consists of a ‘one size fits all’ model which fails to take into account the dynamics of police-community relationships which can vary throughout different patrols. Although recruits are encouraged to build rapport during their interactions with community members, the focus is upon the one off interaction. It is suggested that police need to be taught communication skills in their interactions with youths, similar to those provided to teachers and social workers. These skills assist in the building of professional relationships. In a similar way, teacher training in behaviour management of children and young people, focuses on avoiding confrontation. Teachers are taught how to ignore low-level, inappropriate or attention-seeking

behaviour. Young people, especially, can see teachers as authority figures. Similar to teachers, police, need to learn to refuse to enter into arguments due to this low-level behaviour (Cowley, 2014, p. 212). It is therefore important for police training to include communication skills for dealing with aggressive behaviour in young people.

Sincerely,



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