University of Canberra

The Thin Blue Line of Mental Health: Mediated Representations of Police Use of Force in Mental Health Crisis Interventions

By

Katrina Clifford

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Abstract

This research examines the ways in which police officers and bereaved family members make sense of their lived experience of the fatal police-involved shooting of a mentally ill individual in crisis in the context of news media representations of these critical incidents. Fatal mental health crisis interventions are – by virtue of their circumstances – highly controversial and subject to different, often competing, interpretations between key stakeholders. This research adopts a critical realist approach to identify and explore these divergent interpretive frameworks in the context of 'risk communication' (Blood, Pirkis & Francis, 2004). It examines the ways in which police use of lethal force is typically framed in news media coverage of fatal mental health crisis interventions, and the media's contribution to public understandings of contemporary policing and mental illness. Central to this is a qualitative interpretive framing analysis of the news media coverage of the fatal police-involved shooting of a mentally ill man, Paul Klein, on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia, in May 1998. A critique of the news frames constructed by print and broadcast news media is offered in relation to the personal testimonies of news media professionals, police officers, and bereaved family members involved in the critical incident. On the basis of this research and its comparison with more contemporary news frames of fatal mental health crisis interventions, it is shown that issues of risk, in particular, are often framed through news media and legal discourse in terms of technical expertise and public accountability, but they are dealt with by most individuals who have been involved in a fatal mental health crisis intervention at the local and subjunctive level in their everyday lives. The research argues that

while the risks inherent to fatal mental health crisis interventions may therefore be real, they are also socially mediated and open to contestation as a result of the tensions between the 'situated knowledge' (Wynne, 1996) of these key stakeholders, pre-existing institutional protocols, and the mediated representations of lived experience. A case in point is the personal trauma narratives of the individual police officers responsible for the fatal discharge of firearms, which have often been marginalised in news media reports of fatal mental health crisis interventions as a result of the rules of critical incident investigation. This has left these individuals vulnerable to harmful constructions of risk-based identities. The research considers the implications of this for police relationships with mentally ill individuals and for police agencies in terms of how they approach their interactions with vulnerable people in the community, while being in the media spotlight. The research also addresses the potential 'news framing effects' of these normative news framing practices on traumatised subjects, and the educative opportunities for news media in the construction of 'public risk knowledge' and community understandings of frontline policing and mental illness.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CAD	Computer Aided Dispatch
CAT	Crisis Assessment and Treatment
CIT	Crisis Intervention Team
COPS	Computerised Operational Policing System
DSM-IV-TR	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fourth Edition)
EDP	Emotionally Disturbed Person
ERISP	Police Record of Interview
FOSTU	Firearms Officer Survival Training Unit
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
LAC	Local Area Command
LPC	Local Protocol Committee
MHASP	Mental Health Attitude Survey for Police
MHCA	Mental Health Council of Australia
MHIT	Mental Health Intervention Team
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
SPG	State Protection Group
SPSU	State Protection Support Unit
OPI	Office of Police Integrity
OST	Operational Safety Tactics (Training)
PECC	Psychiatric Emergency Care Centre
PMI	Persons with a Mental Illness
POI	Person(s) of Interest
PORS	Public Order and Riot Squad
PSMI	People with Serious Mental Illness
TOU	Tactical Operations Unit
VKG/PAL	Police Radio Operators

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Photographed by Jean Pierre Bratanoff-Firgoff

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Writing a thesis about traumatic events and the personal impacts on the individuals involved has been more emotionally challenging than I thought it would be intellectually. The act of 'bearing witness' to the personal testimonies of these individuals has brought with it a sense of responsibility that has sometimes been difficult to reconcile. There are many private moments of self-reflection and personal struggle that have informed this research, but which have not been possible to include in this thesis.

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This thesis is dedicated to Nan and to the indispensible contributions of situated knowledge and lived experience in public discussions of complex social issues.

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Preface

This thesis has been inspired by a series of simple observations; primary among which is the recognition that while the lives of ordinary people can be irreversibly and detrimentally impacted by personal involvement in extraordinary and traumatic events, so too can the lives of other ordinary people be irrevocably affected by 'bearing witness' to this personal trauma, and the weight of professional responsibility that often accompanies such acts of 'listening' and 'witnessing'. For these reasons, it has been difficult to completely write myself out of the thesis or beyond the responsibilities that have come with the research. There is reason to suggest that to do so may be problematic to the integrity of the project.

Some time was spent trying to resolve these ethical discomforts; the process for which resulted in the publication of the following peer-reviewed book chapter:

Clifford, K. (2010). Mental Health Trauma Narratives and Misplaced Assumptions: Towards an Ethics of Self-Care Among (Humanities-Based) Trauma Researchers. In M. Broderick & A. Traverso (Eds.), *Trauma, Media, Art: New Perspectives* (pp. 175-192). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Sections of various chapters have also been adapted into the following peer-reviewed journal article and book chapters while the research for this thesis progressed:

Clifford, K. (2010). The Thin Blue Line of Mental Health in Australia. *Police Practice and Research*, *11*(4), 355-370.

Clifford, K. (2012). The Vulnerable Thin Blue Line: Representations of Police Use of Force in the Media. In I. Bartkowiak-Theron & N. Asquith (Eds.), *Policing Vulnerability* (pp. 101-114). Annandale, NSW: Federation Press.

Herrington, V., & **Clifford, K.** (2012). Policing Mental Illness: Examining the Police Role in Addressing Mental Ill-Health. In I. Bartkowiak-Theron & N. Asquith (Eds.), *Policing Vulnerability* (pp. 117-131). Annandale, NSW: Federation Press.

Warning: the confronting content of this thesis may be distressing to some readers.

If you need immediate assistance or support in Australia, please contact:

Lifeline 13 11 14

Or please talk to your GP, local health professional or someone you trust.

For further information about mental illness and suicide prevention, please visit:

SANE Australia: *www.sane.org*

Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW: *www.sfnsw.org.au*

Suicide Prevention Australia: *www.suicidepreventionaust.org*