



# The trauma from within: When the workplace turns against an officer

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## ABSTRACT

The examination of police officers' interactions with co-workers, supervisors, managers, and other employees has established cases of institutional betrayal and sanctuary trauma within the Canadian policing community. There has been a tendency to classify and characterize these traumas independently despite them co-existing in singular or cumulative traumatic events. When the complexities and nuances of the culture of policing are considered, there is a need to define these experiences to better reflect this reality and suitably classify these traumas in a way that singularly encapsulates the dynamics of both sanctuary and institutional betrayal trauma. A singular classification will afford a more complete understanding of the influence these traumas have on police officers. Drawing upon current literature and positioning my embodied knowledge on these traumas, the terminology "sanctuary betrayal trauma theory" better reflects the nature of these experiences in the context of the culture of policing.

**Key Words** Police culture; sanctuary trauma; institutional; betrayal trauma; betrayal; theory; well-being.

## INTRODUCTION

A career in policing exposes officers to traumatic events which predispose them to the development of occupational stress injuries, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at a frequency greater than any other public safety personnel career (Carleton et al., 2018). Much of the focus in understanding this disparity has been on exposures to external traumatic events (Foley et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2019; Karlsson & Christianson, 2003). However, the Merlo–Davidson settlement against the Royal Canadian Mounted Police publicly identified the internal traumatic experiences that are all too common (Bastarache, 2020). Current research (Bikos, 2021) has identified the presence and influence of institutional betrayal trauma, the harm caused by institutions in causing or not addressing workplace traumas, within the Canadian policing context and looked at the role the policing institution plays in these traumas. What happens though when sanctuary trauma, or the harm caused by what is supposed to be a supportive environment, is included in the examination and exploration of the role and influence that the culture of policing plays?

A review of institutional betrayal trauma and sanctuary trauma identified that the "culture" inherent in policing is instrumental in the impact that these traumas have. Within the exploration of the culture of policing's influence, one

sees a police service as occupying a location of being both an institution and a sanctuary to the members of the police service. This view results in interpersonal relationships that are based on a reliance on others for survival due to the life-and-death nature of the job. Further, due to this view, neither institutional betrayal trauma nor sanctuary trauma adequately reflected this reality. A review and examination of the culture of police was done to situate these workplace traumas within the policing context. A discussion then integrates the need to reframe these traumas due to the culture of policing.

Before gaining depth into the subject, it is incumbent upon me to provide context related to where my knowledge is situated and how it situates its presentation. My positionality or embodied knowledge lies within the concept of the outsider/insider, or outside within (Collins, 1986; Mullings, 1999). For 20 years, I served as a police officer doing uniform and plain-clothes duties in various locations across Canada. The knowledge obtained from this career shapes the perspectives or lens that I read and interpret scholarship through due to being immersed within the policing culture that affords an intimate knowledge of the nuances not known by researchers. When I rely upon my embodied knowledge to provide context, I will clearly identify it as my opinion, which is based on my experience within policing. Further, I acknowledge that my language will fluctuate between that of the academy and that of

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a former police officer. The variation in language represents my embodied knowledge from this position as a doctoral student, clinical social worker/therapist, and former police officer. The totality of this knowledge, gained through these various lived experiences, situates the presentation of my findings.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Sanctuary and Institutional Betrayal Traumas

Sanctuary trauma was framed by Silver (1987) in response to observations made about the intentional and unintentional harm caused to veterans at a psychiatric facility, defining it as “what occurs when an individual who suffers a severe stressor next encounters what was expected to be a supportive and protective environment in not as imagined or expected.” (p. 215). He noted that sanctuary trauma has been seen across a spectrum of traumatic events experienced by survivors and implicitly implies a betrayal to what was expected. Further work expanding on sanctuary trauma further articulated the presence and influence of betrayal as being central to this trauma (Bloom, 2013; Bloom & Farragher, 2013). In doing so, they relied upon Freyd’s (1994, 1997a,b) betrayal trauma theory to explore how sanctuaries are destroyed. Further, in the identification of sanctuaries, Silver (1987) and Bloom and Farragher (2013) have noted that government institutions are sanctuaries. Anecdotally, clients, peers, and I have all understood that our police services were believed to be a sanctuary by nature of the culture of the respective police services.

Freyd outlines that betrayal trauma is inherent in interpersonal traumas such as childhood abuse, and the impact is decided by the closeness or connection between the offender and the victim (Freyd, 1997a,b). The importance of the interpersonal relationship is highlighted in the dependence upon the person or institution for survival and/or well-being and the fracture that occurs within the violation of the trust and/or well-being of the individual. The betrayal is a rupture, the impact of which is dependent upon the closeness of this relationship (Hujing & Yalch, 2024); however, there is also a cumulative impact for betrayals in which interpersonal closeness is lacking. Smith and Freyd (2013) expanded upon this to consider the context of an institution’s role in committing the betrayal and subsequently developed institutional betrayal trauma theory. They identify government and its various departments as an institution which can be involved in these traumas, positioning government departments as institutions, which can also be seen as sanctuaries depending on the context.

What if, instead of a familial or institutional relationship, there was a culturally based relationship inherent within the institution? Insight into that question is found in the expansion of these theories into what is known as cultural betrayal trauma theory (Gómez, 2019, 2021; Gómez & Gobin, 2024), which considers harm that occurs within a shared cultural group. Cultural betrayal posits that trauma or abuse that occurs by someone within the same cultural group can result in what amounts to a betrayal of the shared cultural solidarity or trust. It is a rupture of trust that violates the expectations of cultural solidarity and is often coupled with a perceived sense that one must stay silent about the harmful experience to prevent bringing attention of the harm to the larger cultural group. This raises the question of what hap-

pens when cultural betrayal trauma theory is applied to an institution that is seen as having its own “culture,” such as the case with policing.

What happens if, due to the nature of the culture, the institution is also viewed as a sanctuary by its members? To illustrate the dilemma of sanctuary and institutional betrayal trauma in the policing context, I offer an example from my service.

*I was involved in an investigation involving an at-home birth due to “complications.” I soon found myself in the hospital NICU holding a vigil over a declared nonviable premature baby who, for all intents and purposes, was left on an office counter area to “humanly” pass. The medical examiner agreed that dispensing with normal infant death protocols, including immediate parental statements, was warranted and appropriate under the circumstances. Despite this, upon my return to the detachment after watching the child pass over a period of 40 minutes, I was chastised for not following operational protocols and served disciplinary paperwork.*

*Speaking with the medical examiner, the corporal was informed that they wanted to express appreciation for my professionalism and care in this matter. Upon hearing this and gaining an understanding as to why I took the actions I did, the corporal pulled the paperwork back. The following day, still reeling from the previous night and hoping to speak with my staff sergeant about it, I was advised that the local paramedics were doing a debriefing for the call and requested I attend. He advised me that he informed them I was good and would not be attending. He was kind enough however to ask me if I was “good with that.” Supervisors and managers always had a way of sending you a message.*

Within this account of a police investigation and interactions with a supervisor and a manager, there is a clearly defined presence of betrayals by the sanctuary and the institution, intricately linked within the same incident. By definition, they are both sanctuary and institutional betrayal traumas which occurred in the fluidity of the aftermath of the precipitating trauma of the child’s death. The example provides a glimpse of how the culture of policing influences the presentation of these traumas, as I was deemed to have gone against the prescribed and perceived rules and policies of the police service.

### The Culture of Policing

As Couto (2025) points out, policing is a career into which the individual is indoctrinated and, often times, that indoctrination begins well before the first official day of service. Through this indoctrination process, the individual is brought into the culture of policing and shown the rituals, symbols, procedures, and protocols that they must adhere to, which are taught from instructors, supervisors, managers, co-workers, and others (Couto, 2025; Reiner, 2016; Workman-Stark, 2021). This involves an education on the police service, including its history, command structure, organizational structure, and functions along with the requisite education about the law and the application of policies and procedures (Andrews, 2025). It is within these confines that future officers are provided insight and exposed to the reality of the police culture and the idea

of the “Brotherhood” (Couto, 2025; Sanders et al., 2022; Workman-Stark, 2021). New officers are not simply indoctrinated into the policing institution, but subsequent indoctrination leads to them becoming a member of the Brotherhood.

As explained by Sanders et al. (2022), the Brotherhood is a non-gendered concept accepted by female and male officers to describe the larger police service and highlights the belief that many officers have. They have joined a large extended family of people who are like them and will look out for them. There is a belief, based on the indoctrination into the Brotherhood that one is joining something bigger and more evolved than just a family of other officers. It transforms beyond being seen as a job and becomes a way of life in which the ultimate goal is survival and making it to full-pension retirement (Caveney et al., 2020; Paoline, 2003; Reiner, 2016; Workman-Stark, 2017). Unlike the interpersonal dynamics of a family, in policing, police officers are often thrust into life-or-death situations with, for all intents and purposes, strangers. Yet, there is a tacit understanding and acceptance that they will be supportive and be there for the officer based on a shared loyalty to the greater good (Richards, 2010).

The slow progression of indoctrination leads the recruit to begin identifying acceptance into the Brotherhood as a “sanctuary” that they have been given admission to. The Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary and Thesaurus (2020) defines a sanctuary as “a place of refuge and protection” and a place that offers “immunity from the law,” which echoes the description provided by police officers I work with in my therapeutic practice. Many see their police force as being a sanctuary before they began to struggle, affected by the first of many betrayals. The belief that they are protected by their police department is often seen as an attitude of being “above the law” (Crocini, 2024; Maynard, 2020; Paoline, 2003; Puddister & McNabb, 2024; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003), and this belief fuels their continuation in their role within the police department despite the onset of being traumatized and marginalized. The protection or “immunity from law” provided to them by being a member of the Brotherhood and the afforded sanctuary ensures silence and acceptance of the transgression causing the betrayal. It further engrains the notion of a sanctuary for those members who are struggling and trying to ensure their safety and well-being going forth, regardless of the negative treatment.

## DISCUSSION

Within the policing experience, sometimes the worst moments of the officer’s service are the traumas experienced because of the culture of policing – the times in which the officer is victimized, marginalized, and betrayed by the very people they thought were on “their side.”

*As a result of an investigation, I arrested the partner of another member for a criminal offence. The member came to me the following day while I was at home and asked me to drop the charges and their partner “is family which makes them one of us,” despite there being a clear and unavoidable paper trail for the investigation. I apologized and indicated that I would not consider it, nor would it even be possible. I ended the chat after a few additional asks were made of me to drop the matter. I approached my immediate supervisor about the matter as I*

*was not comfortable with the situation as it played out. I was quickly told that I would need to take it to the manager as the supervisor was not going to touch it due to the seriousness of the matter. I spoke with my manager as directed only to be met with anger. Anger at the fact that I was bringing this forward, anger at the fact that this would bring regional and divisional attention to the detachment, and anger at the fact that he had to do the paperwork and didn’t want the outcome.*

*The complaint form was slammed down on the desk in front of me in disgust and my statement outlining the incident was taken, initiating a formal complaint process. A process that gained a lot of attention despite it being a confidential process between the parties involved. I was soon identified as being anti-cop, untrustworthy, a sycophant, a “shit” disturber and definitely not a team player. I was denied training opportunities and banned from participating in activities in which the other member was involved with. I was villainized for arresting a fellow “cop by association” and seen as being out of line and wrong in my actions. Once the investigation on the member concluded, I was advised they were provided operational direction as they were not aware that they could not take the actions they did. The complaint was subsequently closed yet I remained the outcast, often wondering if other members would support me in a moment of need. I feared for my safety and could only hope that if I was involved in a situation, I would have backup. I would never be sure until something happened. All of this for living one of the service’s values: INTEGRITY.*

This example illustrates the betrayal and how the culture of policing illustrates a series of actions to play out, resulting in a further trauma occurring. The trauma, situated in the necessity of questioning “what if” in relation to my safety, was made clear when it was believed that I had gone against the culture.

As a police officer, the officer is thrust into the worst moments of people’s lives. They are bearing witness to the intimacy of others’ most traumatic experiences without regard to whether they are involved as a fully engaged participant or a passive witness to the experience. As seen in the two personal examples of how sanctuary and institutional betrayal traumas transpire in the context of policing, both traumas often occur within the same experience or over the course of the experience. These traumas have been identified as being influential in the development of occupational stress injuries such as PTSD (Bikos, 2021, 2024; Foley et al., 2022; Gómez, 2019; Hujung & Yalch, 2024; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Due to the culture of policing that demands assimilation and adherence to a set of written and perceived policies and procedures (Bikos, 2021; Cohen et al., 2019; Paoline, 2003; Sanders et al., 2022; Silvestri, 2017), these events lack the support required and expected, resulting in further traumatization to the officers. Co-workers, supervisors, managers, and other employees further traumatize those police officers when they begin to struggle or are believed to have gone against the “Brotherhood” due to breaching a perceived or actual cultural pillar.

The intertwined and co-existing nature of these traumas within the policing context holds that neither a singular nor conjoint presentation suffices. Elements of the culture

of policing and its nuances bring forward a necessity to approach these traumas as a singular event that is more than the initial betrayal. Critical trauma theory and somatic-based understandings of trauma have given context to traumas being more than the moment, as the trauma repeats itself in the form of intrusive thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations (Caruth, 2001; Casper & Wertheimer, 2016; Haines, 2019; Herman, 1992; Levine, 2015; Van der Kolk, 2015). The impact of the rupture caused to the sanctuary by the betrayal is not contained within the moment. The deterioration of trust (Fetzner et al., 2016; Gobin & Freyd, 2014; Gómez & Gobin, 2024; Mitchell, 2024) carries forward, causing an unsettling of the officer's belief in their status and acceptance within the Brotherhood and, ultimately, questioning their personal safety and well-being. As a result, the policing institution is more aligned with a view and belief of it being a sanctuary, lending to the recognition that sanctuary betrayal trauma theory, rooted in the culture of policing, better encapsulates the betrayals transpiring in this context.

## CONCLUSION

Current research has shown that sanctuary trauma and institutional betrayal trauma transpire within the Canadian policing experience and are often presented separately. But when the culture of policing and its nuances are considered, these traumas are not occurring separately. They are co-existing traumas occurring within an institution that is also a sanctuary. As such, sanctuary betrayal trauma theory better stands for the experience of betrayal within a police institution or organization. This reframing would align with research showing the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences in police officers and has the potential to explain why officers who have been abused and traumatized remain as employees. Proposed research will explore sanctuary betrayal trauma theory and its influence on Canadian police officers via a phenomenological exploration of their experiences. Further, this research will explore what fuels the officers' belief that their police department was a sanctuary, affording protection and immunity, provided one remains loyal to the department and the police officers within and what caused the betrayal that resulted in the rupture.

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