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To cite this article: Matthew Morgan & Toby Miles-Johnson | (2022) Responding to persons with mental illness (PWMI): Police recruit perceptions of mental health response training and engagement, Cogent Social Sciences, 8:1, 2020469, DOI: [10.1080/23311886.2021.2020469](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.2020469)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.2020469>



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Published online: 19 Jan 2022.



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Received 9 November 2021
Accepted 15 December 2021

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LAW, CRIMINOLOGY & CRIMINAL JUSTICE | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Responding to persons with mental illness (PWMI): Police recruit perceptions of mental health response training and engagement

Matthew Morgan^{1*} and Toby Miles-Johnson²

Abstract: Many Australian police organisations embed mental health response training (MHRT) into their recruit training packages. Yet critics argue police officers are under-trained and ill-equipped to engage with persons with mental illness (PWMI) in crisis, and officers frequently police PWMI using discretionary techniques that are procedurally unfair and unjust. Applying a procedural justice lens, this research sought to better understand whether MHRT offered by one Australian state police organisation (de-identified as part of the ethics agreement) equips its recruits to engage appropriately with PWMI in future practice, and whether the MHRT effectively prepares recruits to use procedurally fair policing techniques when responding to PWMI in crisis. Conducting semi-structured interviews with recruits upon completion of the MHRT, this research determines that recruits are aware of their lack of knowledge regarding policing PWMI in crisis and are concerned that they may engage in differential policing because the MHRT has under-prepared them for future policing practice.

Subjects: Crime and Society; Crime Control - Criminology; Criminal Justice - Criminology; Criminological Psychology

Keywords: Police; mental health; procedural justice; training

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Matthew Morgan is an emerging policing scholar specialising in qualitative research. Associate Professor Toby Miles-Johnson has a national and international profile as a policing scholar specialising in quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Both authors are interested in how institutions such as police and other national/international security agencies, respond to and engage with diverse communities and people categorised as vulnerable or hard to reach when experiencing victimisation or when professional engagement occurs.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This research examines the effectiveness of police mental health training and whether it prepares police recruits to effectively respond to persons with mental illness during times of crisis. It analyses whether police recruits are trained to use policing practices and processes considered fair and just. The research was conducted with police recruits training in one of the largest police academies in Australia. Upon completion of the “mental health response training”, recruits were interviewed, and questions were asked to determine their perceptions of the training program and whether it had prepared them to respond to persons with mental illness in an appropriate manner. The research determines that police recruits are aware of their lack of knowledge regarding policing persons with mental illness, especially when they experience crisis. The research also determines that police recruits are not confident in their ability to police persons with mental illness fairly.

1. Introduction

Procedural justice policing describes people's perceptions of the treatment they receive during processes involving police decision making, specifically regarding whether police treatment received during interactions with the public is fair and just (Wood et al. (2020). Most police organisations across the Western world are familiar with procedural justice and its positive impact on public perceptions of police legitimacy and police interaction with the public (Mazerolle et al., 2014). Although most Western police organisations would consider themselves legitimate organisations, the police and public have often endured a turbulent relationship that has brought public perceptions of their legitimacy as agents of social control into disrepute (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). One key aspect of policing that has challenged public perceptions of police legitimacy is the procedurally unjust treatment of PWMI in crisis. Although police often respond fairly and professionally to PWMI in crisis, PWMI in crisis frequently describe feeling criminalised and stigmatised by the treatment they receive from police, especially when police respond to their crises using unnecessary hostile and heavy-handed police tactics (Bradbury et al., 2017). Critics of policing have argued the need for an increase in training techniques that harness policing strategies associated with procedural justice such as therapeutic de-escalation and tactical communications training (Wooldridge, 2000).

Police training that is underpinned by procedural justice principles (such as when police treat citizens with *trust*, *respect*, *neutrality* and allow citizens an opportunity to express their *voice*) is especially important given its potential to positively shape police-citizen interactions. Skogan et al. (2015) argues that police trainers and supervisors require procedural justice training just as much as recruits and police, so that its principles are practiced internally within the organisation as well as externally when officers engage with citizens. Police trainers and supervisors help define the ethos of the workplace, and studies suggest that procedural justice is most likely to be practiced by officers in the field when they themselves receive a combination of procedural justice training and procedurally just treatment by their supervisors within the police organisation (Owens et al., 2018; Skogan et al., 2015).

Police training begins in the academy where effective police academy training can form a solid foundation for professional police performance and is essential in building effective police-public relations; particularly when police engage with diverse groups of people (Miles-Johnson & Pickering, 2018). Police agencies across Australia, however, have been criticised for not providing their recruits or operational officers with effective MHRT. Critics also argue that officers exiting the academy are unable to appropriately respond to and de-escalate PWMI when in crisis (Clifford, 2010). Research consistently demonstrates that effective MHRT during the onset of police training and throughout an officer's career can enhance knowledge, attitude, skills, confidence, and satisfaction for police and other non-specialist mental health responders when engaging with PWMI (Caulfield et al., 2019). MHRT is, therefore, increasing in importance for police agencies around the world, and many Australian police organisations have implemented MHRT into their training programs.

Like most Western police services, Australian police services can spend anywhere between 10–30% of their time involved in the management of PWMI for a variety of reasons such as searching for PWMI who have absconded from psychiatric services, connecting PWMI to mental health services, and/or responding to mental health crises (Kruger, 2020). The ongoing police response to PWMI in crisis presents significant challenges for police officers, police organisations, and PWMI who encounter the police. For example, research suggests that when police respond to PWMI in crisis in Australia, PWMI often feel criminalised and degraded by the treatment they receive from police (Bradbury et al., 2017).

The mistreatment of PWMI by police as well as the prevalence whereby police encounter PWMI in the community raises questions regarding how police agencies provide MHRT for police recruits to ethically address, recognise, and de-escalate PWMI when in crisis. According to Basham (2014),

the academy is pivotal for increasing positive police perceptions of community-oriented policing, particularly regarding professional conduct for when police engage with diverse community members. Although academy training is not the only method for informing ethical and effective police practice, without robust guidance from police training programs, personal, structural, and situational influences can inform police discretionary decision-making behaviour and hinder the procedurally just treatment of PWMI in crisis (Bradbury et al., 2017).

To address this issue, empirical research examining how police MHRT increases police understanding and recognition of PWMI, and how it shapes de-escalation tactics, was undertaken at the police academy of a large Australian state police service (deidentified as part of an ethics agreement).¹ To determine the extent to which the academy MHRT teaches police recruits how to respond fairly, effectively, and professionally to PWMI in crisis, this research applies a procedural justice lens. As such, this study conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten police recruits two weeks after completion of MHRT at one of the largest Australian police academies. Whilst this study does not test the principles of procedural justice, it applies procedural justice principles as a lens to determine how police recruits perceive the effectiveness of the MHRT on their perceptions of procedurally just policing of PWMI in crisis as well as their perceptions of future engagement with PWMI once working in the field.

We argue that police MHRT which fails to prepare recruits to effectively recognise and appropriately manage PWMI in crisis is problematic, particularly when recruits are taught to also apply forceful and coercive tactics to situations involving PWMI, which are otherwise normally applied to situations involving offenders not identified as PWMI. Given Australian police recruits become fully operational officers upon graduation from the police academy and are required to police in a range of complex situations that often include PWMI, this research offers new insight into this hitherto under-researched area of recruit training.

1.1. Police recruit mental health response training, discretion, and persons with mental illness

In Australia, police recruits typically undertake between 24 and 33 weeks of theory and scenario-based training regarding acceptable and professional police practice with only minimal experience (or professional placement) in actual police stations (Miles-Johnson, 2019a). Based on theoretical policing approaches as well as information imparted from senior officers regarding crisis management of PWMI, all Australian police organisations have embedded MHRT curricula into mandatory academy training programs. Facilitated over discretionary time periods, many MHRT police training programs in Australia are, however, brief, usually offered over two-day or five-day training blocks, and typically held during one week of police training.

Therefore, critics argue that recruits only receive cursory MHRT, offering little information and accurate knowledge, and as such, are inadequately trained and heavily underprepared to recognise and appropriately manage PWMI in crisis (Fisher et al., 2019). Not having a proper understanding or awareness of all the issues a PWMI in crisis may be experiencing, underprepares recruits as they enter the field (Clifford, 2010). Policing response to PWMI in crisis often occurs without the assistance of mental health professionals, it is likely, therefore, that recruits will differentially police PWMI in crisis, thereby leading to procedurally unjust policing (Clifford, 2010). Research suggests that police often misinterpret the idiosyncrasies of a mental health crisis as behaviour that is dangerous and in need of coercive control, whereas health professionals often appropriately interpret such behaviour as in need of care (Kesic et al., 2013; Ruiz & Miller, 2004).

Effective recruit MHRT has the potential to appropriately control officer discretion when recruits enter the field and engage with PWMI, and can, therefore, enhance ethical police treatment of PWM (Coleman & Cotton, 2014). However, PWMI in Australia have often complained about the manner whereby police officers respond to their mental health crises in the community, especially regarding harsh, dehumanising, and criminalising police treatment (Bradbury et al., 2017). The

mistreatment of PWMI by police officers in Australian communities raises questions about the effectiveness and rigour of MHRT police recruits receive at the outset of their policing careers and whether the training they receive is underpinned by procedural justice principles.

There is a small body of research to suggest that police training underpinned by procedural justice principles can positively shape police behaviour in practice (see, Owens et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2020). It is widely believed that public perceptions of procedurally just policing are measured by the presence (or absence) of police committing to sincerely emphasising four key principles during engagement with citizens—*trust, dignity and respect, neutrality, and voice* (Goodman-Delahunty, 2010). Police demonstrating *trust* is regarding the level of confidence the public has that their concerns, well-being, and interests of the community are taken seriously by police. Police treating citizens with *dignity and respect* is regarded by the public when the police behave in a manner that is “professional” by safeguarding the rights and dignity of all citizens. Police demonstrations of *neutrality* is perceived by the public when police procedures are deemed to be transparent, consistent, even-handed, and without bias. Police allowing citizens a *voice* is perceived when police actively listen to citizens and allow community participation in police decision-making processes (Goodman-Delahunty, 2010).

Despite critics arguing that there are limitations with measuring the effects of procedural justice on police-citizen engagement (Nagin & Telep, 2020), the theorised outcomes of procedurally just policing on police-citizen engagement have enjoyed significant empirical support in Australia (and globally) since its inception (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Murphy, 2009). For example, central tenets of procedural justice theory consistently argue that procedurally just policing with citizens has the potential to enhance public perceptions of: (1) police legitimacy (2) fair police conduct; (3) confidence and trust in police; (4) harnessing police-citizen cooperative relationships; (5) satisfaction with police interactions; and (6) in some instances, procedurally just treatment of citizens may improve voluntary compliance with police directives and the law (Murphy & Tyler, 2017).

It has also been argued that vulnerable individuals (such as PWMI) pay particular attention to fair police treatment because many people from marginalised groups have had problematic histories regarding police interaction or have low expectations of police engagement based on their tenuous identity status in society (De Tribolet-Hardy et al., 2015; Wood & Watson, 2017). For example, research suggests that when police engage with PWMI using procedural justice techniques, PWMI often have a better emotional response, feel less coerced, offer less resistance, and cooperate more with police (see, Wood & Watson, 2017). Interactions between PWMI and police can sometimes result in violence, especially when police engage using dominant hostile styles of policing (Ruiz & Miller, 2004), accordingly, procedurally just policing techniques applied to situations involving PWMI may offer therapeutic outcomes for both PWMI and police. Therefore, police organisations should continually emphasise to their officers and trainers the unique “selling points” of procedural justice, by asserting that following such principles in practice will also benefit the police by enhancing officer safety, encouraging citizen co-operation, and increasing voluntary compliance with police directives (Skogan et al., 2015).

It is reasonable to determine that MHRT training based on the principles of procedural justice is likely to better equip recruits when responding to PWMI in crisis, because PWMI are likely to value procedural justice policing more than other members of the general public (see, Wood & Watson, 2017). Although research assessing the efficacy of procedurally just police MHRT is limited, a handful of research suggests that police can be trained to use procedural justice when engaging with the general public. In accordance with the theorised outcomes of procedural justice, this research also contends that such training is beneficial for police-citizen encounters in terms of minimising police complaints, use of force, and citizen arrests (see, Antrobus et al., 2019; Owens et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2020). Police MHRT and engagement underpinned by principles of procedural justice may, therefore, be particularly beneficial for vulnerable persons such as PWMI when they encounter the police (Wood & Watson, 2017).

Inadequate recruit MHRT is likely to result in recruits making incorrect decisions or taking inappropriate action when confronted by a PWMI in crisis once they become operational officers. Without a deeper understanding of the nuances of crises a PWMI can experience, police responses to PWMI in crisis may be based on the individual officer's interpretation (or misinterpretation) of the situation, and the discretion afforded officers in this situation could result in inappropriate policing. If recruits are aware of the different types of situations, they are likely to experience when policing PWMI in crisis and their knowledge base is underpinned by procedural justice principles, it is reasonable to determine that the mistakes they make (such as not recognising a mental health crisis and criminalising PWMI in crisis) during engagement will be reduced.

Almost all police work involving police-citizen engagement requires officers to determine the outcome of a situation based on their recollection of training, as well as the information contained within police operational guidelines, and their own discretionary decision making (Miles-Johnson, 2019b). The nature of police work is that it often occurs away from public view, and at times, occurs without the presence of senior officers who may monitor the professionalism of officers and adherence to codes of conduct (Miles-Johnson, 2019b). Previous research determines that police misconduct is likely to occur when an officer works in isolation without direct supervision, is confronted by high-stress and/or threatening situations, or is challenged by managing members of the public who do not fit with normative expectations of behaviour (such as PWMI in crisis).

When officers police in situations that require discretionary policing practices or decision-making processes, it is argued that an officer's level of explicit bias (based on hostile stereotypes) or implicit bias (stereotyping certain groups in relation to crime or related traits such as violence or hostility) will also influence their decision-making processes (Fridell, 2017; Miles-Johnson, 2019b). This raises questions regarding how officers will react to PWMI in crisis if they do not recall (or possess) appropriate knowledge regarding engagement with citizens in these situations and what this means if it is the first time an officer experiences policing in this situation if they are inadequately trained to deal with the situation.

The expectations and the needs of PWMI in crisis places Australian police organisations in an underlying state of tension because the array of challenges officers will face when engaging with PWMI will grow as the officer's police an array of crises (each with differing levels of complexity) and interact with different PWMI in different contexts. Individuals identified by differences in behaviour or identity have consistently poor relations with police, often complaining about differential policing and disparate treatment during police-citizen encounters (see, Miles-Johnson, 2016a, 2019b). This is not to suggest that policing practice has not improved in Australia; there are numerous Australian police organisations which implement positive community-engagement strategies or who employ liaison officers specifically to work with minority groups such as PWMI. Minority groups and members of marginalised communities have, however, consistently complained about poor police relations and a lack of understanding from officers regarding their communities, identities, and the specific needs they have when interacting with police (Miles-Johnson, 2016a, 2019a). How police officers engage with PWMI in crisis conveys messages about equitable and procedurally fair policing within defined normative expectations associated with policing practice for PWMI and other members of society.

As such, it is imperative that recruits are given appropriate mentoring and training regarding policing of PWMI in crisis, particularly at the onset of their training and at the start of their careers so that recruits are provided with essential tools to respond appropriately and equitably to PWMI in crisis. Given that police work is subject to discretionary decision making (Miles-Johnson, 2016b, 2019a), determining whether police recruits can recognise procedurally just policing techniques within MHRT will offer insight into the factors which may influence recruit decision making when engaging with PWMI in crisis upon entering the field. By analysing the responses from recruits having completed the MHRT, a deeper comprehension of the factors which may influence their perceptions of PWMI as well as their perceptions of future police-citizen interaction with PWMI in

crisis can be understood. Applying tenets of procedural justice as a framework to guide this study, will also help determine whether principles of procedural justice contained within the content of the MHRT are effective in preparing recruits to engage appropriately with PWMI in crisis as well as offer insight into this hitherto under-researched area of recruit training.

2. Methods

Semi-structured interviews with ten police recruits were conducted to better understand their perceptions and experiences of police MHRT. Interview participation occurred two weeks after the recruits completed specific MHRT whilst at the academy. All the participants were in one recruit squadron nearing the completion of their 25-week academy program. Seven of the participants were male and three were female. Over a period of two days, the recruits received a total of eleven hours and fifteen minutes (excluding breaks) of classroom-based (theoretical) MHRT. The first day of the MHRT consisted of five hours and fifteen minutes of theory, whilst the second day of MHRT consisted of three hours and thirty minutes of legislation-based computer training, as well as an additional two hours and thirty minutes of theory (relating to the MHRT content covered in the first day). Although the questions used in the semi-structured interviews did not explicitly discuss elements of procedural justice potentially present in the MHRT, each question was designed to elicit data that assessed perceptual aspects of the MHRT that may facilitate or hinder procedurally just policing techniques in police responses to PWMI. The interview duration times ranged from 20 minutes to 45 minutes each.

All the interviews were recorded on to a digital audio recording device and were subsequently transcribed verbatim into Word documents. The Word documents were then inputted into Nvivo 11 to facilitate the data analysis. Grounded Theory analysis (Oktay, 2012) was used as a systematic method to analyse the data, and to determine the procedural justice focus contained within the MHRT and the presence of elements of procedural justice within each of the interviewee responses. Grounded theory is an inductive approach to collecting and analysing data in which theory is generated from data and coding begins with data collection (Akiko, 2018). We specifically adopted a “modified grounded theory approach” whereby concepts were formed from interpretations of the data by using an analysis worksheet (Nvivo; Kinoshita, 2003). As data collection and analysis can occur simultaneously, themes that emerged in early interviews were explored in later interviews (Akiko, 2018). As such, a two-stage data analytical process was followed whereby key concepts were formed using an *open coding* method and themes were categorised using a *selective coding* method. Once all the key concepts were formed into categories, three core themes emerged from the recruit interviews which include: the recruit’s perceptions of the MHRT; the recruit’s perceptions of PWMI; and the recruit’s perceptions of future policing of PWMI in crisis. Whilst only ten interviews were conducted with recruits, the saturation of the themes was reached because clear recurring themes were present in the data, and the analysis of the data reached a point where no new information was discovered. Each of the themes were assessed in relation to the procedural justice framework to articulate the meaningful discussion that follows each of the findings. The research team was also very aware of their subjectivity and how this may influence interpretation of the data. Careful consideration of interpreter bias and how this may shape interpretation and meaning within the data were therefore, applied to each analytical process and to all the findings considered for inclusion in this research.

In accordance with Human Research Ethics Committee approval (approval number 1900000018), participation in the semi-structured interviews was entirely voluntary, and all participants in the interviews were de-identified. To de-identify police recruits in this study, this paper uses non-gender specific pronouns such as “they” and “their” because specific information regarding ethnicity gender or age of the participants in relation to the responses could potentially identify the recruits. It was also acknowledged that the ethnicity, gender, or age of the recruits may also shape their perceptions of the effectiveness of the MHRT on their perceptions of procedurally just policing of PWMI in crisis as well as their perceptions of future engagement with PWMI once working in the field.

3. Findings

3.1. *The recruit's perceptions of the mental health response training (MHRT)*

Whilst the recruits were aware that the MHRT formed a core component of the recruit training curriculum, some of the recruits' responses reflected their concerns regarding the amount of time spent on the two-day MHRT at the academy (two days of the 25-week training program), which they felt was lacking in curricular and pedagogical content. Many of the recruits discussed how they needed more MHRT to appropriately respond to PWMI. For example, Recruit 1 stated:

I think there needs to be a more in-depth [training], not to make us like psychologists or anything, but if you're working with these people every day, you never know what you're going to get. (Recruit 1).

Some of the recruits also expressed a need for more ongoing MHRT and most of the recruits provided suggestions for extending and improving the MHRT at the academy for the benefit of future recruits. The recruits expressed a desire for adding role-play scenarios as well as the perspectives of mental health professionals and PWMI into the MHRT. For example, Recruit 2 discussed the potential benefits of including the voices of PWMI into the MHRT.

I'd like people with actual mental health issues, if they're willing to come in and talk to us, to say you know if they've been dealt with by the police, how it was for them, you know? (Recruit 2).

This quote provided by Recruit 2 describes their desire to learn from PWMI to gain the voice of PWMI who have interacted with the police. Inviting other stakeholders into the MHRT who can offer nuanced perspectives from organisations or PWMI external to the police could be a fruitful strategy for enhancing procedural justice within the content. If formal diversity awareness information is provided (in the MHRT) from one group to another, understanding of intergroup differences may be enhanced, thus potentially diminishing any implicit biases in the minds of the recruits towards PWMI and other diverse group members (Miles-Johnson, 2016a). Although some of the recruits expressed how the stories of a PWMI could create a more humanising learning experience regarding the detriments of having a mental illness and how this may affect interactions with the police, the recruits also acknowledged how stressful and confronting this may be for a PWMI to facilitate during the class.

The recruits also foresaw difficulties with implementing a role-play scenario into the MHRT at the academy. Although the recruits acknowledged the benefits of incorporating practical learning exercises into the MHRT (such as making the content more engaging and interactive), they expressed how difficult this would be to enact, given the diverse and sensitive nature of mental illness and complexity of policing responses when responding to PWMI. For example, Recruit 8 stated:

It's hard to do, because I think it's hard to act, because you don't want to be disrespectful to the people who have got the mental illness, or somebody who might have a family member who's got a mental illness. (Recruit 8).

By implementing the recruits' suggestions for more MHRT may enhance the overall mental health response curriculum at the academy. Training scenarios that mimic real life situations have the potential to enhance adult learning through physically applying skills learnt in the curriculum (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). For example, research has demonstrated how mental health response scenario-based training involving trained actors has the potential to augment police compassion and communication competency when interacting with PWMI (Fisher et al., 2019). The inclusion of first-hand accounts from PWMI within police MHRT has also been shown to enhance compassion, communication skills, and empathy in police officers when interacting with PWMI

(Dempsey et al., 2020). Empathy is considered a key tool required to facilitate procedurally just responses to PWMI in crisis, because empathy is essential for decision makers (police) to allow citizens a voice, treat citizens with respect, and genuinely demonstrate trustworthy motives to citizens (Pearson, 2020).

Although the recruits stated that there was no scenario-based training within the specific MHRT, some recruits discussed how aspects of their “Operational Skills Training” (OST), involved a role-play scenario with an actor posing as a PWMI, threatening to self-harm with a knife. The OST is a significant component of the recruits’ academy training which teaches the recruits police use-of-force tactics (such as weapons training) and is delivered several weeks prior to the MHRT. The recruits who discussed this mental health related OST scenario emphasised how they perceived it to be out of context, because it was delivered several weeks prior to the core MHRT. Without appropriate contextualisation with the MHRT, this scenario training caused confusion amongst the recruits. For example, Recruit 4 discusses how the recruits were unaware of how to appropriately manage the mental health related scenario in the OST, due to it being significantly misaligned with the MHRT.

So, when we did do a lot of physical scenario-based stuff, we hadn’t done the mental health training ... I think that would probably be the better way, is if you could do mental health in phase 2 or before the skills phase. (Recruit 4).

Although the police will deal with a disproportionate number of violent PWMI by virtue of their profession in maintaining public order and safety, the police will largely encounter PWMI who are non-violent during police-citizen encounters (Kesic et al., 2013), with research consistently stating PWMI are not more prone to violence than the general public (Copeland & Heilemann, 2008; Pulay et al., 2008). Exclusively including violent role-play exercises of PWMI in the OST, and not including any role-play exercises in the MHRT, has potentially negative impacts for the perception of PWMI, especially regarding the common misconception that PWMI are inherently dangerous (Bell & Palmer-Conn, 2018). The fact that the OST (involving violent PWMI role-play scenarios) was delivered before the MHRT may instil negative connotations of PWMI (in relation to violent behaviour) in the minds of the recruits, thus potentially diminishing notions of procedural justice policing during police-PWMI interactions.

All the recruits discussed how the academy teaches communication tactics to be the first police use-of-force option when de-escalating PWMI during a mental health crisis. Some of the recruits drew upon specific communication strategies taught during the MHRT to help achieve trust, rapport, and positive behavioural change regarding de-escalating mental health crises. For example, Recruit 8 discussed how being calm, patient, and encouraging open dialogue with PWMI were key communication aspects of the MHRT.

The way that you speak to them a bit softer, a bit calmer, like trying to relax them down. So yeah, I would say patience is obviously a big one as well. (Recruit 8).

It stands to reason therefore, that if recruit’s use effective communication tactics taught within the MHRT, the MHRT has the potential to facilitate training which incorporates procedurally just policing techniques in police-citizen interactions that the recruits can use once they become operational. All the recruits acknowledged the importance of these procedural justice principles, with some recruits stating how important “trust” is in helping them respond positively to de-escalate a PWMI, and how important it is for building reputational trust between officers and citizens. However, most of the recruits also perceived the MHRT to be useful in teaching police powers for detaining and transporting PWMI under relevant legislation, but not so useful in teaching them how to appropriately de-escalate a mental health crisis in practice. For example, Recruit 9 described how they would only become competent as mental health first responders once operational and working as police officers, by learning through experience, from senior officers, and through trial and error.

... that will come on the job as you gain some experience, and you gain some confidence from that I suspect. I think if you said you would be able to go out and de-escalate a situation straight away, I think you might be a bit naïve. (Recruit 9).

Several recruits also perceived that the academy is not appropriately training the recruits to police in the “real-world”. The recruits stated that because the academy only provided basic and generalised training, once policing in specific rural or urban areas within the Australian state, they would have to adapt to variances in resource disposal and policing culture by learning from their superiors and field officers. This potentially has implications for ethical police practice in relation to specific and minority communities (such as Indigenous and remote communities) across Australia. Responses to PWMI in remote and Indigenous communities provide unique challenges for police, due to a lack of specialist mental health services, and the prevalence of substance and mental disorders in Indigenous and remote communities across Australia (Pink & Allbon, 2008). The academy MHRT neglected to address these cultural and geographical nuances in teaching ethical and procedurally just police responses to PWMI in specific rural and Indigenous communities.

3.2. The recruit's perceptions of persons with mental illness (PWMI)

Most of the recruits stated how their perceptions of mental illness and PWMI positively changed during and after completion of the MHRT, such as having a better understanding of some types of mental illness, being more compassionate towards PWMI, and having increased levels of awareness regarding how pervasive mental illness is in Australian society. The quote from Recruit 3 exemplifies the perceived positive change in attitude towards PWMI following the MHRT.

It's certainly given me a bit more of an understanding ... the training has made me a lot more aware of it, and I guess the relevance of it because that person is someone's son, it's someone's brother, it's someone's father. (Recruit 3).

This positive change in the recruits' perceptions towards PWMI is important considering previous research demonstrating that the police often harbour stigmatising views of PWMI which parallel public misconceptions (Bell & Palmer-Conn, 2018). It may be reasonable to determine that the changes in the recruits' perceptions of PWMI at an early stage in the recruits' policing careers could have the potential to resonate into operational policing and may facilitate use of procedurally just treatment of PWMI during police-citizen encounters. MHRT enhances police empathy towards PWMI, it has, therefore, the potential to lead to enhanced communication skills and reduction of police use-of-force when de-escalating mental health crises (Dempsey et al., 2020).

Completion of the police MHRT also helped change the perceptions of the recruits regarding whether responding to PWMI should be a core component of the policing mandate. Most of the recruits had limited knowledge regarding how much managing PWMI in the community would become a core component of their job. The only exception to this lack of knowledge were two recruits who had immediate family members with serious mental illnesses. The lack of awareness regarding how much police work involves responding to PWMI is significant considering one of the largest Australian police organisations responded to 54,571 mental health related incidents in 2019 (McCusker, 2021).

Whilst many of the recruits stated how their perceptions of mental illness and PWMI changed during and after completion of the MHRT, some of the recruits perceived other recruits in their training cohort (and their respective attitudes towards PWMI) reflected otherwise. For example, some of the recruits disclosed that the language used by some of the recruits to refer to policing of PWMI may challenge their ability to demonstrate empathy and build trust with PWMI once the recruits become operational police officers. Two recruits suggested that other police recruits refer to PWMI as “spoons”, applying the derogatory terminology to describe PWMI as not being able to use (or be trusted to use correctly) a knife and fork (this being associated with normative physical and/or mental behaviour and/or capabilities, as well as associating mental illness with

“dangerousness”; Markowitz, 2005). Such individuals, therefore, are given a spoon, thereby associating mental illness with non-normative physical or mental behaviour and/or capabilities (Feldman & Crandall, 2007). For example, Recruit 2 divulges how the recruits consider this derogatory association between PWMI and spoons as a joke at the expense of PWMI.

So, they [the recruits] still think it’s a big joke a lot of the time and they’re all referred to as ‘spoons’ because you can’t trust them with a knife and fork and that’s the big joke. (Recruit 2).

According to Waddington (1999a), such “canteen banter” is common within the privacy of police agencies. Young (1995) argues that flippant language regarding responding to complex and emotional provoking situations pervades police cultural discourse and serves as a boundary between the police and the public to help “make light” of difficult situations. The use of the term “spoon” has the potential to dehumanise PWMI, at least in the everyday language used by recruits and therefore, potentially, in future interaction between the recruits and operational police officers when engaging with PWMI. How police argot shapes police discretion when interacting with minority and diverse groups is an area of policing that has been widely researched within police organisations (Waddington, 1999a). It is, however, less known how this argot may shape policing of PWMI, especially because scholars have argued that there is a discrepancy between police cultural language used within the workplace and police action (Waddington, 1999b). If this talk and attitude permeates police practice, it may have implications for police practice and a lack of procedural justice when police interact with PWMI. If the police do not show genuine concern towards PWMI during police-citizen engagement, because police perceive PWMI cannot be “trusted with a knife and fork” and are as such referred to as an object rather than an individual, PWMI may be treated in a procedurally unfair manner. It also highlights the perception that PWMI are dangerous and unpredictable.

The perceptions of the dangerousness of PWMI are also emphasised within the academy training during some of the OST scenario role-plays, whereby the recruits described that there were role-play situations involving a suicidal person holding a knife to their throat. The recruits perceived the actor in this role play scenario to be a suicidal PWMI. In these instances, the facilitators teach the recruits to immediately draw their gun to manage the dangerousness of the situation and the PWMI. For example, Recruit 4 said:

In the skills phase, we practiced, we had somebody who had a knife and was threatening self-harm. At first yes, we had our guns out because they had a knife out, and we’re taught that that person can get to you, like 10 meters away, they can get to you and kill you. (Recruit 4).

Several recruits stated that the facilitators emphasised how officer safety, and the safety of others around, takes precedence in situations involving police engagement with a person with an edged weapon. Some recruits reported that the training directive to draw a firearm on an armed PWMI in crisis potentially overrides effective communication strategies that may peacefully de-escalate the situation (especially if the individual is threatening suicide). This may be problematic for recruits to utilise procedurally just policing techniques and to build *trust* and rapport with a PWMI in crisis whilst having their gun drawn. For example, Recruit 4 stated:

It’s going to be difficult to try and convince somebody with mental health issues that they need to put a knife down and make themselves totally vulnerable when there’s a gun drawn. (Recruit 4).

This training directive may have criminalising implications regarding how recruits interact with and de-escalate PWMI, and whether they will apply procedurally just policing techniques once operational and working as police officers. Enabling recruits to build *trust*, thereby allowing the individual

a voice, and respectfully treating an armed PWMI threatening suicide, will conceivably be problematic when perceived citizen aggression is responded to by aggression from an officer in these instances (Usher & Trueman, 2015). Although some of the recruits did state that mental illnesses comprise a broad spectrum of unique disorders, most of the recruits classified PWMI as being a risk to society through unpredictability and violence which may homogenise PWMI into one category of “dangerousness”. Considering police often interpret the unfamiliar idiosyncrasies of a mental health crisis as dangerous and in need of control instead of care, the recruits’ negative perceptions of PWMI may inform these negative police interpretations of PWMI in the community and how they perceive future policing of PWMI.

3.3. The recruit's perceptions of future policing of persons with mental illness (PWMI) in crisis

Analysis of the data indicated that most of the recruits began to understand how ubiquitous police management of PWMI is, and how, throughout the MHRT, they began to realise that police responses to PWMI is a core component of the policing mandate. For example, Recruit 1 revealed how they now have a better understanding of the police role in responding to PWMI, and how it is an integral aspect of general duty policing, and how important this role is when responding to and de-escalating mental health crises.

I knew it was part of the job, but now I’m very aware of how much of the job it is, and how important it all is. (Recruit 1).

Some recruits, however, described how they do not think police response to PWMI should be a core component of the duties of an operational police officer. Recruit 6 described how spending a disproportionate amount of time policing PWMI in the community is an inappropriate use of police resources, whilst Recruit 7 stated that policing PWMI was not the reason why they joined the police.

... I think our time could definitely be spent elsewhere ... I think there’s definitely times where police are having to spend more resources because the mentally ill people aren’t getting the help, or the whatever they need. (Recruit 6).

... you join the police really to fight crime, don’t you? It wasn’t why I joined the police to deal with mental health, so not to the extent that it is. I think for safety issues, of course ... (Recruit 7).

Despite some scholars arguing that police culture might be changing to incorporate a more accepting attitude of policing vulnerability (see, Charman, 2017), this disapproving attitude of responding to PWMI, and level of unawareness regarding managing PWMI as a core police duty, resonates with Reiner’s (1992) concepts of “cop culture”, demonstrating how perceptions of the service may still be epitomised by traditional police notions of maintaining order and fighting crime. Under the concept of cop culture, welfare duties are absent within traditional notions of policing. Although most of the recruits stated they now accept and believe responding to PWMI to be an integral aspect of general policing duties, some recruits are reluctant to accept this as part of their future role and were unaware of this aspect of police work prior to joining the service. A lack of belief or acceptance in caring for PWMI as part of their future police mandate, may negatively impact the sincerity of policing in practice and hinder procedurally just policing of PWMI in crisis. Research shows that PWMI who perceive police to be untrustworthy, insincere, and unsympathetic in their willingness to help, has led to derogatory police treatment during interactions with PWMI (Herrington et al., 2009).

Despite some of the recruits’ disapproving attitude towards responding to PWMI in the future as a core policing duty, most of the recruits were accepting of this role after receiving the MHRT. The lack of MHRT however, coupled with its disjointed place within the recruit training program, may

have implications regarding how the recruits perceive their competency in dealing with PWMI once operational. After completing the MHRT, most of the recruits did not feel competent in de-escalating a mental health crisis once operational. For example, Recruit 8 stated:

I know by the book how to do it, but do I know how to do it? Well, I haven't done one yet, so technically speaking, no I don't know how to do it. (Recruit 8).

These perceptions expressed by the recruits regarding a lack of competency in appropriately de-escalating a PWMI in crisis once operational, could in part be due to an overreliance on theory-based MHRT. Given the recruits become operational police officers the day after they leave the academy (albeit under the supervision of a senior officer), a perceived lack of confidence in practical (rather than theoretical) de-escalation of a PWMI may have implications for the recruits' competency and whether they will apply procedurally just policing techniques once operational.

The recruits are supervised by a field officer following graduation from the academy. Yet, they will be required to attend many policing situations which are likely to involve PWMI whereby the decisions they make will either be based on recalling the training they received or discretionary decision making. Given the initial training the recruits received prior to the MHRT (under the OST)—whereby they frequently practiced drawing a firearm in role-play scenarios involving an armed and dangerous PWMI—it is concerning that several recruits preconceived future policing of PWMI to be dangerous. These perceptions were further exemplified by several of the recruits stating that they determined PWMI to pose an “extreme risk” to society, which draws upon preconceived notions of the unpredictability of PWMI when in a mental health crisis. For example, Recruit 1 stated how they perceive PWMI to be extremely risky and unpredictable.

I think they can pose up to an extreme risk, because even like if you get your homicides and stuff, a lot of the time mental illness is actually backing that as well. And what some of these people who are mentally ill who try and achieve suicide by cop. (Recruit 1).

Most of the recruits discussed how the riskiest PWMI are those suffering symptoms associated with psychoses, such as delusional behaviour. For example, Recruit 3 stated:

You've just got to be prepared for everything. In there, when they are suffering an episode in their head, what they are seeing is real. It is as real to them as our perception of reality as well. And that doesn't give us any insight into how they are going to behave. Yeah, I think unpredictability is probably the key point there. (Recruit 3).

Although some PWMI suffering psychoses may be violent, such negative and stereotypical perceptions of PWMI suffering psychosis may lead to unnecessary heavy-handed and procedurally unjust responses from the recruits once operational. Regardless of the high-risk perceptions of PWMI indicated by the recruits, some of the recruits raised several significant points that may build *trust* and *rapport* with PWMI and facilitate use of procedurally just treatment of PWMI during future police-citizen encounters. For example, some of the recruits discussed procedurally just policing techniques in police-citizen interactions through using *voice* (actively listening and affording the individual a voice in decision making); building *trust* (demonstrating empathy and building *rapport*); demonstrating *neutrality* (providing consistent and unbiased treatment in interactions with PWMI); and, demonstrating *dignity and respect* (using professional and respectful communication in interactions with PWMI). For example, Recruit 7 said:

If you can create *rapport* with someone, it makes the whole process way easier, much easier than jumping on them and slapping the cuffs on them, throwing them in the back. (Recruit 7).

The notion of building rapport or *trust* as a valuable policing commodity reflects key procedural justice debates in ensuring co-operation and building police legitimacy with diverse groups of people (see, Miles-Johnson & Pickering, 2018). Whilst this finding contrasts with some of the findings from the preceding section, whereby the recruits emphasised mistrust for PWMI (espoused in derogatory language) perceiving PWMI to be high-risk, overall, most of the recruits believed communication strategies to be a fundamental prerequisite to building trust, which may in turn influence their perceptions of PWMI as well as their perceptions of future police-citizen interaction with PWMI in crisis.

4. Limitations

First, the research only analysed the interview responses from recruits training at one Australian state police organisation. As such, further research should be conducted with other recruits training in different Australian state police organisations to determine if the findings in this study are representative of all Australian recruits. Second, whilst the study considered the responses of recruits, the inclusion of operational general duties police officers in the research would also offer further insight into policing of PWMI and the effectiveness of the MHRT on procedurally fair policing. Third, whilst this study was not able to collect data from PWMI who have experienced police engagement during times of crisis,² the inclusion of PWMI who have experienced these situations could offer valuable information regarding policing. Despite these limitations, this study provides important insights into this hitherto under-researched area regarding recruit's perceptions of PWMI, the MHRT they received, and how this may shape their perceptions of future engagement with PWMI in crisis.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicate that effective MHRT has the potential to appropriately and positively shape police discretion, police practice, and perceptions of police legitimacy when officers encounter PWMI in the community. This is particularly salient when MHRT encompasses key elements from the procedural justice framework. MHRT that effectively reflects ethical police procedures in real-world policing contexts has the potential to mitigate inappropriate police discretionary behaviour and enhance appropriate de-escalation tactics for police when interacting with PWMI (Caulfield et al., 2019). For the MHRT to mirror the reality of operational police procedures, it requires MHRT to be dynamic and flexible enough to account for the district variations in police resources, different cultural and minority groups, and geographical locations.

Critics argue that differential policing of PWMI as well as police overuse of discretion when engaging with PWMI in crisis is an outcome of cursory and inadequate police MHRT (Fisher et al., 2019). This study certainly supports this idea because the findings indicate that most of the recruits believed that the MHRT was inadequate as a competency training tool. The recruits perceived that they are ill-prepared to respond to PWMI in crisis, particularly given the disconnect they observed between different aspects of police training they received prior to the MHRT. Given the purpose of police training is to inform professional police practice, it is concerning that the recruits were confused regarding how best to interact with PWMI in crisis and what type of "professional" police practice would be appropriate to do so.

To effectively embed a better understanding of the mental health response role within the policing mandate, ample time and resources are required by police organisations to train recruits to appropriately manage a diverse range of PWMI in the community, particularly during times of mental health crisis. The increasingly professionalised role of the police requires newly sworn officers to respond to a range of situations involving vulnerable persons in need (Morgan & Paterson, 2017). Considering the recruits become operational general duties police officers the day after they leave the academy (albeit with a senior officer acting as mentor), this lack of perceived competency is concerning, especially because it may negatively impact the recruit's

ability to recognise PWMI, communicate effectively with PWMI, and therapeutically de-escalate PWMI in a procedurally just manner.

Procedurally just policing is valued by PWMI, which is demonstrated by research suggesting that PWMI have a better emotional response, feel less coerced, offer less resistance, and cooperate more with police when police engage using procedural justice (Wood & Watson, 2017). MHRT which reflects procedurally fair policing practice has, therefore, the potential to mitigate inappropriate police discretionary behaviour and enhance appropriate and therapeutic de-escalation tactics (Caulfield et al., 2019). Yet most of the recruits perceived that the content of the MHRT curriculum offered an unrealistic version of operational police practice and had not effectively prepared them for the realities of policing a PWMI in crisis. Almost all the recruits did however perceive that effective communication could be used as a primary police use-of-force option and a key de-escalation tactic when policing PWMI in crisis. Effective communication training, as well as an emphasis on building *trust* and *rapport* with PWMI in all training aspects at the academy, potentially nurtures a procedural justice philosophy across the organisation (Miles-Johnson & Pickering, 2018).

Instilling effective communication tactics into operational police practice from the MHRT is, however, problematic, particularly considering that the MHRT does not enhance levels of trust recruits have in PWMI or in their ability to therapeutically de-escalate a PWMI in crisis. Homogenising perceptions of PWMI as untrustworthy, unpredictable, and inherently dangerous, as well as all the violent training scenarios disproportionately used in other parts of the recruit training curriculum highlighting PWMI as threatening, may also reinforce the lack of trust recruits have for future policing of PWMI and in their abilities to de-escalate a PWMI in crisis; especially given the absence of non-violent training scenarios involving PWMI in the MHRT. Achieving a balance between the fair treatment of PWMI and the security of the responding officer at a training level and in the minds of recruits may be problematic considering the limitations with the MHRT and conflicting notions regarding communicative and combative de-escalation tactics taught within the academy. It is vital that recruits find this balance so that they use procedurally just policing techniques. Without this balance, recruits perceive that they are likely to engage in differential policing of PWMI in the future, which may result in a lack of policing under procedural justice guidelines once the recruits become operational.

Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information

Cite this article as: Responding to persons with mental illness (PWMI): Police recruit perceptions of mental health response training and engagement, Matthew Morgan & Toby Miles-Johnson, *Cogent Social Sciences* (2022), 8: 2020469.

Notes

1. The research was conducted in accordance with the Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee approval and was deemed low negligible risk (1900000018). It was also approved by the reciprocal research committee of the police organisation.

2. Data collected from PWMI was prohibited by the ethics agreement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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