



## TRUST IN PSYCHOLOGISTS AND IN PEERS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT ORGANISATIONS



**Tatyana Grishkina**  
Latvian State Police  
Latvia

**Abstract:** This article summarises the main findings of a CEPOL pre-course survey (CEPOL course No 50/2015/ *European Medical and Psychological Experts' Network for Law Enforcement*). The main purpose of the survey was to increase awareness of factors facilitating trustful professional relationships between police officers and providers of psychological support in law enforcement organisations. Twenty-five countries participated in the survey: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, The Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland and Turkey. Factors like confidentiality, availability, empathy and information were identified as important ones for trustful relations between police officers and providers of psychological support in law enforcement organisations.

**Keywords:** trustful relationships; psychological support; peer support; law enforcement.

### INTRODUCTION

Police work is highly demanding as police officers are often exposed to extremely stressful, traumatic situations. Police officers around the world acknowledge that their work is challenging (Andersen et al., 2015). But police officers are often resistant to traditional psychotherapy and have idea that 'mental help' implies weakness and lack of ability to do the job (Miller, 1995). Trust is crucial element in providing effective psychotherapy to police officers (Silva, 1991, as mentioned in Miller, 1995). In psychotherapy there is general agreement that the relationship quality between therapist and client strongly correlates with clients' improvements; it is a key factor in determining the effectiveness of the therapeutic work (Beutler et al., 2004, as mentioned in Mearns and Cooper, 2010). Meanwhile police officers have a strong sense of self-sufficiency and usually insist on solving their problems by themselves, which is why there are large difficulties with trust (Miller, 1995).

Trust means that one partner (*trustor*) is willing to rely on the actions of another (trustee). The *trustor* abandons the control over actions and can be uncertain about the outcome. The

uncertainty involves the risk of failure or harm to the *trustor* if the trustee will not behave as desired (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). But the therapeutic relationship does not reflect the same trust as a child has to a parent — both client and therapist are engaged in an adult relationship and express themselves under the care of both (Mearns and Cooper, 2010). During the therapy, if certain relational depth is gained, the client trusts the therapist and is the therapist has deeper empathy and congruence with the client, when the therapist understands how it feels to be a client (Mearns and Cooper, 2010). Meeting at relational depth, when all safety screens go down and the client is expressing his real feelings and needs to the therapist, requires two people: the presence of the therapist, but also some form of responsiveness from the client. Sometimes trust will be achieved immediately, but clients vary and some of them have systems of self-protection and feel danger when exposing themselves to the judgment of others and demand that the therapist 'earn the right' to encounter those feelings (Mearns and Cooper, 2010). Trust also characterises relationships between social groups (Hardin, 2002) and with regard to in-group favouritism, people generally expect better treatment from in-group members





in comparison to out-group members (Tanis and Postmes, 2005; Burger, 2012). That is why peer support programs emerged as standard practice for supporting law enforcement organisations' staff (Levenson and Dwyer, 2003, as mentioned in Creamer et al., 2012; Burger, 2012). In some EU countries (such as Austria, Slovenia, and Finland) police officers who wish to provide help and emotional support to other police officers, are selected and educated by psychologists and work with police staff under the supervision of psychologists.

Peer support programs help to overcome multiple standard care barriers, including stigma, poor access to providers, fear and lack of trust (Creamer et al., 2012). The main goals of peer support are to provide empathic listening, identify peers who may be at risk, lower rates of isolation, increase support and professional help seeking, and increase resilience in different ways (Davidson et al., 1999 as mentioned in Creamer et al., 2012). Psychological support guidelines for uniformed workers recommend using peer support in law enforcement organisations, but also emphasise paying attention to situations where a uniformed worker should contact professional help (psychotherapists, clinical psychologists or other specialists), for example, when such symptoms such as disturbing memories and dreams about traumatic events, mood swings, concentration problems, anxiety, avoidance behaviour and other stress reactions become severe or act simultaneously (Burger, 2012).

So, psychological support — both peer support and professional support — for uniformed workers is rather complicated phenomena, and the main difficulties are around the problem of trust and group stereotypes about weakness and self-sufficiency.

This survey was conducted in order to identify potentially problematic aspects in relationships with professionals, which will help every professional (psychologist, peer supporter, police officer) to analyse mutual collaboration and maybe to find new ways to meet each other in professional relationships. Our research question was focused mainly on trust in professional relationships: which factors help police officers (and other law enforcement staff) to trust mental health specialists (psychologists and peer supporters)?

This question was asked to both groups — a police officers' group and a psychologists and peer supporters group. The results of the survey were presented and discussed during the EMPEN (European Medical and Psychological Experts' Network for law enforcement) annual meeting in Latvia (Riga, 9-12 June 2015). We hope that it indicates important factors that should be taken into account when organising peer support systems or psychological help in law enforcement organisations.

## METHODS

This research was explorative and content analysis was used for the answers. Two questionnaires with open-ended questions were designed for this research. One questionnaire was designed for police psychologists and peer supporters, where recipients were asked to identify which factors, in their opinion, help and which factors interfere with the ability of police officers to trust them. Another questionnaire asked police officers to identify which factors help and interfere with their ability to trust psychologists and peer supporters and which factors help and interfere with the ability of others to trust them as police officers. Survey questionnaires were sent to 30 country member experts who were enrolled to participate in EMPEN (European Medical and Psychological Experts' Network for law enforcement) annual meeting in Latvia (Riga, 9-12 June 2015). They were asked to translate the questionnaire into their national language (if necessary), and distribute it to one law enforcement organisation (mostly police) psychologist or peer-supporter and to three police officers. Twenty five countries sent their answers back: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, The Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland and Turkey.

## SAMPLE

The sample consisted of two groups:

1. Psychologists (34 persons) and peer supporters (2 persons) — altogether 36 specialists. The average length of service in police organisations is 10 years.



2. Police officers (55 persons). The average length of service is 16 years.

## PROCEDURE

Answers to the open-ended questions were categorised in clusters. Using content analysis, the answers were grouped according to the similar meaning and then the groups were named. For example, answers such as 'anonymity, confidentiality, secrecy' were grouped together under the group name 'confidentiality'.

## FINDINGS

Approximately 38 % of survey participants from the police officers group point out that they have had consultations with psychologists or peer supporters and approximately half of respondent police-officers (47 %) answered that they have never consulted one because they 'have no problems' or do not trust them.

According to the police officers and other law enforcement personnel, the main factors which help them trust psychologists are confidentiality, professionalism and a respectful, interested attitude. Regarding police officers' trust in peer supporters, the main factors are professional experiences to share, professionalism and confidentiality. So confidentiality and professionalism are the main factors which help law enforcement personnel to trust both psychologists and peer supporters, but among other popular factors there are a respectful attitude in the relationship with psychologists and experiences to share in contact with peer supporters.

Psychologists and peer supporters themselves note that factors such as confidentiality, availability (and personal knowledge), explanations, and empathic attitudes help them gain trust from police officers. The confidentiality factor is repeatedly noted as very important by both police officers and psychological support specialists.

Police officers, analysing their own work, note that empathic (helpful) attitudes, professionalism (experience) and openness (honesty, lawful action) helps people to trust them.

Police officers note fear that others will know (and fear of negative consequences) and a formal approach among those factors that interfere with their trust in psychologists. Analysing the relationship with peer supporters, fears about confidentiality and doubts about specialists' insufficient education were noted by police officers as interfering factors. Regarding themselves, police officers note negative images about police (especially widespread by media) and cases of aggressive, unprofessional approaches which are generalised by the society to all police work are interfering in creating trustful relationships with people.

Psychologists and peer supporters say that among the main factors that interfere with trust in them are police officers' fear of being unfit for their duty, stereotypes (mainly about psychological service) and multiple roles (especially when psycho-diagnostics, personnel selection goes together with psychological support). Psychologists and peer supporters note that acceptance and emotional warmth in attitude towards clients, more information and explanations about psychological processes and a respectful position towards clients' decisions, views and actions help to increase trust in their relationship with police officers.

Unfortunately there are still some strong stereotypes and negative attitudes towards psychological service providers among police officers, and there is no sufficient information in many countries about peer support systems.

## DISCUSSION

This survey gives some view on the relationship aspects between psychological help providers and police officers or other law enforcement organisation staff. Approximately half of the police officers who participated in the research answer that they have no problems, and that is why they do not use psychological services. Sometimes people cope with their life problems on their own; as research shows, police officers deal with both routine and exceptional stresses by a variety of situational adaptive coping and defense mechanisms, such as repression, displacement, isolation of feelings, and humour, but they are exposed to special kinds of traumatic events and daily pressures that sometimes overwhelm defences and result in maladaptive



behaviour (Miller, 1995). Maybe law enforcement professionals are not always well informed about the risk signs which they should take into account in order to check their psychological condition and about situations when they need to take care of themselves and ask for support otherwise their situation could become more critical. Apparently there are still some stereotypes and negative attitudes towards psychological service providers, although police officers by themselves also suffer from the stereotypes in society about their profession. Other researchers also point to the fact that many believe that seeking mental help implies weakness, that they fear stigmatisation and possible alienation from co-workers (Miller, 1995). Maybe comparing psychology in police with sport psychology could be an argument for police officers which decreases existing stereotypes about mental help, because as it is known that athletes use psychology for better results, not because they are mentally ill.

It is probable that the answer 'I have no problem' also shows barriers in trust and points to worries about confidentiality, which was the main aspect in this survey's answers. These results go together with other researchers' views that says that difficulty with trust appears to be an occupational hazard for workers in public safety, because they insist on solving problems on their own (Miller, 1995). That is why it is very important to provide the law enforcement organisations' staff with more detailed information about psychological services, their work principles, aims and role. Clarifications are important, because, as other researchers explain, later police officers will begin to feel more at ease with the therapist and find comfort and a sense of predictability from the psychotherapy session (Miller, 1995). For law enforcement organisations' chiefs and other officials who are responsible for psychological support services it is important to take into account clients' fears of confidentiality and, for example, not to connect psychological support service with psycho-diagnostics, and to avoid involving specialists in other multiple roles. Also police chiefs and other high law enforcement staff can help to transform organisational culture, which still has a lot of stereotypes about support, emotions, psychology and weaknesses.

It is important to continue to analyse which factors make trustful relationships. Sometimes psychologists, wishing to establish trust during consultation, can exaggerate their willingness to be useful for the client (police officer) and

jump into the trap of providing an overly friendly atmosphere (where professional frames can disappear) or having a hurrying manner towards results and giving advice. Other researchers also point to possible risk factors of premature false familiarity, phony 'bonding', patronising or 'playing cop' from the psychologist's side (Miller, 1995). This behaviour is an attempt to break into police sub-culture, but still should be avoided. Researchers show that police officers develop a closed society, 'cop culture', which for many becomes their life and crowds out other activities and relationships (Blau, 1994, as mentioned in Miller, 1995). For police officers it may be therapeutically helpful to show that a person can be different, not always strong or joyful, but still an understanding connection can be created between them. It could help them to come out of their sub-culture and find understanding among other people who are not police officers. Psychologists could show them special kinds of relationships and the psychotherapy room could be the first place they could experience a different kind of mutual trust.

On the whole, scientific research on psychotherapy show that effects are not so much about methods and results as about a special kind of relationship (Mearns and Cooper, 2010). Therapy is more like a process, and psychological consultation also needs time. Sometimes this is difficult to accept, because in police work police officers should be not only effective, but also quick. But quick results in psychotherapy are not always stable and qualitative. If this is not explained correctly to psychological service consumers, specialists can experience underestimation, which sometimes can be rather aggressive. There is some kind of dilemma — how much can psychology specialists adapt to police sub-culture and where is some boundary where the psychologist will lose his/her identity or professional position and it will be unconstructive for both psychologist and police officer? In our modern culture where a consumer philosophy is widespread, it can be difficult for a specialist (psychologist, police officer or any other) to be helpful for clients and not be used by them. For psychology specialists it can be very helpful to get professional supervision for clarifying and saving their professional work frames and identity.

On the whole, when analysing their own work, psychology specialists, and also police officers, pay attention to the role of respectful, interested,



empathic relationships with people, who have turned to them and need their help.

The findings of this research are consistent with other researchers' results, which show that accurate empathy (understanding of the client), genuineness (therapist as spontaneous, tactful, not defensive), availability (available, whenever needed), respect (therapist preserves client's sense of autonomy, control, self-respect) and concreteness (with a problem-solving focus) as well as attentive listening and reassurance are important for building trustful therapeutic relationships with police officers (Miller, 1995).

But the survey shows that very often there is not sufficient information in many countries about peer support systems. For example, police officers note that it is important to share similar working experiences with peer supporters, although the main role of a peer supporter is not supervision, but emotional help, and police officers do not understand the aim of peer support systems correctly. In many countries

there is no peer support system, and that is why the survey participants' understanding about it can be incomplete.

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Among the main limitations are possible language problems which can appear in cross-cultural research (more precise results would be possible if all participants answer first in their national language and only then translate to English and send their answers to the survey authors). It is possible that not all participants understood correctly what peer support is — some answers could be more about their relationship with colleagues or friends. And a third limitation is the possible subjectivity of the survey author, who grouped answers in the clusters, because answers can be analysed in different ways and some other answers were too general for making more precise interpretations.

## REFERENCES

- Andersen, J., Papazoglou, K., Nyman, M., Koskelainen, M., Clin, D. and Gustafsberg, M. (2015), 'Fostering resilience among the police', *Journal of law enforcement*. Retrieved from: <http://jghcs.info/index.php/I/article/view/424/365>.
- Burger, N. (2012), *Guidelines: Psychosocial support for uniformed workers. Extensive summary and Recommendations*, IMPACT, Partner in ARQ the Netherlands.
- Creamer, M. et al. (2012), 'Guidelines for peer support in high-risk organizations: An international consensus study using the Delphi method', *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 25, pp. 134-141.
- Hardin, R. (ed.) (2002), *Trust and trustworthiness*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
- Mayer, R., Davis, J. and Schoorman, F. (1995), 'An integrative model of organizational trust', *Academy of management review*, Vol. 20, No 3, pp. 709-734.
- Mearns, D. and Cooper, M. (2010), *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy*, Sage Publications, Inc., London.
- Miller, L. (1995), 'Tough guys: Psychotherapeutic strategies with law enforcement and emergency services personnel', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, Vol. 32, No 4, pp. 592-600.
- Tanis, M. and Postmes, T. (2005), 'A social identity approach to trust: Interpersonal perception, group membership and trusting behaviour', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 35, pp. 413-424.