

perceptions, and of course, it affects our relations with other people, both as individuals and within social systems.

The impact of torture on the brain and the nervous system

We could talk for days about how torture and trauma affect the brain, but let me summarise this by saying that the extreme fear and trauma combined with both the deliberate and incidental deregulation of the nervous system can, in many individuals, result in long-lasting effects, which include both physiological and structural changes in the brain. In addition, because our brain is plastic and changeable, our brain adapts to help us survive life in horrific circumstances, and some of these adaptations and survival strategies can be problematic in a more normal environment.

Torture can also affect how we use and organize our brain. In other words, to use a crude analogy, it can affect both our hardware and software. Like in most things, the magnitude of the consequences of trauma is a product of the interaction of both environmental and genetic factors.

The most common sequelae of torture at individual, family and community levels

What does this mean? Many different things. Amongst the most common problems are sleep problems, hyper alertness, recurring memories of the traumatic event, nightmares, concentration problems, irritability, dissociation, anxiety, depression and many others.

Many of our clients talk about feeling in danger all the time, unable to trust or rely on others, and this plays havoc with their family life and their relationships with people around them. All in all, these issues combined with other difficulties that are part and parcel of commencing life in a new environment create quite powerful cocktails.

How do we assist torture survivors to rehabilitate?

We rely on people's strengths and capacity for self healing

The first axiom is that we see our job not as curing people from the effects of torture, but as helping them marshal their strengths in order to heal themselves. This may involve "treating" some particular issues that impede their recovery, but rehabilitation is a lot more. Rehabilitation is about empowerment, about reclaiming their life back from the torturers, about regaining

control of their lives. Thus, we always work in partnership with our clients, and often, also with other helping professions. Reclaiming health and mental health is only one aspect of it, albeit a crucial one.

A bio-psycho-social approach

This approach is very useful to describe a model for healing. If the brain is working in a way that makes daily life difficult, we need to address this problem in order to make healing possible. This is the "bio" aspect of the healing process. Similarly, if the torture experience has changed the way we perceive and interpret the world, rehabilitation means finding ways to process traumatic memories and re-interpret these experiences so that they can be reconciled with a notion of a "safe enough" world. This is the "psycho" aspect of the healing process.

Assisting the individual and shaping their healing environment

Often this also means working to make the other crucial ingredient, the healing environment, as conducive as possible to rehabilitation, and assisting our clients to rebuild a good social support system around them. This is the "social".

Informed eclecticism guided by science and experience

How do we do this? The short and uninformative answer is, any way we can... In slightly more technical terms, I like to think of STARTTS as practising an eclectic approach that combines the benefits of various therapeutic approaches informed by experience, empirical research and, increasingly, the latest developments in neuroscience.

We work with complex problems and to unravel them we need a diverse array of tools. The challenge is often to know what tool to use when. We are learning all the time, and the last few years have been incredibly exciting in terms of the new tools that have become available to help us undo the damage caused by torture.

The much misunderstood and mystified role of culture

Last but not least, if therapy is a partnership, it will not be very productive unless our work makes sense and somehow fits with the worldview of our partners. Hence the necessity for us to make every effort to understand the worldview of our clients, and to make sure we package and adapt what we learn through research, neuroscience and clinical experience with other groups, so that it becomes congruent with their cultural attributes and belief system, but without allowing them to become a barrier. R

Policing the Gap: How Blacktown Police Won Over the Community

Blacktown is home to people from many cultures. The Police and the community have worked closely together to create harmony and understanding, as LIN TAYLOR explains.

What's happening in Blacktown is bit of a mystery. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics nearly 32 per cent of people living in Blacktown have a non-English speaking background, and 19 per cent have arrived in Australia in the last five years, yet this western Sydney suburb should, in theory, be a lot more problematic than it is.

Even with nearly 200 cultural groups represented, Superintendent Mark Wright from Blacktown Local Command says the area is more harmonious than it has ever been.

"We now have about 180 different cultural groups in Blacktown, but we don't have a dominant culture which I think is a real strength.

"When was the last time you've heard of a cultural issue or cultural divide within the community of Blacktown? You know, there hasn't been one," he says.

But it was not that long ago when serious tensions simmered between police and South Sudanese youth. "There was a sudden influx of South Sudanese in Blacktown and there were a lot of young men hanging

around," says STARTTS Community Services Coordinator, Jasmina Bajraktarevic-Hayward.

While shopkeepers felt intimidated by their presence, the young people on the other hand claimed they were being unfairly targeted whenever police or security staff approached them.

"Young people get targeted anyway and when they stand out, like the South Sudanese do, people experience fear. Even when there's no justification for that fear," says Bajraktarevic-Hayward.

Fear and a distrust of authority were also apparent in the South Sudanese community, leading to widespread misunderstanding arising from both the police and the community.

"Coming from a war-torn situation, we don't trust police. No-one trusts the police," says South Sudanese community elder Ajang Biar. "What was happening was the misunderstanding of police with the Sudanese culture."

Being together in large groups is the way Sudanese people socialise, he adds. They will see each other on the street and stop to chat.

"We are a connected community," Biar says. "But to



Blacktown Station. PHOTO: Alan Orchard

the police, they see it as a threat to the public, without any reason.”

As more claims of racial targeting surfaced, Superintendent Wright decided to engage with the community to improve mutual dialogue and relieve tensions. “We engaged with the community leaders, but it wasn’t just the Sudanese. It was the Pacific Islanders, the Indians and others.”

As an overt symbol of unity, he asked community leaders from all cultural groups to walk with Blacktown police officers through hotspots like Westpoint Shopping Centre and around railway stations.

“There was a potential element where the community leaders thought that maybe the police were targeting [the South Sudanese youth].

“But when they walked with us and they were educated, they would actually go over and talk to the boys for us. And they would take those messages back to the community to say, ‘Well I’ve actually met the police, I’ve met the commander and they’re actually not racist’.”

Since taking over Blacktown Local Command five years ago, Wright has also worked tirelessly to expose his

officers to the different cultures present in Blacktown.

“I think the other ‘secret’ is we tried to change the whole culture of the [police] command by exposing all the police to the community.”

While multicultural and youth liaison officers are helpful, Wright believes the entire command needs to be culturally aware and educated.

“My whole objective when I first started [at Blacktown police] five years ago was to build those relationships across the entire community - refugees, cultural groups, Caucasians, the whole lot.”

Biar also played a key role in bridging the gap between the South Sudanese community and the police.

“We needed to change the image of police to the youth. And also we wanted the police to learn about our culture - that a group of Sudanese walking together is not harming, it’s a friendship,” he says.

“If there is an issue we approach it collectively, not the police alone but the community too.”

Biar says the initiative has since improved trust and mutual respect between Sudanese youth and the police.

Over in Victoria, however, the story is very different, with reports of police allegedly targeting young

members of the African community, particularly in Melbourne’s inner north.

In fact, ABC News recently obtained details of a secret Victorian police operation, Operation Molto, that specifically sought out criminality within the African youth. The Operation Molto document read: “There has been a spasmodic and yet continual increase in the number of robberies as well as armed robberies occurring in and around the Flemington Housing Estate.

“The as yet unidentified suspects for these serious offences are primarily young African males.

“The increased level of visible police presence will assist in the identification and targeting of offenders.”

Operation Molto which was established in 2006, still has an impact on the young African community today. Nearly 30 formal complaints were filed against the Victorian police as a result of the alleged targeting. Most recently, a group of six young men, who were teenagers at the time of the allegations, settled a civil case with Victoria police on the issue.

The men claimed that between 2005 and 2009, they were stopped, searched and sometimes verbally and physically abused by police because of their African heritage.

But it wasn’t just anecdotal evidence that drove the case. Lawyers representing the African men approached University of Melbourne statistician Professor Ian Gordon to analyse how frequently the men were being stopped by police.

Professor Gordon found that young African men in the Flemington and Kensington and North Melbourne areas were 2.5 times more likely to be stopped by police than white people or non-African people. Interestingly, the research found that they were also less likely to commit a criminal offence compared to other populations.

The African men involved in the case were teenagers living in public housing in the Melbourne suburbs of Flemington and North Melbourne. One of them is Maki Issa, who is originally from Somalia.

“It comes down to stereotyping. They see three or four African guys there and automatically assume that these are gangsters, or they’re in a gang,” he told SBS News.

“So what we’re trying to work on is for them to understand that these are a group of kids who live in the [Housing] Commission flats who all share one little

park. They’re obviously going to be in big groups all the time, [so] understand that that’s their backyard.”

Jeremy Rapke QC represented the young men in the Federal Court case and was Victoria’s director of public prosecutions during Operation Molto. He too believes the police operation came down to racial profiling.

“They were nominated in the operation order as being the people most likely to be involved in the crime, primarily involved in the crime, and indeed statements made by people who were involved in the operation - statements of witnesses - confirm that that was the primary focus of the operation,” he told ABC News.

But the Victorian Police force has consistently rejected claims that Operation Molto was racially motivated.

A recent statement read: “We reject that Operation Molto involved racial profiling... This operation targeted serious offences of robbery and armed robbery in a small, defined Flemington area and was predicated on credible intelligence and witness reports.

“We do not accept that Victoria Police undertakes racial profiling. We have been actively working with Australian-African communities to build closer relationships.”

Still, as a result of the court settlement, Victorian police have agreed to implement measures to stamp out racism within the force, and to review its cross-cultural

training, thus avoiding a lengthy court trial.

The situation has Victorian police - and other state police forces - scratching their heads and asking why Blacktown is not experiencing similar woes.

“It’s actually quite simple,” says Wright. “From my perspective... the leadership from the community in Blacktown has also accepted some responsibility for themselves.

“They’re not sitting back and saying, ‘you fix it, you do this’. They were prepared to work with us as well.”

Incidentally, Blacktown community elder Ajang Biar could not be more passionate about encouraging the police to engage with the community.

“Involve, involve, involve the community leaders, because if there’s a problem, no-one from the outside will come and solve your problem. If you are part of the problem you must be part of solution.” R

“Coming from a war-torn situation, we don’t trust police. No-one trusts the police”

Ajang Biar