

# Institutional betrayal makes violence more toxic

By Jennifer M. Gómez and Jennifer J. Freyd

With the news of another killing of an unarmed black American — this time Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. — by a white police officer, many people feel fundamentally betrayed. Police should be a source of protection and security, not the apparent perpetrators of racially motivated violence.

Why is the failure of a system that is supposed to protect people — whether family, university, or police — so much more damaging than random brutality from a stranger or enemy? The answer comes from understanding the powerful psychology of dependence and betrayal.

For more than 20 years, the Dynamics Laboratory at the University of Oregon has researched interpersonal trauma and its effects. Along with many other researchers, we have found that trauma, abuse and violence are associated with negative outcomes such as depression and physical illness.

But more to the point, we have discovered the specific toxicity of betrayal trauma. Through our research, we have discovered that individuals' distress depends not only on what happened, but critically, it depends on who did it.

Whenever abuse or mistreatment is perpetrated by someone the victim depends upon or trusts, the harm is likely to be especially great. The trauma or violence is compounded by the betrayal within the act: Violence alone is bad enough, but violence at the hands of someone who is needed — that betrayal is toxic.

Betrayal is so toxic because it puts people in a dangerous bind: Someone needed is not safe. The victim may feel he or she cannot survive without their support. What do people do?

Sometimes people manage this betrayal through betrayal blindness. Victims and bystanders don't fully see the betrayal, because they cannot afford to react with the usual responses of confrontation or withdrawal — they must stay attached and connected to the perpetrator because they depend on him, her or them. The consequences of betrayal and betrayal blindness are especially severe: more mental illness, more physical illness, and tragic re-victimization.

In recent years, our laboratory has moved from studying betrayal between individuals to entire institutions and systems. When institutions that are depended upon, needed, or trusted are implicated in the perpetration of violence — even by passively failing to protect or responding poorly to reports — the increased harm and exacerbated outcomes are measurable.

For instance, Carly Smith and Jennifer Freyd have measured the impact of institutional betrayal in an educational context. When students are confronted with institutional betrayal after sexual assault, their distress symptoms are greater than when the institution responds well. It is not just the act of violence itself that predicts outcomes, but additionally the institutional context and response after the event.

Further, Freyd and Pamela Birrell explain in their 2013 book "Blind to Betrayal" that discrimination — for instance, racism and sexism — is inextricably linked with institutional betrayal. Inequality and violence by needed institutions are fundamental betrayals. New research from our laboratory specifically suggests that some minorities may be at increased risk for experiencing institutional betrayal in university contexts.

Police brutality against black Americans, potentially including the death of Michael Brown, can be understood through the lens of institutional betrayal. Like universities, the police force is a needed and depended-upon institution. Therefore, when unjust deaths occur at the hands of police, the effects of the violence may be

compounded by the institutional betrayal: as a system, police are to protect, not harm.

Further institutional betrayals can occur when the wrongdoing is denied and when those who blow the whistle are punished.

However, when betrayal is openly acknowledged, people have the opportunity to heal and prevent further betrayal. There are already hopeful signs. Blindness is being replaced by protests, as outrage unites with hope: People will not accept these betrayals; justice is demanded.

Institutional reparations can further heal these wounds by preventing and repairing institutional betrayals through self-assessment, transparency, flexibility and ongoing detection and correction of misdeeds. Branches of the federal government have shown institutional courage through the development of several institutional reparations: The FBI will investigate the case; the Justice Department will review police tactics and open a federal civil rights investigation.

Addressing institutional betrayal of this magnitude is necessarily destabilizing, as it shakes off the illusions of equality while calling for introspection on the deepest individual and systemic levels. Justice demands our society acknowledge and then fix systems that put black Americans at risk for violence and inequality. The unsteady terrain reveals how ready our country is to correct these long-standing betrayals.

Through institutional courage, this can be the beginning of an era of not feeling betrayed by police brutality: not because people lie under the cloak of betrayal blindness, but because institutional betrayal traumas, such as the deaths of black Americans by police, no longer plague our society.

Jennifer M. Gómez is a doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Oregon. Jennifer J. Freyd is a professor of psychology at the UO.

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