

WHERE MY GIRLS AT?:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LESBIAN  
LAW ENFORCEMENT COUPLES

---

A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of Counselor Education  
Sam Houston State University

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

---

by  
Krystin L. Holmes

July, 2021

WHERE MY GIRLS AT?:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LESBIAN  
LAW ENFORCEMENT COUPLES

by

Krystin L. Holmes

---

APPROVED:

Richard Henriksen Jr, PhD  
Committee Director

Chi-Sing Li, PhD  
Committee Member

Lauren McLean, PhD  
Committee Member

Stacey Edmonson, PhD  
Dean, College of Education

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, Bruce and Evelyn Jolly. My grandfather imparted his love of learning in my life and I will always treasure the days that we spent at the Texas City library together. He was the first unofficial researcher in my family and he always said that everything I needed to learn could be found in a library. My grandmother, Evelyn, embodied what it meant to be a working mother as she raised a family and helped to shape her community through civil service. She always said that everything I needed to learn could be found in the Bible. Somewhere between the Texas City library and the Bible, I found a love of learning, service to community, and Jesus. This work is dedicated to their memory.

Additionally, this work is dedicated to my family. To my husband, Chris, thank you for the long hours, the overnights, the endless support and encouragement. Thank you for continuing to love me through this process. I hope I have made you proud. To my children Carrigan and Jackson, although you are small now, I hope that this inspires you to follow your dreams.

This research is also dedicated to all of those who wear a badge and hold the line. These peace officers are everyday heroes who choose to put on their uniform and go out to face dangers unknown. They witness tragedy, adversity, and all manner of unspeakable events in service to their fellow man. This is dedicated to those who serve honorably and fight for those who have no voice. Blessed are the peacekeepers.

## ABSTRACT

Holmes, Krystin L., *Where my girls at?: A phenomenological study of the lived experiences of lesbian law enforcement couples*. Doctor of Philosophy (Counselor Education) July, 2021, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

The culture of policing has been studied in various policing journals and numerous aspects of the job have been examined, however, in respect to the changing and diverse nature of today's law enforcement officers (LEOs), this study provided a view inside the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples. The focus of this research was to discover the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple. There were six themes and five subthemes that emerged from the data: (a) *Proving Yourself*, (i) *Identity and Acceptance*, (b) *Respecting the Relationship*, (c) *Safety*, (d) *The Climate*, (e) *It's Not Normal*, (i) *Schedules*, (ii) *Humor*, (f) *Hold the Line*, (i) *Communication*, and (ii) *A Different Roller Coaster*. This study is divided into multiple chapters including an introduction, thorough review of relevant literature, methodology, results, and implications for further study.

KEYWORDS: LEO, Law enforcement officer, Lesbian, Couples, Police, LGBTQI+

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge my family that has been a constant source of support and encouragement. My mom and dad have supported my educational goals from a young age and have continued to stand behind me. To my sister and brother-in-law, who have always provided sound advice and guidance, thank you for never giving up on this dream. Additionally, there have been numerous friends, colleagues, supervisors, and others who have encouraged me to continue towards the finish line when I wanted to quit.

To my mental health unit partners- Ray, Kisha, and Antonio. Each of you have played a key role in helping me to see this through to completion. I will forever cherish our time together and riding second man was one of the best personal and professional experiences I will ever have. Thank you for teaching me, protecting me, and all of our night time shenanigan I hope you learned as much from me as I have from each of you. I appreciate your sacrifices and willingness to do the job with me. I have never worked alongside more compassionate and driven individuals. You're as solid as they come.

I would like to acknowledge all of my former and current professors and mentors who have rallied behind me. Dr. Li, Dr. Garza-Chavez, Dr. Watts, Dr. McLean, Dr. Nelson, and Dr. DeTrude- I appreciate all of the kind words, gentle (and not-so-gentle) nudges needed to help me along the way. Throughout my time at Sam Houston and under your tutelage I have become a better counselor, a better educator, and a better human being. For that, I am forever grateful.

Finally, Dr. Henriksen has been one of the most influential professors that I have had the privilege to call a mentor. He has truly been a rock when I needed solid footing. I

appreciate all of your support, encouragement, and tough love to get this done. I would not be here without your guidance.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
DEDICATION .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background of the Study .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Purpose of the Study .....	3
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Research Questions.....	8
Summary .....	9
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	10
Introduction to Police Culture and Lifestyle.....	12
Organizational Stress and Burnout .....	13
Shiftwork and Sleep Deprivation.....	19
Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Suicide in LEOs.....	20
Critical Incidents, Post-Traumatic Stress, and Hyper-Vigilance in LEOs .....	23
Barriers to Treatment: Media Sensationalism and Mental Health Stigma in LEOs ..	24
Domestic Violence in LEOs .....	26
Family and Romantic Relationships in LEOs .....	27
Summary .....	34

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY.....	35
Research Design .....	35
Participants .....	37
Instrumentation .....	38
Positionality .....	40
Data Collection .....	42
Data Organization .....	43
Establishing Trustworthiness .....	46
Summary .....	48
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS .....	49
Description of Participants .....	49
Emerged Themes .....	53
Proving Yourself.....	54
Respecting the Relationship .....	61
Safety .....	63
The Climate .....	67
It's Not Normal.....	71
Hold the Line .....	74
Essence of Being.....	85
Summary .....	87
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION .....	88
Summary of the Study .....	88
Discussion of Findings .....	90



A Different Roller Coaster.....	101
Implications .....	102
Recommendations for Future Research.....	105
Conclusion .....	106
REFERENCES .....	107
VITA.....	119

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

“If you’ve never had a Supreme Court case decide if you have the same rights as others, you have privilege” (Weinberg, 2020). This sentiment rings true for many minority populations who have had to advocate for equal standing in society, but especially for the LGBTQI+ population in fighting for equal relationship status. On June 26, 2015 the United States Supreme Court struck down state bans on same-sex marriage in all fifty states (Supreme Court of the United States, 2015; Theil, 2019). This monumental, landmark case gave millions of LGBTQI+ Americans the right to marry and have their relationship status equal to heterosexual marriages in the United States. With this legislation, many sweeping changes took place across communities and workplaces around the country in regards to how LGBTQI+ individuals and their spouses were treated and how their marriage licenses were viewed.

### Background of the Study

Law enforcement has always been tasked with upholding the laws of the land and protecting the rights of the individuals in their communities, and following the decision of *Obergefell v. Hodges* in the United States Supreme Court police departments had a new law to enforce regarding same-sex marriage. The historical beginnings of the LGBTQI+ population and law enforcement is rooted in conflict and civil unrest with the Stonewall Riots of 1969 (History.com Editors, 2017). All throughout the 1960’s gatherings of LGBTQI+ individuals were considered “disorderly,” same-sex relations were illegal, and law enforcement was charged with shutting down establishments catering to LGBTQI+ individuals (History.com Editors, 2017). Despite the conflicted and

violent beginnings of the LGBTQI+ community and law enforcement, over half a century later, the law enforcement community now includes many members of the LGBTQI+ community in and among the ranks of law enforcement. The world of law enforcement is an ever-changing system that is not unaccustomed to fluctuation and adaptation to change. In today's political and social climate, policing has gained national attention calling for systemic change in the ways in which law enforcement functions. One of the areas oftentimes overlooked when examining law enforcement is the culture and makeup of the law enforcement officers themselves, particularly in the LGBTQI+ community. Despite the many positive changes that have occurred, there is a lack of research focused on the LGBTQI+ LEO couple. There is a high emphasis placed on police-community interactions and little emphasis on the physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing of the individual officer and their families within the community. In a time where there have been calls to examine everything about how the police operate, and to even dismantle departments all together, there must be research that examines the toll taken on individual officers who represent the larger collective. In regards to specific areas of research within policing, there is little to no research regarding lesbian LEO couples. Through this study, the researcher has examined the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples and their perceptions of the law enforcement occupation as it relates to their romantic relationships. This transcendental phenomenological study sought to uncover the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple.

## **Statement of the Problem**

A key area where there is a lack of research is the area of LGBTQI+ LEOs. Many departments have begun to widely encourage diversity in hiring policies to include all races, ethnicities, religions, genders, and orientation statuses. However, very little research has been conducted with the LGBTQI+ population within law enforcement and virtually nothing specific to lesbian LEOs is currently in print. Additionally, as previous researchers have discussed, the law enforcement occupation does not exist in a static environment where the officer exists in a vacuum, rather this occupation is fast-paced, ever-changing, and one in which life and death decisions may hang in the balance (Armitage, 2017; Che & Boyle, 2013; Heron et al., 2013; Larsson et al., 2016; Martinez, 2010; Ramos, 2010; Violanti, 2007;). Family, friends, and the support systems of the officers are also affected by the occupation of policing and this area of overlap between work-life and home-life is deserving of further research and examination (Armitage, 2017; Heron et al., 2013; Karaffa & Koch, 2016; Karaffa et al., 2015; Karaffa & Tochkov, 2013; Larsson et al., 2016; Porter & Henriksen, Jr, 2016; Ramos, 2010; Violanti, 2007).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of being a lesbian LEO couple. With this study, the researcher intended to give voice to lesbian LEO couples and sought to understand their lived experiences as a lesbian couple navigating a relationship in relation to a high-demand, high-stress, and oftentimes dangerous occupation. By understanding these individuals and how their relationships were able to be resilient and balance the difficulties of a demanding

profession, mental health counselors can provide better support that meets the needs of this population. The results of this study could help to inform law enforcement entities as they continue to push towards a more diverse and inclusive police force and to give voice to lesbians within the policing community.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study was derived from the themes that emerged from the participant data. The researcher anticipated that the data gathered from this study would help add to the body of literature regarding LGBTQI+ LEOs, specifically lesbian LEO couples. In Chapter II of this research, the researcher expanded upon the lack of research currently in existence addressing the concerns of the lesbian LEO community. There were very few studies that attend to the LGBTQI+ community and this study added to the knowledge base, providing qualitative research and a voice to those who have remained voiceless. In addition to expanding the general knowledge base, this research also provided suggestions and recommendations for clinical practice with lesbian LEO couples. Currently, there is no such research in print that addressed this specific cultural demographic.

### **Operational Definitions**

The operational definitions in this study helped to define the terms used throughout the research. In law enforcement culture, some words can have different meanings than in the civilian world and it is imperative to have a clear understanding of terms for the purpose of this study.

***LEO***

The term LEO is an abbreviation for the term Law Enforcement Officer. For the purposes of this study, LEO, police officer, officer, and law enforcement officer are used interchangeably to describe individuals who are sworn police officers in their respective communities (Kirschman et al., 2014; Woody, 2005).

***Partner***

The term partner in this study is used to describe the romantic partner of a lesbian LEO. In many law enforcement agencies, partner refers to one's shift or beat partner, but for this research, this term is used to describe the romantic partner or spouse of a lesbian LEO. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) defines partner as "an individual (opposite or same-sex) the officer has dated, cohabitated with, married, and/or has a child in common (p. 1). I used the term partner as appropriate or spouse if the participants referred to each other as such in order to respect the dignity of each couple participating in the study (IACP, 1999; Karaffa et. al, 2015; Meffert et. al, 2014; Porter & Henriksen, 2016).

***Police Culture***

The term police culture is defined as the implicit and explicit rules of police function, organization and operation. Some of these rules are overt while others are covert tenants developed while on the job. Police culture encompasses attitudes, beliefs, and values learned from the occupation of policing that may or may not conform to the attitudes, beliefs, and values of society at large (Chan, 1997; Kirschman et al., 2014; Paoline et al., 2000; Rokeach et al., 1971; Westley, 1970; Woody, 2005).

### ***Brotherhood***

The term brotherhood is used to describe the camaraderie that exists between members of law enforcement and is not exclusively linked to gender. This term has its origins in military culture where members were referred to as *brothers in arms*. The military at this time was exclusively male and thus, the term *brothers in arms* was used. Since law enforcement is a para-militaristic profession, the term brotherhood was adopted as a way of describing the close-knit relationships that law enforcement has with one another. This term encompasses all of law enforcement including female officers and members generally refer to one another as *brothers* or *sisters*. This brotherhood extends to other agencies and departments and is not exclusively limited to the individuals that a LEO may personally know.

### ***Organizational Stress or Burnout***

The term organizational stress in policing is defined as any internal or external stimulus that may include the pressures of organizational stress compounded with the body's internal fight-or-flight response (Griffin & Sun, 2017). Organizational stress encompasses factors such as organizational hassles, acute stress, shift-work, day-to-day "wear and tear" not encompassed in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the repetitive daily stressors that factor into burnout for LEOs (Descher et al., 2011; Larsson et al., 2016; Nash & Litz, 2013; Rosner & Powell, 2009).

### ***Shiftwork***

Shiftwork in policing is defined as progression of work shifts that cover a 24 hour period, typically referred as day shift, evening shift, and night shift. It is one of the major organizational stressors that contribute to burnout in police culture (Larsson et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2015; Porter & Henriksen Jr., 2016;).

### ***Critical Incidents***

Critical incidents in law enforcement are any incident in which life and death decisions are made and can result in serious injury or loss of life. These events can be traumatic and oftentimes require debriefing. Critical incidents also take a toll on the physiological and psychological effects on LEOs and put them at an increased risk for premature death (Tanigoshi et al., 2008).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Family systems theory is a theoretical framework that explores relationships between family members, multigenerational behavioral patterns, and how families function together (Helm, 2019). There are several major foundational theorists who have been credited with the development of family systems theory including Murray Bowen, Salvador Minuchin, Jay Haley, and Virginia Satir (Corsini & Wedding, 2014; Helm, 2019). While each theorist has differences in their approaches to therapy, in general, there are some core beliefs that comprise a family systems framework. One such belief is that the family unit is an interconnected system wherein one member's actions affect all other members in the system (Helm, 2019). Family systems theory also considers the family patterns across generations, a term Bowen coined as the multigenerational transmission



process (Bowen, 1968). This study focused on Bowen's view of family systems theory as he believed that family members are emotionally interdependent on one another and function in reciprocal relationships (Bowen, 1968). The theoretical framework applied to this study, allowed the researcher to view the lesbian LEO couples as they related to each other through the lens of the policing occupation. Family systems theory helped the researcher view the family system within its context and observe how the functions of one member affect the other within the family unit (Corsini & Wedding, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

In a transcendental phenomenological approach, the research questions are developed from the literature and guide the interview with the participants. The main research question the author sought to uncover is "What are the lived experiences of the lesbian LEO couple?" In transcendental phenomenological study, a semi-structured interview comprised of five grand tour questions was used to uncover the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple. Grand tour questions are interview questions intended to simulate an experience when a researcher begins to study a cultural scene (Spradley, 1979). In this study, the interview questions were (a) Describe what it is like to identify as a lesbian LEO (Belkin & McNichol, 2002; Colvin, 2012; Lyons et al., 2008), (b) Describe how your relationship has been affected by your spouse or partner's law enforcement occupation (Brandl & Stroshine, 2003; Karaffa et al., 2015; Kirschman, 2007; Roberts & Levenson, 2001), (c) How has your life changed since becoming a lesbian LEO couple? (Miller et al., 2004; Porter & Henriksen Jr., 2016; Woody, 2005), (d) What is the most rewarding part of being a lesbian LEO couple? (Karaffa et al., 2015; Kirschman, 2007; Porter & Henriksen Jr., 2016), and (e) What is the most difficult part of

being a lesbian LEO couple? (Miller et al., 2003, 2004; Miller & Lilly, 2014). These questions were designed to be open-ended so that the participants could openly describe the experience of being a lesbian LEO couple and richly describe their lived experiences. The research questions for this study were also discussed in Chapter III when detailing the methodology of this research study.

### **Summary**

Chapter I provided an introduction for the study and included some historical background between law enforcement and the LGBTQI+ community to provide an initial rationale for this research. I next outlined the statement of the problem where I cited a lack of research dedicated to LGBTQI+ LEOs and specifically lesbian LEO couples. I continued to discuss the purpose of the study to give voice to lesbian LEO couples through their lived experiences. Additionally, the significance of the study was delineated and possible impacts of the research was discussed. I continued the chapter and included operational definitions to assist the reader with terms specific to this study. I followed this section with the theoretical framework and rationale for the framework chosen. The research questions were outlined and supported by existing literature. Chapter I was concluded with a review of limitations, delimitations, assumptions, and finally an organization of the study was included.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

The literature review process is one in which the gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing of existing literature helped to inform the current study. In using the Interactive Literature Review Process (ILRP), I utilized an eight-step method to thoroughly examine existing literature related to law enforcement culture, LGBTQI+ LEOs, and family relationships (Combs et al., 2010). The ILRP method is a multistep process where steps one through three encompassed exploring the author's personal belief systems, initiating a literature review process and selecting a research topic based on what areas of research have not been thoroughly explored. The following stages, four through six, include exploring existing literature, developing a research focus, and analyzing, interpreting and integrating the literature (Combs et al., 2010).

The literature review process began by examining my personal belief system, identifying the major areas of my research interests, and using databases to search for relevant research. Of particular interest was LEO family relationships and LGBTQI+ officers. I then had to delineate what were all of the relevant factors that would lead to uncovering relevant research, if any, to this main topic. By grouping relevant search terms, I was able to narrow down subthemes by which to apply the ILRP method. The following themes and subthemes emerged: police culture, LEO family relationships, police stress, LGBTQI+ police, lesbian police, LEO work-life balance. After an exhaustive review of current research and examining relevant factors to the current study, the literature review was closed and I continued to writing the literature review.

The final step in the ILRP process was evaluating the product and process. In this, I discovered that there is a gap in the literature pertaining to lesbian LEOs couples. This population has been a largely overlooked as a demographic of LEOs, and there was virtually no research where the partner or spouse's viewpoint is taken into consideration for research purposes. This gap is an important piece to attend to in research as counselors continue to work their way into populations that have been historically opposed to engaging in mental health services.

From this point, the literature review could be initiated and narrowed to focus specifically on topics pertaining to lesbian LEOs couples. The following databases were used to search for relevant literature: Academic Search Complete; Dissertations and Thesis - Full Text; Professional Development Collection; PsycARTICLES; Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection; PsycARTICLES; Criminal Justice Abstracts; PsycINFO; ProQuest; and EBSCO host-all databases. The search terms used were a combination of the following terms: police relationships, police culture, LEO culture, LGBTQI+ LEO, gay police, lesbian police, police stress, shift-work, work-life balance, mental health and police.

In addition to the relevant articles yielded from these searches, I then found relevant literature from the references sections from existing articles to add to the current study. The remainder of Chapter II focused on examining the existing literature to understand law enforcement culture and relevant issues pertaining to LGBTQI+ officers and specifically, lesbian LEO couples.

## **Introduction to Police Culture and Lifestyle**

Police culture is a multifaceted and dynamic subculture that exists within the first responder community. To begin to understand the complexity involved, one must first examine the overt and covert rules of being a LEO (Woody, 2005). LEOs have their own cultural values, norms, and tenants that an individual must conform to in order to integrate into the policing community (Woody, 2005). This subculture, often identified as “The Brotherhood” or “Cop Culture” has been widely examined in policing journals and has research roots dating back to the 1970’s to present (Chan, 1997; Paoline et al., 2000; Ramos, 2010; Rokeach et al., 1971; Salinas & Webb, 2018 Westley, 1970; Woody, 2005). When working with the law enforcement officer population, there are many variables to consider such as department, length of employment with current department, and culture of the department of the LEO individual. LEOs represent a demographic that, while known for their heroism and bravery, they are also known to undergo major stress related to their chosen occupation. Ramos (2010) suggested that those who entered the profession of policing did so because they wanted to help others and make a difference, however, they quickly learned that in every situation they “must take control of the scene, the suspects, and their emotions” (p. 21). He continued to delineate the nature of police work to be inherently negative as citizens do not call the police when things are good, they call when things go bad (Ramos, 2010, p. 21). Over the course of an officer’s career, there will be memories filled with negative thoughts and limited positive ones due to the bulk of service calls geared towards emergencies that focus on taking care of others (Ramos, 2010).

There were many factors to consider when looking at police culture such as work environment, peers, bureaucratic structure, societal and family support, peer support, and the types of coping mechanisms utilized (He, et al., 2002). The responses to stress experienced can be positive and reflect the resiliency of this population. However, there can also be negative responses to stress that lead to an increased risk of work-related health problems (Salinas & Webb, 2018). Research into the LEO population has revealed that these individuals who are involved in a highly stressful career are at an increased risk of stress-related health issues, especially when they rely on maladaptive behaviors to cope with stress (Gershon, et al., 2002; Salinas & Webb, 2018; Maran, et al., 2015).

Westley (1970) emphasized characteristics such as loyalty among officers to be a positive trait. However, there were also many attributes he pointed out as being negative such as distrust, suspicion, cynicism, secrecy, and burnout (Westley, 1970). While many of these attributes are still common among LEOs in the literature, particularly in policing journals, there has been a shift in counseling literature to understand these concepts from a strengths-based perspective highlighting resiliency factors in law enforcement culture (Karaffa & Koch, 2016; Karaffa et al., 2015; Karaffa & Tochkov, 2013; Porter & Henriksen, Jr., 2016).

### **Organizational Stress and Burnout**

Occupational stress encompasses factors such as organizational hassles, acute stress, shift-work, day-to-day, wear and tear not encompassed in PTSD, and the repetitive daily stressors that factor into burnout for LEOs (Descher et al., 2011; Larsson, et al., 2016; Nash & Litz, 2013; Rosner & Powell, 2009). Griffin and Sun (2017) defined police occupational stress as being comprised of internal and external stimulus that may include

the pressures of organizational stress compounded with the body's internal fight-or-flight response. In this article the authors discussed many concepts regarding occupational and organizational stress including the body's internal responses to stress. Griffin and Sun (2017) suggested that when an officer was involved in physical stressors such as perceived threats to safety, the body attempted to "restore conditions back to or near homeostasis...which can deplete the body's resources" (p. 356). In understanding the internal and external stimuli experienced by LEOs, it is important to also consider the conditions under which they are required to remain in fight-or-flight mode. There are many occasions in which officers are required to maintain a high level of hyper-vigilance and emotional intensity only to experience the depletion after the situation is remedied. This leaves the body in a depleted mode as discussed by Griffin and Sun (2017).

The first responder lifestyle has both physiological and psychological effects on the LEO. Negative physiological health impacts can include gastrointestinal problems, deficient immune systems due to chronic stress, and sleep disorders (Karaffa & Koch, 2016). In another study by Karaffa et al. (2015), the stressors of finances and lack of scheduling freedom was a major factor in overall satisfaction among police and their spouses. In a study conducted by Brough (2005), the researcher concluded that organizational stressors had a significant impact on the overall physical health of the first responder, which was a key point because much of the current literature focused on the dangerous element of the career and not on the subtle, yet hazardous, aspects of other types of stressors experienced by LEOs. Many studies focused on the high levels of stress experienced by police officers in the line of duty, but they fail to include both physical and psychological stressors.

In regards to daily hassles that translate into occupational stress, there has been research to suggest that accumulated daily hassles show stronger relationships with physical and psychological symptoms than major stressful episodes or chronic stress, however, it can also be noted that major events are often linked with minor organizational hassles which can attribute to burnout among LEOs (Violanti, 2007; Martinez, 2010; Ramos, 2010; Che & Boyle, 2013; Heron et al., 2013; Larsson, et al., 2016; Armitage, 2017). In regards to law enforcement, LEOs face life and death episodes on a regular basis, but empirical studies have largely been focused on combat veterans, which discount the para-militaristic nature of law enforcement (Larsson, et al., 2016). This was a notable deficit in the body of the literature due to the frequent combination of extreme and minor stressors that inundate the law enforcement profession.

One of the major factors related to resiliency was the ability to cope with major and minor work-related stresses on a day-to-day basis. Nilsson et al. (2015) suggested that favorable relationships among peers, management, and the presence of formal and informal support are key indicators in developing resiliency in policing. Armitage (2017) further emphasizes the role of organizational stressors as being a key factor to burnout, stress, substance abuse, and suicide among LEOs and reports that pressure from administration oftentimes adds more stress than the duties of the job itself. In a study by Martinez (2010), one respondent commented that her husband “was more screwed up with department problems than anything he encountered on the streets” (p. 52). Che and Boyle (2013) suggested that the structural aspects of the police organization, particularly the bureaucratic leadership, could be a chronic source of anxiety and tension (p. 109).



### ***LGBTQI+ LEOs and Organizational Stress and Burnout***

LGBTQI+ LEOs also experienced organizational stressors and burnout at the same rate as any other LEO, but they also faced another challenge in navigating these organizational stressors while being a member of the LGBTQI+ LEO community. Miller and Lilley (2014) stated that LGBTQI+ “officers are forced to prove themselves more than their straight counterparts” (p. 373). In their article, Miller and Lilley (2014) addressed mainly the issues of homophobia and heterosexism for LGBTQI+ officers. This is a type of organizational stressor that is not faced by heterosexual LEOs. A reason suggested by Miller and Lilley for LGBTQI+ LEOs to have to constantly prove themselves is due to the “machismo” subculture that existed among officers and that “behaviors perceived as feminine are distained” (p. 373). The authors suggested that the conservative nature of policing and a strong favor towards masculinity and heterosexist ideals, created a strong subculture that was not generally inclusive and accepting of LGBTQI+ LEOs (Miller & Lilley, 2014). Rennstam and Sullivan (2018) discussed policing as a “heteronormative masculine culture” where “homophobia is built in” (Myers et al., 2004). This notion was also supported in a study conducted by Mennicke et al. (2018) where a phenomenological study of gay and lesbian corrections officers discussed their lived experiences. One participant stated that she did not believe that lesbians “had to prove themselves as much” as their male counterparts (Mennicke et al., 2018, p. 718). Although there was evidence that LGBTQI+ LEOs perform police work as well as their heterosexual counterparts (Hiatt & Hargrave, 1994), LGBTQI+ LEOs must work harder than their peers in order to prove their position among coworkers (Myers et al., 2004).

In a research study conducted by Myers et al. (2004), LGBTQI+ LEOs suggested that they work to contradict oppressive hetero-gendered stereotypes by actively using good service records and facilitating change one individual at a time. As one lesbian officer stated “I think if you have a reputation of being a good cop, your sexual orientation will just be another part of you that will eventually be accepted” (Myers et al., 2004, p. 33). In a study about lesbian police officers’ interpersonal working relationships, the authors discuss in detail the trepidation that existed for lesbian officers to disclose their sexual orientation to their peers (Galvin-White & O’Neal, 2016).

Another challenge faced by LGBTQI+ LEOs was the scant research regarding changes to cultural diversity among departmental philosophy and leadership (Miller & Lilley, 2014). Miller and Lilley suggested (2014), the culture is moving towards a more open stance to LGBTQI+ LEOs and “recruitment efforts have been made across many departments to have a more diverse and inclusive department” (p. 374). However, in a research study conducted with police chiefs in Texas, researchers found that “more respondents than not (48. 9% compared to 26. 7%) indicated that they would have difficulty working with a gay man...with chiefs split nearly evenly on their willingness to work closely with a lesbian” (Lyons Jr., et al., 2008, p. 110). This highlighted the issue of visibility in departments and the organizational stressor of hiring, promotion, and unit cohesiveness.

In a study conducted by Belkin and McNichol (2002), the authors suggested that resentment towards LGBTQI+ LEOs can occur when efforts are made by administration to recruit and promote LGBTQI+ LEOs into the ranks. While organizational changes may be important for validating LGBTQI+ LEOs, these changes may not lead to a

decrease in homophobic attitudes (Miller & Lilley, 2014). One way in which homophobic attitudes are transmitted throughout a unit is through social isolation where many LGBTQI+ LEOs report feeling like an outsider amongst their peers (Colvin, 2012).

Specifically addressing women in policing, various research articles are consistent that female officers often feel pressure to conform towards masculinity and demonstrate traits such as aggression and authoritative dispositions (Connell, 1987; Miller et al., 2004; Miller & Lilley, 2014). One stereotype that women in policing face is the barrage of constant questioning about their sexuality or lesbian-baiting (Miller & Lilley, 2014; Mennicke et al., 2018). Approximately 80% of women police officers have experienced sexual harassment at work including comments from male coworkers regarding their sexual orientation despite identifying as neither straight or lesbian (Feminist Daily News Wire, 2000).

In regard to burnout and stress experienced by LGBTQI+ LEOs that was unique to their sexual orientation and cultural identity as officers, was the notion of whether to be out or not to one community or another. For example, as put by one participant in a study by Miller et al. (2003) LGBTQI+ LEOs fear that backup might be slow to respond due to negative attitudes towards an LGBTQI+ LEOs sexual orientation. In a study conducted by Bernstein and Swartwout (2012) which examined heterosexual attitudes towards gay and lesbian officers, they also reiterated the viewpoint that “lesbian and gay officers continue to experience trepidation about being out at work and report various forms of discrimination on the job” (p. 1147).

In a study by Miller et al., (2003), a qualitative analysis was conducted with 17 gay and lesbian officers in a Midwestern police department who reported that concerns

about safety and trust were the biggest sources of fear in regard to coming out. Closeted officers also reported heightened anxiety about losing respect from their peers if they initially chose not to disclose their orientation, and then later found out to be gay or lesbian (Miller et al., 2003). There were additional misgivings about disclosing orientation if the individual is a person of color and there was evidence to suggest that race and ethnicity also shaped decisions about coming out to coworkers (Bernstein & Swartwout, 2012; Colvin, 2009; Miller et al., 2003; Miller & Lilley, 2014).

Another factor to consider is the history surrounding law enforcement and the LGBTQI+ community. Many LGBTQI+ LEOs keep a separation between occupation and cultural identification out of fear that they will be rejected by one or both groups and go to great lengths to conceal their orientation from coworkers and may not be open with their LGBTQI+ community about their status as an LGBTQI+ LEO (Belkin & McNichol, 2002; Colvin, 2012; Miller et al., 2003, 2004; Miller & Lilley, 2014; Schneider, 1986; Sklansky, 2006; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995).

### **Shiftwork and Sleep Deprivation**

Fatigue associated with shiftwork in policing is a well-established, pervasive issue that has affected officer safety, physical health, and overall job performance (James & Vila, 2015). Shiftwork contributed to cardiovascular disorders, including myocardial infarction and ischemic stroke, and has been linked to increased cortisol levels and circadian disturbances (Brown et al., 2009; James & Vila, 2015; Morris et al., 2012; Rudic, 2009). In a 2015 study conducted by Ma et al. regarding shift work and occupational stress, one of the major findings of their study was in regard to the differences in day shift versus night shift as well as the type of stressor that was most

detrimental to the LEO. Based on this study, it was determined that LEOs on night shift experience higher levels of stress due to a higher number of work-related stressors compared to day shift. Additionally, the other key finding from this study (Ma et al., 2015) was that a major stressor as reported by LEOs, was due to administrative or professional pressure rather than threats of physical danger or psychological threats. The authors contributed this to the notion that the physical danger or psychological threats were an inherent part of police work and therefore cannot be lessened or mitigated by any feasible means (Ma et al., 2015).

### ***LGBTQI+ LEOs and Shift-Work & Sleep Deprivation***

Specifically regarding LGBTQI+ LEOs and Lesbian LEOs, there was no literature at this time that attended to this area of study. This is an area of greater exploration that should be considered for future research but will not be exclusively researched for the purpose of this study. Shift-work and sleep deprivation are topics that have been studied in policing journals; however, there are no articles at this time that specifically addressed lesbian LEO experiences in relation to shift-work and sleep deprivation.

### **Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Suicide in LEOs**

Mental health, including suicide, and substance use issues in LEOs was a commonly investigated topic amongst researchers (Armitage, 2017; Berg et al., 2003, 2006; Martinez, 2010; Ménard & Arter, 2013; Richmond et al., 1998; Tanigoshi, et al., 2008; Violanti, 2004). Amongst many of the negative physiological and psychological impacts of policing, the toll on an officer's mental health and substance abuse issues can

be devastating. This section will focus on the relevant literature reviewing substance abuse, mental health and suicide in LEOs.

LEOs often turn to damaging coping tools to mitigate stressors associated with the demand of their occupations. The authors of a study that explored life-style factors of police officers found that 83% of LEOs had one unhealthy life-style factor and 19% had three or more (Richmond, et al., 1998). Of these unhealthy life-style factors, some of the most worrisome and prevalent ones included binge drinking, obesity, substance use, and nicotine use. High comorbidity levels of alcohol use and obesity was found in almost 50% of the first responder population (Tanigoshi, et al., 2008). Within the LEO population, Ménard and Arter (2013) suggested that increased alcohol consumption was a result of police officers using an escape-avoidant coping mechanism. This increased alcohol consumption puts police officers at risk for death from alcohol related liver disease at twice the rate of the general population (Ménard & Arter, 2013).

Alcohol use, PTSD symptoms, depression, and family problems all have been associated with increased rates of suicide (Berg et al., 2003, 2006; Violanti, 2004). In a book published by Rufo (2016), the author addressed various issues in the LEO lifestyle that lead to suicidality among officers. While substance abuse was a major issue which had a high correlation with suicidality, it was not the only factor contributing to this phenomenon. Rufo reiterated that more police officers died from suicide than in the line of duty. Rufo also discussed that the mental health of LEOs and first responders in general has been a neglected issue, in part due to the stigma, of a police officer seeking help and partially due to a lack of trust with the mental health community (2016). Additionally, stressors such as calls to critical incidents, acute stress, PTSD and personal

issues related to home life were key indicators to police suicidality that oftentimes are not addressed within the department due to concerns about fitness for duty and the stigma attached to help-seeking behaviors.

The denial to seek help was a major issue that impacted officers' suicidality and is confounded by several factors that were not individually direct causes of, rather contributing factors to, officer suicide (Armitage, 2017). Asking for help or knowing what kind of help to ask for was an area in which officers tended to remain in denial of their mental health needs (Martinez, 2010; Violanti, 2007). Martinez suggested that troubled officers actually want to be rescued but that they do not know who or how to ask for help without appearing to be mentally weak in front of their peers (2010). Violanti (2007) echoed this sentiment and suggested that officers often desire to appear as a *tough guy* and to discuss private matters openly, especially ones that divulge any perceived weakness would be detrimental to their police image. This idea of remaining invulnerable disinclines officers from seeking help in the forms of peer assistance, professional counseling, crisis counseling, or support programs (Armitage, 2017).

### ***LGBTQI+ LEOs and Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and Suicide***

Specifically, regarding LGBTQI+ LEOs and lesbian LEOs, there was no current literature in print that attended to this area of study. The only search results that could be found at the time pertained to substance use, mental health, and suicide in the LGBTQI+ community at large and nothing specifically regarding LGBTQI+ LEOs. This was an area that should be considered for future research, but will not be exclusively researched for the purpose of this study. While substance use, mental health, and suicide as a general topic is widely researched, there are no articles published at this time that is specific to

substance use, mental health, and suicide as experienced by LGBTQI+ LEOs or lesbian LEOs.

### **Critical Incidents, Post-Traumatic Stress, and Hyper-Vigilance in LEOs**

PTSD rates in LEOs vary in current literature from 5% to 50% (Davidson & Moss, 2008). These physiological and psychological negative effects put LEOs at an increased risk for premature death (Tanigoshi, et al., 2008). According to Rabjohn (2012) research into “non-military uniformed services workers... has lagged behind” the research conducted in soldiers and primary victims of trauma (pg. 268). Additionally, he suggested that it is because of the gradual damage experienced by long-term exposure that has led researchers to avoid this area of study (Pole et al., 2003; Rabjohn, 2012). The trauma experienced by LEOs can be best viewed as repeated, prolonged, and largely unnoticed by society in general (Pole et al, 2003). Pole et al. (2003) continue to discuss in the results of their study that “in a potentially threatening situation, the relationship between PTSD symptoms and startle responding decreases as proximity to threat increases” (p. 476). This paradigm seems to be opposite of the expected outcomes, however this response can be attributed to the high degree of training that LEOs undergo in order to perform their duties in the face of mortal danger (Brandl & Strohshine, 2003). In his article titled “The Human Cost of Being a First Responder” Rabjohn (2012) echoes this trauma experienced by LEOs and states this “is the result of exposure to human suffering on a scale rarely witnessed by the rest of society (pg. 269). An additional concept worthy of further exploration is the “layer-building” that Rabjohn suggested was part of the major issue in the treatment of first responders after a critical incident and



further, he suggested that these layers of compounded trauma not only have a negative impact upon the individual LEO, but on those closest to them (2012).

### ***Critical Incidents, Post-Traumatic Stress, and Hyper-Vigilance in LGBTQI+ LEOs***

Specifically, regarding LGBTQI+ LEOs and lesbian LEOs, there was no literature found that attended to this area of study. This is an area of greater exploration that should be considered for future research but will not be exclusively researched for the purpose of this study. In LEOs in general, critical incidents, post-traumatic stress, and hypervigilance have been studied in policing journals, there was no specific literature uncovered at this time that specifically addressed the experiences of lesbian LEOs in relation to this topic.

### **Barriers to Treatment: Media Sensationalism and Mental Health Stigma in LEOs**

LEOs are oftentimes difficult to engage in treatment due to a myriad of factors, however, the main factors discussed in this article are the effects of media sensationalism, stigma, and exploring barriers to treatment. As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, media sensationalism is the presentation of stories in a way that is intended to provoke public interest or excitement, at the expense of accuracy, especially in journalism (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). Many times first responders, particularly police officers assumed that a counselor would view them in a negative light because of stories they may have heard on the news or a general negative public perception of law enforcement (Porter & Henriksen, Jr., 2016). In a study conducted by Galovski et al. (2016), the authors sought to examine the relationship between proximity to community violence and mental health in both community members and police officers following the wake of the riots in Ferguson, Missouri. The authors discussed the impact of high levels of violence,

combined with the impact of the media and heightened PTSD responses in both sample populations studied (community,  $n = 304$ , and police,  $n = 261$ ) (Galovski et al., 2016). In their study, the researchers defined proximity not only in physical distance to the community violence and direct exposure, but also in “personal and emotional connectedness to human suffering, media exposure, life disruption, and fear secondary to a traumatic event” (Galovski et al., 2016, p. 284). The authors suggested that there were longer and farther reaching effects for officers as a collective unit who routinely faced human suffering, community violence, and media sensationalism as a consequence of their occupations.

In a study conducted by Karaffa and Tochkov (2013), 158 officers’ attitudes towards seeking mental health treatment was examined to try to further understand hesitancy towards treatment and barriers to addressing mental health concerns among police. One predominant issue to arise from this research study was inherent distrust of mental health service providers and the need for improved services for first responders. In the portion of Karaffa and Tochkov’s (2013) study where participants provided feedback for improvement to mental health services, suggestions were made in the following areas: cost, provider competency, location, stigma, peer judgment, and confidentiality (p. 84). Stigma is another significant barrier to first responders utilizing mental health treatment even if it is affordable, local, and with a competent professional counselor.

***Barriers to Treatment: Media Sensationalism and Mental Health Stigma among LGBTQI+ LEOs***

Specifically, regarding LGBTQI+ LEOs and Lesbian LEOs, there was no literature found at this time that attended to this area of study. This is an area of greater

exploration that should be considered for future research but will not be exclusively researched for the purpose of this study. While stigma as a general topic is widely researched, there were no articles published at this time that was specific to the media sensationalism or stigma as a barrier to mental health treatment as experienced by lesbian LEOs.

### **Domestic Violence in LEOs**

In 1999 the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) reported that domestic violence committed by LEOs was at least as common as it was in the general public, and encouraged agencies to respond to this staggering demographic among its personnel (IACP, 1999). Police officer domestic violence was defined as “any reported, founded and/or prosecuted incident of domestic violence wherein a sworn police officer is the suspected offender” (IACP, 1999, p. 1). The term “domestic violence” referred to “any act of violence (threatened or actual) perpetrated by a police officer (on or off duty) or any police department employee upon his or her intimate partner” (IACP, 1999, p. 1). In this study “‘partner’ refers to any individual (opposite or same-sex) the officer has dated, cohabitated with, married and/or has a child in common” (IACP, 1999, p. 1). In an article by Oehme, et al. (2012), the authors suggested that there is a strong association between PTSD, alcohol usage or dependence, and intimate partner violence. There have been several educational and prevention programs aimed at reducing instances of domestic violence and promoting healthy families among the law enforcement community; however, one confounding factor may be underreporting due to the impact of a domestic violence offense can have on a LEO’s career (Oehme, et al., 2012).

### ***Domestic Violence in LGBTQI+ LEOs and Lesbian LEOs***

Specifically, regarding LGBTQI+ LEOs and lesbian LEOs, there was no literature found at this time that attended to this area of study. The only search results that could be found at this time pertained to policing domestic violence in the LGBTQI+ community and nothing specifically regarding LGBTQI+ LEOs. This was an area that needed to be considered for future research, but will not be exclusively researched for the purpose of this study. While domestic violence as a general topic is widely researched, there were no articles published at this time that is specific to domestic violence as experienced by LGBTQI+ LEOs or lesbian LEOs.

### **Family and Romantic Relationships in LEOs**

LEOs reported experiencing stress from a variety of sources including traumatic experiences, the paramilitary nature of the career, and lack of social support (Ménard & Arter, 2013). This barrage of stressors negatively impacted both the LEO and their familial and romantic relationships. Karaffa et al. (2015) published a study about the perceived impact of police work on the marital dyad and discussed many challenges faced by first responder relationships due to burnout, organizational stressors, work-family conflict and a lack of effective coping mechanisms. In this study officers ( $n = 82$ ) and police spouses ( $n = 89$ ) participated in a survey study examining the perceived levels of conflict, stressors and perceived support, and resources used (Karaffa et al., 2015). The results of this study shed light on the areas of conflict experienced by police families such as conflict over finances (35%), emotional intimacy (24%), physical intimacy (16%), and conflict regarding high levels of alcohol use (3%). Additionally, under the stressors and sources of support category, officers and spouses reported that their major sources of

stress and concern were about missing important family events (53.9%) due to scheduling and shiftwork conflicts, and giving most of the officers' energy to the job (49.5%) (Karaffa et al., 2015). Effects on personality and attitudes towards the public are also of significant concern. Themes of emotional displacement, overbearingness or control, and an inability to get out of police mode pose challenges to first responder relationships (Karaffa et al., 2015).

In a phenomenological study conducted by Porter and Henriksen, Jr (2016) with first responder spouses, the following themes emerged from the data: (a) safety, (b) stress, (c) pride, (c. 1) civic-mindedness, (d) identity, and (e) finances. This study focused on the lived experiences of first responder spouses and examined both positive and negative aspects of the first responder lifestyle. While much of the current research focused on the negative aspects of first responder culture the researchers were able to solicit both positive and negative lived experiences, which is a derivation from the existing literature. When learning about the experiences of the first responder spouses, information about how their daily lives were impacted by their spouse's career came to light. Routine daily tasks such as going to the grocery store after dark became issues of public safety such as following smoke while off duty to ensure safety precautions were being taken by civilians. Additionally, learning about the shared identity of the first responder and their spouse was a major shift in understanding methods of counseling first responder romantic relationships (Porter & Henriksen, Jr., 2016). Due to the "us versus them" mentality adopted by first responders, it was discovered that the spouses also often ascribed to the same ideas regarding trust and identity, which resulted in having friends who were part of the "brotherhood" and limiting exposure to outsiders who may not

understand or judge their way of life (Porter & Henriksen, Jr., 2016; Woody, 2005).

Horan et al. (2012) also takes a more positive and resilient approach to LEO romantic relationships as their study examined the use of humor as a tool to diffuse tension within the family system. The authors of this study suggested that high humor orientation is used as a coping skill to help the LEO and romantic partner mitigate conflict and stress within the marital dyad (Horan et al., 2012).

Staying married is also a challenge for LEOs and their spouses. Woody (2005) reported high divorce rates, especially among female police officers, due to the police officers' stress levels, emotional guardedness, and unavailability. Ramos (2010) discussed the impact on the family unit that can occur as a by-product of the occupation. He suggested that officers are trained in tactics and communication that are essential and lifesaving in the field or on patrol, but that these same tactics can be detrimental if brought home and used with family, children, and significant others (Ramos, 2010). Oftentimes this means of communication works well with suspects as it is firm and direct but can cause problems on the home-front when attempting to communicate with loved ones who are not suspects. Ramos (2010) continues to discuss how this can transmit further into an "us versus them" mentality and that more resources should be provided in the form of training for families to help the officer transition from work to home.

Gilmartin (2002) described the changes that oftentimes occur when LEOs are trying to navigate the world of work-life balance. He describes "the job itself as fun, with a capital F" and as an entirely new world where young officers are trying to become the best officers they can be (p. 2). However, Gilmartin cautioned that it is during these times of trying to learn their roles and earn their way into police culture, that young officers are

prone to making everything and everyone else secondary to the cop dimension (2002). Ramos (2007) stated that young officers become “addicted to the rush of adrenaline faced in daily work related scenarios” and that this causes life “outside of the uniform to become less interesting and boring” (p. 18). Gilmartin (2002) also stated that “the job takes on more and more of the officer’s time and becomes more than a job – it can become the central and defining aspect of an officer’s life” (p. 4). Partner relationships as discussed by Violanti (2007), Martinez (2010), Armitage (2017), and Ramos (2010) are oftentimes detrimentally affected by the job in a variety of ways, many routes leading to separation and divorce which can put the individual officer at risk for many mental and physical health challenges.

Kirschman, et al., (2014) also discussed the transition into law enforcement as work that “changes people, not overnight, but in incremental stages” that can be both positive and negative (p. 39). In their book, the authors discussed a wide variety of topics pertinent to counseling LEOs and they addressed the issues that LEO families face when it comes to work-family conflict (Kirschman, et al., 2014). They described the journey of a LEO as having several important stages that help the LEO transition from rookie to retiree and all throughout these stages the family unit can fluctuate with the changes present in the LEOs career.

In the beginning stage that Kirschman, et al. (2014) call “At the Academy and On Probation,” they described the difficulties of adopting a new lifestyle. Not only is the rookie LEO learning his or her new job duties, they are also trying to fit in with fellow officers and have to earn their way into the “brotherhood.” One of the major issues addressed in terms of LEO careers impacting family life is the idea that families are now

second to a career they did not choose (Kirschman, et al., 2014). In this early phase of law enforcement culture, the LEO is learning how to become more confident in their own abilities to protect themselves and others and the idea of “loyalty on the job will be repeatedly reinforced as critical to survival on the street” (p. 40-41). This constant time of training and retraining develops an individual who is “soaking up the informal, unwritten ways that veteran officers behave, think, and manage emotions” (Kirschman et al., 2014, p. 42).

In the second phase of law enforcement, “The Honeymoon Phase,” Kirschman, et al., (2014) described this as the five years following the probationary period where officers reported high job satisfaction, less exhaustion, lower levels of cynicism and better overall health. In this time, the LEO is more eager to do his or her job and the job extends to home life as well. This is where the work-family conflict can continue to become an issue for LEO families. The enthusiasm for work overshadowed everything else, even family, because the occupation consolidates their identity greater than being an officer (Miller, 2007). Kirschman, et al., (2014) address this area of putting the job above family and this level of devotion often “do not go over well at home, as families learn that, with few exceptions, the job comes first” (p. 42). This phase of the career is characterized by socialization being strongest at the patrol level, safety is dependent upon solidarity, and officer thinking becomes very black and white (Kirschman, et al., 2014). Violanti (2007) refers to this as “dichotomized decision-making”, whereby an officer takes control of their environments at work by categorizing into “good or bad, right or wrong, black and white, with no gray area in between” (p. 19). The danger that occurs in applying this line of thinking towards home-life is that the officer has little room for



compromise with their loved ones often making them appear to be unyielding and lead to further family dynamic conflict (Violanti, 2007; Ramos, 2010).

The next stage an officer encounters is “The Early Middle Years” which Kirschman et al. described as years five to ten and a time of settling down or decelerated change (2007). Violanti (1983) referred to this time in an officer’s life as a disenchantment stage where the novelty of the job has worn off and circumstances of life have begun to settle. In this stage the family unit has suffered due to the officer becoming more invested in work, especially if the officer is trying to advance or promote. This leads to stress upon the family unit and in this stage many officers are experiencing family separation or divorce (Kirschman, et. al, 2014). Gilmartin (2002) suggests that in this time period officers spend time investing in their careers due to financial stressors and needs of their families. Kirschman, et al. (2014) add that families are usually poorly prepared of the anxiety and disappointment that come with promotion and advancement.

The “Plateau: Late Middle Years” as described by Kirschman et al. is the period of time between 10-20 years where the individual officer experiences continuing disillusion and disenchantment with the profession (2014). Much of the cynicism begins to set in for the officer and they begin to view their careers in a different light. During this stage is where job satisfaction is at its lowest as officers struggle to keep up with the demands of the job and mounting pressure to perform (Kirschman et al., 2014). For the officers who have promoted, it can be a time where they are now in charge of former peers and they have to navigate the political structure of their agencies which can result in missing the “action of the streets” (Kirschman et al., 2014, p. 45).

The final phases as described by Kirschman et al. (2014) are the moves towards retirement. Violanti (1983) described this as a time where stress decreases significantly due to the officer's ability to find fulfillment in their career and investment in their home life. There is a significant decrease in stress until the officer begins to take action towards retiring. At this point, there is a spike in stress, likely due to the thought of no longer being an officer (Violanti, 1983). Kirschman et al. (2014) suggested that this is when family and relationships become the most important as the officer transitions from working and into retirement.

Throughout this section, the work-home life and family unit have been reviewed, and yet, limited information was found regarding LGBTQI+ couples and families.

#### ***LGBTQI+ and Lesbian LEO Family and Romantic Relationships***

Specifically, regarding LGBTQI+ LEOs and lesbian LEOs, there was no literature at this time that attended to this area of study. The only search results that could be found at this time pertained law enforcement issues in the LGBTQI+ community at large and nothing specifically regarding LGBTQI+ LEO or lesbian LEO family or romantic relationships. When it comes exploring the culture experienced by lesbian LEOs and their significant others, one must be mindful of the variables that impact the family dynamic and romantic relationship. Law enforcement careers are occupations that not only affect the individual, but the family unit as well. However, virtually none of the current literature addressed specifically the impact of police careers on lesbian LEO relationships. Largely, lesbian LEO couples have been overlooked in research. This research study will seek to identify the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple while taking into consideration the intersection between orientation, identity, and occupation.

This is an area that was exclusively researched for the purpose of this study. There are no articles published at this time that is specific to family or romantic relationships as experienced by lesbian LEOs.

### **Summary**

This literature review was completed to explore the areas of law enforcement as it pertained to the LGBTQI+ community, specifically lesbian LEOs. The relevant literature reviewed herein was chosen to help provide an overall view of the nature of the law enforcement community and variables LEOs contend with in their occupation, as well as to explore the impact on the family unit. As delineated by the literature review, there were no articles specific to the study of lesbian LEOs couples, which leaves a gap in existing research. The current study examined this gap using a transcendental phenomenological approach which is further detailed in Chapter III of this manuscript. This study was conducted in order to give voice to an underserved population as well as inform practice of counselors who may work with this population in a clinical setting. Joining with clients from a family systems perspective is a vital key in developing a successful working therapeutic relationship (Helm, 2019). Having an understanding of the intersection of culture and occupation with respect to lesbian LEO couples was a major focus of this study.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

In this qualitative research study, a transcendental phenomenological approach was used to uncover and understand the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples. In a phenomenological approach, the researcher allows the data to emerge from gathering rich descriptions from the participants' lived experiences. This research design comes from a philosophy in which the researcher describes the lived experiences about a phenomenon as experienced by the participants because the participants have all experienced the same phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Describing a cultural experience is one of the main goals of a phenomenological study, and I sought to understand the cultural experiences of lesbian LEOs in regards to their occupation and romantic relationships (Creswell, 2013). A transcendental phenomenological qualitative design was chosen as an appropriate method because it afforded the participants the opportunity to describe the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple in their own words (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experience of being a lesbian LEO couple.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design was selected for this study. Maxwell (2013) suggested that a qualitative research design does not start from a "predetermined starting point" but is constructed and reconstructed as the study evolves (p. 3). Phenomenology is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of a phenomenon by gathering rich descriptions from individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This form of qualitative research has strong philosophical underpinnings and often involves conducting interviews (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). This study is best suited for a phenomenological approach since the I sought to understand a phenomenon experienced by individuals within a certain population being LGBTQI+ and a LEO in a committed relationship.

While there are different design methods suited for qualitative research, for the purpose of this study a phenomenological study with a semi-structured interview approach was determined to be the most appropriate in conjunction with a demographic questionnaire to gather all pertinent points of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In qualitative research there are several methodologies that could have been used in conducting this research; however, phenomenology was selected to best describe the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples. Another theory that was considered was grounded theory in which the initial focus of the research is on unraveling the elements of an experience in order to develop a theory (Moustakas, 1994). However, the aim of this research is to capture the essence of being rather than develop a theory, so grounded theory was not most appropriate at this time. Ethnography is another method of qualitative research which was considered for this study but ultimately, ethnography is the study of people in their own environment and for the purposes of this study, I was not going to be going into the environment of the research participants. The term “grand tour” comes from ethnography and in this study, I used this term to for the purpose of developing semi-structured interview questions that are designed to elicit rich descriptions from participants, but ultimately a phenomenological approach was

determined to be a best fit for this research. The research question being asked in this study is: What are the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples?

### **Participants**

Lesbian LEOs include anyone who identifies as a member of law enforcement as a licensed peace officer in the state of Texas and also identifies as lesbian. Additionally, eligible participants must have a romantic partner or spouse with whom they have been in a relationship with for a minimum of one year in duration. The timeframe of one year in duration was selected as a delimitation to ensure that the partner or spouse of the LEO had enough time within the relationship to discuss how the occupation affected the them, if at all. At least one participant must identify as a lesbian LEO to be eligible for the study. Both participants may identify as lesbian LEOs, but it is not a requirement for participation in this study. Participants will be selected using purposeful and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling is the process by which the researcher “purposefully selects participant or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and research question” (Creswell, 2013, p. 185). Snowball sampling is a method of convenience sampling that is applied when there is difficulty accessing research participants (Naderifar et al., 2017). In a snowball sampling method, participants are asked if they have any acquaintances who may be eligible for research participation (Naderifar et al., 2017).

I began by sending an email containing pertinent information about the study to several acquaintances in the law enforcement field and ask that they further disseminate the email to individuals who may be interested in participation and meet the criteria for participation. Additionally, I used social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) to

further recruit participants. During the recruitment of participants phase, I provided contact information so that interested parties can contact me directly and discreetly. Those who agreed to participate in the study were contacted to set up an appointment time at and will receive an individualized Zoom link that will most respect the dignity and confidentiality of the participants.

### **Instrumentation**

For the purpose of this study and maintaining the confidentiality of each participant, the researcher conducted electronic informed consent and followed the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) COVID-19 safety guidelines. The participants completed a demographic questionnaire via email that included questions about the participants' age, race/ethnicity, gender, occupation, relationship status, and a scaling question about their experience being in a lesbian LEO relationship. Participants were also assigned or selected a pseudonym to be identified by so as to further protect their identities. This demographic questionnaire was developed by the researcher and was used to gather descriptive information about the participants. The descriptive information gathered from the demographic questionnaire was general in nature such as pseudonym, age, gender, race, ethnicity, but will also include information specific to the participants' occupations and relationship status. Additional questions included specific agency or departmental affiliation (Sheriff's Office, Constable's Office, Local Police Department, State Trooper, Independent School District Police Department/School Resource Officer, or other), position or division within their agency (patrol, investigations, tactical, etc.), years of service, rank, and other information relevant to the LEO occupation. Further, if the partner or spouse identified if they were also a LEO and responded to the LEO

demographic questions, or conversely, indicated their profession if they identified as other than a LEO. In regards to the relationship, the demographic questionnaire also included questions about the status of their relationship (married, dating, partner, or other), the duration of their relationship (must be equal to or more than 12 months), and other information relevant to the relationship that added to the rich description of the participants.

A semi-structured interview was then conducted via Zoom with each participant couple. There were five open-ended questions that was asked of each participant couple and follow-up questions will be based on their answers. According to Mustakas (1994), a key component in phenomenological research design is development of questions that guided the interview process, also known as grand tour questions. In this study, the interview questions were (a) Describe what it is like to identify as a Lesbian LEO (Belkin & McNichol, 2002; Colvin, 2012; Lyons et al., 2008), (b) Describe how your relationship has been affected by the law enforcement occupation (Brandl & Stroshine, 2003; Karaffa et al., 2015; Kirschman, 2007; Roberts & Levenson, 2001), (c) How has your life changed since becoming a Lesbian LEO couple? (Miller et al., 2004; Porter & Henriksen Jr., 2014; Woody, 2005), (d) What is the most rewarding part of being a Lesbian LEO couple? (Karaffa et al., 2015; Kirschman, 2007; Porter & Henriksen Jr., 2014), and (e) What is the most difficult part of being a Lesbian LEO couple? (Miller, et al., 2003, 2004; Miller & Lilly, 2014). These questions are designed to be open-ended so that the participants could openly describe the experience of being a lesbian LEO couple and richly describe their lived experiences.



Following the semi-structured interviews, the researcher sent a list of mental health resources via email to each lesbian LEO couple if any discussion about their lived experiences raised relational issues, concerns, or unpleasant experiences. The list of mental health resources included referrals to toll free mental health crisis lines, LGBTQI+ specific resources, and state-wide mental health resources.

### **Positionality**

As a researcher, the LEO population is one that I have studied and been in close contact with for the past five years. I have been able to gain first-hand knowledge and experience working alongside LEOs and consider many to be close personal friends and professional contacts. In conducting this research, one area that I must remain cognizant of is how to bracket my personal experiences so that any personally held beliefs do not interfere with the study (Baksh, 2018). Bracketing is the “task of sorting out the qualities that belong to the researcher’s experience of the phenomenon” (Drew, 2004, p. 215). One way in which to bracket my experiences is to have regular consultation sessions with a colleague in order to check any biases or preconceived notions I may have had regarding this population or their experiences. I also kept a journal of my experiences to reflect upon my processes while gathering data from research participants.

I am a Licensed Professional Counselor and Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice. I also work in a community mental health agency and have collaborated with law enforcement for the past five years. I work with law enforcement organizations to provide education in the areas of officer wellness and crisis. I have also been published in the area of first responders and have been dedicated to providing counseling services to first responder families over the course of my career.

Dr. Richard Henriksen Jr is my study methodologist. He has been a qualitative researcher and educator for more than 20 years and he is a Licensed Professional Counselor Supervisor who has worked with lesbian and gay clients throughout his career. Dr. Henriksen also served as co-researcher and author on an article cited in this dissertation focused on the first responder population. He has also provided guidance through mentorship throughout the course of my education at both the Master's and Doctoral levels.

Dr. Chi-Sing Li is my dissertation committee member and is a counselor educator and researcher. He has been my professor in both the master's and doctoral programs and has provided professional guidance and mentorship to me as a developing counselor educator and researcher. Dr. Li has also had many years of experience in private practice as well as crisis intervention and management. Dr. Li has worked with first responders over the course of his extensive career including post-9/11 crisis intervention work with World Trade Center survivors. Dr. Li has also been an advocate in both research and practice for the LGBTQI+ community and continues to support research and education into this population.

Dr. Lauren McLean is my dissertation committee member and has been a qualitative researcher and counselor educator for five years. She is also a Licensed Professional Counselor who has worked in the mental health field in various capacities for approximately 15 years. In addition, she has worked with, and specializes in, the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) community and their mental health needs. Dr. McLean is a counselor educator and researcher who has a dedicated interest in serving LGBTQI+ populations through education, research, and practice. She is an

advocate for underserved populations, social justice, and progression in the mental health field for groups that have historically been ignored in research. She has background in community mental health populations and has transitioned into serving from a counselor educator role.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to recruiting participant couples, I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Participant couples were then recruited from acquaintances in the law enforcement community and through social media outlets. Interested participant couples contacted the researcher about the study and individual interview times were scheduled. The semi-structured interviews took place via Zoom at a time of the participant couple's choosing and lasted approximately 45 minutes in duration. The recordings were then securely stored and will be saved for three years following the conclusion of the study on a password-secured computer, and then destroyed following the three year time frame.

The participants all received an individual Zoom link in order to protect participant couple confidentiality and so that the participant felt comfortable discussing personal issues regarding their experiences as a lesbian LEO couple. The recordings were then transcribed by the researcher. Once the transcription process was completed, respondent validation was obtained. Additionally, the recordings and transcripts were coded and any identifying information was redacted and de-identified so as to protect confidentiality of the participants.

## Data Organization

The process of data organization occurred using the heuristic method (Moustakas, 1990). In this process, the research question is one in which the researcher feels deeply about the question being asked and that the researcher must embody the inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). The process of heuristic inquiry was used to help organize the data collected during this research study before it was analyzed. The process of heuristic theory is divided into six phases of heuristic inquiry. The first is the *Initial Engagement Phase*. In this phase the researcher comes into contact with the subject and question. Moustakas (1990) recognized this piece as the source of the question that generates the movement of research as the individual seeks clarity and understanding. The second phase, *Immersion*, is the “invitation, the experience, or question to the researcher to stay fully with the experience of the phenomenon in whatever form it takes” (Gerard, 2010, p. 8). *Incubation* is the third phase where the researcher recognized the value in retreating from the intense and focused attention on the data to engage in activities that are unrelated to the research. The fourth phase, *Illumination*, the researcher is able to view the research question in a new way after stepping back from the question. This process of *Incubation* and *Illumination* assisted the researcher in being able to view the data from a more objective viewpoint rather than becoming fixated on one point or another (Gerard, 2010). *Explication* is the fifth phase in which the researcher examined what has emerged from the process and was able to understand what possible meanings the data held. Finally, *Creative Synthesis*, the sixth stage of heuristic inquiry occurred where the many strands of experience and understanding that have emerged were brought together to form a coherent whole (Gerard, 2010; Moustakas, 1990). The six phases of heuristic inquiry

helped the researcher to organize the data in manner that is crucial for the process of data analysis using a modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Data Analysis**

The procedure for data analysis followed the steps outlined for phenomenological data analysis by using a modified Van Kamm method (Moustakas, 1994). A modified Van Kaam method involved a nine step process for analyzing data which was further discussed in this section.

The first step of data analysis is the process of horizontalization. During the analysis process, the researcher highlighted significant statements and passages that reflect the lived experiences of the lesbian LEO couple. This method of transcribing and analyzing qualitative data involved listing all expressions relevant to the experience being explored (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). During the process of horizontalization, I began to highlight emerging topics that would later be grouped into themes or subthemes.

The second step of data analysis involved the reduction and elimination of data. Through this process, I reduced redundancy by eliminating verbatim statements if the expression is not sufficient enough to be labeled as a theme. This step allowed me to delete quotes that are not relevant to the study. In doing this, I was left with the thick, rich descriptions vital to performing the following steps of data analysis.

In the third step, I grouped these statements into units of meaning, known as invariant constituents, and began to examine and extract overarching themes directly from the words of the participants. The invariant constituents are developed by grouping the horizons together to identify themes. By allowing these themes to emerge, I was able

to develop a rich description that described the essence of being and lived experiences of a lesbian LEO couple.

Throughout this process, I actively worked to set aside any personal beliefs or biases previously held through a concept known as bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The purpose of the bracketing experience is to suspend the researcher's judgments, preconceived notions, and evaluations of the phenomena being studied (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Step four consisted of taking each theme and applying it to the invariant constituent that was listed for the themes. This step was done to ensure that each invariant constituent fit within the identified themes.

The fifth step of the modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) involved constructing individualized textual descriptions of each theme where a combination of direct quotes and verbatim text was used to demonstrate each theme's meaning.

Step six is where I constructed an individual structural description of each theme by examining what the participants said and the textual description of the theme. I then examined the emotional, social, and cultural connections between the verbatim text and the themes.

In step seven, I took each of the emergent themes and placed them in a separate document to compare side-by-side. This allowed me to examine the themes thoroughly and reorganize them based on dominance. Some themes had more dominance than others and would need to be ranked according to this structure.

Step eight of the data analysis method involved creating a composite structural description where I examined the emotional, social, and cultural connections of the

participants. In this step, I attended to how the culture of law enforcement and lesbian LEO couples experience one another.

Step nine, the final step of the modified Van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) involved developing a textural-structural description of meaning, or the essence. This occurred by integrating the structural components with the textural components in order to discover the overarching phenomenon, or the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Establishing Trustworthiness**

Establishing trustworthiness was a key component to the research process and provided for accurate results and reliability (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). According to Maxwell (2013), at least three methods of validity should be employed to help establish trustworthiness within research. In this study, the researcher used rich data, respondent validation, bracketing, consultation, and quasi-statistics to help combat potential threats to validity and enhance trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Rich data is gathered when a researcher transcribes verbatim intensive interviews in order to analyze data rather than relying on note-taking (Maxwell, 2013). Respondent validation, also commonly referred to as *member checks* is a system of soliciting feedback about data and conclusions from the population being studied (Maxwell, 2013). According to Maxwell (2013) “this is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say, do, and the perspective they have about what is going on” (p. 126). He went on to say that respondent validation is also an important method of identifying biases and misunderstandings about what a researcher has observed (Maxwell, 2013). Bracketing in

qualitative research is a method used to mitigate the errors to validity by eliminating the preconceptions that may taint the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Consultation is the process by which I bracketed my experiences and consulted with a trusted peer or peers to ensure that no biases are posing threats to validity (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013).

Quasi-statistics referred to the use of simple numerical results that can be readily derived from data (Maxwell, 2013). Using simple numbers to help provide clarity to the data helped to bolster validity without making the study quantitative (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). For the purposes of the study, I derived quasi-statistics through the use of a demographic questionnaire completed by each participant.

By soliciting rich data from the participant couples, it helped me to establish trustworthiness because it “provides thick, rich descriptions” of their lived experiences (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). After I conducted the semi-structured interview, I transcribed the interview verbatim so as not to impose any preexisting ideas upon the study. Upon the completion of each transcription, I kept a journal of memos and notes to help further bracket my experiences.

Additionally, to help ensure that researcher bias did not impact the results of the study, respondent validation (Bryman, 1988) was employed so that the participants could provide feedback and validate that the results have accurately reflected the information that was shared with the researcher. I also used thorough consultation with my dissertation chair and trusted colleagues. This bracketing process included discussions about the emergent themes and any personal thoughts or experiences. Through this process, I was able to separate myself from the data and truly allow the voices of the



participants to come forward and describe the phenomenon of being a lesbian LEO couple. Finally, I used quasi-statistics as support and to add further to the rich data that was gathered from the interviews (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the methodology was reviewed and rationale was provided for the research design. The purpose of enlisting a phenomenological approach is to explore the perceptions of Lesbian LEO couples and understand their lived experiences. After reviewing relevant qualitative research designs, a transcendental phenomenological approach was deemed to be most appropriate for uncovering the lived experiences of lesbian LEOs and their romantic partners or spouses. A demographic survey was constructed to capture all pertinent demographic information and included a scaling question to add to the data gathered from the semi-structured interview. The data was analyzed via the modified Van Kamm method (Moustakas, 1994), and the responses were grouped into themes to be further discussed in Chapter IV.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple. Lesbian LEO participants were provided with the opportunity to discuss their experiences as a lesbian LEO and provide rich descriptions of their life as a couple. The purpose of my study was accomplished by conducting interviews with each participant couple. In total, twelve participants (six couples) were interviewed regarding their experience as a lesbian LEO couple. The results of the data analysis from the interviews conducted are presented in this chapter.

This chapter begins with a description of the participants using information provided in the demographic questionnaire. I then began to outline the results of my study by delineating themes that describe the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple using a transcendental phenomenological approach. Qualitative data were collected via a demographic questionnaire, virtual Zoom semi-structured interviews following COVID-19 protocols, and bracketing to gain insight into the essence of the participants' being. The research question that was answered in this study was: *What are the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples?* The following six themes captured the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple: *Proving Yourself, Respect the Relationship, Safety, The Climate, It's Not Normal, and Hold the Line*. The results of the data analysis are further presented in this chapter following the description of participants.

#### **Description of Participants**

The participants in my study were all women who identify as lesbian and as a member of a LEO couple. They all identified as being in a monogamous relationship with

one another, residing in the same household, and are all either a LEO themselves or in a relationship with a LEO for a minimum of twelve months in duration. The following table, Table 1, provides a description of participants.

**Table 1**

*Description of Participants*

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	0	0
Female	12	100
Age Range		
21-29	0	0
30-39	7	58
40-49	5	42
Relationship Status		
Dating	2	33
Engaged	1	17
Married/Partnered	3	50
Ethnicity		
African-American	2	17
Hispanic/Latina	6	50
Caucasian	4	33
Occupation		
Law Enforcement Officer (LEOs)	8	67
Civilian	4	33
Years of Service Among LEOs		
1-5	2	25
6-10	4	50
10-15	1	13
16+	1	13
Rank of LEOs		
Deputy/Officer	6	75
Corporal	1	13
Sergeant	1	13
Work Assignments Among LEOs		
Patrol	6	75
Crime Scene Investigator	1	13
Detective	1	13

The participants ( $n = 12$ ) consisted of twelve women, ranging in age from 30 – 49 years old. Seven of twelve participants indicated they are in the 30 – 39 years old age range and five out of twelve participants indicated they were in the 40 – 49 age range. Three of the six couples identified that were married, two identified as dating and the remaining couple identified as engaged. In regards to ethnicity, two identified as African American, six identified as Hispanic/Latina, and four identified as Caucasian. Of the twelve participants, eight identified as LEOs. Out of the eight identified LEOs, six identified as a deputy/officer, one identified as a corporal, and one identified as a sergeant. Six of the LEOs indicated they were assigned to patrol units, while two others identified as a crime scene investigator and detective, respectively.

The years of service among the LEOs varied as well. Two LEOs reported length of service from one to five years, four LEOs reported six to ten years of service, one LEO indicated ten to fifteen years of service, and another LEO reported 16 or more years of service. The participants also indicated how many years they had been in a committed, monogamous relationship or marriage with one another. The participants reported being in a committed relationship or marriage with one another ranging from two years to 18 years ( $M = 6.2$ ). The remaining four participants did not identify as LEOs and identified occupations as a detention officer, teacher, probation administrator, and administrative assistant for a law enforcement agency, respectively. Of note, three of the four non-LEO partners or spouses identified with a career that is ancillary to law enforcement or closely related. Only one participant, a teacher, indicated she worked in an occupation that was not connected to law enforcement in some way.

To understand to what degree the law enforcement occupation had upon the participants' relationship, I included a question on the demographic questionnaire with Likert scale responses. Twelve out of twelve participants indicated that the law enforcement occupation had affected their relationship in some manner. The possible degrees of impact were as follows: *very positive*, *positive*, *somewhat positive*, *neutral*, *somewhat negative*, *negative*, and *very negative*. Two participants indicated that law enforcement had a *positive* impact on their relationship, while two others indicated that law enforcement had a *somewhat positive* impact. Two respondents indicated *neutral* as a response to the question of impact, meaning neither positive nor negative, and five reported the law enforcement occupation had a *somewhat negative* effect on their relationship. One respondent indicated that they believed law enforcement had a *negative* impact on their relationship. Of note, none of the participants indicated that the law enforcement occupation had a *very positive* or conversely, a *very negative* impact on their relationship.

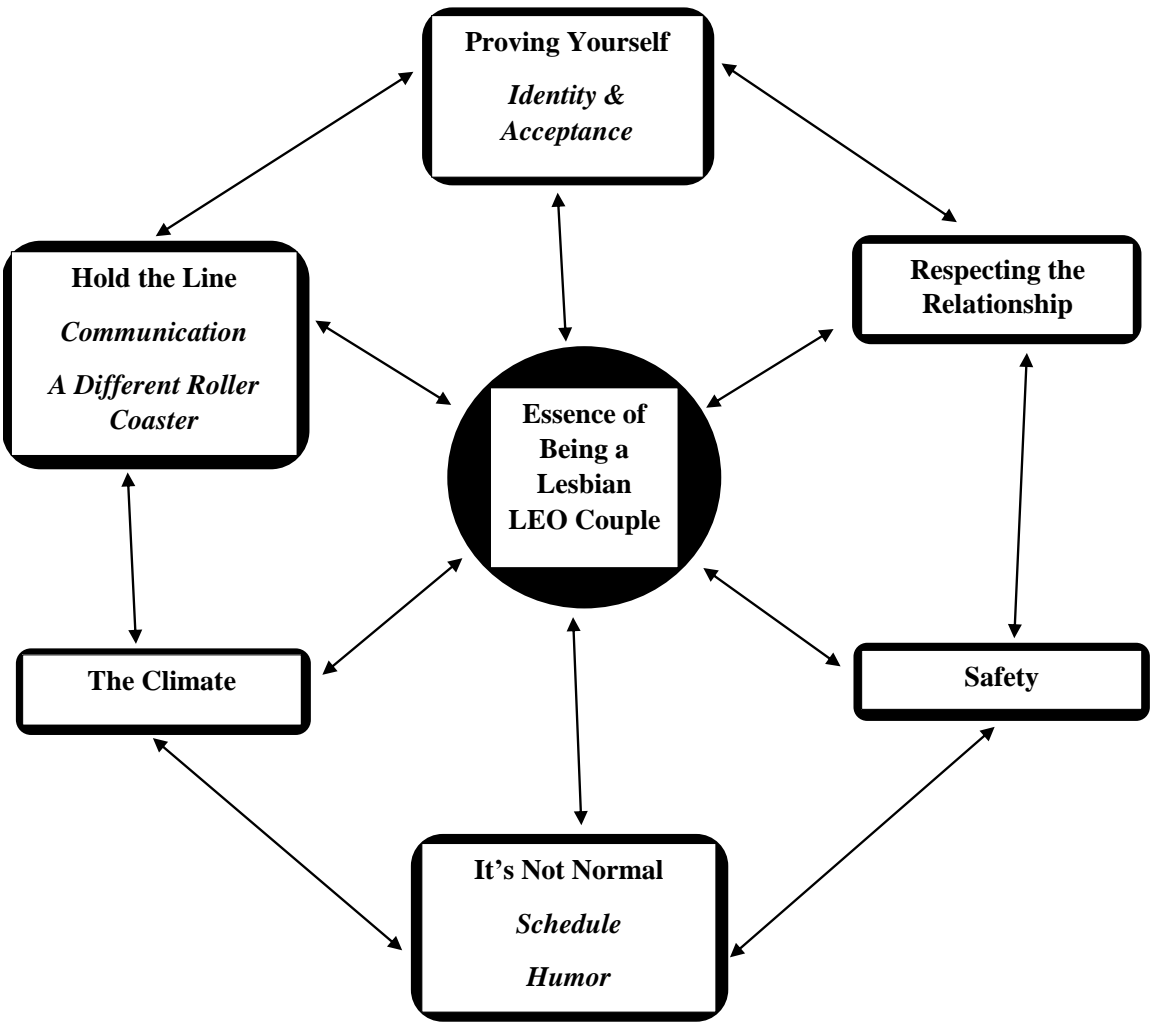
Additionally, participants were asked if they had ever wished their partner or spouse was not a LEO. In LEO couples where both parties identified as law enforcement ( $n = 4$ ), three participants indicated no, that they had not wished their partner or spouse was not a LEO, while one participant indicated yes, she wished her partner or spouse was not a LEO at some point in their relationship. In the remaining LEO couples, where only one partner or spouse identified as LEOs, all non-LEO participants ( $n = 4$ ) responded that yes, they had wished their partners or spouses were not LEOs at some point in the relationship. The remaining LEO partners or spouses ( $n = 4$ ) selected N/A as their partner or spouse was not identified as a LEO.

## **EmergEd Themes**

In this section, I discussed in detail each of the six themes that emerged from the data. In the spirit of phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994), participants' language was used in the thematic titles to stay as close to the descriptions of the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, which were used in the remainder of this chapter. Qualifying terms were as follows: most participants (at least 75% of participants), many or a majority (50% or more of participants), several (20%-30% of participants), and a few (less than or equal to 20% of participants). Upon completion of the semi-structured interviews, I transcribed each participants' statements and then identified core themes that emerged from the data once the participants confirmed the accuracy of their statements through respondent validation. The themes were then organized according to how significant they were to the participants' experiences. All of these themes describe the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple. Figure 1 below depicts the emergEd themes and subthemes from the data that described the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple.

**Figure 1**  
*Essence of Being a Lesbian LEO Couple*

---



---

*Note.* Sub-themes italicized

**Proving Yourself**

The first theme I identified was taken directly from the participants' descriptions. This theme highlights the need for lesbian LEOs to validate their existence in the field of law enforcement. A subtheme that emerged within this topic of proving oneself was the theme of identity and acceptance. Most participants discussed the need to not only prove

themselves in the field but also discussed how their sexual orientation has been accepted in their respective departments or agencies.

In regards to being a female in law enforcement, seven out of twelve participants discussed being tested and needing to prove they possessed the abilities to be a LEO. Lauren discussed in her experience how women are viewed as they enter law enforcement stating, “You have people who apply, and they can’t handle it. But females, it’s off top. If you’re a female you’re going to be determined weak off top. It’s just assumed. You’re going to have to prove yourself.” Specifically in regards to being a lesbian in law enforcement Sam stated:

Being a lesbian in law enforcement you’re always trying to prove yourself. To be polite and professional, but not soft. To show you can fight if you need to, but not be so aggressive that you’re hostile. It’s a weird balance.

Rhonda also added, “There’s more pressure as a lesbian female in law enforcement. You can’t just be good, you have to be better and set the example.” Lisa also echoed this sentiment stating, “In law enforcement you’re always judged, and you get judged harder if you’re a woman and twice as hard as a lesbian. They have to know you can hold your own out there.” Lauren recalled that early on in her career the need to be exceptional stating:

I knew I couldn’t just be good, I had to be better than good. So, they tested me quite a bit, and I guess I passed the test. Cause then once they respect you and they know you gonna do your job and they don’t have to worry about you as far as the job, then you in. They don’t much care about anything else.



The concept of holding your own is most often in regards to being able to handle oneself physically and doing the demands of the job. Kim, Lauren, Maria and Rhonda each discussed holding their own in different aspects. Kim stated “You’ve got to prove that you’re not afraid to jump in, when there is a need to. You can’t be afraid of a fight and I think I proved that pretty early on in my career.” Lauren recalled:

I’ve had to prove myself because they have to know that they can respect you, and that even though you a woman that you are going to have their back on the street, that they don’t have to worry about you. They have to know that you can handle yourself.

Maria discussed another aspect of proving herself when she stated, “Sometimes the guys will try to give you the easy stuff just assuming they will take the hard parts, but I tell them we have the same training and I’m willing to do all the same work you do.” Rhonda recalled the difficulties of the job and stated:

There’s pressure to come in and be able to perform the job and it’s a hard job to do right every single time. To be able to handle your own scenes and tough situations, but that’s where you prove yourself as an officer. I think there’s more pressure being a female doing this job because people automatically assume you can’t do it.

One story as told by Lauren was consistent with the ideal of being able to handle oneself while on duty. When asked what her experience of being tested or proving herself was like, Lauren recalled:

They would like, get me into fights with drunks. If we had to arrest someone, they would let me go after it myself and watch for a little bit to see if I could handle it,

see if I had a little fight game. You know they wouldn't let me get beat up but they would let me get in there to see what I could do first and then they would come help. You know, stuff like that. If we had to chase somebody they would let me chase them and see if I could catch them, stuff like that.

Jennifer summed it up when she described the seriousness of the job and how important proving yourself was in the LEO profession. Jennifer stated:

You get tested when you first come out, like, whether you have the skills to do the job or not, getting tested with your character and integrity. Are you willing to cut corners or do you do the right thing when no one's watching you? Your ethics get tested a lot. This is not working at a grocery store, or bagging burgers, lives are on the line and you have to take that seriously.

In some form or fashion most of the LEOs discussed the ways in which they had to prove their skills and abilities and also commented on the ways in which as a lesbian LEO they needed to further prove themselves.

### ***Identity and Acceptance***

A subtheme of identity and acceptance emerged and most participants discussed how they have been accepted within their agencies or departments. Also discussed by some participants was how the identity as a LEO affects personal identity. Several participants discussed the difficulties they experienced early on in their careers when they disclosed their sexual orientation to others. Most of the participants echoed sentiments of remaining private, but not hiding who they were. Lisette recalled:

At first I didn't identify as lesbian. I was definitely closeted and when I did decide to come out I was very meticulous. I had to be careful with my personal life

because it was not as accepted back then when I came out. I had to decide that I wasn't going to hide.

Sam recalled an experience with her first Field Training Officer (FTO) and reported:

For a long time I wasn't comfortable telling my coworkers or coming out in general...Like my first FTO, he wasn't exactly homophobic or anything, but I could tell he wasn't really accepting. It's a lot better now than in the past, there are more people who are coming out and feel comfortable being themselves at work.

Lisette further discussed how she was received when she came out publicly when she reported:

I lost a lot of friends when I came out. I had promoted and ranked and because things are very political, I lost that too when I decided to be myself. Coming out was hard on my family, my career. I lost friends that I thought were solid. It was a different time and a different culture back then.

Lauren also reported difficulties early on in her career and stated,

I was designed to fail, I was hired to be fired. One of my FTOs, once I was there a couple of years, he told me. He didn't say those words exactly, but he said he was told to make sure I didn't pass.

Most participants also discussed the improvements made, commented on feeling accepted by their peers and not having to hide who they are in the current departmental culture. Lisette stated, "I just am who I am and I'm not in your face about it, but I won't hide anymore." This sentiment was also echoed by several other participants. Lauren stated:

I am who I am, I don't hide who I am, but I don't flaunt it either. But it's just not something I go around telling everybody. But if you ask me I'm honest about it, I don't go around hiding it.

Regarding comfortability in disclosing, Alex commented:

I don't bring it up to people unless I feel comfortable mentioning something about my personal life. I try to keep it a little bit discreet even though I know they're going to find out anyways. I don't just throw it in people's faces.

Sam also commented on the need to feel comfortable disclosing her orientation to others.

She recalled:

I've been outed by friends on patrol. They really don't see it as they are doing anything wrong, but it's still my business and if I want to share that with someone I will. I just try to stay professional.

Remaining professional is one aspect that was echoed by four out of twelve participants.

Jennifer in particular commented on how professionalism affected her on a daily basis when she stated:

In this profession, what you give you receive. So if I give off professionalism and respect, that's what I get back and I really feel that I need to present myself in a professional manner so when they find out that I'm a lesbian they can't say anything about how I did my job.

Kim discussed feeling like she had two identities, that of a LEO and a lesbian, when she remarked:

I'm comfortable with who I am. I don't throw it in people's faces but I also don't hide either. I am going to be me which is both a lesbian and a cop. I feel like I'm just here to do my job.

Another key aspect discussed by many participants was how they felt supported within their respective organizations. Many of the participants did not believe that disclosing their sexual orientation at present would be an issue and reported that other challenges such as professional LEO identity versus personal identity was a bigger issue than their sexual orientation status. In regards to her and her wife, Kim stated, "We are able to be open with our relationship, we don't need to hide it. I don't think that was a possibility in previous decades. I feel like my unit and coworkers were very supportive and accepting." Rhonda echoed a similar sentiment when she reported, "Everyone in our department knows I have a wife and kids, it's just normal, so I don't feel the pressure or stigma. In our department, I can be who I am." Lauren also concurred that the LEO field was making improvements in the area of acceptance for lesbians; however, she has doubts regarding the acceptance of gay men. She stated:

I do think it's more acceptable for a woman to come out as lesbian than it is for a guy to come out and say "I am gay" as a police officer. I've seen it, I don't see that coming around anytime soon.

Lauren continued on to describe the need for having respect for each other regardless of sexual identity when she stated:

Who you sleep with is a very small piece of who you are and the bottom line is who you are as a person and doing your job on the streets. That's what work is about. We all need to be able to have that respect. I believe I have it now, but I

can't believe my story is the same for everyone. Overall, it's not there, we're not there. But the conversations are being had, so that's a start.

Regarding personal versus professional identity, Rhonda stated, "I think this is where officers can lose themselves and not really know who they are outside of this job. Thank goodness this job doesn't define me." Conversely, Lisette reported about her partner, "She's a law enforcement officer first and foremost. I feel like she forgets she's a woman or even in a relationship. No, she is a law enforcement officer and it's 100% of the time." Identity as a professional and personal identity are factors that lesbian LEOs must balance. Kim summed up this idea when she discussed the biggest challenge to identity in law enforcement. Kim stated, "The biggest challenge is not letting the job hide or change who you are. Your identity as a lesbian is just as important as your identity as a cop and I think that's something to keep in mind." In a statement that encompassed the challenges faced and overcome by her spouse, Elaine stated, "As a lesbian officer, you represent all of these things where society has told you you're supposed to fail and you're not supposed to thrive, and she's done the complete opposite."

### **Respecting the Relationship**

The next theme of *Respecting the Relationship* emerged as participants discussed some of the struggles, they endured, regarding having the boundaries of their respective relationships respected. Sam stated, "The harassment and comments are still there, men are just rude with their comments. Even though they know I'm lesbian and engaged and have a committed partner, it doesn't stop them. They still say ignorant things." Lauren echoed this sentiment of rudeness when she stated, "Men are rude. They are your biggest haters, they are my biggest haters for sure. They are intimidated a little bit. I'm not

aggressive, but I'm direct and I'm business – just stern.” In regards to the biggest challenge Lisette faced in regards to respect to her relationship, she stated emphatically:

The disrespect! Males making comments that I haven't been with the right guy yet, looking for love in the wrong places. Basically undermining my relationship that I've been in for the past two years. Just people not having people respect your relationship is hard.

Kim discussed rudeness as well when she reported:

The rudeness gets old quick. It's a cop thing to kind of give each other shit but as a lesbian, my preference is to women and men can't seem to understand that and make really inappropriate comments. So I have to give it right back to them and check them when they do that.

Sam also echoed the need to respond in a like manner when she stated:

Trying to ignore the inappropriate remarks, the ignorant statements, I'm kind of just numb to it now. As sad as that is, once you've had people proposition you enough or assume the only reason you're lesbian is because you haven't been with the “right” guy, you either quit or give them shit back.

Kim discussed a time when her marriage was not respected when she recalled her promotion ceremony and stated:

When I got promoted my wife was going to pin my new badge on me at the ceremony, and our Sheriff called her my “friend” instead of my “wife” and that was kind of a big deal. Other husband-wife couples were referred to as “husband” or “wife” and my wife got called a “friend” by our Sheriff, literally everyone's

boss. She was pretty upset by it, but I just know that's how he is. A lot of my friends were upset for me.

Sam summed it up when she stated:

There are a lot of people who won't respect your relationship for what it is, they will say disgusting comments. It's kind of embarrassing that people would voice that to your face. It makes you wonder how they would talk to other people or the things they are thinking or saying behind your back. We have come so far in some ways and not in others.

Throughout this theme, participants discussed ways in which they have had to defend their relationships from scrutiny and microaggressions. Jill recalled, "I remember the experience of going through the academy and how there were not a lot of families like ours." Most participants recalled times when they did not feel they could be who they were or had to hide, however, many participants also endorsed improvements within the LEO occupation.

### **Safety**

Safety as a theme was addressed by all participants. Each participant had a different viewpoint on the topic of safety and how that has affected their relationship. The partners or spouses of each LEO held a different perspective on safety as delineated below. Stacie discussed how difficult it was for her early on in her relationship when she stated:

For a long time I really had a hard time sleeping without her. It would keep me up worrying about what was going on, or who she's dealing with. It was a frustration because I felt like I never knew what was going on.



From a spouse's perspective, Jill also echoed this sentiment as she stated:

As a spouse worrying about her safety all the time. Thinking about all the things that can happen. I have increased worry, increased anxiety just because of what she does. There will always be the fear of if I'm going to get "the call." Improving our communication has been so helpful because if she can talk to me, she's okay. Sometimes I need to hear her voice.

Lisette reported:

I had to train myself to do something else, because I used to go straight to the local news app on my phone and pull up anything awful that was happening around her patrol area when she wouldn't answer for a significant period of time.

Stacie further discussed:

She's an officer for the thrill of it and because this is what she was built to do, but the environment every day...she never knows what is going to happen. So it's a challenge and can be scary, but she also loves to help people and she gets to do that every day. You just never know when or if your day will come. That's the hardest part for me is her safety.

Elaine also continued, "If I knew she was going to do another 12 hours on patrol, I would be a nervous wreck...I was a nervous spirit." Elaine further discussed her concerns for her partner when she stated:

Being a dispatcher you can hear things and you know how quickly things can happen. When she was on patrol I used to be worried. Right now I still have that false sense that she's alright. But that's not the reality. Someone could ambush her sitting at a red light, or sitting having lunch with her coworkers. Stuff could

still happen. I think knowing what can happen or hearing calls can be a blessing and a curse sometimes.

Maria, a LEO, expressed a similar sentiment when she stated, “Really just being worried about each other, it’s a blessing and a curse to be able to hear each other’s calls. On the one hand I know what’s happening but if something bad happens I hear that too.” Most of participants expressed various types of safety concerns and how those have affected their relationship. Sam reported:

When we go out and there’s weird things I do, I don’t have to explain the “whys”. Like if someone recognizes me and I don’t recognize them, it’s probably not a great idea to see where I know them from. It could be someone I arrested or whatever...My first priority is keeping us safe from my job and that’s a full time job in itself.

Lisette discussed the difficulty of being a LEO when she stated:

I think it’s really difficult for her to let it go at the door when she walks in. She might take the uniform off, but her mindset is constantly in law enforcement officer mode, so it does affect us. When we go out in public she’s hyper vigilant, can’t relax, she can’t enjoy the moment, she can but it costs her a lot of anguish. You can tell she’s constantly scanning, making sure everyone is okay, that I’m okay.

Sam further echoed the difficulties of being both lesbian and a LEO when she reported:

As a lesbian couple in law enforcement, we have to think about safety on all levels. So first we are lesbian and a lot of people may still have a problem with that, so that’s on your mind. Then someone may recognize us from patrol, or the

jail, and they could be pissed off, so that's another layer of safety. So I can't ever get to where I have no inhibitions because that's not safe. It's a lot of baggage.

From a LEO perspective, there are additional concerns for safety such as the loss of a friend in the line of duty or having to still be able to perform following a loss or scary situation. Lauren stated:

With our department being so small I do all major crime scenes. So it's all my coworkers, my friends. Its personal already, and I have to stay composed enough to actually work this crime scene. It's emotional and I now have to stay poised enough to do the job.

She continued on to discussed challenges to performing the job under pressure or stress when she reported:

I think the most difficult thing is when one of your coworkers in your blue family gets hurt, or gets killed...Knowing people can get hurt and die and you still have to keep, moving. You still have to do your job, you know, pretend like everything is okay. It's different, it's hard at times. Very hard. Like that night that my friend got shot. Or another time when one of my coworkers shot somebody and I was the first one on scene. I watched the shooting happen and then I still had to work it. You can't witness that, go through that and not be different afterwards. Something changes in you.

Elaine echoed her fears regarding safety from a LEO spouse perspective when she stated:

Knowing that one of your friends may not come home. Anytime I get a call, it could be one of my friends, my wife. It's not just a unit number or a last name,

these are your friends and your family that you put your life on the line with every single day. That phone call is one you never want to get.

Lauren added that her approach to safety concerns helped her to stay focused on the present and not worry about things that have not occurred. Lauren stated that she, “Can’t worry about shit that ain’t happened. Worry about shit when shit happens. I got to keep going. I don’t do the ‘what-ifs’ or could’ve, would’ve or should’ve’s. I just live.” These sentiments and words of the participants highlight some of the challenges to safety that lesbian LEO couples face. Each participant reported on various aspects of safety for their individual LEO partner or spouse, but they also extended concern for other LEOs as well when they discussed the difficulties of the job and how that played into the dynamics of their relationships.

### **The Climate**

This theme emerged as participants were asked about the difficulties of being a lesbian LEO couple. Seven participants discussed the current sociopolitical climate as being a challenge to both law enforcement and their relationship as a lesbian LEO couple. Sam stated, “When you tell people you’re in law enforcement, especially now with everything in the news, people are super judgmental.” This idea of judgment resonated with many participants who discussed having difficulty relating to others and struggling to find a community. Kim reported:

I don’t really have many lesbian or gay friends. I don’t get along with them very well because a lot of the LGBT community is very liberal or anti-police, especially right now, and it’s hard being hated for a job you love to do.

Sam echoed this statement when she said:

I honestly don't have a lot of lesbian friends because the LGBT community is very liberal and law enforcement is pretty conservative, so you're constantly riding that balance. The few friends I do have that are LGBT and not in law enforcement are not into me being a cop, we just don't have those discussions.

Alex concurred when she stated:

Honestly a lot of my friends that are super gay they are usually super liberal as well and being a cop and being liberal don't usually match up. We are usually more conservative I guess. I've dated women who are super liberal and it just doesn't work. We don't have the same mindset. I don't feel like I exude a lot of gay features, I guess.

Elaine discussed looking for support in other like-minded individuals. She commented, "Most of the couples we hang out with are lesbian officer couples. We hang out with other like-minded individuals who all have that same sense of twisted humor. And they don't judge you for being a cop." Sam commented on the difficulty of reconciling identity as a lesbian in the LGBTQI+ community and a LEO. She stated:

It's actually kind of funny, also sad, but if you see another lesbian officer out at a club or bar you are never going to acknowledge each other. You see them, you know they are a cop, but you don't talk to them because you don't want to dime that person out. You can't out them as cop in a lesbian bar. I don't have many LGBT friends who aren't in law enforcement, because if you tell anyone you're a cop, they all think cops are just out here killing unarmed people and believe what the news says instead of thinking about who they know on a first-hand basis. It's

weird, I used to be afraid to come out to people as gay and now I'm afraid to come out to people as a cop.

Rhonda discussed the difficulty of having a young son and discussed the role of the news and media in her experience. She stated:

We learned a lot this year, more than any year past. It's complicated because I have a black son and as an officer trying to deal with the dynamics of the current climate. Just wearing a uniform and a badge and then having people hate you or that my son hears messages that I would hurt someone like him just for the color of his skin.

Kim also reported difficulty in conversations when she stated:

I just keep my mouth shut when it comes to people talking about law enforcement or what they think the cops should have done in certain situations. It's very rare that someone can have a respectful conversation about this stuff, especially right now. Most of the time I just have to walk away. Those are my brothers and sisters you're talking about without having the slightest clue what it's like.

In regards to dating prior to their current partners or spouses, most participants recalled times that they struggled in relationships. Lisa stated:

I once dated someone who wasn't in law enforcement and she had no clue, she just couldn't get it. When I would come home and talk about whatever happened that day, she couldn't understand why we had to take certain measures and she was super judgmental.

Alex vented her frustrations when she recalled:

There was this one girl I dated who was a veteran and she would post antipolice stuff on her [social media], the kind of crap that would get misconstrued. I would try to explain it to her, but she didn't want to be educated on it. And that just kind of caused a huge rift where I didn't want to mess with her anymore, like I'm done.

Sam also discussed the difficulties in relating to a romantic partner when she reported:

This job takes up a lot of your life, 8+ hours a day. If you can't relate at all to something that I do for a significant portion of my day, a job I dedicate my life to, and you're judging me all the time, it's going to make it almost impossible to maintain a relationship.

Sam discussed the duality of mind she experienced when she questioned:

Gay people who are not cops cannot process it, it does not compute in most people's heads. Like if I'm a good lesbian, I must be very liberal and progressive, and if I'm a cop I can't be that way. Where is there the room to just be me?

Lisette commented on the dangerousness of the current climate when she stated:

I don't see much of the younger generation going into the academy, so there aren't a lot of new officers and I know that's because of the climate. It's not a real great time to be a cop, even a really good one. It's more dangerous than ever and it's not like they are getting paid a ton to do this work.

Seven of the participants discussed the role of the climate and how it has affected their families. Rhonda summed it up best when she said:

We are losing ourselves, this has been a hell of a year and the pedal still hasn't been lifted. We went from the pandemic to civil unrest and it puts our families through hell. I got called out to work the riots and within an hour there were no windows left on

our vehicle. All the windows had been smashed. We went fifteen days straight of that in the middle of a pandemic. For the dedication of the mission, as a peacekeeper, I was asked to go out into the crowd without a mask to try and calm the crowd in some of our most volatile times. I did it because I believed in it, and it was tough. Trying to keep my family safe and not bring COVID into our house, and then I ended up getting COVID anyways from that. I know it's made me a different officer today than I was a year ago.

### **It's Not Normal**

From this theme of *It's Not Normal* emerged two subthemes of scheduling and humor. Both of these subthemes were discussed by participants and highlighted unique features of the lesbian LEO couples in this study.

### ***Schedules***

Most couples discussed the difficulty of scheduling life around a LEO schedule. They each presented a unique view of how the law enforcement occupation can pose challenges to scheduling their lives as individuals and couples. Lisette stated, "It's hard too, because of the scheduling. She's literally getting off work when I start." Sam agreed with this statement and stated, "Definitely the scheduling is the most difficult part. She's always trying to get me to switch shifts or go to another department... This job is dangerous and there's no real way around that." Elaine and her wife discussed the challenges to adjusting to an extended training where her wife was gone for six months in another state. Elaine stated, "She was gone for six months in a whole other state at first I was like 'this is some bullshit' so I started to book flights." Stacie, another LEO wife recalled another challenge to managing home and work life when she reported, "We want to have a family one day and that is something we talk about a lot with her job. It's



basically a 24/7 deal with the on-call hours, and how do you even plan a family around that?" Lauren discussed the difficulty that being on-call puts on her wife and stated, "She understands if I get a call at three in the morning, she understands I'm on-call, I have to go." Stacie further went on to explain the difficulty she and her wife had with scheduling. She recalled:

One of the biggest challenges is working out our schedules. With her being on-call 24/7 it really feels like we are living separately due to differences in schedules. When she is finally home she could get called out in a few hours and has to go. I don't feel like she ever gets out of work mode and that is hard on us.

Maria discussed the first time she recognized the challenges to both partners being LEOs when she stated:

This really going to be work to maintain this relationship. Especially with having different schedules, different shifts. That can be 16 hours of juggling back and forth. Eight hours working, eight hours sleeping. It's hard to make that work all the time.

Elaine discussed her frustration regarding sleep schedules and the challenges she faced with her wife. She reported:

During the week she works an extra job that is a 7p-7a overnight and then turns around and goes to her regular job 8-4. Where you may be physically here but you not here. You get home and basically pass out because she's been at work 24 hours damn near.

Holidays are also another area where the participant couples discussed scheduling being difficult. When asked about holidays, Elaine exclaimed, "What holidays?! When she was

on patrol she didn't get no holidays!" Lauren laughed and echoed this sentiment when she explained:

When I was on patrol I didn't get no holidays. The last two years I've gotten some holidays off. I ain't never gotten no holidays off, but I never cared because I like holiday pay. I'm gonna see my family, I'm gonna eat good, they gonna save me a plate. I'm good, I'll go to work.

Elaine further explained that on holidays such as Christmas, it was expected for her spouse to go to work, so they had to make adjustments to their schedule. She recalled, "Things like Christmas, when she was on patrol, she was on evenings or night shift, so we still got to spend a little time together. Wake up open some gifts and noon get ready to go in for 2 pm." Jennifer discussed the need to find a balance between work and home life. She explained:

It's all about finding a balance. We have been really lucky to have schedules that are close. So we each have a day off together and a day off that is our own to kind of do our own thing. We have been really blessed because I don't know how we would do it if we were totally on opposite schedules. Some people do and that is really hard to manage.

### ***Humor***

One area consistently discussed as not being normal was in the area of humor. Sam discussed humor when she stated, "When you're affected by something you joke about it with your friends. A lot of times it's morbid and definitely not normal, but that's how you vent and cope with things." Lauren also commented on how the job affected her sense of humor when she stated, "This job is crazy, you see a lot, you get desensitized, your sense of humor is a little off." Elaine also commented on how the occupation can

influence how LEOs cope with seeing difficult things day in and day out. She commented:

Some of this stuff is really twisted. I get it, you have to have a really cynical, twisted sense of humor to work in this capacity day in and day out. You see the worst of the worst and you either laugh or cry.

Maria also discussed using humor as a way to manage emotions and stated:

You have to have a good sense of humor. We joke with each other all day long. There are plenty of serious things we deal with so you have to laugh in there somewhere. Kind of like laughing so you don't cry about it.

Elaine discussed how she will inform her wife that she is making jokes that many people may not find funny or even offensive when she recalled:

She will be telling stories, and dying laughing...and I'm like "I love you, and I just want to tell you the story you're telling is not funny, is not normal, and should not be normalized." It's not normal for regular people to have conversations about these things.

### **Hold the Line**

The term *Hold the Line* in law enforcement has been adopted from military terminology when a line of soldiers would hold the line of formation against insurmountable odds. This theme was endorsed by most couples in regards to overcoming difficulties in their relationship. Subthemes of *Communication* and *A Different Roller Coaster* were also discussed.

### *Communication*

One major area affected in the lives of lesbian LEO couples was communication. Even the most basic of communication such as discussing each other's day was impacted by the law enforcement occupation. Rhonda stated, "This is not a normal job, you can't just call me and talk office stuff when I have just had a homicide that I'm in the middle of dealing with. You really have to adjust your communication." Other participants discussed how they have managed conflict resolution and managing stress. In regards to sharing with her partner, Sam stated:

She doesn't want to know, I mean she does, but it scares her. It's one thing to know what I'm doing and ignore it...but it's another thing to see it. I try not to bring a lot of stuff home, we really don't have conversations about the difficult calls.

Rhonda discussed the importance of honoring commitments and boundaries in relation to communication. She stated:

It's so important to set up boundaries in regards to communication because your spouse is at home wondering and worrying about you. If you text during your shift or a call on your lunch just to say you're good, then you should stick by that. That's you holding up your end of the bargain.

Lauren commented on the challenges of trying to communicate about her day with someone not familiar with law enforcement. In discussing how she and her wife learned to communicate better, she stated:

If you're not in law enforcement you're not going to understand so there's going to be some stuff that they won't talk about with you. Cause you're not going to

get it right away. They are not going to bring their work home a lot of the times so there's going to be some communication that's not going to be there.

Alex discussed the importance of having someone understand her occupation and how that understanding or lack of understanding can have an effect on the relationship. She stated, "You tend to date, and marry, and gravitate to someone similar to you. So [dating has] always been in a field similar to mine...the scheduling, the work, understanding the job." Lisette commented on the lack of information she received from her partner and stated, "She keeps a lot to herself about what happens, and I understand why. She doesn't want to scare me, but I just don't think it's healthy." Rhonda discussed a challenge faced by her and her wife when she discussed the importance of communication. She recalled issues with lack of information and communication early in her career. Rhonda stated:

One of the biggest issues as a couple in law enforcement was my wife getting her feelings hurt. She's scared and worried, and before when I worked a normal job I would call her all the time, but now I'm not calling her. I'm doing all this crazy, cool, fun stuff but I'm not communicating it. Then when I get home I don't really want to talk about it. She felt shut out.

Rhonda discussed the need to separate oneself from the job when she reported:

It's not normal. I can't talk about my calls the way normal people talk about their day because it's just not normal. And then if you talk about work when you're not at work, it puts you back on those scenes and doesn't allow you to separate yourself.

In an effort to separate herself from the job, Rhonda discussed her way of creating distance. She stated, "I never wear my uniform home. I don't take my gear home. I drive

in as Rhonda and drive out as Rhonda. When I'm at work, that's when I'm an officer."

Alex also commented on the need for separation in context of the relationship when she stated:

It's really just both of us, and the job. But I think both of us being law enforcement is a problem because we don't have any separation. We are in the same occupation at the same time, with the same days off. I never get alone time.

Lisette continued to discuss the difficulties she and her partner face regarding conflict resolution. She reported, "Her go-to is to treat everything like she's on duty and I don't like that because I'm not a suspect, I'm not a prisoner or inmate. I'm none of those but I can see the tactics that she's using." Jennifer also commented on using tactics from her career in her relationship. She reported:

I don't like being yelled at so I try not to yell. If I'm at work and someone's yelling at me, I just stop, reassess, and calm down. Talk to me normal, I'm human and make mistakes, you're human and make mistakes. Let's work this out together. So yeah, I can see where I use my law enforcement skills at home, she doesn't always know it.

Stacie recalled the adjustments she and her wife have had to make in order to balance their relationship and being married to a LEO. Stacie remembered:

It was an adjustment at the beginning just because she's in a position of authority. I've told her before, it's not always your way or no way. When we are at home I have opinions too and you're not at work.

She further discussed how she managed to cope with her wife's authoritative personality.

Stacie stated:

Whenever we do argue or something and I feel like she's trying to be authoritative I just tell her "Hey, we are married, you can't just tell me to stop and listen to you, I want you to hear my point of view too."

Learning to listen and communicate effectively was another topic brought up by several participants. Rhonda stated, "I tend to shut down, I don't communicate well sometimes. You need to be able to identify when you need help, go to counseling. There's nothing wrong with that. It's normal to have problems." Elaine discussed how therapy helped her and her wife to communicate better when she recalled, "We have gone to therapy and had sessions about different aspects of our relationship. Because I am the talker and she doesn't. She will just hold it in and not verbalize it." The idea of shutting down was brought up by other participants. Kim stated:

I tend to just shut down when we argue at home. If I'm at work, I'm definitely different, maybe I'm just used to confrontation. But I don't want to be that way at home so I just stop talking to avoid a fight.

Rhonda discussed the difficulty she encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic when she disclosed, "I pulled away from my wife because it's confusing and I'm angry. I don't want her to carry that, and I'm scared to get her sick [from COVID]. Because we need her to hold the house down." Jennifer discussed having patience and waiting until her LEO partner decided to open up before pushing the issue of communication. Jennifer described it this way:

I don't intrude, if there's a rough call and she wants to open up and talk about it she will, but I don't push her. If she's just holding it in too much I'll ask, but I try to respect her space and give her time.

One of the key concepts from the LEO participants regarding their spouses was an appreciation of their understanding. Maria reported, “With both of us being in law enforcement we have a very similar mentality. We know where each other is coming from, and that helps so that you’re not holding it in.” Elaine discussed the benefit of being associated with law enforcement as both an administrative assistant and 911 dispatcher. She stated:

We can have conversations about the things she does. Because I’m also a 911 operator, so you know the lingo, the terms they use. All the acronyms, and there’s a million acronyms in law enforcement. If she spits out an acronym to me, I know what she’s talking about. I think me being in law enforcement helps our relationship because our conversations are more understood.

Knowing the lingo and being understood was a concept echoed by many of the participants. Maria expressed a similar sentiment when she stated, “She understands all the terms I use so when I do need to talk and get things off my chest, she just gets it. I don’t have to stop and explain what something means, I can just let it all go and vent.” Sam also discussed the appreciation for her partner who is also connected to law enforcement. She stated:

I think she’s more understanding because she’s in it too. Do we deal with very different things? Yes, but she knows a lot of what goes on and she gets it where I don’t think other people would understand what we go through on a day-to-day basis.

Alex reported, “The best part of it is that we know what each other deals with and we know how to make each other feel better when we have tough calls.” Jennifer discussed



the value of being able to talk about each other's work day with her partner who is also a LEO. She stated, "I love how we can give and receive constructive criticism when it comes to work. We talk about calls we had during the day when we get home, because I can hear everything she's going through during the day." In line with these comments, Sam reflected:

The most rewarding part is that we can have these discussions, she gets it, she understands how difficult my agency can be, or just how hard it is to be a cop in general. She also understands the difficulty of being lesbian and just everything that goes a long with that.

Kim also commented on the positive aspect of her spouse being able to understand her emotions. Kim reported, "One of the good things is that she can feel my emotions. I guess it's a good thing, because when I'm upset I really can't hide it from her and she will make me talk about it."

### ***A Different Roller Coaster***

This concept taken from a statement made by Jill highlights the unique aspects of the lesbian LEO couple and how different their experiences can be from that of others. Jill stated, "Being the spouse of an officer is a whole different rollercoaster than that of any other profession." Throughout this section, the voices of the participants have underscored various aspects of their lives which shed light on being a lesbian LEO couple. Kim expressed the difficulty of managing emotions from the job when she stated, "Definitely me bringing my frustrations home from work. I know that frustration can rub off on our relationship when I get home so I try to just stay to myself if I've had a hard day." Jill echoed this sentiment from a spouse's perspective when she stated, "She comes

home with a lot of baggage. Information about scenes and I know she doesn't tell me everything because a lot of it can be hard to hear, but it's also hard to sit with too." Kim also reported the difficulty of trying to balance work and home life when she reported:

My wife is very affectionate and wants my attention and that can be hard when I feel frustrated. This work is hard some days and I just want to decompress mentally before I can give her my full attention, but by the time I get home she's been home several hours and is ready to see me.

Jill discussed the presence of stressors not faced by other couples when she stated, "There are stressors to being a couple in law enforcement that other couple's don't face. It's okay to seek help, to admit you don't have it all together." One concept endorsed by six of the participants was the personality of their LEO partner or spouse. Alex reported, "We are both officers and our personalities tend to clash, especially on scene. It's an interesting dynamic just because we both have that Type A personality as women in law enforcement." Alex continued to discuss having a Type A personality when she stated:

The hardest part is just the butting heads. We both have strong personalities and that causes issues. We both want to be right. We are both in law enforcement and you need that Type A personality to be successful at work, but it can cause problems at home.

Rhonda also having a Type A personality when she stated:

It's hard because we [LEOs] are Type A's and you got to have some nuts to be able to go "Hey, no, I'm not willing to accept this." Because that's your line and we will all push up to that and you have to be able to hold the line at home.

Rhonda presented the notion of holding the line at home and how that resonated with support from her spouse. All of the participants endorsed the necessity of having support from their partner or spouse as an integral part of their relationships. Rhonda further explained the concept of holding the line when she said:

A long time ago, we laid down ground rules as a family, for what we would accept and not accept and had to find true boundaries. As a law enforcement family you have to set those parameters and no matter what happens in this uniform, those parameters can't be breeched because there's someone else in the relationship expecting you to hold that part of the line.

In a similar vein, Jill commented on the need to develop skills to be supportive as a spouse when she stated:

I wanted her to share but then I also wanted to try and fix it or to make her feel better and I've had to learn over the years how to listen and support her rather than trying to fix her problems.

Alex shared her perspective on how she has helped her LEO partner at work. She reflected:

If I wasn't in law enforcement, I couldn't help her and she would have to do it on her own. She'd have to deal with all the emotions and adrenaline, because after your adrenaline stops you can't really think, and then to have to try and shut all that off and be like, okay cool, paperwork. You just can't really turn it off.

Jill also discussed the notion of a physical reaction in addition to the emotions of the occupation that had an effect on her spouse when she stated:

Depending on what type of work she was doing, there might be this big adrenaline rush, it might be really emotional. There might be all kinds of feelings and even physical reactions, you just never know, so as a spouse just trying to be aware and in tune to be supportive. It's a big commitment as a family, it's a lot sometimes.

Rhonda also commented on the emotional toll of the law enforcement career on her relationship when she recalled the beginning of her law enforcement career. She stated:

We got into this thing when I was a new cop, we made this choice together, but when I first started it was all so fun...I'd get called out and be gone all day and night, then a shooting would drop and I'd go right back out. It left her holding the line a lot and she had to handle two young boys, and then not being able to rely on me. I used my job as my crutch for not being reliable to my family.

Rhonda continued, and discussed the importance of adhering to agreements within the relationship. She commented:

One key for us was me holding up my end of the bargain. We started this career together, she was with me when I entered the academy and it definitely hasn't been easy on our relationship a lot of the time. Many times our relationship took a back seat to my career when I was first starting and I've had to come back and do what I said I would do. I can't always leave her holding the bag.

Jill discussed the need for having self-awareness and accountability in the relationship when she stated, "We stand up for each other and our own needs, we do a lot of self-reflection and self-awareness and we don't accept less than that from one other." Rhonda

reiterated the importance of making your relationship and family a priority when she stated:

I have a lot of conversations about boundaries, at some point the city stops paying, investing in my family doesn't and that pays dividends at home. There are always times where it's difficult, but it has to be a priority. It should remind you why you're doing this. I'm out here doing this because there are people at home that need me.

One crucial area that was endorsed by the participants was the concept of support through loss. Lisa stated:

You share a special bond, being partners at home and on the job, family at home and then being a part of your blue family too. You never want to lose that person and every call is an opportunity for a loss.

Many participants directly discussed or alluded to the concept of loss in relation to the occupation. Lisette somberly recalled:

We have had to go to a few funerals for co-workers and it's been really hard. Normal couples can hold hands and grieve together, but we are both in uniform and can't do that. So you just try not to make eye contact with anyone, no one's looking at each other so they don't start crying, and you just suffer in silence.

Lauren also discussed a more difficult topic that LEO couples must consider when she revealed:

I think that's probably the most draining part of being a lesbian couple in law enforcement. You always have a heavy emotional something going either way. It can be anything from dealing with your relationship to losing a friend and

watching their family suffer, your friends hurt. You just pray you never put your family through that. And that can be a lot on any relationship, but especially ours.

This theme of holding the line and support closes on a solemn tone where the participants sought to describe the real experience of loss that was present in their lives.

### **Essence of Being**

The essence of being a lesbian LEO couple was derived from the above mentioned themes. The following expressions represent the lived experiences of the study participants and they conveyed their lived experiences. Jill began:

One of the things we were told is that there's a high divorce rate and you should expect not to make it. Well, we already knew where we stood, we're not rookies in the relationship. But in their eyes, we walked in with both hands tied behind our backs, and despite all that, being a lesbian couple, raising two children, we are still making it while other people are becoming statistics.

Elaine further expressed her thoughts regarding the challenges her spouse overcame when she stated:

I feel like she represents so much in society where society is fighting against her right? So, she's black, in law enforcement, she's female and she's a lesbian. Like you have these things that society is pushing back against you, and you're still thriving and succeeding in your career and a great spouse too. I find that to be so rewarding and so proud of her.

Continuing on the topic of pride and success, Rhonda recalled the time she and her family walked in her city's Pride parade with her department. She remembered:

One of the things they have asked us to do for a long time was walk as a family in the Pride parade with our department. So we finally agree one year, we're surrounded by all these people and walking in the parade. I'm in uniform and we are hand in hand with our boys and people are going crazy. I was so proud to be an officer, and a lesbian couple with a normal family because I feel like that's what we are, but I feel like we constantly have to be the example of normal.

Lauren described the intensity of emotions experienced on the job and how those same emotions have impacted her relationship at home when she stated:

You can go from that emotion of losing a friend, having to work the scene, and then coming home, and she has emotions too. It's just a lot. We have it coming from both sides of our job. You bring it to your relationship. I'm her person, she's my person, so that could get heavy. Then you wanna throw the lesbian into that mix? We are emotional creatures!

Jennifer summed it up when described her lived experience and stated:

In this field it's scary. It's happy, it's fast, it's satisfying, it's slow, it's everything in a nutshell and you can literally have every kind of call within one shift. A simple call can turn into chaos and go from zero to 50 in an instant, so you never really know what you're going to go up against. We don't know if we're going to be here tomorrow, we don't know we are going to make it to our next shift and I think that makes you live life differently. Your whole life, your families, it effects them and you just live differently. To be a lesbian LEO couple means facing all of that and then coming home to be accountable to your partner, no excuses.

## Summary

In this chapter, I began by describing the participants using information gathered from the demographic survey. I reported the age range, sex, ethnicity, rank, and information regarding the participants' status as a LEO in the state of Texas. Next, I analyzed the data by organizing the participants' responses to the grand tour questions and extracting relevant data that was grouped into six themes and five subthemes that described the lived experiences of being a lesbian LEO couple. I was able to identify the following themes and subthemes: (a) *Proving Yourself*, (i) *Identity and Acceptance*, (b) *Respecting the Relationship*, (c) *Safety*, (d) *The Climate*, (e) *It's Not Normal*, (i) *Schedules*, (ii) *Humor*, (f) *"Hold the Line,"* (i) *Communication*, and (ii) *"A Different Roller Coaster."* Finally, I provided an overall description of the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple. The following chapter, Chapter V, is the final chapter in this research study. Chapter V includes a discussion of the results, implications for practice and recommendations for further research. Specifically, I have provided a detailed discussion of each emerged theme and subtheme as they related to existing literature.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of my study was to describe the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples. A transcendental phenomenological approach was used to capture the participants' experiences and extract and essence of being. The essence of the participants' experiences as extracted from the results indicated that lesbian LEO couples faced many challenges that are not faced by the general public, and that they were resilient in overcoming those challenges. Further, these couples continued to show grit and determination to be seen and heard in their respective agencies.

In beginning this chapter I provided a summary of the study followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the current literature, and further discussed how the results from my phenomenological study were consistent or divergent from previous studies. Finally, I provided implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of the Study**

While completing both my master's and doctoral studies, I continued to provide counseling services to the law enforcement and LBGTQI+ populations. I had conducted prior research with the spouses of first responders and through this research agenda, realized there was very little, if any, research giving voice to the lesbian law enforcement officer couple. After a review of the current literature I found that there was a gap in the literature regarding lesbian LEO couples. At the time of this study, I was unable to find any existing literature published about lesbian LEO couples

I began this study with an introduction that included the background, statement of the problem, purpose, and significance of the study. I then included operational definitions of key terms in the study and included my theoretical framework of Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1968) as a lens for understanding the phenomenon being studied. I also provided my research question, limitations, and delimitations in Chapter I.

In Chapter II, I described in detail the process I used for reviewing current literature regarding my study. Using the Interactive Literature Review Process (ILRP) (Combs et al., 2010), I discovered that there was little to no research in the areas of LGBTQI+ LEOs, and no studies solely focused on lesbian LEO couples. Through this literature review process, I was able to articulate the need for my study and addressed how it would fill a gap in the literature.

In Chapter III, I delineated my methodology and discussed how I would be conducting a phenomenological study with a modified Van Kaam method of data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). I then proposed my study to my dissertation committee and was approved to conduct a transcendental phenomenological study examining the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples using a semi-structured interview and demographic survey design. Using the modified Van Kaam method of data analysis (Moustakas, 1994), I organized my data into six separate themes with five subthemes. These themes were reported in the results chapter: (a) *Proving Yourself*, (i) *Identity and Acceptance*, (b) *Respecting the Relationship*, (c) *Safety*, (d) *The Climate*, (e) *It's Not Normal*, (i) *Schedules*, (ii) *Humor*, (f) *Hold the Line*, (i) *Communication*, and (ii) *A Different Roller Coaster*. In the following section, I discussed the findings of my research in relation to existing literature.

## **Discussion of Findings**

In the completion of this transcendental phenomenological study, I uncovered many themes from the participants' lived experiences of being a lesbian LEO couple. I learned about the challenges and rewards experienced by the couples, the unique circumstances that set them apart from other LGBTQI+ couples and how they have managed to navigate a difficult lifestyle up to and including the loss of friends and loved ones. In the sections below, I discussed these findings in relation to the current literature.

### ***Proving Yourself***

The theme of *Proving Yourself* is one that was endorsed by seven of the twelve participants. Each participant, especially the LEOs all discussed ways in which they had to prove themselves within their departments. The current literature concurred with this finding. One of the first articles to discuss "heteronormative culture" and how this can create a climate in which members of the LGBTQI+ community felt the need to justify their abilities was in Meyers et al. (2004). The focus of this article was to highlight that members of the LGBTQI+ community felt the need to prove themselves to their peers and superiors in regard to doing the job of policing (Meyers et al., 2004). Similarly, in a study conducted by Miller and Lilley (2014), the authors addressed the need for the LGBTQI+ LEOs to prove that they are capable of performing the duties of the job. The presence of the LGBTQI+ LEO in the police world has begun to be addressed in policing literature and covered a broad spectrum of topics from fitness of duty to the need to disclose orientation to peers. Previous studies indicated that LGBTQI+ LEOs were capable of performing their duties as well as their heterosexual counterparts (Hiatt & Hargrave, 1994), yet Miller and Lilley (2014) stated that LGBTQI+ "officers are forced

to prove themselves more than their straight counterparts” (p. 373). The most closely related article to my study was a phenomenological study conducted where the authors researched gay and lesbian correction officers in an effort to understand their lived experiences (Mennicke et al., 2018). One of the findings that was consistent with both my dissertation and in Mennicke et al., (2018) was the finding that lesbian women did not have to prove themselves to the extent that gay men would have to prove themselves. This notion of gay men having a more difficult time both in disclosing their sexual orientation and proving themselves on the job was discussed by three of the twelve the participants. Existing literature also supported this claim in a study about police chiefs where researchers found that “more respondents than not (48. 9% compared to 26. 7%) indicated that they would have difficulty working with a gay man” (Lyons Jr., et al., 2008, p. 110).

In proving themselves, many of the participants discussed being tested by their peers. One participant recalled an experience where her peers would allow her to get into fights or deal with combative subjects to see if she was able to handle the call on her own. In previous studies conducted with LGBTQI+ LEOs, one fear discussed by the participants was a slow response for backup due to negative or homophobic attitudes (Galvin-White et al., 2016; Mennicke et al., 2018; Collins, 2014). However, the results of this study contradicted that notion. Lauren refuted that statement when she reported that her peers would not leave her alone to do deal with a dangerous call and she never felt that her safety was threatened. This finding was inconsistent with current literature suggesting testing a LGBTQI+ LEO to a dangerous degree; however, it was consistent that the individual might find themselves being tested for job skills regardless of

orientation (Galvin-White et al., 2016; Mennicke et al., 2018; Collins, 2014). Through this research, I have found that that the participants of my study believed they had to prove themselves in the field, which is consistent with previous research conducted.

**Identity and Acceptance.** Within the theme of *Proving Yourself*, participants also discussed the concept of being open about their identity and acceptance within the department. Participants of this study discussed various coming out experiences ranging from one participant who had a very difficult time when she chose to disclose her sexual orientation, to others who felt accepted right away, and still others who felt somewhere in between. Six of the twelve participants discussed feeling uncertain at first about disclosing their orientation to their coworkers. The literature supported this idea of trepidation in disclosure to peers (Galvin-White & O’Neal, 2016). A key finding in Colvin’s (2012) study was that homophobic attitudes may be transmitted through a unit and result in creating social isolation for the LGBTQI+ LEO. Based on these findings, it is understandable that my participants expressed hesitation and stress to some degree when they disclosed their orientation to peers or superiors. The participants expressed concern about how they would be received, but ultimately most participants took an “I am who I am” approach and were encouraged when they felt supported by their respective departments and agencies. Recurring themes in existing literature were concerns about safety, losing respect, and discrimination when disclosing to peers (Bernstein & Swartwout, 2012; Galvin-White & O’Neal, 2016; Miller et al., 2003). The participants’ experiences in this study conflicted with existing literature as none of the participants discussed being concerned about the issues of threats to their personal safety

within their agencies, loss of respect from peers or superiors, or discrimination from administration due to their orientation status.

The participants did speak to improvements in acceptance despite having some setbacks with their individual experiences. While one participant recalled instances where news of her sexual orientation was not received well, the remaining five participants recalled positive experiences and suggested that law enforcement culture was headed in a positive direction. A study by Miller and Lilley (2014) was consistent with the finding that departments are tending towards a more accepting and inclusive atmosphere. At the time of this research, there were limited publications that addressed LGBTQI+ concerns, and no research that specifically addressed lesbian LEO couples. The participants described instances where they felt supported by their departments, however, they also described experiences in which they had to prove themselves in order to feel accepted by their peers. The findings of this study support the notion that lesbian LEOs may experience identity and acceptance differently than their heterosexual counterparts in regard to identity and acceptance.

### ***Respecting the Relationship***

The theme of *Respecting the Relationship* emerged from five of the participants who recalled incidents where their relationships were not respected by peers and in some cases, command staff. In this study, participants used words such as harassment and disrespect to describe their experiences. The idea of women facing sexual harassment including questioning from male coworkers was supported in the literature in the area of women in policing (Feminist Daily News Wire, 2000). Other articles discussed the concept of lesbian-baiting, where a woman is constantly questioned about her sexuality

particularly in light of her chosen occupation (Mennicke et al., 2018; Miller & Lilley, 2014). Four of the participants discussed the comments made to them by male coworkers particularly in regards to them not finding the “right” male counterpart. As one participant described it, the male coworkers in her life could not understand that her sexual preference was to women and they continued to make inappropriate remarks. At the time this study was conducted, I was unable to find any published research specific to lesbian LEO couples that addressed this topic of relationships. A key finding of this study is that lesbian LEO couples have experienced a lack of respect towards their relationships in a manner that is different than their heterosexual counterparts.

### *Safety*

The theme of safety is one that all twelve participants discussed in some manner. Threats to one’s physical safety within the law enforcement occupation is a known hazard (Chae & Boyle, 2013; James & Vila, 2015; Meffert et al., 2014; Pole et al., 2003; Ramos, 2010). However, the impact of safety in lesbian LEO couples has not been researched exclusively researched to understand if lesbian LEO couples experience safety in a manner consistent with their heterosexual counterparts. One participant couple discussed the difficulty of managing both her identity as a lesbian and a LEO. She described it as having to straddle a fine line in regard to safety and she expressed safety concerns about being a lesbian couple in society and safety concerns about being a LEO and being recognized by someone with whom she has had a legal interactions. Existing research supported another participant’s responses regarding safety, critical incidents, post-traumatic stress, and hyper-vigilance in LEOs (Brandl & Stroshine, 2003; Pole et al., 2003; Rabjohn, 2012; Tanigoshi, et al., 2008). Specifically, Rabjohn (2012) discussed the

concept of trauma experienced by LEOs and stated “the result of exposure to human suffering on a scale rarely witnessed by the rest of society” (pg. 269). Rabjohn (2012) also discussed the concept of “layer-building” which he suggested was part of the major issue in the treatment of first responders after a critical incident. Further, he suggested that these layers of compounded trauma not only have a negative impact upon the individual LEO, but on those closest to them (Rabjohn, 2012). Each of the twelve participants in this study supported the notion that the occupation of law enforcement has impacted their romantic relationship to some degree. This is consistent with existing literature about LEOs and work-home life (Gilmartin, 2002; Karaffa et al., 2015; Porter & Henriksen, Jr., 2016; Woody, 2005). While some previous research suggested there is an impact on the family unit, there was current literature was found that specifically addressed the intersection between lesbian LEO couples and safety. The participants of this study suggested that stress experienced by the lesbian LEO does have an effect on the partner or spouse regardless of the spouse’s occupation.

One major finding of this study was that there was a significant impact upon the relationship when both partners or spouses are LEOs. In my literature review, I was not able to find any published research studies that discussed consequences to the lesbian LEO relationship when both partners or spouses are LEOs. The participants of this study indicated that there is an effect on the relationship when both partners are LEOs and are aware of each other’s interactions while at work due to being able to hear each other’s calls for service on the radio or being able to locate each other using the mobile data terminal (in-car computer). Three of the six couples interviewed were able to hear on the police radios what their partner or spouse was doing while at work and all of those



participants commented on the stressful nature of that aspect. Two couples consisted of both partners or spouses being LEOs on the same shifts and the third couple was comprised of a dispatcher and LEO. At this time, I was unable to find any research that attended to this aspect of safety within the lesbian or LGBTQI+ population. Through this study, I discovered that lesbian LEO couples have experienced challenges to safety in a manner that is different than their heterosexual counterparts.

### *The Climate*

The theme entitled *The Climate* encompassed the fears, worries, and anxieties the participants faced regarding the sociopolitical climate, specifically in regard to anti-police sentiments. In some respects, there has been research conducted that attends to this theme (Galovski et al., 2016). However, it has been labeled as media sensationalism and centered on how the media has impacted the relationship between the public and law enforcement. In a study conducted by Galovski et al. (2016), the researchers addressed the impact of community violence on officers who experienced a high degree of stress and violence following riots in Ferguson, Missouri. The authors in this study suggested that there were longer and farther reaching effects for officers as a collective unit who routinely faced human suffering, community violence, and media sensationalism as a consequence of their occupations (Galovski et al., 2016). This research was relevant and directly related to the comments participants made regarding the political and social unrest that occurred across the United States in the summer of 2020 following the death of George Floyd. In addition to the protests and riots which police were charged with protecting and maintaining the safety of all involved, the COVID-19 pandemic played a major role in the amount of stress experienced by the lesbian LEO couples. One

participant stated she was asked to wade into a crowd of angry, hostile, citizens without a mask in an effort to keep the peace and it resulted in her contracting COVID-19. There is no literature identified to date that attended to the factor of COVID-19 and the effects on policing, lesbian LEOs, or lesbian LEO couples.

A key finding of this study was in the lack of acceptance of lesbian LEOs in the existing LGBTQI+ community. This concept has been alluded to in some existing research, but in one of two perspectives – either the focus was more in regards to keeping the LGBTQI+ LEO from experiencing rejection and ridicule from the police force or there was focus on the historical underpinnings of the LGBTQI+ and law enforcement community (Belkin & McNichol, 2002; Colvin, 2012; Miller et al., 2003, 2004; Miller & Lilley, 2014; Schneider, 1986; Sklansky, 2006; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). While the historical beginnings such as the Stonewall riots are paramount in understanding the roots of law enforcement and the LGBTQI+ community, it does not attend to the current rejection of a lesbian LEO within her greater LGBTQI+ community that was expressed by some of the participants in my study. Miller and Lilley (2014) suggested that an LGBTQI+ LEOs may want to keep their identity as a LEO concealed from the greater LGBTQI+ community due to fears of rejection. The participants in this study endorsed this idea as a very real fear and suggested that there would be less acceptance as a LEO in the LGBTQI+ community than being a lesbian in the law enforcement world. This was a key finding because the participants of this study suggested that unless they develop their own community of like-minded individuals, they may face resistance or rejection among the LGBTQI+ community at large. Another significant finding is that there is no discussion of political leanings that was found in existing research at the time of this

study. Most participants identified across a broad spectrum politically, but also identified as “conservative” in many respects which at times made them feel rejected by the greater LGBTQI+ community. One participant expressed her exasperation about feeling like she “couldn’t be herself” within the LGBTQI+ community for fear of rejection. No research regarding lesbian LEO couples or LGBTQI+ LEOs addressing the sociopolitical aspects discussed in this research could be found at the time of this study. A key finding from this study is that lesbian LEO couples have experienced the sociopolitical climate in a manner that is different than their heterosexual counterparts.

### ***It’s Not Normal***

In this study, one consistent area addressed by lesbian LEO couples was that much of their lives was not normal. Specifically, there are two areas in particular that the participants in this study found especially abnormal. This theme was divided into two subthemes: Schedules and Humor.

**Schedules.** The subtheme of schedules encompassed various aspects of the couples’ lives. The law enforcement occupation is known for hectic, variable schedules and shift-work (Brown et al., 2009; James & Vila, 2015; Morris et al., 2012; Rudic, 2009). The participants in this study discussed the difficulty they had when navigating each other’s schedules and making time for their relationships. This finding was consistent with the current literature regarding law enforcement; however, the findings from previous studies had to be generalized to this population as there were no published research studies at this time addressing lesbian LEO couples specifically. This pointed to a need for more research in this area of study. Most participants attributed the difficulties they had in scheduling as a consequence of the law enforcement lifestyle. In an article by

Ma et al. (2015) the authors reported on the differences in day shifts versus night shifts and the toll that organizational stressors took on the individual LEO. There is currently no research that addressed lesbian LEO couples or how LGBTQI+ LEOs manage shiftwork, schedules, and their relationships with their significant others. However, the results of this study suggested that lesbian LEO couples do not experience shiftwork and challenges to scheduling differently than their heterosexual counterparts.

**Humor.** In this study, humor was another area identified as not being normal. Each participant discussed the role of humor in their relationship in one aspect or another. This finding was consistent with other research published about law enforcement in general. There have been multiple studies examining the impact law enforcement has upon the family and marital dyad, but there has not been research that explicitly examined the role of humor in a lesbian LEO couple. Research from other authors had to be generalized to lesbian LEO couples. Several authors discussed the role of humor and that LEOs often engaged in inappropriate humor so they could cope with the traumatic issues at their jobs (Armitage, 2017; Kirschman et al., 2014; Martinez, 2010; Violanti, 2007). Additionally, Horan et al. (2012) also examined the use of humor as a tool to diffuse tension within the family system. There was no published research found at the time of this study that addressed the role of humor in lesbian LEO couples. However, the participants of this study suggested that lesbian LEO couples do not experience the role of humor differently than their heterosexual counterparts.

### ***Hold the Line***

The term hold the line is a term used in the military when soldiers were instructed to hold the line of formation against insurmountable odds. This concept was in-line with

police culture as well due to the culture of policing being para-militaristic in nature (Ménard & Arter, 2013). When applied to this study by participants, it was in reference to the partner or spouse of the lesbian LEO being able to keep the household and family unit in tact despite the insurmountable challenges faced by the couple. The participants in this study suggested that there is a large burden placed on the partner or spouse of the lesbian LEO to “hold the line” in regards to setting and maintaining boundaries, confronting issues with the lesbian LEO and not allowing the LEO partner or spouse dictate all the rules in their relationship. This finding was unique to this research study as there are no other studies published at this time that have referred to the spouse or partner as needing to hold the line. The existing research addressed the importance of a partner or spouse as an instrumental support (Karaffa et al., 2015; Porter & Henriksen, Jr., 2016). Two subthemes of *Communication* and *A Different Roller Coaster* emerged from this main theme of “Hold the Line” and are discussed below.

**Communication.** Communication was addressed as one of the major tenants of what it means to hold the line at home. In respect to this study, communication was deemed one of the most crucial elements to a successful relationship as discussed by the participants. Communication was also discussed as not being normal as compared to other couples due to the ways in which lesbian LEO couples in this study communicated with each other. They addressed specifically challenges to communication as a consequence of a law enforcement lifestyle. Most lesbian LEOs discussed the difficulties they had just trying to discuss their day with their partner or spouse. Many suggested the work was difficult or scary and in an effort to not bring that burden home, they would shut down and not communicate. The concept of shutting down and shutting one’s

family or significant others out of the law enforcement field is something that is consistent with the limited studies that have been conducted with law enforcement families (Gilmartin, 2002; Karaffa et al., 2015; Kirschman et al., 2014; Porter & Henriksen, Jr., 2016; Ramos, 2010; Violanti, 2017). In this study, several of the participants discussed times they attended therapy to help them navigate difference and improve communication. This is a deviation from existing literature regarding help-seeking behaviors among LEOs (Armitage, 2017; Berg et al., 2003, 2006; Martinez, 2010; Ménard & Arter, 2013; Richmond, et al., 1998; Tanigoshi, et al., 2008; Violanti, 2004). Through this research, participants of this study engaged in help-seeking behaviors which is a divergent finding from existing literature about LEOs attitudes toward help-seeking behaviors and suggests that lesbian LEO couples are more likely to engage in help-seeking behaviors.

Overall, the challenges faced by participants in this study is consistent with research that has been conducted with law enforcement families to date (Armitage, 2017; Berg et al., 2003, 2006; Martinez, 2010; Ménard & Arter, 2013; Richmond, et al., 1998; Tanigoshi, et al., 2008; Violanti, 2004). While there was no research found at this time that addressed communication in lesbian LEO couples specifically, the participants in this study suggested that lesbian LEO couples managed barriers to communication differently than their heterosexual counterparts due to their willingness to participate in therapy and help-seeking behaviors.

**A Different Roller Coaster.** The theme *A Different Roller Coaster* was derived from the participant interviews and was used to describe the factors unique to the lesbian LEO couple. Participants described the lifestyle as a lesbian LEO couple as a completely

different experience than being a part of any other profession. The participants described times when they brought their frustrations home from work, the level of support that's required for longevity in the field, and described the ever present concern for loss. The non-LEO spouses or partners also discussed the sacrifices they have made in order for their LEO partner or spouse to pursue a law enforcement occupation. They discussed the high points and low points of the lifestyle and what it meant to incorporate their authentic existence as a lesbian couple into the "roller coaster" of their experience. Some of the aspects of this theme are consistent with previous research such as previous phenomenological study of first responder spouses who took on certain aspects of their spouse's first responder career (Porter & Henriksen, Jr., 2016). Kirschman, Kamena, and Fay, 2014) provided a comprehensive overview of the life changes that occur from the standpoint of the LEO which provided insight into the behaviors and interactions of a LEO as they move through their career. However, there is limited information about the perspective of the spouse. Currently there are no studies in print found at the time of this study that specifically attended to lesbian LEO couple from a transcendental phenomenological approach. The most closely related study was a phenomenological study of gay and lesbian corrections officers' lived experiences, but there was not a study conducted of the partners or spouses experiences (Mennicke et al., 2018).

### **Implications**

Researchers in the fields of psychology, criminal justice, and counseling have added to the body of literature regarding the law enforcement occupation, hazards of the field, and the impact on home life (Armitage, 2017; Berg et al., 2003, 2006; Bernstein & Swartwout, 2012; Colvin, 2009; Martinez, 2010; Ménard & Arter, 2013; Miller et al.,

2003; Richmond et al., 1998; Tanigoshi, et al., 2008; Violanti, 2004; Woody, 2005).

Movements have been made towards understanding and giving voice to the LGBTQI+ LEO community and I have sought to contribute to the existing literature by filling a gap in the experiences of lesbian LEO couples. As a result of this study, there are implications for counselors and counselor education programs in consideration of lesbian LEO couples.

The first major implication for counseling practice is how lesbian LEO couples are understood. This population represents a very diverse, and growing demographic within the law enforcement community. From this study, information was gleaned about the improved visibility of the LGBTQI+ community within law enforcement and how these individuals' lives have been impacted by both their identity as a member of the LGBTQI+ community and their identity as law enforcement officers. Additionally, even in couples where one spouse or partner had a job completely outside of, or ancillary to law enforcement, the partners or spouses of the LEO felt included in law enforcement identity. This notion of shared identity was supported by a small segment of the literature (Horan et al., 2012; Kirschman et al., 2014; Porter & Henriksen, Jr., 2016; Ramos, 2010; Violanti, 2007). Developing counseling professionals who are versed in the challenges, needs, and resilience of lesbian LEO couples is a major practice implication from the study conducted. Counselors need to be cognizant of the impact that the sociopolitical climate has on lesbian LEO couples. A main takeaway from this research was that the lesbian LEO couple had the potential to feel isolated and conflicted in regard to their identities and that there is a duality of mind that existed between LEO and lesbain. If



counselors are going to work with this population, a basic grasp on the dual identity dynamics at work is vital.

A second implication for practice is understanding the level of stress that a lesbian LEO couple can endure. From the study conducted, the participants discussed the strain of needing to defend their relationship, navigate the tragedies associated with law enforcement, work daily to improve communication, and the underlying fears and worries that espouse the law enforcement lifestyle. From a counselor education perspective, viewing LEOs as a culture may help practitioners advocate for improved services for LEO couples and families. There is much emphasis placed on advocacy within the profession of counseling and this study placed an emphasis on the need for further advocacy for the lesbian LEO couple.

Implications for counselor educators include the ability to teach students how to work with the lesbian LEO population. Specifically attending to the sociopolitical climate and what that could mean for clients seeking treatment. As counselor educators continue to teach advocacy and support the movement towards social justice, it is important to remember that each client brings their own narrative and based on this study, it is clear that lesbian LEO couples have faced immense stress, fear, isolation, and lack of community at times. Counselor educators are charged with training new counselors to engage in active listening, empathy, and critical thinking in order to develop and implement treatment plans appropriate for each client or family. Though this study, it is evident that the lesbian LEO couple is a unique family dynamic worthy of respect and cultural consideration.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study was focused specifically on the lesbian LEO couple, future research should be directed towards studies that delve into the LGBTQI+ experiences in law enforcement. Most all participants pointed out that their departments or agencies were moving in a positive direction in terms of improved relationships with the LGBTQI+ community, taking part in Pride Parades, and overall visibility within departments. However, there is scant information about perspectives of gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex experiences in the law enforcement community. Due to the trepidation experienced by members of the LGBTQI+ community to disclose their sexual orientation to peers and command staff, a single case study method could be employed to provide voice to a population that has been silenced for many years. There are no current studies found at the time of this study that include the voice of a transgender person.

This research should also be expanded to include other first responder occupations such as fire, EMS, corrections, and dispatch. Each of these entities has their own unique components that needs to be explored in future research regarding the LGBTQI+ community.

An additional study that would be of particular significance could be done regarding attitudes towards politically conservative LGBTQI+ LEOs. My study uncovered a small subculture within the larger LGBTQI+ population that is currently unable to voice their opinions out of fear of facing rejection and further studies that examine the intersection of political attitudes, occupation, and culture would be of particular interest.

Finally, studies regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and civil unrest on LEO couples and families in general would be paramount as a next step in research. COVID-19 has taken a toll on communities worldwide and public service was one area affected the most in terms of service to the community. Additionally, the civil unrest of 2020 combined with the effects of policing during a pandemic is an area yet to be uncovered. As described in my research, the law enforcement occupation is one that takes a mental, physical, and emotional toll on the entire family unit. Research focused on how these factors of civil unrest and the pandemic is greatly needed and research geared toward understanding the impact on the family unit would be instrumental in providing competent and quality services for LEOs and their families.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of, and uncover the essence of being a lesbian LEO couple. I examined and analyzed the data gathered from my research study in order to provide a voice to a population that has been silenced. Through their words, the essence of being was extracted from the data and painted a picture of the lived experiences of lesbian LEO couples. From their lived experiences a picture of resilience, the ability to overcome tragedy, support and collaboration, and the strength needed to endure all things emerged. Counselors and counselor educators that provide service and educate future counselors about this population will have a greater understanding of what it means to be a lesbian LEO couple.

**REFERENCES**

- Armitage, R. N. (2017). *Police suicide: Risk factors and intervention measures*. Routledge.
- Baksh, B. (2018). To bracket or not to bracket: Reflections of a novice qualitative researcher. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping, 24*(3), 45–55.
- Belkin, A. and McNichol, J. (2002). Pink and Blue: Outcomes associated with the integration of open gay and Lesbian personnel in the San Diego Police Department. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 18*(3), 302-328.
- Bell, L. B., Virden, T. B., Lewis, D. J., & Cassidy, B. A. (2015). Effects of 13-Hour 20-minute work shifts on Law Enforcement Officers' sleep, cognitive abilities, health, quality of life, and work performance. *Police Quarterly, 18*(3), 293–337. doi:10.1177/1098611115584910
- Berg, A. M., Hem, E., Lau, B., & Ekeberg, O. (2006). Help-seeking in the Norwegian police service. *Journal of Occupational Health, 48*(3), 145-153. doi:10.1539/joh.48.145
- Berg, A. M., Hem, E., Lau, B., Loeb, M., & Ekeberg, O. (2003). Suicidal ideation and attempts in Norwegian police. *Suicide and life-threatening behavior, 33*(3), 302-312. doi:10.1521/suli.33.3.302.23215
- Bernstein, M. & Swartwout, P. (2012). Gay officers in their midst: Heterosexual police employees' anticipation of the consequences for coworkers who come out. *Journal of Homosexuality, 59*, 1145-1166. doi:10.1080/00918969.2012.673945

- Bowen, M. (1968). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Northvale: Jason Aronson.
- Brandl, S. G., & Strohshine, M. S. (2003). Toward an understanding of the physical hazards of police work. *Police Quarterly*, 6, 172-191.
- Brock, D., Klaus, S., Harbour, L., & Nash, T. (2002). Stress and police in Kansas. *Police Journal*, 75(1), 31–44. doi:10.1177/0032258X0207500104
- Brough, P. (2005). A comparative investigation of the predictors of work-related psychological well-being within police, fire and ambulance workers. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 34(2), 127-134.
- Brown, D. L., Feskanich, D., Sanchez, B. N., Schernhammer, E. S. & Lisabeth, L. D. (2009). Rotating night shift work and the risk of ischemic stroke. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 169, 1370-1377.
- Bryman, A. (1988). *Quantity and quality in social research*. Unwin Hyman.
- Chan, J. B. L. (1997). *Changing police culture*. Cambridge University Press.
- Che M. H. & Boyle, D. J. (2013). Police suicide: Prevalence, risk and protective factors. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 36 (1), 91-118.
- Chopko, B., Palmieri, P., & Adams, R. (2013). Associations between police stress and alcohol use: Implications for practice. *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, 18(5), 482–497. doi:10.1080/15325024.2012.719340
- Colvin, A. (2012). *Gay and Lesbian cops: Diversity and effective policing*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.

- Colvin, R. (2009). Shared perceptions among Lesbian and Gay police officers: Barriers and opportunities in the law enforcement work environment. *Police Quarterly*, 12(1), 86–101. doi:10.1177/1098611108327308
- Combs, J. P., Bustamante, R. M., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2010). A mixed methods approach to conducting literature reviews for stress and coping researchers: An interactive literature review process framework. In K. M. T. Collins, A. J. Onwuegbuzie, & Q. G. Jiao (Eds.), *Toward a broader understanding of stress and coping: Mixed methods approaches*. A Volume in Research on Stress and Coping in Education (pp. 213-242). Greenway, CT: Information Age.
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power*. Stanford University Press.
- Corsini, D., & Wedding, R. J. (2014). *Current psychotherapies* (10th ed.). Brooks/Cole.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (3rd ed. ). Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). SAGE.
- Drescher, K. D., Foy, D. W., Kelly, C., Leshner, A., Shutz, K. & Litz, B. (2011). An exploration of the viability and usefulness of the construct of moral injury in war veterans. *Traumatology*, 17, 8-13.
- Drew, N. (2004). Creating a synthesis of intentionality: The role of bracketing the facilitator. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 27(3), 215-223.
- Feminist Daily News Wire. (2000). Judge speaks out in case of harassed lesbian police officer. September 29 (Internet).

- Galovski, T. E., Peterson, Z. D., Beagley, M. C., Strasshofer, D. R., Held, P., & Fletcher, T. D. (2016). Exposure to violence during Ferguson protests: Mental health effects for law enforcement and community members. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 29*(4), 283–292. doi:10.1002/jts.22105
- Galvin-White, C. M., & O’Neal, E. N. (2016). Lesbian police officers’ interpersonal working relationships and sexuality disclosure. *Feminist Criminology, 11*(3), 253–284. doi:10.1177/1557085115588359
- Gerard, K. (2010). An introduction to Moustakas’ heuristic method. *Nurse Researcher, 19* (3), 6 – 11.
- Gershon, R. R., Lin, S. & Li, X. (2002). Work stress in aging police officers. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, 44*, 160-167.
- Gilmartin, K. M. (2002). *Emotional survival for law enforcement : A guide for officers and their families*. E-S Press.
- Giorgi, A. (2009). *The description phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Duquesne University Press.
- Griffin, J. D., & Sun, I. Y. (2018). Do work-family conflict and resiliency mediate police stress and burnout: A study of state police officers. *American Journal of Criminal Justice, 43*(2), 354–370. doi:10.1007/s12103-017-9401-y
- He, N., Zhao, J. H. & Archbold, C. A. (2002). Gender and police stress- the convergent and divergent impact of work environment, work-family conflict, and stress coping mechanisms of female and male police officers. *Policing, 25*, 687-708.
- Helm, K. M. (2019). *Family systems theory*. Salem Press Encyclopedia of Health.

- Heron, E. A., Bryan, C. J., Dougherty, C. A. & Chapman, W. G. (2013). Military mental health: The role of daily hassles while deployed. *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease, 201*, 1035-1039.
- History.com Editors. (2017, May 31). Stonewall Riots. Retrieved September 14, 2020, from <https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots>
- Horan, S., Bochantin, J., & Booth-Butterfield, M. (2012). Humor in high-stress relationships: Understanding communication in police officers' romantic relationships. *Communication Studies, 63*(5), 554–573. doi:10. 1080/10510974. 2011. 633297
- International Association of Chiefs of Police. (1999). Police officer domestic violence: Concepts and issues paper. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/181409.pdf>
- James, S. M., & Vila, B. (2015). Police drowsy driving: Predicting fatigue-related performance decay. *Policing: An International Journal, 38*(3), 517–538. doi:10. 1108/PIJPSM-03-2015-0033
- Karaffa, K. M., & Koch, J. M. (2016). Stigma, pluralistic ignorance, and attitudes toward seeking mental health services among police officers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 43*(6), 759–777.
- Karaffa, K., Openshaw, L., Koch, J., Clark, H., Harr, C., & Stewart, C. (2015). Perceived impact of police work on marital relationships. *Family Journal, 23*(2), 120–131.
- Karaffa, K. M., & Tochkov, K. (2013). Attitudes toward seeking mental health treatment among law enforcement officers. *Applied Psychology in Criminal Justice, 9*(2), 75.



- Kirschman, E. (2007). *I love a cop: What police families need to know* (rev. ed.). Guilford Press.
- Kirschman, E., Kamena, M., & Fay, J. (2014). *Counseling cops : What clinicians need to know*. Guilford Press.
- Larsson, G., Berglund, A. K. & Ohlsson, A. (2016). Daily hassles, their antecedents and outcomes among professional first responders: A systemic literature review. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 57, 359-367.
- Lyons Jr., P. M., DeValve, M. J., & Garner, R. L. (2008). Texas police chiefs' attitudes towards gay and lesbian police officers. *Police Quarterly* 11(1), 102-117.
- Ma, C. C., Andrew, M. E., Fekedulegn, D., Gu, J. K., Hartley, T. A., Charles, L. E., & Burchfiel, C. M. (2015). Shift work and occupational stress in police officers. *Safety and Health at Work*, 6(1), 25–29. doi:10.1016/j.shaw.2014.10.001
- Maran, D. A., Varetto, A., Zedda, M. & Ieraci, V. (2015). Occupational stress, anxiety, and coping strategies in police officers. *Occupational Medicine*, 65, 466-473.
- Martinez, L. E. (2010). *The secret deaths: Police officer's testimonial views on police suicides and why suicides continue to be hidden in police departments*. Outskirts Press.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Meffert, S. M., Henn-Haase, C., Metzler, T. J., Qian, M., Best, S., Hirschfeld, A., McCaslin, S., Inslicht, S., Neylan, T. C., & Marmar, C. R. (2014). Prospective study of police officer spouse/partners: A new pathway to secondary trauma and relationship violence? *PLoS ONE*, 9(7), 1–8. doi:10.1371/journal.pone. 0100663

- Ménard, K. S., & Arter, M. L. (2013). Police officer alcohol use and trauma symptoms: Associations with critical incidents, coping, and social stressors. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 20(1), 37-56. doi:10.037/a0031434
- Mennicke, A., Gromer, J., Oehme, K., & MacConnie, L. (2018). Workplace experiences of gay and Lesbian criminal justice officers in the United States: A qualitative investigation of officers attending a LGBT law enforcement conference. *Policing & Society*, 28(6), 712–729. doi:10.1080/10439463.2016.1238918
- Miller, L. (2007). Police families: Stresses, syndromes, and solutions. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 35(1), 21-40.
- Miller, S. L., Forest, K. B., & Jurik, N. C. (2003). Diversity in Blue: Lesbian and gay police officers in a masculine occupation. *Men and Masculinities*, 5(4), 355–385. doi:10.1177/0095399702250841
- Miller, S. L., Forest, K. B., & Jurik, N. C. (2004). Lesbians in policing: Perceptions and work experiences within the macho cop culture. *The Criminal Justice System and Women: Offenders, Prisoners, Victims & Workers*, 511-526. McGraw-Hill.
- Miller, S. L., & Lilley, T. G. (2014). Proving themselves: The status of LGBQ police officers. *Sociology Compass-Electronic Edition*, 8(4), 373-383.
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology and applications*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Myers, K. A., Forest, K. B., & Miller, S. L. (2004). Officer friendly and the tough cop: Gays and Lesbians navigate homophobia and policing. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 47(1), 17–37. doi:10.1300/J082v47n01\_02

- Morris, C. J., Yang, J. N. & Scheer, F. A. (2012). The impact of the circadian timing system on cardiovascular and metabolic function. *Progressive Brain Research*, 199, 337-358.
- Naderifar, M., Goli, H., & Ghaljaei, F. (2017). Snowball sampling: A purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research. *Strides in Development of Medical Education*, 14(3), 1-6. doi:10.5812/sdme.67670.
- Nash, W. P. & Litz, B. T. (2013). Moral injury: A mechanism for war-related psychological trauma in military family members. *Clinical, Child and Family Psychology Review*, 16, 365-375.
- Nilsson, S., Hyllengren, P., Ohlsson, A., Kallenbert, K., Waaler, G. & Larsson, G. (2015). Leadership and moral stress: Individual reaction patterns among first responders in acute situations that involve moral stressors. *Journal of Trauma and Treatment*, 4, 261-270.
- Oehme, K., Donnelly, E. A., & Martin, A. (2012). Alcohol Abuse, PTSD, and Officer-Committed Domestic Violence. *Policing: A Journal of Policy & Practice*, 6(4), 418–430. doi:10. 1093/police/pas023
- Oxford Dictionary. (n. d. ). *Media sensationalism*. Lexico Powered by Oxford.  
<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/sensationalism>
- Paoline, E. A., Myers, S. M., & Worden, R. E. (2000). Police culture, individualism, and community policing: Evidence from two police departments. *Justice Quarterly*, (3), 575.

- Pole, N., Neylan, T. C., Best, S. R., Orr, S. P., & Marmar, C. R. (2003). Fear-potentiated startle and posttraumatic stress symptoms in urban police officers. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 16*(5), 471. doi:10.1023/A:1025758411370
- Porter, K. & Henriksen Jr., R. C. (2016). The phenomenological experiences of first responder spouses. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 24* (1), 44-51. doi:0.1177/1066480715615651
- Rabjohn, A. (2013). The human cost of being a ‘first responder.’ *Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning, 6*, 268-271.
- Ramos, O. (2010). Police suicide: Are you at risk. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 79*(5), 21–23.
- Ramos, O. (2007). A leadership perspective for understanding police suicide: An analysis based on the Suicide Attitude Questionnaire. Dissertation.com
- Rennstam, J., & Sullivan, K. R. (2018). Peripheral inclusion informal silencing and voice — A study of LGB officers in the Swedish police. *Gender, Work & Organization, 25*(2), 177–194. doi:10.1111/gwao.12194
- Richmond, R. L., Wodak, A., Kehoe, L., & Heather, N. (1998). How healthy are the police? A survey of life-style factors. *Addiction, 93*(11), 1729-1737.
- Roberts, N. A., & Levenson, R. W. (2001). The remains of the workday: Impact of job stress and exhaustion on marital interaction in police couples. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*(4), 1052-1067. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.01052.x.
- Rokeach, M., Miller, M. G., & Snyder, J. A. (1971). The value gap between police and policed. *Journal of Social Issues, 27* (2), 155-171.

- Rosner, R. & Powell, S. (2009). Does ICD-10 overestimate the prevalence of PTSD?: Effects of differing diagnostic criteria on estimated rates of posttraumatic stress disorder in warzone exposed civilians. *Trauma & Gewalt, 3*, 1-8.
- Rudic, R. D. (2009). Time is of the essence: Vascular implications of the circadian clock. *Circulation, 120*, 1714-1721.
- Rufo, R. A. (2016). *Police suicide :Is police culture killing our officers?* CRC Press.
- Salinas, C. R., Webb, H. E. (2018). Occupational stress and coping mechanisms in crime scene personnel. *Occupational Medicine, 68*, 239-245.
- Schnieder, B. E. (1986). Coming out at work: Bridging the private/public gap. *Work and Occupations 13*, 463-487.
- Sklanski, D. A. (2006). Not your father's police department: Making sense of the new demographics of law enforcement. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, 96*(3), 1209-1243.
- Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Supreme Court of the United States. (2015, June). *Obergefell et al. v. Hodges, Director, Ohio Department of Public Health et al.* Retrieved September 13, 2020, from <https://www.supremecourt.gov/>
- TCOLE. (2020). *A career in Texas Law Enforcement*. Texas Commission on Law Enforcement. <https://www.tcole.texas.gov/content/career-texas-law-enforcement>.
- Thiel, K. B. (2019). Woke Dicta: The discord over statutory interpretation, sexual orientation discrimination, and the scope of Title VII. *George Mason University Civil Rights Law Journal, 29*(2), 191–220.

- Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2012). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work, 11*(1), 80–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010368316>
- Violanti, J. M. (1983). Stress patterns in police work: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Police Science & Administration, 11*, 211–216.
- Violanti, J. M. (2004). Predictors of police suicide ideation. *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior, 34*(3), 277–283. doi:10.1521/suli.34.3.277.42775
- Violanti, J. M. (2007). *Police suicide: Epidemic in blue* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Charles C. Thomas.
- Violanti, J. M., Owens, S. L., Fekedulegn, D., Ma, C. C., Charles, L. E., & Andrew, M. E. (2018). An exploration of shift work, fatigue, and gender among police officers: The BCOPS study. *Workplace Health & Safety, 66*(11), 530–537. doi:10.1177/2165079918754586
- Tanigoshi, H., Kontos, A. P., & Remley, T. J. (2008). The effectiveness of individual wellness counseling on the wellness of law enforcement officers. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*(1), 64–74.
- Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2010). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work, Vol. 11*(1): 80–96. doi: 10. 1177/1473325010368316.
- Westley, W. A. (1970). *Violence and the police: A sociological study of law, custom, and morality*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Weinberg, D. (2020, June 19). News Flash: If you've never had a Supreme Court case decide if you have the same rights as others, you have privilege. [pic.twitter.com/pivLmgHOo7](https://twitter.com/pivLmgHOo7). Retrieved September 13, 2020, from <https://twitter.com/DavidAWeinberg/status/1273772226886729728>

Woody, R. H. (2005). The police culture: Research implications for psychological services. *Professional Psychology Research and Practice*, (5), 525.

## VITA

### EDUCATION

- July 2021      Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas  
                     Ph.D., Counselor Education
- May 2013      Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas  
                     M.A., Counseling
- Dec 2009      University of Mobile, Mobile, Alabama  
                     B.A., Political Science

### LICENSES/CERTIFICATIONS

- #71418          Licensed Professional Counselor
- #202147        Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist
- #321226        National Certified Counselor

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

**Family Center Counseling & Consulting, Houston, TX Jan 2017 – Present**  
**Clinical Director, Owner**

- Private practice specializing in work with first responders, LGBTQI+ populations, families and individual counseling.

**The Harris Center for Mental Health & IDD, Houston, TX July 2020- Present**  
**Program Manager, Jail Based Competency Restoration Program**

- Development and implementation of a Jail Based Competency Restoration program located within the Harris County Jail. Development of programming and curriculum, staff development and training, and tracking of program metrics.

**The Harris Center for Mental Health & IDD, Houston, TX Feb 2019- Present**  
**LPHA-Crisis Intervention Response Team, PRN**

- Responsibilities include responding to crisis calls alongside law enforcement, conducting assessments in the field and educating public about mental health resources in the community.

**The Harris Center for Mental Health & IDD, Houston, TX May 2018- Feb 2019**  
**Clinical Team Leader, Northwest Clinic**

- Responsibilities include managing a clinical team of Rehab Clinicians, LPHA-Interns, and LPHAs



- Directly works with Medical Director to ensure proper patient care and assist with hospitalization of patients as needed.

**The Harris Center for Mental Health & IDD, Houston, TX Oct 2016- May 2018**

Licensed Professional of the Healing Arts/LPHA, TCOOMMI

- Responsible for oversight of clinical services provided to individuals and families with co-occurring mental health and probation services
- Conducts assessments and diagnoses of individuals referred into program
- Collaborates with Juvenile Probation Officers to provide treatment and continuity of care in the transitioning of individuals from state custody to home

**Kingwood Pines Hospital, Kingwood, TX Dec 2014 – Feb 2019**

Lead Unit Therapist, Unit 400/PRN Therapist

- Responsible for managing all duties of adolescent unit including social assessments, family therapy sessions, and treatment plans
- Directs all therapeutic processes for the unit including managing crises as part of a collaborative effort by treatment team to de-escalate and redirect agitated patients
- Trained in both verbal de-escalation and CPI physical restraint techniques

**Sam Houston State University- The Woodlands, TX Jan 2018 – May 2018**

Co-Instructor

- Responsible for supervision of practicum students in clinic
- Interacts with students and faculty to collaborate in the education of master's level students and provide high quality mental health services to the community

**Springfield College- Houston Campus, Springfield, MA Aug 2017 – Dec 2017**

Professor, Adjunct Faculty

- Responsible for course development and delivery of curriculum
- Interacts with students and faculty to collaborate in the education of master's level students

**Woodlands Church, The Woodlands, TX Aug 2012 – Sep 2016**

Counselor, Counseling & Care Ministry

- Provides marriage and family counseling services to church members
- Supervises and provides case-consultation for Lay Counselors

**TRI-COUNTY SERVICES, Conroe, TX Nov 2013 – Dec 2014**

Psychosocial Rehabilitation Specialist

- Primary responsibility of managing a caseload of adults with severe mental illness and providing mental health services based on an individualized treatment plan

- Collaborated with a treatment team of health care professionals to provide clients with multimodal treatment

**SHSU Community Counseling Center, The Woodlands, TX      May 2013 – Aug 2013**

Counselor, Doctoral Internship

- Provided counseling services to the community as part of a doctoral internship
- Areas of specialty include marriage and family therapy, assessment, and adolescent issues
- Provided supervision to Master's level counselors-in-training

**JACK STAGGS COUNSELING CLINIC, Huntsville, TX      May 2012 – Aug 2012**

Counselor, Master's Internship

- Provided counseling services to the community as part of master's level internship
- Responsible for formulating treatment plans and collaborating with counselors-in-training to provide quality services

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

Spring 2018	Sam Houston State University (Co-Instructor), The Woodlands, TX COUN 6376, Supervised Practicum in Counseling
Fall 2017	Springfield College- Houston Campus, Springfield, MA MMHC 630, Group Counseling
Fall 2017	Sam Houston State University (Co-Instructor), Huntsville, TX COUN 5088, Spirituality in Counseling
Summer 2016	Sam Houston State University (Co-Instructor), Huntsville, TX COUN 6374, Practicum in Group Counseling
Spring 2015	Sam Houston State University (Co-Instructor), Huntsville, TX COUN 3331, Introduction to Helping Relationships
Fall 2015	Sam Houston State University (Co-Instructor), The Woodlands, TX COUN 6332, Theories of Marriage and Family Therapy
Summer 2015	Sam Houston State University (Co-Instructor), The Woodlands, TX

	COUN 5393, Community Counseling
Spring 2015	Sam Houston State University (Co-Instructor), The Woodlands, TX
	COUN 6364, Counseling for Addictions
Summer 2014	Sam Houston State University (Co-Instructor), Huntsville, TX
	COUN 5113, Assessment in Marriage and Family Therapy

### **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

**Porter, K.**, Williams, S. L., Smedley, D. (03/02/18). *Therapeutic Mashups: Creating Harmony in Counselor Education, Supervision and Practice*. Presentation session at Texas Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors in Austin, TX.

**Porter, K.**, Henriksen, Jr, R, C., Smedley, D. (11/16/17). *Protect and Serve: Clinical Implications for Counseling First Responders and their Romantic Partners*. Presentation session at the Texas Counseling Association Annual Professional Growth Conference in Galveston, TX.

**Porter, K.**, Henriksen, Jr, R, C., Smedley, D. (03/03/17). *Protect and Serve: Clinical Implications for Counseling First Responders and their Romantic Partners*. Presentation session at Texas Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors in Austin, TX.

Chan, C., Greger, R., **Porter, K.** (03/03/17). *TACES Presents: An Advanced Supervision Session on Trauma Informed Supervision*. Content session at Texas Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors in Austin, TX.

Henriksen, Jr, R, C., **Porter, K.** (11/03/16). *Psychopharmacology for Counselors: The Client, Medication and You*. Content session at Texas Counselor Association in Dallas, TX.

**Porter, K.**, Lertora, I., Liu, V., Lewis, S., Tran, C., & Chi-Sing, L (01/29/16). *Interactive Supervision Techniques for Counselor Educators and Supervisors*. Presentation session at Texas Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors in Austin, TX.

Lertora, I., **Porter, K.**, Greger, R., Liu, V., Lewis, S., Tran, C., & Chi-Sing, L (10/11/15). *Interactive Teaching Techniques for Counselor Educators and Supervisors*. Presentation session at Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors in Philadelphia, PA.

Lewis, S., **Porter, K.**, Henriksen Jr., R. C. (3/15/15). *Are Women of Minority Populations More Likely To Be Victims of Violent Intimate Partner Violence?.* Poster Presentation at the American Counseling Association Annual Conference in Orlando, FL

Lewis, S., **Porter, K.**, Henriksen, Jr., R. C. (3/14/15). *Treating Intimate Partner Violence/Domestic Violence Beyond the Session Room: A Call for Advocacy*. Poster Presentation at the American Counseling Association Annual Conference in Orlando, FL

Chi-Sing, L., Lertora, I., **Porter, K.**, Greger, R., Liu, V., Lewis, S. & Tran, C., (1/29/15). *Interactive Teaching Techniques for Counselor Educators and Supervisors*. Presentation session at Texas Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors in Austin, TX.

**Porter, K.** (2/9/14) *Divorce Rates of First Responders*. Paper Presentation at the 39<sup>th</sup> Southwest Educational Research Association (SERA) conference in New Orleans, LA.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

### Peer-Reviewed

**Porter, K.**, Henriksen Jr., R. C., (2016) The phenomenological experience of first responder spouses. *The Family Journal Vol. 24(I)*, p. 44-51.

### Non-refereed

**Porter, K.**, & Henriksen Jr., R.C. (November, 2015). *The phenomenological experience of first responder spouses or romantic partners*. (Final Report# 10963). Sam Houston State University, Institution Review Board.

**Porter, K.** (September, 2013). *Divorce rates of first responders and emergency personnel*. (Final Report# 12031). Sam Houston State University, Institution Review Board.

## **RESEARCH/SERVICE COMMITTEES**

- Community Program Evaluation and Research Team, 2013-2014

## **AWARDS/RECOGNITION**

- Outstanding Counselor Educator- Doctoral, 2015
- Scholarship Recipient, Graduate Studies Merit Award- Doctoral, 2013
- Chi Sigma Iota, Beta Kappa Tau Chapter, 2012

## **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION AFFILIATIONS**

- TCA (Texas Counselor Association)/ TACES (Texas Association for Counselor Educators & Supervisors)
- ACA (American Counseling Association)/ ACES (Association for Counselor Educators & Supervisors)

- Chi Sigma Iota (The international honor society for students, professional counselors and counselor educators)
- TAMFT (Texas Association of Marriage and Family Therapists)
- NBCC (National Board for Certified Counselors)