

THE EXPERIENCES OF POLICE OFFICERS EXPOSED TO  
DAILY TRAUMA AS A COURSE OF THEIR EMPLOYMENT:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

---

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

Arielle Chandler Carrier

August, 2020

THE EXPERIENCES OF POLICE OFFICERS EXPOSED TO  
DAILY TRAUMA AS A COURSE OF THEIR EMPLOYMENT:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Arielle Chandler Carrier

---

APPROVED:

Dr. David Lawson  
Dissertation Chair

Dr. Yvonne Garza-Chaves  
Committee Member

Dr. Chi-Sing Li  
Committee Member

Dr. Stacey Edmonson  
Dean, College of Counselor Education

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this to my fiancé, Steven Caroccia. He was probably first attracted to me because I talked too much. I also dedicate it to my mother, Ginni. Sadly, she died much too early for her only child.

## ABSTRACT

Carrier, Arielle Chandler, *The experiences of police officers exposed to daily trauma as a course of their employment: A phenomenological study*. Doctor of Philosophy (Counselor Education), August, 2020, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

Although the dangers and risk police officers face while working are well documented in literature, little is understood about their experiences and how they personally self-soothe to build resiliency to the critical situations they experience. A dearth of literature exists regarding qualitative studies which have permeated American police culture in order to explore experiences of officers through their own lived experiences. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe individual experiences of police officers who are exposed to trauma as part of their routine course of employment. Social-cognitive processing theory was used as a framework because it holds that there is an interplay between personal individual experiences and the environment (Brewin & Holmes, 2003). The interplay between personal individual processes and social environment can encourage or discourage willingness to talk about trauma and stress, which can influence adjustment and processing of experiences. Interview questions for police officer participants were formulated to explore their individual experiences and coping behaviors. Data analysis concluded with the following themes as a result of interviews: (a) altruism, (b) compartmentalization, (c) distraction, (d) exposure to violence, (e) high stress, (f) mental health professionals' lack of familiarity with police officer experiences, (g) lack of emotional preparation, (h) mistrust toward seeking professional mental health help, (i) police officer persona, (j) rationalization, and (k) social support.

**KEY WORDS:** Police officers, Coping behaviors, Phenomenology, Qualitative

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I'd like to thank Dr. David Lawson for his unwavering support and mentorship throughout the program. He is funny, approachable, and has great stories! For the past several years, I have appreciated his sense of humor, candor, and pragmatism. He is sensible, genuine, and has a unique way of always getting to the heart of the problem to solve it in a very unassuming way. Thank you for being you.

I'd like to thank Dr. Yvonne Garza for her encouragement, advice, and wisdom. She is compassionate, genuine, and has been an encourager when I've needed it most. Always positive, looking on the bright side, and wanting the best for me. She has shown kindness and offered valuable words when I needed to hear them.

I'd like to thank Dr. Li for the experiences I had in his classes. He thinks outside of the box, likes to try new things, and is open to new possibilities and interpretations. Thank you for the unique, interesting things you brought to your classes from stories, videos, recommended readings, experiments, and fun activities that made me think about learning from a completely different perspective than just reading a textbook or listening to a lecture. The experience was so much more than the destination.

I also must thank Dr. Wally Barnes. He has been a tremendous support during the dissertation phase. His proof-reading and writing skills are phenomenal and unmatched. I appreciate all the times you stopped whatever you were doing and took my phone call or responded to multiple emails as if I was the only student you had. He always makes me feel like I'm the only person in the room. His sense of humor and wit makes you want to have fun while you learn. Thank you so kindly for all your undivided attention.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
DEDICATION .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Study.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Purpose of the Study.....	4
Significance of the Study.....	4
Definition of Terms.....	6
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Research Question.....	8
Limitations.....	8
Delimitations.....	9
Assumptions.....	10
Organization of the Study.....	10
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE. ....	12
Demands of Daily Police Work.....	12
Police Culture.....	16

Social Support.....	21
Coping Strategies.....	24
Summary.....	27
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY .....	28
Research Design.....	28
Participants.....	30
Procedure.....	31
Data Collection.....	34
Data Analysis.....	35
Summary.....	37
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	39
Demographics.....	39
Horizontalization.....	40
Frequency Counts.....	41
Themes.....	42
Composite Textural Description.....	64
Composite Structural Description.....	65
The Essence.....	66
Divergent Cases.....	68
Summary.....	68
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION.....	69
Summary of the Study.....	69
Theoretical Framework.....	71

Discussion of the Findings.....	72
Implications for Practice.....	79
Recommendations for Further Research.....	82
Conclusion.....	83
Summary.....	84
REFERENCES.....	85
APPENDIX A.....	94
APPENDIX B.....	95
APPENDIX C.....	96
APPENDIX D.....	98
APPENDIX E.....	99
VITA.....	100



## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table</b>		<b>Page</b>
1	A List of Themes by Question.....	53

## LIST OF FIGURES

**Page**

- 1 A Listing of Total Frequency Counts for all Questions Organized by Theme. .... 52

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Background of the Study**

The conditions that police officers routinely work under can have ramifications for mental health (Baka, 2015; Chia-huei, 2009; DeTerte, Stephens, & Huddleston, 2014; Gray & Collie, 2017; Louw & Vivers, 2010). Being a police officer requires a high degree of personal flexibility and emotional impermeability, as the daily job demands of being a public servant can be extremely variable (Baka, 2015; Hall, Dollard, Tuckey, Winefield, & Thompson, 2010; Santa Maria et al., 2018). Police work often involves risk and a fair amount of unpredictability (Frank, Lambert, & Qureshi, 2017; Hickman, Fricas, Strom, & Pope, 2011; Willis & Mastrofski, 2018). Many police officers struggle to find proper work-life balance because of the ongoing demands of being a public servant. Job demands significantly predict psychological wellbeing; in that police officers who report high levels of job demands have a low level of psychological wellbeing (Baka, 2015; Deery, Walsh, & Zatzick, 2014; Gray & Collie, 2017; Hu, Schaufeli, & Taris, 2017; Louw & Vivers, 2010; Santa Maria et al., 2018). For many officers, there is also consistent exposure to life-threatening danger, a need for detailed work under pressure, time constraints, and emotional fatigue (Frank et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2010).

Job demands not only spillover to work-family conflict, preventing recovery and influencing emotional exhaustion, but the strain of emotional exhaustion can build over time (Baka, 2015; Hall et al., 2010; Hu et al., 2017; Louw & Vivers, 2010; Santa Maria et al., 2018). Ambiguity of the role of police officers, conflict, and overload are also

associated with higher levels of stress for police officers (Frank et al., 2017). Working over-time, extended long hours, weekend shifts, and midnight shifts can compound the overall stressful experience of police work and influence morale (Frank et al., 2017; Julseth, Ruiz, & Hummer, 2011; Ma et al., 2013). Shift work has also been correlated with frequency of work stress, administrative pressure, and perception of physical/psychological threat (Ma et al., 2013).

Policing is a generally solitary profession, in which an officer may patrol alone or with only one partner. Although the general unpredictability and uncertainty of working conditions for police officers are well documented in the literature, little is understood about the individual coping mechanisms of police officers and how they personally self-soothe and build resiliency to situations they experience. Police officers are routinely exposed to trauma as a course of their employment. Many are exposed to different types of critical incidents that threaten their mental health and physical safety (Baka, 2015; Gray & Collie, 2017; Hu et al., 2017). Violence, assault, discharge of firearms, and exposure to drugs add elements of personal danger to their jobs. Officers often have little control of the situations they face, causing difficulty in attempting to recover from trauma (Colwell et al., 2011; Gray & Collie, 2017; Hickman et al., 2011). However, individual differences exist regarding perceived exposure to on-the-job trauma among police officers (Balmer, Pooley, & Cohen, 2014; DeTerte et al., 2014; Levy-Gigi, Richter-Levin, Okon-Singer, Kéri, & Bonanno, 2016).

Social support has been identified as an effective buffering variable for psychological stress (Chae & Boyle, 2013; Santa Maria et al., 2018; Schwarzer, Cone, Li, & Bowler, 2016; Smoktunowicz et al., 2015). Social support has been identified as one

factor that may help police officers maintain physical, psychological, and emotional wellbeing, although what constitutes supportive or unsupportive interactions is unclear (Balmer et al., 2014; Chae & Boyle, 2013; Evans, Pistrang, & Billings, 2013; Smoktunowicz et al., 2015). Some research has indicated that police officers from smaller agencies experience fewer critical incidents and need less support (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2015). Discussing responses to critical incidents helps police officers alleviate stress and normalize crisis situations (DeTerte et al., 2014; Martin, Marchand, Boyer, & Normand, 2009; Smoktunowicz et al., 2015).

Social support from colleagues has emerged as a significant protective factor for many officers struggling with exposure to trauma on the job (Chae & Boyle, 2013; Martin et al., 2009; Santa Maria et al., 2018; Smoktunowicz et al., 2015). DeTerte et al. (2014) put forth a multi-dimensional model of psychological resilience (including environment, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physical activities) which indicated that social support, coping, and optimism were all effective when police officers were faced with adversity on the job. Coping has been directly associated with organizational commitment and job satisfaction for some police officers (Ortega, Brenner, & Leather, 2007). Further, disclosure of traumatic experiences is related to increased mental health benefits (Davidson & Moss, 2008).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Researchers have reported that repeated exposure to on-the-job trauma negatively impacts police officers. Officers are tasked with performing critical job functions that require making quick, risky assessments in dangerous situations. In fact, the frequency, longevity, and severity of traumatic exposure are thought to influence post-traumatic

reactions (Gray & Collie, 2017; Silver, Roche, Bilach, & Bontrager-Ryon, 2017). Because of the link between exposure to traumatic experiences and adverse effects, police officers are considered at risk for developing psychological problems (DeTerte et al., 2014). Most of the literature that evaluates police officers and their ability to withstand the pressures of their job tends to focus on quantitative metrics, such as crime rate statistics and police response time (Willis & Mastrofski, 2018).

Traditional police culture may inhibit individual sharing of experiences through adopting insular approaches that involve general seclusion and isolation (Frewin, Stephens, & Tuffin, 2006; Jablonowski, 2017; Silver et al., 2017). However, having someone to talk to after work has been acknowledged to be a protective factor from developing stress related adverse psychological effects (Santa Maria et al., 2018). In addition, individual differences exist regarding how police officers feel that they experience trauma (Levy-Gigi, et al., 2016). As apparent from the literature, researchers have not focused on understanding the unique experiences of individual police officers from their own subjective viewpoints.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe individual experiences and coping behaviors of police officers who are exposed to trauma as part of their routine course of employment.

### **Significance of the Study**

The results of this study supplements existing literature by better describing and explaining the experiences of individual police officers from their own personal accounts. In many international studies, researchers have interviewed police officers from different

countries (Balmer et al., 2014; Chia-huei, 2009; Gray & Collie; 2017; Gumani, Fourie, & Blanche, 2013; Hu et al., 2017; Jablanowski, 2017; Kunst, Saan, Bollen, & Kuijpers, 2017; Mikkelsen & Burke, 2004; Rees & Smith, 2008; Santa Maria et al., 2018).

However, from a qualitative perspective, little research has been aimed specifically at the experiences of police officers in the United States. Previously published research has examined the coping behaviors of police officers with a heavy reliance on critical incident debriefing as the sole manner of helping officers to cope with the stresses and trauma on the job (Addis & Stephens, 2008; Leonard & Alison, 1999; Miller, Unruh, Wharton, Liu, Zhang, 2017; Tuckey & Scott, 2014). Research has revealed that debriefing is ineffective at reducing stress-related responses (Addis & Stephens, 2008; Leonard & Alison, 1999; Tuckey & Scott, 2014), and that despite debriefing being mandatory for officers following exposure to any traumatic event, the debriefing process is often not completed by many officers (Addis & Stephens, 2008). By exploring individual experiences and coping behaviors of police officers more thoroughly, we can identify individual protective factors that contribute to ongoing resilience for some officers (Balmer et al., 2014; Weiss et al., 2010). This study also lends information to mental health professionals and programs designed to help police officers process employment-related trauma by offering services targeted at the individual needs of officers.

The results of this qualitative study adds to existing literature by exploring and describing the shared coping behavior experiences of police officers who respond to a dynamic employment environment that is rapidly changing. This study fits into the larger context of theory and best practices in new cadet training and preparing police officers

for their evolving roles as first responders to crisis. Policy changes or practices are likely to succeed only if they are grounded in empirical research (Willis & Mastrofski, 2018). Police officers need to be properly prepared to handle the compounding effects of trauma exposure, build stronger support systems, and exercise effective self-care through coping strategies (Frank et al., 2017; Marshall, 2006). More qualitative studies into the individual coping behaviors of police officers are needed to permeate police culture and explore coping behaviors of resilient officers to ensure their personal experiences and protective factors can be shared and explained. Further, the study adds to the scope of the existing literature on the social-cognitive model of trauma. The social-cognitive processing model holds that there is an interplay between individual factors and interpersonal processes (Brewin & Holmes, 2003). The decision for police officers to talk about traumatic experiences or close themselves off from others is adaptive (DeTerte et al., 2014). Finally, southeast Texas represents one of the largest concentrations of police officers in the southern United States. The state of Texas employs approximately 78,845 full-time police officers (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2019).

### **Definition of Terms**

**Coping behaviors** – Social, behavioral, or communicative emotional mechanisms or skills that assist in a police officer’s ability to perform routine duties, maintain self-control, regulate emotional responses, and exercise keen decision-making ability.

**Debriefing** – a structured intervention designed to promote the emotional processing of traumatic events through the normalization of personal reactions.

Debriefing is an essential technique associated with Critical Incident Response (CIR) model of crisis intervention. A typical debriefing takes place approximately 24-72 hours



after the incident and consists of a single group meeting that lasts approximately 2-3 hours or less.

**On-the-job** – Experiences police officers encounter because of their daily routine employment (writing citations, responding to dispatcher calls, routine traffic stops, or any other first responder response as a condition of their employment).

**Police culture** – Reference to the shared attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of public servants (Silver et al., 2017). Police culture often is described as insulating and socially cohesive (Frewin & Tuffin, 1998). Police officers often are described as having difficulty with trusting those outside of the law enforcement profession and have a strong sense of self-sufficiency with a general lack of vulnerability (Silver et al., 2017).

**Police officer** – For the purpose of this study, a police officer is defined as an actively employed full-time peace-keeping licensed public servant in southeastern Texas.

**Social support** - Positive affirmation and emotional backing that serves as a protective factor against sustained stress or exposure to trauma. Social support also pertains to the quality of the police officer's social relationships.

**Trauma** – Adverse psychological and emotional responses to stress-inducing incidents, exposure to life-threatening experiences, or violence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social cognitive theory holds that there is an interplay between individual experiences and environmental factors. Behavior, cognition, personal factors, and environment all work together to operate as determinants that influence each other; however, different sources of influence are not of equal strength (Bandura, 1989). In their social-cognitive processing model, Brewin and Holmes (2003) explicitly addressed

the interplay between individual factors and interpersonal processes; they proposed that an individual's social environment can promote or deter willingness to talk about a traumatic event, in turn influencing the level of cognitive processing and adaptive adjustment. Unsupportive, unreceptive, and critical responses from others are thought to increase the risk of psychological stress by discouraging communication of feelings and increasing cognitive avoidance or suppression (Evans et al., 2013). The social-cognitive processing model has received little research attention in the context of emergency service work (Evans et al., 2013).

### **Research Question**

What are the individual experiences and coping behaviors of police officers following consistent on-the-job exposure to traumatic stress while employed?

### **Limitations**

This study had a few limitations worth mentioning. Limitations include transferability, sampling bias, and an assumption of honesty. All participant police officers were recruited from southeast Texas. Results may not be transferable in other parts of the United States. Experiences of police officers can vary greatly by their geographic duty stations. Differences between the experiences of police officers can be influenced by staffing issues, geographic location, size of the police department, and whether or not the police officer has an assigned partner for support. There are many fluid and dynamic factors that can make the experience of a police officer similar or dissimilar.

Participant police officers recruited for this study were limited to those who matched the selection criteria by the researcher and consented to participate in interviews.

For the purposes of this study, participants were asked to identify their age, disclose the number of years they have been a police officer, identify their education level, identify how many children they have, identify their relationship status, and identify what percentage of their work time is exposure to high stress or traumatic situations?

A sampling bias may exist because the perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes of the participant police officers may differ from the perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes of police officers in other geographic locations in the United States. Additionally, all participant police officer interviews were limited to their own self-report. Participants could have assumed the role of “good participant” and provided answers in a manner that was consistent with what they perceived the researcher wanted to hear during the interview.

All police officer participants in this study were officers who have been employed at their respective jobs for at least two years. By some standards, two years could be considered premature in a law enforcement career that is generally geared toward long-time employment resulting in a governmental retirement. Seasoned police officers may draw upon their experience in dealing with trauma exposure and respond differently based on years of service. In addition, the longer a police officer spends on the job, the more adept they may become at developing coping behaviors as a result of their experiences.

### **Delimitations**

In terms of delimitations, this study was delimited to the experiences of ten participant police officers employed in southeast Texas. However, a larger group of participants could increase transferability.

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions apply to this study.

1. Participant police officers were open and honest.
2. The employed methodology used in the study was appropriate.
3. The researcher set biases aside and asked the questions in an objective manner that did not skew the responses in favor of already known personal beliefs, hypotheses, or assumptions.
4. Participant police officers answered all demographic questions accurately for qualification to participate in the study.
5. The researcher assumed that the participant police officers understood the purpose, procedures, and explanation of the study during the interview process.

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter includes the introduction. The introduction includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, definition of terms, theoretical framework, research question, limitations, delimitations, and the assumptions of the study. The second chapter includes a review of the extant literature on the topics related to the study. The review of the literature includes sections on the job demands of daily police work, police culture, social support, and coping strategies of police officers.

The theoretical approach discussed herein is the social cognitive process model as it relates to the interaction between individual and interpersonal processes that influence an individual's response to trauma in their environment. Stress related responses can be increased with unsupportive or critical responses from others. The literature review

concludes with a discussion of the role of social support and coping behaviors as a tool for resiliency in exposure to trauma. The third chapter in this study includes the methodology used in the study. Also discussed in chapter three are the qualitative research design, selection of participants, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and a summary. The fourth chapter includes the results of the study. Lastly, the fifth chapter concludes with a formal discussion of the results and implications for further research and practice.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Demands of Daily Police Work**

Routine job demands of police work can be characterized by exposure to violence, threats to personal safety, and exposure to trauma of various kinds, including physical harm and assault (Chopko et al., 2015). Nationally, 144 law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty in 2018 the United States, which is a sharp increase from the 93 officers killed previously in 2017 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). In a recent study of police officers ( $N = 827$ ) Frank, Lambert, and Qureshi (2017) used regression analysis to ascertain levels of work-related stress experienced by police officers. Survey response items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Participants were asked to rate the following statements: (a) most of the time when I'm at work I don't feel that I have much to worry about, (b) I am usually under a lot of pressure when I am at work, (c) when I'm at work I often feel tense or uptight, and (d) a lot of time my job makes me very frustrated or angry (Frank et al., 2017). Job demand variables of conflict, role ambiguity, and overload had significant positive correlations with work stress (Frank et al., 2017). Within the same study, officer input into decision-making and organizational support had significant negative effects, while an increase in these variables was associated with lower stress for police officers (Frank et al., 2017). According to Frank et al. (2017), officers who responded that they were given clear and consistent support from supervisors about expected performance for job responsibilities, had fewer negative effects. In conclusion,

when police officers feel that performance demands are overwhelming, they suffer from higher levels of stress.

Similarly, in a longitudinal study designed to measure the daily demands of police work, the demands of police work and emotional exhaustion exhibited a positive correlation (Hall et al., 2010). Hall et al. (2010) surveyed active duty police officers ( $N = 257$ ) twice over a 12-month period to measure their emotional exhaustion, job demands, and work-family conflict. Critical incidents were assessed separately as an indicator of emotional demands using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very rarely never) to 5 (very often/always) (Hall et al., 2010). Emotional exhaustion was measured using five items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and job demands were assessed with items from the Demand-Induced Strain Questionnaire (Hall et al., 2010). The researchers revealed that each officer's job demands (first interview) was positively related to emotional exhaustion at their second interview. Also, job demands were positively correlated with work-family conflict at both interviews, with all correlations being significant  $p < .01$ .

Police work involves sustaining a heightened sense of readiness to respond with recurrent exposure and vulnerability to job related stress (Baka, 2015; Chia-huei, 2009; Davidson & Moss, 2008; Hu et al., 2017; Louw & Vivers, 2010; Rees & Smith, 2008). Exposure to critical incidents, workplace demands, lack of cooperation among co-workers, and job dissatisfaction have correlated significantly with perceived work stress (Frank et al., 2017; Gershon, Barocas, Canton, Li, & Vlahov, 2009; Willis & Mastrofski, 2018). Considerable research is available on external and occupational sources of stress in police work with an emphasis on organizational and operational problems (Brown,

Fielding, & Grover, 1999; Grawitch, Barber, & Kruger, 2010; Jablonowski, 2017; Kaur, Chodigari, & Reddi, 2013).

Job demands often include a strong element of the unknown. During a typical workday, police officers may assess traffic fatalities, witness domestic violence, engage in assault, engage high speed pursuits, handle illegal substances/drugs, and interact with firearms. Researchers have reported that officers endure on-the-job stress and are often presented with risks of trauma exposure (Colwell et al., 2011; Rees & Smith, 2008; Santa Maria et al., 2018). Daily stressors experienced by many officers include lack of organizational support, excess workload, political pressure, lack of time for family, frequent transfers, and a struggle with negative public image (Brown, Fielding, & Grover, 1999; Frank et al., 2017; Kaur, Chodigari, & Reddi, 2013; Ortega et al., 2007; Webster, 2013). Occupational stressors have been associated with low organization commitment and poor overall job satisfaction (Ortega et al., 2007). Sometimes psychological stress can be residual for an officer because of physical job demands, such as the adrenaline rush experienced during a physical confrontation, use of sustained physical force, or the physical exertion involved during a highspeed chase (Baka, 2015; Louw & Vivers, 2010; Schaible & Six, 2016). Approximately 10% of police officers have reported that they had to seriously wound or kill someone within the first three years of employment (Komarovskaya et al., 2011).

Generally, police officers are viewed as a highly resilient group because of the selection process, thoroughness of screening, and extensive training processes (Schwarzer et al., 2016). Police officers undergo rigorous training at the cadet academy prior to being assigned a permanent station for duty. According to the Bureau of Justice



Statistics (2006), police recruits are equipped with lengthy trainings including the handling of firearms (average of 60 instructional hours); physical agility/fitness (average of 40 instructional hours); basic self-defense (average 51 instructional hours); patrol and investigations (average of 80 instructional hours); first aid response (average of 24 hours); basic criminal law applications (average of 36 instructional hours); and emergency operations (average of 40 instructional hours). However, it would be expected that some variety in training may exist depending on geographic location. In total, the minimum basic recruit training for police officers in the United States averages about 19 weeks of intense specialized training and physical fitness followed by additional field work on the job (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). Based on their training and commonality of experiences, police officers have a shared identity that includes a demanding career with expectation of long hours, on-call obligations, and the unpredictability of traffic patrol (Baka, 2015; Davidson & Moss, 2008; Hu et al., 2017). The job demands of police work require flexibility and a general willingness to be exposed to danger and violence (Hickman et al., 2011).

Stress over time can become a destabilizing emotional factor for officers who sustain prolonged exposure to job demands (Marshall, 2006). Demanding aspects of the job can add emotional strain and, in many cases, spillover to home life, which contributes to work/life conflict (Baka, 2015; Hall et al., 2010; Hu et al., 2017; Santa Maria et al., 2018). Job demands that complicate home life for police officers include working midnights/overtime, strict adherence to bureaucratic procedures, vast amounts of paperwork, deadline-based work, and regular organizational critical review by superiors (Frank et al., 2017; Kaur, Chodigari, & Reddi, 2013; Ortega et al., 2007; Webster, 2013).

Other possible job stressors for police officers include lawsuits from the public, negative media coverage, public scrutiny of actions, and emotional anxiety related to ongoing internal investigations in response to routine police work (Bohrer, 2005). Although researchers have revealed that job demands of police work can lead to a host of adverse outcomes, researchers have reported that the shared experiences of police officers are the result of their unique role, organizational structure, and cohesion (Baka, 2015; Hall et al., 2010; Silver et al., 2017).

### **Police Culture**

A consideration relevant to job demands and the behavioral responses of police officers to their on-the-job experiences is the concept of a thriving police culture. Police officers may differ from other workforce professionals because of the unique organizational culture. Police officers are a cohesive group with a unique professional identity that bonds them to each other through shared experiences (Frewin et al., 2006). In their qualitative study, Frewin et al. (2006) examined interviews of police officers ( $N = 11$ ) conducted to evaluate attitudes towards emotional expression in groups of other police officers and the effects of social support on psychological trauma. As a result of their findings, Frewin et al. (2006) reported that all participants preferred the idea of talking about traumatic experiences with somebody familiar with police culture and expressing emotions after traumatic experiences was problematic for the officers. Further, Frewin et al. (2006) acknowledged that police officers who participated in the study expressed general resistance/hesitation to debriefing, pressure to contribute to debriefing sessions, and reservations about talking regarding post-traumatic experiences to outsiders. Moreover, Frewin et al. (2006) stated that police officers generally resisted

emotional constructions of their experiences to maintain semblance of competency and capability as a police officer.

Ingram, Terrill, and Paoline (2018) conducted a quantitative study of active duty police officers ( $N=1,022$ ) across the midwestern United States (New Mexico, Indiana, Colorado, Oregon, and Tennessee). To gather information, Ingram et al. (2018) used a 116-item questionnaire interview to ascertain officer perceptions of police culture and work environment. The authors also used a 4-point Likert scale to evaluate police culture within the framework of three basic cultural attitudes regarding management, citizen distrust, and aggressive patrol. According to Ingram et al. (2018), police officer culture was associated with police officer behavior, representing a collective effect, but the relationship between behavior and police culture was not direct. Within group (same precinct/shift/squad) agreement was assessed using the average deviation index (ADM) to evaluate how strongly officers shared cultural attitudes. These variables were then used to measure the extent to which officers provided similar ratings for an item on a cultural attitude Likert scale (Ingram et al., 2018). The distribution of ADM values across the sample of workgroups was compared to the accepted threshold for establishing agreement. For cultural attitudes (top management  $ADM_j = .55$ , aggressive patrol  $ADM = .48$ , and citizen distrust  $ADM_j = .56$ ), the calculated ADM values indicated that officers were well below the threshold of .67 needed to establish enough levels of agreement (Ingram et al., 2018). Ingram et al. (2018) reported that police officers within the same work group shared similar culture attitudes, and the culture attitudes of police officers often determined the larger department culture. However, while police officers demonstrated collectiveness and cohesion to their smaller group (precinct/shift/squad),

the extent to which they shared the same culture attitudes to their overarching department was individually different. Police officers in the same work group, when compared to the overall culture attitude of their department was varied (Ingram et al., 2018).

The social and organizational structure of police work may serve to support a policy of non-disclosure, as concern with conduct and on-the-job performance are influences on the emotional expressions of police officers (Frewin et al., 2006; Silver et al., 2017). Police officers may be reluctant to speak to others outside of the police force about their experiences for fear that they will be perceived as weak (Frewin et al., 2006). Police culture presents conflicting attitudes to emotional expression (David & Moss, 2008; Rees & Smith, 2008). Expression of emotion is often judged in terms of hindering performance of duties, or as vulnerability to endangerment (Frewin & Tuffin, 1998). Part of the socialization into police culture by officers can include an adopted code of silence that inhibits emotional disclosure; however, emotional restraint can work to inhibit mental health coping mechanisms and increase vulnerability to trauma (Evans et al., 2013; Lumb & Breazeale, 2002).

### **Exposure to Trauma**

On-the-job traumatic experiences of police officers put them at risk for developing adverse psychological effects. Santa Maria et al. (2018) surveyed participant police officers ( $N = 843$ ) as part of a national mental health monitoring program to assess predictability of depression and anxiety among police officers. The participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire ascertaining their work pressures (i.e., job experiences) on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) I don't agree at all to (4) I totally agree; with a typical item of "I am constantly under time pressure at work due to high

workload” (Santa Maria, et al., 2018). Also, participants were surveyed to recall occurrence of verbal threats, insults, and abuse that they had experienced in the last 12 months. A 9-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) never to (9) to several times per day was used to gather data. A typical item on the survey was “In the last 12 months I was verbally insulted by citizens” (Santa Maria, et al., 2018). Emotional exhaustion was assessed using an adapted Maslach Burnout Inventory measured by a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) never (6) to every day; with a typical item of “I feel depleted/exhausted because of my work” (Santa Maria, et al., 2018). The authors measured depression (feeling down, depressed, or hopeless) and anxiety (feeling nervous, on edge, or having excessive worry) using police officer self-report on the Patient Health Questionnaire and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale. Santa Maria et al. (2018) reported that job experiences predicted higher levels of depression and anxiety among police officers, often mediated through emotional exhaustion. Demanding job experiences were positively associated with emotional exhaustion, which was positively associated with depression and anxiety (Santa Maria, et al., 2018).

In a national study, Asmundson and Stapleton (2008) surveyed active duty police officers ( $N = 138$ ) using the Lifetime Traumatic Events Checklist to assess their exposure to a variety of traumatic events including: (a) fire, (b) natural disaster, (c) physical assault, (d) sexual assault, (e) seeing someone seriously harmed/killed, (f) terrorist attack, (g) motor vehicle accidents, (h) torture, (i) armed robbery, (j) serious illness of someone, (k) unexpected death, and (l) combat exposure/peacekeeping assignments. The authors assessed the participants for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) using the PTSD Symptoms Checklist-Civilian, which is a 20-item assessment that measures

symptomology of PTSD diagnostic criteria. For anxiety-related sensations based on their fear of harm, the Anxiety Sensitivity Index, a 16-item assessment, was used to measure apprehension regarding anxiety symptoms (Asmundson & Stapleton, 2008). Asmundson and Stapleton (2008) asked officers to rate on a 5-point Likert scale the degree to which they experienced PTSD symptoms in the past month as (1) not at all to (5) extremely often; and the degree to which they feared anxiety symptoms using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (agree very little) to 4 (agree very much). Based on participant scores on the PTSD Symptoms Checklist-Civilian, approximately 32% of participants were classified into the group with probable PTSD ( $N = 44$ ) (Asmundson & Stapleton, 2008). Asmundson and Stapleton (2008) also found that the participants in the probable PTSD group were older than the no PTSD group ( $N = 94$ ),  $F(1, 136) = 8.02$ ,  $p < .01$  and had spent more time on the job policing  $F(1, 133) = 6.04$ ,  $p < .05$ . In addition, the probable PTSD group had significantly higher anxiety scores than those in the no PTSD group  $F(1, 107) = 22.66$ ,  $p < .001$ , leading Asmundson and Stapleton (2008) to assert that PTSD symptoms were predicted by the number of reported traumas and anxiety.

Schwarzer, Cone, Li, and Bowler (2016) surveyed police officers ( $N = 2,204$ ) in a longitudinal study from the World Trade Center Health Registry, a national registry of individuals who were active duty police officers directly involved in disaster related duties on 9/11. Participants were given the PCL-C assessment at three different intervals following their involvement in 9/11 to assess for PTSD symptomology (wave one—2-3 years after disaster, wave two—5-6 years after disaster, and wave three—10-11 years after the disaster). The incidence of PTSD among officers increased from 2.5% two years after the attacks to 6.3% five years after the attacks, with 11% total officers who

participated in all three waves exhibiting probable PTSD ten years after the attacks (Schwarzer, Cone, Li, & Bowler, 2016). Additionally, participant co-morbidity of PTSD, depression, and anxiety was examined in this study. Of the participants with probable PTSD ( $N = 243$ ), only 21.8% did not have co-morbid conditions, whereas 24.7% had diagnosed depression and 5.8% had diagnosed anxiety (Schwarzer et al., 2016).

Repeated exposure to traumatic events leads to compounding psychological effects over time (Asmundson & Stapleton, 2008; Frank et al., 2017; Marshall, 2006). The psychological health of active duty police officers is becoming increasingly important to understand because it can lessen their ability to cope with emotions and impair functioning (Baka, 2015; Chia-huei, 2009; Davidson & Moss, 2008; Hu et al., 2017; Louw & Vivers, 2010). Impairments can make police officers more psychologically vulnerable (Frank et al., 2017; Lucas, Weidner, & Janisse, 2012). Further, the interaction of multiple risk factors (trauma/critical incidents, organizational stress/demands, and relationship problems) have a cumulative effect in increasing the risk for suicidal ideation for police officers (Chae & Boyle, 2013; Marshall, 2006). Although governmental agencies do not track police officer suicides as part of reported crime statistics, several watchdog non-profit agencies do. A recently published white paper funded by the Ruderman Family Foundation (2018) indicated that 140 police officers committed suicide in 2017; which was more than those who were killed in the line of duty as reported by the FBI (93 officers).

### **Social Support**

Social support has been reported to be beneficial to police officers who experience traumatic events, but what constitutes social support is varied. Davidson and

Moss (2018) disseminated questionnaires to active duty police officers and their partners ( $N = 104$ ) to assess psychological symptoms relative to disclosure of trauma to their spouses/partners. Officers were administered the PCL-C and General Health Questionnaire to assess for PTSD/psychological symptoms, while each partner/spouse was given the Traumatic Event Disclosure Scale. Scores indicated that 84.5% ( $N = 87$ ) of police officers discussed traumatic events with their spouse, and the remaining 16.5% ( $N = 17$ ) had either concealed the event or alluded to its occurrence without engaging in any involved conversation (Davidson & Moss, 2018). Multiple regression analyses were completed, and correlational data demonstrated that inhibition and negative emotional disclosure correlated positively with scores for PTSD symptomology and PTSD individual symptom clusters: re-experiencing, avoidance/numbing, and hyperarousal (David & Moss, 2008). Inhibition was positively related to general psychological distress,  $B = .37$ ,  $t(5,63) = .3.20$ ,  $p = .002$  (David & Moss, 2008). Both inhibition and negative emotional disclosure were positively associated with PTSD symptom severity  $B = .28$ ,  $t(5,62) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .02$  and  $B = .4$ ,  $t(5,62) = 2.36$ ,  $p = .02$  (David & Moss, 2008).

In a qualitative study, Evans, Pistrang, and Billings (2013) used semi-structured interview questions to survey police officers ( $N = 19$ ) to explore experiences that officers identified as traumatic and the subsequent social support that they had received after their experiences. The purpose of the study was to explore social support interactions that may promote resilience to traumatic experiences for officers. Results were analyzed to reveal eight themes in regard to social support: (a) despite perceptions that talking was unnecessary, many participants endorsed the opinion that talking helps, (b) participants indicated that they tended not to talk about difficult events because they were used to



them, (c) all officers identified at least one situation which had personally affected them that they generally had reluctance to share this with others (several participants commented that they had talked more about events with the interviewing authors than they had with anyone else), (d) sense of humor was universally described as a helpful means of communicating about difficult events, (e) participants described a process of approaching conversation about the impact of events and then withdrawing to avoid going too deep with emotions, (f) participants described formal organizational opportunities to talk (like debriefing) and availability of counseling but retained a sense of suspicion about rationale for services, (g) all participants described concerns about talking to non-police officers in case they upset the other person, and (h) support from someone close who was outside of work was highly valued (Evans et al., 2013). In summary, Evans et al. (2013) concluded that ambivalence about talking about the impact of trauma was prevalent in participant interviews, but the context and source of available social support, along with personal beliefs about talking seemed to influence officer's disclosure.

Police officers who have social support of friends, family, and colleagues develop functioning coping mechanisms (Balmer et al., 2014; Chae & Boyle, 2013; DeTerte et al., 2014). Cognitive disclosures of officers represent an attempt to process their traumatic memories, thus reducing their arousal stimuli associated with the event that may lessen symptomology (David & Moss, 2008). Post-traumatic stress symptoms are negatively related to emotional support (Chae & Boyle, 2013; Davidson & Moss, 2008; Schwarzer et al., 2016). Also, social support pertains to the quality and functionality of the police officer's social relationships, which can vary greatly from officer to officer (David &

Moss, 2018; Schwarzer et al., 2016). Social support can be individually evaluated in terms of how the officer perceives the availability of help and reaction to self-disclosure (David & Moss, 2008; Schwarzer et al., 2016).

Conversely, refraining from disclosing traumatic experiences, or negative disclosure experiences, is associated with increased levels of PTSD and psychological symptoms (Brown, Fielding, & Grover, 1999; David & Moss, 2008). Inhibition and negative emotional disclosures correlate positively with overall psychological distress and measures of somatic concerns, anxiety, sleep disturbance, social dysfunction, and depression (Brown et al., 1999; David & Moss, 2008). The inhibition of emotion, which relates to impaired adjustment in officers, was supported by the significant positive association between inhibition and increased PTSD severity (David & Moss, 2008). Expression of emotions and support seeking behavior can be perceived as potentially interfering with effective police work or being professionally damaging (Evans et al., 2013). Social support after traumatic events has emerged as a significant protective factor (Chae & Boyle, 2013; Martin et al., 2009). Researchers have reported that talking about traumatic events can be an effective coping strategy for some officers, however Evans et al. (2013) suggested that it is premature to conclude what behaviors are supportive and asserted that further qualitative research should be used to gain a better understanding of the process underlying the complex relationship between social support and traumatic experiences.

### **Coping Strategies**

Coping strategies have been linked to promoting resilience for police officers.

Balmer, Pooley, and Cohen (2014) surveyed participant police officers ( $N = 285$ ) using three separate measures including the Resilience Scale for Adults (a 33-item self-report scale measuring resiliency), General Health Questionnaire (12-item screening instrument for detecting psychological illness), and the Coping Style Questionnaire (60-item self-report scale measuring coping strategies using a 4-point Likert scale) to examine the relationship between resilience and coping style. Results indicated that resilience was significantly predicted by rational and emotional coping styles, but not detached or avoidance coping ( $R^2 = .442$ ,  $F(5,284) = 44.23$ ,  $p = .000$ ) (Balmer et al., 2014).

According to Balmer et al. (2014), police officer resilience was predicted by greater use of rational coping; consistent with the perception that approach-based coping strategies are effective and promote resilience. Further, Balmer et al. (2014) suggested that to enhance police officer resilience through use of adaptive coping skills, it is necessary to improve use of effective emotional coping strategies. Resilience was reported to be negatively correlated with age and length of service (Balmer et al., 2014). Weakening of resilience with age/length of service is also consistent with previously discussed research findings that point to a cumulative and compounding effect of trauma for police officers due to multiple exposures over time (Asmundson & Stapleton, 2008; Chae & Boyle, 2013; Frank et al., 2017; Marshall, 2006). Further, Balmer et al. (2014) suggested that continued research is needed to improve understanding of individual factors which promote resilience in police officers from their subjective experiences.

Kaur, Chodagiri, & Reddi (2013) surveyed police officers ( $N = 150$ ) using the General Health Questionnaire-28, Eysenck's Personality Questionnaire (a self-report measure designed to assess psychoticism, extroversion, and neuroticism), and the Coping

Checklist (a 70-item self-report measure with 2 major coping scales: problem-focused and emotion focused, as well as 6 smaller coping sub-scales: problem solving, distraction, acceptance, religion/faith, social support, and denial/blame). To indicate whether the police officers suffered from psychological distress, participants were divided into two groups (stress-group and non-stress group) based on a cut-off score on the General Health Questionnaire-28. Both groups were given the Eysenck's Personality Questionnaire for comparison. Negative distraction ( $p < .001$ ) and denial/blame ( $p < .001$ ) indicated a statistically significant association with the development of psychological distress for both groups of police officers, with both negative distraction and denial/blame being positively correlated with high General Health Questionnaire-28 scores (Kaur et al., 2013). According to Kaur et al. (2013), the most common coping strategies used by participants included relying on social support (72.55%), acceptance/re-definition of circumstances (64.72%), and using a problem-solving method (60.46%). Additionally, police officers with maladaptive coping strategies become more prone to stress (Kaur et al., 2013). While police officers in the study were vulnerable to developing psychological symptoms, what behaviors used to engage in acceptance or effective social support as coping strategies were not defined in the study.

Interventions used to address modifiable stress and promoting effective coping could be beneficial in minimizing adverse psychological outcomes for officers (Balmer et al., 2014; Gershon et al., 2009). However, defining subjective and textual coping strategies that would be helpful to individual officers is paramount. Following an officer's exposure to trauma, debriefing is the most common intervention used by many police departments to provide immediate support with coping (Addis & Stephens, 2008;

Tuckey & Scott, 2014). Debriefing involves talking with a department professional following an incident; however, some officers have acknowledged that they feel emotionally restricted due to fear (Howard, Tuffin, & Stephens, 2000).

### **Summary**

In summary, coping plays an interactive role in positively influencing adjustment to stress (Balmer et al., 2014; Detrick & Chibnall, 2014; Kaur et al., 2013). Specifically, researchers have indicated that police officers use emotion-focused coping strategies to buffer the relationship between events and stress (Balmer et al., 2014; DeTerte et al., 2014; Patterson, 2003; Santa Maria et al., 2018). Coping strategies have been directly associated with promoting resilience for police officers; however, little is understood about coping skills from individual police officer perspectives (Balmer et al., 2014; Kaur et al., 2013; Ortega et al., 2007).

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe individual experiences and coping behaviors of police officers who are exposed to trauma as part of their routine course of employment. In this chapter, the qualitative methodology which was used is explained. Also, I outlined the methods that were used to answer the following research question: What are the individual experiences and coping behaviors of individual police officers following consistent on-the-job exposure to trauma? The research design, participant information, procedure, data collection, and data analysis are also discussed next in the paragraphs that follow.

#### **Research Design**

After careful consideration and the review of several articles on the coping behaviors of police officers and the effects of trauma on their employment, I decided to utilize a qualitative research design. A qualitative research design allowed an approach that helped to understand the individual perspectives of southeast Texas police officers. This design provided a rich, cultural account of police officers' personal lived experiences. The coping behaviors of police officers were best understood with a thorough and enriched approach to their unique perspectives. Foundational research on the coping behaviors of police officers in southeast Texas was scarce. Most of the published research had come from international studies. This study adds to the existing international literature that describes and explores coping behaviors of police officers. The research design that appeared best suited for this study was a phenomenological design. Empirical phenomenological research involves focusing on the commonality of

the lived experiences of a group to obtain comprehensive descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological design allowed for an enriched, contextual account of the lived experiences of southeastern Texas police officers to be obtained. Their descriptions then provided the basis for a reflective structural analysis to portray the essence of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological design produces rich descriptions of experiences of individuals from their own subjective viewpoints, which adds an analytical facet to help discuss theory and practice. Using the phenomenological approach, the goals of this research were aimed at uncovering significant statements from police officers that shed light into their resiliency toward trauma and post-traumatic stress as a result of their experiences. Coping behaviors are important because they are used as protective factors for police officers exposed to job-related trauma. Further, southeast Texas represents one of the largest concentrations of police officers in the nation.

The goals of this study were to identify and develop themes from participant interview responses about their shared lived experiences regarding coping behaviors. First, the raw data was comprised of descriptions obtained through open-ended questions and interactive dialogue with participant police officers (Moustakas, 1994). Detailed subjective descriptions of participants' responses to interview questions are important to give depth and breadth to their lived experiences. Following the interview, the structure of the experience based on reflection and interpretation of participants' stories was described in detail (Moustakas, 1994). Although participants may have had similar characteristics in that they are all active duty police officers in southeastern Texas, their experiences could be vastly different based on differences in perspectives, beliefs, experience on the job, education, culture, context, work history, and/or family history.

Participant police officers with different backgrounds can experience differences in perception despite the general phenomena being similar. The aim of this study was to determine what the experiences meant for the participant police officers who lived it (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing to minimize personal bias and preconceived notions regarding the coping behaviors of police officers exposed to trauma was a priority in this phenomenological study.

### **Participant Information**

Both purposeful and snowball sampling were used in this study to invite participants to participate. Both sampling methods allowed the researcher to choose participants based on criteria. Purposeful sampling was important because it allowed for the selection of participant police officers based on specific criteria needed for the study. Purposeful sampling also allowed for some control of demographics. Snowball sampling was both practical and significant to the completion of this study, as it allowed for police officers to be invited to participate by referral from other participant police officers. This non-probability sampling technique was very important due to the sensitivity of the subject matter of traumatic experiences, as well as the known cohesion among police officers. All participants in this study were active duty police officers currently employed in southeast Texas. All participant police officers participated fully in the study, with no experimental attrition. While the study could have remained open to new participants, it was not necessary as 10 participants allowed for saturation to be accomplished.

Participants were 10 full-time, active duty police officers currently employed in local police departments in southeast Texas as commissioned peace officers. Saturation



was accomplished by using 10 participant police officers until no new significant statements emerged. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before participants were recruited for this study. All police officers who participated in this study were volunteers chosen from sampling methods. No compensation was awarded to any of the participants. All participants were given a copy of a recruitment flyer approved by the IRB containing a detailed explanation of the study for them to review. All participants were allowed time to ask the researcher any questions about the study before moving forward or verbally agreeing to participate. When a participant decided to participate, a date was confirmed with a mutually agreeable time and place to complete the interview. All participants signed informed consent forms which were approved by the IRB before participating in the research interview. Lastly, they were all provided a copy of their informed consent paperwork.

For the purposes of this study, participants were asked to identify: (a) age, (b) number of years employed as a police officer, (c) education level, (d) number of children, (e) relationship status, and (f) what percentage of work time is exposure to high stress or traumatic situations?

### **Procedure**

Each participant participated in a 45 to 60 minute interview with the researcher. The interview format was semi-structured, which allowed for additional questions by the researcher. All interviews were audio-recorded. Questions were developed to address the textual experiences of the participants and the structural descriptions of their experiences. The open-ended questions were created to avoid leading the participant. With open-ended questions, participants felt more uninhibited to explore and explain

their responses without being led into a specific theme or enticed by a certain idea.

Participants were asked the following seven questions during their interview to ascertain the broader picture of what the coping behavior experiences of police officers is like following on-the-job exposure to trauma:

1. Tell me about the best parts and the worst parts of your job.
2. Describe what it is like for you to transition from work life to home life?
3. Describe the most stressful experience(s) that you have had while on the job.
4. How did you deal with this situation(s)?
5. How do you feel about the daily stresses of your job?
6. How do you manage the stresses of being a police officer?
7. What suggestions would you offer mental health professionals who assist police officers in dealing with the stressors of the profession?

To control for researcher bias and researcher reactivity during interviews, the dissertation chair and committee members reviewed and approved interview questions for participants prior to beginning the study. Settings of interviews were chosen by each individual participant, taking into consideration that spaces were comfortable, private, and familiar for all participants to feel at ease. Settings included office spaces or the participant's personal home. The comparison of previous studies was also discussed with the dissertation committee to identify similarities between this study and previously published research on the coping behaviors of police officers exposed to trauma on the job.

Cross validation and triangulation are implemented by gathering different kinds of data (Moustakas, 1994). Validity and reliability were addressed by employing several

strategies in this study. Multiple data sources were used to accomplish data triangulation. Data triangulation was established through collection of information from participant police officers through several sources including their transcribed interviews, demographic questionnaires, and researcher observations of the participant during the interview process. Investigator triangulation was implemented to address reliability by using more than one evaluator (a cohort member) to identify and clarify participant police officer interview informational data themes (Creswell, 2007). Triangulation helps to facilitate validating information through verification by more than one source. The cohort member responsible for co-evaluating themes in this study is a licensed professional counselor in the same doctorate program with over ten years of experience as a counselor. As an additional evaluator, the cohort member helped to analyze and synthesize interview data by reading interview transcripts, identifying significant statements from participants, and developing themes with the researcher. Both co-evaluator and researcher analyzed and discussed resulting identified themes to consensus. Peer review was utilized with discussion until agreement on all overall themes, composite descriptions, and the essence.

Lastly, understanding of themes generated from participant police officer interviews were member-checked through respondent validation. Member checking contributes to both credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007). In order to validate meaning and clarify any inaccuracies based on the transcripts, all identified themes were returned to participant police officers to double check that they agreed with them. Participant police officers were provided with their direct quotes grouped into identified

themes that captured the essence of their responses. All participant police officers confirmed agreement with their emerged themes.

### **Data Collection**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study before it commenced. All participants were informed of their rights prior to completing the study and signed an informed consent document. It was explained to each participant that they have the right to decline or stop the interview at any time. All interview sessions with the participants were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher by hand.

Each interview was completed face-to-face with the researcher and participant. Each participant police officer was interviewed about his or her thoughts concerning coping with the daily stresses of police work. Although there were seven questions that begin the study, additional time was included to explore questions at great length due to their open-ended nature. The researcher recognized non-verbal communication as well. The researcher used clarifying techniques with participants, such as asking if their assertions were understood clearly and checking for accuracy of their verbal assertions as the interview progressed. Clarifying participant responses was essential to ensure accuracy of participant interview data.

All audio tape recordings were kept confidential and encrypted. All audio tape recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study to maintain the highest regard for confidentiality of all participants. Participant names were kept confidential and identified by pseudonym. All electronic documents were password protected and encrypted on the researcher's computer. The computer was kept in a locked cabinet in a locked office when not in use. All data used to identify participants were saved separately from their

actual data. All electronic forms were password protected and encrypted. Hard copies of necessary paperwork (consent forms, demographic questionnaires, and interview transcriptions) were kept in a locked cabinet when not in use, and inside of a locked office. Only the researcher had access throughout the study. At the conclusion the study, all information will be destroyed. Destruction of the data on any electronic files will be accomplished by the full formatting of the computer or hard drive where the data is stored.

### **Data Analysis**

After interviews of all participants were conducted, recorded, and transcribed, all written notes taken during the interview process by the researcher were reviewed closely. A written analysis was completed in which each participant's interview responses were read and reviewed, so that emergent themes could be identified for each question. The data was then coded and categorized into significant statements and themes by participant. Themes across all 10 participant interviews were developed based on the most frequently occurring patterns and statements. The researcher looked for similar words and phrases among the participants to make connections between their responses. Whenever possible, sections of dialogue presented in the participant's own words verbatim was quoted to illustrate how themes developed and emerged from the interview data. A qualitative analysis was used to develop codes, as well as analyze the frequency and similarity of codes based on the interview transcripts. Lastly, all the identified themes were interpreted to attach meaning and significance of the data within the context of the theoretical framework of social cognitive processing theory.

For this study, the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to analyze data. The modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of qualitative analysis dictates that the researcher also becomes one of the participants in the process of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Data collected included perceptions and feelings of phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation was used to deduce the structural essence of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The process in this study included phenomenological reduction with bracketing, horizontaling, organizing invariant quantities, themes, and constructing textural/structural descriptions based on descriptions provided by the participants in their interviews (Moustakas, 1994).

A verbatim transcript from each participant was constructed, with sensitivity to marginalizing the researcher's subjective opinions and biases. Using the verbatim transcript, each statement was analyzed for significance. All relevant statements were listed (including those that did not repeat). As part of the phenomenological reduction process, horizontalization was used to assign equal value to each statement (Moustakas, 1994). All repetitive statements and irrelevant statements that did not pertain to the research question were removed (Moustakas, 1994). Themes were created through the gathering of invariant horizons. Through synthesizing the invariant horizons, a thorough detailed description of the textures of the experience was created. Verbatim examples were used to illustrate participant police officer descriptions taken directly from their interviews.

A construction of the textural-structural description of the meanings and essences was created using imaginative variation. According to Moustakas (1994), the process of imaginative variation lets the researcher uncover structural themes sourced from textural

descriptions. The textural description was examined from different perspectives and eventually arrived at a description of the structure (Moustakas, 1994). The descriptions were integrated into a universal description of the overall group experience (Moustakas, 1994). All participant's individual textural-structural descriptions were synthesized into an overall description that represented the group of participants as a collective whole.

The study was summarized by making connections in the literature review in search of supporting or refuting research that displayed any gaps in the literature. No data analysis software was used in this study. Once transcribed, the entire log of transcription interviews was read in detail, with detailed notes made regarding themes. Significant statements and commonality of themes were examined and tracked in a spreadsheet. Themes were tallied, counted for occurrence, and a subsequent list was compiled of overall themes by each participant police officer and each question.

Upon reviewing the transcriptions and detailed notes, a full list of responses according to theme were compiled. Responses were recorded as participant and question number, to ensure that frequency counts can be tallied and referenced easily. Validity of interpreting the data was increased through both data and investigator triangulation methods (Creswell, 2007). Data was gathered from 10 individual participant police officers in multiple forms to facilitate data triangulation (interviews, observations during interviews, and demographic questionnaires). Investigator triangulation was achieved by having a co-evaluator (cohort member) assist in examining participant police officer interview data and helping to develop emerging themes to ensure interrater reliability. In addition, peer review was used to reach consensus on all overall themes, composite descriptions, and the essence.

### **Summary**

This phenomenological study was conducted to explore and describe the experiences and coping behaviors of police officers exposed to daily trauma as a routine course of their employment. Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were used to collect interview data from 10 different participant police officers in Texas. The interviews were audio recorded. The interviews were reviewed with copious notes taken to identify significant statements, and transcribed verbatim. Themes were formulated from the participant police officer interview data transcripts which were interpreted into the lived experiences of the participant police officers using the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen qualitative method of analysis uses reflective descriptions by participant police officers and then assigns interpretive descriptions from the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to analyze this data. The modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method provided for qualitative analysis with the researcher's role being participatory in the process (Moustakas, 1994). In this type of analysis, open reflective descriptions by participant police officers were interpreted by the researcher. This chapter begins with a complete description of participant police officer demographic statistics. Next, a discussion on horizontalization used within the study follows. Following that, a discussion on emergent themes by question with frequency counts included are outlined in detail. Both textural and structural composite descriptions are combined in this chapter in order to describe the essence of participant police officers' experiences with coping behaviors. This chapter concludes with a discussion on divergent cases and a final summary.

#### Demographics

All participant police officers ( $N = 10$ ) were active duty commissioned peace officers currently employed in the state of Texas for the past two years in their respective precinct or department. The participant police officers included 3 women and 7 men. Two participants were aged between 26-30 years old; three participants were aged between 31-35 years old; three participants were aged between 36-40 years old; one participant was aged between 41-45 years old, and one participant was aged between 46-50 years old ( $M = 35.8$ ). Participants all reported being employed as police officers from 3.5-11 years; with three participants reporting being a police officer for the past 3.5-5 years and seven participants reporting being a police officer for 6-11 years ( $M = 7.65$ ).

All participants reported some college education. Three participants reported they had a bachelor's degree, one reported having an associate degree, and the remaining six participants reported completing some college credits before entering the police academy. All participants reported that they were in a long-term relationship; eight were married and two were living with a companion. Eight participant police officers reported having children, and two reported having no children at this time ( $M = 1.7$ ). When asked about percentage of work time exposed to high stress or traumatic situations, all officers reported some degree of exposure. Four police officers reported 30-50% of work time exposed to high stress or traumatic situations, and six police officers reported 51-100% of work time as exposed to high stress or traumatic situations while working ( $M = 67\%$ ).

Following the lead of previous qualitative studies, participant police officers with at least two years of work experience were chosen for this study to ensure that participants had sufficient time to experience their position, while also withstanding any departmental probationary statuses and completing the mandatory post-academy time as patrol officers. All participant police officers were receptive to the interview process, and years of experience did not affect the substance or detail of interview responses. All participants shared detailed responses when asked open-ended questions during the interview regardless of age, experience, or educational level. However, the participant police officer with the most experience (11 years on the job) reported the highest percentage of exposure to stress or traumatic situations (100%); while the participant police officer with the least amount of years employed as a police officer (3.5 years on the job) reported the lowest percentage of exposure to stress or traumatic situations (30%). All participant police officers with over nine years of experience on the job,

reported over 50% percent of work time as exposure to high stress or traumatic situations. These statistics appear to lend support to the compounding effects of trauma over time for police officers (Frank et al., 2017; Marshall, 2006).

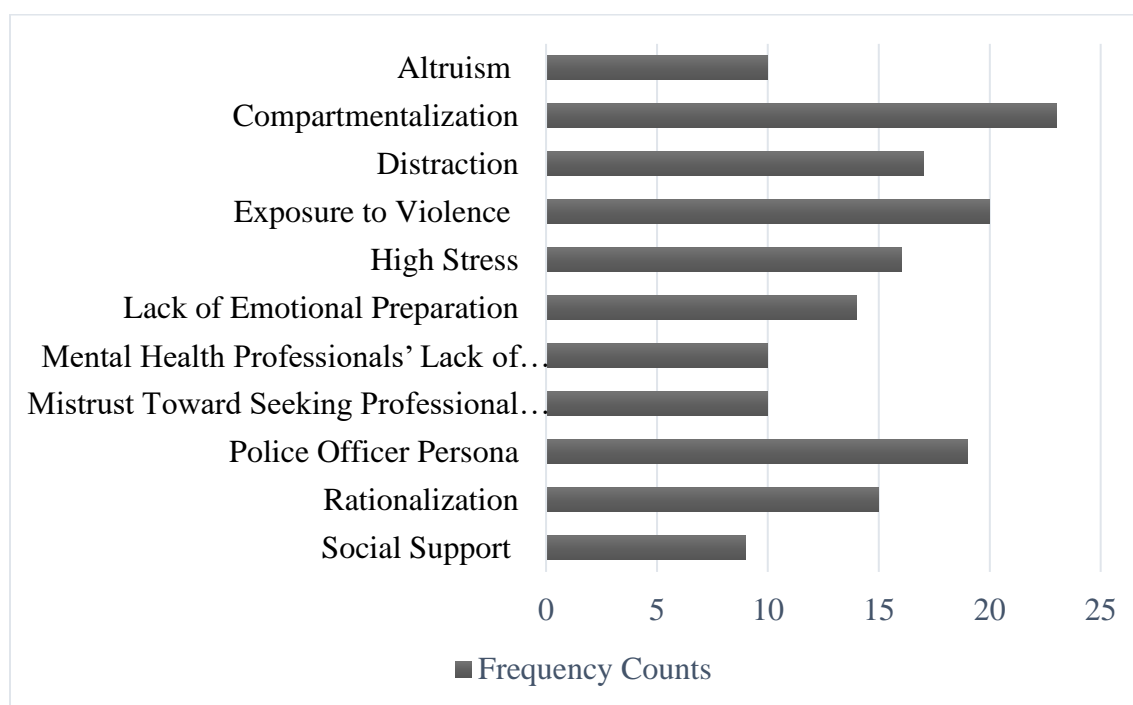
### **Horizontalization**

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher through hand transcription, without the use of any additional computer software or electronic processing. The hand transcription process provided an intimate opportunity to become familiar with participant police officers' interview data. As previously outlined in detail in the previous chapter, confidentiality of all participant police officers was maintained throughout the interview transcription process. From each participant's verbatim transcript, statements were considered with respect for significance to the description of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Statements considered significant to describing their experiences were identified for analyzing to each question. All significant statements were collected and listed into a table organized by question response, with all statements being treated equally by each participant. Significant statements were clustered into themes with similar meaning. Overlapping or repetitive statements were removed from individual descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Using the process of horizontalization, a complete list of significant statements from participant police officer interview data was developed (Creswell, 2007).

### **Frequency Counts**

The full transcription of all participant police officer interviews encompassed 89 pages of text in totality. Responses from all 89 pages of interviews were examined three times for frequency counts. Frequency counts were tallied based on if a theme appeared

in the participant police officer's response. Responses were first tallied in relationship to already identified themes per question. Next, participants were designated with a number that corresponded to each question they answered. For example, P2:2 designated participant police officer number two's response to interview question number two. Ten police officers participated in this study and there were seven interview questions; for a total maximum frequency count of 70. Frequency counts helped to identify themes and subthemes from the interview data. The theme with the highest frequency count across all questions was compartmentalization with a frequency count of 23. The theme with the lowest frequency count across all questions was social support with a frequency count of 9. See Figure 1 for a listing of total frequency counts for all questions organized by theme.



*Figure 1.* Total Frequency Counts Organized by Theme.

## Themes

Themes emerged from the participant police officers' significant statements which were identified by question and then tallied. An overall set of themes across all questions was then developed from analyzing all interview data by participants. Analysis concluded with the identification of the following 11 themes: (a) altruism, (b) compartmentalization, (c) distraction, (d) exposure to violence, (e) high stress, (f) mental health professionals' lack of familiarity with police officer experiences, (g) lack of emotional preparation, (h) mistrust toward seeking professional mental health help, (i) police officer persona, (j) rationalization, and (k) social support. Any themes with a frequency count of fewer than 4 were identified as a subtheme or divergent. Themes were shared with all participant police officers to ensure that the identified themes validated their experiences accurately, and truly resonated their individual personal responses from their interviews. Member checking with participants ensures credibility, validity, and is an integral component of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Significantly, all participant police officers expressed agreement with their respective themes. See Table 1 for a list of themes by question.

Table 1

*Themes by Question*

Question	Themes
1	Altruism, exposure to violence, high stress
2	Compartmentalization, distraction, police officer persona
3	Exposure to violence
4	Compartmentalization, rationalization
5	High stress, lack of emotional preparation, police officer persona, rationalization
6	Compartmentalization, distraction, social support
7	Lack of emotional preparation, mental health professionals' lack of familiarity with police officer experiences, mistrust toward seeking professional mental health help, police officer persona

**Interview question one**

The first interview question asked was: Tell me about the best parts and the worst parts of your job. Participant police officers shared themes of (a) altruism, (b) exposure to violence, and (c) high stress. Participant police officers described the best parts of their job as being able to act on their feelings of general concern regarding the welfare of others, often at personal costs to themselves. Participant police officers expressed having selfless concern for helping and providing aid to people in their communities. Participant police officers described the worst parts of their job as daily exposure to violence and feelings of high stress.

**Altruism.** The total frequency count for altruism was 10. All participant police officers described a selfless personal devotion to the well-being of others in their community, while also acknowledging there is sometimes a personal cost to their safety or well-being as a result of their law enforcement role. All participant police officers identified with the concept of altruism as the best part of their job. Participant police officer 1 attested, “Just being able to put people away that are trying to ruin the lives of other people is always a good thing, you know, doing something good for other people is the best, regardless of the cost to myself.” Participant police officer 6 described his experience similarly as:

If I have the opportunity to make a direct impact in the community by being able to put someone away when they needed to be arrested, just to make the community better for everyone else, then I have done my job and everything was worth it, whatever I went through to make that happen.

Participant police officer 7 reflected on his experience:

I get to be someone's hero, and to save the day for even just one person to protect them from harm or intervene and be a hero just for a moment, to me that's the best part of my job and everything else is just water under the bridge, because it was worth it.

**Exposure to violence.** The total frequency count for exposure to violence was 20. Exposure to violence was the second largest overall theme, appeared in two questions, and was described by all individual participant officers when asked to reflect on the worst parts of the job. All participant police officers described traumatic incidents of violence that they had experienced while on the job and reported them as the worst

parts of their employment as police officers. Exposure to violence included subthemes of (a) domestic disturbances, (b) fatalities, and (c) shootings. Participant police officer 1 explained his feelings on this question:

The worst parts are shootings, and while I wasn't there when the deputy was shot, I heard his call for help over the radio and responded since it was a critical situation. It was a real wake-up call that I can be hurt, too, and was a humbling situation I will never forget.

Participant police officer 5 stated, "Last week, I had a terroristic threat involving a seven-year-old, and so you know it's younger and younger that people are having problems and becoming violent." Participant police officer 10 similarly described, "The worst part is seeing the violent effects of the bad decisions people make, like fatalities as a result of driving under the influence and killing someone."

**High Stress.** The total frequency count for high stress was 16. High stress was a theme that appeared as the 5<sup>th</sup> largest among all themes. Participant police officers described high stress levels related to their experiences while on duty highlighting situations that can be high risk and unpredictable in nature. Participant police officers described a sense that their feelings of stress originate from a general spontaneity of things that occur on their shift such as high-speed pursuits or apprehensions, and general feelings of high stress while working with people who behave badly according to social norms. Participant police officer 2 explained:

When I sit down and think about it, the worst part is sometimes feeling stressed because anything could happen at any time, and this idea of an element of



surprise, that could just occur where I wouldn't be able to control a situation, like our job is so unpredictable, it's stressful.

Participant police officer 4 reported:

The worst part about my job is, you know, probably the stress level, like high-risk apprehensions when you're chasing someone in pursuit, you know a lot of people don't want to go to jail and they're definitely not wanting to spend any time there.

Similarly, participant police officer 7 described his feelings as, "The worst is the stress level, that oftentimes on my shift, I am dealing with people who are not on their best behavior or find themselves in a bad situation and they don't play nice with others."

**Divergent cases.** These cases included descriptions by two participants about the worst parts of their job being related to policy procedural problems. Participant police officer 7 reported some of the worst parts about his job as being changes to procedures. He asserted, "There are a lot of changes in policy and procedures without a lot a notice, the kind of thing that goes along with a government job I guess." Participant police officer 3 also similarly remarked, "Some bad parts of the job can be the procedures, there are so many rules and procedures and policies change a lot, which makes our job hard."

### **Interview question two**

The second interview question asked was: Describe what it is like for you to transition from work life to home life. Participant police officers shared themes of (a) compartmentalization, (b) distraction, and (c) police officer persona. Supporting the social-cognitive processing model regarding the interplay between social environment and interpersonal processes regarding coping with trauma, both themes of compartmentalization and police officer persona were high. Compartmentalization

appeared 23 times throughout the interviews and was the highest appearing theme in all interview questions. Police officer persona appeared 19 times and was the third highest appearing theme across all interview questions.

**Compartmentalization.** The total frequency count for compartmentalization was 23. In terms of transitioning after a shift, participant police officers described how they make conscious, purposeful efforts to separate their professional work role from their more private, personal, family roles at the end of their workday to divide those roles and keep them separated from each other. All participant police officers made a reference to disconnecting emotionally through a physical item of separation as a shut off or transitional valve; such as changing clothes, leaving their work bag in their car, locking their firearm away, removing their uniform, or switching out of their patrol car into their personal vehicle. Participant police officers 2,5,9 and 10 made references to “putting the cop away” and “putting the cop in the closet.” Participant police officer 2 explained:

I think I definitely make a concerted effort to leave things in my car that I don't have to bring in the house, my firearm, my bag, I guess that it's a physical piece of leaving the cop behind, as far as like emotionally. I keep my work life and home life separate, and I do it on purpose every day.

Participant police officer 5 stated, “The transition is that the uniform comes off, and I've put the cop in the closet, until I have to put my uniform on the next day and be a cop again.” Participant police officer 9 described his feelings:

It's simpler than you might think, I'm pretty good about shifting gears to go home and stop thinking about work, I shut it off once I take a shower and get into some different clothes. I put my firearm in the safe, put on some gym clothes, and I am

back to being myself, not a cop, I move in and out of that world easy. I'm pretty good about putting the cop away.

Participant police officer 10 stated, "Once I pick up my car, my shift is over, and I'm back in my own skin, the cop is gone." He further explained in detail:

I have to swap cars at the precinct, so when I drop off my patrol car and get back into my personal car, that's my time. I make a point to stop working in all forms. That's when I'm officially off duty and not a cop, I won't even waste two minutes thinking about work or answering my phone, I'm going home, see you tomorrow morning.

**Distraction.** The total frequency count for distraction was 17. Participant police officers described ways that they redirect their attention to prepare mentally and emotionally for the transition from work to home after their workday. Participant police officer 3 explained his behavior:

It's not an exact science, but I listen to music really loud on my way home it diverts my attention, on my drive, it's my way of pushing whatever thoughts I have out and getting me ready for home, takes my mind off stuff.

Participant police officer 5 described his experience:

I try to do a conscious silence, I mean really just take a few moments mentally to clear my mind, distract my mind with a few good breaths, and consciously clear it out, just a couple minutes before anyone rushes me when I walk in the door.

Similarly, participant police officer 9 reported his experience in detail:

I spend time on my cell phone for a while in my car before I head home, it's soothing a little, get my mind thinking on normal things, I check my email, texts,

my sports sites. It's a time waste, but it gets me to a good place. My other half is always complaining I zone out on my cell phone.

**Police officer persona.** The total frequency count for police officer persona was 19. Participant police officers described a normalized and accepted individual police culture role as partially influencing their transition from work to home after their workday. Participant police officer 1 elaborated:

I carry myself different, I talk different, more authoritative, and I'm in a state of readiness when I put that uniform on, it's all parts of my role so when I get home I'm about ready to put that down.

Participant police officer 2 remarked, "When you're a cop, you have to act like one, and it becomes just who you are, it's not just about what you do, we have a shared culture."

Participant police officer 4 described his personal experience in detail as a legacy:

My grandfather was a cop, my uncle is a retired cop, and my father is a retired chief of police. When he retired, that's about the time I went to the academy. My father was my personal professional role model. He taught me how to be a cop. All the little nuances like talking assertive, walking confident up to people, interacting with people in a direct way, and I'd even go ahead and say being a little cocky at times or witty. I modeled myself after his behavior when I got home, you know, what I saw him and his officers do to transition. His advice was simply to stop being a cop.

### **Interview question three**

The third interview question asked was: Describe the most stressful experience(s) that you've had while on the job. All participant police officers shared thorough

reflections and detailed accounts of their experiences witnessing trauma while responding to critical incidents in their roles as first responders in law enforcement. Participant police officers all described similar exposure to traumatic situations involving violence such as domestic disturbances like assault, fatalities, and shootings. Exposure to violence was described by all participant police officers when asked about their most stressful experiences on the job and was the second highest theme across all interviews.

**Exposure to violence.** The total frequency count for exposure to violence was 20. All participant police officers described traumatic experiences with violence in the community as the most stressful experiences of their work. Exposure to violence as a theme first appeared in responses to the first interview question when participant police officers were asked about the worst parts of their job. Subthemes of exposure to violence included (a) domestic disturbances, (b) fatalities, and (c) shootings. Participant police officer 1 described his experience:

I responded to this call over the radio for help, and the guy lost his life. I wasn't physically there when he got shot, I just arrived on the scene and responded but that was the most stressful experience that I've had. Someone losing their life to sheer violence.

Participant police officer 2 reported:

I responded to a call not too long ago involving domestic violence and they had a child in the house. I had to contact child protective services because the child was being beat on by the parents. It was brute force, really. Seeing the bruises was hard. That was a very difficult stressful situation because I was uncertain about what would happen, but I knew I had to help that kid stay safe amidst all the

trauma. I knew the parents had previous domestic disturbance calls, and I just thought one day, this kid might be killed.

Participant police officer 7 explained:

I was called to a fatality scene a few years ago when I was at my other department. A man purposely drove the wrong way on 610 eastbound and he hit head-on into a car killing 2 college students. The impact force of that accident was savage.

Participant police officer 9 described his experience:

The most stressful was a situation where a car with a group of young men had road raged with another car with 3 small kids, which stemmed from an earlier argument involving one of the men owing another man money. They blocked the car in, then forced it to ram head-on into a telephone pole, then jumped out and fought the driver of the vehicle with a knife, threatening him in front of the kids in the back seat over this owed money. The man pleaded for his children according to witnesses. Two children were permanently disabled, and one died at the scene in the crash. The idea of how brutal, premeditated, on purpose these men did this. It was hard to stomach a senseless fatality.

#### **Interview question four**

The fourth interview question asked was: How did you deal with this situation(s)? Participant police officer interview responses to this question suggested that they often attempt to put their thoughts out of their mind and move forward emotionally quickly or make attempts to explain away their feelings in response to traumatic situations involving violence. Both methods showcase attempts by the participant police

officers to effectively cope with their experiences on the job. Participant police officers shared themes of (a) compartmentalization and (b) rationalization in response to this interview question.

**Compartmentalization.** The total frequency count for compartmentalization was 23. Compartmentalization as a theme first appeared in interview question two, when participant police officers were asked about their transition from work life to home life. Participant police officers described conscious efforts at an internal process of putting their experiences into a ‘metaphorical box’ to push thoughts out of their mind when faced with traumatic experiences. Participant police officer 6 stated, “When I was at the scene it was a stressful experience, but I really just kind of went to work the next day and pushed it to the back of my mind, it’s a new patrol, a new day.” Participant police officer 7 reported a similar response:

I put it in the back of my mind and force myself to think about the next thing that I have to do. I don't go back to the past. I like to live in the present and deal with the circumstances that are right in front of me.

Participant 9 also described his experience similarly, “I distance myself from thinking about things that aren’t comfortable, I shut it off and move on to my next task, break it down. It serves no purpose otherwise.”

**Rationalization.** The total frequency count for rationalization was 15. Participant police officers reported dealing with stressful situations by generally attempting to justify and explain their stressful experiences in a logical fashion in order to make better sense of what they experienced. Participant police officer 2 stated, “I rationalized that I got the right people involved to help, they are supposed to do their job

to help, and I did the right thing by bringing his situation to other people's attention.”

Participant police officer 3 attested his thoughts, “I have accepted on a universal level, a good understanding that morals aren't what they used to be, and society is changing, you can't expect people to behave well anymore.” Participant police officer 4 described his experience:

When my partner was shot, I told myself, you made this decision for your career, and so you took a transfer, and it was a great career move. So how it worked out is that you weren't there on that day to help him, it is what it is.

**Divergent cases.** These cases included descriptions by two participants regarding using spiritualism to deal with stressful experiences on the job. Participant police officer 1 and participant police officer 5 both described using their spiritualism as a coping strategy to deal with their experiences. Participant police officer 5 stated, “I'm very spiritual and I really get teased about that a lot because I'm not the typical cop, because I'm grounded. I prayed after that situation.” Participant police officer 1 reported, “Sometimes I will say a little prayer to calm my nerves or something, if I'm having a situation on shift, where it's really hitting me.”

### **Interview question five**

The fifth interview question asked was: How do you feel about the daily stresses of your job? Participant police officers described their feelings regarding what they experience on the job as highly stressful, but also as a routine part of their job that they accept. They also indicated concerns about not being amply emotionally prepared to cope with the experiences of the job by their previous training, as well as being influenced by police culture. Participant police officers also described attempts to make



logical sense of their experiences by making them seem plausible. Participant police officers shared themes of (a) high stress, (b) lack of emotional preparation, (c) police officer persona, (d) rationalization.

**High stress.** The total frequency count for high stress was 16. This theme first appeared in question one, when participant police officers were asked about the worst parts of their job. Nine out of the ten participant police officers reported feeling highly stressed due to the nature of their work. Participant police officer 1 reported, “I mean it's very stressful, you're sitting in your vehicle typing a report, and then something happens, or changes. It's stress from all angles.” Participant police officer 2 stated:

The stress is great, you never really know what you're going to be up against when you go to work in the morning. You could be thinking that you will be doing this or that, well your very first situation you pull over somebody who wants to fight.

Participant 3 reported, “There's always going to be a lot of stresses no matter where you go in law enforcement field, it's a bureaucracy, and it's sometimes too intense to deal with.”

**Lack of emotional preparation.** The total frequency count was 14. Participant police officer 2 reported, “The reality is that nothing at the academy truly prepares you for what you'll experience, you're not ready to be a cop straight out of training and handle these kind of experiences.” Participant police officer 4 remarked similar thoughts on this:

I feel that there's not enough training for us, we aren't prepared for what we will face emotionally with the stress. I know I definitely didn't feel like I knew the

depth of what I could experience on the job until it happened. I just couldn't have learned that in all of our role plays and all-day classes, the extent of what we experience.

Participant police officer 6 declared, "I wasn't prepared. Now that I've been doing this for a while, I can see why this career is not for everyone."

**Police officer persona.** The total frequency count for police officer persona was 19. This theme first appeared in responses to question two, when participant police officers were asked how they transition from work life to home life. Participant police officer 1 stated:

You have to be always thinking like a cop, investigating, looking ahead, asking the right question, and handling things the way you've been trained to respond, that keeps the job manageable. Think like a cop, like we've been trained.

Participant police officer 3 described his experience:

I grew up in a household where my father was a civil servant police officer with a 40-year career span. We've been in the stress business for a long time, so I grew up with the cop mentality, stress was the job. Stress is what we do, no changing it.

Participant police officer 6 attested:

It takes a certain type of person to handle the situations we face. Only certain types of people become successful law enforcement officers. If you take a close look at us, we are probably alike in being able to digest more than normal, it's cop culture.

**Rationalization.** The total frequency count for rationalization was 15. This theme first appeared in the previous question, number four, when participant police

officers were asked how they deal with stressful situations they experienced. Participant police officer 3 stated, "Stress and public service is just a part of life." Participant police officer 8 described his feelings as, "The way I see it is you signed up for this job, you knew there was stress involved, and you can't let it get to you. If you can't handle it, then you know there's more careers out there." Participant police officer 10 reported:

If I was emotionally affected by the things that I see or the things that happened on my shift, then that would tell me this isn't the job for me. The fact I can continue to do this, it means that I can handle what's thrown at me.

### **Interview question six**

The sixth interview question asked was: How do you manage the stresses of being a police officer? In response to this question, participant police officers discussed their coping behaviors in detail and responses indicated that they attempt to regularly make efforts to categorically separate their professional work life from their personal home life, use support from family and friends, and self-soothe emotionally both while on the job and after work hours. Participant police officers shared themes of (a) compartmentalization, (b) distraction, and (c) social support.

**Compartmentalization.** The total frequency count for compartmentalization was 23. As the highest appearing theme, compartmentalization previously appeared in both interview question number two when officers were asked what it was like to transition from work life to home life, and number four when officers were asked how they dealt with stressful situations. Seven out of ten participants described managing their stress by simply subscribing to a manner of principled, regimented behavior of dividing their

professional police officer role with clear distinction from their personal home life by not attending to any police work when not on duty. Participant police officer 1 explained:

As far as taking care of myself, I just don't do police work on my days off.

Usually I have Mondays and Tuesdays off, and let me tell you, I don't do anything that I don't want to do on those days. I do not do anything cop. That's enough.

Participant police officer 2 stated:

Well I really try to take one day at a time, I take one shift at a time. I do my job, and when that shift ends, the stress ends. I don't take anything home with me, whatever stress is at work, stays at work.

Participant police officer 3 remarked, "I leave work at work, nothing follows me home at night. If it was a stressful day, that stress is checked at the door when I go home. My evening starts fresh." He elaborated further regarding his coping behaviors:

As far as managing it, I like to keep my work separate from my home, so I think about it as two different places. I am doing a job and when that job is done, I am back to being a husband and father. I manage it by separating it. They are two different places and require different things from me, so I don't take whatever I had left over from my workday, home. I leave that stress at work, where it belongs, for the next workday.

**Distraction.** The total frequency count for distraction was 17. The theme of distraction first appeared in question two, when participant police officers were asked about transitioning from work life to home life. Participant police officers described managing their feelings through various ways of diverting their attention and mental

processing to more pleasant activities. Participant police officers reported attempts at trying to take their mind off experiences during the workday while on shift, as well as efforts to consciously shift mental processing using activities after work hours that they find more enjoyable to divert thinking. Subthemes of distraction included (a) hobbies, (b) sports, and (c) solitude. Participant police officer 6 described his feelings:

I like my alone time. I need to recharge between shifts. I like to get up early in the morning and see the sunrise, by myself, be alone with myself without any interruptions. Just being alone works wonders and is calming. Sometimes, I'll take a long walk in the woods, it clears everything out. The important part is I'm getting my mind off of things.

Participant police officer 9 reported:

When I have a long shift, or sitting in my patrol car, I have this app on my phone and if I start to feel stressed or something, I create pictures on my app. It's funny, it's mind-numbing, but it's creative.

Participant police officer 9 further elaborated about when he's not working a shift:

But when I'm not on shift, I try hard to take really good care of myself by playing sports. With physical exertion, you can't think of the job because it forces everything out. I coach a swimming team, play softball, and go to the gym several times a week. Staying active keeps my mind healthy. It's about physical fitness and sports for me, just doing something active to keep my mind off work.

Participant police officer 10 explained, "Sometimes I play this weird game, a mental trick, where I count things around me. Like I count how many stop lights, how many

cars, it's something to make my mind stay in the present on patrol." Participant police officer 10 clarified further about managing feelings after the workday:

Outside of work, I spend as much time with my hobbies as I can. I crochet, cook, and spend time camping with my family on weekends. I do things for myself as often as I can and do the things that I enjoy doing. I have too many hobbies to name to keep myself busy outside of work, keep my mind busy.

**Social Support.** The total frequency count for social support was 9. Nine out of ten participant police officers described having at least one close, personal, friend or family member that they could confide in about their experiences or feelings. However, the same participants asserted being protective of that relationship by admitting to holding back information in order to shield the transference of potential emotional distress. Police officer participant 2 explained:

I have one close friend, he's a detective now, and that's about the only other person I like to talk to about things at work. If something happens, I talk to him if I need it, because I can tell him anything, and he usually makes sense of things for me. I don't talk about that kind of thing in detail to my family, it's just too much for them and I'm protective about what they see or hear. A lot of things will stay with you, I'm not passing that on to anyone I love.

Participant police officer 5 reported, "My husband knows what I do, and I can talk to him about anything, he's my rock. We check in usually during the day; he is so supportive."

However, she discussed further:

But I don't talk to him too much, like if I wanted to just unload, I just wouldn't want to do that to him. I don't want to give that to my family or to my husband

where they hold on to the things that I've seen. So, there's some things I don't always share and that's pretty much a decision I make about my work.

Participant police officer 7 described his experience somewhat similarly, "I have a few close buddies that I can tell anything to, they understand because they all do something related to law enforcement." He added further:

Sometimes it's good because they'll have a different perspective on it. I'm probably open about sharing stuff when I'm stressed out. It helps me to talk stuff out when I'm stuck. I hold back if it hits too close to home, I think there's an unwritten line where I limit what I talk about, because it can be pretty dark to give someone else.

Participant police officer 8 discussed his perspective, "I have a close relationship with my wife, we have big families, and do family things that make me feel like a normal person outside of the job." Participant police officer 8 elaborated a little bit further:

I guess I have a healthy life outside the job and that helps me manage it. Even if you have someone you can talk to, I think we hold back. There are things I wouldn't dream about telling my wife that happened or situations because it would just make her worry. There's always this limiting factor in what you tell your family with this work.

### **Interview question seven**

The seventh interview question asked was: What suggestions would you offer mental health professionals who assist police officers in dealing with the stressors of the profession? Participant police officers discussed how their unique culture contributes to how they view mental health and described feeling that they were not adequately

emotionally prepared for what they would face on the job. All participants indicated that they felt mental health professionals did not fully understand their experiences and would recommend that mental health providers become more familiar with the kinds of things they experience. On that same token, all participant police officers described feelings of mistrust regarding seeking mental health treatment. Participant police officers shared themes of (a) lack of emotional preparation, (b) mental health professionals' lack of familiarity with police officer experiences, (c) mistrust toward seeking professional mental health help, and (d) police officer persona.

**Lack of emotional preparation.** The total frequency count for lack of emotional preparation was 14. This theme first appeared as a theme in question five, when officers were asked about how they felt about the daily stresses of their job. In response to this question, participant police officers described concern that mental health providers should know that they may not have been properly emotionally prepared for the experiences they have on the job. Participant police officer 9 attested:

I think anyone working with police officers needs to realize that we may very well not have good skills about dealing with things and others might feel like I do. That, maybe we don't have the skills to deal with it, but we also need help the most even if it's frowned on.

Participant police officer 7 stated:

They need to understand that a lot of us are muddling through, we may have some problems because we weren't necessarily fully trained on how to handle what happens to us, that we're learning as we go, how to handle it.

Participant police officer 10 described his feelings on this subject:



I don't think any of us really feels completely ready for the types of situations we are put in, the things that happen on shift. I'm not sure I imagined what kinds of feelings I'd be put through doing this kind of work, nothing prepares you.

**Mental health professionals' lack of familiarity with police officer experiences.** The total frequency count for mental health professionals' lack of familiarity with police officer experiences, was 10. All participant police officers described their concerns that mental health professionals are not very familiar with the kinds of things they experience on the job. Participant police officer 1 attested:

Anyone in mental health has to get a good grasp of what kind of work we do, learn what work and stress we work under, and be familiar with it in order to help us. But I still think there is somewhat an attitude that says, if you're not a cop or have been a cop or worked with cops, you probably just won't get it.

Participant police officer 2 remarked, "I would say that they need to have a better working knowledge of what the job is like and what we go through; what kind of situations we face and really what we're up against." Participant police officer 4 declared, "I feel like there needs to be more contact between departments and therapists, where therapists would know a little bit more about the gloom-and-doom, the things we encounter, and how to help us."

**Mistrust toward seeking professional mental health help.** The total frequency count for mistrust was 10. All participant police officers described a lack of trust regarding any attempted professional mental health treatment. Participants felt that even if mental health help was needed, there was a risk that it would not remain confidential and verbalized concerns about how it could adversely affect their employment if they did

seek out support. Participant police officer 5 declared, “I’ve met officers that need help really bad, and you know they’re not talking to anybody and not getting help because they don’t want it to come back on them.” She elaborated further about a situation at work:

I had a specific person, a friend, who worked with me and she was fired because she went to talk to somebody because of the stresses of her job. She was going through a lot of stuff and stresses of a divorce. Somehow it got back to the department that she would go talk to someone and I don’t know the details, but she ended up losing her job. I think a lot of the stories like that, you hear, and it makes other people not want to talk to anybody.

Participant police officer 6 reported, “There is this feeling or sense like getting some help will not be good for you and the wrong person will eventually find out, and then maybe you could get leave without pay or something like that.” Participant police officer 8 described his experience at the academy:

When you’re at the academy you’re told that you will lose your badge. I mean they don’t outright say that, they don’t really tell it to you in those exact words, but it’s like if you have mental health problems you can’t be over here saving people, so the message is pretty clear that you have to have everything together mentally.

The way I see it, you know, is the way it was put to us and that is if we go get any help, we’re going to lose our badge. And that’s my livelihood so it’s not a chance I want to take.

**Police officer persona.** The total frequency count for police officer persona was 19. The theme of police officer persona first appeared in question two when officers were asked what it was like for them to transition from work life to home life; and re-

appeared again in question four when officers were asked how officers felt about the daily stresses of their job. Participant police officer 2 stated:

It's important to know who you're working with. We are a certain breed, we are very strict structured type of people, we like things a certain way so we're not necessarily the most open to new ideas and new things like therapy.

Participant police officer 4 echoed similar thoughts, "Cops have too much pride, and we don't ask for help, we are all alpha personalities. Asking for help is a sign of weakness or vulnerability for us, it's not a cop thing." Participant police officer 8 attested to his opinion on this:

If you're going to work with police officers, we are very straightforward, no psycho-talk types, be straightforward and direct. Cops don't like to read between the lines, we don't like sugarcoating, just tell us exactly what you want us to do.

### **Composite Textural Description**

A composite textural description was developed that described the lived coping experiences of 10 participant police officers who were exposed to daily trauma as a course of their employment through analyzing both the individual interview data from participant police officer interviews and the identified themes described. The composite textural description was devised to describe the group experiences as a collective whole (Moustakas, 1994).

In terms of commonality of experience, all participant police officers reported exposure to trauma during the daily course of their workday and using some form of distraction to manage the daily stresses of being a police officer. Additionally, all participant police officers reported using either rationalization (justifying and explaining

feelings in a logical manner) or compartmentalization (separating professional identity through a principled approach of dividing their police officer role with clear distinction from their home life), or a combination of both of these defense mechanisms to deal with stressful situations on the job. The most common theme throughout all participant police officer interviews was compartmentalization. While the only active emotional processing coping strategy that emerged from interview data was social support, police officer participants that described using social support also verbalized conscious efforts to hold back information they considered too intense in order to protect their loved ones from emotional distress. All participant police officers verbalized concerns that mental health professionals need to be more familiar with their experiences in order to fully help them. All participant police officers also expressed a general mistrust of the process of seeking professional mental health help, with specific concerns over their confidentiality or adverse reactions by their employers.

### **Composite Structural Description**

A composite structural description was developed that described how the 10 participant police officers formed their individual perceptions associated with coping with trauma as part of their employment. The composite structural description is a way of understanding how a group experiences what they experience (Moustakas, 1994). The composite structural description was devised from analyzing both data from individual participant police officer interviews and subsequent identified themes.

All participant police officers reported a general feeling of acceptance of exposure to trauma as a routine occurrence while working as a police officer. Participant police officers reported personal experience with shootings, domestic disturbances, and fatalities

but having little emotional preparation for what they would experience mentally on the job through their training at the academy, or how to properly cope with it. All participant police officers reported an overarching influence on their perceptions of a police officer persona; describing a cohesive cop culture learned through exposure on the job and through experience with generational family legacy that was used as a stereotypical standard for which they based how they felt they were supposed to respond or behave in situations.

### **The Essence**

All participant police officers felt exposure to traumatic violence was a routine part of their typical workday and reported that it was also the worst part of their experience as law enforcement officers. All participant police officers recalled exposure to violent, traumatic incidents in detail during their reflective interviews specifically highlighting experiences with domestic disturbances, fatalities, and shootings. They indicated that despite training at the academy, they felt unprepared emotionally for some of the situations and feelings that they would eventually experience while working. Despite feeling emotionally unprepared, all participant police officers also described a lack of trust that any attempted mental health treatment, even if needed, would remain confidential and described concern it could adversely affect their employment in the long run.

All participant police officers described methods to cope with their experiences regarding exposure to trauma using sophisticated defense mechanisms such as compartmentalization, rationalization, and sometimes distraction; often circumventing active processing of feelings to avoid cognitive dissonance. While nearly all participant

police officers reported having social support in the form of at least one close personal friend or family member to discuss their stressful experiences or feelings with, all participants reported holding back in the form of limiting the sharing of information in order to avoid causing emotional distress to another person they care for.

### **Divergent Cases**

Divergent cases included policy procedural problems and spiritualism. Two participant police officers described the worst parts of their job being related to policy procedural problems in response to question one, when asked to discuss the worst parts of their employment. Two participant police officers also described using spiritualism to deal with stressful experiences on the job in response to question four, when asked to discuss how they dealt with a stressful situation they had experienced while on the job.

### **Summary**

This chapter concluded with the results of this study. Themes identified were: (a) altruism, (b) compartmentalization, (c) distraction, (d) exposure to violence, (e) high stress, (f) mental health professionals' lack of familiarity with police officer experiences, (g) lack of emotional preparation, (h) mistrust toward seeking professional mental health help, (i) police officer persona, (j) rationalization, and (k) social support. The next and final chapter in this dissertation includes a discussion, summary of this study, theoretical framework analysis, and a full discussion of the findings. The next chapter also concludes this study with a detailed discussion on the implications for future practice, recommendations for future research, along with a conclusion and summary.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of my phenomenological study was to understand more about individual experiences and coping behaviors of police officers who were exposed to trauma as a part of their routine course of employment. The information from this study can be used to inform counselors as they prepare to work with police officers. This study was aimed at understanding more about coping behaviors from individual police officer accounts of their own subjective experiences. My study was steered by my overall research question: What are the individual experiences and coping behaviors of police officers following consistent on-the-job exposure to traumatic stress while employed? This final chapter concludes with a summary, theoretical framework analysis, discussion of findings, implications for future practice, recommendations for future research, conclusion, and final summary.

#### **Summary of the Study**

A phenomenological research design was used in this study to explore the experiences and coping behaviors of police officers exposed to trauma as a routine course of employment. Ten participant police officers were interviewed at length regarding their experiences coping with what they experienced on their jobs. Semi-structured interviews provided an interactive way to collect phenomenological data from participant police officers with the primary use of long open-ended questioning and personal interaction with the researcher as participatory in the process. During interviews, participant police officers reflected on their experiences, while the researcher took copious notes and recorded their responses. Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to analyze

the verbatim interview data in this study. Triangulation, bracketing, member checking, and peer review were used to further validate findings and contribute to trustworthiness in order to enhance the credibility of this study. Statistical information concerning demographics of each individual participant police officer was collected and outlined in detail for applicability and transferability. All interviews with participant police officers were transcribed by hand by the researcher without any additional software support.

A total of 11 themes were produced by this study. The four themes related to coping behavior experiences of participant police officers were (a) compartmentalization, (b) distraction, (c) rationalization, and (d) social support. Compartmentalization was the most frequently occurring theme across all questions for participant police officers, with social support being the least occurring theme. All participant police officers described using defense mechanisms such as compartmentalization, rationalization, and to some degree distraction to cope with their experiences. While nearly all participants identified social support as constructive and helpful to managing the stressors of their job; the participants who identified social support also acknowledged consciously limiting the amount of detailed information they share to shield loved ones from any emotional distress. Participant police officers emphasized a stronger endorsement of negative aspects of their job when asked to describe both the best parts and worst parts of their experiences. While discussing the concept of altruistic feelings about their work as positive, police officers also described exposure to traumatic situations involving violence as the worst parts of their job focusing on subthemes of (a) domestic disturbances, (b) fatalities, and (c) shootings. Further, exposure to violence was the second most commonly occurring theme across all participants. Ironically, all



participants described feeling a general mistrust toward seeking professional mental health help, despite also acknowledging and describing a general awareness that they were not fully emotionally prepared to handle the emotional stresses of the job.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The social cognitive processing model was an appropriate framework to analyze the individual experiences and coping behaviors of police officers exposed to trauma as a course of their employment. Use of the social cognitive processing model as suggested by Brewin and Holmes (2003) proposed that social environments can influence or deter willingness to talk about traumatic experiences. Social cognitive processing as a theoretical framework is supported in this study by how often the themes of compartmentalization, exposure to violence, and police officer persona appeared in the participant police officers' interviews. It is further supported by responses regarding social support by participant police officers.

Compartmentalization, exposure to violence, and police officer persona were the top three appearing themes across all participant police officer interviews. Compartmentalization by participant police officers, more often associated with defensive rather than active emotional processing or coping, suggests a concerted effort to categorically separate from their experiences at work in order to cope with transition. However, deliberate avoidance of thoughts or memories of experiences is generally considered to be unhelpful for those exposed to traumatic stress (Brewin & Holmes, 2003). In terms of social support, the social cognitive processing model asserts that healthy adjustment following traumatic experiences depends on interpersonal processing with a supportive person (Brewin & Holmes, 2003). Nearly all participant police officers

identified a close, personal relationship with at least one person that they can talk to for support. The social-cognitive processing model further suggests that positive adjustment after traumatic experiences can depend on the quality of interactions with people who are supportive afterwards (Brewin & Holmes, 2003). Exposure to violence as a theme appeared 20 times and ranked second amongst all themes, confirming that all participant police officers acknowledged significant trauma exposure. However, all participants who acknowledged social support also described holding back when talking about feelings.

Lastly, the more general theoretical perspective of social cognitive processing theory is grounded in some basic assumptions regarding learning through observation of others. Learning is acquired through observing someone who models behavior. Police officer persona appeared 19 times and ranked third amongst all themes. Seven out of ten participant police officers in this study described modeling their behaviors through identification with a larger stereotypical police culture based on observation of other officers, including the behavior of family legacies of generational law enforcement officers. General social cognitive theory posits that people learn through observing others, interacting with the environment, as well as their own behaviors and thoughts (cognitions) through their experiences (Bandura, 1989).

### **Discussion of Findings**

The 11 identified themes produced from this study were further reorganized into three distinct categories: (a) police officers' mental health concerns, (b) coping strategies, and (c) factors affecting police officer experiences. A discussion regarding the mental health concerns of police officers, their coping strategies, the factors affecting police

officer experiences, and a full discussion on the overall themes in comparison to past studies follows.

### **Police officers' mental health concerns**

Participant police officers described (a) lack of emotional preparation (b) mental health professionals' lack of familiarity with police officer experiences, and (c) mistrust of seeking professional mental health help as their primary concerns regarding their experiences on the job. Through their interviews, participant police officers described wanting professional mental health providers to be more familiar with their work and what they are exposed to, concerns over not being emotionally prepared for the kinds of emotional stress and situations they experience, and a general mistrust regarding seeking any professional help. This study supports indications that many police officers hold skepticism about receiving professional mental health help, but their reasons are varied (Papazoglou & Tuttle, 2018). This study also supports previous studies regarding making the case for improving preparing police officers to handle compounding effects of trauma exposure (Frank et al., 2017; Marshall, 2006). Participant police officer 8 summarized this succinctly:

I go home thinking sometimes, that this job can be rough. I don't think I was prepared emotionally, even though if you had asked me when I was at the academy, I would have bragged I was ready for anything you threw at me. No one sat us down, and said, you're going to see things that you can't go back and not see. Your life will be different because of this job. I wasn't mentally ready for the kinds of things we do.

This study also supports previous studies regarding police officers being reluctant

to speak to professionals about their experiences (David & Moss, 2008; Frewin et al., 2006; Rees & Smith, 2008). All participants in this study described feelings of mistrust and hesitancy to seek any professional help, while also discussing concerns about their confidentiality or employer's reactions. On that same note, all participants reported feeling that most professional mental health providers didn't know or understand what types of experiences they had, which only seemed to fuel the participant's assertions of mistrust. Participant police officer 4 shared his thoughts about this:

I don't think the average person understands, so I don't think the average therapist understands the totality of what we are up against out here. The fact is we work all day making split-second decisions that could cost someone's life, I'm not sure mental health understands what we do, period. The conversation starts there.

### **Coping strategies**

Through their interviews, participant police officers described (a) compartmentalization, (b) distraction, (c) rationalization, and (d) social support as endorsed coping strategies to handle stressful and traumatic experiences while working. Participant police officers described methods of categorically separating their professional life from their home life through compartmentalizing, trying to divert their attention or mind from distressing thoughts through distracting behavior, and trying to make logical sense of their experiences to avoid the real or true explanation through rationalizing versus active emotional processing. Generally, participant police officers discussed avoidance of active emotional processing. All participant police officers reported some form of compartmentalization, rationalization, or distraction strategies when dealing with traumatic experiences. This is concerning for police officers because

officers that do not work through trauma experiences can showcase more psychological distress (Baka, 2015; Chia-huei, 2009; Davidson & Moss, 2008; Hu et al., 2017; Louw & Vivers, 2010).

Noteworthy, in response to interview question number five, when participant police officers were asked how they feel about the daily stresses of their job, all officers responded to a stem feeling question with cognitive responses. While officers discussed reactions such as high stress, not being emotionally prepared, and the role of their cop persona in rationalizing their experiences, none openly processed any emotional feeling in response. This apparent emotional dissonance is well documented in literature regarding police officers and their inherent ability to suppress communicating emotions (Bakker & Heuven, 2006; Huey & Kalyal, 2017; Van Gelderen, Konijn, & Bakker, 2011). According to Frewin et al. (2006) police officers generally resist emotional constructions of experiences to maintain semblance of competency and capability as a police officer. Additionally, police officers tend to exclude any emotional language that could suggest fear (Frewin et al., 2006). While emotional management is an integral part of police work and training, it is often interpreted within the police community as professionalism (Huey & Kalyal, 2017; Van Gelderen, & et al., 2011). Police culture is responsible for the social production of a specific moral order with values and obligations that revolve around professional conduct and adherence to standards of communicative response behavior; police emotion talk is constructed through this same moral order (Frewin & Tuffin, 1998). Participant police officer responses to this question support previous work by Frewin et al. (2006) indicating that officers communicate emotion by direct and understated descriptions serving to signify the police officer is competent, de-

personalizing emotional experiences, and evaluating responses or self-conduct in terms of adequacy.

This study supports many previous studies that have implicated the role of coping in influencing adjustment to stress (Balmer et al., 2014; Detrick & Chibnall, 2014; Kaur et al., 2013). However, my study refutes previous studies reporting that police officers often used emotion-focused coping to buffer experiences of stressful events (Balmer et al., 2014; DeTerte et al., 2014; Patterson, 2003; Santa Maria et al., 2018). Participants in this study avoided emotion-focused coping when dealing with stressful experiences and preferred to compartmentalize. Out of all 11 themes, compartmentalization had the highest frequency count at 23.

This study also supports previous research attesting to the role of social support in buffering psychological stress (Chae & Boyle, 2013; Santa Maria et al., 2018; Schwarzer, Cone, Li, & Bowler, 2016; Smoktunowicz et al., 2015). Noteworthy, when police officer participants were asked how they manage the stresses of being a police officer (interview question six), all participants emphasized greater dependence on self-reliance versus reliance on others (social support). Participant police officers reported compartmentalizing their work life from their home life, and a strong self-reliance on distractions such as personal hobbies, playing or participating in sports, and periods of solitude or alone time to emotionally re-charge. However, nearly all participants indicated they had at least one person who supported them in the form of a close friend, spouse, or family member. The same participants who identified social support as an effective way to manage stress, also described a conscious effort to hold back information they considered too stressful or emotionally distressing for another person they care for to

handle. This study supports previous studies linking the positive effects of social support following traumatic experiences as a protective factor (Chae & Boyle, 2013; Martin et al., 2009).

### **Factors affecting police officer experiences**

Through their interviews, participant police officers described (a) altruism, (b) exposure to violence, (c) high stress, and (d) police officer persona as factors affecting their experiences. All participant police officers described having selfless concern for the well-being of others when asked about the best parts of their jobs. They described in detail having a genuine sense of concern for the public and their communities, while understanding the risk to their personal safety and being willing to make sacrifices for the common good. All participant police officers discussed their exposure to violence as the worst parts of their jobs on a regular basis with detail shared in their interviews regarding experiences with (a) domestic disturbances, (b) fatalities, and (c) shootings.

In this study, all participant police officers shared a common theme of altruism when describing the best parts of their job. Their shared stories echoed selfless concern for others at their own expense; which all participants reported as being “worth it.” Participant police officer 7 resonated with his peers in the following statement from his interview:

Few jobs really give you opportunity to make a change or difference in someone's life, and every opportunity that I have to be able to do something good or show kindness to someone who is innocent, is a great day at work. No matter what I went through to make that happen. I went into law enforcement because I wanted

to help the community and feel like I could do something by protecting the innocent, so for me that's the best part of my job.

This study also supports previous research on both the high stresses of the policing profession and routine exposure to violence having an impact on police officers. Previous studies discussed that police officers often endure on-the-job stress and trauma exposure regularly (Colwell et al., 2011; Rees & Smith, 2008; Santa Maria et al., 2018). All participant police officers acknowledged exposure to violence as routine, but also described it as the worst and most stressful part of their job. Considering this, the greatest concern for police officers is the common acceptance in the mental health arena that repeated exposure to traumatic stressors compounds adverse psychological effects over time (Asmundson & Stapleton, 2008; Frank et al., 2017; Marshall, 2006).

Lastly, the role of police culture in influencing a professional persona for police officers in this study was also supported by the participants. The theme of police officer persona was the third most frequent theme and endorsed by participant police officers in this study across three different interview questions. Previous research has suggested that police officers share a common culture, a cohesive professional identity (Frewin et al., 2006; Jablonowski, 2017; Silver et al., 2017). Participant police officer 10 attested to his experience as a police officer:

I'll tell you what, being a cop is about ages of tradition and discipline. I feel like it's the biggest thing that describes me. I'll put it this way, we are a lot more alike than not. If I know someone who is a cop, I can tell a lot of things about how he likes things just knowing that fact about him. You sort of belong to a bigger piece



of something that's important, and it is status, respect, and closed to everyone else but us.

By being a part of a larger collective group that shares common experiences, culture, and values; participants may lose some of their individuality. Previous research suggests that sometimes the concept of police culture can inhibit the sharing of experiences due to officers adopting insular approaches to coping (Frewin et al., 2006; Jablonowski, 2017; Silver et al., 2017).

### **Implications for Practice**

While all participant police officers in this study described traumatic exposure to incidents as the worst part of their job, most described concerns that they were not emotionally prepared to handle the crisis situations they would eventually experience. While admitting to being emotionally unprepared for compounding emotional impacts of the types of incidents they would handle on the job, all participant police officers also reported a sense of mistrust regarding obtaining professional mental health help. The results of this study imply that if police officers are not adequately prepared emotionally for the situations they will experience, they could struggle with processing difficult emotions related to their experiences, which could increase adverse psychological and emotional effects over the long term. Psychoeducation regarding mental health and trauma may need to be increased for police officers (pre-incident) so that they can understand situations they are confronted with, as well as recognize their own emotional reactions to experiencing trauma.

All participant police officers in this study described attempts at coping through using compartmentalization, distraction, rationalization, or a combination of all three

strategies. This is important to note for counselors working with police officers in any critical incident debriefing program. A case could be made that consistently using compartmentalization, distraction, and rationalization to cope with traumatic experiences or stressful situations is defensive in nature and avoidant to active emotional processing.

This study implies that police officer resilience could be enhanced through the teaching, development, and use of active emotional processing coping strategies. The repertoire of coping skills for police officers should be expanded as police officers would benefit from having stronger emotional processing to build resiliency and increase self-care when working with traumatic situations on a regular basis. These results indicate that Critical Incident Response (CIR) programs could enhance both the quality of their pre-incident programs and continuing education programs designed to support officers proactively before they experience crisis on the job through psychoeducation.

In terms of direct implications for counselors working with law enforcement, it should be noted that the participant police officers in this study were generally verbally direct, pragmatic, and practical in their responses to open ended discussion questions that would typically be capable of provoking a more emotional response. As discussed in the previous chapter, participants generally resisted emotional reconstructions or expressions of affect while describing their experiences; often in favor of responding comfortably in great detail with a more cognitive, straight-forward talking style that exuded professionalism, containment, and control. Significantly, all participants were on time for their interviews, anticipatory that the researcher would arrive promptly on time or a few minutes ahead of the scheduled interview time, some confirmed their appointment the day before, and none rescheduled their appointment. Counselors should be cognizant

of some police officers' general affinity to timeliness, structure, and attention to detail. This behavior may be considered part of police officer culture. Several police officers discussed during their interviews that they viewed themselves as liking direct verbal approaches, being able to see through "sugar-coating" by others, and preferred straightforward, candid communication styles. Counselors should be cautioned regarding imposing traditional views of healthy emotional expression or feelings on police officers, especially regarding their time on duty. This is supported in the literature regarding police officers having a general standard of rigid conformity which pertains to both behaving and communicating (Bakker & Heuven, 2006; Frewin & Tuffin, 1998). With that in mind, approaches that have typically been identified as evidence based practice for trauma like trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, might be best supplemented for police officers to also include reality therapy approaches; which would focus more on problem-solving and self-reliance on personal choices to achieve goals or results, while maintaining a sense of the here-and-now versus re-living the past.

Counselor educators deciding to teach crisis and trauma should be cognizant that participant police officers in this study discussed mistrust regarding seeking professional help and concern over mental health professionals' unfamiliarity with their experiences. While participant police officers discussed extensive tactical training and physical instruction for evasive actions, nearly all indicated personal concerns over being prepared to handle psychological and emotional experiences. To enhance ability to educate counselors regarding working with police officers, counselor educators should be encouraged to subscribe to law enforcement policy and policing professional journals, as well as attend law enforcement conferences to increase their familiarity with police

officer experiences, culture, and nuances surrounding police work. Some police departments also offer 'ride-a-long' community outreach programs in which citizens can ride along with a police officer on patrol to increase understanding regarding police work. This was explained and offered to the researcher by a couple of participants. Social support was regarded highly by nearly all the participant police officers as an effective coping strategy, despite the officers discussing limiting, watering-down information, or leaving out information to avoid concern of loved ones. Involving the immediate family in counseling could improve communication between a potential police officer client and family. Counselor educators should also familiarize themselves with available police officer peer support programs in their local community for referral and training.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study supported many previous studies regarding coping behaviors and trauma exposure in police officers. While all participant police officers described concerns that professional mental health providers need to improve familiarity with their experiences so they can help them, they also declared mistrust toward seeking any help due to perceived social consequences. More qualitative research could explore this seemingly ironic relationship between police officers wanting professional mental health providers to be more familiar with their experiences in order to help them, acknowledging being emotionally unprepared, however remaining mistrustful of receiving help. While this study identified social support as an effective and important coping behavior for police officers, all participant police officers in this study acknowledged a conscious limiting of information sharing with their confidants as to avoid transference of emotional distress. More qualitative research should also be aimed

at exploring the unique role of social support as a buffering agent; in terms of what constitutes effective versus ineffective social support from individual police officers' perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

According to this study, all participant police officers reported experiencing traumatic exposure to violence as the worst part of their job and feeling emotionally unprepared to handle their experiences. All participant police officers described concerns that mental health providers may not be familiar with the kinds of experiences they have faced on the job, and expressed mistrust regarding obtaining professional mental health help, even if they needed it, due to fear regarding adverse reactions by their employer or concerns their treatment would not remain fully confidential. All participant police officers described using some form or combined variation of compartmentalization, rationalization, or distraction to cope with their experiences, often avoiding active emotional processing. Nearly all participants endorsed a benefitted use of social support, but all participant police officers with social support further described efforts to limit sharing of their experiences to protect their confidant from potential emotional distress. Coping behaviors endorsed by the participant police officers in this study included (a) compartmentalization, (b) distraction, (c) rationalization, and (d) social support. Factors affecting police officer experiences included (a) altruism, (b) exposure to violence, (c) high stress, and (d) police officer persona. Police officers' mental health concerns included (a) lack of emotional preparation, (b) mental health professionals' unfamiliarity with their experiences, and (c) mistrust toward seeking professional mental health help as their primary concerns regarding their experiences.

### **Summary**

This phenomenological study explored the experiences and coping behaviors of police officers exposed to trauma as a routine course of their employment. Generally, participant police officers reported utilizing avoidant coping strategies such as compartmentalization, rationalization, and distraction versus more active emotional processing of traumatic incidents. Participant police officers described concerns regarding a lack of emotional preparation for the impact of their experiences; but at the same time, endorsed feelings of mistrust regarding seeking any professional mental health help. This study provides valuable qualitative support for the social cognitive processing model in the context of emergency service work by police officers. This study also adds to the dearth of literature on qualitative studies which have permeated police culture in order to explore the personal lived experiences of American police officers through their own accounts. Further research is needed on exploring the role of effective versus ineffective social support as a coping behavior.

## REFERENCES

- Addis, N. & Stephens, C. (2008). An evaluation of a police debriefing program: Outcomes for police officers five years after a police shooting. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 10(4), 361-373.  
doi:10.1350/ijps.2008.10.4.092
- Asmundson, G., & Stapleton, J. (2008). Associations between dimensions of anxiety sensitivity and PTSD symptom clusters in active duty police officers. *Cognitive Behavior Therapy*, 37(2), 66-75. doi:10.1080/16506070801969005
- Baka, L. (2015). The effects of job demands on mental and physical health in the group of police officers: Testing the mediating role of job burnout. *Studia Psychologica*, 57(4), 285-299.
- Bakker, A., & Heuven, A. (2006). Emotional dissonance, burnout, and in-role performance among nurses and police officers. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 13, 423-440.
- Balmer, G., Pooley, J., & Cohen, L. (2014). Psychological resilience of western Australian police officers: Relationship between resilience, coping style, psychological functioning and demographics. *Police Practice & Research*, 15(4), 270–282.
- Bandura, A. (1989). Social cognitive theory. *Annals of child development*, 6, 1-60.
- Bohrer, S. (2005). After firing the shots, what happens? *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 74, 8–13.
- Brewin, C. & Holmes, C. (2003). Psychological theories of post-traumatic stress disorder. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 23, 339-377.

- Brown, J., Fielding, J., & Grover, J. (1999). Distinguishing traumatic, vicarious and routine operational stressor exposure and attendant adverse consequences in a sample of police officers. *Work and Stress, 13*, 312-325.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=qa&iid=361>.
- Chae, M., & Boyle, D. (2013). Police suicide: prevalence, risk, and protective factors. *Policing: An International Journal, 36*, 91-118.
- Chia-huei, W. (2009). Role conflicts, emotional exhaustion and health problems: A study of police officers in Taiwan. *Stress & Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress, 25*(3), 259–265.
- Chopko, B., Palmieri, P., & Adams, R. (2015). Critical incident history questionnaire replication: Frequency and severity of trauma exposure among officers from small and midsize police agencies. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 28*(2), 157-161.
- Colwell, L., Lyons, J., Bruce, A., Garner, R., & Miller, R. (2011). Police officers' cognitive appraisals for traumatic events: Implications for treatment and training. *Applied Psychology in Criminal Justice, 7*(2), 106-132.
- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Davidson, A., & Moss, S. (2008). Examining the trauma disclosure of police officers to their partners and officers' subsequent adjustment. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 27*, 51-70.



- Deery, S., Walsh, J., & Zatzick, C. (2014). A moderated mediation analysis of job demands, presenteeism, and absenteeism. *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology, 87*(2), 352–369.
- DeTerte, I., Stephens, C., & Huddleson, L. (2014). The development of a three part model of psychological resilience. *Stress and Health, 30*, 416-424.
- Detrick, P., & Chibnall, J. (2014). Underreporting on the MMPI-2-RF in a high demand police officer selection context: An illustration. *Psychological Assessment, 26*(3), 1044–1049.
- Evans, R., Pistrang, N., & Billings, J. (2013). Police officers' experiences of supportive and unsupportive social interactions following traumatic incidents. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology, 4*, 1-9.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2018). Retrieved from <https://ucr.fbi.gov/leoka/2018>.
- Frank, J., Lambert, E., & Qureshi, H. (2017). Examining police officer work stress using the job demands-resources model. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 33*, 348-367.
- Frewin, K., Stephens, C., & Tuffin, K. (2006). Re-arranging fear: Police officers' discursive constructions of emotion. *Policing & Society, 16*, 243-260.
- Frewin, K., & Tuffin, K. (1998). Police status, conformity, and internal pressure: A discursive analysis of police culture. *Discourse & Society, 9*(2), 173-185.
- Gershon, R., Barocas, B., Canton, A., Li, X., & Vlahov, D. (2009). Mental, physical, and behavioral outcomes associated with perceived work stress in police officers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 36*, 275-289.

- Grawitch, M., Barber, L., & Kruger, M. (2010). Role identification, community socio-economic status demands, and stress outcomes in police officers. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping, 23*(2), 165-180.
- Gray, S., & Collie, A. (2017). The nature and burden of occupational injury among first responder occupations: A retrospective cohort study in Australian workers. *Injury, 48*(11), 2470-2477.
- Gumani, M., Fourie, E., & Blanche, M. (2013). Critical incidents impact management among South African police service officers. *Journal of Psychology in Africa, 23*(3), 481-487.
- Hall, G., Dollard, M., Tuckey, M., Winefield, A., & Thompson, B. (2010). Job demands, work-family conflict, and emotional exhaustion in police officers: A longitudinal test of competing theories. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 83*, 237-250.
- Heyman, M., Dill, J., & Douglas, R. (2018). *Police officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in line of duty* [White paper]. Retrieved from [http://rudermanfoundation.org/white\\_papers/police-officers-and-firefighters-are-more-likely-to-die-by-suicide-than-in-line-of-duty/](http://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/police-officers-and-firefighters-are-more-likely-to-die-by-suicide-than-in-line-of-duty/).
- Hickman, M., Fricas, J., Strom, K., & Pope, M. (2011). Mapping police stress. *Police Quarterly, 14*, 227-250.
- Howard, C., Tuffin, K., & Stephens, C. (2000). Unspeakable emotion: A discursive analysis of police talk about reactions to trauma. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 19*, 295-314.

- Hu, Q., Schaufeli, W., & Taris, T. (2017). How are changes in exposure to job demands and job resources related to burnout and engagement? A longitudinal study among Chinese nurses and police officers. *Stress & Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress*, 33(5), 631–644.
- Huey, L., & Kalyal, H. (2017). We deal with human beings: The emotional labor aspects of criminal investigation. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 19(3), 140-147.
- Ingram, J., Terrill, W., & Paoline, E. (2018). Police culture and officer behavior: Application of a multi-level framework. *Criminology*, 56, 780-811.
- Jablonowski, L. (2017). Healthy organizational culture – healthy employees? Effectiveness of organizational culture on perceived health of German police officers. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 19, 205-217.
- Julseth, J., Ruiz, J., & Hummer, D. (2011). Municipal police officer job satisfaction in Pennsylvania: A study of organizational development in small police departments. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, 13(3), 243–254.
- Kaur, R., Chodagiri, V., & Reddi, N. (2013). A psychological study of stress, personality, and coping in police personnel. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 35, 141-147.

- Komarovskaya, I., Maguen, S., McCaslin, S., Metzler, T., Madan, A., Brown, A., Galatzer-Levy, I., Henn-Haase, C., & Marmar, C. (2011). The impact of killing and injuring others on mental health symptoms among police officers. *Journal of Psychiatric Research, 45*(10), 1332-1336.
- Kunst, M., Saan, M., Bollen, L., & Kuijpers, K. (2017). Secondary traumatic stress and secondary posttraumatic growth in a sample of Dutch police family liaison officers. *Stress & Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress, 33*(5), 570–577.
- Leonard, R., & Alison, L. (1999). Critical incident stress debriefing and its effects on coping strategies and anger in a sample of Australian police officers involved in shooting incidents. *Work & Stress, 13*(2), 144–161.
- Levy-Gigi, E., Richter-Levin, G., Okon-Singer, H., Kéri, S., & Bonanno, G. (2016). The hidden price and possible benefit of repeated traumatic exposure. *Stress: The International Journal on the Biology of Stress, 19*(1), 1–7.
- Louw, G., & Viviers, A. (2010). An evaluation of a psychosocial stress and coping model in the police work context. *South African Journal of Industrial Psychology, 36*(1), 1–11.
- Lucas, T., Weidner, N., & Janisse, J. (2012). Where does work stress come from? A generalizability analysis of stress in police officers. *Psychology & Health, 27*(12), 1426–1447.
- Lumb, R. & Breazeale, R. (2002). Police officer attitudes and community policing implementation: Developing strategies for durable organizational change. *Policing & Society, 13*, 91-106.

- Ma, C., Burchfiel, C., Andrew, M., Fekedulegn, D., Hartley, T., Gu, J., Violanti, J., & Charles, L. (2013). Shift work and work stress among police officers. *Annals of Epidemiology, 23*, 596-597.
- Marshall, E. (2006). Cumulative career traumatic stress (CCTS): A pilot study of traumatic stress in law enforcement. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, 62-71*.
- Martin, M., Marchand, A., Boyer, R., & Normand, M. (2009). Predictors of the development of post-traumatic stress disorder among police officers. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, 10*, 451-468.
- Mikkelsen, A., & Burke, R. (2004). Work-Family Concerns of Norwegian Police Officers: Antecedents and Consequences. *International Journal of Stress Management, 11*(4), 429-444.
- Miller, A., Unruh, L., Wharton, T., Liu, X., & Zhang, N. (2017). The relationship between perceived organizational support, perceived coworker support, debriefing and professional quality of life in Florida law enforcement officers. *International Journal of Police Science & Management, 19*(3), 129-139.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ortega, A., Brenner, S., & Leather, P. (2007). Occupational stress, coping and personality in the police: An SEM study. *International Journal of Police Science & Management, 9*, 36-50.

- Papazoglou, K., & Tuttle, B. (2018). Fighting police trauma: Practical approaches to addressing psychological needs of officers. *Journal of Police Emergency Response, 8*(3), 1-11.
- Patterson, G. (2003). Examining the effects of coping and social support on work and life stress among police officers. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 31*, 215-226.
- Rees, B., & Smith, J. (2008). Breaking the silence: The traumatic circle of policing. *International Journal of Police Science & Management, 10*(3), 267-279.
- Santa Maria, A., Wörfel, F., Wolter, C., Gusy, B., Rotter, M., Stark, S., ... Renneberg, B. (2018). The Role of Job Demands and Job Resources in the Development of Emotional Exhaustion, Depression, and Anxiety Among Police Officers. *Police Quarterly, 21*(1), 109–134.
- Schaible, L. & Six, M. (2016). Emotional strategies of police and their varying consequences for burnout. *Police Quarterly, 19*, 3-31.
- Schwarzer, R., Cone, J., Li, J., & Bowler, R. (2016). A PTSD symptoms trajectory mediates between exposure levels and emotional support in police responders to 9/11: A growth curve analysis. *BMC Psychiatry, 16*, 1-7.
- Silver, J., Roche, S., Bilach, T., & Bontrager-Ryon, S. (2017). Traditional police culture, use of force, and procedural justice: Investigating individual, organizational, and contextual factors. *Justice Quarterly, 34*(7), 1272–1309.

Smoktunowicz, E., Baka, L., Cieslak, R., Nichols, C., Benight, C., & Luszczynska,

A. (2015). Explaining counterproductive work behaviors among police officers: The indirect effects of job demands are mediated by job burnout and moderated by job control and social support. *Human Performance*, 28(4), 332-350.

Texas Department of Public Safety (2019). Retrieved from

<http://www.dps.texas.gov/crimereports/16/citCh8.pdf>.

Tuckey, M., & Scott, J. (2014). Group critical incident stress debriefing with emergency services personnel: A randomized controlled trial. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, 27(1), 38–54.

Van Gelderen, B., Konijn, E., & Bakker, A. (2011). Emotional labor among trainee police officers: The interpersonal role of positive emotions. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(2), 163-172.

Webster, J. (2013). Perceived stress among police officers: An integrative model of stress and coping. *Policing*, 37, 839-857.

Weiss, D., Brunet, A., Best, S., Metzler, T., Liberman, A., Pole, N., & Marmar, C.

(2010). Frequency and severity approaches to indexing exposure to trauma: The critical incident history questionnaire for police officers. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 23, 734–743.

Willis, J. & Mastrofski, S. (2018). Improving policing by integrating craft and science:

What can patrol officers teach us about good police work? *Policing and Society*, 28, 27-44.

**APPENDIX A****IRB Approval**

IRB#: IRB-2019-266

Title: The coping behaviors of police officers exposed to daily trauma as a course of their employment: A phenomenological study.

Creation Date: 8-30-2019

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Arielle Carrier

Review Board: SHSU IRB

Sponsor: Study

History Submission Type: Initial

Review Type: Expedited

Decision: Approved

Key Study Contacts: David Lawson, dxl028@shsu.edu

Arielle Carrier, Principal Investigator, acc057@shsu.edu





## APPENDIX C

### Consent Form

# Sam Houston State University

## Consent for Participation in Research

**KEY INFORMATION FOR:** The coping behaviors of police officers exposed to daily trauma as a course of their employment: A phenomenological study.

You are being asked to be a participant in a research study about individual coping behaviors of police officers who are exposed to trauma as part of their routine course of employment. You have been asked to participate in the research because you are over the age of 18, currently employed in southeast Texas as a police officer for the past two years and may be eligible to participate.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE, PROCEDURES, AND DURATION OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe individual experiences and coping behaviors of police officers who are exposed to trauma as part of their routine course of employment. If you agree to be in the study, you will participate in an interview. You will be asked demographic questions such as your age, number of years as a police officer, education level, number of children, relationship status, and what percentage of your work time is exposure to high stress or traumatic situations? The interview will also include questions regarding your coping experiences such as: 1) Tell me about the best parts and worst parts of your job. 2) Describe what it is like for you to transition from work life to home life? 3) Describe the most stressful experience(s) that you've had while on the job. 4) How did you deal with this situation(s)? 5) How do you feel about the daily stresses of your job? 6) How do you manage the stresses of being a police officer? 7) What suggestions would you offer mental health professionals who assist police officers in dealing with the stressors of the profession?

If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will be held in a private location that will provide confidentiality and privacy for you (such as an office or your home). With your permission, I would also like to audio-record the interview.

By doing this study, we hope to learn more about describing coping behaviors of individual police officers in order to explore what contributes to their resilience, so that mental health programs could become more effective by offering services targeted at individual needs of officers. Your participation in this research will last about 45-60 minutes.

#### WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

Your voluntary participation will contribute to knowledge about how police officers cope. This research will add to the body of existing information on how mental health professionals and programs designed to help police officers process employment-related trauma can address individual needs of officers.

#### WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

Risks for participation in this study may include the production of negative feelings such as anxiety or stress.

#### DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

#### WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

The person in charge of this study is Arielle Carrier of the Sam Houston State University Department of Counselor Education, who is working under the supervision of Dr. David Lawson. If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study his/her contact information is: Arielle Carrier, (email) [acc057@shsu.edu](mailto:acc057@shsu.edu) or (telephone) 346-314-1588 and Dr. David Lawson (email) [dxl028@shsu.edu](mailto:dxl028@shsu.edu) or (telephone) 936-294-2529. If you have any questions, suggestions or concerns about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Sharla Miles at 936-294-4875 or e-mail ORSP at [sharla\\_miles@shsu.edu](mailto:sharla_miles@shsu.edu).

**APPENDIX D****Demographic Questionnaire**

1. Participant's age:

2. Number of years employed as a police officer:

3. Education Level:

Less than High school    High school Diploma    Some College    Associate degree

Bachelor's Degree    Graduate Degree    Doctoral Degree

4. Relationship Status:

Single    In a relationship    Married    Divorced    Separated    Widowed

5. Do you have children?

Yes    No

If so, how many? \_\_\_\_\_

6. What percentage of your work time is exposure to high stress or traumatic situations?

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about the best parts and worst parts of your job.
2. Describe what it is like for you to transition from work life to home life?
3. Describe the most stressful experience(s) that you've had while on the job.
4. How did you deal with this situation(s)?
5. How do you feel about the daily stresses of your job?
6. How do you manage the stresses of being a police officer?
7. What suggestions would you offer mental health professionals who assist police officers in dealing with the stressors of the profession?

## VITA

Arielle Carrier  
Curriculum Vitae

### EDUCATION

Sam Houston State University  
PhD candidate - Counselor Education

2013 University of Houston-Victoria  
Master of Education in Counseling

2009 American Military University  
Master of Public Health

2001 Wayne State University  
Bachelor of arts degree in Psychology

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Teaching  
2018 Sam Houston State University – Instructor  
COUN 5088 – *Advanced Studies in Trauma.*

2016 Sam Houston State University – Co-Instructor  
COUN 5394 – *Crisis and Trauma Counseling.*

Clinical/Counseling Experience  
September 2016 - Present  
The Harris Center for Mental Health & IDD

April 2014 – September 2016  
Harris County Department of Education

August 2015 - December 2015  
Sam Houston State University Counseling Clinic – The Woodlands

August 2012 - November 2013  
The Source for Women Medical Clinic

August 2012 – November 2013  
Renewing Hope

January 2013 – November 2013  
The Center for Stress Management

August 2012 – January 2013

## Fort Bend County Behavioral Health

April 2003 – January 2013  
Child Advocates, Inc.

### Clinical Supervision

2016 Sam Houston State University (SHSU) - Supervised Master's Practicum Student Interns

2017 Sam Houston State University (SHSU) - Supervised Master's Practicum Student Interns

## **SCHOLARLY AND CREATIVE ENDEAVORS**

### Professional Presentations

Carrier, A. & Williams, R. (2018, October). Stop, walk, talk bullying prevention program: Putting it into action. Presented at the Colorado School Counseling Association's Annual Conference – Keystone, CO.

Carrier, A. & Williams, R. (2018, October). Trauma-Informed expressive arts therapy with children: Responding to painful emotional experiences. Presented at the Colorado School Counseling Association's Annual Conference – Keystone, CO.

Carrier, A. (2015, May). A public health perspective on communicable diseases, safety and injury prevention when working with children. Presented at Harris County Department of Education's Healthy Minds Healthy Families Conference – Houston, TX.

## **PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT AND SERVICE**

American Counseling Association (ACA)

Texas Counseling Association (TCA)

Texas Public Health Association

### **Committee Membership**

2016 – 2017 Bay Area Counseling Association (BACA) - Secretary

2014 – 2016 Health Services Advisory Committee (HSAC)

2007 – 2010 Harris County Child Abuse Task Force (HCCATF) - Secretary

2011 – 2013 Harris County Child Fatality Review Team (HCCFRT)

### **Honors and Awards**

SHSU General Scholarship recipient

SHSU Department of Counseling Education scholarship recipient

### **Credentials**

Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)

Texas State Board of Examiners