

**Blending light and dark:**  
**A Qualitative Analysis of the Experiences of Stress and Growth**  
**in Retired Police Officers**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the School of  
Psychology, University of East London for the degree of Professional Doctorate in  
Counselling Psychology

January, 2019

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend my thanks to my supervisor Dr. Stelios Gkouskos, for his invaluable and consistent support, specifically for his patience and deeply insightful, reflective and at times, strict guidance during all stages of the research. Thanks also to Dr. Lisa C. Fellin, my initial research supervisor for her direction.

My heartfelt thanks to the retired police officers who agreed to participate in my research. Their willingness share their difficult and at times, profoundly moving experiences so openly, was sincerely humbling.

I extend immense gratitude to my fellow counselling psychology trainees, whose care, encouragement and humour, provided me with the strength and support to keep joyfully battling through three years of training.

Thanks too to my dearest friends, D and S for their ongoing care and wisdom during my training, you held me together with your thousand small kindnesses. To A for her compassion, irrepressible wit and enduring confidence in me. Also to CP, who helped me bear the load with love.

My biggest thanks, go to my family. To my parents, who instilled in me a true joy for learning, the routine of profound self-belief and the thirst to always dream big. To EB for his support and encouragement in the good and also in the most trying times during the past 3 years. My biggest thanks go to my children, Sofia and Liam, for their huge patience, playfulness, ruthless humour and love, you kept me grounded.

Last but not least, thanks to my mentor, Daisaku Ikeda.

## **Abstract**

This research aimed to explore the experiences of operational stress in retired police officers and of their growth following the adverse events they had faced during their service in U.K. police forces. As there exists a paucity of studies on retired officers, the rationale for exploring these participants' perspectives in the present study was illuminated through the review and critical analysis of relevant theory and research on stress and growth among serving police officers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants and the resultant transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which gave rise to seven superordinate themes: "How stress presents itself"; "The weight of accountability"; "Diverse ways of coping"; "The corrosive nature of distress"; "Breaking point"; "Anchored in macho narratives" and "Forged in the fire".

Findings were discussed at an interpersonal level, which examined culturally-specific aspects of experiencing operational stress, emotion and vulnerability within the police and also at the individual level. More specifically, findings showed that in the context of stress and inconsistent support, officers had distanced themselves from the organisation, minimising distress, before turning to social groups for support. Furthermore, within the hegemonic, masculine context of the police, officers had been left to construe the expression of emotion as unhelpful or unacceptable, leaving them in a state of emotional isolation and often extricating them from their own internal worlds.

Findings suggested that the minimisation of emotion was construed as adaptive in terms of job performance but toxic in hindering officers' capacity to make sense of their individual and interpersonal experiences.

Recommendations were made in relation to more comprehensive police training around the expression of emotion; around the need for the police organisation to become a more secure base, where operational stress may be contained and harnessed in order to enhance performance and in terms of the necessity to move away from clinical interventions that rely purely on help seeking practices of the individual.

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## **Abbreviations**

**BPS:** British Psychological Society

**IPA:** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

**PTSD:** Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

**UEL:** University of East London

**UK:** United Kingdom

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## **Introduction chapter**

### **1.1 Chapter Overview**

This section begins by providing a context to policing in the UK and summary of the physical and psychological hazards of police work, before offering an overview of the effects of operational stress on police officers and the potential for growth as a different outcome of distress among retired officers. The rationale for the present study and its relevance to Counselling Psychology are then presented, before concluding the chapter with a discussion of reflexivity which includes a context to my interest in the topic.

### **1.2 The Context of Policing in the UK**

The main task of police officers is to ensure the internal security of a country and to protect the public. Police officers are regularly exposed to highly stressful, dangerous, uncertain environments as part of their daily work, making their role increasingly complex and emotionally demanding. In the UK, police officers need to manage this challenging function in the context of continual structural changes and cuts in resources, which have recently led to dramatic reductions in numbers of officers and staff in the police service. In fact, Home Office statistics show that the number of police officers in England and Wales fell by 1,213 in six months and is now 16% below its 2009 peak (Siddique, 2018). Such insufficient funding has left officers overstretched in the face of escalating violent crime and persistent terrorist threats.

The need for forces to constantly improve their performance has also led to substantial organisational changes to the way policing is delivered, particularly to increased efficiency, often at the cost of the social support available for officers. Furthermore, there has been an exceptional level of social change over the past decade (College of Policing, 2018), which has been intensified by the increased use of internet

and social media. Sexting, online child abuse, internet radicalisation, money laundering and trafficking have initiated new types of crime, offenders and victims, which police officers are now required to manage. In tandem with this social change, there has been a transformation in the role of the police officer from its traditional policing functions, towards a social welfare role (College of Policing, 2018), as they deal with more complex crime within the context of the expanding responsibility that comes with having to protect more vulnerable people (Dearden, 2018).

### **1.3 Physical and Psychological Hazards of Police Work**

Police officers tend to differ from other populations that also experience occupational stress and trauma since they are not only regularly exposed to experiences of threat to the self but also to witnessing the distress of others throughout their careers.

A review by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2011) identified the physical and psychological hazards that can impact on the wellbeing of police officers. Physical hazards encompass the physically demanding nature of their role, which involves long shifts, frequent overtime and insufficient breaks, in addition to the potential physical violence inherent in their role. Furthermore, the routinely stressful and potentially traumatic situations faced by police officers (Karlsson & Christianson, 2003; Tehrani, 2014), often place them under regular direct exposure to potentially life-threatening situations, in addition to indirect exposure to psychological distress, when having to observe the suffering of others (Andersen, Papazoglou, Arnetz & Collins, 2015). This has been described by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2011) as ‘emotional overstrain’, due to the enormous psychological demands that police officers face when burdened with the responsibility for the lives of others.

Empirical studies on police stress have tended to divide stressors into the two broad categories of job context (organisational stressors) and job content (Evans &

Coman, 1993). More specifically, job context, comprising supervisory support, peer support and administration policies and actions (Castle & Martin, 2006), has been identified as having the most impact on police officer stress (Violanti & Aron, 1995).

The detrimental psychological effects of policing have been highlighted in recent media coverage reports regarding the number of police officers in the UK taking long-term sick leave (of around 28 to 29 days), which has increased by 12% between 2010-2011 and 2014-2015 (Press Association, 2016). Moreover, the number of officers taking time off for mental health reasons is reported as having risen by 35% in the last five years. As of 31 March 2017, there were 4,426 police officers on recuperative duties and 4,111 on restricted duties in the 43 police forces in England and Wales. This accounted for 3.6% and 3.3% of officers respectively (Hargreaves, Husband & Linehan, 2017). These figures do not include short and medium-term sickness, presenteeism (coming to work while unwell) or leaveism (taking annual leave when sick). In the past, sickness absence was mainly caused by physical conditions, however, a high proportion of current sickness absence is due to mental health conditions (Hargreaves et al., 2017).

Scoping research by Mind (2016) suggests that the disproportionate levels of emergency services personnel affected by mental health difficulties may be due to a reduction in budgets, to the lack of informal support and to the prevalence of mental health stigma in the workplace. In fact, officers have also begun to speak out in the media about their experiences, expressing how budget cuts and increased operational targets have impacted on their wellbeing. For example, Met officer, Alex Stewart, told The Guardian (Stewart, 2015) he and his colleagues often worked double shifts without pay just to keep up with the workload, noting that police organisations were “held together by the good will of men and women who make it work despite the cost to them” (para. 11) and that “the vast majority of officers who remain are miserable, stressed, overworked” (para. 19). Thus, experienced and able officers appear to be leaving the

police but due to the context of fiscal austerity, they are being replaced by new recruits receiving a fraction of the training (Stewart, 2015).

In the past, police organisations in England and Wales have tried to address the increased stress levels of their officers by sending them on ‘emotional survival’ training, where they have been taught various techniques such as breathing and visualisation exercises (Blake, 2010), but it appears that reactive measures of this sort have made little impact on the wellbeing of officers. In fact, a national survey by the Police Federation (2017) found that 66% of officers described workload as too high; 73% said that their team had a minimum officer staffing level; 80% of respondents experienced feelings of stress, low mood and anxiety; nine out of ten (92%) of these indicated that their psychological difficulties had been caused by work; only 21% of line managers had received training on supporting colleagues who had disclosed a mental health difficulty; 42% reported that they were ‘Poorly’ or ‘Very poorly’ supported by the police service and that the most frequently cited reason for not seeking help was that officers ‘did not want to be treated differently (negatively)’ (Police Federation, 2017). Furthermore, a recent report (Meechan, 2018) highlighted that 80% of officers suffer from symptoms of depression and anxiety due to feeling overworked and stressed but that due to austerity measures, the ability for forces to provide support for officers was diminished.

#### **1.4 Operational Stress: The Cumulative Weight of Adversity**

The statistics outlined above suggest that the stressful and adverse experiences, which are potentially a necessary part of the working lives of police officers, tend to result in a high degree of physical and psychological distress (Wagner, Heinrichs & Ehler, 1998).

Research emphasises that police officers often show higher risk of physical ill health such as increased rates of contracting cancer, diabetes, heart and gastrointestinal

disease (Lieberman et al., 2002; Violanti et al., 2005) and also a higher prevalence of mental health difficulties (Tehrani & Piper, 2011) such as depression, sleep problems, irritability, anxiety and higher rates of suicide than individuals from other professions (Andersen, Wade, Possemato, & Ouimette, 2010; Chopko, 2010; Collins & Gibbs, 2003; Karlsson & Christianson, 2003; Violanti, 2004).

The psychological distress experienced by police officers has tended to be examined along a spectrum ranging from chronic work stress involving the ever-present perception of danger and job risk (Violanti, 2014), to traumatic experiences such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is important to note, however, that despite the numerous empirical studies examining the effects of police stress, most research has tended to focus either on the overall physical risks or on the psychological impact of singular traumatic experiences following adversity. Nevertheless, as emphasised by Miller (2015), the nature of police work often involves not a singular trauma or event of critical stress but instead, the cumulative weight of a number of mundane stressors over the course of an officer's career. He suggests that this "daily grind of unpredictable crises" (Miller, 2015, p.203), comprising not only the direct and indirect exposure to psychological distress but also procedural stressors such as long overtime, shift work and other organisational stressors, are often overlooked in the literature or conceptualised as less important than the larger more acute, high profile, post-traumatic stressors. In fact, there has been a tendency to focus on headliner events of critical trauma instead of the accumulation of stressful incidents which, with time, may become deeply ingrained.

It is for this reason that I wish to focus my research on the experience of multiple stress-related experiences or operational stress in policing.

### **1.5 The Salutogenic Effects of Distress**

Although the majority of research examining the impact of adverse experiences

on individuals has focused on their negative impact, there is also a body of research that points to the potential of transforming from adversity. More specifically, research into police stress has been rooted in the perspective of a pathological model of distress, which has tended to highlight the detrimental effects of stress or trauma on an officer's functioning (Burke & Paton, 2006; Falconer, Alexander & Klein, 2013). Such a widespread psychopathological model of distress, has owed much of its popularity to the construct of PTSD, which has tended to overshadow interest in the positive transformation also observed following adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

However, over the past decade researchers and practitioners have begun to delve into the salutogenic effects (Antonovsky, 1979) or growth (Joseph, Murphy & Regel, 2015) arising from adverse experiences (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Joseph, 2012; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). As such, growth has been understood as a trajectory that goes beyond impairment and recovery, whereby an individual does not simply return to earlier levels of functioning but instead surpasses them (Carver, 1998).

It is worth noting that distress and growth tend to appear in the literature as two divergent constructs with a historical lineage embedded in very distinct research traditions. On the one hand, distress is rooted within an illness ideology supporting the medicalisation of human experience, where clinical objectives tend to target recovery from traumatic symptoms. Growth, on the other hand, is located within a humanistic ideology, which, in line with the fertile new paradigm of second wave positive psychology (Lomas, 2016), allows for a new perspective of higher human functioning arising from the struggle to find meaning in the face of adversity (Joseph, 2009).

Although the construct of growth is still not well understood (Maercker & Zoellner, 2004; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006) it may be an important aspect to consider for first responders who must regularly cope with stressful events.

Given that the investigation of growth among police officers still remains an underexplored area of research, the current study aims to address this gap by proposing to examine their experience of operational stress and of their growth following adversity. Furthermore, as highlighted by Pole, Kulkarni, Bernstein & Kaufmann (2006), literature on the impact of stress in policing has tended to focus on serving officers, often overlooking the effects of policing from the perspective of retired police officers, a population which may provide an important perspective in understanding the long-term effects of stress in police work.

In fact, longitudinal research indicates that growth tends to occur after some time has passed (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). For instance, research has found that time since an adverse incident occurred, tended to be positively correlated with growth (Cordova et al., 2001), suggesting that growth may be promoted through engaging in cognitive, affective and interpersonal processes over a longer period of time (Groleau, Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2012).

Thus, due to the protracted effects of cumulative stress, which comprise the build-up of adverse events that can arise throughout an officer's career and of the longer-term process of growth, I have decided to focus my research on retired police officers. This group of participants is likely to have had extensive exposure to police-related stressors relating to job content and context and are less likely to be susceptible to institutional pressures when sharing their experiences. In fact, retired officers may be able to look back and provide a more global perspective of their experience of stress due to their distance from the role, which may, in turn, allow them to explore possible experiences of growth following adversity, from the wider context of their lives.

## **1.6 Rationale for the Study and Contributions to Counselling Psychology**

Given that the exploration of cumulative stress and growth specifically among retired police officers remains an underexplored area of research, the current study aims



to address this gap by proposing an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the experiences of operational stress in retired officers and of their growth through adversity. This research would make an original contribution to existing literature since no other studies have addressed operational stress and growth in this group of participants. Furthermore, I propose that a move away from the medicalisation and epidemiology of stress and towards a more humanistic, phenomenological approach to human distress and growth is highly relevant to the discipline of Counselling Psychology, which, as a pluralistic profession that is rooted in a humanistic framework, places significant value on the unique meaning-making of the individual.

More specifically, an understanding of the lived experience of officers as they struggle to make meaning of adversity would add to the knowledge-base of Counselling Psychology and potentially make further contributions to the evidence base of the profession. This may also lead to further clinical recommendations for mental health interventions that may be able to not only focus on alleviating symptoms but on promoting growth and helping individuals lead more fulfilling lives. Finally, this study may also provide insights into the ways to further support police officers' wellbeing and may inform organisational recommendations that aim to address the high percentage of police officers on long term sick absence from work due to psychological distress.

## **1.7 Reflexivity**

Counselling Psychology is underpinned by a set of values that acknowledge the inevitability of our subjectivity (i.e. how our experience, values, beliefs and investments influence our perspective); take a pluralistic stance on psychotherapy; have an orientation towards empowering and respecting individuals from a non-hierarchical positioning and focus on enabling others to grow (Cooper, 2009; Orlans & van Scoyoc, 2008). Furthermore, as emphasised by Kasket (2013), the discipline of Counselling Psychology

is rooted not just in these values but in their application, both clinically and in research. As such, one of the ways in which these values can be actioned in research is through the connection between the acknowledgement of our subjectivity and reflexivity, i.e. how we manage and acknowledge the impact of our subjectivity on the research process.

Kasket (2013) emphasises three types of reflexivity that are important to engage in during research. The first is personal reflexivity, which recognises the influence of the researcher on the way a topic is chosen and how the data is viewed, processed and presented. The second is methodological reflexivity, which acknowledges that the way the researcher undertakes the research, serves to shape the results; and the third is epistemological reflexivity, which recognises that the assumptions guiding the choice of methodology, shape the knowledge that is produced.

In order to attend to personal reflexivity, it is relevant to state my professional motivation to undertake this study, which stemmed from previous research I conducted in the field of Investigative and Forensic Psychology, when I explored the management of major critical incidents by UK emergency services. The data I analysed was collected from a large, multiagency, live training exercise for UK blue light services. During every stage of my research I became curious about the psychological effects (positive or negative) of such potentially stressful and traumatic experiences on emergency services personnel, which led to my current interest in exploring the experiences of stress and growth among police officers, since they are generally the first responders to arrive at the scene of a critical incident.

Although methodological reflexivity will be attended to more fully in the Methodology and Discussion chapters, it may be relevant to state that the way I carried out the literature review could have been influenced by preconceived ideas or assumptions on the topic coming to the fore through my previous research experience. However, as highlighted by Brocki, Brocki & Wearden (2006), it is unlikely that as a

researcher I could have feasibly begun this study without having at least some idea of the current literature.

I will also attend to epistemological reflexivity in the Methodology chapter but it is important to highlight that throughout the research, I have engaged in other reflexive practices such as carrying out a reflexive exercise on the topic of research; keeping a reflexive journal and taking personal notes on associations and reactions alongside interview transcripts and analyses (Kasket, 2013).

## **Literature Review**

### **2.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter offers a contextual overview and critical analysis of relevant theory and research on stress and growth among police officers. The first section of the review provides definitions of key constructs. Subsequently, the existing literature on stress and growth is examined in terms of its findings, epistemological underpinnings and the types of knowledge that it can generate, in order to gain further understanding of the unique, lived experiences of retired police officers. The psychological significance of this topic is explored by discussing its relevance to theory, research and clinical practice, addressing the lack of empirical research on growth among retired police officers in the UK, particularly attending to the dearth of empirical, qualitative studies in this area. The review concludes by returning to the rationale and research question of the proposed study.

### **2.2 The Experience of Stress, Trauma and Growth Among Police Officers.**

To date, the majority of research into trauma among police officers has reflected the medicalisation of traumatic distress and, in turn, the hedonic perspective of wellbeing, which have usefully allowed for the identification of the detrimental effects of work-related stressors (Tehrani & Piper, 2011). As such, this standpoint has placed at the top of the research agenda the examination of the causes of PTSD in the police service and the effectiveness of specific mental health interventions into its treatment such as trauma-focused CBT (TF-CBT) and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) (Murphy et al., 2010), which in the UK have been supported by clinical guidelines proposed by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2018). Unfortunately, this has left little room for the exploration of relationship-based approaches that seek to

understand the meaning of stressful or traumatic experiences that may lead to growth (Murphy, Durkin & Joseph., 2010).

**2.2.1 Key constructs: stress and trauma.** As discussed above, the psychological distress experienced by police officers has tended to be examined along a spectrum ranging from chronic stress to traumatic experiences that lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The term ‘stress’ as it is currently used in the field of health, was first coined by Selye (1936) when he defined it as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made on it” (p. 32). More recently, however, it has been defined by McEwen (2000) as a threat, real or implied, to the psychological or physiological integrity of an individual. More specifically, it has been understood in the literature as a relationship between the person and the environment, such that when an individual’s resources are felt to be exceeded, their wellbeing can be compromised (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980), which may lead to physiological, psychological and behavioural consequences (Brockman, Burque, Van Hasselt & Baker, 2015).

McEwen and Seeman (1999) conceptualise an individual’s stress response in relation to ‘allostasis’, a person’s ability to maintain stability through change (McEwan, 2000) or the process of adaptation to acute stress (Sterling & Eyer 1988). They also use the term ‘allostatic load’ to refer to the wear and tear that characterises the stress response when the body endures recurring cycles of stress. In essence, it is the price paid for being forced to adapt to adverse psychosocial or physical situations in events of too much stress.

The stress response is considered adaptive when it is the result of a reaction to an acute situation of limited duration, but maladaptive when these regulatory mechanisms cannot bring the physiological reaction under control. Dysregulation may

thus occur when the individual is unable to remove themselves from a stressful event, which may then become chronic or protracted (McEwen, 1998).

Research into work-related stressors have shown that acute stress can trigger thrombotic, arrhythmic or mechanical cardiovascular disease, whilst chronic, cumulative stress increases cardiovascular risk by accelerating the atherosclerotic process (Bonnet, Irving, Terra, Nony, Berthezene & Moulin, 2005; Brockman et al, 2015).

The relationship between stress and the onset of PTSD has been a relatively recent development (Green, Lindy & Grace, 1985). PTSD was conceptualised as a new diagnosable mental disorder with the publication of the Third Edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), where it was highlighted that its onset was attributable to an individual experiencing a potentially stressful event in an extreme way. This new diagnosis of PTSD was subsequently classified under anxiety disorders and defined as "a severe response to an extreme stressor" (Davison & Neale, 1998, p. 155).

Due to this relationship between stress and trauma and the current acknowledgment that both may indeed be located along the same a spectrum of human distress, it may prove helpful to unpack the construct of 'trauma'. This concept has been widely used in many contexts and providing a clear definition remains a complex task. While some authors propose that 'trauma' should be used to refer to both a negative situation that causes distress and also to the distress that is experienced (Briere & Scott, 2006), others have argued that the construct should only refer to the highly stressful event that overwhelms a person's capacity to cope (Horowitz, 1986; McNally, 2005). While this viewpoint holds traumatic responses as distinct from the distressing event, such a stimulus/response perspective does not leave room for interactive models of functioning in which an individual's emotions, perceptions and reactions can also become stimuli

among their understanding of an event and whereby individuals can determine whether a situation is traumatic or not through their subjective experience (James & Martin, 2013).

As stated above, the current study will adopt the perspective that stress and trauma are indeed found along a spectrum of human distress. Therefore, the research will focus on experiences of operational stress, which may encompass both acute, single events that participants may deem traumatic as well as the protracted stressful overstrain felt by officers due to their work in the police.

**2.2.2 Growth.** ‘Posttraumatic growth’ was a term was coined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), which refers to how adversity and distress can, in fact, become catalysts for higher levels of psychological wellbeing. Many terms have been used to describe growth following adversity, such as ‘stress-related growth’ (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996); ‘positive changes’ (Joseph, Williams, & Yule, 1993); ‘perceived benefits’ (McMillen & Fisher, 1998) and ‘adversarial growth’ (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

The current literature review will adopt the term ‘growth’ which, as proposed by Joseph (2009), invokes an image of human experience embedded in a natural developmental process whereby individuals are able to build themselves anew and welcome new ways of living after experiencing trauma and distress (Joseph, 2012).

The critical analysis of trauma and growth presented in this literature review, highlight and address the methodological, conceptual and epistemological tensions that can be found in the stress and trauma literature between the medicalisation of human experience that promotes an illness ideology and the phenomenological approach to growth located within the full range of human functioning that arises from a struggle to find meaning in life experiences (Joseph, 2009).

**2.2.3 The salutogenic effects of stress, trauma and adversity.** A considerable body of literature has highlighted that the salutogenic effects which individuals experience after adversity (Helgeson et al., 2006; Joseph, 2012; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), involve changes broadly across three life domains relating to the self, others and the world (Ramos & Leal, 2013). The first refers to a transformation in people's view of themselves, which often entails a re-evaluation of their self-worth. For example, individuals tend to report a greater sense of resilience, strength and wisdom, which can be linked to increased self-acceptance (Joseph & Linley, 2005). Second, individuals often describe enhanced personal relationships, reporting that they appreciate friends and family more and feel greater kindness for others (Joseph, 2012). Third, people tend to report changes in personal values and beliefs, which impact on their life philosophy and often lead them to experience a greater appreciation of life as finite. As such, individuals often report that this positive transformation in their psychological wellbeing (PWB) has provided them with a valuable learning experience that has allowed them to live more authentically (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Ramos & Leal, 2013). It is significant to note, therefore, that these studies emphasise that growth does not preclude the psychopathological effects of stress and trauma or that growth reflects the complete absence of stress or trauma-related mental health symptoms (Helgeson et al., 2006). They actually propose that growth involves the transformation of a person's assumptive world (Joseph, 2012) from the struggle that arises from dealing with the stressors and losses inherent in dealing with adversity (Baker, Kelly, Calhoun, Cann & Tedeschi, 2008). In fact, a meta-analysis by Helgeson et al. (2006) highlighted that although there was an association between growth and better mental health outcomes, there was also an correlation between growth and more intrusive thoughts about the traumatic stressor, which the authors suggest may be due to the cognitive processing involved in working through a stressful traumatic experience. It is therefore possible that growth arises from



a period of self-exploration in which an individual strives to make sense of an adverse event in terms of its causes and consequences. As such, researchers have underscored that it may be helpful to look at growth from a eudaemonic (as opposed to from a hedonic) mental health perspective (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Joseph, 2012). These two comparatively distinctive frameworks to empirically study wellbeing are located in two divergent philosophies. On the one hand, the hedonic perspective (Kahneman, Diener & Schwarz, 1999) purports that wellbeing is concerned with happiness, the absence of negative affective states (Diener, Suk, Lucas & Smith, 1999) and subjective wellbeing (SWB). In this sense, theories of posttraumatic distress are therefore theories of SWB, since they focus on restoring a person's psychological states (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002) through the alleviation of symptoms of PTSD. The eudaemonic perspective (Waterman, 1993), on the other hand, refers to a person's inner characterological resources and suggests that wellbeing relates to the degree to which an individual can develop psychological maturity to find meaning and purpose in life following adversity (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2001). In this sense, theories of growth are actually theories of PWB (Joseph & Linley, 2005), since they go beyond the alleviation of symptoms, by encompassing increased autonomy, improved relationships, environmental mastery and openness to personal changes to life philosophy (Joseph et al., 2015).

To date, much of the research has focused on the view that growth is a process that follows an acute traumatic event, rather than moderate and prolonged stressful events. In fact, research studies have given rise to mixed findings, with some proposing that there exists a positive relationship between posttraumatic stress and growth (Kashdan & Kane, 2011; Pietrzak et al., 2010) with others showing that moderate levels of stress lead to the highest levels of growth (Dekel, Mandl, & Solomon, 2011; Joseph, Murphy, & Regel, 2012). However, there is a dearth of research exploring the lived experiences of police

officers from a broader perspective, which may instead welcome narratives of protracted stress, acute traumatic events and of growth following adversity.

## **2.3 Literature Review Findings**

**2.3.1 Predictors of growth.** The majority of research found on police officers, stress and growth tended to examine predictors of growth (Chopko, 2007; Chopko, Facemire, Palmieri & Schwartz, 2016; Chopko, Palmieri & Adams, 2018; Kunst, Saan, Bollen & Kuijpers, 2017; Leppma, 2018; Paton, 2005), with differing emphases on the risk and protective factors for stress and resilience.

For example, a study by Kunst, Saan, Bollen & Kuijpers (2017) examined the potential risk and protective factors for secondary traumatic stress (STS) as well as the association between STS and secondary posttraumatic growth (SPG) in a sample of Dutch police family liaison officers. This was carried out through self-report measures using standardised questionnaires on personal trauma history, social support (by supervisors and co-workers), STS, and SPG. They specifically explored potential risk (caseload and a personal trauma history) and protective factors (age, work experience, and support by supervisors and co-workers) of STS and the association between STS and SPG. Their study found that none of the risk and protective factors correlated with STS but that there was a positive but small association between STS and SPG, which they suggested may be moderated by other variables not included in their research, such as affective personality type. This is representative of the type of research prevalent in the area of stress and growth in the police, where the focus has remained on pinpointing the protective and risk factors that may predict stress and growth.

**2.3.1.1 Growth as mediated by PTSD.** Other studies looking to find predictors of growth among officers have specifically examined the role of PTSD. For example, a recent study by Chopko, Palmieri & Adams (2018) proposed a model involving a pathway from type of trauma exposure to growth as mediated by PTSD symptoms. They assessed serving officers through the use of self-report scales measuring post-traumatic growth, PTSD symptoms and perceived relationship stress, in order to examine the association between different trauma exposure types of threat to self and harm to others, as well as how these were related to growth. Their results suggested that events involving threat to self were more closely related to growth, via an indirect pathway through PTSD symptoms, i.e. events involving threat to self were most associated with PTSD symptoms, and higher PTSD symptoms were related to more PTG. In addition, they found that the frequency of witnessing harm to others was not significantly related (directly or indirectly through PTSD symptoms) to growth. Overall, their results seemed to suggest that the type of occupational trauma experienced by officers can play a significant role in the development of growth. Additionally, they found that personal relationship stress was directly associated with PTSD symptoms and behavioural growth (growth directed towards goal-directed action), but not with cognitive growth (growth that purely involved changes to beliefs and attitudes though not reflected in changes in behaviour). In fact, what the authors suggest is the possibility that positive changes in behaviour, which may be facilitated by cognitive suppression, may lead to increased behavioural growth. This stands in contrast to the common notion that deliberate cognitive engagement is required for growth to occur and points to different mechanisms that may lead to different types of growth for police officers. As such, it highlights the need to explore a broader model of growth, which may consist of a behavioural-based growth response to distress involving cognitive suppression rather cognitive engagement.

**2.3.1.2 Growth as mediated by event type.** Another study by Chopko (2010), highlighted significant positive correlations between posttraumatic distress and growth, with multiple regression showing that ‘involvement in a duty-related shooting’ was the only predictor of growth once all other predictors were controlled for. These results are further supported by research that recognised how traumatic events connected to life threat are also associated to more growth (Smith, Dalen, Bernard & Baumgartner, 2008). Chopko (2010) also found that incidents of greatest distress and rumination had stronger associations to growth, as compared to the cumulative effects of less distressing traumas over a longer period of time. However, these findings stand in direct contrast to a study by Adjero, et al. (2014), who examined the covariance between growth and stressful life events, which included subfactors of stress such as health; work; home and family; personal and social and financial stressors. Interestingly, this study addressed growth in the context of a range of life stressors in the lives of police officers instead of its association with single acute traumatic incidents, as has been the prevalence in empirical research. This study found that an increasing number of stressful life events were associated with greater growth, particularly among individuals with high levels of satisfaction with life; gratitude and interpersonal support. However, it is important to note that the stressful life events covered a range of subfactors, one of which was work-related and possibly directly relevant to operational stress. As such, the study by Adjero et al. (2014) only serves to provide partial clarity in relation to my research topic, which will purely focus on operational stress and adverse events experienced on the job.

It is worth noting that this research by Adjero et al. (2014), was followed up by Leppma et al. (2018) in a cross-sectional study examining the relationship between the level of stressful life events and growth in police officers, with the addition of mediating factors that may serve to promote growth. They found a linear relationship between total life stress scores and growth, in which higher scores in total life stress seemed to predict

higher scores of growth. This differed from the curvilinear relationship (the inverted ‘U’) usually found in previous studies (Dekel et al., 2011; Joseph et al., 2012), which has tended to suggest that only moderate levels of stress promote more growth but up to a certain point after which stress may become too high for growth to occur. This may prove relevant to consider in my own study in relation to the protracted and cumulative experiences of operational stress among my participants, which may also differ from curvilinear relationship found in the literature that has tends to examine single, acute events.

**2.3.3.1 Resilience to stress and promotion of growth.** As mentioned above, much of the literature has also focused on understanding the incidental factors that make police officers more resilient to the ill-effects of occupational stress in order to improve their longer-term well-being (Papazoglou & Anderson, 2014). For instance, Chopko, et al. (2016) examined the associations between spiritual practice, spiritual effort and spiritual growth with multiple psychological and health outcomes (e.g. depression, alcohol use, general work stress). However, they found that police officers engaging in spiritual practice did not significantly differ in health or psychological outcomes compared to police officers not incorporating spirituality or that the amount of effort put towards spiritual development was not associated with most health outcomes. They also found that a sense of heightened spiritual growth was related with higher, not lower, psychological distress, possibly suggesting that although spirituality does not serve as a protective factor, spiritual beliefs may strongly influence sense-making in the face of adverse life events (Glen, 2014), which lead to greater growth.

**2.3.2 Promoting growth therapeutically.** There is a dearth of literature examining how growth can be promoted therapeutically and only one theoretical paper by Joseph, Murphy and Regel (2015) was found to provide an overview of growth in the

context of the difficult experiences inherent in police work. They draw on their clinical experience in this area and provide guidelines on how growth can be promoted therapeutically. They highlight the growing research in the area that currently looks the factors that mediate the effects of exposure to adversity on the development of later psychological difficulties and emphasise that to date, the most significant factor predicting how individuals are able to adjust to adverse experiences is the support they receive, which may be social or organisational.

**2.3.3 Secondary trauma and associations with growth.** It is important to note that the role of support in the promotion of growth has also been highlighted in empirical research. For instance, Tehrani (2010) conducted a study on Family Liaison Officers (FLO) and examined compassion fatigue and growth among 45 British FLOs compared with 64 occupational health advisors, 53 human resource advisors and 114 counsellors on indices of generalized anxiety, depression, and growth. Participants completed the Carer Belief Inventory (CBI), which assessed the impact of secondary trauma on assumptions values and beliefs as well as questions on supervision, other sources of support and coping strategies. They also completed a Short-Form of the Goldberg questionnaire in order to assess anxiety and depression. Findings from this study showed that working environments that expose caring professionals to distress and trauma can be both harming and beneficial. More specifically, this study found that FLOs had anxiety levels above the cut-off level, lower levels of supervision, significantly higher scores for *a* 'feeling that there is no justice in the world' but also significant high scores relating to learning, doing a good job and developing a sense of fulfilment. This study, therefore, seemed to capture, from a research perspective, what has been underscored in the media in relation to the impact of adverse experiences on the mental health of officers as well

as the lack of support provided to them, nevertheless, it also highlighted the positive experiences that can potentially develop from these.

**2.3.4 The experience of stress and growth from the perspective of the individual.** The only research found that examined the experience of stress and growth among police officers from the perspective of the individual was a study by McCormack & Riley (2016), who conducted an IPA study examining the subjective impact of stress and trauma, when it resulted in discharge from the police service. This is a significant study as it highlights the operational and organisational stressors that affect the mental health of police officers. In addition, it elucidates the complexity of policing trauma as experienced by the officers interviewed, with the cumulative effects of distress eroding hope for them over time. It is worth noting that results showed limited growth in the experiences of these officers, which the authors suggest may be due to the lack of social and organisational support found by the participants and may add to their sense of betrayal from the police force and to their impeded growth. The authors propose important links to clinical practice, proposing that it may be helpful for clinicians to consider how the internalised shame and guilt associated with organisational invalidation can disrupt therapeutic outcomes, though no specific suggestions are made in relation to how to promote growth therapeutically. This study represents a noteworthy step forward in examining the experience of trauma and growth among police officers from the subjective perspective of the individual and as such, it aligns with Counselling Psychology's humanistic and phenomenological ethos by moving away from the prioritisation of cause-and-effect links that focus on generalisability and instead, towards an in-depth understanding of the unique lived experience of officers.

## **2.4 Epistemological and Methodological Critique.**

Overall, the literature reviewed includes mostly quantitative methodologies used to investigate this topic from what appears to be generally a positivist perspective, though it is important to note that only one study (McCormack & Riley, 2016) included information relating to the paradigmatic underpinnings of their research. More specifically, the majority of the studies were correlational, using self-report questionnaires and standardised measures to investigate the protective and risk factors that could be associated with positive and negative aspects of growth, which seemed to provide a greater understanding of the epidemiology of police stress and trauma but unfortunately, to the detriment of understanding the individual. In addition, only one study focused on understanding the subjective experiences of stress, trauma and growth among officers (McCormack & Riley, 2016), which used IPA to gain a phenomenological and idiographic understanding of the topic. This suggests that the dearth of research on the phenomenology of stress, trauma and growth among the police has left an important opening for research that focuses on the emic perspective of officers.

In addition, apart from the study by Tehrani (2010), none of the literature reviewed focused on UK police officers, showing that there is a significant need to not only examine stress and growth from a phenomenological perspective honing in on the experiences of the individual, but also, in light of the extremely precarious context of policing in the UK in the current socio-economic climate of austerity, from the perspective of UK officers.

It is also key to highlight that only a handful of studies (Adjero et al., 2014; Leppma et al., 2017; Tehrani, 2010; McCormack & Riley, 2016), investigated protracted and cumulative operational stress, with most of the research focusing on single, acute events. This points to a clear under-researched area in the field of stress, trauma and growth, which may be highly relevant for a large number of individuals who may not



necessarily experience a single, highly traumatic event in their working lives in the police but instead face regular, repetitive and moderately stressful events. Finally, no studies to date were found examining stress and growth among retired police officers.

## **2.5 Implications of the Review and Research Gap**

In essence, the outcomes of this literature review highlight a clear gap in existing research, which leaves unaddressed the lived experiences and meaning-making of stressful or traumatic events by retired police officers. The prevalence of quantitative research in the more general field of stress among the police, continues to emphasise the negative sequelae of stressful and traumatic events, which begs the question around the kinds of claims and understanding that this imbalance can produce on the topic. On the one hand, the perpetuation of a medicalised model of psychological stress, distress and trauma, with an overemphasis on stressful and adverse reactions that focus on the ‘darker side’ of human experience, can lead to a biased view of how stress among the police is understood. On the other, even within the perspective that adversity can lead to growth, the dominant, quantitative, nomothetic approach has meant that little focus has been paid to how stress is experienced at an individual level. Yet, the assumption that focusing on the ‘lighter side’ of human experience (i.e. that adversity can lead to growth and that this can emerge through the exploration of individual experience) may also be considered as biased when it comes to engaging with a different type of lens with which to understand human experience. It is key to highlight that the concept of research ‘biases’ have originated from positivist-empiricist models of research (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and are based on the premise that the researcher may have influenced the results, rendering knowledge as contaminated. However, within the qualitative paradigm, all research is viewed as subjective and perspectival, which is why reflexivity is essential for sound qualitative research and why this has been carefully attended to in the present study.

Nevertheless, in order to provide a critical review of the literature, and more specifically, of the extant paradigms generally used to examine operational stress, adversity and growth, it is important to note that the proposed dichotomy between theories of posttraumatic stress (i.e. the darker side of human experience) and theories of growth (i.e. the lighter side of human experience) is also a lens and a subjective stance on how knowledge can be understood and produced. The present study, therefore, does not assume or look for a particular ‘shade’ of human experience and instead remains open to the exploration of the participants’ experiences which may or may not be located/understood solely through theories of posttraumatic stress or theories of growth.

Thus, the current research sets out to provide a phenomenological account of how retired police officers experience stress and growth in order to explore how individuals may make meaning of distress in the uncertain context of policing and within the organisational culture of police forces, which research suggests, continue to be organisations where the stigma around distress and mental health still proves to be a significant barrier to seeking support (Falconer, Alexander & Klein, 2013).

## **2.6 The Proposed Study: Rationale**

It is important to highlight that my values as a Counselling Psychologist, particularly the uniqueness and subjectivity of the individual, have served to underpin the focus of my study. As can be seen from the review above, the crucial gap is the voice of the individual and therefore, in line with the values of my profession and with my epistemological stance, I believe it is key to understand the person and their experience in context. It is hoped that the participants’ accounts will not only shed light on the topic of enquiry but also serve to inform the work of counselling psychologists (including their clinical practice). It is hoped that perhaps the reasons as to why some people thrive while

others struggle may be illuminated by investigating the experiences of operational stress and growth among retired officers who have faced adversity in their jobs. It is also hoped that these findings may potentially contribute to enhancing individual resilience to life's challenges, whilst underscoring the idea that it may be possible to develop out of extremely challenging events.

## **2.7 Research Aims**

To create knowledge that can provide new insights into the experiences of operational stress and growth among police officers in the UK

To use data collection methods that can facilitate the exploration of police officers' lived experiences from ontological and epistemological positions that acknowledge participants' relatedness to the world and thus the contextualization of their experiences within the intersubjective process of meaning-making between researcher and participant.

## **2.8 Research Question**

What is the experience of operational stress in retired police officers and of their growth following adversity?

# **Methodology**

## **3.1 Chapter overview**

This chapter starts by outlining the methodology and methods used in this study. In addition, a description of the process of analysis is provided, before giving consideration to how issues of quality are attended to in this research. The use of the first

person in this chapter underscores the immersion of the researcher in the process of analysis and highlights how personal reflexivity has been engaged with throughout.

### **3.2 Rationale for Using IPA**

The aim of the study is to provide an account of the experience of operational stress and growth among retired police officers following adverse events in their jobs. Since no other studies had addressed operational stress and growth in this group of participants from the perspective of the individual, it seemed appropriate to select a methodology that could explore this phenomenon through a lens that focused on participants' lived experience.

Initially, three approaches (Phenomenology, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and Narrative Analysis) were considered in the early stages of this project's formulation, before finally settling on IPA as the qualitative framework that could best address my research question (Willig, 2013). Although they come from different intellectual traditions, their coevolution in psychological research has kept the boundaries between them relatively porous (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) was considered due to its emphasis on knowledge, meaning and how ultimately, social and psychological reality can be constructed through the interaction of multiple discourses (Willig, 2013). This seemed relevant to consider in my study due to the cultural discourses of stress I found in the literature in relation to the organisational stigma around emotional distress and mental health that currently presents a significant barrier to seeking support within the police service (Falconer, Alexander & Klein, 2013; Mind, 2016). However, I became aware that due to FDA's constructionist positioning, its emphasis would be on the role of language in the construction of social and psychological life (Smith & Osborn, 2015) instead of using language as a way to express participants' realities, which I felt that

phenomenology seemed best placed to do. More specifically, using FDA would have certain implications for participants' subjectivities and experiences, since discourse would be seen as a way through which the participant would be constructed as a subject (Coyle, 2016) instead of language being used as a way for participants to communicate how they ascribe meaning to their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

The other approach I considered was Narrative Analysis (NA), since looking at how officers articulate their experiences through meaningful stories could provide insight into how they construct their past, adverse experiences and current lives. However, I found a tension between my interpretative phenomenological stance (underpinned by a critical realist ontology) and NA's social constructionist orientation, since the latter posits that although constructions of meaning cannot be completely socially disconnected, subjective reality cannot be influenced by social and material structures. Moreover, since NA is typically more useful in examining how people make sense of their experience as they encode it into a narrative and not through lived, embodied experience per se, I concluded that a phenomenological approach may be most appropriate for honing in on the subjective meaning of the particular experience of each police officer.

Given that the aim of the study was to provide an account of the experience of stress and distress among retired police officers, I turned to phenomenology as a qualitative approach that could provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon explored (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Within phenomenology itself, however, a choice was made amongst two parallel streams: descriptive and interpretative phenomenology. Since I was interested in not only describing but also understanding the lived experiences of police officers through an interpretative process of making sense of their meaning-making, I decided to adopt IPA.

**3.2.1 Ontological and Epistemological Positioning of this study.** Ponterotto (2005) makes reference to the philosophical roots underpinning the quest for knowledge. He emphasises that the different perspectives both on the nature of reality and on how knowledge can be attained can serve to guide the philosophical and conceptual framework that the researcher adopts with respect to methodology and research process. He highlights that ontology corresponds to the nature of reality and what can be known about it, while epistemology, deals with the theory of knowledge and how it can be acquired.

My ontological stance is critical-realist, positioned between positivist and criticalist perspectives, whereby I maintain a degree of ontological realism within a framework of constructivism and relativism (Frazer & Lacey, 1993). As such, ontologically, I accept that there is a real phenomenon to explore with regards to each research participant, and that this phenomenon exists independently of my perceptions and theories, but that I am only able to observe and experience this phenomenon based on my own standpoint, perspective and interpretation (Maxwell, 2012).

Epistemologically, I accept that I do not have unmediated access to the reality behind a given phenomenon and that knowledge must be historically and locally relative. As such, my epistemological stance is interpretative phenomenological (Willig, 2012), whereby I aim to understand the individual's relatedness to the world through their particular personal accounts and experiences and through a process of intersubjective meaning-making (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). More specifically, as a researcher, I acknowledge that while it is not possible for me to fully and directly access people's experiences, I can engage in a reflective and relational process of understanding and making sense of others' meaning-making about the world.

### **3.3 Overview of IPA and Rationale for Choosing this Methodology.**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach that aims to explore, in a focused and systematic way, how individuals make sense of their own lived experience as influenced by their social, political and cultural contexts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012; Wagstaff et al., 2014). IPA is inductive in that it focuses on experience instead of pre-defined categories, thus allowing for data to emerge from the analysis instead of from hypotheses that need to be tested (Smith et al., 2012). In addition, IPA is interrogative since it aims to make a contribution to existing research by discussing the results that emerge from the analysis in relation to extant literature instead of viewing results from a position of isolation (Smith et al., 2012).

IPA was the methodology chosen for this study and this section provides an overview of this methodology as well as the rationale for why it was used.

**3.3.1 Theoretical foundations of IPA.** IPA is rooted in three central principles: phenomenology, referring to the unique, lived experiences of individuals; idiography, relating to the in-depth examination of the individual instead of the universal; and hermeneutics, referring to the dynamic interpretative activity that takes place in the analysis of a phenomenon (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). It is these three central principles that I now turn to.

**3.3.1.1 Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that explores both existence and experience (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The initial historical phase of phenomenology was rooted in a transcendental stance based on Edmond Husserl's ideas, which focused on identifying the essential qualities of experience through a process of methodological reduction to basic core structures (Tuffour, 2017). He proposed that this could be achieved through a natural attitude by transcending our

assumptions in relation to context, culture and history, in order to arrive at the universal essence of a phenomenon (Larkin & Thompson, 2012) and get to a descriptive phenomenology of experience.

The next phase of phenomenology came with Husserl's successors, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, who offered a move away from the transcendental stance and towards a hermeneutic or existential positioning, based on the understanding that a reduction to an essential core of a phenomenon was not possible, since observations are necessarily rooted in the lived world. More specifically, Heidegger questioned whether knowledge could be arrived at outside of an interpretative stance, since it is inextricably linked to people, relationships and language, with intersubjectivity seen as a binding interrelationship between the self and the world. This perspectival and temporal quality of our understanding of the world was further developed by Merleau-Ponty (1945), who focused on the embodied nature of our relationship to the world. Finally, Sartre (2003), extended this concept of existential phenomenology by exploring the nature of existence, where the self was not understood as an essence to be discovered but as a process to be unfurled (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2011).

Thus, the development of phenomenological philosophy, which navigates from Husserl's essential qualities of experience, through Merleau-Ponty's concerns with embodiment and Heidegger and Sartre's existential focus, bring into IPA research complementary ideas that make phenomenology more mature, holistic and multi-faceted (Smith et al., 2012). As such, IPA research focuses on understanding individual experience, through an interpretative process that attempts to make meaning of people's relationship to the world. This interpretative process is rooted in hermeneutics, the second major theoretical basis of IPA.

#### **3.3.1.2 Hermeneutics.** Hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation)



involves a process of close interpretative engagement on the part of the researcher, who facilitates the understanding of a phenomenon as it emerges, whilst attending to their own prior experiences, assumptions and preconceptions. This holistic, interpretative analysis of experience relates to the ‘hermeneutic circle’ idea, which postulates two types of processes, the first, between part and whole and the second, between researcher and participant (Smith, 2007). As such, the dynamic relationship between part and whole involves a cyclical process of iterative engagement of understanding the part (a single word, extract or episode) by looking at the whole (a sentence, the complete text or the whole life), whilst also seeking to understand the whole by looking at the part (Smith, 2007). The process of interpretative analysis between researcher and participant is underpinned by a double hermeneutic process through which the researcher seeks to make sense of the participant, who is, in turn, making sense of their own experience (Smith et al., 2012).

**3.3.1.3 Idiography.** IPA is an idiographic approach with a sensibility for the particular instead of the generalisable, which offers a nuanced, fine-grained exploration of specific examples of lived experience. Thus, focus is placed on understanding the meaning of each participant’s narrative, before moving onto the examination of similarities and differences across cases. In this way, detailed accounts of patterns of meaning for participants can reflect shared experience with idiosyncratic tenor (Smith et al., 2012).

**3.3.2 Characteristics of IPA.** There are three characteristics of IPA which are important to highlight, particularly as they underpinned the rationale for using this methodology in the current study.

**3.3.2.1 Epistemological basis.** IPA's ontological positioning is broadly critical realist, reflecting its hermeneutic and phenomenological basis which postulate that there is a phenomenon, subjectively experienced by individuals, which it aims to capture (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Epistemologically, IPA is rooted in an interpretative phenomenological position (Larkin & Thompson, 2011) based on the assumption that any understanding of the world necessitates an understanding of experience, that participants' personal accounts are immersed in linguistic, relational, physical and cultural contexts and that access to these accounts can only be arrived through a process of intersubjective meaning-making.

**3.3.2.2 Focus on context.** IPA is largely a contextualist approach based on the assumption that a person's experience can only be meaningfully understood in context (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, the researcher aims to make tentative inferences and interpretations that incorporate an understanding of the contextual and cultural environment within which the data are produced. As such, with the socio-cultural grounding of the participant in mind and whilst remaining aware of their own theoretical commitments and political frameworks, the researcher aims to maintain clear focus on the psychological aspects of the material, which emphasise the subjectivities of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

**3.3.2.3 The role of language.** IPA is predicated on the assumption that language can capture participants' experiences as it provides the essential tools to express, encapsulate and transmit meaning (Willig, 2012). Thus, the researcher aims to grasp the richness of the participant's experience by paying close attention to their nuanced use of language in terms of particular words, phrases, inflections and metaphors, which are seen to give expression to the underlying meanings of their experience, assuming a link

between people's language, their thinking and emotional states.

### **3.4 Ethics**

Ethical approval was obtained for this study from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of East London (appendix A). Each participant was given an invitation letter outlining details of the researcher, a description of the project, information regarding how the data would be kept confidential, their right to withdraw and contact details of the researcher and supervisor (appendix B). Each participant was given a consent form to confirm they had read the information sheet relating to research study (appendix C).

Confidentiality was ensured by locking paper transcripts and signed consent forms in two separate secure cabinets. Confidentiality was safeguarded by omitting real names and identifying references from transcripts, with only the main researcher gaining access to the names and identity of participants. Due to a change in research supervision, the interview schedule was amended after four interviews had been conducted. At this point, ethical approval was sought again and granted to amend the interview, change the schedule and to approach participants for a second interview (appendix D).

### **3.5 Conducting IPA**

**3.5.1 Sampling method.** I used purposive sampling, which tends to be typical for data collection in IPA research (Smith & Osborn, 2003), in order to find a closely defined group for whom the research question would be relevant, such that the sample was determined by me as the researcher based on my particular study and research question.

Initially, this study was designed to explore the experiences of stress in serving and retired officers, however, gaining ethical approval from the Metropolitan Police

became a protracted and complex process, which led me to change the focus of the study towards only interviewing retired officers. Given the importance of having a relatively homogenous sample of participants who would provide rich data from their experiences of the phenomenon under study (Smith et al., 2012), the suitability of participants became a core criterion. In order to meet these conditions, the inclusion criteria were set that participants should be retired UK police officers who had experienced operational stress and adversity whilst serving in the police.

**3.5.2 Sample size.** Due to the idiographic focus of IPA, studies tend to have relatively small sample sizes with the suggestion that for professional doctorates, a typical sample size would be between four to ten interviews (Smith et al., 2012). In addition to attending to this criteria when deciding on the sample size for this study (which ultimately led me to recruit eight participants), I also aimed to ensure that I had enough rich data to answer the research question but not so much that it would lead me to lose the depth, nuances and complexity of the participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

**3.5.3 Recruitment.** Participants were sourced via opportunities (Smith et al., 2012) from peers who worked with individuals who had retired from the police. They were also recruited via snowballing since individuals made referrals of ex colleagues. As such, details of the study were emailed to peers and other contacts, with the request made to disseminate the recruitment ad (appendix E) to any relevant individuals. Interested participants were asked to email me for further details, which provided an opportunity to also ensure they met the criteria for the study. I then followed this up by contacting participants to answer any additional questions they may have, to provide them with the participant information sheet and if they still wanted to take part in the study, they

received a consent form to sign prior to interview. No individuals asked to withdraw from the study.

Since most participants were located across different areas of the UK, most interviews (apart from one) were carried out via Skype and all were audio recorded. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 26 minutes. Two participants were re-interviewed to cover only the new added questions to the interview schedule and these second interviews lasted 23 and 26 minutes.

**3.5.4 The participants.** There were eight participants in this study, who filled in a demographics questionnaire prior to interview (appendix F). In order to protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms were given and any potentially identifying information in the transcripts was changed, this was particularly relevant in relation to details about previous cases, investigations or the location of their teams. All participants identified themselves as retired police UK officers who had worked in the police between 28-30 years, with their ages ranging between 53 and 60 years old.

As a novice IPA researcher I was keenly aware that I needed a large enough sample to provide enough variability but a small enough one to enable me to analyse each case in great detail and with idiographic depth. In hindsight, I think that I struck the right balance with the number of participants, as this allowed me to look carefully at each case but to also shift to a wider perspective across cases whilst retaining the richness of individual nuances.

**3.5.5 Data collection.** Smith and Osborn (2003) describe semi-structured interviews as the exemplary method for collecting verbal data in IPA as these can elicit rich, detailed, first person accounts. In IPA, interviews aim to address the research question ‘sideways’ (Smith et al., 2012: 58), by facilitating the discussion of topics that

allow it to be answered afterwards via analysis and as such, interview questions are generally described as open-ended and non-directive.

**3.5.5.1 The interview schedule.** The interview schedule (Appendix G) followed general suggestions by Smith et al. (2012). It consisted of initial warm up questions related to what drew officers to work in the police, a description of their roles and what situations had tended to feel difficult or stressful. Subsequently, the wider area of interest around stress was introduced through open questioning such as “can you think of any particularly stressful events that you had to respond to as an officer”; “Do you feel that these situations affected you. If so, how?” followed by prompts around the meaning of these situations, whether they had affected participants’ sense of who they were, how they felt they had changed through these experiences and whether there was something they felt they had learned through such events. Afterwards, the broader topic of growth was addressed through questions such as “Did you feel these situations impacted on how you thought of yourself? If so, how?” as well as other questions inviting participants to reflect on whether they had felt that adversity had impacted on their relationships or on their beliefs about others and the world. These were followed by the prompt “Looking back, are there aspects of your life that you feel developed out of these experiences? If so, how?” in order to once again engage participants to reflect on possible experiences of growth over time. Finally, the interview closed with questions asking whether officers felt there had been adequate support in the police to prepare them for such experiences or to help them deal with these after they had taken place, before asking them whether there was anything else they would like to add.

**3.5.5.2 Pilot interview.** After developing the initial interview schedule, I asked a fellow Counselling Psychologist in training to interview me using the schedule so that I

could identify any possible difficulties with the sequencing of the questions or the flow of the topics as well as to reveal any presuppositions, assumptions or expectations I may have held. I noted all reflections in my reflexive journal and also amended the schedule by altering the wording of some questions and adding more prompts where I noticed that a topic could be further explored.

**3.5.5.3 Conducting the interviews.** Interviews were carried out between June 2017 and March 2018 via Skype and also face to face, at convenient times for participants. The interview process began with a reiteration of the aims of the study and a reminder of the confidential nature of the interview. Participants were invited to ask any questions before signing the consent forms, completing the demographics questionnaires and proceeding with the audio recorded interview. During the interviews, I tried to keep questions as neutral and open as possible in order to facilitate and guide participants' accounts and get as close as possible to their experience. However, I was aware that due to my lack of experience and my concern that I may miss important aspects of the study, I tended to rely on the structure provided by the interview schedule, which may have, at times, limited or framed participants' responses about their experiences. I was also keenly aware that the interview may evoke difficult feelings for participants, which led me to remain attentive to the emotional impact of the experiences they offered. It was in these moments, whilst I listened to and tried to make sense of the experiences of distress provided by participants, that I often felt conflicted between my role as a researcher and clinician. These were conflicts that were not easy to navigate but during which I tried to keep a balanced perspective, attending both to the participant's needs and also to the research.

At the end of the interview, participants were handed a debrief letter (Appendix H) which contained details of relevant support organisations, should they wish to access

these services to gain further emotional or psychological support (Samaritans, MIND Blue Light Info line and MIND helpline).

**3.5.6 Preparation of the data.** The data in the current research were prepared following guidelines provided by Smith et al. (2012). All audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using an online, automated, secure and confidential transcription service. All transcripts were later carefully checked by the researcher against the original recording to ensure that final transcripts were accurate. At this point, notes were also made of non-verbal utterances, significant pauses and hesitations (Smith et al., 2012). In addition, I kept a reflexive journal on which I made notes immediately post interview and also during the transcription process, where I made reflexions on my experience of the participants, the research, my expectations and also on my interview style, which I subsequently used to improve my approach to later interviews. I was mindful that awareness of my contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process involved acknowledging that it would be impossible to remain outside of my topic whilst conducting the research. Therefore, reflexivity, propelled me to explore the ways in which my involvement guided, informed, framed and ultimately formed every aspect of the study (Nightingale & Cromby 1999). Therefore, my reflexive journal served to increase the rigour of my research by openly engaging with methodological reflexivity. Thus, following Kasket (2013), I used my diary reflections to help me interrogate how my positioning could affect the research, particularly how I, as a researcher, helped shape the results; how the choices I made in the execution of the study influenced the findings; the reasons behind my choices; and how any issues that arose in the process of this study were managed. For instance, I was keenly aware that my previous knowledge of forensic psychology might provide me with a different lens through which to understand participants' experiences. I realised that this may perhaps push me to veer towards a more



mechanistic and procedural interpretation of their professional roles, instead of a humanistic and phenomenological perspective, rooted in my current identity as a counselling psychologist. This was a conflict that I would often encounter, which I would manage by noticing and reflecting on it, thus enabling me to identify my positioning, which I would then foreground again during my approach to each participant encounter. As suggested by Kasket, (2013), I also undertook a reflexive exercise (appendix H) before I began the process of analysis. I did this in order to further identify any presuppositions or personal agenda (comprising my assumptions, hopes and expectations about the findings of my study) which might further influence the research process and which I aimed to openly engage with in order to improve my understanding of the data and the research process as a whole.

**3.5.7 Analytic process.** This section presents an overview of the process of analysis undertaken following data collection. I offer this as a step-by-step account in order to provide further transparency to my research process.

**3.5.7.1 Analytic strategy and procedure.** The data were analysed using IPA and as a novice in this method, I closely followed the six stage analytic process suggested by Smith et al. (2012). I therefore provide an outline below of how I engaged in the process of analysis, providing both a description and reflexive observations. In order to fully reflect on the influence of my epistemological positioning, prior to analysis I considered how my critical realist ontology influenced my approach to the data. I did this by assuming that although it told me something about the ‘real’ world, it did not do so in an unmediated or self-evident way, given that this required interpretation. As such, I reflected on my interpretative phenomenological epistemology, which guided how I aimed to understand the meaning of participants’ accounts, through considering their

status and wider sociocultural and psychological meanings. Thus, the initial level of interpretation of the data was at the level of description relative to its context, which included theoretical perspectives (Larkin, 2006) on the topic of operational stress and growth among police. This subsequently served as the foundation for a second-order account that provided a critical and conceptual exploration of participants' sense-making, based on my own interpretation (Willig, 2012) and influenced by my own knowledge, background, clinical experience and presuppositions.

**3.5.7.2 Stage 1: Reading and re-reading.** I began this stage by immersing myself in the original data by reading and re-reading the transcript, often in parallel to listening to the recording, in order for the participant to become the focus of analysis. I also noted important recollections of the interview to bracket them and reflect on them later. I was also often struck by how the participant's voice brought the data to life, through intonation, emotion, hesitations and emphases that provided depth and texture to the transcripts, leading to a more nuanced and richer analysis. An example of this was the hesitation from a participant whose account touched on very difficult feelings, which had lead him to pause due to becoming 'choked up'. This moment was gently followed by his reflection of how he had experienced overwhelming and unmitigated emotions at different times in his career in the police, all of which supported the interpretations that I later made.

During this stage, I was also mindful of how overwhelmed I was becoming by the volume of the data as well as by the myriad connections and ideas looming over the process of analysis. Such experiences were similar to those suggested by Smith et al., (2012) in relation to initial reactions by researchers to the data early on in the process of analysis. I noted and reflected on this in relation to my position as a novice researcher

and to my expectations around the complexities of embarking on a new method in this project.

**3.5.7.3 Stage 2: Initial noting.** During this level of analysis, I worked in table format, with the transcript located on the far-left column. I subsequently focused on discrete chunks of meaningful experience and made exploratory comments adjacent to the transcript in the middle column. I analysed the data at three levels as suggested by Smith et al. (2012). Descriptive comments were written in normal text and these focused on the content of the participant's narrative; linguistic comments were written in italics and focused on how each person used language, and conceptual comments took on a more interpretative dimension and interrogated the experiences of participants in a conceptual and reflective manner. I was aware of the tension to stay connected to the participant's account whilst being able to move away towards interpretative claims that provided a more sophisticated conceptual layer. I found it useful to go back to Smith et al. (2012), who highlighted the importance of reflexive engagement that attends to the participants' words and therefore roots the analysis in the data, but which employs the use of self as researcher in order to make sense of the data that arises from the participant's experience.

**3.5.7.4 Stage 3: Developing emergent themes.** At this stage I aimed to reduce the volume of detail, moving away from the transcript and basing my analysis on the exploratory notes. This served to distil meaning but and at the same time, enabled me to retain complexity and depth. As such, I moved on to the development of emergent themes on the far-right margin of my analysis table, by summarising the salient aspects of the exploratory comments. Themes were expressed as phrases that reduced the detail but preserved psychological meaning, ideally creating a synergy between the participant's

description and my own interpretation (appendix J shows an example of the analysis table for participant seven with Stages 1-3).

**3.5.7.5 Stage 4: Searching for connections among emergent themes.** This stage comprised my mapping of how the emergent themes fitted together. Thus, I created a separate document with a table, where I organised the emergent themes and grouped them under major themes. This comprised a creative process whereby I aimed to produce a framework to highlight the most salient aspects of the participant's account. At this stage, I used abstraction (to cluster together similar themes under a new name); subsumption (to use an emergent theme as a superordinate, under which other themes could be grouped); polarisation (to bring together themes with oppositional relationships) and contextualisation (to identify connections between themes located at the cultural level). Appendix K shows an example of the clustered themes for participant seven. It is important to note that this table also tracked each emergent theme with the relevant transcript extract, together with the numbered line of the analysis table, so that I could subsequently locate it in the data. This also assisted me visually in ensuring that I had not made interpretative leaps that could have moved too far from the data. In addition, I created a mind map for each participant (Appendix L shows the mind map for participant seven), which enabled me to graphically organise the data in a visible way. This allowed me to gain a clearer overarching view of the themes for each case and to later focus on the wider perspective across cases, as explained below in Stage 6.

**3.5.7.6 Stage 5: Moving to the next case.** Once I had completed analysis of the first case, I moved onto the next participant's account and repeated the process outlined above, with the same procedure followed for each participant. I was keenly aware that I did not want the analysis of prior cases to influence the next and therefore, I attempted to

bracket any ideas that had emerged from previous analyses, as suggested by Smith et al. (2012), in my attempt to treat each case separately. This became more challenging for me the more cases I analysed, and at times, I felt that there were aspects of prior participants' accounts that I could not 'unsee' when examining the next. These I noted in my reflexive journal, which I used to interrogate some of my interpretations in order to ensure that my reflections were rooted in each participant's account and not in my own presuppositions.

**3.5.7.7 Stage 6: Looking for patterns across cases.** This stage consisted of looking across all mind maps I had created for each participant. I did this by placing them all on a big surface and visually scanning them over and over again in order to identify connections between them. I subsequently colour-coded connected themes across participants' maps in order to visually cluster them. I felt initially challenged by this task as I became overwhelmed by the large number of themes across cases. Specifically, I grew concerned that by moving from the micro-level analysis of each case onto the macro-level perspective across cases, I may not do justice to the depth and richness of each account. However, I realised that by rooting the themes in relevant extracts, which I would use to illustrate their meaning, I could still ensure IPA's idiographic commitment. I then created a document with an initial 14 major themes with around four sub-themes each, which through further discussions in research supervision, I was able to distil into my final seven superordinate themes with three subordinate themes each (appendix M).

I subsequently produced a short paragraph with a 'story' describing each superordinate and subordinate theme, which I again took to research supervision as a way to increase the quality of my research through a mini audit of my approach to the analysis.

## **3.6 Appraising Quality in Qualitative Research**

In response to the extensive discussion around how best to assess quality in

qualitative research, Yardley (2017) outlines broad recommendations, which can be largely grouped into four dimensions: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence and impact and importance.

Yardley (2017) highlights the importance of demonstrating *sensitivity to context* in a qualitative study by showing an understanding of the theoretical positioning of the research; participants' perspectives and context; the sociocultural and linguistic positioning of the research (including the ways in which these may impact participants' accounts) and how this is understood by the researcher. In this regard, the current study has emerged from an engagement with prior literature, which identified a gap in research in relation to the experience of operational stress from the perspective of the individual and more specifically from the perspective of retired officers. The sociocultural and socio-political milieu have also been taken into consideration, particularly with regards to the context of policing in the UK in light of the current climate of austerity as well as in the backdrop of police culture within the organisation.

*Commitment and rigour* refer to how the researcher is able to demonstrate sensitivity to the data through the considered, skillful engagement with the topic. As such, I have aimed to ensure commitment through methodological competence, by remaining attentive to each participant in the process of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, I have aimed to facilitate rigour by remaining systematically aligned to IPA as a method; by engaging in a process of meticulous data collection; by ensuring I sustain sufficient idiographic focus in the research and also by maintaining enough breadth and depth of analysis without losing sight of the meanings generated by participants.

In addition, I have aimed to maintain *transparency* by clearly showing the stages of the research process that I have followed and *coherence* by ensuring that the research is adequately aligned with my underlying theoretical assumptions.

I also endeavoured to remain focused on the *impact and importance* of my research by attempting to produce knowledge that is valuable, both in terms of practical utility and also in relation to proposing an alternative epistemological, theoretical and contextual understanding of the subject, which may influence how research practices can be enriched.

In addition, I followed Smith's IPA quality evaluation guide (Smith, 2011) and aimed to ensure that my study met his four criteria of "acceptable" IPA research (Smith, 2011, p. 17). These related to clearly subscribing to the theoretical principles of IPA; showing my IPA research process in a transparent way; offering a coherent, plausible and interesting analysis; and showing sufficient sampling from the corpus of data to provide evidence for each theme. I endeavoured to account for the first three by providing a clear description of my research process as underpinned by IPA's principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography in the Methodology and Analysis chapters. The fourth, I have aimed to show in Appendix N, as a table containing the prevalence of themes according to the number of participants it was taken from. I used this when deciding on the selection of extracts, in order to ensure that my judgement was based not only on my subjective understanding of the relevance of each extract, but on their recurrence, which, as suggested by Smith (2011), and according to my sample size, should be from at least three participants.

### **3.7 Summary**

This chapter offered an overview of my chosen methodology, together with the different stages of my research process. I highlighted my chosen methods, which I outlined chronologically and interweaved methodological and epistemological reflexivity throughout.

### 4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter aims to present a rich and nuanced analysis of the experience of operational stress in retired police officers and of their growth through adversity. Due to the large volume of data examined individually and then across participants, it is not possible to include each aspect of the participants' narrative, however, the chapter presents themes in a way that tracks a journey through the areas which best illuminate the research question.

The analysis is organised into seven super-ordinate themes each of which has three sub-themes representing different dimensions of it and reflective of both shared experience and idiosyncratic tenor (Figure 1 below).

It is important to highlight that the research process at interview and later at the level of analysis, involved the co-construction of meaning and sense-making between researcher and participant, grounded in the hermeneutic circle as described by Smith, (2007). In this way, the close interpretative engagement on my part as the researcher, involved a non-linear, cyclical, dynamic and iterative process that enabled me to prioritise themes and extracts through a process of subjective choice. As such, another researcher may have made a different selection of themes and extracts from this body of data. However, due to the subjective nature of the research, I placed great emphasis on following the guidance by Yardley's (2000) recommendations as discussed in the methodology chapter.

I have also chosen to present the themes in an order that can be coherently followed as a process, but which does not necessarily reflect the order in which participants discussed their experiences. Each superordinate theme begins with a representative overview across participants, with the sub-themes comprised in each, providing an idiographic focus through individual extracts that offer more unique and



nuanced aspect of the officers' experiences (see Appendix O for Presentation Key for participants' quotes)

## 4.2 The Themes

Figure 1 below, shows seven super-ordinate themes and corresponding sub-ordinate themes.

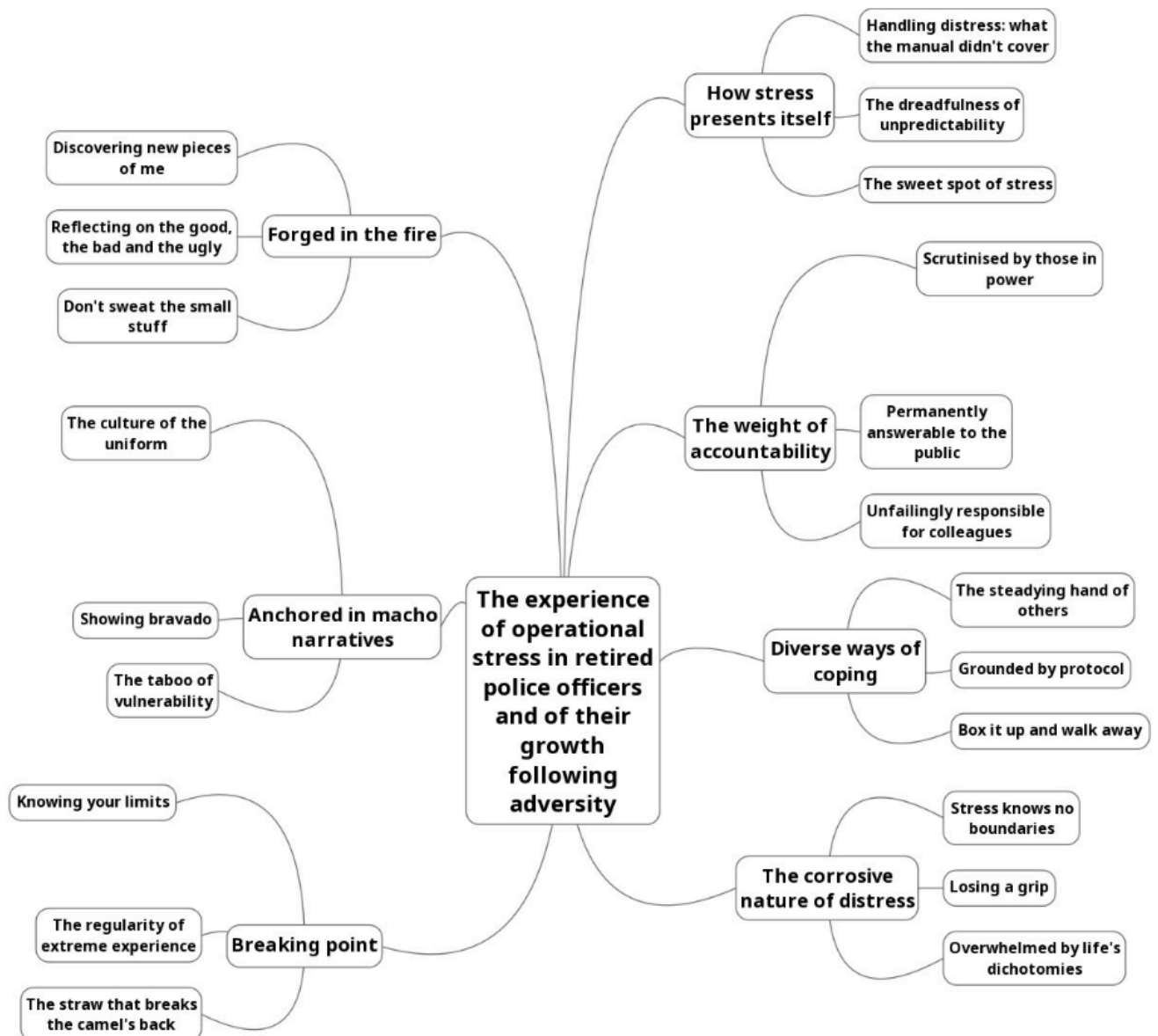


Figure 1 : Diagram of super-ordinate themes and sub-ordinate themes

#### **4.2.1 Super-ordinate theme one: “How stress presents itself”.**

The first theme explores the different perspectives that participants offered in relation to how they encountered operational stress and adversity. Despite the wide array of uniquely idiosyncratic experiences expressed by the officers, there is an element of the unexpected that permeates through this theme. More specifically, this theme speaks to both, the unforeseen nature of the sources of stress and the unanticipated ‘felt’ experience once confronted with these. Furthermore, the name of the theme expresses the way in which stress manifests, almost with an agentic drive and potency that seems to render the officers as passive recipients of stress. Three sub-themes are discussed, which serve to provide a nuanced analysis of the overarching theme: ‘handling distress: what the manual didn’t cover’, ‘the dreadfulness of unpredictability’ and ‘the sweet spot of stress’.

**4.2.1.1 Sub-ordinate theme one: “Handling distress: what the manual didn’t cover”.** This sub-theme explores the dichotomy between the training that participants received and what they felt was missing in helping them handle operational stress.

Police training in the UK is aimed to equip police officers with the “skills and knowledge necessary to prevent crime, protect the public and secure public trust” (College of Policing, 2018, para. 1). Thus, the training seems to be conceptualised by the police service as instruction around the functional protocols to be followed, addressing a pragmatic and operational dimension which does not take into account the deeper human processes supporting these practical procedures.

*There certainly wasn’t a great deal of training there was a lot of training  
around the processes and around the law...but there wasn’t a great deal of training  
about how to cope with what you saw*

[Oliver: 617]

Oliver alludes to the need for a cognitive framework with which to deal with the more challenging aspects of operational life. It seems that participants lacked cognitive schemas to enable them to impose meaning and coherence on the distressing experiences in the field, which left them unable to organise or interpret the often disturbing events they faced in their jobs. This is emphasised by Harry, who speaks in absolutes, in order to specify that it was the emotional toll of the job that the police service did not prepare him for. In addition, from the way that Harry expresses himself, through the repetition of his words and tone, it seems that he wishes the police had, in fact, prepared him emotionally for the job:

*We never had anything like that at all, nothing whatsoever. We didn't have anything to prepare us emotionally for anything that we dealt with.*

[Harry:974]

It appears that participants often felt overwhelmed by their emotions through lack of organisational containment. In this sense, they may have felt that they had been unsupported in two ways, the first through the lack of preparation from their training, which had not enabled them to develop the capacity to deal effectively with anxiety-provoking experiences. The second through the lack of a facilitating structure that could enable them to handle the distressing emotions later faced in the field. In this way, many participants expressed how their professional identity had failed them during events of great emotional magnitude, leaving them to respond as human beings in the best way they could:

*You just have to be as human...and do what you can...but you don't feel very prepared for it.*

[Joseph: 354]

There is another dimension in handling distress, which moves away from witnessing the experience of the other onto how to manage the distress within the self, when it is the officer who becomes the victim of harm and violence. Many officers recalled highly distressing events in which they had been threatened or hurt, revealing a new sense of vulnerability:

*You know your training sort of prepares you for it to a degree but I guess [ ] apart from the traumatic incidents that you see around death and destruction and harm is the violence you can experience as well.*

[Daniel: 179]

The lack of psychological preparedness afforded by the organisation seems to leave the officers with a new sense of increased personal susceptibility, which can render the self as helpless, exposed and unprotected. It lies in juxtaposition to the role of the officer as protector, through the realisation that they may also come to inhabit the world of the victim.

**4.2.1.2 Sub-ordinate theme two: “The dreadfulness of unpredictability”.** This subordinate-theme illustrates how stress can present itself through the sense of doom that comes when events become more complex, impactful or ambiguous. Such intensification can come from situations that escalate quickly, become multifaceted and multiply:

*It's the unpredictability of the situations [ ] really. Although you've sort of trained and are prepared but sometimes you can be off your guard and things can happen, quickly develop into a situation where you're not in control.*

[Susan: 161]

It seems that participants feel a loss of external control over an event when they are unable to predict what is occurring in their environment, which they find destabilising. Indeed, this is reflected by Susan above, when she describes that the training can only take her so far before she is left unable to appraise and respond to the situation at hand. The lack of safety and security that uncertainty and unpredictability bring for participants seem to lead them to feel that they do not have the internal or external capability to handle such situations and furthermore, it appears that feeling destabilised may render them unable to be effective in their roles.

There is another aspect of unpredictability, however, which relates to how operational stress can suddenly present itself internally, when there is an unexpected emotional impact from an event, which leads officers to feel a loss of control over their internal world due to the unforeseen intensity of emotion they experience. It seems that this can occur when the officer becomes aware of the full impact of human suffering, surprising them and thus becoming an overwhelming experience that leaves them unable to regulate their emotional response on the job:

*I had to turn my back and I was in an absolute flood of tears [ ] But as a father myself, the way his mother was howling and crying and begging her son to come back was just... that was one of my worst experiences and I'm getting quite choked up now talking about it.*

[Oliver:119]

It seems that for Oliver, the suffering he witnessed at that particular event as a police officer touched on personal aspects, from which he was not able to shield his feelings. Furthermore, it appears that prior to this event, Oliver may have been able to manage stress by distancing himself from adverse situations and from victims by creating an emotional barrier to protect himself. It seems that at other times, however, the full emotional impact of adversity can become visible at a later stage, again, through a process whereby victims and families are humanised, possibly leading the officers to part-identify with the other's distress:

*Fortunately you purely engaged with the physical so you never got... you never spoke with anybody that knew this piece of dead meat as a living breathing human being until you went to the coroner's inquest. So the coroner's inquiry was the first time you actually met anybody and translated that mess into a father, mother, daughter, son, child, so that's [ ] that was a challenge.*

[Dominic: 211]

It is therefore clear that due to the typically disturbing nature of the job, policing places high emotional demands on officers and therefore, the management of emotions plays a central role in conducting police work. Thus, although participants may tend to suppress emotion as a way to buffer from the intensity of their distressing roles, it is possible that certain emotionally-charged events may unpredictably get through this buffer, surprising and overwhelming the officer with the intensity of their felt experience.

**4.2.1.3 Sub-ordinate theme three: “The sweet spot of stress”.** This subordinate theme speaks to the positive or valuable aspects of experiencing stress, which participants

describe as enabling them to thrive on the job and which they discussed as boosting them and providing them with a rush and excitement that propelled them on within a difficult or adverse event. This is an aspect of stress that many participants made reference to when they reflected on the reasons why they had stayed in roles where adversity was so prevalent. It is important to note that while conceptualisations of growth can be understood as developing after a period of time and after self-reflection, this aspect of how stress presents itself relates, instead, to the positive aspects of difficulty as felt in the moment.

For Patrick, operational stress seems to represent a motivational need, which propels him and invigorates him as long as it does not tip him over the edge and 'break' him. It seems that there is a fine balance to maintain between the pressure needed to invigorate the officer physically and psychologically and the overload that will harm him:

*That's where the buzz is, really, and I think this is the thing where there are pressures and stresses, I think provided they don't break you, they are actually quite stimulating, so something that hasn't got any stress attached to it I would say it's pretty boring and dull, and why oh why would I want something that hasn't got a bit a... whether that stress is intellectually challenging whether it's physically challenging or whatever.*

[Patrick: 627]

Harry also discusses the cyclical nature and potentially positive function of operational stress:

*But sometimes you need stressful... I suppose it comes round in a circle sometimes depending on what kind of psyche you are, you need stress or you need a*

*stressful environment and responsibility and what have you, in order to get that adrenaline going in order to ward off the stress.*

[Harry: 826]

Harry seems to allude to the need for some stress in the officer's life, as this appears to motivate and engage the officer in the task at hand. In addition, his allusion to the function of adrenaline in warding off further stress, points to the way in which difficulty may serve to protect the individual against further distress.

#### **4.2.2 Super-ordinate theme two: "The weight of accountability".**

This superordinate theme relates to participants' experience of being answerable for their actions in three different dimensions, reflected in the subthemes. The first, 'scrutinised by those in power', occurs at the level of the organisation, which carries with it the political and governmental influences that impact on the structure, resources, processes and demands on the police service as an institution. The second, 'permanently answerable to the public', pertains to the public level and the people that police officers serve and have a duty of care to outside of the organisation. 'The public' may be those who are committing crime, victims of crime, witnesses, communities or even the media and society at large. The third, 'unfailingly responsible for colleagues', occurs at the level of departments, teams and peers, and relates to the pressures felt through being responsible for others.

**4.2.2.1 Sub-ordinate theme one: "Scrutinised by those in power".** This sub-ordinate theme speaks to some of the operational stresses that come from outside of the organisation, from the government and from political pressure that subsequently influence performance targets and the overall expectations placed on officers. This was a



theme that ran through many of the officers' narratives in relation to the socioeconomic context that the police service was grounded in, determining the resources that they relied on to support their everyday roles. For example, Patrick highlights the stresses attached to performance targets that were imposed by the organisation and driven by political needs:

*There was a time when there was a very strong performance drive under certain past governments and we had quite a lot of central intervention and so if you weren't hitting performance targets [ ] that was putting you on a radar of people sort and saying why aren't you hitting the targets. When that had a high political imperative attached to it, that could be quite stressful. So I think they are probably the areas that I would have felt most stress in my day to day work.*

[Patrick, 238]

It is possible that for officers, such prescriptive and politically driven performance targets may have impacted on their sense of autonomy, bringing a feeling of powerlessness into their roles by having to work to prescribed processes and procedures, which may have also clashed with core policing activities and expectations. This conflict between newly imposed frameworks and the original policing role that officers had signed up for, is highlighted by Dominic:

*Now you're suddenly trying to manage human resources and fiscal planning and come up with strategic plans and come up with community engagement plans, that's not what you were trained to do, that's not what you joined to do and now suddenly you're expected to be able to do it.*

[Dominic: 486]

Such inconsistencies between organisational imperatives and officers' expectations may have created a state of instability, tension and dissonance in relation to officers' beliefs, values and actions with respect to their roles within the organisation and their ability to cope with them.

Participants also highlighted the pressures that came from inside the organisation. Harry, for example, describes his time in the counterterrorist unit where the stresses came from being under scrutiny almost in the very moment he was doing his job:

*Probably an ongoing example would...one of my main roles was as a specialist interviewer and interviewing was extremely stressful because... everything's recorded you know, it's there to be played in court, it's evidential. Making mistakes in a high profile case where you're literally coming in in the morning and ...you're being briefed by Sky News, almost because the job is of national interest.*

[Harry: 142]

Harry speaks to the operational stress that comes from being accountable not only to the police but to the courts and the nation, which leaves him no room for error. There is also a lack of containment in how he is being briefed by the news, indicating that he may be experiencing a loss of control in relation to where key information comes from, which he is the last to know.

**4.2.2.2 Sub-ordinate theme two: “Permanently answerable to the public”.** This subordinate theme illustrates an aspect of operational stress that derives from accountability to the general public and the media. For instance, Jack describes the

pressure he felt from being closely examined and the influence this may have had on him and his team in setting very high expectations to solve a complex investigation:

*Well I think it's the ups and downs of feeling the responsibility within a small county of (name of area). The world's media looking in and it's that sort of self-imposed feeling of we've got to try and sort this out. We need to solve it. And that in itself raises some of the emotions because it makes you... I don't know how to describe really, it all adds to the commitment to get the thing resolved.*

[Jack: 279]

It seems that the pressure and responsibility described by Jack may come from the discrepancy that exists between the beliefs and expectations held by the public and the actual powers and capabilities that officers may readily have to perform some tasks, which may take longer or be inherently more multifaceted than anticipated. This points to the incongruity between what the public wants and what the police believe the public needs. For example, the public and media may often demand that police reach a quick conclusion to a high impact investigation when in fact, officers need to ensure that their actions are considered and guided by evidence and accuracy to build a robust case. This means that police officers may feel accountable for both what is in the public's interest as well what the public are interested in, since they are answerable to both. In addition, the role of the media is put forward by participants as almost an inquisitorial 'big brother figure' that serves to oversee their work and scrutinise their investigations. The language used by Jack creates a distinctive picture of the embodied sense of being meticulously examined by an all-encompassing other:

*That was particularly stressful because we were very much under the spotlight and media attention and also questions being asked.*

[Jack: 150]

This is reiterated by Daniel who is needing to handle a complex and serious investigation under immense external scrutiny. The idea that it is the whole world looking in, gives the impression of having his every move microscopically examined, leaving him exposed and unprotected:

*Again, it was very stressful because obviously we had the world looking in on (name of area). We had a problem with prostitution in (name of area), which had been going on for years, we'd had five women murdered in very quick succession.*

[Daniel: 534]

#### **4.2.2.3 Sub-ordinate theme three: “Unfailingly responsible for colleagues”.**

This sub-ordinate theme illustrates the stresses felt by participants due to the burdensome weight of responsibility towards managing other officers, for which they felt relentlessly accountable and which, at times, seemed to overload the participants:

*And I guess I was also aware as a person rather than just as a police officer, that the other officers around me, how they were responding, and particularly if they were looking to me for guidance, you know. Was I up to it? Did they have confidence in me? Were they bearing up? Where they coping? Were they keeping their cool?*

[Joseph: 867]

Joseph describes his dual response to the pressures of managing a team, not just from the perspective of an officer but also from the human being who is attuning to the needs of the colleagues whom he supports. There is also a level of questioning of the self, where Joseph wonders whether he has the capacity to meet his colleagues' needs. There seems to be a metarepresentational process taking place, where Joseph reflects on the self, thinks of the other and thinks about what the other thinks of him. It's a circular method of keeping track of those under his wing and of ensuring that everything and everyone is in place to get the job done.

By contrast, Susan discusses the operational stress that comes from working in a control room, from a remote position and with her attention divided between many incidents. She expresses the sense of responsibility to keep her colleagues safe whilst feeling that she has no eyes on the ground:

*I was in the control room and that I found it particularly stressful, because when you're out there you're just dealing with one job at a time but when you're in the control room, you've got to be aware of all the jobs that the officers are going to in your area and sometimes they could be going into a tricky situation and you need to sort of keep an ear out on what's happening to them as well as all the other incidents that are going on.*

[Susan: 89]

This speaks to the pronounced emotional and psychological strain felt by officers who need to swiftly build a meaningful mental model of complex events in order to make clear decisions that ensure the safety of colleagues and of the public, in the backdrop multifaceted environments that are often characterised by information overload. Thus, the enormous weight of responsibility for others in the context of operating under duress,

may leave officers with a sense of inadequacy about their capability to manage others' needs and to undertake effective action.

#### **4.2.3 Super-ordinate theme three: "Diverse ways of coping".**

Participants shared the different ways they had managed to cope with adversity and operational stress. They expressed how the support offered by others (colleagues, friends or family) served to stabilise them during times of difficulty as well as how following organisational procedures had provided them with a structure to work from and a direction to follow. This was particularly helpful at times of heightened emotion when they found it difficult to process information. Finally, a way to manage stress and distress was to compartmentalise their feelings and ignore the almost dangerous, emotional toll of adversity. Three sub-themes are discussed, which serve to provide a nuanced analysis of the overarching theme: 'the steadying hand of others', 'grounded by protocol' and 'box it up and walk away'.

**4.2.3.1 Sub-ordinate theme one: "The steadying hand of others".** This sub-ordinate theme comprises many facets highlighted by the participants in relation to how the support afforded by others had been a key element in their ability to cope with operational stress. There was a clear distinction in the participants' narrative between the types of support they had been able to make use of, with organisational support highlighted by many participants as unavailable or unhelpful. For instance, Harry describes the absence of help from the organisation through using the force of absolute language, which conveys the clarity, simplicity and certainty of his belief in the unavailability of the police service to meet his needs. This seems to have left him without a resource to organise his experience in a meaningful or manageable way, alienating him and isolating him in his distress:

*There's never been any mechanism, any official mechanism that I've had any involvement in, to deal with stress within the police. In the 31 years, I've never had any debriefing, I've never been to any post-traumatic kind of stress debrief, I've never been offered that. I've never taken, I've never sought it, it's always been in my time, which obviously ended three and a half years ago, it's always been basically sort it out yourself.*

[Harry: 251]

In comparison, Jack stresses how the support from family, friends and colleagues provided him with a facilitating environment in which to make sense of his experience, a space where he may have been able to contain his feelings by being attentive to his psychological and emotional needs:

*I think everybody was very conscious of the potential impact it could have on any individual being involved in all of that. So we got a lot personal support from friends family and colleagues generally, and informal support.*

[Jack: 417]

The support and attentiveness offered to them during trying times of heightened operational stress, was expressed by participants, who highlighted how family and friends could perceive when they needed support. Daniel, for instance, describes how his wife could detect the 'signs' that he needed help and how she would serve to anchor him back to 'reality':

*I was very fortunate I had great family support, my wife has been hugely supportive. She would see some signs and sort of get me back to reality. But I think that you can't underestimate the support of loved ones and wives, husbands, family, which is hugely important.*

[Daniel: 1016]

It appears that family and friends were able to offer empathic attunement by tuning into, sensing and resonating with the experiences of the officers as a way to understand their emotions, their perspectives and meanings.

Susan describes another facet of the support that comes through being in relation with others, when she discusses that at times of adversity, the 'normality' of family life provided her with a known framework within which to function:

*Just like the normality of sort of family life, really, just getting on with what you need to do to keep the mechanism of family going.*

[Susan: 201]

It appears that in contrast to the unpredictability and uncontained nature of policing, the inherent familiarity and routine aspects of ordinary life may have provided a palpable structure within which officers were able to feel grounded enough to maintain psychological and emotional stability. In addition, it seems that the need to be rooted in a known context may even drive officers to extricate themselves from colleagues who may not be seen as offering cohesive networks within which to make emotional disclosures. For instance, Oliver speaks of his reluctance to socialise with police officers and of his need to meet with friends from different backgrounds. It appears that in order



to feel supported, Oliver needs to leave his identity as an officer behind and instead, allow for his identity as the man under the uniform to seek the help he needs:

*All of my friends were like car mechanics builders things like that so that was quite good so you know and so if I wasn't feeling good, if I was feeling stressed, I would go either to the gym or I would go to the pub with my mates and have three or four pints and have a good old bitch.*

[Oliver: 243]

**4.2.3.2 Sub-ordinate theme two: “Grounded by protocol”.** Many participants described the stabilising qualities of following processes and procedures during critical incidents, particularly when they experienced heightened emotion due to the distressing nature of the events they investigated. For instance, Daniel describes how his methodical approach served to ward off the darkness of emotion and shield him from absorbing potential distress:

*To the extent that once you get to that investigative mood and professionalism kicks in, the whole dark side of it kind of moves on and you become very professional in the incident and methodical in your role and to achieve what you want to achieve.*

[Daniel: 1090]

Similarly, Oliver describes the operational protocol as a clear path to follow when he could so easily get stuck in the tragedy of the event:

*The thing that probably got you through was the fact that there was a process to be followed[ ]... it's something that kept you going and kept you kind of moving on and moving forward [ ] with the task.*

[Oliver: 374]

As highlighted above, the challenges inherent in policing seem to be rooted in the uncertainty, ambiguity and unpredictability of operational roles as well as in the potentially dangerous and disturbing events that may be witnessed or experienced. Thus, these challenges may lead officers to feel a loss of control in their internal and external worlds. It appears that policing processes and procedures may serve to ground the officers, connecting them to the job at hand and providing them with a known structure within which to operate. This may represent a coping mechanism that enables them to keep overwhelming emotions temporarily at bay, by refocusing their attention on the investigation and instilling in them a sense of control over their internal and external worlds. In fact, Susan reflects on this key aspect of following protocol, which she refers to as the ‘professionalism’ that serves to shield the officer from the emotional distress that may get in the way of successfully performing on the job:

*I think you do, just to try and be professional and deal with things like you say, with your training. And you just gotta go through certain circles, set of procedures, which some people might think you're being quite cold and callous but ultimately, you need to gather the evidence as best you can.*

[Susan: 328]

This points to the tension that officers hold between displaying enough positive emotions of warmth and compassion, whilst needing to shield themselves from other

potentially harmful emotions that may overwhelm them. In this regard, the protocol serves as a framework to carry out an effective investigation, a structure to ground the officer to make meaning of the external event, and a coping mechanism to provisionally keep difficult emotions at bay in order to perform on the job, all of which are perceived to be of ultimate benefit to the public. There are times, however, when the protocols are seen as a restriction, isolating the officer from the natural human emotions they feel they need to express. Daniel describes an incident when he was required to follow police protocol during the death of a close colleague:

*You could hear it all, officer found and officer down, and then I had to try...and then I was really gutted because you knew that he was almost like a close colleague, you know, and you had to be professional and then run through the whole process to deal with the incident of the police officer who had died, as if anybody else had died, and I remember coming home after that, really pretty low after that, and that was a pretty nasty day that was.*

[Daniel:240]

An underlying tension is present within the investigative process that serves to shield Daniel from overwhelming distress, but which also prevents him from expressing his natural grief reaction to the event.

**4.2.3.3 Sub-ordinate theme three: “Box it up and walk away”.** There are different facets to this subordinate theme which are related to how officers manage overwhelming emotion in their roles in order to cope with distress. For instance, Joseph describes two underlying psychological processes linked to different aspects of his identity, one as the officer who remains closed to his emotional world, which would get

in the way of performing his duties and the other, as the human being who has access to emotion but may become overwhelmed:

*You're driving two parallel paths, what you need to do in your job and your human response to it. And it took prompts at the human response but you leave it alone, I'd say, until the job's done but actually, in my experience, you left it alone anyway, you didn't sort of talk about it much particularly.*

[Joseph: 318]

It is striking that Joseph refers to the distress felt on the job as though it is an entity, almost with a sense of agency, like a monster that must not be disturbed and which he intends to deal with at a later stage but which he never returns to. It points to the potentially overwhelming toxicity of distress, which he must protect himself from. Dominic also describes that in the absence of a framework to look at his emotions, he too needed to leave his distress compartmentalised:

*That inability to debrief meant you would have to go there and you have to box it up and put it on a shelf to be dealt with at some later stage. And unfortunately for me, they all came off the shelf at the same time.*

[Dominic: 671]

Dominic describes a process alluded to by many participants in relation to the challenges to handle heightened emotion on the job. It appears that during distressing events, it is important for them to manage, contain and separate themselves from intense emotions, which may get in the way of their professional role. However, when these emotions are not dealt with at a later stage and instead become cut-off aspects of their

lives, they remain unprocessed and eventually create incommensurable internal conflict, which serves to destabilise the individual.

Another dimension that adds to the facets of compartmentalisation and suppression, is one where officers can become desensitised to adversity:

*I think is just kind of a little bit of a barrier, a forcefield that you...that you build up but at the same time something can trigger and maybe hit a nerve with you and then, then things can affect you.*

[Susan: 319]

Susan's account highlights how she defends herself from distress and employs vivid language such as 'barrier' and 'forcefield' to express the strength required to ward off difficulty that seems to represent a dangerous threat to her sense of self. Daniel also expressed this 'hardening' of the self, during what many participants described as one of the most disturbing aspects of the job:

*You do get hardened to it because I noticed I remember the first impact of watching a post mortem examination, you know, it was pretty horrible and I felt very queasy but come the end of my service it was a pretty routine part of the job.*

[Daniel: 963]

It appears that the suppression of emotion holds a central role in conducting police work given that the acknowledgment and expression of distress is considered to dangerously undermine an officer's job performance. Thus, it seems that there is a need for officers to temporarily disengage themselves emotionally in order to maintain a sense of agency and control over their internal worlds and external environment and to meet

organisational expectations. However, it appears less conducive over the long-term, since unprocessed emotion may lead to emotional leakage into other areas of the officer's life.

#### **4.2.4 Super-ordinate theme four: "The corrosive nature of distress".**

This superordinate theme illustrates the gradual psychological and at times physical deterioration of the officer as a reaction to his adverse environment, which in general can prove toxic. In a similar way to the process of corrosion in metals, the progressive weathering of the police officer can be concentrated locally to form a crack that weakens the person, which can be in one particular aspect of their lives, or it can extend more widely, causing a more extensive breakdown, encompassing other facets of an officer's life. Three sub-themes are discussed, which serve to provide a nuanced analysis of the overarching theme: 'stress knows no boundaries', 'losing a grip' and 'overwhelmed by life's dichotomies'.

**4.2.4.1 Sub-ordinate theme one: "Stress knows no boundaries".** This subordinate theme illustrates the intrusive nature of operational stress, which invades and permeates the officers' lives. The participants' narratives describe the ways that stress can plague them and begin to saturate their internal lives almost without them realising:

*I was never able to totally turn off from it but I don't think I realised that until afterwards.*

[Patrick: 470]

Patrick expresses the persistent intrusive effects of stress, which surreptitiously enter his life, leaving him unable to escape it. This may, in turn, leave him with no sense of agency in being able to set clear boundaries between work and other aspects of his life. For Harry, however, operational stress invades his life differently, by extricating him

from himself and from the present moment. He describes the 'one track mind' that takes over, leaving him unable to focus on anything else apart from the job that awaits him and the distress that lurks:

*You are continuously somewhere else. You know you have a... you can't think of anything else other than you know, what you know about that issue.*

[Harry: 466]

It appears that for Harry, the job can become an all-encompassing entity, which leaves no room in his psychological life for other aspects of his lived experience to be thought about or reflected on.

Oliver expresses another dimension to the unboundaried nature of stress, which made him inflexible, narrow minded and constrained in his personal life. He reflects on the impact of this, the losses it brought to his life, due to his inability to see the self and his positioning in relationship to the other:

*I became blinkered to the exclusion of my personal life when I was on the accident investigation department. That cost me my first marriage and [ ] well the post-traumatic stress disorder and the ridiculous loss of life in 9/11 cost me my second marriage because my wife wasn't able to cope with me not functioning effectively.*

[Oliver:809]

It seems that the negative effects of stress are not limited to those who are subjected to it and that these effects can be spread inadvertently onto others, causing further distress. As such, the damage to Oliver's life seems to transcend him, since his

distress becomes something that neither he nor his wife were able to manage and contain, thus leaving a trail of loss and harm in its path.

**4.2.4.2 Sub-ordinate theme two: “Losing a grip”.** This sub-ordinate theme describes the officers’ realisation that they no longer feel able to maintain control and function in their roles due to the operational stresses they have endured. At times, the loss of control pervades both the physical and the psychological realms, driving the officer to question their capacity to lead and to keep others safe:

*I didn't get a grip of it and there was...there were officers I think slightly injured. That was one of the situations that led towards me deciding that I'd had enough of the public order, I was getting stale.*

[Joseph: 633]

The officer’s capacity to perform effectively seems diminished and broken down by the stress. This is communicated through Joseph’s powerful use of language, when he speaks of ‘getting stale’, which points to the sense of decay pervading the way he begins to make sense of his ability to manage the role. Participants also described the profound cognitive and emotional effects that operational stress had on them. Harry describes a period of protracted stress during which he was still able to function in work but to the detriment of his capacity to function healthily in his personal life:

*I remember at that period going to Tesco's and looking at two packets of I now can't remember maybe coffee and not being able to make a decision on what one to buy. You know one was 20 pence more than the other one, the other one was this particular*



*bean you know, and literally standing there in a trance for maybe 15 minutes almost frozen not being able to make a decision.*

[Harry: 655]

It appears that the impactful nature of operational stress had caused a collapse in Harry's ability to cope with non-specific work tasks whilst leaving his work performance unimpaired. For Oliver, however, operational stress causes him to lose his reference points and distress becomes carved into the very way he is able to locate himself in the world, as such, the adversity he has experienced becomes his compass:

*I must have gone to about 1000 road fatalities in the course of that six years, and I used, prior to that incident [ ], prior to that tenure, I used to navigate the carriages by the pubs that I knew and towards the end of it I was actually navigating by the fatal accidents that I'd been to.*

[Oliver: 208]

This points to the omnipresence of distress which begin to steer his course, removing any remnants of how he had made sense of himself based on prior experiences. The role and its disturbing imprint appear to take over and become the lens through which he positions himself in the world.

**4.2.4.3 Sub-ordinate theme three: "Overwhelmed by life's dichotomies".** This sub-ordinate theme illustrates the contradictory experiences that officers routinely contend with when they are managing adverse events in the context of their ordinary lives. These are opposites which appear difficult to navigate through as they are located in extremely contrasting experiences:

*I got a call to say that one of the bodies had been found so I had to leave my son's birthday party to go across to that.*

[Jack: 294]

Jack's account illustrates the juxtaposition between the ordinary and joyful experience of celebrating his son and the morbid process of investigating a homicide, subsumed in the most gruesome aspects of death. It is possible that this creates a level of emotional dissonance, between two intensely opposing experiences and emotions. This contradiction was also expressed by participants who investigated incidents that resonated with their personal lives and brought to the fore the oppositions between the goodness in their lives and the distress of others' and which ultimately, seem to begin tainting their personal lives with the toxicity and threat of adversity:

*I went to the cot death of a little girl who was four months old [ ] and interestingly enough, about a year after that I thought I'd dealt with that, I thought I'd filed it, my first child was born, my son, and I used to go into his room at night to make sure that he was alive.*

[Oliver: 303]

It appears that for Oliver, distressing work experiences that may potentially relate to his personal life may leave him with a sense of vulnerability and threat as a residual effect, with the dangers of work now able to reach into his life to grasp at his loved ones. For Dominic, however, the dichotomies come in a different guise, between the gravity of fatality and the insignificance of ordinary life:

*I'd literally gone from one end of the county to the other [ ] and I'd been to about five fatal accidents that day [ ] started early, finished really really, really late that day, got in and (name of wife) completely lost it because the nice dinner that she'd prepared was completely ruined and from my perspective it was well, is anybody dead? has anybody died? but to her that was a major life event. She wanted a nice quiet evening with a loving attentive husband and here am I coming in absolutely shattered [ ] and the last thing I want to do is talk about what I've been doing today.*

[Dominic:718]

It seems that the operational stress and adversity which consumes Dominic's life has coloured the lens through which he is now able to make sense of his internal world and his position in relation to others. He now operates from a recalibrated perspective, anchored in the extremes of his work, a position where the ordinary values and experience of his partner appear remote, unrelatable, casting him off into a position of isolated estrangement.

#### **4.2.5 Super-ordinate theme five: "Breaking point".**

The name of this theme encompasses how participants had described the most significant or heightened incidents of operational stress as felt through a specific event, where they had felt tested to the limits of their capacity to face any more adversity in their roles. This can be distinguished from the super-ordinate theme "The Corrosive Nature of Distress", which is conceptualised as the prolonged process of deterioration that occurs for the officer over time.

It's sub-themes: 'knowing your limits', 'the regularity of extreme experience' and 'the straw that breaks the camel's back', reflect almost three levels. The first, where the officers describe their own understanding of how much distress they could continue to

bear, almost a moment of self-discovery where, for the first time, they had realised that there was a limit and that this had been reached. The second relates to the aspects of the role that had led to a layering of distress, which began to overwhelm or crush officers. The last refers to the one thing, the one incident, the one more weight of distress that simply became one too many for officers to handle and subsequently, sent them over the edge.

**4.2.5.1 Sub-ordinate theme one: “Knowing your limits”.** Officers often referred to the difference in people’s strength to withstand distress, which tended to be conceptualised in terms of self and other, with only a few participants expressing that they were confident about what their own threshold had been. For instance, Patrick discusses in abstract terms his understanding of the limits of what someone can bear, however, he does so in a way that bypasses his own experience, which may be due to the difficulties in owning his vulnerability or in being able to attune to the self in times of adversity:

*I think people have got individual thresholds which will be very different because we're all individuals. I think [ ] those pressures break someone[ ] in the sense of making them physically unwell, then that for that individual is outside their tolerances. But I think all the time you're operating within your own tolerance levels. And after a while you probably get to know, you get to know the physical signs of stress erm within yourself.*

[Patrick: 639]

In contrast, Susan is able to express how she was able to perceive she had reached her limits and suggests that it may have been her circumstances that led her to this final realisation:

*I don't know whether it was because I was older and I don't know. But there was quite a set of circumstances and I just thought I really can't do this anymore.*

[Susan: 100]

It appears that for Susan, her threshold is visible and clearly felt, such that there is a tacit understanding that this limit must not be surpassed if she is to preserve a sense a coherent and integrated sense of self. Dominic's narrative, however, provides a different perspective, one whereby the officer, due to mounting pressures, is unable to see when his limits have been reached and thus goes over the edge. Dominic's emphatic language highlights the categorical obliteration of his capacity to cope, which he was unable to anticipate:

*I had ten weeks off through a complete inability to function [ ] funny enough it was a friend in the local pub and she is a psychiatrist down in (name of the area) and she was chatting and took me away, and ended up having to hold me with me crying on her shoulder and she said right [ ] and so she put me in touch with one of her colleagues and was able to help me out and take the boxes off the shelf and unpack them but the police service hadn't done that. The police service doesn't know how to do that.*

[Dominic: 1057]

It appears that in some instances, the corrosive effects of distress slowly eat away at the officer's sense of self to the extent that they become detached from their own capacity to observe their vulnerability and their inability to cope. From Dominic's narrative we can gauge how due to his fragmented and diminished sense of self, he can only begin to understand his breakdown through the eyes of another. It is striking that the process of making sense of his difficult experiences is used not only to explain his recovery, but to highlight the unavailability of organisational holding and containment from the police service.

**4.2.5.2 Sub-ordinate theme two: “The regularity of extreme experience”.** One of the precursors discussed by participants to reaching breaking point seemed to be the volume of serious incidents they had needed to deal with instead of a single event. This speaks to a key difference between conceptualisations of single incident trauma as compared to the notion of operational stress, which relates more to high-volume and ‘relatively’ less acute adversity. This is clearly expressed by Patrick who speaks to the additive effects of managing numerous stressful events:

*I think my pressure levels have felt most challenged when I've had multiple things on the go, some of which have been difficult or troublesome for one reason or another, and it's been volume that's got me closer to the threshold rather than a single individual incident.*

[Patrick: 687]

It seems that the layering of distressing events may saturate the officer's ability to cope and that eventually, a level is reached at which their capacity to manage stress and distress are exceeded, rendering them psychologically and emotionally destabilised.

The regularity with which serious incidents are experienced is also highlighted by Daniel, who discusses the unsettling nature of the disturbing investigations that are an integral part of police work:

*I remember some really difficult cases, particularly where I went to a child who'd died and then having to go to the post mortem of the child death and investigating that and that, was, you know, it's part and parcel of your job [ ]. And then interestingly, the other things there and it's all to do with macabre deaths 'cos you sort of deal with it on such a regular basis.*

[Daniel: 87]

Daniel's narrative is imbued with distressing events that speak to human experiences which may be deemed unnatural, such as the death and post mortem of child victims. It appears that the shock and brutality associated with a lot of police work may become overwhelming and surpass officers' coping mechanisms. It is possible that the regularity and cumulative nature of such shocking experiences may contribute to police officers' psychological and emotional deterioration on the job.

Dominic's account describes the magnitude of his distressing experiences accumulated over the years. The profoundly disturbing nature of each of these events is conveyed through the sensorial detail provided by him, giving us clues about the depth of the imprint left by these routinely gruesome and potentially traumatic experiences:

*We dealt with about 1000 serious injury and potentially life threatening or fatal road collisions a year and as is still the case in the event of something like that, it's your job to go there and to work out what's gone wrong... the vehicles and bodies are still*

*left in situ until you arrive... I could still see in vivid colour and smell the accident scene and location in terrific detail.*

[Dominic: 198]

What is highlighted by Dominic's narrative is the striking contrast between the normality attributed to the work tasks that must be carried out, such as attending and investigating a crash scene, compared to the dreadful reality of the event and its overwhelming human impact. The emotional and cognitive dissonance encapsulated by such extreme aspects of the officer's experience speak to the disjointed parts of the self that must exist in parallel within the working officer, but which appear impossible to integrate coherently and healthily.

**4.2.5.3 Sub-ordinate theme three: “The straw the breaks the camel’s back”.** This theme refers to the moment when the accumulation of adversity finally reaches a tipping point, when officers find themselves at capacity and unable to carry any more distress:

*I don't know whether you learn sort of like a sponge, and each time you soak up a little bit more and eventually it just gets so full up that you can't cope anymore.*

[Daniel: 925]

Daniel's narrative alludes to the point of saturation reached by participants when they are rendered unable to take on any more distress. Similarly, Harry alludes to the process of reaching breaking point through the overload of adversity. There is an inherent threat around the unexpected and unknown single addition to the load of distress already carried, which will become too much to bear:



*You put another stone in your rucksack and you keep going, and provided you can carry that rucksack, then that's fine but you know there'll be one time when that stone goes in and you'll go over backwards. [ ] A death, another, or another [ ] atrocity. [ ] You rip, you just put that extra stone in your rucksack. So I don't know how heavy my rucksack is, I don't know how many stones I got left in life before I go.*

[Harry: 188]

Harry's powerful metaphor also speaks to the way in which units of distress, symbolised by stones, are compartmentalised, isolating the difficult affect that remains unprocessed and is therefore carried throughout the officer's life. In addition, the emotional overspill that comes as a result of the overload of distress is represented by Harry's image of falling backwards, which alludes to a process whereby the officer, overcome by distress, is no longer grounded and thus becomes destabilised, collapsed and immovable. It appears that the officer loses his sense of agency, which leaves him at the mercy of an unknown influence that may strike him down at any moment. Furthermore, once breaking point is reached, it can prove destabilising and damaging, as expressed by Dominic who states categorically that surpassing coping thresholds can annihilate the officer:

*And so we break down, true, tremendously.*

[Dominic: 446]

There is an undeniable certainty in the state of crisis reached by officers, which leaves no room for manoeuvre, no escape, and which can only function in the irrefutable truth of absolutes.

#### 4.2.6 Super-ordinate theme six: “Anchored in macho narratives”.

*So the culture of John Wayne, don't cry and don't show your emotions, fortunately that's starting to fade. But there's still this macho, bravado, tough-it-out type stuff. It's still not okay to ask for help because it's still seen as a career block. It's still perceived that if you show that you've had these problems, they're not never going to get a special job.*

[Dominic: 1047]

This theme was conceptualised from the participants' narratives in relation to how they had navigated police culture and societal norms around masculinity, by implicitly using the macho narrative as a point of reference to make sense of their own experience. The 'macho' element refers to the 'John Wayne' culture that one of the participants discussed at interview, with respect to a masculinity imbued with an extreme version of virility, the overly assertive, aggressive, powerful, manly persona that many of the officers equated with the expectations put on them, from the organisation, from society and from themselves. Interestingly, this macho narrative also seemed present in the female police officer's account, as a cultural norm that pervaded the context grounding her experiences.

The three sub themes relate to the different levels at which the compass of the 'macho narrative' is used by the police officer to position themselves: 'the culture of the uniform'; 'showing bravado' and 'the taboo of vulnerability'.

**4.2.6.1 Sub-ordinate theme one: “The culture of the uniform”.** This sub-theme addresses the level of the individual's own identity as an officer and as a person. It relates to the personal sacrifices that are often made in the name of the role, their tacit

understanding that adversity is faced in order to make a valuable contribution and that facing danger and being in the line of fire is what policing is all about. There are elements of sacrifice and honour that pervade this aspect of the officer's identity, often represented by the uniform or badge, personifying a code and sense of service.

The first facet of this sub-theme describes the inherent character of the officer, which is expressed by Dominic in relation to a conceptualisation of police identity in a collective sense:

*Police officers, they are the same animal, the same net, the same creature all over the world.*

[Dominic: 692]

It seems that for Dominic, police identity is deeply embedded in the officers' very nature, making them almost a different species, setting them apart from others. Similarly, Patrick describes the bottom line in this police identity in relation to the essence of the officer and the purpose of the role:

*That's what policing's all about, it's dealing with ambiguous difficult situations and ultimately trying to protect vulnerable people and lock up bad people...I think people know very quickly whether they're cut out for this type of work.*

[Patrick: 618]

It appears that a sense of duty and focus on the mission are associated with the belief that policing is not just a job and that it has a meaningful purpose in society. Furthermore, the officers' attachment and absorption into the police role are represented by Patrick's intrinsic enmeshment between the job description and the officer's nature. It

appears that a proscription of role by the organisation and its culture may serve to constrict officers into a certain set of assumptions and beliefs about how situations must be responded to. Furthermore, this may serve to communicate something significant about the substance of the individual, providing access or exit from the organisational collective. Nevertheless, when participants move from the abstract notions of police identity to discuss specific cases of police culture, the narratives appear more critical and at times extremely disturbing:

*There was a lot of racism and sexism [ ] there was a woman inspector in charge of my team and she was awfully treated [ ] disrespectfully treated, had practical tricks played on her that she should never have had to put up with and the bad language and bad jokes and posters you know put up on the wall [ ]. I didn't know how to handle that and there was a culture also of abusing, well, using too much force and too much violence.*

[Joseph: 682]

It seems that the outcome of this police culture is a 'boys' club' which excludes, isolates and punishes members who are not part of the in-group, since they are perceived as a weak fit. Joseph's account enables us to take a look at the ugly face of police culture during the beginning of his career in the 80's, when discrimination appeared rampant and when the police organisation seemed a toxic place to inhabit. Joseph's narrative is one imbued with confusion around how to navigate his way through this noxious environment. Nevertheless, for Joseph, the uniform also seems to hold a protective function without which, the officer is left exposed and vulnerable. As such, affixed to a narrative of masculinity, with the dominant image of the ideal man as autonomous, brave

and strong, the police officer inhabits the deeper identity of the individual, with duty and service becoming embodied and adhered to:

*But it's about those situations when you're not in your uniform...it's just you, face to face with this bloke who is trying to do something wrong [ ]. It's just you [ ], you and him and you have to assert yourself [ ]. Either you get the better of him or he gets the better of you.*

[Joseph: 457]

**4.2.6.2 Sub-ordinate theme two: “Showing bravado”.** The second level refers to the aspect of the officer who does not wish to lose face by admitting distress, it relates to how the officer is willing to present themselves to the team, the organisation and the public, through a boldness that communicates capability without hesitation. This was often described as both a need (in order to be respected and accepted) and a coping strategy (in order to get through extremely difficult and often toxic aspects of the role). Daniel’s narrative speaks to the necessity to demonstrate certain masculine attributes in order to prove his worth and fit. In addition, his account alludes to the intense pressure to conform to a certain masculine identity that values composure, self-control and fortitude:

*There’s an element, I guess, of peer pressure and almost mocking if you like: oh and how was your post-mortem? Did you feel sick? You know, and did you keel over? [ ] It's all a bit of bravado and nothing affects them and you say, well I wanna be like that. [ ] It’s a bit of an act.*

[Daniel :1004]

Furthermore, it appears that for Harry, the loss of self- control or equanimity, can lead to a deep threat to his sense of identity and position within the organisation. As such, his ability to locate himself in his role and amongst his peers is rooted in the notion that masculinity serves as his compass, anchoring him safely in the hyper-masculine environment of the force:

*You know you start to doubt yourself, you start to doubt your abilities, you start to... for a guy you know it kind of almost like threatens your masculinity, again within a kind of very masculine, very masculine kind of environment.*

[Harry: 345]

In addition, Harry highlights how in the real world of policing, disclosing distress is not an option, since it would entail humiliation and the loss of his colleagues' respect:

*You're going to lose face by going to your...and saying I can't deal with this and it's causing me major stress.*

[Harry :737]

This speaks to the risk of rejection by peers in the police service, which might lead to isolation, thus, in order to avoid shaming, officers may overemphasise their masculinity and repress emotions so as not to appear vulnerable.

Jack reflects on the collective identity of the organisation, which he identifies as having the combative undercurrent of the army. He questions, on the one hand, the loss of the individual amongst the needs of the group and on the other, the person as something to be used versus something to be valued:

*There is still a bit of a militaristic view of the police service, seen as a police force and therefore, people are talked about as troops, you know, staff are troops. [ ] I think you're seen as units as opposed to necessarily individuals. [ ] There is a tendency for senior managers to think of them as just resources and not necessarily as individuals.*

[Jack: 690]

Once again, this alludes to the need for officers to fit into a structure where the needs of the individual, which comprise unique internal worlds, are, to some extent, marginalised, while certain hyper-masculine group expectations, particularly around the discourse of non-emotion, are legitimised. It appears that part of socialising into the police organisation, may lead to the assimilation and the suppression of differences amongst its people.

**4.2.6.3 Sub-ordinate theme three: “The taboo of vulnerability”.** The third level refers to the ‘macho’ narratives often internalised by officers, which stigmatise distress and tend to lead the officer to suffer in silence, cope alone and function as a lone entity, which in essence, serve to silence the distress that is unacceptable in a traditionally masculine arena.

*It was always seen as a sign of weakness if you sort of had those problems.*

[Susan: 544]

It appears that displaying emotion, may typically be regarded as a weakness since the norms and values of police culture may have tended to prevent officers from talking about their emotions in order to preserve a hegemonic masculine identity.

Harry also openly describes his impressions of the context of police work, which according to his account, served to silence distress. His language expresses both certainty and uncertainty around the adversity encountered by colleagues, possibly due to the stigmatising environment in which distress may have been present but also invisible:

*It was a very macho environment particularly within the CID, [ ] the detective world. [ ] I'm sure people did suffer, but everyone suffered in silence, if they suffered at all.*

[Harry: 273]

Furthermore, Patrick reflects on the organisational culture that demeans difficulty, clarifying that for police officers, the reality of ordinary work is embedded in witnessing and experiencing extreme adversity. As such, distress should not be seen as a sign of weakness, when it is simply valid and justified:

*It's a case of building resilience at all levels in an environment, where the culture is such, people feel they're not going to be disadvantaged, criticized, belittled by sort of exposing what could be perceived as frailties, but are probably no more than normal reactions to abnormal circumstances.*

[Patrick: 856]

Dominic also underscores a necessary truth that appears to be denied in an organisation where suffering is unacceptable, that it is ok to be authentic, to express pain and to be human:



*It starts from the top [ ] and actually admitting I had a problem or it is okay to ask for help. And it's okay, look, look at me, ten weeks off but now look at the job I'm doing, and until it becomes acceptable to turn around and say it's okay to be human.*

[Dominic:1116]

Patrick's and Dominic's accounts reflect the conflict or psychological strain that officers experience between the official, dominant masculinity in the police force (implicitly expounding organisational expectations around enacting appropriate attitudes and beliefs) and their own individual, informal perspectives regarding human needs to feel and express distress.

#### **4.2.7 Super-ordinate theme seven: "Forged in the fire".**

This theme reflects the different ways that participants felt adverse events had transformed them. Employing metallic metaphors, the name of this theme symbolises a process of change, whereby metal is shaped when it is heated in a fire or furnace and in which localised, compressive forces are applied. Similarly, operational stress and adversity could be seen to create intensely pressurised events that shape the officers' internal and external worlds in different ways. Furthermore, akin to the forging process for metal, the intense pressure felt by the officer may elicit a process of transformation to adapt to environmental cues through which they are able to, among other things, gain greater strength.

It is important to note that I was aware of a process of co-construction, whereby my questions served to prompt the participants to look at themselves and reflect on their experiences, thus the discovery of the new pieces of themselves, was many times a live process that I witnessed during interviews. In this way, the sense of 'growth' expressed,

was rooted in a fluid process of reflection when the participants discussed their past. I was reminded of a quote from a novel by Milan Kundera:

*“You think that just because it's already happened, the past is finished and unchangeable? Oh no, the past is cloaked in multicoloured taffeta and every time we look at it we see a different hue.”*

(Kundera, 1987)

Three sub-ordinate themes are discussed below, which reflect how participants felt they had transformed out of their experiences of stress and adversity: ‘discovering new pieces of me’, ‘reflecting on the good, the bad and the ugly’ and ‘don’t sweat the small stuff’.

**4.2.7.1 Sub-ordinate theme one: “Discovering new pieces of me”.** Participants described how they had discovered new aspects of themselves relating to vulnerability, compassion, care, and maturity. There was also a widespread acknowledgement of strength and resilience. This was linked to a sense of pride from having come out the other side, often with long successful careers behind them and a sense of accomplishment, enabling them to live life with a greater sense of composure, solidity and confidence.

It appears that stress and adversity may have created a window through which Harry was able to perceive his internal world in a different light, in relation to his capacity to both experience distress and to manage it:

*I think you learn about yourself a little bit more, you learn about what you can cope with.*

[Harry: 633]

Susan describes strength as a quality built over time, as a result of having faced extreme difficulty. It appears that they are both able to look at their trajectories through adversity and to view the changes in the self through a transformative lens. This speaks to the salutogenic effects of distress, which are rooted in eudaemonic perspectives of distress and psychological wellbeing as opposed to the hedonic view of subjective wellbeing:

*I think you end up being a stronger person than you thought that you might have been initially.*

[Susan: 433]

Daniel's account alludes to a different aspect of his experience as related to his sense of pride in making an honourable contribution to his community. This was communicated at interview not just through his words, but in fact, embodied in the passion of his delivery, through his voice and expressive gestures:

*I suppose the biggest, my biggest career achievement, I think, was after the murders and the work we did to deal with prostitution in (name of area) and that was a huge...[ ] You know, over 80 women were helped exit prostitution [ ]. To see some really good things and see people change their lives and come out of a life of vulnerability and chaos and harm, to live a more useful and fruitful and worthwhile life, I felt was a real achievement.*

[Daniel:503]

As such, Daniel's narrative expresses the satisfaction in seeing how the abstract sense of duty around the mission of policing has manifested in the reality of his work through his efforts and dedication. In essence, this reflects the discovery of a part of the self that moves beyond a personal quality at the level of the individual and into the realm of the moral contribution that the person can make for others and the value of their service.

**4.2.7.2 Sub-ordinate theme two: "Reflecting on the good the bad and the ugly".**

Participants also reflected on their perception of others and the world, with a mixture of cynicism, hopefulness, and often a bitter acceptance around the ugly face of human nature, which seemed to have created an imprint that they could not erase or unsee.

'The good' is reflected by Dominic's experience, which seems to have primed him for a brighter side of life. Thus, it appears that for some participants, their experience of harrowing adversity gives rise to a worldview that stands in direct contrast to it, opening up the prospects of hope and optimism when conceptualising the nature or intentions of others:

*It actually it keeps reaffirming my belief that most people 99% of people are good 99% of the time. There will always be the rotten egg that you can do nothing about. That person, for whatever reason, has it's just that they're beyond there but most people are trying to do the best they can and with the means they've got around them.*

[Dominic: 862]

Susan's narrative, however, encompasses a duality of perspectives, where there is room to conceptualise human nature in both light and shadow, underscoring the negative facets of individuals, as well as her openness to welcome a sense of hope in the more affirmative faces of humanity:

*I suppose that not everybody is as kind and helpful as you'd like them to be, but certain things do restore your faith in humanity and you think yeah, well, actually, not such a bad place after all so yeah... You can see both sides of life really, the good and the bad.*

[Susan: 357]

For Oliver, however, 'the ugly' face of human nature becomes more visible, prevalent and deeply felt, which is communicated clearly at interview by the commitment in the tone of his voice to this perspective:

*Hugely cynical, yeah, massively. Made me cynical, [ ] some very normal people do some very bad things to people, just 'cos they've snapped.*

[Oliver: 488]

In fact, many participants spoke of the suspicion and cynicism they had developed out of the adversity they had experienced while observing the ugly face of humanity. It appears that cynicism may be used as a defense against the uncertainty, danger and suffering witnessed within the realities of policing and used as a disguised expression of felt passivity and hopelessness.

**4.2.7.2 Sub-ordinate theme three: "Don't sweat the small stuff".** This theme brings together the sense of resilience felt by participants and their conceptualisations of adversity, which are used as points of reference that have enabled them to build new perspectives. Dominic describes how overcoming difficulty has enabled him to widen his capacity to withstand difficulty:

*I stopped sweating the small stuff and it really comes down to: Is anybody dead?*

*Has anybody died? Well it's not a problem then.*

[Dominic:737]

It appears that that officers' experiences of adversity have enabled them to discover a sense of resilience, which allows them to manage events that could potentially destabilise them. For Joseph, the experience of not being broken by hardship appears to have provided him with the resources to gain a felt sense of his capacity to deal with challenge (in terms of containing his own distress) as well as with the cognitive and behavioural competence to work his way through it:

*I think probably a positive way, it make made me more confident about dealing with crises, you know, and feeling that I'd dealt with difficult situations and that I can stay calm and can surprise myself by being organised and structured and authoritative, which I hadn't been tested in that way before when I joined the police yeah.*

[Joseph:934]

Susan's perspective is more pragmatic, whereby the catastrophic events she has witnessed, have enabled her to gain an understanding of context and of the lived world of the other. It appears that the resilience developed through adversity, grounds officers enough to allow them to not only contain their own distress but to mentalise and thus reflect on the mental states of self and other.

*When you go to tragic incidents and you just think well, somebody is not going to be going home to their family and loved ones today and I just yeah I think I've now got a more of a practical sort of view on life.*

[Susan: 446]

## **Discussion**

### **5.1 Chapter Overview**

The current study aimed to explore the experience of operational stress in retired police officers and of their growth through adversity. Seven super-ordinate themes emerged: How Stress Presents Itself, The Weight of Accountability, Diverse Ways of Coping, The Corrosive Nature of Distress, Breaking Point, Anchored in Macho Narratives and Forged in the Fire. This chapter outlines the study's major findings alongside links to theory and previous research and in terms of their wider significance to the practice of counselling psychology. A methodological critique is also presented alongside suggestions for future research and possible limitations of the study, before closing the chapter with a summary of the research and final conclusions.

### **5.2 Understanding the Findings in the Context of Policing in the UK**

One of the core phenomenological concepts on which IPA research is grounded is being-in-the-world (Langdridge, 2007), which is predicated on understanding individuals' experiences through an interpretative process that attempts to make meaning of people's relationship to the world. More specifically, individuals are able to make sense of their experiences in the backdrop of the social, political and cultural positionings (Hollway, 2007) that influence how they understand their lives (Flood, 2010; Smith et al., 2011). As such, major research findings are discussed in this chapter in light of the context of policing in the UK, given that participants' accounts of their experiences are rooted in their social environment.

**5.2.1 The Culture of masculinity in the police.** Participants' accounts highlighted their experiences of navigating police culture and societal norms around masculinity. In particular, a 'macho' narrative seemed to pervade officers' stories about



their experience within the police, which was imbued with the overly aggressive, powerful persona that many of the participants associated with the expectations put on them, from the organisation, from society and from themselves. Thus, major findings are discussed in light of relevant research and in the backdrop of the culturally specific issues around the masculinity permeating officers' lived worlds. This seems to be reflected in the theme 'Anchored in Macho Narratives', where key contextual issues around masculinity within the police, appear to give rise to certain gendered cultural norms. These are norms that seem to be implicitly used by officers to position themselves and from which to make sense of their experiences. In fact, sub-themes highlighted the difficulties experienced by officers when having assimilate into a role that expounded the ideals of fortitude and capability without hesitation, also rooted in the unacceptability of distress. It is important to highlight, however, the nuances that emerged in the subtheme of 'Showing Bravado', which encapsulated not only the need to demonstrate boldness and fortitude in order to be accepted by colleagues, but its function as a coping strategy to manage the extremely difficult aspects of the role.

Police culture is typically described as embodying specific values around hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal attitudes (Paton, Burke, Violanti & Gehrke, 2009). These tend to become implicitly normative within the organisation as the most honoured way (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) of being an officer and against which, men and women tend to position themselves in order to make sense of their place within the institution. However, masculinity is not a fixed characteristic (McAllister, Callaghan & Fellin, 2018) but as proposed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), it comes into being at specific times and places and as such, is located historically. In this way, masculinity exists only in the context of an overall framework of gender relations, within a cultural positioning that encompasses social processes and structures. Thus, this dominant, institutionalised masculinity that appears to be present in police culture, can

tacitly shape how police officers approach their roles and how they understand their experiences, even if they do not necessarily express such hegemonic masculinity explicitly in their behaviours and attitudes. Therefore, police culture can reflect a substantive gendered aspect of the organisation (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) that subsequently underpins how officers perceive their occupation and each other and which contextualises their experiences of operational stress (Chan, 1997). Thus, it may be important to reflect on the utility of exploring participants' narratives from a wider vantage point that can focus on two levels. One that explores the interpersonal, culturally-specific aspects of experiencing operational stress and growth in relation to the organisation, and the other, which examines the process of sense-making around distress, adversity and growth at the individual level.

### **5.3 The Interpersonal Arena**

This section explores how the complex emotional constellations of operational stress are experienced within the interpersonal field of the organisation in terms of the relationship between the officer and the institution. It is important to note that although empirical studies on police stress have tended to divide work stressors into the two broad categories of job context and job content (Evans & Coman, 1993; Violanti, 2014), participants' narratives showed a less binary picture, where job content and context appeared enmeshed. For instance, the super-ordinate themes 'How Stress Presents Itself', 'The Weight of Accountability' and 'Diverse Ways of Coping', illustrated the interconnection between the experience of job content as it was made sense of within the organisational environment.

'How Stress Presents Itself' identified how participants encountered operational stress through the unforeseen nature of the sources of stress they came to face, as well as the unanticipated 'felt' experience once confronted with these. In fact, research into the

subjective nature of uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese 1975) highlights that what is key is not necessarily the ambiguity or unpredictability inherent in events, but the perception of uncertainty held by the individual who needs to feel a sense of control over their environment in order to feel safe and secure and to create meaningful plans for goal-directed action (Bradac, 2001; Fiore et al., 2010; Kobus, Proctor, Bank & Holste, 2001). Indeed, subthemes illustrated that in light of such adverse environments, officers often felt ill-equipped to handle distress either due to the lack of preparation from their training in dealing effectively with intensely emotional experiences, or through the lack of a facilitating structure from the organisation that could support them in handling the difficult emotions later faced in the field. This lack of psychological preparedness afforded by the organisation, seemed to leave officers with a sense of increased personal susceptibility (Bradac, 2001; Fiore et al., 2010; Kobus et al. 2001).

It is important to note, however, an interesting aspect of the theme ‘How Stress Presents Itself’ and its sub-ordinate theme ‘The sweet spot of stress’, which showed the positive or valuable aspects of experiencing stress that enabled participants to thrive on the job. Firstly, it is helpful to highlight that this sub-ordinate theme can be distinguished from conceptualisations of growth typically understood as developing after a period of time and through a process of self-reflection, when in fact, ‘the sweet spot of stress’ relates to the positive aspects of difficulty as felt in the moment. Secondly, this sub-ordinate theme can be linked to current research suggesting that moderate levels of stress can make individuals sharper, stronger and more content, as long as levels of arousal remain at an optimal level above and below which, performance tends to become poor (Robertson, 2016). In fact, what determines whether the level of arousal is optimal, is the individual’s appraisal of the stressor and whether it is perceived as a challenge to be overcome or as a threat to be avoided. Indeed, research shows that challenging events tend to activate the brain’s key neurotransmitter and neuromodulator Noradrenaline (NA)

when individuals are engaged, excited, frightened, alerted or generally aroused (Sara, 2009), and which serves to help different parts of the brain to synchronise harmoniously in order to carry out smooth performance in physical or mental tasks. Thus, provided that NA levels remain optimal and in its ‘sweet spot’, it can improve cognitive functioning. In addition, studies into the effects of adversity in individuals who have experienced moderate levels of stress in their lives, show they had lower levels of emotional vulnerability than those who had experienced lower adversity (Seery, Holman & Silver, 2010). In essence, what this research suggests is that not only do moderate stress levels enhance emotional, cognitive and physical capacity as felt in the moment, but that some adversity is necessary for individuals to learn habits of managing stress and to experience the optimisation of NA levels in the brain when a situation is appraised as a challenge. In this sense, according to Robertson (2016), the psychological and physiological benefits of moderate stress may serve to inoculate individuals against the negative distress that it would otherwise cause. This may provide a bridge into aspects of growth to be explored below when discussing the superordinate theme ‘Forged in the Fire’, particularly in relation to the subtheme ‘don’t sweat the small stuff’. Thus, it is possible that the cumulative effects of learning habits of managing operational stress in the moment, may contribute in the long term to the development of those aspects of the self that officers seem to later discover (in retrospect) with regards to strength and resilience.

The next super-ordinate theme, ‘The Weight of Accountability’, illustrated how participants’ experienced operational stress through being answerable for their actions in three different dimensions. The first, at the level of the organisation, which impacted on their sense of autonomy and clashed with their expectations regarding core policing duties. The second, at the level of departments, in terms of the emotional weight of being responsible for teams and colleagues and the third, at the public level, from managing the conflict between working towards the public’s interest and meeting public expectations.

Overall, this elucidated the pressures felt by officers from the demanding and, at times, accusatorial environment they operated in, regarding having to proffer statements, reasons, or motives to account for their actions to themselves, their colleagues, teams, managers the government and to the public (Walker & Katz, 2008). These findings are consistent with research on police accountability (Macpherson, 1999; McGlaughlin, 2005; Neyroud, 2004; Waring, 2011), which highlight the different ways in which the decisions and actions of British police have become more visible and increasingly dissected due to their greater responsibility to maintain the stability of the state. As such, police officers have had to adapt to the larger number of mechanisms used to demonstrate and enhance their effective performance and sound decision-making as well as the minimisation of operational failures. As outlined by Waring (2011), British police officers have become increasingly accountable internally, in relation to the organisation (at all levels) through corporate governance systems which include “organisational policies; reporting systems; codes of ethical standards; the cultural ethos; appraisal mechanisms; disciplinary regulations, and an inspection regime” (McGlaughlin, 2005, p. 473). In addition, officers have become accountable externally in relation to the public, victims and their families, government, media, steering groups, all of which are able to hold officers to account through “the law courts; the constitutional structure; police complaints system; pressure groups; and the news media representing civil society” (p. 474), creating increased evaluation pressure for police officers (Punch, 2009). Therefore, findings in the present study extend the literature above by giving voice to the officers through their individual and nuanced accounts of operational stress in the context of the increased transparency, scrutiny and disciplinary measures inherent in their roles. As such, major findings also serve to provide a richer perspective of the pressures felt by officers as they manage the difficulties of job content within the context increased internal and external scrutiny.

The super-ordinate theme ‘Diverse Ways of Coping’, explored how participants were able to manage operational stress and adversity in the absence of organisational support. The first sub-ordinate theme ‘the steadying hand of others’ illustrated how the informal support provided by colleagues, friends and family, served to stabilise officers in difficult times, with organisational support highlighted by many participants as unavailable or unhelpful. This sub-ordinate theme spoke to the isolation felt by participants when they experienced difficult and overwhelming events in the absence of formal support from a consistent and responsive structure. These findings can also be linked to current literature showing that the most significant factor predicting how individuals are able to adjust to adverse experiences is the support they receive (Joseph et. al., 2015) and conversely, that impeded growth may be due to a lack of social and organisational support (McCormack & Riley; 2016).

The second sub-theme, ‘grounded by protocol’ explored the stabilising qualities of following processes and procedures during critical incidents, particularly when officers experienced heightened emotion due to the distressing nature of the events they investigated. It appeared following protocol may also represent a coping mechanism enabling officers to keep overwhelming emotions temporarily at bay, by refocusing their attention on the investigation and instilling in them a sense of control over their internal and external worlds. Furthermore, in light of the absence of formal ‘human’ support within the organisation, it may be the case that institutional processes and procedures may be perceived as the next best way to access a reliable, helpful and consistent support system to ground officers in times of need.

Finally, the sub-ordinate theme ‘box it up and walk away’ showed how by compartmentalising emotion, officers could buffer from distressing aspects of their jobs, which in turn, led them to become desensitised to adversity. It is important to note, that these findings are consistent with research showing that police officers tend to limit

emotional and cognitive engagement when experiencing distress and to focus instead on action-oriented coping in order to both maintain control (to carry out job related tasks) and achieve emotional detachment (Conn & Butterfield, 2013).

It may also be helpful to look at attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) as a way to further illuminate the findings above. Attachment theory suggests that when an individual experiences psychological or physical threat, their attachment behavioural system is triggered, activating a set of responses geared towards meeting attachment needs by seeking support from others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) but that in the absence of support, an individual's attachment behavioural system can become either suppressed or hyper-activated (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009). Thus, if we use attachment as an additional lens to view the findings, we could suggest that in the face of an unavailable and inaccessible secure base from the organisation, police officers are left with a sense of vulnerability under conditions of psychological and physical stress, which often leads them to suppress the expression of their emotional needs. In fact, attachment theory has recently been used to provide a distinct perspective to research around organisational behaviour (Yip, Ehrhardt, Black & Walker, 2017). For instance, emerging research has begun to explore the organisation as an attachment figure and to focus on attachment behaviours in terms of the bonds between an individual and their organisation (Yip et al., 2017), particularly at times of emotional distress, when the institution does not provide a secure base for its employees (Albert, Allen, Biggane & Ma, 2015). For example, research has highlighted that in a work context, when an individual's attachment needs are not met, they can experience heightened stress (Schirmer & Lopez, 2001), increased staff turnover (Tziner, Ben-David, Oren, & Sharoni, 2014) and higher rates of burnout (Littman-Ovadia, Oren, & Lavy, 2013), all of which reflect current challenges faced by the police in the UK.

A recent review by Yip et al. (2017) highlighted that in parallel to interpersonal attachment, the group can be experienced as a potential attachment figure where the individual aims to seek felt security. This may be akin to the ‘brotherhood of biochemistry’ proposed by Gimlartin (1990), which posits that there is a process of bonding through the physiological and social assimilation into the police role that takes place as officers join the organisation. This is due to sharing similar physiological sensations on the job, often characterised by their psychological and physical reactions to stress. This could be used as another perspective to understand the findings in the current study, which showed that officers tended to look for support informally, in peers, colleagues and through personal relationships. This may serve to bring a new and highly humanising viewpoint to police officer stress research, which has been traditionally examined in a categorical manner, by singularly focusing on trait approaches that look at police officer personality, resilience, vulnerabilities and performance (see Paton et al., 2009 for a review) by focusing on a stressor and strain approach in terms of job content (Hart & Cooper, 2001;) or from an organisational health/resilience framework (Violanti, 2014) focusing on job context.

#### **5.4 The Experience of Stress at the Individual Level**

Stress among police officers has been a topic of interest in empirical research for many years (Paton et al., 2009) with particular emphasis on the individual’s capacity for emotional control (Pogrebin & Poole, 1991); coping strategies and coping styles (Miller, 2015); emotion-focused strategies and problem-focused strategies (Hart, Wearing & Headey, 1995); emotional avoidance and suppression (Carlier, Lamberta & Gersons, 1997; Kirschman, Kamena, & Fay, 2015); the relationship between emotional avoidance and mental health outcomes (Williams, Ciarrochi & Deane, 2010); and emotional labour among others (van Gelderen, 2013; Hochschild, 1983). Thus, most of the research on



police stress (with a focus on job content) has tended to consider the link between the individual and stress/distress in quite instrumental ways, that is, as something to be coped with, managed and regulated as well as on the effects of stress on mental health outcomes. As such, the individual experience of operational stress itself regarding how the person relates to the self, has not been widely researched.

Major findings were illustrated by two major themes that speak to the lived experience of operational stress as it was embodied and lived by participants. 'The Corrosive nature of Distress' spoke to the gradual deterioration of the officer as a reaction to their adverse environment. Subthemes communicated how participants had felt that the intrusive and unboundaried nature of stress, had left them at the mercy of distress. In addition, participants' narratives also spoke to how cumulative stress had led to a loss of physical and psychological control, which had pervaded their lives in the midst of adversity. Moreover, the conflict between the dichotomies they faced regularly, concerning the extremely toxic and disturbing experiences at work and the ordinary aspects of their personal lives, often proved disconcerting, alarming and distressing moments to be contended with.

It appears that within the hegemonic, masculine context of the police, which culturally tends to communicate the unacceptability of distress in an organisation that is not perceived to provide a secure, available base to make sense of distress, officers may be left to construe the expression of emotion as unhelpful at best and impossible at worst, feeling enormous distress but unable to express it freely. This seems to leave officers in a state of emotional isolation, preserved through the emotional distance they keep from others in their external working environment and from themselves in their internal worlds. Such minimisation of distress has often been understood in stress research as a coping strategy to help officers perform in roles where they need to respond competently and dispassionately to crises, by placing the needs of the public and even colleagues above

their own (Miller, 2015). The findings in the present study can be linked to recent research on the coping strategies of police officers, conceptualising it as a ‘general mental toughening’ (Miller, 2015, p. 196). This can be seen a defense mechanism used by officers to compartmentalise and isolate affect in order protect the self temporarily from negative emotions and preserve cognitive faculties to keep functioning. It is suggested, however, that when this response is not used purely in a time-limited fashion, it can persist and either lead to emotional leakage in other areas of work or become counterproductive as a coping strategy in the long term. More specifically, research has shown that the summation of cumulative stress and fatigue can erode work quality and affect workplace and home relationships (Rossmo, 2009), wearing down the officers’ psychological defences, rendering them more susceptible to stress and distress (Sewell, 1994), as reflected by participants’ accounts in ‘The Corrosive Nature of Distress’.

Additionally, the effects of reaching a state of complete vulnerability to stress and saturation of distress was exemplified by ‘Breaking Point’, which illustrated participants’ most significant or heightened incidents of operational stress as felt through a specific event where they had been tested to the limits of their capacity to face any more adversity in their roles. The first sub-ordinate theme ‘knowing your limits’, explored the difficult process of knowing that officers’ thresholds to withstand distress had been reached, which for some participants was a felt experience of reaching their limits, whilst for others, whose sense of self had been corroded and fragmented by stress, was a process of making sense of their own distress through the lens of another. The second sub-ordinate theme ‘the regularity of extreme experience’ explored participants’ accounts of the cumulative effects of adverse events, some of which proved profoundly disturbing, but which they routinely faced in the roles. The third sub-ordinate theme ‘the straw the breaks the camel’s back’, exemplified the impact of reaching their threshold and a point of saturation in their ability to cope with distress.

In light of the current findings, it may be helpful to suggest that officers may occupy a representational world governed by rules that minimise awareness of emotions and reflect their need to feel (or appear to feel) self-sufficient, strong and independent (Wallin, 2015). However, it is possible that such rules also cast a shadow on their capacity to reflect on their internal worlds and interpersonal experiences. In essence, officers' difficulty to make sense of their internal landscape may hinder their capacity to anticipate or recognise when their thresholds to withstand adversity have been reached, thus leading them to the crisis point highlighted in their accounts. The findings of the present study consequently bring into question the effectiveness and value of many traditional stress management training programs that focus purely on the individual dimension in an isolated manner, without taking into account how the officer's sense making-processes are understood in the context of the organisation. As such, the findings may suggest that such types of programs often focusing on a range of emotion and problem-focused coping strategies, may only exert a small influence over police mental health and well-being outcomes. On the other hand, considering organisational factors from a purely instrumental and functional way, without consideration of contextual or cultural elements that influence the dynamics of organisational life, may overlook the centrality of interpersonal processes through which the self can be understood at the individual level.

### **5.5 Growth: Blending Light and Dark**

Major findings also reflected a process of self-discovery and transformation experienced by officers, which they felt had arisen from operational stress and adversity. The super-ordinate theme 'Forged in the Fire' expressed the three levels at which this process took place. The first, represented by the sub-ordinate theme 'discovering new pieces of me', related to the aspects of the self that developed out of adversity, such as strength, resilience, pride and vulnerability, as well as qualities of the self in relation to

others, such as compassion and social responsibility. The second level, 'reflecting on the good, the bad and the ugly', illustrated how adversity had impacted on officers' perspectives about others and the world. In this regard, participants' narratives were imbued with cynicism and suspicion around the goodness of human beings, for others, they appeared more hopeful. The third level, 'don't sweat the small stuff' related to how participants' experiences of extreme circumstances had enabled them sit more comfortably with difficulty, due to their enhanced capacity to deal with crises.

Some of the findings in this study allude to the concept of growth found in the literature which relates to a transformation in people's view of themselves, others and the world (Joseph & Linley, 2005). However, it is important to note that most of the literature on growth has tended to make sense of this transformation purely in positive terms, i.e. greater sense of resilience, wisdom and self-acceptance, greater appreciation for others and increased kindness, as well as changes in personal beliefs leading to greater appreciation for life (Joseph, 2012). Nevertheless, the current study, builds a more mixed journey of transformation, where the development of the self also encompasses aspects that speak to a newly discovered sense of susceptibility and vulnerability that had not been visible to participants before experiencing protracted stress and adversity. In addition, reappraisal around others and the world, reflect less of a rosy lens and instead, a wider encompassing perspective, which comes to mirror officers' prolonged immersion in often the worst elements of human nature.

It is also important to note that traditionally, research on growth has tended to focus on more acute single events of trauma, which must exhibit sufficient intensity to shift an individual's worldview through the engagement of purposeful cognitive processing (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) and rumination (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998), which in turn, is seen to enhance cognitive reappraisal and lead to growth (Chopko et al., 2018). However, this study's findings, which are based on cumulative and moderate

experiences of stress instead of single, acute trauma, bring into question conceptualisations of growth which require the process of active rumination. It is important to highlight, however, that some studies have, indeed, focused on the stressful and adverse life events experienced by police officers (instead of single acute trauma) and their associations to growth (Adjero, et. al., 2014; Chopko et al., 2016; Leppma et al., 2017). Nevertheless, they have done so from a nomothetic perspective and by examining a host of adverse or stressful life events encountered by officers inside and outside of work, with none of the literature focusing purely on operational stress. As such, findings from the present study provide new knowledge in an under-researched area, placing emphasis on the growth that may arise following cumulative operational stress and adversity as experienced by police officers. Therefore, the findings offer a significant and informative piece of research, which is idiographic in nature and thus gives voice to the individual's experience. As such, it may prove relevant to the large number of officers in the UK who may not necessarily experience a single, highly traumatic events in their working lives but instead face regular, repetitive, moderately stressful events along their careers.

In addition, as highlighted in the analysis chapter in relation to the super-ordinate theme "Forged in the fire", participants' reflections appeared to be a live process occurring at interview as they began to think back to their experiences and to make sense of them from their current perspective as retired officers. If we are to tentatively make use of an attachment perspective in order to bring a different light to the findings, it may be possible to consider a conceptualisation of growth that goes beyond cognitive processing and rumination. It is possible that growth may instead be linked to the process of mentalisation, and to officers' ability to not only reflect on but to fundamentally know that their experiences have interpretative depth. In other words, growth may be linked to officers' ability to reflect upon and to grasp their own states of mind, in order to gain an

insightful understanding of their thoughts and feelings. However, it is possible that in the midst of cumulative stress and in the context of an unavailable secure base from which to make sense of their experience, officers may not have been able to engage in mentalising, which is a capacity normally connected to security (Wallin, 2015). As such, it may be that post retirement, when the police organisation no longer represents a significant attachment figure for them, officers may have developed the capacity to be conscious of their psychological life and to be in touch with the representational nature of their thinking selves (Wallin, 2015), which enables them to reflect on how they have grown and transformed through adversity.

## **5.6 Methodological Critique and Reflexivity**

According to Cresswell, (2007, p. 42) qualitative research can be metaphorically understood as an “intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different textures and various blends of material. This fabric is not explained easily or simply”. It is for this reason that issues of methodological reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity will be attended to. This will be discussed as a way to show how research coherence was facilitated with regards to the different steps and content of the research process (Crescentini & Mainardi, 2009).

One of the issues I attended to in relation to IPA as my chosen methodology was linked to linguistic representationalism, and the presupposition that language and speech could provide direct access to experience and subjectivity, an element that also linked into the debate in qualitative research concerning embodiment. While Meleau-Ponty's (1945) phenomenology sees body, language and speech as intimately linked (Zahavi, 2008), in much of the IPA literature the body itself is either absent or presumed to inhabit behind the descriptions provided by participants (Murray & Holmes, 2013). Nevertheless, the subjectivity inherent in experiences of operational stress and growth were seen to also

potentially arise through an embodied phenomenology as individuals grappled to make sense of their experiences and communicate them. Hence, I aimed to maintain the connection between the phenomenology of the body, cognition and verbal expression by emphasising *speech* (Murray & Holmes, 2013), in order to capture the embodied language of participants. In this way, I endeavored to attend to these corporeal dimensions by focusing on silence, body language, tone, hesitations, gestures and any relevant items that pointed not only to what was being communicated but also to how this was being performed. This stance on *speech* that I decided to adopt, served to comprise a phenomenological and embodied approach to language that went beyond the mere one-to-one correspondence between language and experience. Indeed, I hoped it would enable me to reflect on the participants' broad position in the world in terms of their body inhabiting their specific environment as a social and relational human being, occupying particular stylistic and aesthetic dimensions located in space and time. Thus, one possible limitation of the current study relates to the way the interview questions may have elicited notions of growth by linguistically framing it as a possibility, when it may not have arisen naturally from participants' narratives. However, particular attention was given to the interview schedule following suggestions by Smith et al., (2012) in order to ensure that open questions were appropriately phrased without presuming to limit participants' experiences or lead them in a specific direction, thus bringing careful consideration to the order of the questions so as to elicit data that could reflect participants' lived worlds. In addition, participants' narratives required them to look back at their experiences, some of which had taken place anywhere from six months to more than a decade ago. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that similarities and differences across cases may also reflect discrepancies not only in relation to memory recall of past events but on the time that each participant had to process and reflect on these experiences from their current context.

As such, the current research focuses purely on the idiographic focus of participants meaning-making without inference to issues of reality or truth.

It is important to note that during the initial stages of this study, key constructs of ‘stress’, ‘trauma’ and ‘operational stress’ were understood by the researcher to be located along the same spectrum of human distress and that participants’ experiences were originally conceptualised through this paradigm. Therefore, the impact of using this paradigm meant that in many ways, it coloured how the literature reviewed was understood and critiqued. However, it became clear through conducting the research interviews that none of the participants drew from this conceptual framework to make sense of their experience, with none referring to the concept of ‘trauma’ and with only some using the concept of ‘stress’ to speak broadly about their experiences. Instead, participants spoke of, for example, ‘difficult experiences’, ‘challenges’, ‘suffering’, ‘the dark side’, ‘a heavy rucksack’ and ‘problems’. Only one participant used the term of ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ to discuss part of his experience and I suspect his use of the term may have been due to having received a formal diagnosis of PTSD by a psychiatrist in the past. Therefore, I became acutely aware, during the research interviews, of the assumptions and presuppositions I had initially brought into the research, which were greatly challenged by the narratives and positioning of the retired officers I spoke to. In essence, I found that the conceptual lens and paradigm I had brought as a researcher to approach this study became highly limiting, restrictive and unsuitable to view and understand the experiences of my participants. Overall, it seemed to miss out the nuanced and idiosyncratic uniqueness in which each individual made sense of themselves in light of the profoundly adverse events they had faced in their roles. I reflected deeply on this, using my research journal explore how I could suspend the paradigms I had initially brought with me. This was a process allowed me to embark on the analysis with a fresh



and more open perspective, in line with IPA's commitment to grasp the richness of an experience as it is lived by the experiencing individual (Eatough & Smith, 2008). It is hoped that this reflexive process, of becoming aware of the conceptual assumptions and presuppositions I had brought into the research, challenging them, unpacking them, and understanding their limitations, freed me to reach the participants experiences not only in terms of 'what' mattered to them but 'how' it mattered.

### **5.7 Personal Reflexivity**

In IPA, the analysis comprises a double hermeneutic where I, as a researcher, make sense of the participants making sense of their experience, thus, it must be acknowledged that the findings entail the interpretation of the data (Smith et al. 2012). Therefore, it is important to note that a different, and equally valid interpretation of the participants' narratives could have been made by a different researcher.

I was mindful of my dual role as a researcher/clinician, a position that pervaded every stage of my research from the conceptualisation of the study, recruitment, interview, analysis and reflections on the findings. I was aware that particularly during interviews, my engagement with participants occurred from my position as a clinician, since I heard their accounts of distress more so from a practitioner's perspective than from a purely researcher stance. However, this position also enabled me to engage more deeply in the process of analysis, where I felt that my position as a clinician provided more depth to my interpretative process and allowed me to go beyond the mere descriptive aspects of the participants' narratives.

I was also aware that during the process of analysis and more so later, as I engaged with research on making sense of major findings in my study, my knowledge and personal interest in attachment research and psychoanalytic theory inexorably influenced my perspective and my own interpretative process of making sense of the data. As such, other

theoretical frameworks could have been drawn upon, possibly eliciting a different understanding of the research findings. This is not conceptualised as a limitation, but as an acknowledgement of other possible and equally valid views in understanding individuals' responses to threat, stress and growth. As such, my identity as a counselling psychologist and integrative practitioner have enabled me to bring a multidimensional perspective in how I come to understand the individual in terms of their relatedness to the world and how they make sense of their experiences, which I am only able to access via my own interpretation. In this way, the scientist-practitioner model of professional practice has offered me a way to understand my role as producer and user of knowledge (Corrie & Callahan, 2000), rooted in the values of the profession as translated into my own research practices.

## **5.8 Implications of the Findings for Counselling Psychology**

Counselling psychology is underpinned by a set values that prioritise the individual's subjective and intersubjective experience (Milton, Craven & Coyle, 2010); focus on meaning-making instead of on psychopathology (Milton et al., 2010); maintain a stance that promotes empowerment (BPS, 2005) and upholds an appreciation of people as unique, socially and relationally embedded beings (Cooper, 2009). In addition, the discipline is positioned between the scientific foundation of psychology and the practice-based, therapeutic domain of counselling and psychotherapy (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010). Together, these areas have been given equal emphasis in the field, placing the scientist-practitioner model for training and practice at the core of the profession (Blair, 2010). The crux of this model has therefore been to apply the psychological knowledge gained from theory and research into therapeutic work (Jones & Mehr, 2007), whilst also deriving research from clinical practice and maintaining a scientific attitude to build practice-based evidence (Barkham et al, 2010; Jones & Mehr, 2007). As such, it is

important to highlight my particular interest in using the current study to produce research that informs and improves professional practice.

**5.8.1 Contributions to the knowledge and evidence base of the profession.** The present research was driven by a lack of sufficient knowledge in the area of operational stress and growth among police officers and therefore, as discussed above, in light of current literature, major findings have expanded on previous research on police stress and growth, specifically from the perspective of retired officers. This has provided a distinct, more humanistic, phenomenological approach, which offers a relevant addition to the knowledge and evidence base of the discipline.

**5.8.2 Informing clinical practice.** Major findings in the present study can provide relevant, practice-applicable research that directly impacts on retired and serving police officers as a population that can currently be served by counselling psychologists.

This study has shown that in the context of policing, which is characterised by adverse and uncertain environments, officers can feel ill-equipped to handle distress, particularly due to the intensely emotional experiences often encountered in their jobs. These important and relevant contextual aspects of police work, can prove informative for clinicians, who may be able to provide therapeutic support that enhances officers' capacity to understand their intense experiences and more specifically, to reflect on their internal worlds. In addition, findings around officers' ability to thrive under moderately stressful experiences, may also inform clinicians to provide a facilitative and containing environment that could serve to harness experiences of moderate stress and enhance performance, making individuals sharper, stronger and more content. This aspect of police stress is not visibly researched in the medicalised model of distress prevalent in empirical studies but may prove beneficial in a profession steeped in experiences of operational stress and adversity.

This study has also highlighted how officers tend to compartmentalise emotion and minimise distress as a buffer from the difficult aspects of their jobs, something that may be helpful when used in a time-limited fashion but counterproductive as an enduring coping strategy. Clinicians may also be able to attend to this and work to support officers to develop other helpful ways to understand their experiences and manage their affect, which may prove more helpful in the long term and also serve to enhance their resilience.

Major findings also suggest that practitioners may be able to encourage the promotion of growth therapeutically, by focusing on officers' mentalising, which may enhance officers' capacity to reflect on their experiences and to be in touch with the representational nature of their thinking selves.

Retired officers are specifically a population that has not been widely researched and may prove to be a group that could benefit from therapeutic support if they carry with them experiences of stress and adversity that they have not been able to process, and which may continue to cause them distress. As such, it may be that the knowledge derived from the present study can serve to support therapeutic interventions that are relevant and helpful for police officers who have now left the force.

Overall, it is hoped that the current research will make a positive difference in officers' lives and also maximise the potential of counselling psychologists by enhancing our therapeutic work.

**5.8.3 Informing police training.** Given that a counselling psychologist's research practices may also involve disseminating knowledge beyond the consulting room (Kasket, 2013; Milton et al., 2010), another important implication of this study relates to police training. Training is currently conceptualised in the police service as instruction around the functional protocols to be followed, addressing a pragmatic and operational dimension, which does not take into account the deeper human processes supporting these

practical procedures. Thus, major findings highlight the importance of meeting training needs that take into account officers' experiences of having been let down by the organisation, specifically in relation to the lack of a framework to help them organise or interpret the often-disturbing events they face in their jobs. It is hoped that these findings highlight the need to incorporate a more transformative psycho-educational approach to the performance of emotion in the police. This may encourage a move away from a narrative of coping with, regulating and controlling distress, which usually focuses on identifying signs of pathology and vulnerability, and towards an understanding of how distress feels and how it can be expressed (McAllister et al., 2018). As already discussed, however, in order for this to be of any utility, wider changes may need to occur in the organisation as an entity, so that it can become a facilitative structure for officers to make sense of and express emotion. This is particularly relevant in the context of policing, which typically comprises a disturbing arena and places high emotional demands on officers.

## **5.9 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

As already mentioned, a possible limitation of the current study relates to how the interview questions may have elicited notions of growth by linguistically framing it as a possibility, when it may not have arisen naturally from participants' narratives. Another possible limitation may have been issues of recall, given that the majority of participants had left the police organisation six months to ten years prior to interview. As such, their ability to remember in detail their experiences of operational stress could have been affected by the time that had elapsed since they left the police. Finally, it is possible that since seven out of the eight participants were men, the sample of participants was not homogenous enough in relation to gender, thus affecting the uniformity of the group and the psychological variability (including the patterns on convergence and divergence) that

arose as I examined the data. This may have particularly influenced cultural aspects of participants' accounts which related to gender and specifically masculinity.

Although this study focused on a small sample of participants in order to bring an idiographic understanding of officers' narratives, it has highlighted a number of possible avenues for further research.

Given the dearth of literature examining the experiences of stress and growth among retired officers, future research focusing on this particular population may provide a better understanding of how the appraisal of stress and adverse events are understood in observing the self from a distance, post retirement.

Further research could also focus on the process of growth that may come with cumulative adverse experiences, which, as highlighted by the present findings, may encompass a more mixed journey of transformation in comparison to the growth developing out of single, acute traumatic events, as found in previous studies.

Another possible line of enquiry may be to examine the kinds of processes and protocols are most grounding for officers in enabling them to manage intensely emotional situations, which may provide a helpful framework to support them in their roles, specifically through training.

Finally, it may be helpful to focus on gendered aspects of police culture by examining the experiences of operational stress and growth from the perspective of female officers, which may offer convergent or divergent perspectives on the institutional narratives around distress and the expression of emotion.

## **5.10 Summary and Conclusions**

This study aimed to explore experiences of operational stress in retired police officers and of their growth following adversity using a methodology predicated on

understanding individuals' experiences, through an interpretative process that attempts to make meaning of people's relationship to the world.

Findings suggest that experiences of stress and adversity can be best understood from the perspective of culturally-specific issues around the hegemonic masculinity that pervades the police, as a normative way of gendering and reifying emotion as well as silencing distress.

Findings were discussed from an interpersonal level, which looked at culturally-specific aspects of experiencing operational stress, emotion and vulnerability within the police and from the level of the individual, which explored the internal world of the officer. It appeared that within the masculine context of the police, officers were left to construe the expression of emotion as unhelpful or unacceptable, leaving them in a state of emotional isolation and often extricating them from their own internal worlds. This was understood as adaptive for job performance but toxic by hindering officers' capacity to make sense of their individual and interpersonal experiences. The current study also illustrated a process of growth that comprised a more mixed journey of transformation, where the positive development of the self also encompassed aspects of a newly discovered sense of vulnerability that had not been visible to participants before experiencing protracted stress and adversity. As such, growth was linked to the process of mentalisation, putting officers in touch with the representational nature of their thinking selves, which was only possible in retrospect due to their ability to understand their experiences from a position distance post-retirement.

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**Appendix A: Notice of Ethics Review Decision (including request for amendment to initial Ethics Application)**

**School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee**

**NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION**

**For research involving human participants**  
BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates

**REVIEWER:** Dr Nicholas Wood

**SUPERVISOR:** Dr Lisa Fellin

**COURSE:** Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

**STUDENT:** Vanessa Irene Contreras-Negretti

**TITLE OF PROPOSED STUDY:** Blending light and dark: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of how serving police officers experience trauma.

**DECISION OPTIONS:**

1. **APPROVED:** Ethics approval for the above named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice) to the date it is submitted for assessment/examination.
2. **APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES** (see Minor Amendments box below): In this circumstance, re-submission of an ethics application is not required but the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made before the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box below when all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to her/his supervisor for their records. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.
3. **NOT APPROVED, MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED** (see Major Amendments box below): In this circumstance, a revised ethics application must be submitted and approved before any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.

**DECISION ON THE ABOVE-NAMED PROPOSED RESEARCH STUDY**

*(Please indicate the decision according to one of the 3 options above)*

2. APPROVED, with consideration to points made below.

**Minor amendments required (for reviewer):**

1. It's unusual to keep audio recordings after completion of study as these are not possible to anonymise and are thus very sensitive. Can you not rather consider getting participant members to validate the accuracy of their transcribed interviews?  
(21)

Major amendments required (for reviewer):

--

**ASSESSMENT OF RISK TO RESEARCHER (for reviewer)**

If the proposed research could expose the researcher to any of kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard? Please rate the degree of risk:

<input type="checkbox"/>	HIGH
<input type="checkbox"/>	MEDIUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	LOW

**Reviewer comments in relation to researcher risk (if any):**

Hearing repeated tales of trauma may make the researcher open to secondary (vicarious) traumatisation and good support is required to avoid this.

**Reviewer** Dr. Nicholas Wood

**Date:** 30<sup>th</sup> January 2017

This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

**Confirmation of making the above minor amendments (for students):**

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data.

**Student's name** Vanessa Irene Contreras-Negretti

**Student number:** u1220679

**Date:** 3 February 2017

(Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed, if minor amendments to your ethics application are required)

**PLEASE NOTE:**

\*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

\*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, travel approval from UEL (not the School of Psychology) must be gained if a researcher intends to travel overseas to collect data, even if this involves the researcher travelling to his/her home country to conduct the research. Application details can be found here: <http://www.uel.ac.uk/gradschool/ethics/fieldwork/>



**REQUEST FOR AMENDMENT TO AN ETHICS APPLICATION**

**FOR BSc, MSc/MA & TAUGHT PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE  
STUDENTS**

**Please complete this form if you are requesting approval for proposed amendment(s) to an ethics application that has been approved by the School of Psychology.**

Note that approval must be given for significant change to research procedure that impacts on ethical protocol. If you are not sure about whether your proposed amendment warrants approval consult your supervisor or contact Dr Mary Spiller (Chair of the School Research Ethics Committee).

**HOW TO COMPLETE & SUBMIT THE REQUEST**

1. Complete the request form electronically and accurately.
2. Type your name in the 'student's signature' section (page 2).
3. When submitting this request form, ensure that all necessary documents are attached (see below).
4. Using your UEL email address, email the completed request form along with associated documents to: Dr Mary Spiller at [m.j.spiller@uel.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.spiller@uel.ac.uk)
5. Your request form will be returned to you via your UEL email address with reviewer's response box completed. This will normally be within five days. Keep a copy of the approval to submit with your project/dissertation/thesis.
6. Recruitment and data collection are **not** to commence until your proposed amendment has been approved.

**REQUIRED DOCUMENTS**

1. A copy of your previously approved ethics application with proposed amendments(s) added as tracked changes.
2. Copies of updated documents that may relate to your proposed amendment(s). For example an updated recruitment notice, updated participant information letter, updated consent form etc.
3. A copy of the approval of your initial ethics application.

Name of applicant: Vanessa Contreras-Negretti
Programme of study: Professional Doctorate in Counselling <del>Psychology</del>
Title of research: Working title:
Blending light and dark: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of how police officers experience trauma.
Name of supervisor: Dr. Lisa Fellin

Briefly outline the nature of your proposed amendment(s) and associated rationale(s) in the boxes below



Proposed amendment	Rationale
I would like to also interviews via Skype	Some of my potential participants currently live far from London (where the researcher is located) so therefore, without being able t use Skype for interviews, it will not be possible to include these participants in my study.
I would also like to extend my inclusion criteria in order to incorporate retired police officers.	This is in order to consider another perspective on the experience of trauma, which may shed further light on post-traumatic growth among this population.

Please tick	YES	NO
Is your supervisor aware of your proposed amendment(s) and agree to them?	X	

Student's signature (please type your name): Vanessa Contreras-Negretti

Date: 07/06/2017

TO BE COMPLETED BY REVIEWER		
Amendment(s) approved	YES	
Comments		

Reviewer: Mary Spiller

Date: 8<sup>th</sup> June 2017

## Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet



### **UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON**

School of Psychology  
Stratford Campus  
Water Lane  
London E15 4LZ

#### **The Principal Investigator**

Vanessa Contreras-Negretti

Contact Details: [u1220679@uel.ac.uk](mailto:u1220679@uel.ac.uk)

#### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in a research study. The study is being conducted as part of my Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at the University of East London.

#### **Project Title**

Blending light and dark: looking back at how retired police officers experienced operational stress and growth following adversity.

#### **Project Description**

This study aims to capture individual accounts of how retired police officers experienced adverse events, which have taken place as part of their jobs in the police force in the U.K.

You will be interviewed individually for approximately sixty minutes. During this time, you will be invited to offer a detailed account of both positive and negative aspects of your experience of policing, which may relate to particular difficult events that might have led you to challenge how you view yourself, your relationships or your beliefs.

Due to the sensitive nature of the experiences you may discuss, it is possible that you could become upset or distressed as sometimes talking about these events can touch on difficult emotions. Therefore, you will be provided with helpline numbers so that you are able to access support if you feel that you need it.

#### **Confidentiality of the Data**

Confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured by locking paper transcripts and signed consent forms in a secure cabinet. After data has been analysed, supervisors and examiners will also have access to sections from the anonymised transcriptions of interviews.

Audio-recordings will be uploaded onto a laptop and destroyed from the digital voice recorder and all electronic data, including audio recordings, will be password-protected.

Real names and identifying references will be omitted from transcripts, and only the main researcher will have access to the names and identity of participants, which will be stored separately from all transcripts.

After the completion of the study, all audio recordings will be deleted, transcripts will be kept securely and anonymised for a period of three years in the event that it is possible to publish the findings.

You will be given the chance to ask any questions after the interview, which will provide you with an opportunity to further discuss how your data will be used and stored.

Please tick if you give permission to be contacted by the main researcher in the event that clarification is needed after the interview has taken place.

☐

Confidentiality will be maintained unless a disclosure is made that indicates that you or someone else is at serious risk of harm. Such disclosures may be reported to the project supervisor or relevant professionals/authority.

#### **Location**

Interviews will take place at University of East London (UEL) or alternative confidential settings. Interviews may also take place via Skype.

#### **Disclaimer**

You are not obliged to take part in this study and should not feel coerced. You are free to withdraw at any time. Should you choose to withdraw from the study you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason.

If you wish to withdraw from this research project, you are able to do so within two weeks of this interview by emailing the researcher with your request. Should you withdraw within two weeks of your interview, all data belonging to you will be electronically and physically destroyed by the researcher, and none of the information you have provided will be used. After the two-week period, your anonymised data will be used in the write-up of the study.

Please feel free to ask me any questions. If you are happy to continue you will be asked to sign a consent form prior to your participation. Please retain this invitation letter for reference.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the study has been conducted, please contact the study's supervisor:

Dr. Stelios Gkouskos, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ (tel. 020 8223 4993 Email: [s.gkouskos@uel.ac.uk](mailto:s.gkouskos@uel.ac.uk))

or

Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr. Mary Spiller, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.  
(Tel: 020 8223 4004. Email: [m.j.spiller@uel.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.spiller@uel.ac.uk))

Thank you in anticipation.

Yours sincerely,  
Vanessa Contreras-Negretti  
[u1220679@uel.ac.uk](mailto:u1220679@uel.ac.uk)



## Appendix C: Participant Consent Form



### UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

#### **Consent to participate in a research study**

Blending light and dark: looking back at how retired police officers experienced operational stress and growth following adversity.

I have read the information sheet relating to the above research study and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my interviews will be audio recorded, and I give my consent to this. I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researcher(s) involved in the study will have access to identifying data. However, if significant risk to my life or others' lives is disclosed (particularly relating to children and vulnerable adults) an appropriate referral to the relevant services may be made and depending on the nature of the risk may be disclosed to relevant authorities, after discussion with supervisor and yourself beforehand, if possible. It has been explained to me what will happen once the research study has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent, I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study within two weeks after the date of my interview, without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

I understand that this research may be published in the future in academic journals/books maintaining full anonymity and that anonymized quotes will be used in publications.

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Participant's Signature

.....

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Researcher's Signature

.....

Date: .....

## Appendix D: Second Amendment Request to Ethics Application

### REQUEST FOR AMENDMENT TO AN ETHICS APPLICATION

#### FOR BSc, MSc/MA & TAUGHT PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE STUDENTS

**Please complete this form if you are requesting approval for proposed amendment(s) to an ethics application that has been approved by the School of Psychology.**

Note that approval must be given for significant change to research procedure that impacts on ethical protocol. If you are not sure about whether your proposed amendment warrants approval consult your supervisor or contact Dr Mary Spiller (Chair of the School Research Ethics Committee).

#### HOW TO COMPLETE & SUBMIT THE REQUEST

1. Complete the request form electronically and accurately.
2. Type your name in the 'student's signature' section (page 2).
3. When submitting this request form, ensure that all necessary documents are attached (see below).
4. Using your UEL email address, email the completed request form along with associated documents to: Dr Mary Spiller at [m.j.spiller@uel.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.spiller@uel.ac.uk)
5. Your request form will be returned to you via your UEL email address with reviewer's response box completed. This will normally be within five days. Keep a copy of the approval to submit with your project/dissertation/thesis.
6. Recruitment and data collection are **not** to commence until your proposed amendment has been approved.

#### REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

1. A copy of your previously approved ethics application with proposed amendments(s) added as tracked changes.
2. Copies of updated documents that may relate to your proposed amendment(s). For example an updated recruitment notice, updated participant information letter, updated consent form etc.
3. A copy of the approval of your initial ethics application.

Name of applicant: Vanessa Contreras-Negretti

Programme of study: Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

Title of research: Working title:

Blending light and dark: Looking back at of how retired police officers experienced operational stress and growth through adversity.

Name of supervisor: Dr. Stelios Gkouskos

Briefly outline the nature of your proposed amendment(s) and associated rationale(s) in the boxes below



Proposed amendment	Rationale
<p>Change of conceptualisation of 'trauma' to 'operational stress' as reflected throughout the project, participant documents and working title:</p> <p><i>Blending light and dark: looking back at how retired police officers experienced operational stress and growth through adversity.</i></p>	<p>The psychological distress experienced by police officers in their workplace can be located along a spectrum ranging from chronic work stress at one end (involving the ever-present perception of danger and job risk, often seen as cumulative, operational stress) to acute, traumatic experiences, which include posttraumatic stress disorder towards the other end of the spectrum.</p> <p>Furthermore, changing the conceptualisation of the experiences of police officers from 'trauma' to 'operational stress' may enable participants, who would otherwise not consider themselves as 'traumatised', to explore relevant difficult experiences in their work.</p>
<p>Sampling change to only include retired police officers and not serving officers.</p>	<p>Due to recent information regarding ethical approval requirements from the Metropolitan police that I would have to obtain in order to use data from serving police officers, I have</p>



	decided to only focus my research on retired police officers for which I do not need any additional ethical approval from the police service.
Change of Research Question wording to:  What has been the experience of operational stress for retired police officers and of their growth through adversity?	Through discussions in supervision it became clear that my research question needed further clarification in order to reflect not only the recent wording change from 'trauma' to 'operational stress' but also the growth they may have experienced following adverse events in their workplace.
Change of Supervisor details on Ethics Application Form and all participant documents.	Change of supervisor due to Dr. Lisa Fellin's maternity leave. New Supervisor Dr. Stelios Gkouskos.
Inclusion of full interview schedule	My previous ethics application only had sample interview questions and I have now included the full range of questions.
Wording changes to recruitment advertisement	To include further information about my previous research, which may be relevant for participants.
I would like to seek ethical approval to re-interview four participants (retired police officers)	Due to the changes in my research question, which now explicitly addresses 'growth following adversity', I returned to the data gathered in four of my interviews to see whether 'growth' had been explored in enough detail. Unfortunately, I realised that

	<p>some of the positive experiences or reappraisals following adverse events had not been unpacked enough through prompts. I would therefore like to interview my participants again for a much shorter amount of time (20-30 minutes) and purely focus on exploring the possible development or transformation (including possible positive changes) that they may have experienced. The participants I would like to re-interview already gave their permission to be contacted again by me via the consent form they filled out prior to interview.</p>
--	--

Please tick	YES	NO
Is your supervisor aware of your proposed amendment(s) and agree to them?	X	

Student's signature (please type your name): Vanessa Contreras-Negretti

Date: 02/01/20178

TO BE COMPLETED BY REVIEWER		
Amendment(s) approved	YES	
<p align="center"><b>Comments</b></p> <p>Please note that change of supervisor details and change of title will need to be lodged with the Graduate School</p>		

Reviewer: Mark Finn

Date: 20/01/18

## Appendix E: Research Recruitment Ad



### UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

School of Psychology  
Stratford Campus  
Water Lane  
London E15 4LZ

#### **The Principal Investigator**

Vanessa Contreras-Negretti

Contact Details:

[u1220679@uel.ac.uk](mailto:u1220679@uel.ac.uk)

[vanessacontrerasn@gmail.com](mailto:vanessacontrerasn@gmail.com)

Hello, I am Vanessa, a doctoral student and Counselling Psychologist in training at the University of East London.

I recently completed a Masters Degree in Investigative and Forensic Psychology, in which I researched how Emergency Services personnel manage major and critical incidents in the U.K.

My current doctoral research focuses on the well-being of police officers in the U.K. and I am specifically interested in examining **how officers respond to adverse or highly stressful events experienced as part of their jobs**. This is a valuable but under researched area, which may provide insight into how police officers' well-being could be further supported in the U.K.

I am interested in speaking to officers who would like to participate in my research, which would consist of a one-to-one interview with me at a convenient location or over skype.

If you would like to take part, you will need be a current or retired police officer in the U.K. who has experienced highly stressful events as part of your work.

If you would like further information, you can email me [u1220679@uel.ac.uk](mailto:u1220679@uel.ac.uk) or call me on **07931570501**. If you know someone else who may be interested in participating, please feel free to encourage them to contact me.

Thank you.

Vanessa Contreras-Negretti.

### **Project Description**

This study aims to capture individual accounts of how police officers respond to adverse or highly stressful events experienced as part of their jobs in the police force in the U.K.

You will be interviewed individually for approximately sixty minutes. During this time, you will be invited to offer a detailed account of both positive and negative aspects of your experience of policing, which may relate to particularly stressful or difficult events that might have led you to challenge how you view yourself, your relationships or your beliefs.

### **Confidentiality of the Data**

Confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured by locking paper transcripts and signed consent forms in a secure cabinet. After data has been analysed, supervisors and examiners will also have access to sections from the anonymised transcripts of interviews.

Audio-recordings will be uploaded onto a laptop and destroyed from the digital voice recorder and all electronic data, including audio recordings, will be password-protected.

Real names and identifying references will be omitted from transcripts, and only the main researcher will have access to the names and identity of participants, which will be stored separately from all transcripts.

After the completion of the study, audio recordings will be deleted and transcripts will be kept securely and anonymised for a period of three years in the event that it is possible to publish the findings.

You will be given the chance to ask any questions after the interview, which will provide you with an opportunity to further discuss how your data will be used and stored.

If you have any further questions or concerns about the study, please contact:

**Vanessa Contreras-Negretti**

**07931570501**

[u1220679@uel.ac.uk](mailto:u1220679@uel.ac.uk) or [vanessacontrerasn@gmail.com](mailto:vanessacontrerasn@gmail.com)

**This study has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee at the University of East London.**

## Appendix F: Participant Demographics Form and Demographics Table



Please can you provide us with some information about yourself by completing this form:

**Gender** (Please circle)

Male                      Female

**Ethnicity** (Please circle)

White

Black/ African/Caribbean/Black British

Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups

Asian/Asian British

Other ethnic background.

**Age**

**Years of professional experience as a police officer**

**Role within the police service**



Table 1

*Demographics Table*

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Years of professional service	Roles within police service
1	Male	White	56 years	31 years	Chief Constable.
2	Male	White	55 years	30 years	CID roles, Constable to Chief Superintendent.
3	Female	White	53 years	28 years	Constable, Control Room.
4	Male	White	57 years	33 years	Uniform General Patrol, Traffic Division, Accident Investigation, Strategic Command.
5	Male	White	56 years	31 years	Detective, Counterterrorism, Major Crime.
6	Male	White	53 years	30 years	Detective Chief Superintendent.
7	Male	White	60 years	30 years	Sergeant, Inspector, Chief Inspector, Public Order Event Commander.
8	Male	White	55 years	24 years	Uniformed officer, CID, Intelligence.

## Appendix G: Interview Schedule

### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- SCENE SETTING

Can you tell me what drew you to work in the police?

How would you describe your role in the police?

What types of situations would feel particularly difficult or stressful in work?

How frequent were these situations?

- NARROWING THE FOCUS

**Can you think of any particularly stressful events that you had to respond to as an officer?**

**Can you describe what made these situations particularly stressful/difficult?**

**Can you describe what allowed you to cope with/manage these stressful situations?**

**Do you feel these events affected you? If so, how**

*What did this situation (situations) mean to you?*

*Did it (they) affect your sense of who you are, if so, how?*

*Do you feel you changed through these experiences, if so, how?*

*Was there something you feel that you learned through these experiences?*

**Do you feel these situations impacted on how you thought of yourself? If so, how**

**Do you feel they impacted on your relationships? If so, how**

**Do you feel they impacted on your beliefs? If so, how**

*Looking back, are there aspects of your life that you feel developed out of these experiences? If so, how?*

**What was it that kept you in your job?**

- ENDING THE INTERVIEW

Do you feel that there was adequate support by your service in preparing you to deal with such experiences in your day to day work? If so, what was it? If not, what type of support would have been helpful?

Do you feel that there was adequate support by your service in helping you to deal with these stressful experiences after these had taken place? If so, what was it? If not, what type of support would have been helpful?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Is there anything I have missed that you would like to speak about?



## Appendix H: Participant Debrief Form



### UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

#### **Debrief Form**

##### **Thank you**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research. This the aim of this study was to explore how retired police officers experienced operational stress through adverse events that occurred as part of their jobs in the U.K. police force.

Your contributions to this study will complement the development of information in this area, which is currently under researched. This study may provide insight into how police officers' well-being could be further supported in the U.K. and help address the stigma currently attached to seeking and providing emotional and psychological support within the police service.

##### **Withdrawing**

If you wish to withdraw from this research project, you are able to do so within two weeks of this interview by emailing the researcher with your request. Withdrawing your interview from the project will mean that all data belonging to you will be electronically and physically destroyed by the researcher, and none of the information you have provided will be used. After the two-week period, your anonymised data will be used in the write-up of the study.

##### **Data protection**

The demographic details that you have provided are for purposes of analysis. Data arising from this interview will be used anonymously, and selective quotes will be anonymised to support the data. All data will be retained securely and anonymously as outlined in the consent form for three years after the interview takes place, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998), allowing for its potential use for future publications arising from this research.

##### **Distress following participation**

Due to the sensitive nature of the experiences your may discuss, it is possible that you could become upset or distressed as sometimes talking about these events can touch on difficult emotions. If you do experience distress associated with taking part in this project, you can contact the helplines below for further support:

##### **MIND Mental Health Charity:**

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)  
0300 123 3393  
or Text: 86463

##### **Samaritans:**

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)  
116 123  
[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

##### **MIND Blue Light Infoline**

(specifically for emergency services personnel)

0300 303 5999 (local rates)  
[bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk](mailto:bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk)



Text: 84999

If you have any questions or concerns about how the study has been conducted, I can be contacted on the following email address:

Vanessa Contreras-Negretti  
University of East London  
u1220679@uel.ac.uk

For any concerns relating to the study, please contact Director of Studies for this project:

Dr. Stelios Gkouskos  
University of East London  
s.gkouskos@uel.ac.uk

## Appendix I: Reflexive Exercise

Reflexive Exercise

Operated from + join any  
retired police officers.

Do have this  
a point  
on the  
traveller  
experiences.

trainer.  
yet depends.

uncertained  
fellows

promise

gives details.

Diagnostic  
unmanageable

turnover  
possible no  
growth?

Anger  
time?

fears about  
fidelity to  
person / the individual.

Richness of data  
if officers are  
retired?

- will it be too old?

- will they be relevant  
+ pertinent?

- what are they looking for?

Insights of psychology  
over knowledge  
of forensic  
psychology.  
Matters  
of procedural aspects.

fully aware  
new areas  
new topics  
what it can  
bring

I hope to find meaningful stories and  
personal stories that are relevant today  
in current climate!!

applicable knowledge. → clinical  
significance?

## Appendix J: Example of Transcript Analysis (for Dominic, participant 7)

Excerpt for one participant's initial analysis, showing exploratory comments and emergent themes alongside the transcript.

Transcript	Exploratory Comments	Line No.	Emergent Themes
<p>are criminal laws to protect property and actually the laws might change a little bit around the edges but fundamentally you're there to protect people and property. And so police officers there are the same animal the same net the same creature all over the world they have that willingness to help people to protect people to protect people's property and yet that's I hadn't realised that about myself and it's that caring social responsibility. One of the reasons I get so annoyed and angry when you hear about police corruption and police brutality and what have you it's those people are so far beyond the pale and the overwhelming majority of the police service would want somebody that's done something like that. they're worse than the worst criminal that you deal with because they're betraying not only the trust of the community that put them in that position of trust but they're betraying the trust of their colleagues miles.</p> <p>I: Ok so and in terms of the actual experiences that you shared particularly the difficult stressful either operationally or inside the police erm would you feel do you feel that you changed through these experiences.</p> <p>P: Ha ha I have yeah I have yeah and and it's cost me two marriages and it's a...it has made me become a lot more aware of myself I think and it's made me a lot more tolerant I think it's...I remember Mary my first wife I was on the accident and investigation unit at the time and I'd started off the day with a callout before my shift started and I'd literally gone from one end of the county to the other end of county across to another and I'd been to about five fatal accidents that day erm... started early finished really really late that day got in and Mary completely lost it because the nice dinner that she'd prepared was completely ruined and from my perspective it was well is anybody dead has anybody died but to her that was a major life event she wanted a nice quiet evening with a loving</p>	<p><i>Police officers are the same animal the same creature. Language used points to the visceral intuitive and primitive nature of how the role is felt and managed at a deep level. Instinct to protect others. Use of word 'net' something that connects them at a deeper level?</i></p> <p>Had not realised this about himself, the caring part, who exercises a social responsibility and is of service to others.</p> <p>Trust of the community and of colleagues at the heart of his identity as an officer.</p> <p>The cost of the service: two marriages, increased self awareness and tolerance. <i>Laughter, used as a defence? Is he deeply laughing and rejecting a part of himself? The loss which is too hard to bear?</i></p> <p>The discrepancy between experiences felt by the officer and those around him. <i>The construction of a narrative which mismatches and ruptures two people who do not understand one another.</i></p> <p><i>Running on empty he is unable to give anymore to the other.</i></p>	<p>694</p> <p>695</p> <p>696</p> <p>697</p> <p>698</p> <p>699</p> <p>700</p> <p>701</p> <p>702</p> <p>703</p> <p>704</p> <p>705</p> <p>706</p> <p>707</p> <p>708</p> <p>709</p> <p>710</p> <p>711</p> <p>712</p> <p>713</p> <p>714</p> <p>715</p> <p>716</p> <p>717</p> <p>718</p> <p>719</p> <p>720</p> <p>721</p> <p>722</p> <p>723</p> <p>724</p>	<p>Police officers are all the same animal.</p> <p>Cut from the same cloth</p> <p>Developing a sense of self as socially responsible.</p> <p>The 'cost' of my police service.</p> <p>Service is my cross to bear</p> <p>Misaligned expectations in private life</p> <p>Running on empty</p>



# Appendix K: Clustered Themes with Extracts (for Dominic, participant seven)

<b>The ways you break</b>			
<i>An undeniable collapse</i>	446		And so we break down true tremendously.
<i>The victims' struggle gets under your skin</i>	540		and going to the accident on the M4 at (name of area) in the fog where a hundred twenty vehicles involved and about 15 people lost their lives and about 30 cars all went up in flames seeing all of these human beings that the cars and the roof and this carbon skeleton of someone that's obviously been trying to crawl out of the car and you can see they're trying to crawl out of the car from that position knowing that they were on fire and knowing that they'd die it wasn't particularly pleasant. So those sides of things are they're not particularly pleasant.
<i>Making decisions under duress</i>	472		But Sam* bless his cotton socks he actually had the balls to make a decision a really really difficult hard call and I think hats off to him. It was the in hindsight which isn't an exact science it was the wrong call that but based on the information he had available to him at the time it was the right decision the right call. And I think that's where it's the internal stress.
<i>Nothing prepared us for the human impact.</i>	987		So the riots and public disorder in 80-01 we had no training for that. We reacted to that the peace demonstrations (name of area) and (name of area) we were totally unprepared and the miners dispute we were completely unprepared for that. Then going and dealing with fatal road and traffic accidents other than going back to school and trying to re-learn physics erm but dealing with the human impact side of that there was no support. There was no counselling. There was no preparation for that. And things like 9/11 there was absolutely no preparation or support or planning or training for that.
<i>The destruction of a man can cut you up.</i>	995		the things that cut me up most are I was in (name of area) and I met a detective who this is after 9/11 and I met a detective there from my precincts and he had been it's his job the rubble was being cleared from (name of area) and as it was cleared from (name of area) it was obviously being checked for any obvious human remains or things and then it went to (name of area) and he was part of a crew of detectives whose job it was to go through the (name of area) with basically a fine toothcomb and make sure that any human remains or identifiable things or DNA was recovered at the scene before it was put on barges and taken up the (name of area) to be landfilled and this chap he was erm... he was in a state that was the that was the hardest I think that really was that was a really decent human being destroyed by doing his job.

## Appendix L: Mind Map of Clustered Themes (for Dominic, participant seven)



## Appendix M: Mind Map of Final Super-ordinate Themes



## Appendix N: Theme Recurrence Table

Table showing recurrence of each super-ordinate and sub-ordinate theme and in which participants' accounts they are reflected.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
How stress presents itself	<i>Handling distress: what the manual didn't cover</i>	✓		✓	✓			✓
	<i>The dreadfulness of unpredictability</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	<i>The sweet spot of stress</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
The weight of accountability	<i>Scrutinised by those in power</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	<i>Permanently answerable to the public</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	<i>Unfailingly responsible for colleagues</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Diverse ways of coping	<i>The steading hand of others</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<i>Grounded by protocol</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓
	<i>Box it up and walk away</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
	<i>Stress knows no boundaries</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
The corrosive nature of distress	<i>Losing a grip</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	<i>Overwhelmed by life's dichotomies</i>	✓			✓	✓		✓
	<i>Knowing your limits</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Breaking point	<i>The regularity of extreme experience</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	<i>The straw that breaks the camel's back</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓
	<i>The culture of the uniform</i>		✓	✓			✓	
Anchored in macho narratives	<i>Showing bravado</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
	<i>The taboo of vulnerability</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
	<i>Discovering new pieces of me</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Forged in the fire	<i>Reflecting on the good, the bad and the ugly</i>					✓	✓	✓
	<i>Don't sweat the small stuff</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓

## **Appendix O: Key to Quote Presentation**

Quotes are followed by the participant's pseudonym and line number of transcript within the analysis table in square brackets. E.g. [Harry:275] represents Harry, line 275 of the transcript within the analysis table. Ellipsis points ... indicate short pauses in the participants' narratives. Square brackets [ ] indicate deletion of repeated words or phrases which were regarded as less relevant to the extract.