

2020

## Perceptions of Stress and Coping in the First Year of Police Work

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Scott David Eaton

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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

Perceptions of Stress and Coping in the First Year of Police Work

by

Scott David Eaton

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

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August 2020

## Abstract

The pressures associated with a career in law enforcement are considerable and often result in significant detriment to an officer's personality, behavior, and overall mental health, ultimately impacting job performance and work engagement. Although there is extensive research on the influence of stress encountered in police work, an understanding of those stressors and ways of coping in the first year of police work has yet to be fully explored. The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of 5 police officers who have been subject to stress in their first year and to identify the coping skills, whether adaptive or maladaptive, used by these individuals. The theoretical framework for this research was grounded in the dynamic system theory of development. A phenomenological approach was used to obtain an understanding of the lived experiences of officers in their first year of policing. Data sources included semi-structured interviews and direct observation. Three themes emerged: external stressors, mental health stigmatization, and emotion-focused coping. Study findings may contribute to positive social change by providing police administrators with insight on prevention, intervention, and treatment strategies for addressing stress among first-year police officers. The promotion of adaptive coping strategies may enhance officers' job performance and mental health. These benefits have the potential to trickle down to the community in the form of better relationships and interactions between police officers and the public.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

The pressures associated with a career in law enforcement have a considerable influence on the conduct and character of those employed in the field. Several researchers have examined the stress and job performance of law enforcement personnel through the administration of personality assessments (Lowmaster & Morey, 2012; Tarescavage et al., 2015). Their research has revealed several predictors linked to the behavioral and personality characteristics of police officers. Police stress has been associated with considerable consequences and has been linked to various causal factors (e.g., physical/mental, domestic, and emotional) significant to employment as a police officer (Acquadro, Varetto, Zedda, & Ieraci, 2015). The strain perpetuated by these aspects of police work has the potential to greatly impact the personality and behavior characteristics of law enforcement officers, ultimately influencing productivity and career longevity. Exploration of this phenomenon has the potential to contribute to positive social change by providing insight on prevention, intervention, and treatment strategies for addressing stress among officers. The promotion of adaptive coping strategies may enhance officers' job performance and mental health. These benefits have the potential to trickle down to the community in the form of better relationships and interactions between police officers and the public. The following chapter provides a brief overview of this study first examining the problem that was addressed and its background. The research questions that guided this research are also presented. The purpose of the study is clearly illustrated for the reader as well. The chapter concludes with a discussion of

other key components which include information related to the study's theoretical framework, nature, definitions, scope, and significance.

### **Background**

Although there is extensive research on the influence of stress encountered in police work, an understanding of those stressors exclusive to an officer's first year of service has yet to be fully explored. This deficiency in data is evident as existing research has primarily been directed towards an examination of the effects of career-extensive stressors, while those pressures significant to recruits have gone unattended. Acquadro et al. (2015), Louw (2014), Shane (2013), and Webster (2013) offered insight into how occupational stress is perceived by law enforcement personnel, outlining methods utilized by officers to address the pressures of police work. Their research provides a workable framework for further exploration of police stress.

Developing a foundation of knowledge that reflects the different sources of stress is crucial to an understanding of how stress influences first-year law enforcement personnel. Consequently, the types of stressors to which police officers are exposed will also be explored to ascertain their role in how officers predict, perceive, and address these pressures. Kaur et al. (2013), Russell (2014), Weltman et al. (2014), and Yun et al. (2015) outlined differences between the types of stressors (i.e. organizational and operational) associated with police work, while Mercadillo et al. (2015), Myhill and Bradford (2013), and Terpstra and Schaap (2013) examined influences on external and internal stressors in an effort gauge to their overall impact on policing styles and behavior. These studies also are beneficial in differentiating between the varying

stressors associated with police work. Furthermore, the authors exemplify how police stress perpetuates psychological change in the law enforcement population. Yet, little to no focus has been placed on officers' first year of service.

Exploration of the psychological impact of stress is pivotal in substantiating the damaging side effects associated with police work. Garbarino et al. (2013) and Van der Velden et al. (2013) examined the mental health risks that arise due to employment as a police officer, providing evidence as to the legitimacy and severity of these risks. These researchers have opened the door to further exploration of innovative approaches to this issue. Van der Velden et al.'s article also provided a framework for initiating a multicomparative design that can be applied when concentrating on the risk and/or impact of police stress on specific aspects of mental health, such as personality and behavior, which could influence job performance. The design used by Van der Velden et al. can be modified to compare the stress of first-year police work to that of other occupational groups. Garbarino et al. provided similar insight in terms of a design focusing on the first year of service that would prove beneficial for this study. Ultimately, these studies provide a methodology that can be incorporated into further research on the impact of police stress on job performance.

The administration of a structured interview was necessary to reveal the perceptions of stress and ways in which law enforcement populations address such pressures. Research that offers support for such an approach will be beneficial to this aspect of the study. Moreto (2015), Marchand et al. (2015), Dabney et al. (2013), and Viotti (2016) provided different perspectives on interview strategies utilized to assess

perceived stress encountered in police work weighing out the advantages and disadvantages of such instruments. This literature is useful in that it provides readers a more comprehensive understanding of the utility of interviews when studying police personnel. Overall, these authors provided a foundation for further study that enforces the benefits of utilizing interviews when researching police populations, while illustrating the most effective means of incorporating such practices.

Examining the potential pitfalls of pursuing this line of inquiry was imperative to the success of this study. Research conducted by Lucas, Weidner, and Janisse (2012) revealed the inconsistencies and deficiencies of prior literature related to the occupational stress encountered by police officers, demonstrating a need for further exploration. Further research can benefit from the extensive support for the influence of job-specific stressors identified by the authors, as well as the pertinent literature referred to throughout the article. Lucas et al. also outlined the value of obtaining such information when developing stress prevention and management strategies. Lucas et al. justified the necessity for more comprehensive research in this area perpetuating alternative lines of inquiry. Overall, Lucas et al.'s study provides a practical means of implementing a quantitative approach to the study of police stress, while also legitimizing the pursuit of more extensive exploration.

How officers perceive and experience stressors unique to the first year of police work, and how that critical period in time influences the development of coping skills, has yet to be adequately explored in the literature. This dissertation provides a better understanding of first-year police officers' experiences and offers additional insight into

those needs required for the development of beneficial, healthy coping strategies. This dissertation provides a better understanding of their experiences and additional insight into those needs required for the development of beneficial, healthy coping strategies. The theoretical model that was incorporated into this research as a means of providing a better understanding of the perceptions and experiences of police officers is the dynamic systems theory. The dynamic systems theory suggests that development (i.e., physical, cognitive, psychosocial, etc.) is a construct that changes over time and is comprised of a host of components that interact in a multifaceted and lawful manner. This model is more thoroughly detailed later in this chapter and Chapter 2.

### **Problem Statement**

Upon review of the prior literature, this researcher found limited coverage on the impact of an officer's transition from recruit to an officer within their first year of service. This lack of research represents a considerable gap associated with the study of stressors unique to police work (Detrick & Chibnall, 2013; Lough & Von Treuer, 2013). For a recruit to achieve and maintain professionalism, once fully initiated as a police officer, such pressures must not only be revealed but must also be resolved in an adequate fashion (Burke, 2016). Closer examination of this critical phase of employment, to understand existing research in a new context, represented the rationale for this dissertation. Such an endeavor yields considerable implications for early interventions and the development of career-lasting coping strategies directed towards alleviating the pressures associated with a career in law enforcement. Comprehensive, multidisciplinary, and broad-minded approaches to addressing the impact of stress, and

the various pressures encountered in the first year of police work, are critical to enhancing overall job performance and career success. Sound strategies directed towards resolving the detrimental effects of police stress are reliant on an exploration into this line of inquiry conducted in a manner that is thorough and reflective of current trends.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the stress that police officers experience within their first year of service is experienced, perceived, and addressed. Examination of this critical phase of employment represents a blind spot that has received limited attention in prior research. To address this gap, this researcher administered structured interviews to develop an understanding of the dynamics of police stress as well as police officers' perceptions of stress and their strategies directed towards resolving the pressures of police work. Exploration into this area may yield insight on coping-strategies that officers can use throughout their career. Such implications are further discussed in Chapter 5. The rationale for exploration into this area of study was twofold, focused upon the following endeavors: (a) to contribute to or provide support for a formal theory, which in this case involves the incorporation of a dynamic systems framework, and (b) to understand existing research in a new context (i.e., a police officer's first year of service).

### **Research Questions**

This researcher sought to answer the following research questions (RQs) in this study:



RQ1: For police officers performing in their first year of police service, how is stress experienced?

RQ2: For police officers performing in their first year of police service, what perceptions of stress emerge?

RQ3: For police officers performing in their first year of police service, what strategies for addressing stress emerge?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical base for this study was the dynamic systems theory of human development. Originally constructed for use in the field of mathematics, the dynamic systems approach can be applied to the development of thinking and behavior patterns, Thelen and Smith (1994) noted. Thelen (1995) later attempted to validate this assertion by employing the theory to explain motor development in infants--an endeavor that proved to be well founded and highly respected. This theory is currently considered one of the most extensive in its sphere of interest, focusing on the interactions between internal processes and contextual influences as the main driving forces behind development (Salvatore, Tschacher, Gelo, & Koch, 2015). The approach encompasses relevant factors influencing development at any given time along with a wide range of contexts (cultural, environmental, biological, etc.) while considering development in terms of multiple time scales (Salvatore et al., 2015).

How growth and change are explained through the dynamic systems approach sets it apart from competing theories. Development is viewed as being constant, fluid, nonlinear, and multidetermined (Gelo & Salvatore, 2016). The potential and versatility

of this approach in explaining the development of psychological characteristics and behavioral patterns made the dynamic systems theory the appropriate instrument for initiating exploration into the area of inquiry. Additionally, literature associated with stress in law enforcement populations has lacked representation of a dynamic systems approach, further justifying the need for the implementation of this framework as a means of addressing a theoretical gap in understanding this phenomenon.

### **Nature of the Study**

For this study, a phenomenological strategy was chosen as the research methodology. Incorporating this methodology permits the exploration of a phenomenon through an analysis of the lived experiences of several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers conducting phenomenological studies focus on the commonalities of their subjects as those individuals experience a particular phenomenon. This aspect aligned with the multifaceted nature of the study, as the interaction between the definitions, perceptions, and reactions of police officers when confronted with occupational stress was a focal point. This choice is considered appropriate as this researcher had not experienced the phenomenon. Therefore, little focus was placed on this researcher's perceptions of police stress; rather, the research centered on the shared, lived experiences of the subjects involved providing both a textual (i.e., what they experienced) and structural description (i.e., how they experienced it) of what they were confronted within their first year as a police officer (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, the timing characteristics of the assessment used, interviews administered on multiple

separate occasions, justified the implementation of such a strategy. Chapter 3 will further expand upon the rationale for use of a phenomenological design.

This research explores the many facets of occupational stress through the eyes of police personnel who have experienced the phenomenon during their first year as an officer. This researcher obtained data on how officers define and perceive the pressures of police work, while also gathering information related to the strategies they implement for prevention and intervention. Such pressures may originate from the completion of training programs, subjection to a probationary period, and so forth. For this study, stress was defined as the relationship between the individual police officer and their work environment which results in an emotional, physical, and/or psychological impairment or other detriments (Patterson, Chung, & Swan, 2012). Modification of one's emotions and actions that are not related to a single, obvious event, but resulting from exposure to situations or pressures associated with police work, are quite detrimental to job performance (Kaur et al., 2013; Lowmaster & Morey, 2012; Tarescavage et al., 2015). Such a harmful influence illustrates the importance of exploring this phenomenon through the experiences of those individuals who have been confronted with stress in the first year of police work. The research referenced throughout this section demonstrates that patterns of behavior established during this formative stage of a police officer's development can persist throughout their entire career; therefore, those experiences of officers in their first-year must be thoroughly explored.

## **Operational Definitions**

In this section, this researcher provides the operational definitions of the variables explored in this study. Establishing these operational definitions permits a better understanding of the analytic strategies that were implemented. The definitions relevant to this study are as follows:

*Coping*: “Constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141; see also Shin et al., 2014).

*Perceived stress*: A term that “incorporates feelings about the uncontrollability and unpredictability of one’s life, how often one has to deal with irritating hassles, how much change is occurring in one’s life, and confidence in one’s ability to deal with problems or difficulties” (Phillips, 2013, p. 1453).

*Stress*: Those pressures unique to an officer’s first year of police work (Patterson et al., 2012).

## **Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations**

Participants of this study consisted of officers who were about to or has recently completed their first year of police work. A considerable assumption that was made as a result of setting forth on this line of inquiry was that those participants would answer all of the interview questions openly and honestly. The results of this study were limited to those officers completing their first year of police work. Other critical periods throughout a career in policing were not be examined, which limits the scope of the study to only that first year when officers are initially subjected to the pressures of such work.

A phenomenological inquiry may not provide the quantitative evidence of previous studies concerning stress in police work have found. Quantitative studies can specifically identify the prevalence and impact of the stress to which police officers are exposed. The findings from the study were limited to interpretation rather than quantitative analysis.

### **Significance**

This research filled a gap through recognition, focusing specifically on the distinct stressors law enforcement personnel are introduced to in their first year of service, to enhancing our understanding due to a lack of investigation directed towards this area. This dissertation provides illumination of an unexplored period of police work, possibly rearing considerable implications for perceptions of stress and the resulting strategies addressing such pressures implemented throughout the career of an officer (Acquadro et al., 2015; Louw, 2014; Shane, 2013; Webster, 2013). The results of this study provide insight into how the stress encountered in first-year police work is predicted, perceived, and addressed by officers. Such examination also revealed information related to the influence of stress on the psychology of an officer (i.e., personality, behavior, cognitive patterns, etc.) which may, in turn, prove impactful to one's ability to manage effectively within that position. The information obtained proves beneficial to the field of law enforcement as the findings could potentially be used to develop prevention and early intervention strategies directed towards reducing the harmful impact of stress in police populations.

The differentiation of pressures associated with police work has been the subject of much exploration. Research has indicated that police officers are introduced to several

external and internal stressors unique to a career in law enforcement (Kaur et al., 2013; Russell, 2014; Weltman et al., 2014; Yun et al., 2015). The revelation of such stressors specific to an officer's first year of police work may yield considerable dividends.

Addressing the damaging effects of stressors at this critical stage may promote healthier outcomes for law enforcement populations through education and prevention efforts.

### **Summary**

A career in policing has long been characterized by unique stressors that have been found to have a considerable effect on the productivity and longevity of law enforcement officers. Research has shown that police officers routinely encounter unique pressures relevant to their careers and their lives outside of law enforcement.

Researchers have found that many officers experience various psychological issues (i.e., personality change, behavioral shifts, mental health problems, etc.) directly related to these pressures and those coping strategies that develop as a result of stress. In recent years, public attitudes and opinions have changed concerning policing as a consequence of social media, new technologies, etc. Researchers have explored how officers perceive, experience, and cope with stress throughout their careers; however, to date, qualitative research focused on the critical period of an officers' first year in police work, and how it influences the development of coping strategies, could not be located. This study sought to understand the perceptions and experiences of police officers completing the first year of their careers and their development/use of adaptive and/or maladaptive coping skills.

A thorough review of the literature relevant to this area of exploration is provided in Chapter 2.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

A career in law enforcement has long been associated with a variety of unique pressures that can be quite impactful to a police officer's productivity and longevity in the field. As a result, much research has been focused on revealing the intricacies of police stress and those strategies associated with addressing these pressures. In recent years, the world has experienced significant change concerning the impact of social media, public attitude/opinion, and police culture. As a result, current research demonstrates a shift in how law enforcement personnel experience stress and develop coping strategies. Research also shows that the manner in which police officers define stress has also evolved to ultimately influence how they perceive and address these pressures. Throughout this study, this researcher used the terms *police officers* and *law enforcement personnel* interchangeably in line with the research explored during this literature review, which acknowledges and supports the utilization of such terminology.

Research shows that police officers tend to develop adaptive and/or maladaptive coping strategies to manage work-related stress. Adaptive coping methods may include utilizing available support groups, exercising/dieting, or meditating and/or engaging in therapy, thereby resulting in decreased stress and improved physical health. Contrarily, maladaptive coping may include substance abuse, violence, and suicidality, in turn contributing to increased stress, poorer health, and job-related consequences. In reviewing the literature, this researcher could not locate research that addresses the unique pressures associated with the first year of police work. Therefore, the problem

addressed in this research was the lack of qualitative studies on the experiences of first-year police officers in terms of their definitions and perceptions of stress and the coping strategies they have used to combat its effects.

Before delving into the results of the literature review, this researcher outlines the research strategies used to procure this information. A review of the dynamic systems approach to development is also presented providing insight into how multiple factors at any given time may influence how police officers perceive and address work-related stress. Often, definitions and perceptions of those pressures associated with a career in law enforcement may be skewed as several factors come together (i.e., dynamic systems), ultimately contributing to the development of maladaptive coping strategies. The question becomes how do the dynamic systems influence how police officers define, perceive, and address work-related stress. The remainder of this literature review focuses on uncovering key research that explores definitions and perceptions of stress as encountered by law enforcement personnel within both historical and current contexts. The review provides a better understanding of the physiological, social, and psychological effects that work-related stressors have on those charged with protecting and serving the public. This review also provides insight into how police officers implement coping strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive, to manage pressures they are routinely confronted with.

### **Literature Search Strategies**

A majority of the necessary peer-reviewed articles for this literature review were procured through the use of Walden University Library's online databases. Academic



Search Complete and PsycINFO were databases most often accessed using the general search terms *police* and *stress* as the root of all inquiries. This researcher used other search terms such as *law enforcement*, *pressures*, *mental health*, *cope*, and *coping* to ensure that all avenues were explored during the research phase of this project. Those articles located using these databases were supplemented by additional references found through a review of the sources used by previous authors. This researcher could not locate research that addressed unique pressures associated with the first year of police work and the strategies used by officers when confronted with these stresses. Hence, the contents of this review are limited to the definitions and the impact of the stress and pressures experienced by police officers, in addition to reviewing the coping process and related strategies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The development of a proper framework represented an important step towards implementing this phenomenological study as that context was structured from broad ideas to help properly identify the issue under study, define the concepts being examined, and frame and provide clarity to those research questions being set forth. The concepts being explored are representative of the perceptions of stress and coping strategies in the first year of police work. This study was framed, from a theoretical perspective, according to the dynamic systems approach, which suggests that development is a construct that changes over time and is comprised of a host of components that interact in a multifaceted and lawful manner.

## **Dynamic Systems Theory**

For the study's theoretical base, this researcher drew from the dynamic systems theory of human development. The dynamic systems theory is a relatively recent addition to theories of development developed by Esther Thelen in the 20th century. It was originally constructed for use in the field of mathematics as a means of explaining the interactions of the smaller components of some larger entity and how those relationships course (e.g., the solar system; Thelen & Smith, 1994). Thelen and Smith (1994) proposed that the dynamic systems approach could be applied to the cognitive, physical, and psychosocial domains of human development. Thelen (1995) later would attempt to validate this assertion by employing the theory to explain motor development in infants. Thelen questioned whether or not those same principles originally outlined in the fields of mathematics and physics could be applied to the development of humans as she was dissatisfied with the ability of those current theories of development to address the motor behavior of infants (Spencer et al., 2006; Thelen, 2005). This endeavor would later be considered well founded and highly respected.

Thelen's goal was to develop a theory that would both explain how multiple constructs initiate developmental changes over time and mark the transition from a focus on specific domains to a more global perspective on development. This perspective ultimately led the dynamic systems theory to be considered one of the broadest theories established addressing the various influences of human development. This theory is currently considered one of the most extensive in its sphere of interest, focusing on the interactions between internal processes and contextual influences as the main driving

forces behind development (Salvatore et al., 2015). The approach encompasses relevant factors influencing development at any given time and examining a wide range of contexts (cultural, environmental, biological, etc.) while considering development in terms of multiple time scales (Salvatore et al., 2015).

**Core concepts and major assumptions.** How growth and change are explained through the dynamic systems approach sets it apart from competing theories. The core concepts established for this theory consider development as being both dynamic and occurring within a system. In short, the theory posits that development is comprised of a host of components that interact in a multifaceted and lawful manner and any change to one component can result in a change within the entity as a whole. Development is viewed as being constant, fluid, non-linear, and multidetermined (Gelo & Salvatore, 2016). Those major assumptions being made through this theory are as follows:

- Development is step by step.
- Development is non-linear.
- Development is continuous over time.
- Behavior is both flexible and stable.
- Behavior is multiply-determined.
- Behavior is softly assembled.

Development is step by step which means that behavior introduced in the present or past will impact the establishment of future behavior (Thelen, 2005). The components of development interact in a non-linear manner. Small deviations to one component may lead to significant behavioral change (Thelen & Bates, 2003). Development is

recognized on multiple time scales. The theory recognizes the significance of acknowledging developmental change on a minute level as well as how it will unfold over extended periods (Thelen, 2005). Behavior is both flexible and stable occurring fluidly. Organisms tend to prefer patterns of behavior that elicit the most stability. Stable patterns often lead to resistance to change. Any change occurs with the introduction of stimuli which disrupts stability. Behavior is also multiply-determined.

There does not exist one single component which perpetuates development. Behavior is a product of the interaction of the many components associated with development (Miller, 2002). Finally, the meaning behind the assumption that behavior is softly assembled states that there exist many manners in which these contexts can interact to perpetuate changes in development (Miller, 2002). There is no single route to the introduction of new cognitive, physical, or psychosocial changes.

**Strengths of approach.** There are many strengths to consider before incorporating the dynamic systems approach to human development into the study of the perceptions of stress unique to the first year of police work and those coping strategies developed to address such pressures. One such strength lies in that the theory is testable. This is primarily because behavior is observable. As a result, the dynamic systems theory is grounded in research being called upon to examine such paradigms as social interaction, competition, and language acquisition; just to name a few (Thelen & Smith, 1993). Also, this approach permits researchers to consider development on both a specific and global level. Moreover, the theory is resistant to pathologizing those whose diverse characteristics (cultural, social, etc.) do not meet the status quo (Thelen, 2005).

**Weaknesses of approach.** Weaknesses of the dynamic systems theory include issues with applying concepts to higher-level cognition, criticisms for overemphasizing individualism in development, and there exist contradictions embedded in the theory. For example, Thelen argues for the existence of general principles of development yet stresses its unpredictable nature (Spencer et al., 2006; Thelen, 2005). One final weakness that proves noteworthy is that the approach represents a relatively new theory; therefore issues of diversity have yet to be fully explored. As a result, the role of culture in development has yet to be specifically addressed. Even though the cultural context represents only one of many components that initiate change within a system, it proves more difficult to focus on such a specific domain when utilizing this approach.

**Summary of approach.** In summation, the dynamic systems theory of human development has roots in mathematics and physics. At the core of the theory, development is defined as dynamic and as occurring within a system of constructs. The theory has been established as a well-tested approach grounded in research. Although culture is not addressed specifically, the theory respects the individualism and diversity that go beyond the characteristics of the status quo. Finally, even though originally applied to the development of motor skills in infants, this theory has been utilized to address a variety of other areas of development. The potential and versatility of this approach in explaining the development of psychological characteristics and behavioral patterns are what make the dynamic systems theory the appropriate instrument for initiating an exploration of the intricacies of police stress.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts**

Research has shown the negative impact of work-related stress on law enforcement personnel (Rajeswari & Chalam, 2018; Santa Maria et al., 2018; Wakil, 2015). For this study, “stress” is defined as “a relationship the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 21). That is, stress encompasses those pressures that challenge an individual’s ability to cope ultimately resulting in harmful consequences such as the development of maladaptive emotional, behavioral, or personality traits. More recent literature has incorporated this definition as it has been deemed to be consistent with contemporary views of the phenomenon (Colgan, Klee, Memmott, Proulx, & Oken, in press; Frison & Eggermont, 2015; Patterson et al., 2014). Stress, in this case, is not to be confused with what has become recognized as “eustress” which is not explored in this study. Eustress, or positive stress, is comprised of those bearable pressures which have a beneficial effect on the individual such as higher efficiency or better overall job performance (Selye, 1956). This explanation coincides with the Yerkes-Dodson Law which suggests that performance is improved with increased arousal (i.e., stress) (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Improved performance would be considered a benefit of stress which does not fall under the purview of this research. Even though recognition of eustress provides a foundation for future research in a police officer’s first year of service, this study pertained strictly to the detrimental effects of stress that taxes or exceeds one’s ability to effectively cope.

The focus of the past exploration of stress in police work has been primarily focused on those pressures which police officers are confronted throughout their career (Abdollahi, 2002; Dantzer, 1987; Smith & Webb, 1980). Despite ample research into this area, there is a lack of attention focused on the unique stress officers are confronted with within the first year of their careers. The following literature review provides insight into what police officers experience in terms of stress throughout a career in law enforcement and how their perceptions influence the development of coping strategies designed to address those pressures. The review begins with a brief discussion of some pertinent characteristics of those police departments represented by the participants of the is study.

### **Characteristics of Police Departments**

Before delving into the intricacies of police stress, recent literature outlining how police agencies differ from one another must be explored taking into consideration the uniqueness of the departments representative of the sample studied when conducting this research. Law enforcement agencies are prevalent throughout the country with most being responsible for the coverage (i.e., patrolling, responding, investigating, etc.) of multiple jurisdictions that overlap all levels of government (i.e., city/town, county state, etc.). The most recent data on the number of police agencies that exist throughout the country was distributed by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2016. According to its Office of Justice Programs' Bureau of Justice Statistics, the 15,322 general-purpose law enforcement agencies dispersed throughout the United States during that time employed approximately 701,000 full-time sworn officers; local police departments making up 80%

(12,261) of this group which employed 67% (468,000) full-time sworn officers (Hyland & Davis, 2019). The aforementioned figures communicate the extent to which police coverage has been established across the United States.

**Volume of calls for service.** A closer look at the aforementioned agencies reveals significant comparisons amongst these entities that should be noted when proceeding to study law enforcement populations, one of which is the volume of calls and agencies receives. Police officers routinely answer a variety of calls for service that require them to respond to a wide range of situations within the region for which they are responsible. As the next paragraph of this section illustrates some calls can put an officer at great risk while others would be considered more benign. The number of these calls received by an agency is typically dependent upon the characteristics of the geographical area for which it is responsible in terms of its size and density of its occupants. This study examines local departments responsible for smaller cities and towns located in central New York. Not surprising, these local departments would see less call volume than agencies in New York City as the density of the latter in terms of population lends itself to a higher prevalence of criminal activity, however, the challenges faced by smaller departments is that they often lack the manpower and resources that larger departments are provided (Reaves, 2015). Given that distinction, smaller departments, such as those represented through the sample studied, are confronted by similar types of criminal activity than their counterparts. Often found to be ill-equipped, officers of smaller departments, such as those examined in this study, are placed under considerable pressure to maintain order and protect the community without the same access to valuable resources which promotes



higher stress levels among these groups (Strom et. al, 2016). Training and/or access to current technologies (e.g., body-worn cameras, mobile computers, etc.) or often dependent on the funding available. Lack of resources may have a detrimental impact on the safety and well-being of police officers ultimately promoting levels of distress.

**Violence associated with calls for service.** Another characteristic that should be recognized is the violence associated with calls for service. As mentioned, smaller agencies are often confronted with the same types of criminal activity that would be found in larger departments. Even though violent crime rates appear to be falling across the board, smaller departments are communicating recruitment issues due to the competitive nature of the field of law enforcement yielding in criminality that exceeds the resources of such departments in terms of personnel tasked with attending to these calls (Elkins, 2019; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). Lack of adequate personnel, its impact being considerably influential on the stress levels of police officers, is noteworthy despite this reduction in violent crime. The competitiveness of employment in the field observed in central New York is no exception and often has perpetuated in a lack of options in terms of recruitment for smaller towns outside of the Utica area. As indicated later in this study, the result is longer hours, overlapping shifts, and officers often on patrol by themselves. The remainder of this literature review explores the dangers associated with such circumstances and their impact on the stress of police officers as well as their overall health and well-being.

## **Stress in Police Work**

The pressures of policing have been the centerpiece of volumes of research conducted over the past several decades (Abdollahi, 2002; Rajeswari & Chalam, 2018). For example, Drabek (1969), one of the earliest explorations of the phenomenon, investigated the influence of stress found within police organizations. The author analyzed data collected from three simulated police communication teams establishing both the influence of stress on these groups and how each responded to those pressures. Upon reviewing the literature directed towards exploring stress in police populations, the author maintained that, although discussions related to the topic were prevalent, little empirical research had been conducted then, while also stressing that the vocabulary being utilized when discussing the phenomenon was vastly limited (Drabek, 1969). A critical need for further exploration of police stress was exposed through this research, opening the door to a more extensive investigation of these pressures, their impact, and how they are addressed in police populations. Among those studies that result from Drabek's (1969) initial examination of the phenomenon, Kroes, Margolis, and Hurrell (1974) would begin to unravel some of the loose threads of police stress. Through their interviews with 100 Cincinnati police officers, the authors were able to lay the foundation in terms of the examination of job-specific stressors providing evidence of not only their existence, but of their influence as well (Kroes, Margolis, & Hurrell, 1974). Lawrence (1979) would go on to measure the intensity of the stress that police officers are routinely confronted within an effort to establish some predictability concerning the phenomenon. The author examined stress associated with specific aspects of the job (e.g.,

administrative procedures, court appearances/decisions, etc.) establishing a propensity for these features of police work to result in considerable stress (Lawrence, 1979).

Lawrence's (1979) findings would establish the field's initial strides towards predicting the presence of stress and its overall influence on the police officer. Ultimately, these influential contributions to this area of study encouraged research that would differentiate these stressors further which represents the next area discussed in this section.

**Operational and organizational dichotomy.** At the time of Drabek's (1969) research, there was little known concerning the dynamics of police stress. Since that landmark study, the phenomenon has been explored from several perspectives. For example, Symonds (1970) was one of the first researchers to differentiate types of stressors (i.e., operational and organizational). The author established that operational stressors were products of police work itself, while organizational stressors were a result of the structures and procedures of the police agency (Symonds, 1970). Many recent studies continue to use utilized this dichotomy to study how stress is perceived and addressed in law enforcement. For example, Acquadro et al. (2015) attempted to determine the level of perceived stress, distinguishing between operational and organizational pressures, encountered by police officers, how it influenced anxiety, and the coping skills employed to address that impact. Results revealed female officers were more susceptible to anxiety associated with both operational and organizational stressors, while men were more vulnerable to symptoms stemming from organizational stressors. Salinas and Webb (2018) supported these findings adding that male and female officers often behaved differently when confronted with operational and organizational stressors.

Distinguishing between these categories of stressor (i.e. operational and organizational) has also acted to reveal limitations concerning past literature. Webster (2013) analyzed and compared past literature which examined how work-related stress is perceived by law enforcement populations. The author incorporated a meta-analytic approach which synthesized 103 articles from both published and unpublished resources (Webster, 2013). The results of this study indicated that most of the prior literature focused on operational stressors, while not attending to those of an organizational nature. It was also found that the majority of research analyzed made only a modest contribution concerning the analysis of the predictive domains of police stress (Webster, 2013). The author's findings demonstrated the need for a more expansive look at police stress going beyond the operational/organizational dichotomy. Webster's research would provide additional support for a definition of police stress which allows for a more complex and dynamic system of stressors to which law enforcement personnel are confronted. The next area discussed in this review of the literature on "police stress" covers how the field broke away from classifying stressors as either organizational or operational, to include sources of internal pressure that, to that point, had gone unacknowledged.

**More diverse stressors.** Selye (1956), the author who coined the term "stressor", believed that to understand the complexities of stress one must first pick it apart systematically. Such an approach has been reflected in the past literature dedicated to police stress. Rajeswari & Chalam (2018) cited the depth of Selye's influence when discussing models that have been used, historically, to explore police stress. These stressors fall into four categories: stresses inherent in police work, stresses arising

internally from police department practices and policies, external stresses stemming from the criminal justice system and the society at large, and internal stresses confronting individual officers (Stratton, 1977; Rajeswari & Chalam, 2018). One of the initial researchers to explore this model, Grencik (1975), acknowledged the significance of all of these aforementioned categories but placed special attention on intra-personal stressors. The author ascertained that the internal struggles of the police officers if gone unchecked, would cause discord among the other categories of stressor (Grencik, 1975). Webb and Smith (1980) echoed the necessity for a thorough examination of the relationships between all categories of stress, also citing a host of inconsistencies concerning past research into this area.

As decades passed, the focus of researchers exploring police stress was directed towards procuring knowledge of how the types of stressors intermingled and played off one another (Brown & Campbell, 1990; Can, Hendy, & Karagoz, 2015; Houdmont, 2016). One recent study examines the impact of law enforcement agency size on each of these types of stressor establishing how influential these categories have become (Warner, 2019). The result of these endeavors is a rich tapestry depicting those stressors unique to police work, differentiating them among categories established by pioneers who first examined the phenomenon.

**Perceived stress.** Research since the field's initial foray into the phenomenon known as police stress, such as those accounts of Drabek (1969), Symonds (1970), and Grencik (1975), has focused on a need for clarity when it comes to what police officers perceive as stressors. For example, during an examination of the past literature on police

stress, Abdollahi (2002) concluded most studies involving the topic to that point had centered on expert opinion to define stressors rather than the first-hand experience of the officers that are confronted with such pressures on a routine basis. Studies such as this emphasized the need for establishing a dialogue with law enforcement personnel when exploring police stress. Many studies since have accomplished this feat through the implementation of a variety of measures (i.e., qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods). For example, Shane (2013) touched upon police stress through an exploration of how police officers perceive daily work-related activities and how those perceptions influence job performance. The author studied officers employed with urban police departments administering the Daily Hassles Scale (DHS) to personnel, while also conducting a full agency records review for each participant (Shane, 2013). The results of the study indicated that work experiences and the accompanying stress that results from an individual's interaction with their environment, as perceived by those law enforcement personnel involved, was a predictor of job performance.

More recently, Violanti et al. (2016) were able to shed light on those stressors most impactful as perceived by police officers. The authors' examination of feedback provided by over 400 police officers revealed the five most impactful stressors which included: navigating family disputes and crises, responding to a felony in progress, fellow officers not doing their job, having to make critical on-the-spot decisions, and insufficient manpower to adequately address job duties (Violanti et al., 2016). These observations illustrate those stressors officers perceive as most influential which may differ when compared to a current exploration of those pressures unique to the first year of police

work. An additional area that has been under scrutiny when studying police stress has been its relationship with personality, how traits influence these pressures, and vice versa, which is discussed in the following segment.

**Personality's impact on stress.** Initially, the connection between personality characteristics and police stress represented, yet, another area that had gone unexplored in the literature. As with other topics discussed in this section, even though discussions of this connection were rampant at the time, there was little empirical research conducted on how these variables (i.e., personality and police stress) related to one another (Lawrence, 1984; Dantzer, 1987). By the mid-'90s, the focus turned towards how one's personality impacted perceived work experience, ultimately shedding more light on the relationship between such traits and police stress (Hart, Wearing, & Headey, 1995). Other studies during this time would focus on other components of personality, such as attitude, mood, and intellect, and their impact on police stress (Perrott & Taylor, 1995; Mearns & Mauch, 1998; Kop, Euwema, & Schaufeli, 1999). Since these early explorations, the idea that personality type has had a considerable impact on the presence and influence of stress has taken center stage concerning research of recent years.

Detrick and Chibnall (2013) examined police stress through the lens of Costa and McCrae's (1992) Five-Factor Model of personality. Steadiness under stressful conditions was attributed to personalities that reflected low levels of neuroticism, high levels of extraversion and conscientiousness, and average levels of openness and agreeableness (Detrick & Chibnall, 2013). Recent literature has examined the role of a police officer's temperament when confronted with stressful situations. For example,

Conn (2018) discussed the role of temperament in the development of resilient traits that influence how stress impacts a police officer oftentimes reducing the negative consequences that may result from such pressures going unchecked. This author found that the development of protective factors related to personality is especially influential to the success of the officer when overcoming stress (Conn, 2018). The studies discussed highlight the crucial influence an officer's personality characteristics has on police stress, while also revealing some of the negative outcomes that can result as law enforcement personnel are at risk of potential career-ending consequences (i.e., misconduct, burnout, etc.). Personality will be mentioned again later in this literature review through a discussion of how police stress can influence the development of traits, both beneficial and detrimental to the officer.

**Summary.** The study of police stress has evolved over the years to perpetuate a long-lasting impact on how research is conducted. From the humble beginnings of pioneers who called for more empirical research and richer vocabulary to those researchers of recent years who have revealed the complexities of stress unique to each officer's personality, the field has taken great strides in the study of police stress. A move towards studying the topic from the police officers who struggle with these pressures on a routine basis has been crucial to the field's understanding of police stress. Finally, coverage of the role personality plays concerning police stress has been invaluable.

Notwithstanding these shifts to account for a more thorough examination of police stress, a review of the literature underscores that a gap exists. This blind spot



represents the study of stress within the first year of police work; an area worthy of further exploration. As modern researchers narrow their scope to how the features (e.g., nationality, rural vs. urban, etc.) of the police agency, as well as the characteristics (e.g., specialty, rank, etc.) of the officer, influence perceived stress, it becomes even more apparent that this the first year of police work represents a critical period which remains unexplored (Madamet, Potard, Huart, El-Hage, & Courtois, 2018; Plazas, 2018; Simmons, 2018). An examination of this overlooked period would yield much adding to an already abundant cache of knowledge associated with the phenomenon known as police stress. In the following section, research is presented to provide additional insight as to how occupational stress impacts the police officer.

### **Impact of Stress Related to Police Work**

By the beginning of the 1970s, research on the presence of stress was becoming more readily available (Drabek, 1969; Symonds, 1970; Kroes, Margolis, & Hurrell, 1974). A richer vocabulary related to the topic of police stress was forming as researchers began to develop terminology for the different types of stress to which a police officer is routinely confronted. Upon a review of the literature available around that period, it had become apparent that the field had begun to recognize the significance of police stress. As a result, the focus of research related to police stress was then directed towards how these pressures impact the police officer establishing not only a need for such literature but presenting a primer on this influence touching upon health issues, psychological problems, etc. related to police stress (Esbeck & Halverson, 1973; Margolis, Kroes & Quinn, 1974; Wallace, 1978). These initial explorations into the

impact of police stress would set future researchers on the path to exploring how these pressures influence specific aspects of a police officer's life.

By the 1980s, research of police stress was directed towards specific features of the officer (i.e., job satisfaction, work performance, marital problems, etc.) (Band & Manuele, 1987; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Silbert, 1982). Silbert (1982) differentiated between physical and psychological risk factors demonstrating how these pressures influenced the police officer's overall satisfaction concerning their chosen career. The study found that the presence of police stress was related to increased levels of job dissatisfaction (Silbert, 1982). Silbert's (1982) contribution was also one of the first to distinguish gender differences associated with the presence of occupational stress maintaining females were more susceptible to such pressures. Work performance, as influenced by police stress, represents another area that has received attention over the years. Perrier (1984) examined this relationship citing specifically that an officer's inability to follow procedure, their reluctance to accept responsibilities, and their persistent tardiness was among the most detrimental outcomes of police stress, ultimately, impacting overall job performance. These findings were echoed by other researchers during this time (Rotella, 1984; Cacioppe & Mock, 1985).

Many articles examine the influence of police stress on marital relationships and family relations (Depue, 1981; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Cooper & Davidson, 1987). For example, Jackson and Maslach (1982) examined the influence of police stress on family dynamics within the profession. According to this study, law enforcement experiencing stress were more likely to present with anger, avoid spending time with

their family, be less involved in matters regarding the family, and report their marriage as being unsatisfactory (Jackson & Maslach, 1982). In the decades since the publication of that article, many researchers would follow-up on this line of inquiry further supporting the authors' findings (Beehr, Johnson, & Nieva, 1995; Keerthi, Ampalam, & Reddi, 2016). As the years progressed, research dedicated to revealing the impact of police stress began to focus on more specific criteria examining the influence of occupational pressures on behavior, personality, and, ultimately, an officer's overall mental health.

**Influence on behavior.** An abundance of prior literature has linked occupational stress to several behaviors (e.g., absenteeism, withdrawal, sleep disturbance) that may impact the careers; personal relationships, etc. of police officers. One of the initial attempts at bringing attention to such behaviors, Schwartz & Schwartz (1975), discussed the effects of occupational stress demonstrated in other studies in relation to many other jobs in the context of police work. Through this endeavor, the author submitted a plea for more exploration into this area citing many behaviors that quite impactful to an officers' ability to do their job, while examining these acts through coping strategies, most considered substantially harmful (e.g., alcohol use, suicide, etc.), which are indicative of other occupations (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1975). This plea for a more thorough examination of the influence of police stress on behavior would be echoed by other researchers during this time (Martin, 1980; Smith & Webb, 1980; Terry, 1981). After this study being published, many researchers heeded the call of Schwartz and Schwartz, who declared a need for more empirical evidence, setting forth on their exploration of the influence of police stress on behavior. As a result, the field has come a long way in its

understanding of how occupational stress is revealed through behavior in police populations. This review of the literature continues with an examination of some of the most influential of these, oftentimes, career-altering behaviors specifically examining trends associated with absenteeism, withdrawal, and separation issues.

*Absenteeism.* The tendency to routinely be absent from work is behavior influenced by the pressures of the job which has been cited often in the literature associated with police stress. As mentioned in the previous section, Schwartz and Schwartz (1975) set the ball in motion in terms of field shedding more light on the behaviors which arise from police stress, however, it also should be noted that they often referenced absenteeism as a potential byproduct of these occupational pressures. It should be noted that prior literature suggested that over 70 percent of all job absenteeism could be linked to job-related stress establishing a need for further research dedicated towards specific occupations (Adams, 1987). One of the first to study the relationship between police stress and absenteeism, Tang and Hammontree (1992) administered a questionnaire twice over six months to 60 suburban law enforcement officers. The aforementioned study would become one of the first to establish that high levels of occupational stress were associated with high absenteeism in police populations providing avenues for future exploration (Tang & Hammontree, 1992). While these authors set forth to examine, specifically, the influence of police stress on rates of absenteeism, subsequent studies would tie police stress to the physical problems associated with increased substance use, ultimately resulting in higher levels of absenteeism (Kirkcaldy, Cooper, Brown, & Athanasou, 1994). Today, the rates of

absenteeism resulting from stress have been found to cost American industries over 100 billion dollars annually highlighting the detriment of such behavior (Kim & Garman, 2003). Concerning police work, the stress outside that which is experienced routinely has been established as a culprit of absenteeism. According to Anderson, Litzenberger, & Plecas, (2002), the stress from “critical incidents” (e.g., high-speed pursuit, conflict with a suspect, etc.), or those sudden, impactful situations that place an officer in danger, are the most influential on rates of absenteeism. These types of incidents are the most difficult for officers to recover from often resulting in patterns of absenteeism (Anderson, Litzenberger, & Plecas, 2002; Tafoya, 2015). Implications for future research lie in how these responses to critical incidents develop in the first year of police work. Other recent studies dedicated to revealing more substantial information regarding the link between police stress and absenteeism has focused on the psychological and physical problems/illnesses (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder, metabolic syndrome, cardiovascular disease) that have been found to result from the pressures associated to a career in law enforcement (Garbarino & Magnavita, 2015; Habersaat, Geiger, Abdellaoui, & Wolf, 2015; Magnavita, Capitanelli, Garbarino, & Pira, 2018). The extensive literature directed towards exploring the link between occupational stress in law enforcement and absenteeism provides a solid foundation for further research examining these dynamics within the first year of police work.

***Social withdrawal.*** A tendency for an officer to be influenced by occupational stress to the point in which they engage in social withdrawal has been another behavior documented in prior literature. Social withdrawal involves avoidance of those people and

activities one would normally enjoy. This propensity to withdraw socially can progress to a point of social isolation, where an officer will take lengths to avoid any contact with their family and close friends. Through personality testing, early exploration established social withdrawal as a response which is characteristic of the stereotypical male police officer (Carpenter & Raza, 1987). Research conducted by Gould and Funk (1998) would support these findings during their comparison of male and female officers adding the latter did not fit the same stereotypical response to the pressures of the job. Further study of female officer social behavioral change in the face of police stress indicated quite the opposite as they are more likely to become more social (He, Zhao, & Archbold, 2002). This tendency for female officers to engage socially when confronted by job-related pressures has also been discussed as a way in which officers cope with police stress; an idea which will be discussed further later in this literature review.

In police officers, social withdrawal has been known to have a considerable impact on relationships with family, peers, and the community. The impact of such behavior has been recognized as early as the 1960's when the literature explored social isolation of police officers from the public citing the demands of the job as a factor promoting this rift (Banton, 1964; Clark, 1965). Research since these initial studies have indicated other explanations for this divide between law enforcement and the community (e.g., police culture, officer mistrust, "us vs them" mentality) (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Reiner, 2007; Skolnick, 2008). The one point in which many researchers appear to agree is the extent to which social withdrawal influences the relationships an officer has with his/her family. An officer's tendency to isolate or withdraw from his family due to

job-related stress has been linked to high rates of divorce, domestic violence, etc. (Beehr et al., 1995; Abdollahi, 2002). With peer relationships, officers are placed in a role in which they need to appear strong and avoid being perceived as weak making connections with one's partners or colleagues difficult especially in the face of those pressures of police work (Miller, 2000). The damage that can result from an officer becoming withdrawn is well documented and occurs on multiple fronts establishing this behavior as noteworthy when examining the specific ways in which occupational stress impacts police officers.

***Sleep disturbance.*** Another example of behavior change in police officers resulting from occupational stress involves its impact on an individual's sleep patterns. Across occupations, work-related stress is the most often reported cause of sleep issues (Ertel, Karestan, & Berkman, 2008; Rau, Georgiades, Fredrikson, Lemne, & de Faire, 2001; Roth & Ancoli-Israel, 1999). Sleep difficulties can greatly impact one's effectiveness ultimately harming job performance while resulting in a greater need for the use of physical/psychological health services and sick leave (Chevalier, Souques, Coing, Dab, & Lambrozo, 1999; Jacquinet-Salord, Lang, Fouriaud, Nicoulet, & Bingham, 1993; Stoller, 1994). A majority of employees report increased work demands as being a major contributor to the development and frequency of sleep issues (Jansson & Linton, 2006). Aguilera (1994) theorized that certain hormones introduced into the bloodstream (i.e., adrenocorticotrophic hormone and cortisol) rise in response to stress. Sleep disturbances, such as insomnia, are perpetuated by the introduction of these hormones which cause melatonin levels to become erratic ultimately disrupting normal sleep patterns.

With police work, sleep disturbance has received much attention since the 1980s with relation to officer-involved shootings (Nielsen, 1981; Stratton, 1984). Many of these studies indicated the presence of sleep issues as a byproduct of those feelings (i.e., anxiety, fear, guilt) associated with the event. The impact of officer-involved shootings, and other highly traumatic events (e.g., death of a partner, exposure to HIV/AIDS, interview of a child victim, etc.), continues to be explored today as a major contributor to sleep disturbance (Bond et al., 2013; Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2018). Non-traumatic stressors have also been found to be predictors of sleep issues (Nixon, Mazzola, Bauer, Krueger, & Spector, 2011). Of these two types of stressors (i.e., organizational and operational) previously discussed in this literature review, it was found that those of an operational nature was far more influential to detrimental sleep patterns of police officers than organizational pressures (Neylan et al., 2002). Gender was not found to play a role in the aforementioned relationship between occupational stressors and sleep disturbance in law enforcement populations (Neylan et al., 2002). The overall impact of behavior change due to work-related stress is well documented illustrating the potential detriment it may cause to job performance, relationships, and the career of a police officer.

**Influence on personality.** Volumes of literature have been directed towards revealing the impact of police stress on personality development and change. One of the earliest examinations of this relationship, Beutler, Nussbaum, and Meredith (1988), tracked personality change in police officers at the time of their recruitment until their fourth year of service. Assessing personality change over time using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), the authors were presented scores signifying



increased somatic symptoms, anxiety, and, as previously discussed in this literature review, alcohol vulnerability among officers after their fourth year of service (Beutler et al., 1988). Other research into this area recognized the considerable impact of police stress on mood as officers tend to display changes in temper, attitude, etc. upon increased work-related pressure (Evans, Coman, & Stanley, 1992; Evans, Coman, Stanley, & Burrows, 1993). By the 2000s, an examination of this area reveals more on the prevalence of physical and emotional exhaustion (i.e., burnout) as a byproduct of those pressures associated with the job. The studies reflect higher rates of burnout resulting from an officer's exposure to a traumatic experience or high levels of stress due to such pressures as low salary, lack of resources, and overload (Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2006). Burnout, and other personality development/change, due to occupational stress has the potential to result in careering lasting and even ending, consequences among police officers.

***Mental health risks.*** The recent exploration into this area has continued to examine how occupational stress perpetuates changes in or the development of personality characteristics in police populations. For example, Van der Velden et al. (2013) explored the potential mental health risks associated with personality change due to increased stress in the form of a longitudinal study. The prevalence of changing symptoms was self-reported by participants comprising two groups of law enforcement personnel, samples of 144 and 503, as compared to groups representing several alternative occupations (e.g., bank tellers, soldiers, social workers, etc.) (Van der Velden et al., 2013). Surprisingly, the findings of this study indicated that the prevalence of

symptomology (i.e. anxiety, depression, and hostility) in samples comprised of law enforcement personnel were not significantly higher than those groups used for comparison. The study refuted the evidence established in prior studies which indicated police officers as being at higher risk for psychological and emotional disturbances (Lieberman et al., 2002; Violanti et al., 2006). The study distinguished that, even though stressors are impactful on the mental health and personality characteristics of police officers, these pressures are just as influential when compared to other occupations.

*Emotional responses.* Other studies have examined how these disturbances are reflected in police officers. Occupational stress associated to job demands and its influence on changes to the police officer's personality has been an area of interest for researchers in the field (Chen et al., 2006; Santa Maria et al., 2018; Bishopp, Piquero, Worrall, & Piquero, 2018). Santa Maria et al.'s (2018) study of 843 police officers found that high workload and assaults by citizens were predictive of a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety ultimately leading to burnout (i.e., physical and emotional exhaustion). Similarly, Bishopp, Piquero, Worrall, & Piquero (2018) examined how officer's experience with organizational and environmental stressors can perpetuate a negative emotional response, such as anger, depression, etc., which may impact their risk of misconduct. These authors found organizational stressors are especially influential to these negative emotions which significantly increase the potential for officer transgression (Bishopp et al., 2018). On the whole, the stress associated with police work has been linked to a variety of changes to personality. Such evidence proved impactful

during an exploration of how occupational stress is perceived and addressed within the first year of police work.

**Summary.** The effects of police stress on personality, behavior, etc. remains at the forefront of current research lending legitimacy to further exploration of critical periods (i.e., the first year of service) related to this occupation. While the early examination of the impact of occupational stress revealed broad strokes of how these pressures influence and officer's daily routine, more recent research has focused on specific changes to behavior (e.g., prevalence of substance use, suicide, etc.) and personality (e.g., prevalence of depression, anxiety, etc.). A move towards studying the effects of specific job demands associated with police work has added considerably to the field's understanding of the impact of occupational stress. Ultimately, prior research on the influence of police stress has been invaluable to those set forth on the path of exploring perceptions of stress in the first year of police service.

A review of the literature continues to stress that a gap exists as the first year of police work goes unexplored in terms of the effects of those stressors related to policing. Since prior research has established that these pressures tend to lead to considerable personality and behavioral changes that have the potential for career altering consequences, it seems obvious exploration of how police officers initially perceive these pressures and their impact would be beneficial to the development of early interventions. With that said, the scope of research needs to be narrowed as a means of yielding a maximum benefit to police populations. Exploration of this largely ignored period should add much to an already established reserve of knowledge base related to the

impact of police stress. In the following section, research is presented to provide more depth to an understanding of police stress focusing on how police officers cope with occupational stress.

### **Coping Strategies**

Coping strategies utilized by police officers to address stress have been studied extensively in prior literature (Can & Hendy, 2014; Kaiseler, Passos, Queiros, & Sousa, 2014; Shin et al., 2014). Coping behaviors are those actions an individual takes to reduce or eliminate the harmful effects of stress (Lazarus, 1983; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). In short, adaptive methods of coping result in healthy outcomes, while maladaptive strategies often lead to harmful ones. These two types of coping will be differentiated further in the following sections of this literature review.

It has been noted in early sections of this literature review that the 1960s through 1970s were marked with an extensive exploration into this area leading towards a better understanding of police stress, the identification of stressors, and recognition of their impact on law enforcement officers. By the end of the 1970s, research began to place more emphasis on those coping mechanisms, both adaptive and maladaptive, police officers implement when faced with increased levels of stress. The development of stress management interventions was on the rise to address the need for healthy coping; however, it became clear that little empirical research was begin done to assess the effectiveness of these programs (Sarason, Johnson, Berberich, & Siegel, 1979). Exploration of police stress was still new and researchers were still uncovering the many dynamics of this phenomenon. Researchers were putting the proverbial “cart before the

horse” as they proposed interventions without fully examining the foundation representing those coping strategies police officers utilized when confronted with these pressures.

Stressors that impact police officers are constantly evolving as innovative technologies are introduced, new policies and procedures are implemented, and the public’s opinion regarding law enforcement shifts. As a result, recent research continues to explore how officers address occupational stress. For example, Can and Hendy (2014) studied the influence of police stressors, the detriment of these pressures, and those coping mechanisms initiated by officers to address stress. One purpose of this investigation was to reveal those healthy and unhealthy coping strategies officers turned to when encountering stress. As a means of addressing this objective, the authors used material suggested by the Theory of Threat Appraisal and Coping as a means of procuring data from police officers representing small departments (i.e., agencies comprised of fewer than 100 law enforcement personnel) (Can & Hendy, 2014). The aforementioned instrument uncovered the presence of a variety of beneficial (e.g., exercise, sleep, etc.) and detrimental (e.g., substance use, repressed/expressed anger, etc.) coping skills which officers often resort to when encountering stressful situations. The findings of the study support the idea that high exposure to stress is significantly harmful to the health of the officer, while also revealing “repressed anger” as being the most utilized coping strategy initiated by this population when addressing the pressures of police work (Can & Hendy, 2014). Studies such as this are prevalent throughout the prior literature on adaptive and maladaptive coping in police populations. As this review

proceeds in providing representation of how this research has unfolded throughout the past decades, it will become apparent that the focus of such exploration has become more specific as time has progressed accounting for the various dynamics of coping with police stress.

**Adaptive coping.** Much research has been dedicated to revealing the healthy ways in which police officers cope with occupational stress. Adaptive coping is that which removes or limits the effects of the byproducts of stress (i.e., fear, anxiety, etc.) promoting healthy psychosocial and physical outcomes for, in this case, those police officers implementing such strategies (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). Early attempts at exploring this area, such as Fennell (1981), revealed many beneficial strategies including training, physical exercise, hobbies and other distractions, relaxation, vacations, socialization with others outside law enforcement, and counseling.

**Role distance.** As a means of coping with occupational stress in police work, role distance represents a strategy examined in earlier explorations of the phenomenon. This strategy involves detaching oneself from the role they are tasked with performing as a means of reducing the pressures of the duties and decisions associated with that position (Goffman, 1961). Role distance was first introduced during a study of surgeons and how they cope with occupational stress (Goffman, 1961). Moyer (1986) would find that the methods to attain role distance in police work were similar to those purposed by Goffman about surgeons, however, the former's work reveals two unique ways in which officers detach: verbal denials of being in danger and playing pranks on other law enforcement personnel. Band and Manuele (1987) would echo the importance of counseling and

training discussed earlier but added that effective work performance could be considered a coping mechanism as it tends to result in increased confidence and self-esteem lowering the influence of occupational stressors. These initial strides towards developing a better understanding of those broad adaptive measures police officers utilize when coping with the pressures of the job laid the foundation for other researchers to explore more specific means of coping and how often these strategies are implemented.

*Emotion-focused v. problem-focused.* The following decades provide more support for a variety of coping strategies implemented by law enforcement personnel. Hart, Wearing, and Headey (1995) differentiated between emotion-focused, strategies directed towards addressing the emotions that arise from stress, and problem-focused coping mechanisms, strategies directed towards addressing the sources of stress directly, supporting prior literature (e.g., police culture) stating that the former was often associated with maladaptive coping while the latter coincided with adaptive coping. Beehr, Johnson, and Nieva (1995) also examined the use of these strategies (i.e., problem-focused and emotion-focused) adding religious activity (e.g., prayer, meditation, etc.) and rugged individualism, or reliance on one's abilities rather than resources provided them through an overseeing entity, as coping methods often utilized by police officers, and their spouses, when encountering stressful situations. One's reliance on their spirituality was stressed by the authors as a considerable adaptive coping strategy for law enforcement officers. Studies that examined demographical differences concerning the use of coping strategies would contribute even further to an understanding of police stress.

***Gender/Racial differences.*** During a time when the presence of female police officers became more common, He, Zhao, and Archbold (2002) examined the gender differences associated with the utilization of coping strategies. One noteworthy finding of this study, in terms of constructive coping strategies, was that female officers were more likely to rely on their spirituality and the support of family and friends when confronted with work-related pressures, while males were more likely to turn towards physical activity (i.e., exercise) as a means of relieving occupational stress (He, Zhao, & Archbold, 2002). Three years later, two of these authors would collaborate again, with the help of another, to examine racial differences with an officer's use of constructive coping strategies (He, Zhao, & Ren, 2005). Their findings revealed that African-American officers were more likely than their white counterparts to implement constructive coping strategies when faced with stress (He et al., 2005). The aforementioned study would also support the findings of the authors' earlier work regarding gender differences and coping strategies.

***Impact on job performance/work engagement.*** Recent literature has examined the benefit of adaptive coping to work engagement and performance. Kaiseler et al. (2014) conducted an exploratory study on the influence of stress and coping on work engagement among police recruits. The impact of the aforementioned variables on the specific dimensions of work engagement (i.e., absorption, vigor, and dedication) was explored using a web-based survey, developed by the authors, which was administered to a group of police recruits (i.e., those in their last month of academy training) (Kaiseler et al., 2014). Not surprisingly, the findings of this study confirmed that those officers who



incorporated adaptive coping strategies were more likely to exhibit positive behavior or an overall positive state of mind which ultimately led to better work-related outcomes. These findings reinforced the idea that a police officer's ability to cope effectively when exposed to stressors is influential in their job performance.

Similarly, Shin et al. (2014) offered insights on how the prior research dedicated to the relationship between coping strategies and burnout (i.e. a component of work engagement) compare and contrast. Their findings were applied to a diverse range of occupations. The authors took on a meta-analytic approach to synthesize the research outlined by relevant studies examining the aforementioned relationship (Shin et al., 2014). The findings of this study supported those offered by Kaiseler et al. (2014) indicating that, despite the occupation, clients must develop effective, healthy coping strategies to reduce the likelihood of burnout and other job performance altering detriments resulting from occupational stress. Overall, these articles provide support for evolving definitions of stress and coping, while also illustrating many beneficial strategies, all of which prove useful when developing interventions to improve upon work performance and engagement.

**Maladaptive coping.** Police officers have been found to rely on several maladaptive coping methods discussed throughout the prior literature on police stress. Maladaptive coping involves one's reliance on strategies that yield immediate relief from stressors, yet generate increased stress over time, ultimately promoting more harmful outcomes to the individual (Zeitlin, 1980). This section will not only reinforce the evidence presenting in past studies indicating a tendency for law enforcement personnel

to resort to maladaptive coping, but also discuss the impact of these methods on work engagement and job performance. Once again, it must be emphasized that the earliest research into the use of specific coping strategies seemed to appear after researchers had already begun proposing stress management interventions. This trend begs the obvious question: how does one develop such intervention without first recognizing how police officers are already addressing occupational stress?

Initially, responses to stress were not reported by police officers and went often ignored by departments. According to Blackmore (1978), the reluctance of officers to share their methods of coping with job-related pressures resulted from a general distrust of mental health professionals, including researchers. The author went on to touch upon what had already been established concerning some of these maladaptive strategies and their impact gave the limited exploration into this area. Considered pioneering research at the time, the author surveyed 2,300 police officers on how they handle occupational stress (Blackmore, 1978). The findings revealed substance use and expressed anger as coping techniques which would ultimately have a considerable impact on an officer's family relationships, job performance, and overall health; evidence which would find support among research efforts conducted during or around the same time (Alkus & Padesky, 1983; Blackmore, 1978; Depue, 1981). These initial probes into this phenomenon would establish a foundation that researchers have been building upon ever since, strengthening the field's understanding of the presence and impact of maladaptive coping strategies in policing.

***Violence and aggression.*** Indication of violent and aggressive acts as a means of coping has been provided through past examination of police stress (Gershon, Barocas, Canton, Li, & Vlahov, 2009; Violanti, Marshall, & Howe, 1985). An expressed response to violent behavior has been found to present in the form of spousal\intimate partner violence, a phenomenon linked to child abuse and animal cruelty (Ascione et al., 2007; Beehr et al., 1995; Walton-Moss, Manganelo, Frye, & Campbell, 2005). These methods of dealing with work-related pressures extend to potential suspects as patterns of violent and abusive behaviors have been revealed in past studies. The use of extensive force by police officers has been covered extensively throughout the literature, most recently demonstrating this behavior as a means of relieving occupational stress (Crank, 1998; Griffin & Bernard, 2003). More recently, Gershon et al. (2009) have offered supporting evidence of this reliance on violent behavior as a coping strategy. These authors also found acts of violence (e.g., spousal abuse, fighting, etc.) as a method officers often utilize when coping with occupational stress. Again, such behavior was reported to also be directed towards their property, pets, and even children. The authors added that these findings represent a troubling trend considering this population often carries a firearm or readily has access to weapons (Gershon et al., 2009).

Acts of aggression have also been widely recognized as methods of coping for law enforcement populations. Such behaviors (e.g., hostility, threats, etc.) are directed toward another individual carried out with the immediate intent to cause some kind of harm whether it is emotional, psychological, and/or physical (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Can and Hendy (2014) found such behavior to be frequently directed towards the

spouse/partner of the officer as well as other police personnel. These outlets for stress relief would often result in considerable consequences, such as divorce, termination of employment, and even criminal charges, for the officer-involved especially when paired with another impactful maladaptive coping strategy established in prior literature – substance use/abuse.

***Substance use/abuse.*** Gershon et al.'s (2009) findings also supported the results of previous studies which indicated substance use as a means of coping with stress, placing an emphasis on the consumption of alcohol (Gorta, 2009; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Me'nard & Arter, 2013; Stinson, 2015; Violanti, 1999; Wakil, 2015). For example, Violanti (1999) found that police officers tend to drink twice as much alcohol when compared to the general population. Even though the author maintained that providing evidence that stress is the culprit proves to be a daunting task, he did state that stress management interventions do reduce the occurrence of alcohol abuse among police officers implying that there could be a relationship worthy of future exploration (Violanti, 1999). This relationship, or lack thereof, would later become debatable as research of Mississippi Municipal, Sheriff, and State police officers, conducted by Lindsay, Banks-Taylor, & Shelley (2008), indicated that perceived occupational stress was not a predictor of alcohol abuse. The authors found that police drank alcohol at the same levels as the general population, even despite the devastation of Hurricane Katrina (Lindsay et al., 2008). More recent studies, however, have clarified the impact of police stress on alcohol abuse providing evidence that drinking is used as a means to cope with occupational stressors as a means of self-medication (Me'nard & Arter, 2013; Wakil,

2015). Extensive research would also provide evidence of substance use as a means of coping to the stress of police work manifest concerning the usage of tobacco and illicit drugs (e.g., marijuana, amphetamines, cocaine, heroin, etc.) (Gorta, 2009; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Stinson, 2015; Wakil, 2015). The review of the literature continues with an examination of a far more devastating coping method which may result as a means of addressing unchecked police stress - suicide.

***Suicide.*** Putting an end to one's life has been another focus of considerable research into the coping mechanisms used to address police stress. The earliest study of this relationship began being conducted shortly after the definition and theory related to police stress had become more established during the mid to late 1960s (Lewis, 1973; Heiman, 1975). Revealing suicide behavior as a means of coping with police stress became the obvious next step for researchers hoping to reduce the high rates of mortality among law enforcement. As with most research efforts directed towards a phenomenon, as time progressed, the field became inundated with studies examining this relationship through the specific dynamics of police stress (e.g., types of stressors, demographics, etc.). The issue which has been raised is that the literature tends to present conflicting representations in terms of the impact of police stress on suicide. Abdollahi's (2002) examination of the past literature on police stress examines many of these conflicting studies over several decades. With suicide in police populations, the author found that the research has been inconclusive (Abdollahi, 2002). One characteristic of suicide rates that researchers can agree upon is that these numbers have been on the rise since the 1980s (Violanti, 1995; Baker & Baker, 1996; Leenaars & Lund, 2017). This trend has

been attributed to more police officers relying on the option of ending their lives as the ultimate means of dealing with the pressures associated with the job (Arrigo & Garsky, 1997; Leenaars & Lund, 2017). During a more recent review of the literature compiled between 1997 and 2016, Violanti, Owens, McCanlies, Fekedulegn, and Andrew (2018) cited several studies (e.g., Marzuk, Nock, Leon, Portera, & Tardiff, 2002; Tiesman, Hendricks, Bell, & Amandus, 2010; Violanti, Mnatsakanova, & Andrew, 2012) which indicated that police officers have a lower rate of completed suicide when compared to the general public. The authors admitted that these findings may be questionable as many of the studies mentioned included those individuals suffering from considerable mental illness in the general population resulting in a higher percentage when compared to police officers (Violanti et al., 2018). The one point of which most who study this phenomenon can agree is that further exploration is necessary and a more definite account of this relationship needs to be unmasked to ensure the development of the most effective suicide prevention and stress management interventions.

**Summary.** How police officers cope with occupational stress has been and continues to be covered frequently in the literature associated with the phenomenon. Early attempts at intervention and management of stress were built upon limited empirical research on how officers address pressures of police work. These early endeavors were met with criticisms and a call for further research on how stressors are dealt with in police populations. Research shifted towards studying the specific means of coping, both adaptive and maladaptive strategies, with work-related stress. That exploration has led to insight on some of the most beneficial (i.e., counseling, spirituality,

exercise) and detrimental to coping (i.e., violent/aggressive behavior, substance use/abuse, suicide) methods. This prior research on addressing occupational stress in law enforcement will be instrumental when exploring those perceptions of stress and coping associated with the first year of police work.

Potential changes in coping that might occur within the first year of police work further illustrates the gap that has gone unexplored in terms of the prior literature on occupational stress in law enforcement populations. Considering that prior research has established that a reliance on these strategies can make or break a career in policing, it seems that attention to this critical period in an officer's development is necessary to the advancement of suicide prevention and stress management interventions. Further investigation of this highly influential time in an officer's career should yield much insight into an, oftentimes, inconsistent foundation of prior literature associated with coping with the occupational stress relevant to police work.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Research has shown that occupational stress is quite influential in law enforcement personnel, resulting in several detrimental outcomes for police officers including, poor job performance, maladaptive behaviors, personality change, etc. Moreover, it is known that when police officers encounter stress, they are likely to implement a variety of coping strategies, both health and unhealthy (Can & Hendy, 2014; Kaiseler et al., 2014). What has not been established, however, is how stress is perceived and coping mechanisms are developed within the first year of police work. Due to these

gaps in the literature, this study focused on this critical period in a police officer's development.

Upon initial experiences with stress, officers in their first year of police work may perceive such pressures differently and incorporate a variety of potential coping strategies, adaptive or maladaptive, or a combination of strategies to manage, minimize, or control levels of stress. Please note that even though prior research has established a link between some coping strategies used and the influence of "police culture", for this study, the phenomenon was examined irrelevant to the influence of this variable (Terpstra & Schaap, 2013). The dynamic systems theory provides insight into how these police officers experience stress, how coping strategies are influenced by stress, and which coping mechanisms are employed to manage stress. The purpose of this study was to obtain a better understanding of how an officer in their first year of police work perceive stress and develop/utilize coping strategies. Chapter 3 provides information on how the study was being conducted, how the participants were identified, the interview questions asked, and how the information was collected, organized, and analyzed.



## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

Historically, a career in law enforcement has been known for distinct stressors that may ultimately have a considerable effect on an officer's productivity and longevity in the field. In recent years, however, the world has experienced significant change concerning the impact of social media, the influence of the public's attitudes/opinions associated with law enforcement, and the awareness of mental health issues related to careers in policing. Such changes have altered how police officers perceive and address stress as old patterns of pressure change or new ones are introduced. As a result, police officers have developed coping mechanisms, adaptive and/or maladaptive, to minimize, tolerate, or control stress. What was not known, however, is how the first year of police work impacts an officer's definitions and perceptions of stress and how this critical period influences their development of coping strategies. Therefore, the problem this research intended to address was the lack of qualitative studies on the experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies associated with the stress unique to an officer's first year of police work. The dynamic systems theory (Thelen & Smith, 1993) provided additional insight into these unexplored areas. In Chapter 3, this researcher describes the qualitative method he used to investigate and shed light on the aforementioned experiences, perceptions, and coping methods linked to the targeted population.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to determine how police officers in the first year of their careers experience and perceive stress while also exploring how they utilize coping

skills to address those pressures. Only officers currently participating in their first year of police work were selected. A list of questions used in the primary interview with the participants is located in Appendix B. The broad, overarching RQs developed to better understand the participants' experiences were as follows:

RQ1: For police officers performing in their first year of police service, how is stress experienced?

RQ2: For police officers performing in their first year of police service, what perceptions of stress emerge?

RQ3: For police officers performing in their first year of police service, what strategies for addressing stress emerge?

For many reasons, a qualitative methodology was selected as the means of analyzing the research topic. Some of the more noteworthy reasons for incorporating a qualitative design include the exploration of the inner experiences of those participants involved, the discovery of relevant variables that may later be examined using alternative designs, and the ability to take a more comprehensive look at a particular phenomenon in its natural setting (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The appeal of utilizing qualitative measures is based on the adaptability of this approach. According to Corbin and Strauss (2014), those who implement qualitative measures are “drawn to the fluid, evolving, and dynamic nature of this approach as opposed to the more structured designs of quantitative methods” (p. 5). Such an approach relies on the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection.

When initiating a qualitative approach to research, one engages a design that is considered more open and flexible, with more options than other methods of inquiry (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each of the routes varies in both purpose and structure (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Before the use of a qualitative approach, one should first consider which instrument(s) fits the intended goal of the investigation. For this project, this researcher gathered, organized, and analyzed the data collected utilizing qualitative tools such as semi-structured interviews and direct observation. The qualitative process began with inductive reasoning methodologies that included observation, a real example, and exploration. As this researcher proceeded to analyze the data collected, deductive reasoning was incorporated when reviewing said data to determine if additional information was required.

This approach aided the researcher in understanding the cultural and social aspects that influenced how the participants perceived and addressed stress. This design was also conducive to the core concepts of the dynamics systems approach, which was a theoretical framework for the study. The use of a phenomenological approach to researching this area allowed this researcher to provide readers a descriptive representation of the perceptions of stress offered by participants incorporating what these individuals have experienced and how they experienced it. By incorporating a phenomenological approach with this study, this researcher gathered data from the experiences of police officers in the study and described the common understanding of stress and how it is addressed through a depiction of their own lived experience of this

phenomenon. Based on the collected data, the research revealed a comprehensive description of all the participants as a whole.

After considering other qualitative designs, other methods did not appear to fit the intent of this research. For example, narrative research is directed towards procuring experiential data from one or two participants, which limits the information collected to a single or shared experience rather than a collective one among a group of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study called for information collected from a larger participant pool which would provide more depth to the interpretation of the data. The grounded theory approach to research was also not conducive to this study. The primary objective of implementing such an approach is to uncover the theoretical framework related to a given phenomenon based on the information obtained from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this scenario, revealing the theory becomes the primary goal which was not the intent of this study. Case studies also fell short as a suitable design for this study. In this design, the focus of the researcher is to provide a summary of interpretations and assertions based on the examination of a single case or multiple cases rather than an exploration of how participants interpret or perceive a phenomenon, which was the goal of this study. As with the grounded theory approach, ethnography tends to promote too much emphasis on the theoretical framework that is incorporated into the research. Ethnography relies on theory to guide what the researcher hopes to discover in terms of cultural beliefs and ideologies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, the aforementioned research designs were not selected. Specifically, they would not have been suitable to explore the current experiences of participants in terms of the

phenomenon, they would lend too much focus on the theory as a driving force behind the research, or they would include too small of a participant pool.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

To conduct a qualitative study, a diverse group ranging from 3 to 15 participants is recommended (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To conduct a qualitative study, a diverse group ranging from three to 15 participants is recommended (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, the participant group was originally supposed to comprise of a minimum of eight police officers, including both men and women, but no more than 10. For reasons that were out of this researcher's control, as discussed in Chapter 4, the sample was reduced. Participants were selected through the use of criterion sampling in which all participants were required to have experienced the same phenomenon (i.e., stress) and be in the process of completing or have recently completed their first year of police work. Criterion sampling was implemented as a means of intentionally selecting only those participants able to assist this researcher to better understand the phenomenon. If additional individuals were needed after the selection of participants, the option to implement snowball sampling was in place to assist this researcher in locating additional subjects. This process involved a few of the originally contacted participants initiating contact with other potential participants (Griffith, Morris, & Thakar, 2016). Interviews were conducted until saturation was obtained. The study confined itself to researching law enforcement officers in their first year of police work. Policing has long been associated with unique stressors that can have a significant impact on an officer's effectiveness in the field (Acquadro et al., 2015). Lucas et al. (2012) justified the

necessity for more comprehensive research into the impact of police stress and how officers cope to perpetuate alternative lines of inquiry. Therefore, officers engaging in their first year of police work provided additional insight into the phenomenon and how coping skills are utilized in this context.

As a means of selecting participants for this study, this researcher contacted the director of the Police Pre-Employment Training Program, with a state community college located in central New York. The program director is also retired from the New York State Police and connected this researcher with potential candidates for this research. This individual was instrumental in connecting this researcher with officers who had completed or were in the process of completing their first year of police work. This researcher also reached out to local law enforcement agencies through the professional relationships he had developed during his time working in forensic settings as a means of supplementing his efforts directed towards obtaining participants for this research. A letter describing the study was drafted and passed on to all potential participants through the aforementioned sources (see Appendix A).

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The following procedures served as a sequential guide to select and inform participants, collect and analyze data, and validate data findings.

1. The researcher will locate potential participants by contacting those responsible for the training and education of police officers entering the field and those agencies who are currently employing those recruits.

2. The researcher will provide each participant with an informative letter that describes the nature of the study and a copy of the Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality to be signed by the research subject.
3. The researcher will schedule individual interviews with selected participants to take place at a location that assures the privacy and safety of the research subjects.
4. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher will review the study's intent and the signed Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality with the participant.
5. The researcher will conduct the individual interview with the participant, based on the researcher-designed interview protocol.
6. Before the completion of the interview, the researcher will review the interview notes with the participant to ensure accuracy.
7. The researcher will provide a copy of the interview transcript to each participant for review to ensure accuracy.
8. A graduate student who has completed a qualitative methods course at Regent University will assist the researcher in validating themes extracted from transcripts while adhering to the ethical protection of participants previously identified in this proposal. A confidentiality agreement form will be signed by said student before assisting with this study.
9. The researcher will disseminate the study's results to participants.

## **Instrumentation**

Data was collected through the use of a semi-structured interview protocol that was conducted for each participant at a location agreed upon by both parties (i.e., researcher and participant) involved. Before initiating each interview process, this researcher made efforts to establish rapport with the subject. For each participant, this researcher also designated time to review the Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality forms, obtain the necessary signatures, and collect background information. The interview instrument was constructed as a means of exploring the details of the participant's experience with stress during their first year of police work. This was accomplished through the development of focused questions based on those research questions set forth for the study. Every effort was made to conduct these interviews in person. Due to circumstances discussed in Chapter 4, interviews were forced to be carried out through the utilization of a suitable video conferencing platform (i.e. ZOOM). The interview process consisted of this researcher referencing a prepared list of open-ended questions. Additional probing questions were asked by this researcher as a means of ensuring that the data collected represents a rich and meaningful source of information for analysis and interpretation. Interviews ranged from a half hour to one hour. In some cases, this researcher requested more time with the participant as doing so was necessary to ensure satisfactory data collection. Due to the sensitivity of the areas being explored, this researcher remained neutral during the interview process and avoided making any suggestion or evaluation of the participant's responses.



Video conferencing interviews were recorded via both field notes and audio recorders to ensure efficient transcription. The required use of an audio recording device was communicated during the informed consent of each of the participants. Aside from documenting the responses of participants, field notes also included logging nonverbal communication (i.e., gestures, facial expressions, and voice tone). Also, field notes described characteristics of the environment revealing any details that may have the potential to influence the response patterns of participants.

The Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality included a statement discussing details surrounding the use of an audio recording device. Tessier (2012) illustrated the benefits of utilizing a combination of field notes and audio recordings during qualitative interviews and ways in which to avoid potential limitations when using these methods. Relying solely on field notes tends to be troublesome for researchers performing such interviews. According to Tessier (2012), “although it is simple, quick, and inexpensive, this method has several disadvantages, including that field notes cannot be replayed, that is the event cannot be encountered more than once” (p. 449). Combining field notes and audio recording ensured that transcripts of interviews were clear and accurate.

Upon concluding each interview, this researcher communicated his appreciation to the participant for their time and contribution to the study. Participants were informed that they will receive a copy of their transcription which will be hand-delivered by this researcher to each subject interviewed. In the event audio recording software was used, interview transcriptions were produced with transcription software, which was verified

by this researcher for accuracy before their disbursement to participants. Before being handed over to the participants, all fielded notes, transcripts, and audio recordings were locked in the work office of this researcher. This researcher maintained backup copies of all data associated with the study in a secure location at his home office in the event of data loss or data corruption. Once the study concluded and the results had been published, all documentation and recordings were destroyed by this researcher to ensure confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Upon completion of the data collection and organization phases of this project, this researcher focused on establishing an overall meaning to the information procured during the interview process. This process was comprised of a series of steps crucial to the goal of developing an understanding of the phenomenon being studied. First and foremost, this researcher's thoughts and experiences related to the areas being explored are communicated to the reader. The objective of doing so is to shine a spotlight on any personal experiences or beliefs related to the phenomenon which may have altered or influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data collected. This process represents an important one when preparing for data analysis as it reveals possible prejudices or assumptions that a researcher has regarding what they are studying. This permits the opportunity to counter these potential obstacles to an unbiased examination and enables him to investigate the phenomenon from a neutral position. In preparation for the next step in the analysis process, this researcher reviewed each transcript in its entirety to gain a general sense of the meaning conveyed by the participant.

The second step of this process involved the development of an inventory containing significant statements, terms, and ideas communicated by participants during the interview process. This inventory served as evidence that describes how the participants experienced the phenomenon. For this research, these statements, terms, and ideas led this researcher towards a more meaningful understanding of how officers experience, perceive and address stress within the first year of police work. Noteworthy statements, terms, and ideas were transferred to a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further analysis. Once this inventory was constructed, these important statements, terms, and ideas were grouped into themes or meaning units. This part of the overall process involved categorizing the information based on the overall meaning of the statement. This researcher then continued to cluster the central categories and begin the development of themes. This step also provided this researcher with an opportunity to eliminate themes and meaning units that have no bearing on how participants experience the phenomenon being studied.

The third step of this process involved categorizing each item listed in the aforementioned inventory. During this step, this researcher labeled the themes and meaning units according to expressions that will represent those behaviors, emotions, and feelings communicated by participants, whether verbally or nonverbally, as they were interviewed regarding how they experience the phenomenon. Once labeled, these components were utilized as a means of developing more thorough descriptions depicting how the participants experienced the phenomenon both individually and as a group. This was accomplished by providing verbatim examples of these multiple experiences and

structural descriptions referencing how the experience occurred. This researcher formed individual descriptions by reviewing psychological expressions. Key patterns were then clustered into a collective description of a group of officers who have experienced the same phenomenon during their first year of police work providing a thorough representation of their shared experience.

This approach described is an appropriate one as the primary goal of a phenomenological study was directed towards revealing the underlying meaning of the lived and shared experiences of those who have encountered the phenomenon being explored. The study's participants included officers in their first year of police work, and this line of inquiry sought to develop a more profound understanding of how these individuals experience, perceive, and address the stressors unique to that period. Using this data analysis method, the diverse base of information that was procured during the interview process was reviewed, labeled, and organized into clusters of meaningful, similar content. This researcher took measures to eliminate any repetitive or irrelevant data to make that information more efficiently analyzed and the themes constructed to be more meaningful. Through a thorough examination of the experiences of participants, this researcher was able to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The main objective of this study was to explore the experience of this group of individuals concerning the stress to develop a more meaningful understanding of the influence of this phenomenon; therefore, the data analysis technique described represents an efficient method of organization and systematic analyzes of the data collected.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Verification of findings was attained through the processes of member checking and peer review which ensured a rich and meaningful representation of those experiencing the phenomenon, while also clarifying any potential researcher bias. Member checking is a process that was implemented permitting participants to verify data procured during the interview process and its resulting interpretations. The integrity of the data (i.e., information obtained from the participants) was established through follow up questions formulated by this researcher based on the interview's initial findings. Following the procedure, each participant received a review copy of their interview's transcript at which point they had the opportunity to verify that information. All data obtained through the interview process was verified by the participants of this study through this process of member checking.

Peer review required the aid of a fellow doctoral student, educated in qualitative research, that was currently attending Regent University located in Virginia. There exist several benefits associated with incorporating the assistance of a knowledgeable peer. Such an individual ensured that the transcripts were aligned with the themes that developed, assisted in revealing any potential researcher bias, and served to challenge the theories which may emerge from the perspective of this researcher. Upon completion of the interview process and the initial analysis of data collected, copies of the original transcripts and their resulting interpretations were sent to the peer for validation.

The verification of findings also ensured this researcher's goal of obtaining a rich foundation of information to base forthcoming interpretations. Through obtaining a full

description of how participants experience the phenomenon, the goal of this researcher was to advance the transferability of the analysis of that data which would permit readers to incorporate information resulting from this research to alternative settings based on shared characteristics of the phenomenon. This research included information from several resources for readers including verbatim transcripts, peer review notes, documented behavioral observations, and direct quotations obtained during participant interviews. Consistent and thorough record-keeping and data preservation ensured confirmation of the results of the research.

Furthermore, this researcher clarified existing biases related to this study. The future value of the study may be compromised if this researcher's expectations had influenced the data collection and subsequent analysis. This researcher was cognizant of his experiences and bracketed them accordingly. This researcher is not and has never been a police officer; however, this researcher has become familiar with many law enforcement personnel over the years and has become knowledgeable of the impact of stress and the coping strategies developed to address those pressures. As a result, this researcher disclosed personal perceptions and experiences through the recording of preconceived beliefs related to the research of this phenomenon.

### **Ethical Procedures**

At the beginning of each interview, this researcher reviewed the Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality, and the participant was asked to sign the document if not already signed beforehand. This researcher explained that participation is entirely voluntary and that participants have the right to terminate participation at any

time. Each participant was informed that their identity would remain completely confidential and that personal identifiers will be removed from the transcripts. There was no known harm associated with participation in this study. All research resources, including interview transcripts, audiotapes, and files, were securely stored in a locked file cabinet in this researcher's office. Only this researcher and authorized individuals had access to secured transcripts to validate the data results. Before data validation, identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and personal names were replaced with alias names.

### **Summary**

The goal of the phenomenological study was to develop a better understanding of how law enforcement officers in their first year of police work experience stress and how their perceptions of those unique pressures influence the development of coping strategies. Study participants included five officers who are actively engaged in or had recently completed their first year of police work. Employing semi-structured interviews, this researcher interviewed each participant individually asking qualitative questions directed towards understanding the shared experience of these participants. An instrument designed by this researcher was utilized to guide the interview process. Also, probing questions were asked as a means of obtaining a richer, more meaningful collection of data for analysis and interpretation.

Participant protection was ensured as this researcher was obligated to provide an Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality prior to each interview taking place. For each participant, all personal identifiers were removed from the record and replaced

with aliases. Verification of findings was obtained using another doctoral student familiar with research design who checked, reviewed, provided feedback, and uncovered any potential researcher bias. The implications for positive social change include a better understanding of the impact an officer's perception of stress on the development of coping strategies within the first year of police work. The aim was to reveal information that might reveal possible ways in which positive coping skills can be established. The aforementioned procedures were approved by Walden University's institutional review board. The approval number for this study is 09-09-19-0566041. Chapter 4 reviews the data collection, summarizes the interview data, including specific categories and themes that emerged from the data using quotations as needed to emphasize their importance.



## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how police officers experience stress in their first year of police work and identify the coping skills, whether adaptive or maladaptive, they use to manage stress. This first year of policing represents a blind spot in the research on occupational stress. Other researchers have examined stress among later-career officers. This researcher addressed the gap in the literature by focusing on first-year officers' experiences of stress and strategies for coping with it. The use of a phenomenological approach allowed this researcher to describe and clarify the meanings of participants' lived experiences. The implications for positive social change include a better understanding of an officer's experience during their first year of police work and the potential to reveal positive coping methods. The following research questions were used in this phenomenological study and provided the foundation for the development of the comprehensive questions used during the interview:

RQ1: For police officers performing in their first year of police service, how is stress experienced?

RQ2: For police officers performing in their first year of police service, what perceptions of stress emerge?

RQ3: For police officers performing in their first year of police service, what strategies for addressing stress emerge?

This chapter provides the findings of the aforementioned interviews of police officers who are close to completing or have completed their first year of police work. It

also presents the results of the analyses that acted as the next step in answering the research questions listed above. This analysis of those interviews will reveal the experiences of the participants who share the same phenomenon, while also describing the common understanding of these individuals about their own lived experience of the phenomenon (i.e., stress) explored by this research. These findings are crucial in providing a basis from which implications can be drawn.

### **Setting**

Originally, interviews were to be conducted at a public location both this researcher and participant had agreed upon, however, due to the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) and the precautions enacted to address the virus, this researcher was authorized to conduct interviews through video conferencing. The platform used to conduct interviews was Zoom. Each participant was contacted through the use of e-mail and provided with both the Letter to Participant (Appendix A) and the Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality. Before commencing with each interview, this researcher extended his appreciation to the participants for putting their time aside to contribute to this research, especially considering the strain due to the COVID-19 crisis each had been undergoing. A general overview of the research topic and the primary objectives of the interview were then provided to each participant.

A signed informed consent form was then obtained, during which time this researcher reviewed the use of audio recording and the participant's option to refuse this feature as outlined in the Informed Consent. The aforementioned form was also reviewed to ensure that each participant had selected an option whether to agree or disagree with

the use of an audio recording device. The participants were then reminded that they would be e-mailed a copy of the transcription for review. Finally, as is standard with most research interviews, each participant was informed that they could terminate the interview at any time for any reason.

During each interview, this researcher referred to a guide (see Appendix B) that outlined all of the main questions that would be posed to each participant. These questions were repeated in the event the participant required clarification. Probing questions were asked throughout each interview, as described in Chapter 3, to gain further insight and a deeper understanding of how each participant experienced the phenomenon of stress during their first year in police work. These procedures ensured a richer foundation of information that this researcher would later be able to ascertain how these experiences were shared by the participants and what that would suggest.

### **Demographics**

COVID-19 also impacted the availability of police personnel during the time of data collection, therefore the originally proposed sample had to be reduced from eight to 10 subjects to accommodate this researcher's lack of access to those representing the target population. As a result, five individuals who met the research criteria were selected to participate in this study. This group was comprised of three men and two women. At the time of the interviews, all participants identified as either being close to finishing or had already completed their first year of police work. The group of participants ranged in age from 22 through 32. The demographics of the sample are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participants' Demographic Information*

Identifier	Age	Sex	Months employed
P1	27	Female	16
P2	22	Male	12
P3	30	Male	11
P4	32	Female	11
P5	25	Male	12

**Participant 1**

Participant 1 (P1) was a 27-year-old, white female. She had completed her first year of police work and was, at the time of this writing, in her 16th month of service. She became a police officer as a means to alleviate boredom through the pursuit of a lifestyle that held more excitement. P1 also mentioned that she also went into this field to “try to make the world a better place”. She is currently married. She and her husband have one child. She described specific situations that had caused her stress during her first year as a police officer. She mentioned her role during domestic disputes and vehicle/traffic stops as being more noteworthy. P1 disclosed that family members would be more likely than other police personnel to know or suspect her work-related stress.

**Participant 2**

Participant 2 (P2) was a 25-year-old, white male. At the time of the interview, P2 had just completed his first year of service. P2 stated that his initial reason for entering the field was because he wanted an “exciting job”. He also maintained that he wanted to be able to reflect on his time as an officer later at the end of his career and say that he had done “something useful, something good”. He is unmarried, currently residing with his

significant other, and has no children. P2 described situations he was called to in which he had to address volatile groups of bystanders maintaining the safety of those individuals with whom he communicated as well as his own. He mentioned his stress during such encounters in terms of fear, uncertainty, and intimidation. As a coping strategy, P2 identified exercise, an activity he engages in almost every day, as being most influential in terms of reducing stress.

### **Participant 3**

Participant 3 (P3) identified as a 30-year-old, white/Hispanic male. At the time of his interview, P3 was a month away from concluding his first year as a police officer. In terms of his primary motive for becoming a police officer, P3 stated that before entering the field he considered himself a “shy” individual and he believed a career in law enforcement would permit him the opportunity to interact more with the community. He is unmarried and has no children. When asked about how police work impacted his stress, P3 mentioned the scheduling of his work to be quite impactful as he had yet to be able to establish a healthy sleep pattern. This lack of routine would affect him throughout the day. As a means of coping, P3 identified reaching out to close family and friends and discussing his stress with them to be a considerable benefit to relieving that pressure.

### **Participant 4**

Participant 4 (P4) was a 32-year-old, Hispanic female. At the time she was interviewed, she was a month away from completing her first year as a police officer. P4 stated that she became a police officer as a means of “helping people”. She went on to establish that she was originally drawn to the medical field, at the time overestimating the

requirements to enter the field of law enforcement. Once her brother, who had already begun the process of entering the field, clarified the requirements, P4 felt that she was better suited for a career in policing. At the time of the interview, she was a single mother of one child who received much support from her mother. The participant was straightforward in describing many situations that had caused her stress during her first year as a police officer. The specifics of these events will be outlined in chapter 4. P4 disclosed that when confronted with stressful situations since becoming a police officer she tends to suppress those thoughts and feelings awaiting a solution to present itself.

### **Participant 5**

Participant 5 (P5) was a 25-year-old, white male. At the time of the interview, P5 had just completed his first year of service. In an attempt to avoid being placed behind a desk at a mediocre job, he was initially drawn to law enforcement and the medical field. P5 stated that he chose a career as a police officer as it allowed him to constantly be in the public arena interacting with the community. He is unmarried, currently residing with his significant other, and had just become a father within months of the interview. P5 discussed his exposure to the pressures of police work throughout his first year as an officer indicating that the pregnancy was quite impactful to how stress manifested itself during that time. He mentioned the fear attributed to the possibility that he may not come home to his family, a thought he had whenever he left for work, as being especially stressful. As a result of the stress he encountered in his first year, P5 described a lowered anger threshold than that seen before becoming a police officer.

## Data Collection

Using the methods discussed in Chapter 3, data collection began by identifying potential research participants using this researcher's professional network (i.e., colleagues, police officers, etc.). Each of these potential participants was contacted through email in which the research topic and interview process. The aforementioned email contained both an invitation letter that described the nature of the study and the Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality. Phone contact with those interested would later ensure each participant met the required criteria. The number of participants totaled five. Through phone interaction with the participant, this researcher established an appropriate time for an interview using the ZOOM video conferencing platform. At the onset of each interview, this researcher reviewed the Informed Consent and Statement of Confidentiality form with the participant. During this time, this researcher emphasized the section within the aforementioned form in which the participant agrees to the audio recording of the interview. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, the interview commenced.

The interview protocol developed for this study met all of its objectives. As a result, there were no changes needed to the questions that had been originally developed, however, due to the length of some questions, many of them had to be repeated to participants. Extensive field notes were taken as a means of recording nonverbal signals presented by the participants during the interview. The average interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Upon completion of the interview, this researcher reviewed these field notes with the participant. This researcher then proceeded to discuss

the participant's reaction to the interview ensuring that the process had not caused discomfort.

Recordings were transcribed manually and the transcripts were sent to the participants for validation before proceeding on to data analysis. During the analysis of data collected, a graduate student who had completed a qualitative research methods course at Regent University, located in Virginia, assisted in validating themes obtained through examination of the transcripts. Before proceeding on to this step, the aforementioned graduate student signed a Confidentiality Agreement form acknowledging that data analyzed must remain confidential; nevertheless, any information which could identify the participants was removed before validation.

### **Data Analysis**

A modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, put forth by Moustakas in 1994, was utilized as the primary tool for the analysis of data collected during the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As outlined in Chapter 3, data analysis utilizing the aforementioned method consists of three broad steps. The first step required this researcher to record his thoughts and experiences related to the phenomenon and population being explored which was communicated to the reader. The second step of this process involved the development of an inventory containing significant statements, terms, and ideas communicated by participants during the interview process. This researcher then proceeded to the third step which involved categorizing each item listed in the aforementioned inventory. Based on this categorization, this researcher formed



descriptions by reviewing psychological expressions that were used to develop a thorough representation of the shared experience of the officers interviewed.

### **Epoche**

Epoche also referred to as bracketing, represents an important step of data analysis in which the researcher attempts to remove and assumptions, biases, or prejudices regarding any of the components (i.e., phenomenon, population, etc.) involved in the study. During this step, the researcher brackets, or communicates to the reader, his or her own experiences as a means of effectively managing any potential predisposition that would influence the outcome of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Below this researcher describes his personal experiences involving police stress. He also reflects only his experiences and beliefs concerning the population being studied. This step is crucial to the process of data analysis as it illuminates and reduces the impact of any assumptions held by a researcher that may hinder their ability to examine the phenomenon and population through a clear lens.

Throughout his 20 years in the human services field and seven years as an instructor of psychology and criminal justice with undergraduate colleges, this researcher has had many interactions with law enforcement personnel. As a result, many of his close friends are police officers. These relationships are valued as they offer much in terms of insight into the pressures of police work and eventually laid the foundation for the research questions addressed in this study as many of the aforementioned interactions have revealed many queries on the part of this researcher. For the most part, these experiences have been positive ones, however, there have been exchanges that proved to

as not pleasant. As a result of his background and understanding of the influence of stress on personality, emotion, and behavior, this researcher has grouped these “not-so-pleasant” interactions as being a byproduct of those pressures associated with police work. Through his training and education, this researcher has learned not to take these encounters personally.

This process of bracketing his beliefs, attitudes, and experiences associated with law enforcement personnel and police stress permitted this researcher to examine the phenomenon with fresh eyes allowing the participants’ experiences to be front and center as the focal point of the study. As he proceeded on in data analysis, this researcher did not associate compare the aforementioned experiences to those shared by the participants. As a result, he able to detach his experiences from those shared withholding any opinions or beliefs of his own during the interview process. Upon completion of the bracketing step of data analysis, this researcher proceeded on to the horizontalization of the data.

### **Horizontalization**

Horizontalization of the data procured during the interview process involved each relevant statement being assigned equal value as it became a horizon, or segment of the meaning of those experiences shared by participants (Moustakas, 1994). The transcript from each interview was meticulously studied by this researcher with each statement being inferred as a unique experience offered by the participant. Said experiences contributed to the overall understanding of the shared phenomenon. During his review of the transcripts, this researcher highlighted significant statements, thoughts, and emotions that were relevant to each participant's experience. All vague, irrelevant, or repetitive

data was removed as this researcher proceeded on to copy significant statements into an Excel spreadsheet. Categories were then assigned based on the overall meaning of these statements.

Data analysis proceeded as this researcher clustered the aforementioned statements into core categories which, ultimately, led to the development of themes. Statements were clustered into eleven categories which represented three themes. This was accomplished by combining categories that appeared to repeat themselves and where themes were found to be similar. The three themes that remained represents the essence, or composite description, of the overall experience of the participants. Both the final categories and themes are outlined in Appendix C. Table 2 contains information on both the final themes and those participants that identified each which will be supported later in this chapter by using direct quotations from each of those individuals.

Table 2

*Themes by Participant*

Themes	Participants who identified themes
External Stressors	P1 – P5
Mental Health Stigmatization	P1 – P5
Emotion-Focused Coping	P1 – P5

**Textual Description**

Textual descriptions describing *what* each participant experienced were created using the themes developed during the horizontalization process described in the preceding section. According to Moustakas (1994), textual descriptions are meant to provide insight into the context of *what* the participants experience. Integrated with the

structural description discussed below, the textual description is used as a means of synthesizing the meanings leading to an overall essence of the phenomenon or experiences being studied (Moustakas, 1994). Direct quotations transcribed from the interviews served were used to develop the textual description.

### **Structural Description**

Upon review of the textual descriptions, this researcher developed a structural description pinpointing *how* the experience or phenomenon was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). The structural description serves to further explain how the experience outlined in the textual description of the participants occurred. Along with the textual description, the structural description provides a more solid foundation to build upon when developing the composite description, or essence, of the study. Doing so provides valuable insight into the phenomenon being studied as a better understanding of the experience of participants is delivered for further analysis.

### **Composite Description (Essence)**

Finally, textual and structural descriptions were used to develop a composite description (i.e., essence). The essence of the experience communicates to the reader both *what* the participants experienced and *how* they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Through an examination of the composite description, this researcher was able to develop and communicate a deeper understanding of the participants and their experiences. Confirmation that saturation was obtained is apparent as each of the themes received support based on the participants' responses. The shared experience of participants was derived through the examination of commonalities found in their accounts having been

exposed to police stress. The composite description emphasizes what it is like to be confronted with stress in an officer's first year of police work and to cope with those pressures. Additionally, the essence offered answers to those research questions outlined in the introduction of this chapter. The composite description is provided to the reader later on in Chapter 5.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative measures tend to study that which cannot be quantified. As a result, the qualitative researcher relies heavily on establishing the trustworthiness of data rather than letting the data speak for itself, the case often found with quantitative studies. The qualitative researcher must go to great lengths to establish trustworthiness. The following sections examine the four key components of establishing trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These components are addressed by this researcher outlining his response to establishing evidence of trustworthiness.

#### **Credibility**

Establishing the trustworthiness of one's research is an important feature of qualitative research. This process begins with ensuring credibility which has been recognized as one of the most important components of establishing trustworthiness. Credibility is an indicator of "how we ensure rigor in the research process and how we communicate to others that we have done so" (Gasson, 2004, p. 95). Credibility involves establishing that the work accomplished during the project is sound. One way in which researchers establish credibility is to permit the participants to review their transcripts

from the interview. Through this process, participants verify the information obtained during the interview and the interpretation of that data by the researcher. Therefore, for this study participants were emailed a transcript from their interview which was verified before this researcher continued data analysis.

Credibility was also enhanced through peer review. Before embarking on this study, this researcher reached out to a colleague who agreed to verify that the data analyzed was credible. Said colleague was a fellow graduate student at Regent's University who had completed coursework in qualitative research design. After signing a confidentiality statement (see Appendix D), the peer was forwarded copies of the original transcripts as well as this researcher's interpretations of that information. Once reviewed, the peer agreed that the interpretations were sound further ensuring the credibility of the study and its results.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is another means of ensuring trustworthiness and is primarily a function of the reader of research. In terms of phenomenological research, this process involves the reader noting the specific details of the experiences discussed by participants and comparing that to similar situations or environments with which they are more familiar (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). To ensure that the reader can accomplish this endeavor, the researcher must provide a detailed description of those experiences. A thorough description of these experiences improves the transferability of the results of the study and the reader's ability to apply that information to other settings as a means of emphasizing it as a shared phenomenon. Creswell and Creswell (2013) stated that

detailed descriptions “may transport the reader to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences” (p. 200). To ensure that this occurred, this researcher relied on direct quotations to illustrate the experiences of the participants which would lead to the formation of interpretations on behalf of this researcher that communicated that same detail.

### **Dependability**

Trustworthiness is also ensured when research has been established as being dependable. This is determined through detailed accounts of how every component of the project was executed. Each of these components is later examined by an external auditor that examines all aspects of the project as a means of ensuring the overall quality of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). A research reviewer, unfamiliar with this researcher and his project, was assigned through Walden University in the capacity of external auditor ensuring the dependability of this research. This researcher provided this independent assessor with detailed documentation of every step involved in this project including data collection, data analysis, and theme development.

### **Confirmability**

The last component involved in establishing trustworthiness, confirmability, seeks to verify that the findings are based solely on the experiences communicated by participants and not skewed by the researcher's assumptions, biases, experiences, or even as a byproduct of their imagination (Tobin & Begley, 2004). A researcher's thorough review of transcripts and his reliance on detailed quotations provided by participants, rather than their thoughts related to the data, ensured the confirmability of the study. The

assistance of an external reviewer also plays an important role in establishing confirmability; especially if the researcher provides a thorough audit trail (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Hence, this researcher provided his external reviewer with comprehensive documentation which thoroughly illustrated every aspect of this study. Confirmability was established through extensive, detailed record-keeping throughout this project which communicated the rationale for the results of the study, outlined in chapter 5, and how that outcome came to be.

### **Results**

In this phenomenological study, this researcher focused on obtaining information related to participant experiences with stress using a semi-structured interview protocol during which he sought to describe and clarify the meanings of these experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). As a means of gaining a better understanding of the experiences of participants, this researcher implemented a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as the primary tool for the analysis of data collected during the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As data analysis progressed, themes emerged from the collected data which were found to align with the research questions discussed earlier in this chapter. The three emerging themes included external stressors, mental health stigmatization, emotion-focused coping, (see Table 2). The following sections demonstrate support to exemplify the themes that emerged using verbatim quotes from the participants interviewed.



### **Theme 1: External Stressors**

External stressors are demands that come in the form of events and situations that occur to an individual causing them to feel pressured and/or strained (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Participants reported these demands as situations, events, rules/regulations that happen to a police officer and are often viewed as factors that are of their control. External stressors reported by participants were categorizing as being related to calls for service, major life events, and organizational factors. All five participants expressed discomfort at one time or another due to the influence of external stressors. These individuals reported specific causes for their external stress which are outlined in this section.

Police officers are routinely called into situations that are often unpredictable and, at times, volatile. Many of these calls for service may have an uneventful resolution however the potential for dangerous and/or tragic outcomes is at the forefront of an officer's mind when summoned to particular types of events. Many participants outlined specific instances that occurred during their first year where they were called into a situation that resulted in considerable stress. The following excerpts from participant responses identify many calls for service, unique to each reporting them, demonstrating the influence on their emotions and behavior at the time of the event:

P1: Domestics. I mean you're dealing with everyone that wants to put in their terms of what happened and there's a lot going on. There's more than just one person to deal with. I think that those are always the hardest calls.

P1: I would say one particular one was a simple vehicle and traffic stop. They were all over the road and turns out when I pulled them over there was a needle sticking out of their arm. They were shooting up heroin while they were driving. So he was extremely high and very combative and I mean I'm small, to begin with, but when you have someone that high, nothing you do affects them. I mean he was tased, he was hit with a baton, he was pepper-sprayed, and he was fighting. I mean there was nothing, so I pretty much just had to remain on top until my backup got there. It was scary.

P2: So one of the guys started screaming at the crowd to tell them to get back. I've never had to scream at a crowd of 20 people before, but if this is what he's doing, that's what I am going to do. So I started screaming at the crowd and I noticed that when we pushed them back and I was standing there, my leg was shaking. My leg was moving and I couldn't stop shaking it and I can tell that I was kind of freaked out.

P3: We're looking for this kid that stole bottles, but apparently, he was kind of affiliated with a small gang. We had to bring him in for questioning and that was the first time I was getting into something. When I went to knock on his door you could feel those, that first adrenaline and it was the first time I got that feeling. Like I knew what was going to come because they talk about it, but I didn't think it would be just knocking on someone's door.

P4: You'll feel bad for certain people and the situations they are in and just because I'm a cop doesn't mean that... You've seen what has just happened to that person. You're the first responder. You're there first.

P4: I'm new so there's a lot of things I still have to see, but there are a few things I've seen that you're just there standing. Real quick in your head you're like 'Oh my god, I feel so bad for this person' and then you just snap into it 'Oh wait, I'm here I need to do something about it'.

P5: Most of the time when I feel under pressure it's usually a shots fired incident or a domestic where I'm showing up and somebody's trying to push me around.

P5: My reaction isn't 'alright, let's stay calm and talk', it's to...they're at this level, mine's to go to this level to overpower their anger and that's where I go with it. Most of its anger, yelling at them... kind of like, asserting my presence that I am the one in command.

When participants reported examples of their stress since becoming a police officer, some mentioned situations outside of work, or major life events, that added to the pressures of the job. When asked to describe the factors that influenced their stress in the first year, some participants provided the following responses:

P2: I moved out. This whole last year is when I moved out so I haven't been with my parents anymore.

P3: I was getting help from the county for a little bit and then I got to the point where I had a full-time job and obviously, I made \$300 more than what they allow

you so I was cut off completely from that, you know. Like they don't even ween you off, they just say okay you're done with us.

P5: We ended up getting pregnant and so halfway through the academy, she was pregnant. I was getting out in a few months and then, when I hit the street stress started setting in because then on top of it, she wasn't feeling too well, so she wasn't working as much.

P5: As much as we act super tough or whatnot, I was nervous every day whether or not...am I coming home? And stuff like that. Can anything go wrong today that's going to affect my girlfriend...affect me not seeing my daughter be born in a few months or will something happen where I won't be able to take care of my family anymore? I still think about it every day when I put the uniform on and I go out there.

Participants also reported organizational situations, expectations, or other issues as a cause of stress. These external demands are associated with the unique job characteristics that come with being police officers and having to deal with what is expected of them by the department. When asked how their definitions of stress have changed since becoming a police officer, participants replied with the following statements:

P1: I mean, paperwork. Now you have deadlines, when the paperwork has to be in it's I mean you have 24 hours deadline, so it's crazy I mean you can spend hours on a call, and then you have to spend triple that amount of time on paperwork, and it gets very stressful.

P1: I work in small villages, so you're usually just one. One man on, so, and it's hard to back up. You're dealing with multiple people in a domestic and it's just you.

P2: I really don't know this is stress-related but as I said before I am very hesitant to do things I've never done before and being in the first year almost every single night I'm doing something and I have never done before. So that definitely can put stress on me, but I kind of handle it all the same way.

P3: So there were days where I was doing like 20-hour days. Trying to get my hours and getting no sleep.

P4: The thing is now there's a job to do. There are guidelines on how to do it.

There are policies on how to do it. So, I think that's my biggest stress. Just, ok, how do I get from point A to point B the right way?

P4: For me, it's more, how am I going to handle this paperwork? What do I need to do or how to handle that portion?

## **Theme 2: Mental Health Stigmatization**

The second theme that was revealed through data analysis alluded to mental health stigmatization among police officers. This was primarily represented in participant statements involving disclosing their stress to other personnel. Stuart (2017) linked a stigma associated with anything mental health-related in law enforcement to the refusal of officers to disclose any issue to colleagues or supervisors. Also revealed through the data collected was the perspectives of those participants involved with this study concerning how they had perceived and addressed the stress of other officers even

when not disclosed. Participants citing changes in behavior that indicated to them that the other officer was likely under a significant amount of pressure and it was impacting their performance. It is apparent in their descriptions of how they approached such situations that support a mental health stigma in law enforcement.

Outside of their circle of family friends, etc., police officers rely heavily on the support of their fellow officers when in the field. Unfortunately, as indicated in their responses below, participants recounting their first year did not feel as if they were able to do so when dealing with the pressures of police work. The following statements provide evidence that participants were more likely to keep these issues to themselves rather than discuss them with other law enforcement personnel:

P1: I work with other agencies more than my agency. So, you don't want someone like from another department thinking you don't know what you are doing in your department.

P1: There's not much, you know, going back and talking about what happened during the call or once the call's clear. They go back to their zone and I go back to my department. So, there's not much interaction with other officers.

P1: I probably wouldn't. I try and be positive, I focus on the positives. I mean if my partner is stressed, I would talk to them and help them through it, but I probably wouldn't say anything.

P2: And so, if I get into a stressful situation you don't let it show. So honestly, I have no idea how they're perceiving it.

P2: If I show them basically how I am in my personal life then they think I'm a goofball and then they don't pay attention to my work anymore.

P2: I don't know if it's just like a police thing, but as soon as you get done with that whatever the situation is you, you flip instantly to talking about something else. So like that thing yesterday to where I had to tell that chick to back off, 30 seconds later after I told her to back off, I was talking to the guy next to me about how expensive fences are. So we just started talking about just something else and I have noticed like that does help.

P2: I just got to keep it in, don't let it show, and then... I think not letting it show is the hardest part. I mean, I've gotten pretty good at it but I think that's probably the hardest part because even with the like leg shaking thing like I don't want anyone to see that my leg's shaking. So, I just try not to let it show.

P2: I mean, if I'm in a stressful situation and they see me shaking they're probably going to go "wow. this guy's a pansy or something".

P2: I flex as hard as I can to stop that shaking, because I know that if they see that I'm shaking, they're going to think that I'm stressed out and that I can't handle the situation that I'm in.

P2: When I'm at work I kind of keep it all in so I don't know if anyone sees it.

P3: So, I keep it to myself and my brother, obviously is the one that says "Don't think you could trust everyone else because it's a little crooked and it's sad to say, but that's how the departments are".

P4: They understood. And they didn't give me no BS saying, "Oh no, you'll be fine". It's more like, "yeah, you're right".

A couple of participants discussed their perspectives on disclosing to their supervisors the impact of stress. One participant when as far as to describe an experience in which she did discuss her stress with another officer charged with her training. The statements outlined below are telling in terms of how some police officers feel about expressing that they are feeling stressed to their supervisors:

P2: Like the first year, I just did my job that was it. I want people to form opinions of me based on what my work shows not how I act at work. I want them to see my work. That it's good work and they're like 'oh this guy's good at his job' and then once they realize that I'm good at my job, I'm not like some idiot, then I'll show them what I'm actually like.

P3: I think he was just finished leaving on disability and I learned a lot from him and when I told him like, everything that was going on he was like 'just get it done'. You know. Whatever you're going through it's going to pass.

P3: And he said, "don't go around letting everyone else know that you're feeling stressed or that you have a heavy load". So, I was like, 'what do you mean?'. Like what if they want to know? You know and he was like "no, because sad to say, they'll use that against you. Like, you're not equipped for the job".

P3: Even now my brother working in the force, he said the same thing. Like, "be careful who you talk to". Even though you're all there for each other at the end of the day they're only there for themselves. So, they might say something that you



told them and throw you under the bus, and it might get to the Chief and then the Chief is asking, like, Oh. “You know, I hear you're stressed out because your child's home you have to work a double. Is that a problem? Because is that something that you can't handle?”. So, you have to be careful who you talk to and it can bite you in the booty.

P3: After once he mentioned that I was like ‘oh damn that’s, that’s what I’m dealing with now’. So I am careful about how I say, you know, on how my life is going because if you think about it, I mean, for other people can deal with it. Not that I can't, but it's stressful.

Another area that featured prominently during the interviews was the participants’ reactions when their fellow officers expressed or exhibited indicators of stress. Some of these indicators communicated by the participants of the study included fellow officers lashing out at them, losing control of situations, etc. Often the participants reacted to those indications that their fellow officers were experiencing stress with a superficial response (e.g., “You're okay? Alright, cool”). Others described a hands-off approach letting the officer deal on their own. Below are statements that support the thought process and behavior of the participants when faced with such situations:

P1: I wouldn’t want a civilian to think I don't know how to do my job, so I wouldn't want them to think that about any other officer. So, I kind of nonchalantly slip in before it’s shown.

P1: I think that happens anytime I go out on a call with someone I mean, there's not any negativity. You know just 'good job...see you on the next call pretty much'.

P2: I let them do what they've got to do. I mean like I said I don't know them enough, to know what to say to them. At that point though, if I see someone that's like pretty stressed out, I let them do their own thing. I don't talk to them and I let them handle it their way because again, I mean, I don't know what to say. If I say something to another guy, he'd tell me "oh go pound salt".

P2: I mean everyone that's in policing kind of has to be like a macho man. Like that's the thing I've noticed, and I'm not the kind of person to like I said, I don't want to be the center of attention all the time... That's one thing I have noticed everyone tries to be a big tough guy.

P4: I guess at that moment I'll take charge and handle the situation and make sure that we're all safe. And then after the call is done after everything's clear and we're, you know, okay, well, I'll address it then. 'Hey you, kind of,' and it's been done to me obviously cause I'm new. 'Hey, you kind of froze up there, kind of, you didn't know what to do. You're okay? Alright, cool'.

P5: I like my shift a lot. They're a confident group of guys, at least, whether they're stressed or not, I don't see it. They don't show it, and they do a very good job of not showing it.

### **Theme 3: Emotion-Focused Coping**

The use of emotion-focused coping represents another theme consistent across all participants. Such regulation of stress often occurs as the only option available as the individual acknowledges the stressor as being out of their control and, therefore, not a candidate for the implementation of problem-focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As the name suggests, emotion-focused coping looks to address the emotional responses (i.e., anger, fear, etc.) that result from stressful situations. An examination of emotion-focused coping skills reveals both adaptive and maladaptive strategies (Moore, Biegel, & McMahon, 2011). Maladaptive strategies include avoidance, isolation, drinking alcohol, etc., while adaptive measures consist of emotional disclosure, exercise, prayer/mediation, etc. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Moore, Biegel, & McMahon, 2011).

Many participants of this study reported emotional disclosure to family, friends, and significant others as a means of relieving the impact of stress during the first year of police work. The following responses obtained during the interview process exemplify how this strategy was used and, in some cases, how it reduced the emotional burden of stress:

P3: Where if I am feeling like I've had a rough day, my brother is really good at talking to me sometimes.

P4: I see my parents at least every other day. Me and my girlfriend, we communicate every day. I have a close family. I have a few close friends. So I'm always, I've learned that if I have anything that's bothering me, you know,

stressing me out, I just, I'm very open about it with my close, close people. These four people are my go-to, are my girlfriend, my sister, and my mom and dad. So all four of them react differently or can give me different feedback. So I always talk to the four of them whenever I need to.

P4: There are times where I go to my girlfriend, my sister, and I say, Hey, I don't need you to respond. I don't need you to tell me how to change this or do anything about it. I just want you there to listen. Just let me talk, and then we'll go from there. A lot of times it's even saying it out loud.

Another example of an emotion-focused coping strategy is exercising which acts as a reliever of stress (Moore, Biegel, & McMahon, 2011). Several participants expressed engaging in some form of physical activity and/or going to the gym as a means of reducing the emotional toll of policing. This method is demonstrated in the following statements:

P1: The gym always helps. Going to the gym helps a lot, running, music; you know, just anything to take your mind off of the stress that's at work.

P1: Yes. I never really worked out before becoming a police officer, never went to the gym. Running was awful. I thought I was going to die through phase one. I go there after a stressful day at work or it even helps to go before work cause then you know you're just starting a fresh new day. Now I can run a lot better and like I said I've never coped that way.

P2: That stress would kind of linger and it really wouldn't go away until I went to the gym worked out and then after the gym, I felt that I was just perfectly fine.

P2: No. I mean I go to the gym every single day. I'll take a rest day now and then but now; I don't know what I'm going to do with all the gym closed. I've no idea.

P3: I also go to the gym and escape there but even then, I'm still listening to these motivational videos and spiritual videos, whatever. It is something to pep me up. So I'm not in the slums or thinking of negative things.

P4: Going every day, two, three hours a day. To me, that would be unhealthy. I like to do high-intensity workouts once in a while, just heavy weights so that could be 45 minutes.

Emotion-focused also includes avoidance to manage stress. For example, it was mentioned earlier that after a stressful situation, P2 would avoid talking about it by focusing the conversation on a superficial topic (i.e., fencing). Several participants reported this avoidance as a way of distancing themselves from stress. For some, this meant putting miles between them and the location of the stressors. The following responses demonstrate these points:

P1: One of the biggest coping things which people find crazy, it doesn't exactly work for them, is in my marriage we don't talk about what happens at work. He will ask how my day went and it's either good or bad. We don't talk about the situation; we don't talk about... it stresses him out and stresses me out. He is fearful of my safety doing the job. So it was better for both of us, in our marriage, to just not talk about work.

P1: I've learned to separate my home life from work. I've learned to walk away from things. Leave things at work. That's much easier said than done.

P1: I didn't have any coping mechanisms. I just would be stressed, go to bed stressed, until a new day. Until it wore off. I didn't have any way of dealing with stress.

P2: Now, it's like somehow, I've developed a switch. Kind of like when I'm at work I'll feel the stress, but as soon as I'm done with work, I take my belt off and I put my shirt back up it's gone. I don't think about work at all. I don't worry about work and I only think about work when I put my clothes on.

P2: Another thing I have noticed too, is I leave the city as much as I can. I'll try and get out of the city as much as I can. I try to go to my parents as much as possible and just get away from it.

P2: If I've never done something before it's like 'I'll just keep doing what I'm doing' cause I'm the kind of guy where... 'don't fix something that's not broken'.

P2: When I get off of work, I instantly stop thinking about work. I don't think about work at all. When I'm with my family friends, that's all I'm thinking about. Like I don't even talk about work with them, they'll start to ask me questions and I'll give him like short answers and I'm like let's talk about something else.

P5: I would, like, go to my parents' house once a week, stuff like that. They don't see it, at least not yet for being so young on the force that they haven't seen it or noticed it.

Turning to alcohol or food as a stress reliever was also communicated by participants of the study. Even though no participant felt the acts of drinking or eating to

be in excess, they still reported these behaviors as a means of relieving stress. The following statements demonstrate these behaviors as a coping mechanism:

P2: I know a lot of people drink. A lot of people drink. I do now and then. On my days off, I will but it'll only be for like the one day and that's it I never drink during my work week.

P4: Eating. It's easy to eat, you know, some, some fried pork chops and some fried salami with fried cheese and it tastes delicious. Or you could just eat broccoli. And there are times where I do eat, you know, the unhealthy foods.

P5: I don't have a coping mechanism. I mean, as sad as it sounds, if I have a rough day at work or something, I come home, I'll have a few beers, try to calm myself down and then just go to sleep or whatnot.

Finally, a couple of participants reported turning to prayer and meditation as a means of reducing the emotional toll of stressors. Focusing on one's spirituality can be an adaptive means to address stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The following two statements reflect the participants use of such techniques:

P1: When I first became a police officer, it impacted things. I would bring a lot of my work stress home and it was messy. I started focusing on myself more, I started doing yoga and I started meditating and it's helped a lot.

P3: I go to church a lot more I feel like that helps me a lot. It helps me just forget about everything else and it helps me focus on something different. So it's kind of hard to think negative things when you're in church trying to read a Bible and praying. I just feel like it helps. It's helped me a lot. There are times where I

kind of strayed away and was too busy because I'd been working and then I kind of noticed that my mind is kind of jumbling up again. Going to church helped.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to develop a more extensive understanding of how officers experience and cope with stress during their first year of police work. The data collected during in-depth interviews illuminated many patterns of meaning across all participants. Most noteworthy were the contributions of all participants that led to the development of the following themes: external stressors, mental health stigmatization, and emotion-focused coping. A modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method developed by Moustakas (1994) was instituted during the analysis of data collected from the aforementioned interviews. The steps performed during this process (bracketing, horizontalization, etc.) led to the development of a composite description (i.e., essence) representing both the *what* and *how* associated with the overall experience of participants. Chapter 5 provides the reader with an interpretation of this researcher's findings outlined in this chapter. The limitations of the study, recommendations, essence, and implications for social change will also be discussed.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

In this phenomenological study, this researcher sought to provide a better understanding of how police officers experience stress during their first year of police work and to identify adaptive and/or maladaptive coping strategies used when addressing such pressures. The study was also directed towards exploring a gap in the literature concerning this phenomenon. This researcher instituted a phenomenological research design as a means of uncovering what participants experienced and what the meanings of these lived experiences were. A better understanding of how stress is experienced in the first year of police work has implications for the development of preventative measures as well as the potential to identify positive coping strategies.

In Chapter 4, this researcher discussed patterns of meaning in the study findings. These revelations resulted in the development of three significant themes that offer much insight into the research questions posed. These themes include external stressors, emotion-focused coping, and mental health stigma. External stressors are those events and/or situations that occur to cause an individual to be under pressure (Kaur et al., 2013; Russell, 2014; Weltman et al., 2014; Yun et al., 2015). Stress reported by participants included calls for service, major life events, and organizational factors. Emotion-focused coping addresses stress by controlling or reducing those harmful emotional responses that arise as a result (i.e., anger, fear, depression, etc.; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Often, participants recognized such coping as the only option as many of the situations they were confronted with appeared to be out of their control. Emotion-focused coping

reported by participants included engaging in emotional disclosure, seeking social support, exercising, drinking alcohol, eating more, and avoidance. According to Stuart (2017), there exists a stigma associated with mental health that many law enforcement personnel acknowledge. All participants reported perspectives that support a mental health stigma which can be categorized into the following groups: disclosure to fellow officers, disclosure to a supervisor, and seeking mental health treatment. The last chapter of this study provides the reader with an interpretation of the findings. Also included are limitations of the study, recommendations, social change implications, and a conclusion to the study.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The following section provides an interpretation of the findings related to how stress is perceived and coped with in the first year of police work. This researcher's interpretations are presented according to the data procured through exploring the research questions and the peer-reviewed literature presented in Chapter 2. This researcher reviewed prior literature examining police stress in which other academics discussed the types of stressors one faces in the field, how those stressors are experienced or perceived, and the coping strategies, both maladaptive and adaptive, that officers tend to gravitate towards when addressing the pressures of police work. Research has shown that the stress encountered by police officers and how they address those pressures is associated with various detriments (e.g., physical/mental, domestic, emotional) that are impactful to one's employment in the field of law enforcement (Acquadro et al., 2015). What is not known, however, is how the phenomena first manifest in the first year of

police work. The research conducted and the resulting interpretation sought to establish a foundation of knowledge that will begin to address that gap in the existing literature.

This was accomplished by considering what has already been revealed in prior research as it relates to the following three themes: external stressors, mental health stigmatization, and emotion-focused coping.

### **Theme 1: External Stressors**

The participants interviewed in this study described situations that support the influence of external stressors. External stressors are demands that come in the form of events and situations that occur that cause an individual to feel pressured and/or strained (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). All participants described situations in which their stress levels were impacted through the influence of calls to service, major life events, and organizational issues that arose during their first year of police work. In these situations, participants described reactions that indicated the presence of stress including anxiety, fear, and depression, to name a few. For example, many participants described specific situations (e.g., domestic disputes, shots fired, etc.) they were called to as a police officer that caused them to fear for their safety. For many of these individuals, the sources of stress described were considered to be out of their control, an attitude/perspective that will be reflected on during the examination of another theme which was revealed through this study (i.e., emotion-focused coping).

According to peer-reviewed literature, stressors may be grouped into a variety of categories. For example, can stressors fall into the following four categories: stresses inherent in police work, stresses arising internally from police department practices and

policies, external stresses stemming from the criminal justice system and the society at large, and internal stresses confronting individual officers (Stratton, 1977; Rajeswari & Chalam, 2018). Further exploration into this area indicated that police officers are routinely introduced to several external and internal stressors unique to a career in law enforcement (Kaur et al., 2013; Russell, 2014; Weltman et al., 2014; Yun et al., 2015). With that said, the participants of this study revealed several external stressors that impacted them and provided no indication of the influence of internal stressors. For example, all participants recalled various calls to service in which they found themselves distressed. P1 reported an instance in which she had to wrestle a drug addict to the ground, during a vehicle and traffic stop, and hold him down until backup arrived. P3 recounted arriving at the scene of a car accident and the confusion that resulted when he processed the initial emotional reaction to stress at that moment.

As it relates to the field of law enforcement, a call for service is assigned to an officer who patrols the specific location to where the call originates. These calls are often reported by the public in an attempt to resolve a criminal or safety issue. Depending on the urgency of the call, or the scheduling for the shift when the call is received, one individual officer or pair of officers may be assigned to address the call. During data analysis, calls for service represent a prominent theme reported by all participants involved in the study. When asked to recall an event that brought on distress, each participant described a specific instance in which they felt the emotional impact of stress while answering a call for service. For example, P3 discussed one of the first calls she was assigned to, which involved detaining a juvenile for questioning; in her response, she

outlined the physiological reactions of stress that occurred by simply knocking on a door. P5 described his reaction dealing with suspects when assigned to volatile situations (e.g., shots-fired calls) stating

“My reaction isn’t ‘alright, let's stay calm and talk’, it’s to...they’re at this level, mine’s to go to this level to overpower their anger and that’s where I go with it.

Most of its anger, yelling at them... kind of like, asserting my presence that I am the one in command”.

These represent a couple of examples that provide evidence of not only the impact of the stress resulting from a particular call but also how officers in their first year perceive and react to stress, one participant reacting on a psychological level while the other intentionally altered his behavior and dialog to manage the impact stressful.

Police officers are routinely exposed to work stress and the pressures of major life events that affect their psychological and emotional well-being. Research into this area involving 100 randomly chosen police officers who work in Buffalo, NY revealed that “exposure to multiple negative life events is significantly associated with elevated depression” (Hartley, Violanti, Fekedulegn, Andrew, & Burchfiel, 2007, p. 25). While discussing such stressors during the interview, some participants described how these challenges comingle with the pressures of police work resulting in distress that influenced their behavior and thinking patterns. Due to the pregnancy of his significant other, P5 revealed nervousness at the thought of something happening while he was at work that would prohibit him from seeing his daughter born and taking care of his family. Other examples include P2 reflecting on how his stress levels shifted during his first year of

police work as a result of moving away from home and his parents, who had acted as considerable support for him, while P3 discussed how her financial struggles due to being taken off of public assistance altered her stress when being introduced to the field.

Participants communicated their discomfort as these life events collided with the stress they had been introduced to as a result of entering policing. Further exploration into this area may reveal that the combination of these conditions may exacerbate the stress of first-year officers to a level that becomes more difficult to manage than it would be for more seasoned police personnel.

Data analysis confirmed much of the prior research discussed in the literature review for this study concerning organizational factors impacting stress. Symonds (1970) established that organizational stressors were a result of the structures and procedures of the police agency. Participants referenced scheduling issues, shift assignments, and paperwork. P1 discussed the position she's placed when working a shift alone outlining the perceived stress associated with answering calls with multiple individuals involved (e.g., domestics, vehicle/traffic stops, etc.). Another example was P4's stress as a result of having to abide by strict departmental guidelines whenever acting in the capacity of a police officer. Acquadro et al. (2015) exploration of the level of perceived stress, how it influenced anxiety, and the coping skills employed to address that impact revealed that both female and male officers were susceptible to anxiety associated with organizational stressors. This study supported Acquadro et al. as all but one participant reported their stress being influenced by organizational stressors. Salinas and Webb (2018) supported these findings of Acquadro et al. adding that male and female officers often behaved

differently when confronted with organizational stressors. This research was also confirmed as participants discussed how they dealt with such issues. For example, P1's issues regarding paperwork and shift assignments were met with avoidance tactics, while P4 discussed his problems with scheduling with colleagues in the context of it being a hassle as opposed to a stressor.

### **Theme 2: Mental Health Stigmatization**

Police officers have to deal with many challenging situations. As a result, a career in law enforcement is considered one of the most stress-inducing occupations (Finn & Tomz, 1997; Liberman et al., 2002). Law enforcement's negative stereotypes associated with engaging in mental health treatment and those officers who are undergoing treatment can be impactful on the well-being of those in the field (Stuart, 2017). Even efforts directed towards discussing one's stress with supervisors or fellow officers are influenced by this stigmatization. Research has indicated that the failure of officers to disclose because of this stigma makes it less likely that they will reach out for treatment or assistance (Stuart, 2017). The stigmatization of anything relating to mental health by law enforcement populations has been at the center of many studies examining stress in policing. Much of this research has examined how the stigma interferes with coping and treatment demonstrating a need to reduce or eliminate the effects of these stereotypes (Karaffa & Koch, 2016; Royle, Keenan, & Farrell, 2009; Stuart, 2017; Tucker, 2015).

The categories (i.e., disclosure to fellow officers, disclose to supervisors, and reactions to disclosure or lack thereof) that were revealed during data collection support

the aforementioned research and is conducive to a theme of mental health stigmatization displayed amongst all participants. More specifically, the statements of those interviewed supported finding that link between the failure to disclose stress and the stigma of issues that are related to mental health. Stuart (2017) studied 131 police officers utilizing a survey which assessed disclosure patterns and attitudes associated to disclosure which revealed, not only that an officer's tendency to disclose was highly influenced by the stigma of mental health, but also indicated that the lack of disclosure was a detriment to taking advantage of resources and treatment. Participant responses varied concerning disclosure to fellow officers, but these statements were conducive to an apprehension based on how mental health is perceived by them and in the department.

Some participants in this study indicated perceived stigma about how others might feel about revealing their experiences with stress and how that would prevent them from disclosing to fellow officers. P1 stated that she was not likely to disclose for fear of other officers perceiving that she did not know what she was doing. P2 went as far as to say that the reason he did not want to disclose his distress to other officers was that he did not want to be perceived as a "pansy" or "goofball. Interestingly, P3 discussed advice given to her by her bother in which he stated that other police officers cannot be trusted. This suggests that other officers would judge P3 and use that discolored against her. The contributions of the participants allude to an underlying stigma that affects their decision to disclose their experiences with stress. Other participants inferred that the topic of stress was taboo amongst police officers and therefore would go unacknowledged or ignored. For example, P1 stated that further interaction between her and other officers



after a call is not the norm as they tend to go their separate ways. P2 mentioned that it is routine amongst officers to change the subject completely after a stressful call avoiding any conversation about how that situation had impacted him. P4 mentioned how when he does disclose about his stress due to organizational factors, he is met with a response that lacks substance (e.g., “yeah, you're right”) which acknowledges the situation while ignoring the distress that he communicates. The responses of participants suggest there are obstacles to keep in mind when considering whether not to disclose their experiences with stress to their fellow officers. Whether it is how they might be perceived, an overall understanding that the topic is off-limits, or how disclosure is responded to, these barriers that hinder officers to disclose their experiences with stress points to the stigmatization of mental health.

The paramilitary structure of police departments fails to accommodate effective interpersonal relations between supervisors and those they are charged with overseeing; interactions which are further hindered considerably by the stigmatization of mental health (Violanti & Aron, 1994; Stuart, 2017). Some participants that were interviewed for the current study reported apprehension to disclose their experiences and the impact of distress directly to their supervisors based on these factors. For example, P3 discussed an experience in which she did disclose the stress that had arisen for the long hours she has been working and its impact on her relationship with her infant son. She was met with a warning to not let it get out in the open that she's being impacted by the stress of policing and that such disclosure could be used against even causing her to lose her job. As a result of these interactions, she avoided mentioning her distress as it became more

impactful in her daily life and mental health. P2 also described why he avoided reaching out to supervisors when stressed. He stated that he would rather be known for his actions rather than his internal struggles with stress. Even though he reported that he would disclose possibly once his good work had been recognized, P2 maintained throughout the interview that he was more likely to keep his experiences with stress and its impact on himself. Even though a small subgroup of the sample spoke directly about disclosing stress to a supervisor, those comments were quite telling and revealed much concerning how those participants perceived how their supervisors might respond to such disclosure ultimately supporting prior research involving the presence of a mental health stigma in the field of law enforcement (Stuart, 2017).

The final theme addressed how participants perceive their fellow officers when they do disclose that they are in distress or show signs of stress but fail to acknowledge it. Many participants reported a “hands-off” policy when dealing with other officers they perceive as showing signs of stress. P1’s interactions with other officers who exhibit were often met with her becoming more involved or taking point during a call or with encouraging words unrelated to the stress being perceived. This behavior is consistent with her statement on not wanting other officers to be perceived by civilians as not knowing what they were doing. P4 stated that he also would address the stress of another officer with the superficial response of “You’re okay? Alright, cool”. P2 was content with letting his stressed colleagues “do what they’ve got to do”. He also stated that his perception of police officers is that they all want to be considered “macho” and, therefore, internalize their stress while not showing any signs of it. P5 reported similar

perceptions stating that stress isn't shown because he works with a “confident” group.

Both P2 and P5 provide evidence that police officers rather keep their stress to themselves and be perceived as strong than come off as weak due to their disclosure of stress to their fellow officers or supervisors. The consensus of the participants that did contribute to this theme was not to acknowledge the signs of stress from other officers and let them deal with it on their own. The statements support the detrimental impact of the stigma of mental health on a police officer's decision of whether or not to disclose stress and how they react to those that they perceive as being in distress.

### **Theme 3: Emotion-Focused Coping**

In addition to revealing the impact of external stressors and supporting mental health stigmatization, the participants also described efforts to incorporate behaviors directed towards reducing or eliminating the emotional state that resulted from stress. Many participants reported that they address the emotional state of stress rather than the problems causing these emotions primarily because they often feel that these situations are out of their control. These aforementioned behaviors support the research of Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) who distinguished emotion-focused coping as a means often utilized when individuals perceive that a stressor must be endured. Due to an attitude that reflects these situations/problems as being “just part of the job”, many participants in this study sought to tolerate the stressor, as they pursued behaviors directed towards managing the emotional effects of stress.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguished two forms of coping strategies which they labeled problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. As the name

indicates, problem-focused coping involves actively addressing the problem or situations as a means of that reducing or eliminating stress caused by external events. Emotion-focused coping, on the other hand, is directed towards reducing or eliminating the emotional impact of stress resulting from those same external events. Individuals will incorporate problem-solving coping techniques when they perceive that something can be done to alter the source of stress, while those who use emotion-focused coping utilize such strategies as they feel that the stressor is out of their control and, therefore, must be endured (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Carver et al., 1989).

However, within the realm of police work, participants in this study feel they are placed in situations in which the source of stress must be endured as they perceive these situations as being characteristic of policing and out of their control. As a result, the utilization of emotion-focused coping became a well-established theme for all participants of this study as each reported using one strategy or another conducive to the aforementioned form of coping. As mentioned previously, emotion-focused coping involves an individual's efforts to reduce or eliminate the emotional impact resulting from sources of stress caused by external events. Emotion-focused coping includes strategies that are considered to be beneficial to an individual's well-being (i.e., adaptive), as well as, those strategies that may be detrimental to an individual's health (i.e., maladaptive) (Sornberger, Smith, Toste, & Heath, 2013). Specific examples of adaptive strategies, relative to this study, included emotional disclosure, exercise, and prayer/mediation, whereas examples of maladaptive strategies included drinking/eating, distancing, and avoidance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Carver et al., 1989).

Amongst many participants, emotion-focused coping behaviors that would be considered adaptive were incorporated into their routines. Emotional disclosure of stress often produces positive emotions (i.e., courage, comfort, and relief) (Hoyt et al., 2010). Several participants looked to friends, relatives, and significant others for emotional support through the disclosure of their stress. P4 stated that when he communicates his stress and its impact, he is not looking for feedback, but just someone to listen to him. Others turned to exercise (i.e., going to the gym, running, etc.) and/or prayer/meditation to alleviate the emotional distress of their work. During their interviews, P3 outlined the advantages of going to church and reading her bible, while P1 discussed the influence of stress on her family and how those issues were benefited by mediation.

Some participants reported incorporated two or even all three of these coping strategies. For example, P3 discussed disclosing her stress, and its emotional impact, to her closest relatives. She also mentioned that going to church and going to the gym while listening to spiritual audio recording as methods of coping. P3 described some of the positive results listed above as a result of these coping mechanisms. These strategies were a conscious choice of P3 that she incorporated into her routine to combat the emotional stress of policing which supports the findings of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). These researchers claimed that coping was not an act that occurred unconsciously, but a conscious behavior initiated when an individual determines that a distressing event has become challenging or that the stressful situation has surpassed their ability to manage that emotional toll effectively.

Emotion-focused coping may also include strategies that are considered maladaptive. Avoidance/distancing and drinking/eating were two categories that would support the theme established as emotion-focused coping. Amongst some participants, avoidance and distancing were both strategies directed towards accomplishing the same goal which was to intentionally evade the stressor. For example, P1 discussed how she avoided all conversations involving work-related stress as soon as the uniform came off, while P2 described constant visits with his parents as a means of putting distance between himself and the stressors he left behind. Drinking alcohol and eating food considered to be unhealthy, was another means of emotion-focused coping that participants turned to when exposed to the emotional impact of stress. These strategies became evident when, during their interviews, P4 discussed his reliance on fried foods, while P5 stated that “If I have a rough day at work or something, I come home, I'll have a few beers, try to calm myself down and then just go to sleep or whatnot”, a pattern of behavior that P2 also reported as engaging in.

These methods of coping appear, at first glance, to be an effective way of coping with stress in a short-term capacity, however, when looking at the long-term effects of these strategies, research of this area has established them as often being maladaptive (Seiffge-Krenke, 2004). Such coping behavior reported by all but one of the participants corroborated the findings in the literature review of this study regarding maladaptive coping. Zeitlin (1980) described maladaptive coping as one's reliance on strategies that yield immediate relief from stressors, yet generate increased stress over time, ultimately promoting more harmful outcomes to the individual. For example, some participants

reported the use of the maladaptive strategies listed above as perpetuating immediate relief, however, based on evidence accumulated during data collection, participants described that such efforts did not eliminate or reduce stress, but only acted as a quick fix.

### **Potential Impact of Policing in 2020**

Before moving on to the remaining sections of this study, it is important to note the developments that have occurred in the field of law enforcement since the onset of this project; developments that may have led to the perpetuation of stressors which may be considered unprecedented and, even though not acknowledged by those interviewed, could have impacted the responses of participants during the interview process nonetheless. At the time of this writing, the country is under considerable duress as decades of police brutality and discrimination have culminated in public protest and civil unrest. Social media and news outlets have directed a spotlight on the activities of police officers spurring changes to departmental policies and a call for the dissolution of many law enforcement agencies. Even though the death of George Floyd, allegedly due to the actions of police officers, occurred after the interviews had taken place, the police community had already been under fire for similar occurrences particularly those taking place in recent years.

Technology, in the form of social media, bodycams, and the video recording quality of cellphones, has placed the public “in the know” when it comes to the activities of police officers. Such scrutiny has had a considerable impact on the public’s perception of the policing community depicting officers as “overly aggressive” (Schultz, 2019).

Such a perception has been damaging to the reputation of law enforcement personnel promoting an atmosphere of distrust and animosity towards those that serve and protect. As a result, the public's willingness to cooperate with police officers has been considerably impacted (Schultz, 2019). It would seem foolhardy, to ignore such developments and its potential impact on the stress endured by the police community. Although not specifically mentioned by participants of this study, the potential for the current state of police and community relations not to influence the safety and well-being of officers. Further exploration into its effects is not only warranted but also highly recommended.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The results of this research further validated the theoretical framework for this that was used to support this phenomenological study. The utilization of this framework added clarity to when interpreting the results obtained through the exploration of the study's research questions. This study was framed corresponding with Thelen's (2013) dynamic systems theory. This theory is currently considered one of the most extensive in its sphere of interest, focusing on the interactions between internal processes and contextual influences as the main driving forces behind development (Salvatore et al., 2015). More specifically, the approach encompasses relevant factors influencing development at any given time examining a wide range of contexts (e.g., cultural, environmental, biological, etc.) while considering development in terms of multiple time scales (Salvatore et al., 2015). Thelen and Smith (1994) proposed that the dynamic systems approach could be applied to the development of thinking and behavior patterns.



As discussed in Chapter 2, police stress is multidimensional, resulting from forces external/internal, organizational/operational, etc. (Abdollahi, 2002; Rajeswari & Chalam, 2018). The development of coping strategies is also diverse ranging from those that are adaptive to those that are maladaptive. The dynamic systems approach argues that how police stress is experienced and coping mechanisms are developed is a product of several contextual influences occurring within any given moment. Previous research failed to acknowledge police stress through this theoretical lens, however, literature does exist that examines the impact of individual factors (i.e., environmental, social, etc.) on how stress is perceived and addressed, ultimately, revealing the overall impact of such pressures on police officers (Van der Velden et al., 2013; Can & Hendy, 2014; Kaiseler, Passos, Queiros, & Sousa, 2014).

The theory suggests that the way police officers experience and address stress is the result of many contextual influences occurring at once. Perceptions of stress and coping strategies are a product of variables occurring within the same system and interval. Biological, environmental, social factors, among many others, occurring at the time stress presents influences how the officer experiences and, in turn, copes with the pressures of policing. Given an alternate time and set of contextual factors, the way a police officer experiences and copes with the same stress may be different. Evidence that the theory corresponded with the data obtained through the interview process was substantial.

During this phenomenological study, it became evident that the experiences of stress and the development of coping strategies depicted by the participants were

influenced by several contextual factors that were present at the time these pressures were introduced. As a result, data collection revealed several instances where participants modified their behavior based on the presence of such factors. The influence of support networks, personal beliefs, organizational factors on their experiences with stress and coping provides support for Thelen's theory. In this way, these individual systems interact in concert to influence the behavior of the organism (i.e., participant). The choice to incorporate emotion-focused coping strategies exemplifies the impact of these contextual factors on the behavior and decision making of participants. The dynamic systems approach provides an appropriate framework for the experiences divulged by the participants during the interview process, while also providing support for how coping strategies are implemented by those subjects.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This phenomenological research provides a valuable contribution to the existing body of literature on the lived experiences of officers confronted with stress in their first year of police work and the coping strategies they develop as a result of those pressures. With that established, it is imperative that this researcher record limitations attributed to the study's design and/or methodology which may have impacted the interpretation of findings, while also outlining how those challenges were addressed. Due to the nature of the research topic and the timing of data collection (i.e., amidst the COVID-19 crisis), this researcher was faced with some considerable challenges which include: obtaining participants for the interviews, establishing an alternate means to conduct those

interviews, and overcoming the reluctance of participants to disclose details regarding their experiences with stress.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the availability of law enforcement personnel to participate in the study was greatly impacted. The means of conducting the interview was also subject to change due to social distancing and the fact the originally proposed face-to-face interviews were not permitted. To limit the influence of these factors on the overall study the sample size was reduced to a more manageable figure (i.e., from 8-9 to 4-5 participants) and video conferencing was implemented for the interviews. Of course, the newly established sample size would only be considered adequate if saturation was met. Upon conclusion of the final interviews, it became clear that saturation was obtained occurring when no new ideas were expressed by participants. As mentioned in chapter 4, evidence of trustworthiness was established through an audit trail using verbatim transcripts, peer review notes, and direct quotes from the participants along with psychological expressions outlined in this researcher's notes.

Woody (2005) established how perception tends to influence how law enforcement officers share with others their experiences with stress, and other mental health issues, limiting their disclosure of its effects or keeping such information to themselves altogether. It is for this reason that this researcher needed to develop rapport and establish a comfortable setting for the interview despite the restrictions involved with video conferencing. An environment such as this promotes honesty and genuineness by both parties as an open dialogue is established. During the interview, this researcher needed to avoid communicating his personal beliefs or assumptions reading the

phenomenon and/or population which may skew or hinder a participant's contribution. This researcher utilized an interview protocol comprised of open-ended questions, while also incorporating probing questions where necessary, to ensure optimal data collection. Given these considerations, it was assumed that the participants answered all the interview questions openly and honestly. Although the findings should not be considered generalizable to all police officers, other than those specified in the inclusion criteria, the data obtained through participant interviews provided valuable information that will benefit the field of law enforcement as a whole.

Finally, a limitation that can be said for most qualitative studies is that they do not yield as much measurable evidence as quantitative studies. This is especially true of a phenomenological study exploring a gap in the literature established by this study (i.e., first-year police officer's experiences with stress). As an exploratory study, in a sense, this research will spark a further examination of this phenomenon paving the way for the descriptive evidence which will be established through the implementation of the quantitative design. Quantitative studies will establish a better representation of the population studied, while the qualitative design incorporated with this study provides a mere glimpse of how stress is experienced by officers in the first year of police work. The findings from this study are based on the qualitative interpretation of the shared experience of the five participants.

### **Recommendations**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to address the gap in the literature concerning how stress is experienced by officers in their first year of police

work. The findings were comprised of data obtained through interviewing five participants who identified as officers who were close to completing or had already completed their first year of police work and had experienced stress during that period. Three men and two women represented a group of participants whose ages ranged from 22 to 32 years old. This group provided valuable insights as to how stress is perceived through their lived experiences and what coping strategies developed to address these pressures.

### **Recommendations for Research**

Based on the research criteria of this study participation was limited to only those individuals who were close to finishing their first year or had already completed it, therefore more seasoned officers (i.e., those beyond 18 months of service) were excluded. The focus on officers who met this particular criterion is related to a gap in the literature that addresses officers in the first year and the prior research establishing police stress as impactful to job performance, mental health, etc. (Garbarino et al., 2013; Van der Velden et al., 2013; Kaiseler et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2014). Hence, those police officers who had been on the job for years were not included in this research as these individuals tend to perceive and cope with stress differently. It is for that reason that the results of this study are not reflective of that specific population. More relevant research should be conducted adding to the wealth of research already established addressing the shared experience of more seasoned officers and how such individuals cope with police stress.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to conduct additional research into a more diverse sample of first-year police officers. The group of five individuals who

participated in this study was limited in its representation of the diversity found in law enforcement personnel. For example, the sample did not include black or Asian minorities. As a result, the findings reflected the shared experiences of a group primarily comprised of white police officers. Findings could have differed with the examination of a more diverse group. Therefore, it would be of value to the field to develop an understanding of how officers representing different backgrounds, other than those examined during this study, would experience police stress and what coping strategies they would implement to address those pressures.

Additional research into the psychosocial forces that influence coping skills could provide further insight into how strategies develop. Prior research demonstrated that personality type, in particular, affects one's necessity for coping strategy. For example, Detrick and Chibnall (2013) found that steadiness under stressful conditions was attributed to personalities that reflected low levels of neuroticism, high levels of extraversion and conscientiousness, and average levels of openness and agreeableness. It has also been established that personality traits might influence the development of coping strategies and the impact on the effectiveness of those skills (Afshar et al., 2015). In this study, all participants chose, in one way or another, to incorporate emotion-based coping strategies begging the question: what personality factors exist in the first year of police work that perpetuates reliance on specific types of coping? Even though personality is one of many elements considered when examining police stress through a dynamic systems approach to development, a more concentrated effort to reveal the role of personality in choosing specific coping skills would prove beneficial.

As mentioned in the previous section, qualitative studies have their limitations.

Due to the nature of phenomenological studies, findings based on the data are more subjective and interpretive. A quantitative approach to studying this phenomenon would yield more objective and measurable data to base findings. Thus, a quantitative study produces more conclusive evidence related to how officers experience stress in the first year of police work and what coping strategies are implemented as a result. For instance, statistical data could provide additional insight into the effectiveness of coping strategies used by police officers. To date, there is a lack of research related to the experiences and coping skills of first-year police officers altogether, therefore, an extensive quantitative analysis would promote a more thorough foundation of knowledge on how stress impacts this population.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

This study obtained valuable insight from participants into the experiences and coping strategies of police officers who often struggle with unique pressures in their first year of policing. These insights provide knowledge to communities, family, friends, and other law enforcement personnel as to how stress negatively influences those charged with serving and protecting. Consequently, implications for positive social change include increased understanding of the emotional and psychological challenges reported by police officers. Moreover, the lived experiences provided by this study's participants provide direction for additional research to improve the practices of police officers with a more solid grasp of the development of coping strategies relying on the perceptions of the participants interviewed. These findings will contribute to stress treatment, intervention,

and prevention programs tailored to police officers, especially those in their first year who are initially developing the necessary career lasting skills to adapt.

### **Implications**

The implications for the information revealed through this study have far-reaching applications in terms of promoting positive social change, supporting methodology, and strengthening theory. The law enforcement community, as well as the public, benefit from the shared experiences of those interviewed and the meaning for which developed. Support for more qualitative exploration of police stress was also revealed through this research. Implications also demonstrate the utility of the dynamic systems approach to development when studying law enforcement populations. These ideas, and more, are explored further in the following sections.

### **Positive Social Change Implications**

The findings from this research have considerable implications for positive social change and could prove significantly beneficial for police officers, their families, and the general public. This study has provided a better understanding of what police officers experience in terms of stress and how they address it, whether those means be adaptive or maladaptive. More specifically, this information provides valuable insights as to how officers in their first year of police work experience stress and developed coping strategies that may potentially be career lasting. For example, participants of this study reported turning towards emotion-based coping strategies when dealing with stressful situations. Thus, the initial steps for positive social change have been taken starting a dialogue exploring the effectiveness of such strategies when compared to other means of



coping (i.e., problem-focused strategies). Further research will use this study as a stepping stone to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon resulting in more effective stress prevention and intervention strategies.

According to many of the participants interviewed, self-disclosure of the impact of stress is not an easy task, especially when communicating with other law enforcement personnel. Yet, some participants expressed relief and a better understanding of how stress impacts them after disclosure, a couple of participants even discussed exploring other options (e.g., therapy, open communication with family, etc.) to secure a healthier mental state. Therefore, the police officer who discloses their stress might feel more empowered and direct more positive energy both during work and after. As individuals charged with the responsibility of protecting and serving the community members, police officers who disclose the influence of the unique stressors they face benefit job performance, mental health, etc. Normalizing stress and its impact within law enforcement circles will also benefit relationships and interactions between police officers. Although this was recognized among the participants, they still recognized the impact of police culture on one's ability to communicate their stress to other officers. This factor will continue to be an obstacle for police officers, however, recognition of the benefits of disclosure is a good first step directed towards overcoming such challenges. This study revealed how disclosure of stress leads to positive outcomes, such as decreased anxiety, emotional relief, and better relationships.

Additionally, the participants of the study revealed external stressors as being most impactful. Such stress was attributed by many participants to situations they face

while on the job. For example, both P1 and P3 discussed the emotional toll of domestic disputes as being most impactful. P2 mentioned the pressures associated with addressing large, volatile crowds as being influential to his behavior during such incidents. Such situations are not unique to these particular officers as those in the field are exposed to these circumstances routinely. This study played a pivotal role in revealing external stressors as considerably impactful during the first year of police work emphasizing the importance of early interventions directed toward alleviating stress in police officers. Combine this information with the disclosure of coping strategies that were revealed as being both adaptive as well as maladaptive, the study stresses that a closer examination of current practices associated with stress prevention and reduction is needed. Positive social change has the potential to stem from such scrutiny as officers will learn early in their career how to recognize and adapt to stress enhancing job performance, lowering suicide rates among police personnel, and reducing the likelihood of mental illness. These benefits have the potential to trickle down to the community in the form of better relationships and interactions between police officers and the public.

### **Methodological Implications**

In Chapter 2, this researcher described a lack of research dedicated to examining the intricacies of stress and coping in the first year of police work. With that said, the methodology used for this research would be considered firsts in terms of studying the phenomenon during this critical period in the development of a police officer. The tool used for data collection, a semi-structured interview, was valuable in exploring the intricate details of the shared experiences of participants while obtaining an extensive

foundation of information that could be used during data analysis. Also, the modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method used for this phenomenological study proved to accomplish the goal of data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Consequently, the lived experiences of the five participants were described thoroughly. As a result of these tools, the data collection and analysis processes were able to provide readers with a substantial description and, ultimately, an overall better understanding of how officers experience and cope with stress in the first year of police work.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Originally, Thelen prosed the dynamics systems approach as a means of examining and understanding cognitive development, but since its development, this theory has been used in several alternative applications as a means of studying growth in other domains (i.e., psychosocial, physical, etc.; Salvatore et al., 2015). At the time of this writing, the dynamic systems approach has yet to be applied to law enforcement populations. As mentioned in previous sections this approach supported the findings as the themes revealed suggested that an officer's experience of and response to stress is influenced by various contextual variables occurring at once. For example, P3's experience, and those coping strategies that developed, were highly influenced by organizational expectations, her responsibilities as a single mother, and her financial struggles which exacerbated her work-related stress and hindered her ability to adapt to stress. Witnessing these variables in action also provides a better understanding of Thelen's dynamic systems theory and supports its utility in examining features of psychology other than the cognitive. Without a dynamic system perspective, the field is

limited in its understanding of how the many contextual variables occurring at the same time impact the experiences of stress and those behaviors that arise to address those pressures.

### **Conclusion**

Implementation of the phenomenological approach to research focuses on how a phenomenon is experienced by a sample of individuals that represents a larger population, while also seeking to define and clarify the meanings of that group's shared experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). For this reason, the phenomenological design was selected as a means of exploring how officers in their first year of police work experience stress and identifying the coping skills used in this context. The goal of the study was to address a gap in the literature related to stress explored through the eyes of an officer in their first year of policing. The study's findings corroborated what had already been established in the peer-reviewed literature associated with stress coping strategies in law enforcement, including the influence of external stressors and emotion-focused coping (Stratton, 1977; Billings & Moos, 1984; Headey & Wearing, 1990; Beehr, Johnson, & Nieva, 1995; Rajeswari & Chalam, 2018 ). Additionally, the findings illustrated an avoidance to disclose stress and its impact supporting the presence of mental health stigma associated with law enforcement; an idea also consistent with prior literature (Stuart, 2017). Through an in-depth interview process, the participants revealed valuable insights into their lived experiences. These revelations resulted in a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (i.e., police stress) through the eyes of a first-year officer and the development of coping strategies they implemented during that period.

The draw to the field of law enforcement was a common denominator amongst all participants, as expressed by their desire to help people, to make a difference, and to explore an exciting career choice. With that said, these officers were not swayed by the potential to be exposed to the many challenging situations that result in distress. Many participants cited examples of these situations reporting that, when exposed to these challenges, they had been confronted with the physical and emotional effects of stress. Such instances were reported as resulting from calls for services (e.g., domestic disputes, child abuse/endangerment, etc.). A few participants acknowledged the impact of major life events (e.g., having a child, moving in with a significant other, etc.). Others discussed the influence of organizational factors (e.g., long hours, scheduling issues, etc.) that perpetuated stress. For most participants, this was the first time they had been exposed to such situations and they reported being ill-prepared for dealing with the stress they had been exposed at the time the events have taken place. The external stressors at work would prove impactful both on and off the job.

The perspectives communicated by participants support the presence of a mental health stigma among law enforcement. All participants described some sort of hesitance to discuss the emotional impact of their job to those individuals subject to the same experiences and often influenced in the same manner. Participants often considered the disclosure of stress from the perspective of other law enforcement personnel communicating they would be judged or criticized as a result. While exploring this stigma through the assessment of police officers, Stuart (2017) stated “by asking respondents what they think “most people” believe, it is possible to tap deep, culturally

held attitudes” (p. 20). Even in their first year of police work participants were well aware of the stigma associated with mental health which would impact those methods, or lack thereof, implemented to address their stress. Limitations on supervision and peer assistance in addressing the emotional toll of the job led participants to rely on other coping strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive.

When faced with stressors all participants turned towards some form of emotion-based coping. Many of these individuals recognized that they lacked means of coping before becoming a police officer mainly because they never felt stress other than those daily hassles that had arisen. Their introduction into law enforcement was the first time they began to notice the formation of coping strategies many of which would focus more on the emotions that resulted from the situations rather than the problems encompassed by that event. As participants were confronted by these situations, many of which considered external stressors discussed in the previous section, these individuals reported engaging in actions such as eating, drinking, and avoidance, to mention a few, more than they did before becoming a police officer. Some participants reported the reliance on such measures as being in access, even unhealthy.

The participants also reported other methods of emotion-focused coping as being beneficial to their experiences with stress. These strategies were used as a means of adapting to a series of stressful situations they were being introduced to and they considered to be unique to the field of law enforcement. For example, the group of emotion-focused coping also included adaptive strategies such as exercise, emotional disclosure, and social support. Some participants reported visiting with their families

more often and disclosing their stress to those close to them (e.g., parent, significant others, etc.). Others conveyed that they turned towards exercise more often as a means of coping with the pressures associated with police work. These strategies, both adaptive as well as the aforementioned maladaptive, represent coping directed towards addressing the participant's emotional state and efforts to manage stress caused by, in most cases, the external stressors that are accompanied by law enforcement.

Even though participants reported emotional disclosure to those close to them as an adaptive coping strategy, these individuals described an avoidance or reluctance to disclose their stress to other police officers. For example, many participants stated that they would not disclose their stress, or its impact, to their fellow officers or supervisors because they did not know those individuals well enough and, therefore, were concerned about their response to such disclosure. Some feared judgment or even career-ending repercussions. As a single parent who leaves her son at home for extended periods, P3 stated that she avoided discussing the stress that she was confronted with because she was afraid to appear weak or compromised. She also feared that her supervisors would dismiss her from her position if her stress was noticed. The consensus was that the participants believed emotional disclosure to other law enforcement personnel to be a negative strategy yielding career impacting consequences. In closing, this phenomenological study effectively accomplished its objective by exploring the deeper meanings of the shared experience of participants. This resulted in more substantial insight into the essence of those experiences reported by this group of police officers. This study sought to understand how stress is experienced in the first year of police work

and how coping strategies developed by these officers, resulting in a deeper understanding of the external stressors they are exposed to and the emotion-focused coping strategies often implemented. The knowledge acquired through this study will contribute to the body of literature regarding how police officers experience and cope with stress filling a gap that existed addressing how the phenomenon manifests in the first year of policing (Abdollahi, 2002; Rajeswari & Chalam, 2018). The dynamic systems approach to development played a significant role in demonstrating how contextual factors influenced those experiences reported by participants ultimately lending credence to the theory's utility when being applied to law enforcement populations. The implications for the study's findings are vast, most noteworthy being the potential to improve upon the treatment, intervention, and prevention strategies which will, ultimately, promote career lasting benefits to the field of law enforcement.



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## Appendix A: Letter to Participant

## Letter to Participant

Name of Participant  
Address

Date:

Dear (Name),

My name is Scott David Eaton and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting dissertation research on the perceptions of stress and those coping strategies employed within the first year of police work. There are a vast number of studies detailing the impact of stress on personality, traits, work performance, and the development of maladaptive behaviors. What is not known, however, is how officers in their first year of police work experience/perceive stress and utilize coping skills. This research will provide insight into what these officers experience, in terms of stress, during that critical period.

I realize that your time is important to you and I appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. In order to fully understand your experience, I would like to invite you to meet me for an interview that would last approximately one hour. Meetings can be held at a private conference/meeting room of a public setting (e.g., library) of your choosing and will not require you to do anything that you do not feel comfortable doing. The meetings are designed to simply get to know you and learn about your experience of being an officer completing your first year of police work. All information gathered during our meeting will be kept strictly confidential.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time that we can meet. My telephone number is [redacted]. You can also email me at [scott.eaton@waldenu.edu](mailto:scott.eaton@waldenu.edu).

I look forward to hearing from you.

Scott David Eaton  
Doctoral Candidate  
Walden University

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

## Interview Protocol

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Whether your motives have changed or remained the same, describe your reasons for becoming a police officer.
2. How would you have defined stress prior to becoming a police officer?
  - a. How has your definition changed within your first as a police officer?
3. How do you cope with stress as an officer currently engaged in or in the process of completing their first year of police work?
4. How does being a police officer influence how you address stressful situations?
5. If you have not implemented specific coping strategies, describe your reasons for not addressing your stress.
6. Describe your emotional response(s) attributed to the pressures of being a police officer.
  - a. How are these responses reflected in your behavior both during work and outside of work?

7. Describe your emotions after your fellow officers learned of your stress and your responses to stress.
8. Recall a stressful event encountered during your first year of police work related to your duties as an officer, and tell me how you typically react to the situation.
  - a. How do you manage that discomfort?
9. Describe the most challenging aspect of encountering stress as a police officer.
10. Describe circumstances in which you conscientiously altered your behavior so as not to appear stressed in front of other police officers.
  - a. How does that behavior present with family, friends, etc.?
11. During your first year employed as a police officer, who knew or suspected your stress?
  - a. Describe your experience with how you are treated by these individuals.
12. Describe your experiences when interacting with other officers who are exhibiting signs of stress or are currently experiencing a stressful situation.

## Appendix C: Categories and Themes

Category	Themes
Calls for service	External stressors
Major life events	
Organizational factors	
Disclosure to fellow officers	Mental health stigmatization
Disclosure to supervisors	
Reactions to disclosure or lack thereof	
Emotional disclosure	Emotion-focused coping
Exercise	
Avoidance/Distancing	
Drinking/Eating	
Prayer/Meditation	

## Appendix D: Peer Review Statement of Confidentiality

## Peer Review Statement of Confidentiality

## Perceptions of Stress and Coping Strategies in First Year of Police Work

## Walden University

As a reviewer of this project, I understand that the duty of confidentiality prohibits me from purposefully disclosing confidential information and requires me to act with due care in order to avoid the inadvertent disclosure of confidential information. Confidential information includes but is not limited to the identity of subjects, their interview responses, and all other proprietary information submitted by them.

I understand that this duty extends beyond the period of time during which I serve as a reviewer for this study. As such, confidentiality will apply to information and materials to which I had access during my time as a reviewer.

I agree to take all reasonable steps to ensure that no use by me, or by any third parties, shall be made of the study's confidential material. Further, I agree to return to Scott David Eaton all documentation I received for the purpose of review and not to retain any copies of such documentation.

I understand that any deviation from the code of confidentiality may be grounds for immediate dismissal as a peer reviewer and possible legal action.

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and received answers. I will comply with the standards outlined in this confidentiality statement.

Printed Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Reviewed and Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_