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Barriers that Prevent Officers from Seeking Mental Health Support

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Jessica Jude Ziegler

MA, Saint Leo University, 2015

BS, Saint Leo University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Law enforcement officers have hidden their inability to cope with the exposure to trauma and occupational stress endemic to the profession. This particular community continues to suffer because of the stigma associated with seeking mental health and stress management. The problem this study addressed are factors embedded within police culture that deter officers working in the Tampa Bay region from help-seeking behaviors. There is a critical need to evaluate officers' perceptions in order to provide lifesaving tools that can ultimately mitigate police suicide. Participants were ten police officers from six different agencies located within the Tampa Bay region. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews focusing on the officers' lived experiences and perceptions. Colaizzi's six-step process guided data analysis. Six themes emerged from analysis: fear/ anger, distrust/misunderstanding, helplessness/ hopelessness, fatigue, isolation, and relevance. Police cultural and organizational barriers were found to be the main obstacle to seeking out psychological assistance. A key recommendation is to build strong relationships between officers and leadership to bridge the trust gap between field officers and management, which is crucial to break stigma associated with mental health support by redefining police culture. Mandating training through adequate policies and procedures can aid newly appointed officers and ultimately mitigate the epidemic of police suicide. This study contributes to positive social change by providing insights regarding negative perceptions which creates barriers and prevents officers from seeking mental health support.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my beloved mother, Ana Virgilia Guide de Pierce. My mama was my rock, strength, and compass. She never allowed me to lose my way and give up on my passion. I cannot say enough about my Daddy, Jerry D. Pierce, the one person in the world that always reminded me I am not alone. I also want to thank my loving husband, Dennis James Ziegler, who has always been in my corner and has supported me through thick and thin. I also need to give my Chewy, my faithful companion who slept at my feet all night while I typed, all my love. I am so grateful to Tara Winthrop, who pushed me to take a leap of faith and took a gamble on me. I am blessed to have good people in my corner: Nellie Chambers, Kristin Jackson, Stephanie Jetter, Jackie Masotto, Lauren Pantoja, Cory Sommers, and Terry Yohn. Finally, I want to dedicate this work to the men and women of my law enforcement family. For far too long we have suffered in silence too fearful to ask for help and have lost the battle, Deputy April Rodriquez (EOW 2-27-19) and Deputy Conor Schemelter (EOW 09-28-19). God's speed my warriors without your courage society would be without Guardian Angels.

Acknowledgments

I want to take a moment to thank Dr. Robert Spivey and Dr. Lori Salgado for agreeing to guide me through this path. I have no words to express my everlasting gratitude toward you. Without your patience and encouragement, I would have never pushed to the top of my personal Mount Everest. The doctoral process is difficult, made even more challenging by taking on not only my bold personality but also my topic choice, law enforcement and police suicide. While completing this work, my agency experienced one of its darkest hours due to the death of a deputy by her own hands. Deputy Sheriff April Rodriguez took her life after a long battle with her demons. She leaves behind a husband, three children, and several unanswered questions.

The hope is for this work to help the next generation of crime fighters to be better prepared to deal with the stress, and trauma brought on by their chosen occupation. The police culture and organization will need to challenge themselves to be human beings rather than superheroes. Perhaps then law enforcement organizations will stop silently burring their officers who surrender to the pain unable to find the strength to continue fighting, thus, killing themselves.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Although studies have been conducted regarding the exposure of trauma, stress, and critical incidents as they relate to the law enforcement profession, issues continue to affect this particular population. Psychological trauma in police officers is attributed to routine stressors as well as potentially distressing events in the line of duty (Tuttle et al., 2018). Such trauma may include disruptions involving control of one's environment, caring for others, and having a purpose for life as well as the world at large (Flannery, 2015). This can create an environment that is based on anxiety, stress, uncertainty, and hopelessness.

Police officers are required to face a variety of unknown situations that may negatively impact their mental and physical health as well as their career. Stress and exposure to trauma on officers is likely to promote unhealthy coping mechanisms which allow them to compartmentalize and repress their emotions (Chan, 1996). Unhealthy coping strategies can promote reckless and self-harming behaviors creating disruption in terms of psychological resilience (Das et al., 2018). De Terte al. (2014) conducted a study which reported 40 percent of police officers surveyed reported they experienced divorce, alcoholism, suicide, and other emotional and health issues, making this segment of population at a higher risk when compared to other segments of society.

An epidemic is emerging involving police officers committing suicide rather than seeking stress management help (Crosbie, 2018). The stigma associated with requesting mental health assistance often prevents officers from getting the support they need (Karaffa & Koch, 2015). Karaffa and Koch (2015) said officer self-stigma is a

catalyst that is influenced by police culture. Attitudes of police officers have a direct correlation with organizational and operational sources.

No one is built to handle exposure to daily stressors of dealing with a hostile public environment. Law enforcement officers are part of a subculture which discourages them from seeking emotional and mental health assistance for fear that admitting they need help makes them appear weak or vulnerable (Charles et al., 2007; Rouse et al., 2015). There are also myths that keep police officers from accessing resources that could prolong their careers, mental and physical health, and life, because they are afraid to lose the confidence of their peers, department, and the public.

Fear and anxiety about losing their positions means some officers go to extremes to cover up their need for treatment (Violanti et al., 2015). As a result, in the United States the number of police suicides annually exceeds traffic crashes and homicides (Graves et al., 2018), making suicide the number one killer of law enforcement officers. The law enforcement culture and organization continue to ignore it with grave consequences. Police departments are aware that officers fear seeking mental health and stress management assistance. (Golembienwski, 1992). Thus, such organizations have implemented steps to encourage officers to address the barriers that prevent them from asking for stress management help.

Background

The law enforcement occupation is a highly stressful profession, and police officers are frequently exposed to a multitude of stressors. The organizational culture of law enforcement includes demands of the job and performance. There are many reasons

why officers are always on edge. Law enforcement agents are exposed to violence, confrontations, and traumatic incidents (Golembienwski, 1992). In addition, technological advances such as cell phone cameras allow citizens to record all police interactions, which keeps officers on high alert, since their encounters with the public can be continuously scrutinized (Grady et al., 2016), thus contributing to stress levels felt by officers as well as organizational leadership.

Issues involving police culture are causing law enforcement leadership in the state of Florida to address underreported problems associated with occupational stress, PTSD, and police suicide. From 2008 through 2012, the number of police officers who killed themselves was doubled compared to the number of officers killed by felons (Rouse et al., 2015). Moreover, in California, Florida, New York, and Texas, police officers are at higher risk of suicide than any other profession (Hillard, 2019).

Fear and stigma along with negative peer reactions and career ramifications discourage at-risk officers from seeking help (Caelli et al., 2003). Currently, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement does not provide policies or mandate training to address barriers that prevent officers from seeking mental support associated with prolonged exposure to trauma. Therefore, first responders have been reported to turn toward self-destructive behaviors that lead them to contemplate suicide (Emmanuel et al., 2020; Golembienwski, 1992). This study will examine and focus on police officers working in the Tampa Bay region.

Problem Statement

There is a uniquely challenging landscape for law enforcement whose customs, regulations, and rules contain implications that affect the mental and emotional state of each officer. A problem exists in that factors which deter police officers from help-seeking are embedded in the professional culture of the force, including normalizing implications of stress and trauma, and self-censorship from discussing this sensitive topic. Although there has been research conducted on the topic of mental health stigma among law enforcement officers and its impact on suicide among them there is a gap in the literature regarding barriers that discourage officers from seeking out stress management support, ultimately preventing symptoms that may lead to suicide.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore barriers that inhibit police officers working in the Tampa Bay region from seeking help for stress management and exposure to trauma, as well as PTSD interventions ultimately designed to prevent police suicide. The study's purpose was to investigate the relationship between stigma, culture, and the police organization's impact on the mental health of law enforcement officers working in the Tampa Bay region. Patrol officers, including supervisors and training personnel, were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews regarding barriers that prevent them from seeking mental health help. The focus of the study was to understand cultural and organizational issues enabled by policies, procedures, and practices that may lead to police suicide. In-depth one-on-one interviews consisted of open-ended questions to gauge officers' knowledge and perspectives regarding police suicide.

Research Questions

RQ: How do police officers in the Tampa Bay region describe cultural and organizational barriers that inhibit them from seeking stress management, trauma, and PTSD interventions designed to avert police suicide?

Three sub questions were addressed:

SQ1: How do officers describe strengths and weaknesses of their departments' policies and procedures related to employee assistance programs?

SQ2: How do officers describe their personal performance as it relates to policies and procedures implemented by agencies to address occupational stress?

SQ3: What are officers' recommendations for improving policies and procedures regarding employee assistance programs that might deter officers from suicide ideation?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework selected for this study is the policy feedback theory (PFT). The PFT involves political behavior as well as policy-making processes (Beland, 2010). The basis of this theory is processes for analyzing policymaking and undergoing continual evolution. This theory has been used to evaluate different aspects of public assistance programs and is often associated with policy analysis and evaluating existing policies that target social problems and in most cases are also influenced by policy deficiencies (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018). Thus, the PFT was an important tool to address changes in police cultures and organizations. Pierson (1992) said public policies are a

"path dependent process whereby each step along a policy pathway makes it increasingly difficult to reverse course" (p. 105-106).

This theory involves the creation of agency policies, including allocation of funding and resources to help organize, prioritize, and provide advantages for specific groups (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018). The rate of suicide among police officers keeps rising each year and has sparked an interest within law enforcement leadership to promote mental health services. However, there are barriers including cultural and organizational stigma that prevent officers from seeking mental health relief. The PFT was an important tool for organizations that are seeking to change police culture in order to create an atmosphere that encourages police officers to seek mental health aid. This theory was used to provide a detail-oriented platform that focuses on ideas, actors, and networks involving mental and emotional assistance programs.

Nature of the Study

The study was completed using a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach. A qualitative design was determined to be the most appropriate approach for this study since it was essential to hear from the officers' perspective and face-to-face interviews with the selected population of police officers working in the Tampa Bay region. The goal was to understand police officers' perspectives regarding barriers that prevent them from seeking psychological services. This qualitative study allowed for the exploration of cultures and organizations that discourage officers from seeking assistance and stress management. Data were analyzed using a modification of Colaizzi's method for data analysis.

Definition of Terms

Anxiety: A person's ability to cope with or respond to threatening situations (Swanson, 2008), resulting in emotions such as weariness and tenseness (Grossman, 2009).

Coping: Is the conscious and unconscious efforts made individuals to deal with demands, problems and reduce stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Exposure to trauma: Incidents that put the first responder at risk of death or harm as well as witnessing or fearing such incidents (Haugen et al., 2012).

Occupational Stress: Stress caused through the job responsibilities, duties, and associations with the policies and procedures of the agencies (Arial et al., 2009).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Illness that arises after a person is exposed to a carrying ordeal involving potential or physical harm (Wang et al., 2010).

Stigma: A mark of disgrace or shame when seeking mental help (Hillard, 2019).

Stress: Either a psychological or physical reaction of the body when one must adjust to real or perceived circumstances (Gore & Pattavina, 2004).

Stress management: A technique or strategy used to cope with and manage stress (Caracota Dimitriu & Mitovski, 2014).

Stressors: Adverse experiences that increase stress for individuals (Molines et al., 2017).

Suicide: Death resulting from direct or indirect acts that the individual believe will produce their death (Durkeheim, 1951).

Traumatic Event: An impactful, sudden, and significant event outside the range of the ordinary human experience (McNabb, 2013).

Assumptions

An assumption associated with qualitative phenomenological designs is than individual descriptions and general or universal meanings are derived based on the structure of each experience (Moustakas, 1994). Based on the focus of the current study, I assumed that members of the police department with 1 year or more of experience in the department have been exposed to trauma and elevated stress levels during their career. I also assumed that police officers were willing to participate on a volunteer basis because this research potentially could be beneficial in terms of their self-care. Due to the nature of this study and my application of anonymous tools, I assumed that police officers were more likely to admit they had been affected by constant exposure to trauma and stressful incidents.

Scope and Delimitations of Study

This qualitative study was based on obtaining a better understanding of barriers that prevent officers from seeking mental health assistance. Moreover, I examined police agencies that discourage officers from asking for stress management support. For this study, I interviewed approximately 10 active members of police and sheriff offices from six agencies within the Tampa Bay region in order to obtain a comprehensive description of common shared experiences of all participants.

There is potential for the research in this study to be transferable to other populations. Transferability involves the researcher's responsibility to provide sufficient

information that establishes similarities between the case and case findings that might provide for comparisons in other contexts (Nestor & Schutt, 2018). This framework could be applicable not only to the police community, but all first responders. It might also be helpful for family members and support systems who are affected by psychological and emotional effects as well as stress of police officer experiences.

Limitations

This research project had certain limitations that affected the overall process. The officers who participated in the interview process felt free to participate. If officers did not feel comfortable speaking about the subject of police suicide or believed that their experiences were not valid and not needed for this type of study, this could limit the quality of data.

Police officers may have been reluctant to acknowledge the long-term effects of the exposure to trauma and how it affects them. Officer's perception, experience, and apprehensions may have altered how they responded to questions. Data collected for this study came from police officers who may or may not have admitted they have been exposed to traumatic, violent, or critical incidents. They may also have been concerned that their privacy and anonymity will not be protected during and after this study was completed.

Significance of the Study

This research involved addressing a gap in literature regarding the barriers that prevent law enforcement officers from seeking emotional and mental health assistance. Another significant aspect of this study was that it might provide information regarding

why law enforcement officers are reluctant to seek mental health assistance and suffer from a lack of stress management services. Police officers are more likely to be affected by PTSD after they are exposed to death, the threat of death, or adverse events (Faust & Ven, 2014). Although there are some services available to police personnel in the Tampa Bay region, officers continue to suffer because of the stigma associated with seeking out mental health services. This research involved focusing on perceptions of current officers working in the Tampa Bay region. Promoting the idea that police officers are not alone and may be a crucial step forward in effecting changes in order to obtain help for officers. Experienced officers may understand that there is a need to break to the stigma associated with mental and emotional support and ultimately decrease the number of suicides within this community. Furthermore, the commitment of seasoned officers to share their perceptions may contribute to creation of policies and procedures encouraging officers to seek out assistance early in their careers, prompt self-care, and lead to better understanding among police leadership that both the police culture and organization need to work together to change negative perception regarding mental health support.

Social Change

There is evidence that law enforcement duties are stressful, and continuous stress adversely affects the mental and physical health of police officers. Understanding effects as well as symptoms of stress, trauma, and PTSD will assist police officers in terms of implementing critical and healthy coping skills that should deter them from committing suicide. Positive social change may also occur due to law enforcement agencies

integrating new policies and procedures regarding stress management and ensuring that officers are not penalized for seeking assistance.

Summary

Police culture and organization are extremely secretive and guarded. It is their duty to serve and protect society without questioning the cost. Contributing to the nature of the occupation are additional stressors such as public opinion that weight heavily on police officers and the manner in which they conduct themselves. Such stressors and negative influences contribute to personal and societal damage (Biggs et al., 2014). However, individuals outside of the police community are often naïve regarding the actual stress and fears that frontline police officers encounter on a daily basis. Failure to properly manage such stressors could lead officers to express maladjusted coping behaviors and ultimately lead to suicide. The focus of this chapter was to introduce the background of this qualitative study. Understanding the effects of the exposure of trauma, stress, anxiety, and symptoms of PTSD as it leads police officers to contemplate suicide is critical to the law enforcement community in the Tampa Bay region. Chapter 2 includes a review of literature regarding police culture and organization as well as police officers' exposure to traumatic and critical incidents and the possible results that may occur when the officer fears asking for a mental and emotional support.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Police officers are expected to answer calls for service and make decisions that are often brought into question. Such situations produce both personal and organizational stress. Stressors associated with this profession educe adverse emotional, mental, and physical effects when police officers fail to manage emotions and turn to maladaptive coping techniques (Steinkopt et al., 2018; Violanti et al., 2015; de Terte et al., 2014). The fact that police officers begin their careers in excellent physical and mental health but retire early or die from job-related stress disorders demonstrates continuous pressure they experience (Waters & Ussery, 2007). There are a number of risk factors associated with police work. Police culture emphasizes both control and strength which not only increases despair among some officers but promotes the stigma involving mental health support.

The nature of police work allows officers to be exposed to a tremendous level of trauma and critical incidents that lead officers to suffer effects which include depression, isolation, post-traumatic stress, and suicide. According to Violanti (1995), a sense of hopelessness may be felt by police officers due to the futility of their work as well as work-related stress. Types of work-related exposure experienced by law enforcement officers may lead to the development of PTSD symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2022a). The law enforcement profession has long been recognized as a vulnerable population based on their work environment, which consists of long-term, violent, toxic, and critical incidents. Therefore, the implication is that professional life of

officers is considered to be more traumatic than soldiers sent into war zones (O'Hara et al., 2016). Nonetheless, there are police departments in various states that fail to recognize the need for stress management training. This training is necessary to educate officers to recognize the necessity of post-traumatic management and suicide prevention.

PTSD concerns have long been an issue that affects first responders. There are a variety of multifaceted stressors involving of police work. Exposing officers to critical incidents and dangerous situations threatens both administrative leadership as well as policies of law enforcement agencies (Rouse et al., 2015). Based on continuous amounts of tension over time, police officers define their work experience and related circumstances as stressful and traumatic due to their constant exposure to hostility and violence.

Law enforcement officers are not properly trained to understand and recognize signs of stress, exposure to trauma, and PTSD within themselves. These symptoms that can lead officers to struggle with both mental and physical ailments in silence. Depression and PTSD symptoms as well as self-medication or alcohol abuse are commonly comorbid in populations exposed to trauma such as police officers, and have frequently been associated with suicidality in other trauma-exposed populations (Caelli et al., 2003; Golembienwski, 1992;; Possemato et al., 2015; Read et al., 2014).

Literature Search Strategies

The literature review consisted of peer-reviewed scholarly articles I accessed using Walden University Library. The databases that I used were EBSCOHost, ProQuest,

ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, and ProQuest Central. I also used Google and Google Scholar via the Walden University library.

Keywords

The keywords that I used in databases were: *occupational stress and police, police post-traumatic stress disorder, burnout, stigma, law enforcement traumatic events, police stress management training, police culture and stigma, negative coping mechanisms reported by law enforcement officers, compassion fatigue, critical incidents training, peer support, mental health, police wellness, barriers, stigma, police resiliency programs, police culture,* and *police suicide.*

Theoretical Foundation

The application of the PFT brings involves the policy process often referred to as feedback effects. Feedback effects involve insights regarding the progress of policy and policymakers who correct and improve policies (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018). As such, the PFT allows participants to provide the responses and forms the basis for allowing shifts in police culture and organization providing changes for officers regarding mental and emotional health for law enforcement officers. Although the PFT involves social policies, it evolved and has been used to address other policies involving criminal justice (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018). Since the PFT is used for other policy domains such as social services and policy changes it became clear it was suitable for this study.

According to Wieble and Sabatier (2017b), public policy is driven by objective data-based considerations in which resources are allocated based on the greatest positive impact on social welfare. So public policies may alter in terms of the extent to which they

stimulate social movement and goals groups pursue. The PFT involves specific groups, networks, and actors. Within the context of this study, the actors were identified as police officers working in the Tampa Bay region. According to Cairney and Heikkila (2014), when actors are active participants in the policy process, policies can highlight the importance of rights to specific groups. Networks create opportunities for law enforcement organizations to mobilize support that protects them. As such, the PFT can be used to create a shift within police culture based on both organizational and provincial changes for police officers regarding mental health support.

Although resistance to change is an issue at the core of many organizations, this is a true dominant factor among police agencies. Lorsch and McTague (2016) said when attempting to bring cultural transformation, one should avoid fixing the culture and rather allow new processes and strategies to create a new culture for members of organizations. Therefore, it was prudent to create an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality for participants feel comfortable to address the barriers and stigma through policy changes that encourage officers to seek mental health support services.

<div align="center">**Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**</div>

Types of Stress Faced by Police Officers

The police profession is one of the most stressful and dangerous work fields within the United States (Gary Howard et al., 2004; Harpold & Feemster, 2002; Liberman et al., 2002a). Law enforcement members respond to calls for service that include a tremendous number of critical incidents (Golembienwski, 1992. Police officers are expected to perform well and make split-second decisions while undergoing extreme

stress. There is an expectation from the police departments, the public, and co-workers

for police agents not only to be healthy, but also to maintain high performance in the line

of duty (Anderson & Papazoglou, 2014). This creates a strain between organizations and

officers based on roles and expectations of public safety officers.

Occupational Stress

Stress is "a relationship between an individual and the environment that is

appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his

or her well-being," (Steinkopf et al., 2018; Violanti et al., 2015; de Terte et al., 2014)),

and a career in law enforcement brings forward a number of occupational stressors. There

are a number of studies that have identified various aspects of a police career that may

lead to burnout, alcohol and substance abuse, and various health related issues. As a

profession, law enforcement is one of the most stressful as well as dangerous (Magnusson

Hanson et al., 2008), and it seeks out highly fit, healthy, and emotionally stable

individuals at the start of their career. However, eventually those same officers obtain an

early retirement or die from the symptoms associated with stress (Violanti, 1995). The

law enforcement environment repeatedly calls for officers to be placed in danger, and

unexpected situations.

According to Lees et al., (2019) the workplace health is influenced by the

changing atmosphere and demands of the job of a first responder. Moreover, the practical

definition of occupation stress occurs when the requirements of the job become

physically and emotionally harmful as the stress surpasses the capabilities, resources, and

or needs of the worker (Higgitt, 2006). There are numerous law enforcement agencies

throughout the United States that operate their departments based on a bureaucratic model of leadership, thereby, maintaining a culture of extreme formality that is stratified based on rank and status as well as procedures and regulations that are the core aspects of the everyday operations (Violanti, 1995). Such systems are based on paramilitary doctrines that link military boot camp and police academy training to the ideal where officers are "not paid to think, but follow orders" (Wester, & Lyubelsky, 2005, p. 54). Police occupational stress includes both external and internal stimuli. An example of occupational stress may include additional scrutiny from a supervisor, traffic and distance from call to call, and responding to officers' in need of aid calls. While internal stimuli includes self-doubt, fear, and anger (Griffin & Sun, 2017).

Due to the nature of police work, the officer may experience both external and internal stimuli multiple times during the course of a shift. The police work is one of the few professions where officers are repeatedly placed in harm's way. Research illustrates that the strains from first responder's work demands lead to the development of new mental health conditions and/or exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions (Acquadro Maran et al., 2015; Stellman et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2010). Lack of understanding and unawareness of stress symptoms opens the possibility that police agents will lean towards self-harming behaviors rather than seeking healthier options.

Operational Stress

There are a number of stressors that are specifically related to operational stress. For instance, patrol officers may have a distinct set of operational stressors compared to detectives. Operational stress emerges from an officer's exposure to a multitude of

stressors as well as potential traumatic incidents that are experienced within the line of duty (Arensman et al., 2016). Such types of mental-health-related issues are often known as operational stress injuries (Milliard, 2020, p. 21).

Operational Stress Injuries (OSIs) is a category that was first introduced by the military to provide an explanation which normalizes and validates the psychologically affected personnel affected by the nature of their work. Moreover, these effects have been associated with mental health issues such as: depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Historically, this meaning has expanded to be similar to a physical injury rather than a diagnosis of mental illness.

Organizational Stress

The tension generated from the characteristics within the workplace are commonly described as organizational stress. Stressors of the organization are often the result of ineffective leadership, favoritism within the promotional processes, lack of staffing, and misunderstandings (Milliard, 2020). Thus, the make-up of the organizational culture poses significant challenges for law enforcement officers (Griffiths & Murphy, 2016). In fact, police personnel rank organizational stress as one of their major sources of anxiety (Weinberg et al., 2015).

Violanti and Aron (1995) identified four factors within a police organization that cause stress; (a) an authoritarian structure, (b) lack of participation in decisions affecting daily work tasks, (c) lack of administrative support, and (d) unfair discipline (p.160-161). Organizational factors rather than the danger of an unpredictable encounter produces a higher level of stress among police officers. Although stress is present in everyone's life,

there is a higher amplification among police officers due to the nature and culture of the job.

Police Culture

Police culture is defined as a set of norms, values and shared perceptions that guide an officer and his/her behaviors (Demirkol & Nalla, 2019). Workman-Stark (2017) added that one significant concept of police culture is a sense of duty, independence, and toughness that shields the officer during their off-duty time. Society often associates police culture with negative aspects such as: suspicion, cynicism, prejudice, distrust, and abuse (Demirkol & Nalla, 2019). Crank (2014) "culture is an enigma, a mysterious condensation of unity that prevails among all police agencies" (p. 339). The unity among police officers stems from their unit and the nature of the work that is a combination of authority and close bonds among comrades. Loyalty and safety are inseparable issues when speaking about police officers who depend solely on one another to survive street encounters and aid calls. To survive the encroachment of infinite darkness, officers rely on their special skills and iconic common sense.

Police officers form part of an institution that has been established for the purpose of social control and is responsible for identifying and seizing law violators (Crank, 2014). Danger is a poorly understood phenomenon among police officers (p. 155). Police work is unpredictable and it is this uncertainty that sharpens the officer's skills and promotes social isolation (Fox & Holt, 2018). However, one of most powerful aesthetics of cop culture is based on the sense of solidarity shared by officers. Officers often display

an extreme level of solidarity which binds them (Christopher et al., 2015; Manning, 2001) into a culture while also segregating them from the rest of society.

The high level of solidarity and isolation has produced an important ideological end where police officers see themselves not as a selfish actor, rather a group struggling for a higher purpose (Crank, 2014). On its surface, the atmosphere surrounding officers entices them to believe that they are labeled as outsiders. As outsiders, officers tend to develop a perception focused on an *us versus them* mentality that is a strong portrayal of police culture (Golembienwski, 1992; Pauline & Gau, 2017). Cops firmly believe that they are not liked by the general public (Manning, 2001). Thus, they hold tightly to this concept as a survival tool. The ironic connection between officers working in a dangerous environment, often in horrific ways, means the culture yields a safe haven for each police officer.

According to Chan (1996, as cited in Boivin et al., 2018) police culture should not be viewed as monolithic, and static though there is a divide between officers and the citizens that they have sworn to protect and serve. Personal experiences have been linked to perceptions regarding trust among different groups, but overall negative encounters between officers and the public seem to prevail over time (Miles-Johnson et al., 2016). Boivin et al. (2018) suggested that one significant fact regarding the element of '*us versus them*' is based on the fact that policers are authorized by law to use force when it is determined to protect lives. One of the distinctive features of police work is the application of physical force, deadly force, and injury that could be sustained by the officer while in the course of their duties (Clark & Bittner, 1972). Consequently, police

training focuses on force tactics possibly feeding the 'us versus them' mentality (Boivin et al., 2018).

Burnout

A commonly used term in the workplace is burnout. A definition provided by the American Psychological Association defines the term burnout as "characterized by emotional exhaustion, and negative attitudes and feelings toward one's co-workers and job role." (Wilson, 2011, p. 17). Burnout is described as a common psychological response to chronic occupational stress (Magnusson Hanson et al., 2008). Historically, burnout is described as having three major dimensions that include exhaustion, cynicism, and a decreased sense of accomplishments (Burke, 1994; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). Exhaustion has been identified as the core of burnout (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Emotional exhaustion arises when situations call for emotional responses that are foreign to one's emotional state. Cynicism takes place when workers are exposed to negative work interactions and such interactions provide for both distance and job dissatisfaction. A decreased sense of accomplishment is when one no longer feels validated or feels like they are making meaningful contributions in their work (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Collectively, the experiences that cause burnout are not often reported by the law enforcement community.

Burnout in Policing

The dangerous and stressful profession of police work has often been associated with burnout (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006; Moon et al., 2016). Psychological burnout has been attributed to the emotional demands that are required of police officers who

fluctuate between responding to human suffering and confronting dangers in the line of duty (Magnusson Hanson et al., 2008). Thus, burnout is commonly found among police officers.

Shift work has been identified as significant source of stress among first responders. Shift work can lead to fatigue, sleep disorders, as well as irritability that creates short tempered episodes, distractions, and health issues. In an attempt to free up time for first responders many police agencies implement extended shifts and compressed working weeks to allow time for officers to be with their families, engage in distractions, and participate in extra-curricular activities. However, it becomes difficult for officers to enjoy time off because unlike average workers shift work is not synchronized with the rest of the population (Regehr & Bobert, 2005). Collectively, shift work plays a role that affects not only an officer with a family, but also the single police officer.

The terminology burnout syndrome was first introduced by Freudenberg in 1974. He described the phenomenon as a professional exhaustion as a "state of depletion and loss of motivation accompanied by different mental and physical symptoms" (Stoyanova, & Harizanova, 2017, p. 33). Maslach defined *burnout syndrome* "-as a state of physiological, emotional and intellectual depletion characterized by chronic fatigue, a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness...-" (Stoyanova, & Harizanova, 2016, p. 33) that is developed from negative feelings towards oneself, occupation, life, and others. Work conditions and excessive and prolonged job stress levels are often attributed as the process that leads to burnout syndrome in the law enforcement profession.

There are other organizational sources of stress for law enforcement job, yet the focus is often based on the potential dangers faced by police agents. While the threat of violence is always present, the organizational stressors are common and can lead the individual to experience both the low impact and the cumulative effects of these stressors (Lanterman et al., 2010). There are detrimental impacts on an officer's emotional health as a result of work stress. One common effect has been identified as occupational burnout. Burnout refers to a state whereby an officer is prone to exhibit signs of exhaustion, cynicism, depression, avoidance, withdrawal, anxiety, and PTSD (Lanterman et al., 2010).

It has long been recognized that a common hazard among law enforcement officers revolves around the areas of occupational stress and burnout. Research has long proven that the police profession embodies unique occupational demands that cause officers to experience physiological and psychological stress which includes burnout (Griffin & Sun, 2017). Symptoms of burnout tend to be attributed to exhaustion, and correlate with symptoms of headaches, chronic fatigue, hypertension, and depression to name a few. Thus, an individual who is on a state of burnout also exhibits work behaviors that incorporate isolation, absenteeism, and intensions to quit their job (Leiter & Maslach, 2016).

Due to the nature of police environment, officers face internal and external stressors that affect them daily. Unfavorable work conditions lead to physical and mental depletions, depression, and physical illnesses that impact the employment core. Collectively, the consequences of burnout syndrome promote negative consequences that

directly and indirectly affect the police organization. Chronically stressful emotions related to alienation, burnout, and psychosomatic symptoms (Stoyanova & Harizanova, 2016) as well as dealing with hostile individuals' negatively impact the agencies and personnel.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is often found within caregiving-type professions such as the medical and human service professionals. Compassion fatigue results from the exposure or interaction with people who have been traumatized (Cocker & Joss, 2016). Individuals in service-oriented professions are often found to experience an increased risk of dealing with individuals suffering from trauma and as a result, increase their chances of exposure to compassion fatigue (Cocker & Joss, 2016). Compassion fatigue is often characterized by feelings of hopelessness, hypervigilance, and irritability (Bride & Figley, 2009). Based on the lack of social support, prior trauma, and inability to provide self-care police officers find themselves experiencing compassionate fatigue. Compassion fatigue is in essence the cost of caring for others experiencing trauma (Flannery, 2015). The cost of caring for others takes a toll both physically and emotionally (Golembienwski, 1992; Russo et al., 2020).

Compassion fatigue refers to a profound set of negative psychological symptoms that are experience as a result of providing care being exposed to trauma (Flannery, 2015). Compassion fatigue is typically conceptualized as a destruction of one's psyche (Golembienwski, 1992; Russo et al., 2020), generally associated with ongoing, and repeated exposure to trauma and traumatic events. Over time, the act of providing care

for human suffering and trauma wears down the individual's emotional and physical resilience. A caregiver's empathy and responsibility to assist others emotionally exposes them to negative side effects associated with prolonged stress and trauma (Golembienwski, 1992; Russo et al., 2020).

Compassion Fatigue Among Police Officers

The law enforcement profession often requires officers to be exposed to people who are hurt, abused, injured, or killed. Officers are regularly exposed to critical incidents that have long-lasting effects on their emotional, mental, and physical health (Crosbie, 2018). The cost of caring in police work is regarded as police compassion fatigue that has adverse effects on the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of the officer (Andersen & Papazoglou, 2014). Seeing the worst of society and caring for victims contributes to an officer's negative perceptions that adversely impacts the job performance of police officers. Police officers may struggle fighting compassionate fatigue on a personal level both physically and mentally. Officers are skilled in concealing their emotions and others may not perceive their struggle until problematic behaviors come to the surface.

Compassion fatigue can lead to numerous health symptoms and increase susceptibility to other conditions such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety disorders (Cocker & Joss, 2016). More explicitly, research indicates that compassion fatigue particularly affects police officers behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally (Bride & Figley, 2009). The impact of compassion fatigue can be incapacitating for the officers' health and wellbeing if left unaddressed for extended periods of time (Golembienwski,

1992). Acquadro Maran et al. (2015) said there is a substantial risk of enduring distress and developing PTSD when officers cope through the application of maladaptive strategies. A common misconception among law enforcement officers is that mental health challenges can be addressed through maladaptive coping behaviors such as alcohol or drug abuse, gambling, and other self-destructive tactics (Acquadro Maran et al., 2015).

The impact of compassion fatigue on a police officers' health and wellbeing is likely to affect their overall performance at work. Police officers are expected to support and endure numerous incidents throughout their career. Therefore, compassion fatigue may create a ripple that includes poor health, and mental malfunction. Research has shown that those who suffer from previous mental health challenges are likely to develop PTSD (Stake, 2005). Thus, the impact of compassion fatigue may also affect the officer's family. At the end of their shift, police officers are expected to resume their roles as parents, spouses, and friends.

Officers who suffer from compassion fatigue may become cynical, apathetic, negative, and aloof which impacts interactions with family and friends (Fox & Holt, 2018). As a result, a snowball phenomenon occurs and family and personal issues may remain unresolved and continue to be aggravated over time until the family nucleus breaks down (Miller, 1991). The extant research on compassion fatigue has largely focused the literature on healthcare and mental health professions, so less is understood about the effects among law enforcement officers (Andersen & Papazoglou, 2014).

PTSD

Post-traumatic stress disorder is defined by the APA (2022b) as a psychological traumatic reaction to an event outside of the normal range of life experiences. Although PTSD is not a physical injury or disease, it is a psychiatric disorder recognized by the DSM-V that is caused by an external source (O'Hara et al., 2016). According to Faust and Ven (2014), there are a number of symptoms associated with PTSD that include the dissociative reactions or flashbacks that occur on a continuous basis beginning briefly after the critical encounter to the complete loss of consciousness. These are recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive memories. Thereby, the manifestation of PTSD includes symptoms that can lead to serious difficulties that can persist for months to years after the exposure to trauma (Milner et al., 2013).

Post-traumatic growth has been defined as symptoms that are clustered in three sections: Re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, and physical responses at create a feeling of numbness (Haugen et al., 2012). PTSD is characterized by re-living the traumatic event through intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, and psychological reactivity that revisits that critical event (Spinella, 2020). This psychological response creates difficulties at home and in the workplace. Law enforcement officers are constantly exposed to accidents, domestic violence cases, homicides, and horrific tragedies. Thus, the profession forces the personnel to work long hours with little or no time to de-stress or properly deal with critical incidents.

An individual's world assumptions are influenced by the exposure of traumatic events (Haugen et al., 2012). Law enforcement officers are surrounded by stress and

danger whose sources come with a high price tag. "Exposure to human suffering and death may result in a negative view of life, as psychological effects such as PTSD, depression, and suicide ideation (Violanti et al., 2017, p. 3). PTSD is fueled by sustained fear, and triggered by terror of a threat, and constant feeling that the officer is in harm's way.

Notably, symptoms of stress, depression, and PTSD are increased among law enforcement officers who engage in alcohol consumption while trying to cope with the stress of the profession (Martin et al., 2017). Theoretically, symptoms of PTSD and depression are particularly high as the officer drinks alcohol in excess. Therefore, alcohol abuse may increase the officer's vulnerabilities leaving them unable to cope with the emotional strain officers' encounter on a daily basis. By analyzing the variables impacting officers: alcohol abuse, symptoms of depression, and PTSD one can see that this combination of factors may indirectly elevate suicidality, including ideation and attempts (Martin et al., 2017).

Stigma

Law enforcement officers work in an environment that forces the individual to remain in an alert state from the start of their shift to the end. Police service constantly places the responding officer in harm's way requiring the police officer to respond quickly, rationally, and effectively too dangerous as well as unpredictable situations (Lynn Packard, 2008). Police officers are at an increased risk of developing physical and psychiatric health issues that are related to their service and exposure to stressful

incidents during service (Golembienwski, 1992). The stigma associated with seeking

mental and emotional assistance continues to hinder the officer's ability to ask for help.

Fear and misunderstanding creates a dark shadow that fuels the uncertainties and

mistrust in the organization. According to Russell (2017) the stigma associated with

mental health issues prevents officers from seeking assistance. Within the police ranks

stigma as "something judged by others as a sign of disgrace and something that sets a

person apart from others," (Russell, 2017, p. 7). The unique nature of the law

enforcement field and the challenges encountered by its members have led to the

understanding of a subculture i.e. "police culture." (Andersen & Papazoglou, 2014, p.

183). Moreover, this particular subculture is distinguished by rules, traditions, language,

and even secrecy. This creates an atmosphere that is based on suspicion of others outside

of the subculture, solidarity among members, and also isolation from the rest of society

(Andersen & Papazoglou, 2014).

Officers are often reluctant to admit that they are struggling and this is often more

apparent regarding mental health issues (Olson & Wasilewski, 2016). An officer's

feelings of reluctance toward mental health assistance exemplifies the dark side of police

culture where struggling with mental health is stigmatized and associated as a weakness

(Hohner, 2017; Workman-Stark, 2017). Hohner (2017) adds that officers report that they

are reluctant to seek mental health support for fear seeking aid might be negatively

perceived by management and their peers. Stigma may also keep officers from speaking

about what distresses them, because the officers do not want to be perceived as incapable

of handling their career or be relied upon as backup (Blum, 2000; Fakis et al., 2013; Kurezka, 1996; Miller, 1995).

There is a large body of empirical evidence to suggest that police officers do not properly understand the need for mental health assessments, education, and awareness in their profession. Officers avoid seeking help because they are not taught to speak about their emotions. Typically speaking about their feelings is considered a weakness, and "unacceptable" (Stuart, 2017, p. 18). A lack of understanding regarding the benefits of mental health leads the officer to believe that they will be ostracized and become "shunned" (Stuart, 2017, p. 18) by their peers, supervisors, organization, and community they serve. In addition, the police officer fears that a label of mental illness will force their agency to require them to surrender their weapon and therefore lose the ability to enforce the law.

Based on stigmas regarding mental health police officers avoid obtaining valuable treatment and support. Concerns over privacy and embarrassment continues to be a barrier that prevents first responders from facing negative psychological effects of their chosen career. Police work is unique in that the threat of bodily harm and anxiety is often activated during the course of a shift (Andersen, & Papazoglou, 2014). Sharing the burden of the job is not an easy task, but it is beneficial if it is received.

Watson and Andrews (2018) found that the greatest barrier preventing officers from seeking mental health treatment is the fear that their careers will be negatively impacted. There is an overall fear that co-workers, the agency, and public will lose confidence in the officer's performance. Crowe et al. (2017) argued that a disbelief,

discrimination, and feeling of shame are dominant emotions among first responders who are hesitant when contemplating seeking mental health support. For police officers asking for mental health assistance may lead their peers to believe that they are not pulling their weight, dodging calls, or simply not being a team player. Among police officers these fears can be perceived as a weakness as well as unreliability. These fears are contradictory to a police culture emphasis on strength, steadfastness, and commitment to performing one's duty (Bullock & Garland, 2017).

Police Suicide

A major characteristic of law enforcement includes stressful and intense events resulting in the officer experiencing episodes of PTSD, alcohol and or substance abuse, and suicide ideation (Chae & Boyle, 2013; Swatt et al., 2007; Violanti, 1995). Research has determined differential suicide risk across occupational groups (Boxer et al., 1995; Milner et al., 2013). However, there are considerable obstacles that hinder the research of police suicide (Violanti, 1995). These include misconceptions, fear, police perceptions, as well as the lack of training regarding stress, PTSD, and other symptoms that can lead the officer towards suicide. However, controversy exists surrounding the accuracy and validity of police suicide rates due to a variety of factors including underreporting, misclassification, and the lack of nationwide data source. Violanti, (1995) said there are serious suicide ideations in officers associated with separation or divorce status, job dissatisfaction, health complaints, burnout, anxiety, and depression.

Police subculture instills in its member's expectations and attitudes towards the public (Rose, 2015). This subculture promotes the ideas that revolve around ideas that

include us vs them, a code of silence, and the thin blue line. Tragically, this attitude

creates an environment that can only be described as a lonely profession (Crowe et al.,

2017). These attitudes also lead to cynicism, a lack of trust of the public, and deep

isolation. Crowe et al., (2017) said there are serious suicide ideations in officers

associated with separations or divorce status, job dissatisfaction, health complaints,

burnout, anxiety, and depression. Just as the culture brings officers together so does the

code of secrecy that is at the core among police agencies. Secrecy serves several

purposes: it protects line officers from abrupt oversight and scrutiny, it promotes

discretion, and binds officers' together (Manning, 2001). Collectively, police officers

have a profound distrust for their own organizational administration (de Terte et al.,

2014).

First responder professionals carry with them an inherited risk that poses acute

and chronic dangers to the health and safety of the officer (Stanley et al., 2016).

Additionally, shift-work associated with the occupation may affect the individual's sleep

patterns as well as family support network. Researchers contend that suicidal ideations

are also influenced by the officer's easy access to firearms which is a constant hazard to

their life (Lanterman et al., 2010). Thus, the continuous threat to life and fear of self-

mortality creates conditions that allow suicidal thoughts to emerge (Stanley et al., 2016).

Even now, when the sources of police stress are identified there are dysfunctional

responses that are associated with high-risk occupations such as police careers (Waters &

Ussery, 2007). Furthermore, Carter (2006) argued that the negative and stressful

environment that officers experience promotes feelings of cynicism and isolation from

society. Conversely, police culture encourages officers to be isolated from psychological

critical support which increases the risk of suicide (Violanti, 1995).

Violanti (1995) said law enforcement occupations confer a variety of stressful and

traumatic exposures (p. 141). Police activities are associated with suicidal behaviors, and

that the risk factors inherit in this occupation including immediate access to a weapon,

gives reason to believe that individuals in these positions are at a higher risk of suicide

(Violanti et al., 2015). However, there are few studies that have thoroughly examined

police suicide, and those that do leave a void with conflicting results.

Police Suicide Prevention

Lack of awareness about suicide awareness and associated health issues may

contribute to stigmatizing attitudes and limit the support that an individual receives

(Dagnan et al., 1998) potentially increasing the distress and level of risk (Boivin et al.,

2018). Moreover, the lack of training exacerbates (a) poor confidence and feelings of

anxiety, irritation, and fear among police officers and (b) the perception that individuals

who are dealing with mental issues are challenging, difficult to manage, and potentially

dangerous (Godfredson et al., 2011).

Suicide Prevention Strategies

O'Hara et al., (2017) said a successful prevention model should focus on training

which incorporates suicide warning signs, co-workers and family affected by suicide,

common myths regarding suicide, and all major predictors of suicidal behaviors. Suicide

prevention programs are often not found within police organizations. However, a degree

of responsibility for prevention rests with the leadership of each police organization.

Overcoming and adapting to negative experiences is a concept encapsulated through resilience (Southwick et al., 2014).

Resilience

Resilience is defined as the ability to overcome or adapt to stressful events (Southwick et al., 2014). Resiliency has been described as a process to harness resources to sustain well-being (McCanlies, et al., 2017, p. 64; Southwick et al., 2014). Resiliency resources can include hardiness, self-esteem, humor, and coping skills (Southwick et al., 2014). Aspects of resilience that protect against depression include prompting cognitive behaviors and factors of self-care, the embracing of a personal moral compass, optimism, and cognitive flexibility (Carter, 2006; Southwick et al., 2014).

The law enforcement organization can help foster resilience against the effects of stress and trauma among police officers. Resilience brings forward positivity through self-esteem, coping skills, hardiness, and social support. Debriefing is a tool that can be prevent officers from seeking out maladaptive coping responses (Farrell et al., 2020). The human effects such as coping style and social cohesion can be forced by the organization's policy and procedures to reduce stressors that police officers cannot reduce by themselves (Sledge, 1980).

Peer Support and Critical Incident Stress Management

Peer support is a one of the most commonly used intervention methods found to be helpful in reducing the potential for suicidal behavior (Violanti, 1995). Peer supporters draw from their own lived and shared experiences in an attempt to provide empathetic understanding and advice to the affected peers. Critical Incident Stress Management

system (McDonnell, 2009), CISM is a formal, structural, and confidential support system that is a response for rescue workers following a critical incident. CISM developed a small group supportive set of first responders who encountered traumatic events and are asked to recount the event. The goal of the CISM is for the officer to recount the event in safe manner with members of who have similar backgrounds.

Christopher et al. (2015) reviewed mindfulness-based on interventions among police officers and found improvements in areas that focuses on stress reduction and increased resilience. Thus, mindfulness can be used by officers to manage stress and increase their ability to deal with trauma. Chesin et al., (2016), reviewed studies on mindfulness and concluded that several interventions showed improvements in suicidal persons in areas such as; (a) attention control, (b) problem solving, and (c) altered stress responses. Therefore, some researchers suggest that mental health stigma could be reduced by normalizing symptoms and providing an explanation for them (Arensman et al., 2016; Blum, 2000).

Summary and Conclusions

There is abundant amount of literature that focuses on the traumatic effects on police officers. Of the literature that examines the experiences of police officers, stressors, and trauma are an overwhelming theme. Stress has illuminated the literature and there is much that is documented about it. However, based on the nature and secrecy of police work this population has not been forthcoming to examination.

The present study that uses an understanding of the attitudes of police officers regarding mental health may contribute to breaking the stigma and barriers that prevent

police officers from seeking mental health. Therefore, prompting a better understanding of police culture may reduce the stigma-induced attitudes regarding officers seeking the support of mental health professionals.

Collectively, by interviewing police officers who are currently actively working regarding their lived experiences with critical incidents, stress, trauma, PTSD, and police suicide will highlight their perceptions regarding the barriers that prevent officers from seeking mental help. The results of this study will address the gap in research pertaining to police officers working in the Tampa Bay region. Additionally, the results of this study inform law enforcement officers of the value placed on breaking through the stigma that prevents them seeking mental health support.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop a deeper understanding of both cultural and organizational barriers that inhibit police officers from seeking stress management, trauma management, and PTSD interventions to avert police suicide. This study was specifically focused on a population of police officers working in the Tampa Bay region, and explored what impedes the law enforcement organization and officers from seeking help and addressing stigma and other barriers preventing stress management assistance that might prevent suicidal ideation.

This study's findings involve research gaps associated with officers' experiences regarding their perceptions of stress and exposure to trauma and its impact on their lives, as well as police officers' culture and organizational policies for dealing with occupational stress. In order to best meet the purpose, fill literature gaps, and address noted problems, I selected a qualitative methodology with elements of a phenomenological approach in the design. In this chapter, I describe the research design, instrumentation, participants, and data collection plan, as well as an explanation regarding why other design options were insufficient to meet the purpose of this study. Additionally, I presented a rationale for applying a qualitative method, the role of the researcher, how confidentiality was secured, and possible ethical issues.

Research Design and Rationale

I selected a qualitative design for this study since this particular design works well to elicit comprehensive, detailed, and firsthand accounts from participants regarding a

phenomenon. Detailed responses from law enforcement officers who shared their stories of dealing with the stigma associated with seeking mental-health support and how cultures and organizations affected decisions to seek out support were necessary for this study. According to Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2013), the process of qualitative research produces an opportunity to catalyze the development of a theory, enhance the relationship between participants and researchers, and empower research through voices of participants.

Selecting the appropriate research method required considering alternative options of qualitative methodologies. Therefore, I considered the qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods for this study. Selecting the appropriate methodological process was an integral part of this research. I chose to use a qualitative approach after reviewing previous studies on law enforcement stress management, critical incidents, and exposure to trauma, PTSD symptoms, and police suicidal ideation. The object of this research was to identify and address barriers that prevent officers from seeking mental health support from the points of view of police officers.

I selected a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design because this allows for acquisition of rich details regarding actual experiences of police officers in an effort to understand lived experiences from each individual's perspective. Applying this qualitative research design allowed me to have a better understanding of stigmas, fears, and barriers that limit officers from seeking help in terms of managing stress, stress management, organizational stress, and exposure to trauma, critical incidents, PTSD symptoms, as well as suicidal ideation.

This research was designed as a qualitative study with a combination of data sources, including semi-structured face-to-face interviews and field notes. This provides an opportunity to gain a contextualized meaning of the phenomenon being examined in order to produce rich and descriptive data that can bring awareness to and enhance the specific issue. Gathering information through multiple sources allowed me to triangulate as well as enhance validity of results of this examination.

The application of a qualitative paradigm that focuses on participants' experiences as seen through their perspective is an essential part of this research study. According to Creswell (2022), there are five main approaches to guide a qualitative research study: Narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Before making an educated decision, I reviewed each research design.

Case Study

Case study methods refer to research based on descriptions of real-life situations, problems, or incidents with boundaries established by the researcher. Chesin et al., (2016) said the case study method requires that every effort should be made by the researcher to be unbiased and examine various cases and arrive at solutions. Case studies involve applying inductive logic to disclose realities hidden within collected data (Buckman et al., 2010). McNabb (2013) said case study research involves public management based on successes and failures within organizations. Yin (2010) said a qualitative research design which applies a case study method is necessary to explore issues and perceptions in depth. Furthermore, McNabb (2013) explained case study research describes what is taking place, why it's happening, and how it takes place inside of an organization.

An essential part of this study involves participants' experiences. I chose to use a phenomenological design after reviewing previous studies regarding law enforcement stress management, critical incidents, exposure to trauma, PTSD symptoms, and police suicidal ideation. The goal of this research is to identify and address available training for police officers.

Phenomenological Research Design Rationale

After consideration, I selected the phenomenological design because the focus of this study is to understand officers' experiences, how they evaluated their agencies' policies and procedures involving stress management, and what barriers keep them from seeking help. According to Giorgio (2019), phenomenology involves the constitution of phenomena of the world and conclusions based on knowledge revealed from the examination. Additionally, Rudestam (2015) said qualitative research is often linked to constructivist theory because the qualitative method involves understanding experiences from points of view of those who experience them. This allowed me to address actual experiences of each participant in order to better understand of lived experiences of individuals (Caelli et al., 2003).

Face-to-face interviews provide the richest data source for human science researchers seeking to understand human experiences and therefore, I selected a phenomenological design. The phenomenological research design approach "aims to identify and describe the subjective experiences. It is the point of view the subject, and it shuns critical evaluation of forms of social life" (Nestor & Schutt, 2018, p. 192). By

listening to what officers have experienced, I can better understand lived experiences and ways to improve the profession.

Research Questions

RQ: How do police officers in the Tampa Bay region describe cultural and organizational barriers that inhibit them from seeking stress management, trauma, and PTSD interventions designed to avert police suicide?

Three sub questions were addressed:

SQ1: How do officers describe strengths and weaknesses of their departments' policies and procedures related to employee assistance programs?

SQ2: How do officers describe their personal performance as it relates to policies and procedures implemented by agencies to address occupational stress?

SQ3: What are officers' recommendations for improving policies and procedures regarding employee assistance programs that might deter officers from suicide ideation?

Role of the Researcher

The role of a researcher comes with an abundant amount of responsibility. My role for this study was one of the investigator who is able to interview the participants in order to have a better understanding of the phenomenon. Beyond that, I was the instrument for collecting all the data and following the process that will lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, the purpose of the qualitative researcher is to collect, interpret, and analyze the data (Ritanti, 2017). I have been that primary

instrument who serves to collect data through face-to-face interviews, but also through note taking that includes observation of how the officers react to the questions.

Nestor and Schutt (2018) argued that challenges could take place when attempting to maintain "objectivity, remain detached, and be an unemotionally involved with the participant" (p. 42). The selection of an appropriate method of exploration is essential. Consideration of this information is the critical core of this study because as a police officer I understand the magnitude of stress that can lead to suicide. In addition, I know the culture and the organization that encompasses law enforcement. Although my reasons for pursuing this subject are close to my heart, I have been careful not to allow my personal experiences, opinions, or emotions to interfere with this study. I have an extensive background in the law enforcement profession as a current deputy sheriff with nineteen years of patrolman experience that includes: Field Training Officer, Street Crimes, Vice and Narcotics, Community Policing, and other specialized units in a law enforcement agency located in the Tampa Bay region in the state of Florida. Because of this I must confront my own biases. In addition, prior to collecting any data, I have informed the officers/ participants of my background, as well as during the data collection phase of the investigation.

At all times, I have done my best to maintain a high level of reflexivity. Watson and Andrews (2018) states that to remain in the qualitative inquirer realm one has to tap into reflexivity which means being attentive as well as conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of one's own perspectives. In other words, reflexivity is the path of self-awareness (Watson & Andrews, 2018) as well as a

technique used to clarify the biases of the researcher that are being brought to the study. Wertz (2005) stated that part of the rigor of qualitative research is based on self-disclosure and reflexivity. Therefore, as researcher I must understand my personal role and the significant influence that can taint the process (Carl & Ravitch, 2018). To alleviate the concern of biases, I have contacted agencies where I do not have any affiliations. I also maintained a journal that documents the feelings, thoughts, and emotions that I experienced while I conducted my research.

In this study, the officers were asked to share their perspectives on the training they were afforded on the topic of stress, occupational stress, critical incidents, stress management, exposure to trauma, and PTSD symptoms that can lead to police suicide. In addition, the participants were able to provide their opinion on what training they believed could assist them coping with occupational stress, PTSD symptoms, and police suicide. My role as a researcher was to gain the best understanding possible of the issues affecting the law enforcement community. Therefore, it is critical not to have preconceived expectations regarding the participant's responses and ultimately the outcomes (Nestor & Schutt, 2018).

As mentioned previously, I have prior experience as a deputy sheriff working in the Tampa Bay Region. As a patrol officer, I have survived critical incidents, exposure to trauma, stress, occupational stress, organizational stress, PTSD symptoms, and police suicide experienced by law enforcement officers working in the Tampa Bay Region. Because I am a current police office, I fully understand the protocols, policies, procedures, and subculture associated with law enforcement. Klein and Kozlowski (2000)

explained police culture is an emergent phenomenon originating within an officer's attitudes and then shared at all levels of the profession. It is further argued that culture cannot be fully understood by any one individual's perspective who is part of it (Bhagat, 2002). Thus, I am also aware that based on my experiences I have a jaded point of view and preconceived notions as well as biases involving this particular profession.

The research design has aided me in mitigating personal biases throughout my study. I selected a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of law enforcement officers as they applied to the research questions. I have applied elements of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the officer's lived experiences. IPA is a methodological approach that began in the psychology arena but with time, was adopted across a wide range of disciplines (Golembienwski, 1992; Pringle, 2011). The focus of IPA is on the examination of how people make sense of their life experiences (Smith, 2003).

Smith (2003) suggested that the interpretation of the participant's perspectives may shed light on the hidden aspects that are within the participant's lived experiences. Oxley (2015) stated reflection is the central theme of IPA and the researcher should be vigilant of not tainting the data collected. Therefore, Smith (2003) suggested a technique of reflection that included keeping a diary that allows one to capture thoughts, and feelings at the conclusion of each interview. In addition, following the guidelines for analysis within IPA are flexible; however, the transcription of the interviews needs to be verbatim without any misleading information.

In order to address my personal biases, I have remained consciously vigilant and professional at all times. The application of open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews helped avoid biases by providing a specific guide that lays down a path followed during each session. Stake (2005) stated that researchers have to balance their personal involvement while examining a phenomenon. I have followed a semi-structured guide to find commonalities and formulate themes. This process helped me to determine common themes within the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the phenomenon. The IPA method has allowed me to be an active learner, listener, and observer.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic and Recruitment

The population of interest in this study comes from the current law enforcement members working in the Tampa Bay region. The sampling of certified officers working in six different law enforcement agencies in the Tampa Bay region was selected so that any officer had an equal opportunity of being selected (when they volunteer to participate) from this police population. The selected sample population consists of the following six law enforcement agencies in the Tampa Bay region. Additionally, the criteria considered for the study includes participants being (a) a law enforcement officer, (b) working in the Tampa Bay Region, (c) currently employed as a full-time police officer, (d) has worked a minimum of two years full-time experience, and (e) has completed their Field Training Process and probationary mandated period.

Compared to a quantitative study, the sample size for a qualitative study was much smaller (Mason, 2010). According to Watson and Andrews (2018), redundancy sampling is a strategy to deal with small sample size; and, it is a powerful technique for saturation sampling. Through redundancy, the information is purposeful, and the data is collected until no new information is forthcoming (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Moreover, Glaser et al. (1967) coined the term "saturation point" (p.236), referring to the point that no new information is introduced. To meet saturation for this qualitative research study, I interviewed police officers from six different police agencies in the Tampa Bay region until the time that redundancy become apparent. I continued to interview police officers who presented different perspectives until such time that no new information was unveiled.

As a current law enforcement officer working in the Tampa Bay region of Florida, I felt compelled to inform the senior official of my agency about my research. After an in-depth conversation concerning law enforcement officers in the Tampa Bay region regarding the lack of awareness and policies that address stress, stress management, organizational stress, exposure to trauma, critical incidents, PTSD symptoms as well as police suicide, it was agreed that there was an essential need to understand this phenomenon. Once obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this study, I formally pursued authorization and support from senior law enforcement officials to move forward with the research process. This is discussed more thoroughly in the section on ethical procedures.

With that in mind, I compiled a list that contains the appropriate contact person and proper protocols from each police department in the Tampa Bay region that I would select. In other words, to have easier access to each agency, I researched the necessary information. For instance, I obtained the names and email addresses for the individuals who could authorize me to conduct the face-to-face interviews as well as inspect their policies and procedures for handling officers affected by stress, stress management, organizational stress, and exposure to trauma, critical incidents, PTSD symptoms, and police suicide. Once the information was available, I emailed a letter asking for written authorization from each of the selected agencies (Appendix A).

Before collecting any data, I received permission from Walden University. Through personal and professional contacts within the law enforcement community, I have been able to network and identify possible contacts from different departments who were willing to assist me. Once approved by the IRB, I emailed an information and recruitment letter to the contact person, requesting details that will be disbursed to sworn members of each agency (Appendix A). I also worked with the selected agencies' training bureaus to help disseminate details of the study. The message highlighted the basis of the research and provided contact information if anyone needed further information regarding the purpose and process of the interviews. Additionally, the recruitment arrangement included asking the partnering organizations to circulate my flyer, which was an open invitation for interested participants to contact me (Appendix B). I also asked for agencies to advertise the flyer though their social media forums such as Facebook, to provide an unobstructed exposure to the study. The interested

participants who contacted me were sent a participant invitation letter with a set of screening questions (Appendix C). The screening questions ensured that the eligibility criteria were met. After reviewing the responses, I emailed each qualifying participant individually to move forward with the interview process.

Due to the stigma associated with police officers and their fears regarding stress and PTSD, there might be a hesitation with participants coming forward. Therefore, a contingency plan was developed for when members of this special population are difficult to locate. This contingency plan included a sampling technique known as snowball sampling. According to Babbie (2016), snowball sampling is a method whereby each participant will be asked to suggest information for additional participants to join in the study. Thus, the participants will assist in bridging the gap between the researcher and future participants.

Participants had to meet basic requirements in order to allow for a better understanding of the phenomenon. I looked for participants who met these criteria: (a) a law enforcement officer, (b) working in the Tampa Bay region, (c) currently employed as a full-time police officer, (d) has worked a minimum of two years full-time police officer, and (e) has completed their Field Training Process and probationary mandated period. Police officers were given information regarding the study, its goals, and privacy practices. Prospective participants (law enforcement officers) were given my phone number and I emailed to arrange to meet them at their convenience and explain the research study protocols.

Instrumentation

In order to be objective, it is critical that data gathered are "reliable knowledge, checked, and controlled, undistorted by personal bias and prejudice" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 242). With this in mind, a specific interview guide (see Appendix D) was created which includes an introduction of the researcher and the project, a statement informing the participant that the interview will be confidential and their participation will need to be voluntary, the length of the meeting, the interview guide and the conclusion of the conversation. Before starting the interviews, both the interview questions and the conclusion of the conversation. Before starting the interviews, both the interview protocol and the data collection process needed to receive the approval from Walden University's IRB.

I used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to focus on the lived experiences confronting police office officers working in the Tampa Bay region. I used open-ended questions based on a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix D) that allowed the officers to provide answers based on their previous experiences and knowledge regarding critical incidents, stress, stress management, PTSD, and police suicide. I used follow-up questions as necessary to promote an in-depth understating of the research topic and to encourage participants to elaborate beyond yes or no responses (Yin, 2010). According to Simmons (2001), people need a way to tell their story, so this protocol allowed the participants to convey in their own words their experiences, perceptions, and perspectives.

In addition to obtaining a consent form from all participants, they were advised that a digital recorder was used to memorialize the interview. The time spent with each participant was recorded and included the interview questions, responses, and any additional discussion that occurs during our time spent together. I also used field notes to document nonverbal or emotional reactions provided by each participant while they were speaking about their experiences (Ritanti, 2017). Watson and Andrews (2018) suggested the recording of data during the interview process since it could be an essential element of the data collection phase. My field notes were a useful tool if the participant does not agree to be recorded, or the instrument fails to capture the interview.

The interview guide was comprised of 10 open-ended questions that explore the research questions posed by this study. Specifically, the interview guide was derived from the primary research questions as well as sub-questions that were used to encourage each participant to disclose and discover their perceptions and experiences regarding critical incidents, stress, stress management, PTSD, trauma, and police suicide. The design of the interview guide encourages each officer to engage in an informative conversation, reflecting their insights about dealing with occupational stress and trauma.

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology is rooted in questions that create a direction and focus on the meaning and themes of the phenomenon being explored (p. 59). Therefore, the application of an interview guide containing open-ended questions to conduct semi-structured interviews with participants suffices to meet the data collection instrumentation protocol that addresses the research questions. Das, et al. (2018) explained that this type of instrumentation is a technique for the interviewer to probe and

encourage participants to engage with their lived experiences. Collectively, semi-structured interviews will focus on a set of predetermined interview questions; however, this plan was structured in a manner that allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions that explore the topic of interest (Murphy et al., 2014). As suggested by Alby et al. (2014), interviewers use semiformal interview techniques because they are attempting to avoid potential biases.

Data Collection

The plan was to study sworn police officers currently employed in the law enforcement field in the Tampa Bay region. The perspectives of multiple law enforcement officers offered insights regarding their agencies' policies and procedures. Officers will be approached through purposeful contacts with the selected agencies. I were asked the head of each agency to allow me to attend roll calls to provide background information about the study. During this time, I provided everyone with my contact information that includes an email and phone number for anyone willing to contact me (Appendix B). I then coordinated an interview schedule with each participant to allow the process to flow and continue.

The primary data collection tool for this research was face-to-face-in-depth interviews and note-taking. All participants will have volunteered to participate in the process. I conducted a one-time interview at the police station, satellite office, training building, or other sites such as a university or college campus where training takes place. Each conversation was allotted a time frame of 45 to 60 minutes.

During the interview with potential participants, I went over privacy and confidentiality measures. For instance, each interview was labeled under a pseudonym number such as Case 1 (C1), which corresponded to the individual's meeting. This process ensured confidentiality as well as the safety of the officer's rights and anonymity. After ensuring that the officer understands the process, protocols, and objectives of the study, I moved forward and set up an appointment for an interview to take place.

Before the interviews, I provided each participant with a consent form that they read and signed (Appendix D). In addition, everyone was informed that all conversations were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed. After each interview is completed, I encouraged each officer to ask questions and provide additional feedback regarding the study. I informed each individual that a copy of the transcript of their interview would be made available upon request.

Data Analysis Plan

Thematic analysis is a process used to identify, analyze, and report themes that are concealed within the data. The process organizes and describes the data set in (rich) detail" (Braun &Clarke, 2006 p.13). By applying inductive thematic analysis of the data, the researcher will seek to "identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—ideologies-that are theorized as shaping or informing the sematic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.13). The analysis will take two phases: The first phase will consist of preparation as well as compilation of all the evidence collected. The second phase consists of coding the collected data. According to Saldaňa (2016),

Coding requires that you (the researcher) wear our researcher's analytic lens. But

how you perceive and interpret what is happening in the data depends on what

type of filter covers has a lens and which angle you view the phenomenon (p. 7-

8).

I incorporated Colaizzi's data analysis and most of the specific steps provided by

this method to assist me with the analysis of the data collected. The first six steps of

Colaizzi's method which include familiarization. In this step, the researcher reviews and

reads the participant's accounts multiple times in order to have an understanding with the

data collected. The second step involves identifying significant statements. This step

requires the researcher to highlight and identify all the statements provided by each

participant that are directly related to the phenomenon under exploration.

After carefully reviewing the participant's statements, the researcher will

commence the third step of formulating meaning. This step requires the researcher to

highlight and identify the meaning behind these statements that are specific to the

phenomenon. Thus, it is critical for the researcher to reflect on his or her presumptions in

order to truly experience an understanding of the phenomenon. Moran (2017) noted that

Colaizzi understood that complete bracketing is impossible.

In order to cluster themes in Step 4, it is important to fully identify the meaning of

the phenomenon, and the researcher then clusters this meaning into specific themes. Here

in this step, it is essential that the researcher take steps to bracket any presumptions to

avoid any influences from existing theory. In Step 5, the researcher developw an

exhaustive description of the themes, while incorporating the themes that were identified

in the previous steps. Finally, Step 6 is producing the fundamental structure. In this step, the researcher condenses the previous description into a short statement that describes only the essential aspects of the specific phenomenon (Moran, 2017).

Additionally, Colaizzi's data analysis has a final step which calls for seeking verification of fundamental structure where the researcher returns the central structure statement to all participants to determine if it provides an accurate description of their experience. However, due to the nature and sensitivity of the topic, I did request that the participants complete this particular step. Moreover, Colaizzi's data analysis allows the modification of any of the earlier steps related to analysis if it is deemed necessary. Thus, I used step six to emphasize and generate the clear clusters of themes and their relationships (Shosha, 2012).

Stannard (2012) found that Colaizzi's method of data analysis encouraged the researcher to revisit the participants and share the results of the data to provide them with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Shosha (2012) argued that Colaizzi's seven-step process is an opportunity for self-reflection after the data will be collected. I applied Colaizzi's method to assist me in identifying the common themes that emerge from the data collected as specific words, phrases, and perceptions reported by police officers.

Moreover, Hess et al. (2013) reported that presuppositions often limit one's understanding of the participants' experiences due to an extensive knowledge of the phenomenon. Chan (1996), therefore, recommended that researchers maintain the concept of bracketing throughout the process in order to identify and minimize potential

influence. According to Wertz (2005), a fundamental method that focuses on the participant's experiences is known as phenomenological bracketing, where it is essential to recognize contexts to the experiences stated by each officer.

Early in the data analysis, I followed the advice of Saldaňa (2016) and summarized all interviews into one page that allows for easy reference during the coding phase. I created a coding tree that highlights key themes that address the research questions using the computer-assisted program, NVivo 12. The application of NVivo 12 helped me formulate and identify possible commonalities regarding themes. Finally, I analyzed the data by reducing and combining the significant statements made into thematic categories. Thus, NVivo 12 searched for themes that emerge from the data collected. Collectively, patterns regarding the officer's lived experiences regarding stress, stress management, exposure to trauma, PTSD, and police suicide developed.

Saldaňa (2016) recommended that qualitative studies require coding in cycles to identify themes that derive from the in-depth interviews. My study's data analysis used the NVivo coding method of coding that flushes out patterns and themes. Saldaňa (2016), suggested using" words and short phrases from the participant's language in the data record as codes" (p. 264). This study aimed to reach data saturation through data triangulation of the interviews, confirming, that no new information was introduced. According to Faust and Vens (2014), a researcher will reach data saturation after a sufficient amount of information becomes available to duplicate the study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

One of the most critical aspects of any research study is the reliability and trustworthiness of the study. In a qualitative study, validity is also identified as credibility or trustworthiness. This process allows for the results of the study to be classified as believable (Creswell, 2022). It is essential for the researcher to be objective, and to provide a well-documented methodological approach, research design, data collection tool, and data analysis description that offers reliable results and a believable conclusion. This, allows for limitations to be conquered through credibility as well as trustworthiness.

Each element of trustworthiness is expanded upon in this section to meet the criteria set to ensure trustworthiness, I followed several steps.

Triangulation

According to Creswell (2022), triangulation is a way to assure both qualitative validities as well as reliability. Moreover, Creswell (2022) explains that different data sources, as well as evidence examination, allows the researcher to "build a coherent justification for themes" (p. 201). Similarly, Watson and Andrews (2018) noted that triangulation within qualitative research is attained by combining both interviews and observations to reach a competing theoretical perspective based on inform data analysis. Thus, the application of triangulation strengthens the study by ensuring trustworthiness.

Triangulation is an application that checks the integrity of the inferences that are concluded (Nestor & Schutt, 2018). In broad terms, triangulation implies collecting different perspectives and distinct sources to form themes within the study (Flick, 2007). Thus, the collections of multiple perspectives are brought together to answer the research

questions that are posed (Flick, 2007). I have applied the process of triangulation

collecting and analyzing the data to ensure that findings to this research are legitimate.

Ultimately, the goal of triangulation strategies are to consider the depth of the data, and to

confidently answer the research inquiry (Ravitch, 2016).

Credibility

During a qualitative research investigation, the foundation of the study needs to

be based on credibility. Credibility or internal validity is the proper instrument applied to

the data. Validity describes a measure that accurately reflects the concept that is intended

to be measured (Babbie, 2016). "Qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for

the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedure-" (Creswell, 2022, p. 201).

To ensure the validity of this project, I created a series of questions that addresses all

aspects of the phenomenon being investigated. Moreover, to secure the credibility of the

research, I placed emphasis on the content validity of my interview guide, and I used the

technique of member checking.

Member Checking

To ensure both credibility and accuracy, all the officers were asked to review their

interview transcript a technique as known as "member checking", (Birt et al., 2016).

They were provided with a chance to make comments or corrections to the research. This

was optional for the participant. They were asked if they want to review a copy of their

transcript which can be forward to the email that they provided. They were given 15 days

to review the text and respond. Once the time allotted has expired it was assumed that no

comments or corrections were noted. After the validation and document period, each

participant received a summary that is similar to a debriefing that will include the critical results from the study once it reaches publication.

Content Validity

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative validity involves checking the accuracy of the findings by applying particular procedures. I used the following techniques to enhance the content validity: (a) relevant information that can be collaborated through current research literature sources regarding the phenomenon, (b) participant's interviews, and (c)a coding process that highlights classification and themes of the data interview (Vanden Bos, 2016).

When referring to the content or validity of the research-development instrument, it is essential that there is a clear and well-grounded tool examining the topic explored. This event requires that the behavior be measured, and that the conditions of the data collected appropriately validates the indicator for the "construct of the topic of interest" (Faust & Ven, 2014, p. 96). The definition of content validity is "the extent to which an instrument contains the relevant and important aspects of the concept it intends to measure" (Matza et al., 2015, p. 9). To assure uniformity in the interview process, I used the interview guide as a map to direct and coordinate each interview (Fakis et al., 2013).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the external validity and generalizability of the study. External validity is concentrated on the inquirer's responsibility for providing sufficient information regarding the phenomenon under review (Patton, 2015). In this case, to ensure a high level of transferability I applied an interview process that is detailed, and

includes perceptions as well descriptions of each participant's account. This study

employed a group of voluntary participants consisting of police officers working in the

Tampa Bay Region. The phenomenological method was used to explain the importance

of the lived experiences of each officer I developed and provided research tools,

instruments, and protocols to promote a check and balance system to oversee the results

of this study. This will assist future studies and allow for the study to be duplicated.

Dependability

According to Nestor and Schutt (2018), dependability refers to the focus on the

process and the responsibility of the investigator to ensure that the inquiry was completed

in a logical, traceable, and well documented manner. To determine the dependability of

the data collected, I initially coded all the information obtained in the in-depth, semi-

structured interviews. Dependability was met through the practice of following research

procedures established for this qualitative research project. The entire process including

the application of the data analysis was achieved.

Confirmability

Confirmability establishes a link between the assertions, findings, and

interpretations of the data collected (Nestor & Schutt, 2018). Furthermore, this qualitative

research study should exclude all forms of biases; therefore, assuring confirmability. This

protocol forces all personal opinions and past assumptions regarding the phenomenon to

be eliminated during the interview process. Rudestam (2015) stated that researchers could

ascertain value in their findings by spending significant time with participants and

exploring participants' experiences in detail (Dunham et al., 2020, p. 58). The acquisition

of confirmability is established by highlighting the evidence that will be collected and analyzed. Additionally, the entire research protocol will be adequately documented to establish confirmability as it relates to the findings of this phenomenological study.

Keeping this in mind, I conducted qualitative interviews that contained open-ended questions that ensured and emphasized my research's transferability. That is, the conclusions of this work will serve as a basis for future studies to replicate my study. Finally, Bride and Figley (2009) affirm that confirmability is established when the findings of the researcher are transparent and therefore allows the audience to understand the collection process and the analysis of the data collected.

Ethical Procedures

Before collecting any data or conducting any research, I needed approval from the Walden University IRB. All guidelines provided by IRB were followed prior to collecting any data. In addition, prior authorization was required from the six law enforcement agencies before interviews could be initiated. All participants were required to read, comprehend, and sign a consent form (Appendix D) before starting the interview. It was critical for all subjects to completely understand that there would be no compensation, and they would have no vested interest in the outcome of this study. All ethical concerns related to recruitment and processes were addressed through the Walden's University IRB. If a participant decided to withdraw from the study early, refused to continue, or fears that they will be adversely affected, there was a two- phase contingency plan in place. The first phase of the plan was to attempt to overcome the

participant's fears, indifference, miscomputation, or skepticism. The second phase was to recruit and replace the participant with another officer.

To enhance the participants' confidentially and protect the data, all participants' identities will be removed. I labeled each interview under a pseudonym such as Case 1 (C1). All participants will be advised that their interview would be recorded with a digital recording device. All participants were informed prior to starting the interview, and the recordings will be kept secured in a file cabinet with a lock to ensure their privacy and safety at all times. After the mandated 5 year waiting period all data collected including; notes, recordings, and transcripts will be properly destroyed.

Summary

The focus of this chapter included an overview of the methodological approach that I will applied for this study. I added a description as well as an explanation of the type of study I selected as well as the rationale used for this research approach. In addition, I included the process, protocols, data collection, data analysis, and instrumentation. I also presented instruments for the data collection and any possible ethical issues that could taint this qualitative inquiry.

Chapter 4 includes a detailed analysis of all the in-depth interviews from the selected law enforcement officers working in the Tampa Bay Region. In addition, the chapter includes a description of the research findings from the analysis of the collected data.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to provide insights

regarding barriers that prevent police officers from seeking mental health support from a

cultural as well as organizational lens. Data gathered from in-depth semi-structured

interviews with 10 participants were used to answer the primary research question and

three subquestions.

RQ: How do police officers in the Tampa Bay region describe cultural and

organizational barriers that inhibit them from seeking stress management, trauma, and

PTSD interventions designed to avert police suicide?

SQ1: How do officers describe strengths and weaknesses of their departments'

policies and procedures related to employee assistance programs?

SQ2: How do officers describe their personal performance as it relates to

policies and procedures implemented by agencies to address occupational stress?

SQ3: What are officers' recommendations for improving policies and

procedures regarding employee assistance programs that might deter officers from

suicide ideation?

Chapter 4 includes a description of the research setting, participant demographics,

data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and study results. The chapter

concludes with a summary.

Research Setting

I had no prior contacts or relationships with participants and did not have contact

with them outside of this study. Some of the officers may be familiar with me due to

networking events; however, at no point did I know or work with any participants who volunteered for the study.

It is important to clarify the COVID-19 pandemic did not influence this research, since I was able to conduct face-to-face interviews while maintaining social distance guidelines. Interviews were conducted in outdoor settings and I used a digital recorder with an attached microphone to eliminate background noise.

Demographics

There were 10 participants who agreed to take part in the study. In order to protect identities of each participant and provide confidentiality of collected data, I assigned each participant an alias code which included the letter C and a number. Police officers worked in various police agencies throughout the Tampa Bay region. Years of experience for officers ranged from 3 to 25 years. Table 1 includes an overview of demographic and background information for the 10 participants in this study.

Data Collection

The data collection process for the study began after I received Walden's Institutional Review Board 08-20-21-0709866 approval to move forward to conduct my study. Emails were sent to police departments in the Tampa Bay region requesting assistance for advertising my recruitment flyer. Flyers and letters of invitation were sent and posted as well as sent out through internal emails to police agency members working in the Tampa Bay region.

Table 1

Demographics and Background Information

Code	Gender	Race	Division	Rank	Years of Service
C1	Female	White	K9	Corporal	21
C2	Male	Black	Training	Corporal	4
C3	Male	White	Court Service	Master Patrolman	24
C4	Male	White	School Resource	Corporal	22
C5	Male	White	Property Crimes	Detective	17
C6	Female	Hispanic	Communications	Sergeant	11
C7	Female	White	School Resource	Corporal	7
C8	Male	White	Patrol	Lieutenant	23
C9	Male	Hispanic	Narcotics	Sergeant	25
C10	Male	White	Patrol	Field Training	10

Within the first week of advertising the study, I received four requests through email and phone calls from police officers working in the Tampa Bay region expressing interest in participating in my study. Next, a schedule was established to conduct individual face-to-face interviews with those officers who met selection criteria. More officers came forward via word of mouth of various participants, leading to unanticipated snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is an approach for locating information-rich key informants involving generating interviewees based on people who know people who are good sources given the inquiry. I began collecting data in the middle of August 2021 and completed all interviews by the second week of September 2021. I interviewed 10 police officers during that period.

I anticipated that the COVID-19 situation might interrupt my plans to conduct face-to-face interviews with officers, so I prepared contingency plans. This entailed the

use of the Zoom meeting application which allowed for live interviews. However, when I was contacted by each participant, they wanted to meet in person. In order to accommodate them and comply with social distancing regulations, we met outdoors. Interviews were conducted in public spaces such as public libraries, outdoor parks, and other spaces such as parking lots that provided distance as well as privacy.

Participants received an informed consent form and after reading it, agreed to take part in the research. I emphasized the voluntary nature of the process and explained to them they could choose not to answer any questions and stop participating at any time without penalties. I explained that my role was student researcher and made it clear that all information would be kept confidential and protected using privacy methods. This process was fully explained in detail. Again, each participant stated they understood and agreed to continue with interviews.

I collected demographic information from each participant and addressed all questions or concerns officers had about participating in the study. All participants consented to interviews being audio-recorded and were comfortable with me taking written notes during sessions. I used my journal to record any nonverbal behavior and emotional clues displayed by participants as they recalled experiences, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder application HD Audio Recorder. I decided to use this particular application because it allowed me to automatically save audio files and was readily accessible to upload on my laptop computer for data analysis. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

I used a researcher-developed interview questionnaire guide to conduct interviews (see Appendix D). Questions were intended to focus on topics related to participants' backgrounds as police officers with the purpose of seeking out lived experiences as it relates to barriers that prevent them from seeking out mental health support. Questions were structured so that participants could talk freely and elaborate on their experiences. Follow-up probing questions were asked to ensure the richest and most descriptive data possible. This technique allowed for participants to disclose the meaning of their lived experiences as they told their stories in own words.

To enhance participants' confidentiality and protect the data, all participants' identities were removed. I labeled each interview under a pseudonym such as Case 1 (C1). These assigned alias codes maintain the confidentiality of each participant. Also, this code was used to help identify the participants' audio recordings and interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Colaizzi's methods of data analysis. This data analysis method consisted of the following six steps:

1. Read and reread each transcript thoroughly to acquire an overall sense and feeling of the content (i.e. participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon).

2. Review each transcript carefully to extract significant statements relevant to the phenomenon being studied.

3. The extracted significant statements should be used to construct formulated meaning units.

4. The formulate meanings should be organized into a cluster of themes and categories.

5. The results should be integrated into an exhaustive and rich description of the phenomenon or lived experience.

6. The exhaustive description of the phenomenon should be presented as a clear and unambiguous a statement of identification as possible.

After conducting the interviews, the audio recorded data was transcribed by the researcher into Microsoft Word files. The individual semi-structured interviews were analyzed through inductive analysis. Inductive analysis calls for the researcher not to fit the themes into a preconceived list of possible themes but rather uses the data to determine the themes and categories (Penney, 2018). During the audio listening session, I noticed some words and phrases that were used frequently by participants and I noted them in my journal. I used in vivo coding to draw attention to the developing themes. NVivo coding refers to the process of using "a word or short phrase from the actual language in the qualitative data" (Mason, 2010, p. 1017). Each participants' set of data was analyzed where after the findings were compared to arrive at larger themes and categories.

While transcribing the data, I became familiar with the data of each participant. After the transcription, I read through the data once again to prepare for the next steps of the analysis process. Thus, following Step 1 of Colaizzi's method of data analysis. I read each transcript numerous times and highlighted significant statements and recurring

words of the phenomenon from participants' experiences. I also highlighted specific words, phrases, or paragraphs that seemed significant to answer the research questions.

The second step of Colaizzi's method of data analysis was to highlight the data sections, to determine whether the data are linked to the research question. I then was able to disregard all highlighted data that was found to be incompatible to the research question this was highlighted with a different color. By keeping the data highlighted with distinct colors I was able to easily revisit the data in the future when deemed necessary. This was an instrumental during the processes of creating themes from significant statements, meanings, and concepts. Then I used NVivo (version 12) software to organize and code the uploaded interview transcript text data. All of the highlighted data extracted from the journal field notes and interview transcripts that revealed meaningful statements, textual descriptions, and recurring phrases were used to formulate meaning groups and generate thematic categories (Phillippi et al., 2018).

Next, I organized the clusters of themes into categories according to subject matter and placed them into sets within categories. This allowed me to follow the path mapped out by Colaizzi's third and fourth steps of data analysis. Quotes and descriptive textual statements were taken from the participants' interview transcript and coded based on the central research question and subsequent questions. Thus, this process allowed me to integrate each participant's experiences from their actual words creating a rich description of the phenomenon (Phillippi et al. , 2018).

I was able to identify specific patterns as they began to be formed through the linkage of data. This was reinforced through the application of direct quotes from

participants' described interviews which were noted to highlight the pattern in a clearer manner. A more abstract label was allocated to the pattern as an *identifier*. After all the codes were grouped under categories, larger grouping of pattern emerged, which formed the overarching themes. Therefore a more abstract label was attached to the emerging themes, making this the third level descriptor. As the themes emerged they were arranged in matrix with their supportive patterns and direct quotes from the data collected. The matrix was created from the categories and codes. The analysis data was combined to find consistent themes across the data reveal by the participants. Thus, the themes were synthesized to form a combined blend of the collected data as it related to the research questions.

The final step of Colaizzi's method of data analysis was to have each participant validate the findings and to incorporate any changes requested by the participants in the final narrative of the results (Yambo et. al., 2016). After the results were analyzed, I provided participants with a copy of their transcript. To ensure both credibility and accuracy, all officers were asked to review their interview transcript, which is a technique known as *member checking*, (Birt et al., 2016). Each participant were provided with a chance to make comments and corrections to the research. However, this is optional for each participant. Each officer was asked if they wanted to review a copy of their transcript which would be sent through a two-step process. First they would be sent an individual confidential passcode via email. The second step would be forward the transcript that could only be open with their particular passcode. Each participant was given 15 days to review the text and respond. Once the time allotted expired it was

assumed that no comments or corrections would be noted. However, none of the participants wanted to participate in this step. I went forward and sent out the emails in case anyone had a change of heart.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers serve as the data collector and data analyst which poses a potential threat for what is often called researcher bias (Birt et al., 2016, p.1802). Based on this imminent threat to contaminate the data the qualitative researcher must always seek to determine if the quality of the research findings are both rigorous as well as credible (Russo et al., 2020). It is important to dissect the data provided from a research study to determine its authenticity, trustworthiness, and to generate practical results (Rubin et al., 2012). I have implemented systems in place to guard against erosion of the aforementioned aspects of this research study with four preventative measures. This measures are as follows: the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Garside, 2014).

Credibility

Credibility is based on the researchers' confidence in truth findings (Russo et al. , 2020). I established credibility through member checking, triangulation, prolonged engagement, and reflexivity. For example, I performed a source of triangulation of the data by crosschecking the consistency of the information provided by one participant to another (Papautsky et al., 2015). Creswell (2022) explains that different data sources, as well as evidence examination that allows the researcher to "build a coherent justification for themes" (p.201), comprised one means of triangulation.

Similarly, Patton (2015) noted that triangulation within qualitative research is attained by combining both interviews and observations to reach a competing theoretical perspective based on informed data analysis. Thus, this application has strengthened the trustworthiness of this study. I then compared the participants' interviews with the findings in the literature as a way to increase the credibility of the study results (Mason, 2010). Furthermore, in order to reveal all biases, assumptions, and personal experiences I kept a diary in which I practiced reflective journaling. This technique allowed me as the researcher to engage in reflexivity and to monitor the influences of my own biases as a method to increase the credibility of the research finding (Barker, 1999).

Transferability

Applying the findings of the study to other similar, contexts and individuals is known as transferability (Moran, 2017). I used the pictorial and vivid data of the participants' experiences to established transferability. I directly quoted and provided passages of the text from the interview transcripts that consisted of participants' actual responses in order to demonstrate the research findings. This phase provided a rich description of the participants and their lived experiences that related to barriers that prevented them from seeking mental health support. Such experiences would allow readers to fully comprehend and compare the research findings with other studies (Agrahiri & Kotnalia, 2018).

Dependability

According to Nestor and Schutt (2018), dependability refers to the focus on the process and the responsibility of the investigator to ensure that the inquiry was completed

in a logical, traceable, and well documented manner. To determine the dependability of the data collected, I initially coded all the information obtained in the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Dependability was met through the practice of following research procedures established for this qualitative research project. The entire process including the application of the data analysis was achieved.

Dependability was ensured through documentation of the data analysis and detailed auditing trail, and I was able to track the qualitative research process in order to plot a path for future researcher to replicate the study. The audit trail consisted of written notes depicting my thought process and how the data was interpreted using the audio files, interview notes, and transcripts (Moran, 2017). Moreover, triangulation was achieved by comparing participants' narrative with other research data.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity that ensures the research finding are based on actual experiences and preferences of the participants rather than the researcher's predispositions (Moon et al., 2016; Russo et al., 2020). Confirmability establishes a link between the assertions, findings, and interpretations of the data collected (Nestor & Schutt, 2018). Furthermore, this qualitative research study sought to mitigate researcher biases, thus enhancing confirmability. This protocol forced all personal opinions and past assumptions regarding the phenomenon to be acknowledged and potentially eliminated during the interview process. The acquisition of confirmability was established by highlighting the evidence that would be collected and analyzed. Additionally, the entire

research protocol was adequately documented to establish confirmability as it related to the findings of this qualitative study.

Keeping this in mind, I maintained confirmability throughout the entire research process by practicing strict neutrality when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. I interpreted the research findings based on the theoretical framework of this qualitative study to verify the trustworthiness of the research results. I affirmed confirmability through reflexivity in the form of a reflexive journal (Arensman et al., 2016).

Confirmability was achieved by serious interaction with participants during the interviews, linking the finding to the theoretical position and my research experiences. I had a reflective and objective look on the data by applying NVivo (12) software to code and analyze the data. I was continuously thinking about the potential impact of my practical experience in the police experience.

Study Results

Police officers are among the most stressed professionals in the United States (Sayed et al., 2015). I explored a variety of occupational stressors that relate to the police profession and aimed to investigate the variations between culture and organization. The results of this study are divided into the central research question and the themes that emerged.

Central Research Question

RQ: How do police officers in the Tampa Bay region describe cultural and organizational barriers that inhibit them from seeking stress management, trauma, and PTSD interventions designed to avert police suicide?

SQ1: How do officers describe strengths and weaknesses of their departments' policies and procedures related to employee assistance programs?

SQ2: How do officers describe their personal performance as it relates to policies and procedures implemented by agencies to address occupational stress?

SQ3: What are officers' recommendations for improving policies and procedures regarding employee assistance programs that might deter officers from suicide ideation?

Barriers

The themes within the central research question examine some of the barriers that the participants identify both culturally and organizationally preventing them from seeking mental health support.

Police Officer Meaning

To disclose the barriers that police officers have identified from a cultural perspective, the first step was to understand what it means to be a police officer. Every participant provided a reason why they choose to join the police profession. Six out of the ten stated they joined because they had relatives who were also in police departments. Three out of the ten participants had a close friend who worked in the same field. The last officer said they joined because they wanted a sense of "family much like a team or

military comrades…like a brotherhood, ". Possessing a sense of belonging is critical to being a police officer. Nine out of the ten participants talked about the importance of embarrassing the police family. Participant C3 said, "The idea that is us. We are the good guys and we are in it together…we got each other's back… us versus them."

By pointing out the meaning they found in being a police the officers added words that they often use to define themselves. Participants C1, C2, C3, C4, and C6 used words such as; *honor, pride, service,* and *sacrifice* in order to provide their meaning to being a police officer. Participants C3, C5, C7, and C10 used words such as; *defenders, sheepdogs, guardians, gladiators,* and, *warriors*. The data revealed that this sub-set of participants had prior military exposure or experience. "I learned early in my career that I needed to trust my partner and they knew to count on me. I had their six on or off the job "said participant C7.

Loss of Police Identity

Police officers by virtue of holding a public office they occupy a unique social status since they are individuals empowered by the state to use force in the pursuit of lawful objectives (Clark & Bittner, 1972). Participant C3 said, "I work under the shadow of a code of honor. I honor God, love my country and family, and serve to defend them from evil. Without that code I would not know how to live." Police culture can be seen from both a positive as well as negative lens (Hakik & Langlois, 2020). Moreover, police culture has been identified as the incorporation of characteristics such as supportiveness, teamwork, empathy, and perseverance (Chan, 1996). On the other hand, some have suggested that police culture can be viewed as highly destructive and toxic affecting the

police officer's ability to conduct their lives (Grady et al., 2016, p. 20). Participant C1 explained that the primary barrier for them not seeking mental health support was:

> I was trained to not to ask for help of any kind. Suck it up buttercup. I do not even know if my department offers mental health support. I think if I ask for that type of help you will be sent to pasture. I would no longer be trusted and my fellow officers would think that I cannot do my job.

By pointing to past training techniques passed on by previous generations for handling police stress the participants alluded to both the secrecy as well as traditions within the culture that stigmatized mental health support. Additionally, from a cultural lens it created a negative perception about mental health assistance.

Theme 1: Fear/Anger

Within the police ranks spectrum there is fear and anger regarding mental health support. Nine of the ten participants stated that they police department or agency was the largest factor contributing to their fear of seeking out mental health help. C10 stated:

> If I were to go to my supervisor and tell them that I am stressed out they would have to report it up the Chain of Command. Pretty soon everyone would know that I was 'losing it'. No one would trust me or my judgement and I would lose my job. What really pisses me off that no one really prepared me to deal with all the Bullshit and the human cost? The administration tell us that there is help out there, but how we to get it? If I call on myself I might as well commit career suicide. I have a family and they depend on me. No one talks about what we do or

see we eventually become robots. We have to jade ourselves to go from call to call. One day I went to three death investigations, a car crash with injuries, and fought a stoner with a knife. All my supervisor wanted to know was when the reports would be ready so he could go home. Home! How can I go to my house and take all this crap to my wife and kids?

C3 stated:

I get very little support from my agency when it comes to dealing with stress. They say that they care, but they really don't. I was going to a rough divorce and my ex-wife wanted to relocate out of state with my child. I told my sergeant what was taking place his words to me were home is home and work is work. He later told me to go home and get drunk. I can't talk to them about my home life because they do not even bother to get to know the people they supervise. But if call in sick or I am late because I am trying to resolve an issue at home they are more than happy to write me up. It is ridiculous! At roll call we are told that there are services out there for us if we are feeling stressed? Of course we are stressed we are cops and people are always trying to hurt us. I just do not think they the people in charge get it because they are not on the road. It is so easy for them to say go talk to someone, but who or how? Like I said ridiculous.

C7 said:

I think the way stuff is done is unfair especially for women. We are expected to do so call 'man's job', but if we show emotions or cry at scenes we are less than my male counter-parts. I can't really ask for time off for any reason. This job is

not like job that you are there 9 to 5 we are always working. Police officers are expected to be at work all the time. I am never not on duty and there is never enough time off. I think because I am a woman I think my supervisor thinks I am weak and so I try twice as hard to show that I am not. There are times I feel emotion, but then I think I have to tough up or they will think I am less than them. So I would never tell them (my Sergeant) that stuff bothered me. I just would not and it really bothers me that I do not have that trust with them.

After allowing C7 to gain his composure I followed up on this issue and asked why it was felt that officers' (this one in particular) could not talk to their supervisor after a stressful or traumatic experience. C7 stated:

I had an older Sergeant when I started. I loved him not like I was in love with him, but I connected with him. All the guys I worked with did. We would have those shitty calls. You know the dead kids, or the bad domestics where you are boiling. He would come over and make sure I was good before I went home. We could talk and he would share his stories and I would work out my feelings and it was not like every night. Just on those busy nights he made sure to get with everyone. Now I got some new guy wet behind the ears with less time than me. He doesn't even take the time to know me. If I call he is too busy to bother to answer the phone. When he answers he is so condescending and would you believe he is better than the last three supervisors I had. Yes, I had four different supervisors in the past three years. How are you expected to know them when they just get promoted, relocated, or some new shiny job is created and they

move. They move and we are still here answering calls for service. No

recognition, no promotion, no vacation, not even lunch breaks.

Theme 2: Distrust/Misunderstanding

Police officers who are exposed to the daily demands of the job are more

susceptible to stress and burnout (Chan, 1996; de Terte et al., 2014), resulting in apathy

and a lack of concern for themselves and others (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Due to the

possible effects of job stress on the psychological and physical wellbeing of the officer

several agencies have taken a proactive approach by offering mental health support

(Pagon et al., 2011).

C2 stated:

> I do not rely on my agency for mental health relief. I do it myself and I know that
>
> is my responsibility to take of my body and mind. I have that obligation to treat
>
> my body as a temple. I do not believe that the department has to tell me to
>
> workout. That is on me. All they have to do is if I call is to refer me to the right
>
> place. If I am stressed out I go for a run. If I need a gym membership I call the
>
> Human Resources and they tell me who has a good deal.

C2 stated:

> I contacted Human Resources because they handle our insurance. I explained to
>
> them my son was having trouble sleeping because my spouse and I are going
>
> through a divorce. I wanted him to see a counselor not me. I am fine. Like I said if
>
> feel overwhelmed I would go to the gym. I do not need the agency to get in my
>
> head.

C9 said:

When I started many years ago we did not talk about our feelings but we did. I am not sure how we would call it today but I would pull up next to another Officer and we had time to chat. We got to know the guys we work with and build each day those layers of trust. The guys and gals would meet after work and had a few beers no matter the shift days or nights. I had a lot of beer for breakfast, but we never got drunk. We didn't need the drink just the solidarity and camaraderie. As time passed it was looked on poorly to meet with the guys. Then the agency said no more squad parties. We weren't partying we were hanging out, but they did not get it. So top wigs thought the squad was too close we were busted and split. After a few weeks of new squads people got the message. So we come into work look at the new faces and don't bother to know one and other. I understand what the policy is intended to do, but no one bother to ask us what effects are on the people. The agency implements regulations like no more than two guys eating at the time, but I am supervisor I should be able to break bread the men and women I serve it without wondering if Big Brother is going to tell on us.

C9 said:

In all my years of service my word was my bond. I took an oath and live by it. But today there are so many safety features geared towards transparency it is hard to keep up. Don't get me wrong the BWC (Body Worn Cameras) are as essential as our guns. We need them for the protection of our citizens, our officers, and our laws. It is the knee jerk reaction that adds to confusion. When

does it need to activate? When does the video need to be uploaded to the system? What if the officer is caught cursing in the heat of moment? And who decides when saying a curse word is acceptable and not? So then I am expected to tell the guys to be professional but when are they allowed to vent, curse, and scream. We see people at their worst and cops are punished for their humanity. I see it all the time good young men and women walked in shiny, bright, and happy. We old timers say give them three years. We are right three years or less they are jaded, sarcastic, and malcontents. The agency does not prepare them for what they are about to experience. It is a shame to be honest. The old way of doing things we would pair a new cop with an old guy. Zone partners and they would learn from one and other. Now we don't even do that. The guys are overwhelmed by calls for service and there are very few old cops left. The agency wants new blood and no broken toys.

Four participants from the group explained that one of their biggest struggles they encounter is workload/volume/unrealistic expectations. C5 said:

I hate Mondays because over the weekend I get 30 more cases assigned me. This is over the cases that I have already on my desk. The pressure to clear cases is unbelievable. The supervisors want case clearances but it is unrealistic. I take time away from my family, and myself trying to get caught up. I don't really know what they want from me. I know that there is help to handle the stress, but I would not even know where to start.

The category of relationships between superiors and officers was considered as a cause of barriers that prevented officers from seeking out mental health support, but it should also be considered as one aspect of distrust and misunderstanding as it relates to the officers and the department. Eight out of the ten police officers said that that they feel that their agencies take them for granted. The other two participants said that they really did not form have strong relationships at work. C4 explained:

I feel that a lot of times they think that we are expendable, that we

are replaceable, and no matter what your years of service or how much

you have sacrificed for them. And I just don't think they care about how difficult

it is come in to work each day. I talk to my supervisor but he has

so much on his list that he doesn't have the time.

Theme 3: Helplessness/Hopelessness

The challenge of police work may result in poor job satisfaction, increased conflict within the police agencies, poor job performance, resignation of experienced officers, and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Jaramillo et al., 2005; Swanson, et al., 2012).

C6 expressed that she was feelings dedicated to the job which was both a blessing and curse. C6 explained the blessings that come from helping others which include the officers she oversee and the residents who call for help. C6 said:

There are times that this job becomes difficult and coming into work is

extremely hard. I have left my home wondering if I am doing the right thing. I

worked during holidays, birthdays, and my kid's birthdays. You know there are

no holidays at my house. We make the best of it, but it is not like the rest of the people. It is almost indescribable I came into to work during a hurricane. Every hurricane, every emergency, every call out. I had to leave- my family behind to take care of everyone else's family. Strangers over blood is what I hear in my heart and yet I feel obligated to come in. It is very helpless feeling that takes over. Then I have to go into 'work mode' my feeling have to be put aside and start answering calls, taking care of my crew, and go on with my day. There is never enough time to make sure your family is safe. You do the best you can, but there is always that guilty feeling like a shadow that follows me all the time.

Moreover, C8 shared that although the police profession has evolved to be better prepared with challenging times. The cost on the personnel has always been high. C8 said:

As a supervisor I see the toll of the job on the deputies. The work environment today with everyone looking down on us and judging every decision is a heavy burden especially for the new generation of officers. It is a balancing act to keep their moral up and my hope alive. Don't get me wrong I love my job but times have changed. The new recruits come in with little or no life experience. They come in ready to work, but they simply do not know the job. The academies are not teaching basic skills like talking to people, understanding other perspectives, and diversity much less how to deal with the chaos and insanity. It falls on us 'old timers' to teach them. Some want to learn and others are just arrogant and just think they know it all. There are days that I see them learning, but those are far

and few in between. Eventually their lack of human understanding catches up with them and I see them dealing with it through alcohol, infidelity, and gambling. Then they start washing out and calling out and making mistakes. The old guys have to step in and now we are feeling it. That bad feeling never goes away.

Theme 4: Fatigue

Organizational hierarchy, closed society of policing and police culture are aspects of the work environment that contribute to stress (Morash & Kwak, 2006). Because police departments are paramilitary, bureaucratic, and discipline-oriented the results in stressors beyond what can be explained by workplace problems (Morash & Kwak, 2006, p. 544). Dangers associated with the police profession include: workday length, shift work, high crime areas, and personnel assignment also contribute to employee fatigue (Vila et al., 2002). Fatigue in police officers impairs vigilance, reaction time, and performance; thereby, elevating the risk for fatal and non-fatal injuries to both the officers and the general public (Vila et al., 2002).

All the participants except for one spoke of the workload and unrealistic expectations. The officers described how they never feel like there is enough time to recover from their previous shift. Additionally, the participants explained that they find themselves always working. C5 stated:

I come into work tired and somedays are hard. I spend more time at work than I do at home. When I am home I try to spend time with my son. There are days that we can just hangout and relax. But there are other days that my phone just will not

stop ringing. No one seems to respect my off time. My supervisor calls or another

detective. My wife gets on me about answering, but if I do not it bothers me. If

my kid is at a playdate and I don't like telling other parents what I do for a living

because then they start asking me questions or telling me about crimes. I

remember this one time I told a neighbor who just would not stop complaining

that I was not working to call in his complaint. The guy got pissed off and started

cursing me out telling me he pays taxes. I thought you know what an asshole, I

pay taxes too. He is a pool guy I would not start bitching about my pool expecting

him to fix it if he was at my house. It's like this, if I was a lawyer I would not like

people asking me for advice, but then I could shut them up quick if I send them a

bill. As a Cop I can't say, 'I will send you a bill' because people already think I

am on their pay roll. People don't get it we want our time off too. I just can't

shake the cop off.

C4 said:

I have been working for 22 years and I worry all the time. I find that I cannot

seem to relax. Even before the pandemic and the social discourse I noticed there

is a huge chunk of officers missing. I joined the force right before 9/11, but right

after my agency was overwhelmed by new recruits. Like 10 years ago we could

not find officers to join. I am not sure why? It was not too important back then

because there were enough of the old guys to fill in those slots. Now we are

feeling it. We are not recruiting and training fast enough to plug that hole. The

new guys burn out at 4 years and we old guys are tired. I cannot keep up with the

pace, the paperwork, the technology, and all the other crap they throw at us.

Everyone is watching and waiting for me to mess up. Some people really hate us,

well unless they need a Cop then we can't get there fast enough. If I miss

something I feel like the agency is going to put me out. They replace us anyway

because I make enough money to cover two new green guys.

C4 continued:

On top of that I think my hypervigilance is off the chain. I go everywhere

armed and if the places do not allow guns I do not patronize them. I do not

fly or go on cruise. I do not even take my grandchildren to amusement

parks. I know I have to protect them and if I am not carrying my service

weapon then I am vulnerable. It's just the way I am wired. I cannot seem

to relax if I do not know that I can be there to protect them. Today more

than ever we know how dangerous police work is, but for me it always has

been a dangerous time. I just do not like that because of technology and

little protections for Cops we become sitting ducks. I bad guy can follow

me home or threaten my family. I have to follow the law, but they don't.

So I have to prepare and be ready.

Theme 5: Isolation

Enduring consistent stressors can also lead to officers feeling overworked and

exhausted and can lead to burnout (Finn, 2000; Bullock & Garland, 2017; Leiter &

Maslach, 2016). Over time, burnout can be more harmful than basic stress because it can

carry over into the officer's daily routine and home life. Once officers have experienced

burnout, a sense of detachment and cynicism can overcome their mental state (Leigh

Wills & Schuldberg, 2016).

Nine of the participants explained that the police life is very lonely and

their work is costly not only to them, but to their family life.

C3 stated:

I try not to tell people I am cop because I don't want to them to judge me. I work

hard to make sure my family is safe and provided for. But the job cost me my

marriage and family. It was not like I cheated of my wife, but I was not there it

took me a long time to figure it out. I cheated my family out of my time and

attention. I could not share my day with them. I would come from work tired,

spent, and stressed out. I would drink and drink a lot. Then I would zone out in

front of the T. V. and pass out and pretty soon it was time to go back to work. I

could not talk to by wife about my work. Pretty soon we were not talking about

anything. I came home one day and she had moved out. Worst of all she moved

out of state with my daughter. Like I said it took a long time to figure it out.

Similarly, C9 said:

Working in the police field is hard, but it is very hard on the family. I

stayed in Narcotics for all of my career and kept trying to shield my family

from that type of life. I don't recall ever talking to them about cases or

investigations or wanting to. I was someone else at work if was like I had

two personalities. So my family and I had a very normal life, but no one

knew I was a police officer. However, every few years the agency would

rotate me out of Narcotics and the shit got real. I would go to traffic

accidents, shootings, and other horrific calls things I did not have the heart

to share with them. So I kept quiet but there were times I wished would

had talked to someone.

Theme 6: Relevance

Nine of the participants deal with stress in their own way. One talked about

participating with assistance provided by their agency through the Employee Assistance

Program (EAP). C10 talked about seeking outside help through his church and speaking

to a private doctor rather than using the support measures provided through their agency.

Every participant thought that the police profession is stressful and the occupational

stress spills over on to their private lives. Collectively, there is a need for the next

generation of officers to be more prepared and better trained.

C10 stated:

 I heard that there is an Employee Program that can help with the job stress. I was

having trouble sleeping and I had a lot on my mind. I was making stupid

mistakes, and I found myself really short-tempered. My family told me that I was

just 'nasty.' So I went to my priest and I talked to him. After a while I started

looking at my health and dealing with my blood pressure issues. My doctor gave

me some new prescriptions and started working on being more aware of my

stress. I take more time for me. I go to the gym, eat healthier, and try to spend

more time with my family.

C10 said:

I think it only takes a few years and the new guys start getting jaded, cynical, and

overwhelmed by' Cop 'life. I think much like anything else we train, and train but

not on how to deal with stress. If the training starts from day one at the academy

and reinforced on the field I think they would be better off. Self-care is critical to

survival. Knowing who to speak to is just as important as keeping your gun clean.

Breaking the stigma comes with time and a lot of hard work.

Additionally, C8 stated:

Change comes from the top. New recruits look for advice from officers

they respect and from their supervisors, captains, and chain of command.

If the new officers see that those people up top are open and vulnerable

about mental health and wellness then they will too will feel able to seek

out help. Bringing the two spectrums together will come once there is an

open dialogue about mental health support.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore 10 active police officers'

perspectives regarding their lived experiences regarding the barriers that prevent police

officers from seeking mental health support. The central research question and three sub-

questions guided the study. Through semi structured interviews and Colaizzi's methods

of data analysis, five themes emerged in addressing the research questions.

Finding related to the central research question indicated that participants

expressed that they understood that there is a need for mental health support; however,

the barriers that prevent them from seeking help are based on both the police culture and

distrust in their agency. In addition, the officers stated that it is essential to aid the next generation of officers through better training and breaking the stigma associated with mental health assistance. Participants rationalized that because of the stress and trauma associated with police work there is a need for both personal and family support.

Moreover, the findings also indicated that the officers expressed that they were overwhelmed and overworked which negatively influence their lives. Results were consistent with the Policy Feedback Theory. Participants perceived police work as a calling, and knowing that heightened their sense of purpose and the need for agencies to put in place policies to support the mental health needs of their officers.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore barriers that inhibit police officers working in the Tampa Bay region from seeking help for stress management, exposure to trauma, and PTSD interventions ultimately designed to prevent police suicide. The study's purpose was to investigate the relationship between stigma, culture, and the law enforcement organization's impact on the mental health of law enforcement officers working in the Tampa Bay region. Patrol officers, including supervisors and training personnel were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews regarding barriers that prevent them from seeking mental health help. The focus of this study was to understand cultural and organizational issues enabled by policies, procedures, and practices that may lead to police suicide. In-depth one-on-one interviews included open-ended questions in order to gauge officers' knowledge and perspectives regarding police suicide.

Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

The police profession is considered to be based on tradition, secrecy, and physical and mental fitness. Although law enforcement agencies are recognizing the need for personnel to have access to emotional and mental health support, officers are reporting difficulty seeking out such services. There is a disconnection between the police leadership and peace officers regarding stress management and mental health support. To address the research question in the study, each participant was asked to share their experiences and perspectives regarding stress management, policies, and procedures they

experienced during their time with their agencies. Participants said that stigma, mistrust, and cultural fallacies played a major part in the Tampa Bay region.

Central Research Question

The study was designed to answer one central question and three subquestions. The majority of previous studies I researched on police and stress management were found to be of a quantitative nature. These quantitative studies provided numerical information on the effects of stress in law enforcement based on gender, sleep habits, and family life. However, a few studies provided qualitative research explaining how current police officers' personal experiences are exacerbated by professional stress. Many officers are in favor of having better programs focusing on optimal wellness. During interviews, officers identified areas of weakness that involving stress management techniques that promote healthy coping methods for newly appointed officers.

Using Colaizzi's method of data analysis, I concluded that six themes emerged from analyzed data. Findings related to the central research question indicated that officers feel that mental health training should be offered to newly appointed officers as they enter the field. Officers expressed that their exposure to trauma and stress significantly affected their work. Findings related to SQ1 indicated that participants did not trust their agency's policies to protect their identity and properly provide them mental health assistance. Results related to SQ2 indicated that participants had little or no knowledge of policies and procedures to provide mental health support. Although participants indicated their agencies had stress management help available, they did not know how to activate such services while protecting their identity. Finally, results related

to SQ3 indicated that participants recommended that their organizations take an active role in training new recruits involving methods of dealing with stress and using appropriate techniques. Additionally, participants recommended resiliency training and peer support to be continuous to ensure they are exposed to work-related stress.

Participants perceived police work as stressful and were aware of sacrifices that affect every aspect of their lives. The PFT involves promoting policymaking and continual evolution to address social problems. The PFT was an important tool to address changes in police cultures and organizations. This theory involves the creation of agency policies, including allocations of funding and resources to help organize, prioritize, and provide resources for mental health support and ultimately prevent the epidemic of police suicide. This chapter includes viewpoints regarding police officers' lived experiences. I also discuss interpretations of research findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research, implications for practice and social change, as well as concluding observations.

Emic and Etic Perspectives

Given the subjective nature of this qualitative examination, both emic and etic perspectives played a significant role in terms of understanding the phenomenon being addressed. According to Pike (2015), the terms *emic* and *etic* apply to the nature of human behavior, and Yin (2010) said, an emic perspective attempts view a participant's experiences from an insider's perspective. Contrast this with an outsider's etic perspective, which can never fully capture what it really means to be part of the culture. The etic perspective is associated with the researcher since it comprises "the structures

and criteria which developed outside the culture as a frame-work for studying the culture" (Wilson, 2011, p. 100). Ryle (1949) explained the use of a thick description when examining a phenomenon is an approach that can be used to lessen the gap between emic and etic perspectives. The use of thick, rich, and deep descriptions as well as participants' own words serve to reduce researchers' selectivity and forces them to be aware of preconceived notions (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2010).

Yin (2010) said there is a contrast between an insider and outsider's point of view which always exists and must be counted as an influence for the overall work product of the research. However, as a qualitative researcher, it was critical to balance both my emic and etic perspectives as they applied to participants. These participants represented a wide range of perspectives based on their lived experiences. I owe it to the police community to strive for change as officers are struggling to address barriers that prevent them from seeking mental health services.

Interpretation of Findings

In this qualitative study, I sought to uncover lived experiences of 10 active police officers and explore barriers through the lens of participants. Results of the study were interpreted using peer-reviewed literature and the PFT. The study was designed to answer one central research question and three sub questions.

Central Research Question

RQ: How do police officers in the Tampa Bay region describe cultural and organizational barriers that inhibit them from seeking stress management, trauma, and PTSD interventions designed to avert police suicide?

Findings from the central research question are consistent with what was found in peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2. As stated previously, literature shows that law enforcement officers do not receive proper training that enables them to understand when they are suffering from occupational stress, exposure to trauma, and PTSD. Participants in the current study shared they find barriers preventing them from seeking mental help both from cultural and organizational leadership perspectives.

Police officers begin their careers in excellent physical and mental health, but retire early or die from job related stress disorders, which demonstrates the price officers pay as a result of continuous pressure (Waters & Ussery, 2007). Moreover, the police culture emphasizes both control and strength which not only increases despair among some officers but promotes the stigma that dissuades the need for mental health support. As explained in Chapter 2, researchers reported that law enforcement officers are not properly trained to understand and recognized the signs of stress, exposure to trauma, and post- traumatic stress disorders within themselves. Collectively, such symptoms can lead officers to struggle with both mental and physical ailments in silence and may lead to police suicide.

The current study extended this understanding, since the participants expressed that they are not confident their police agencies properly trained them to deal with the occupational stress associated with law enforcement. Although this information was implied in previous studies it was not reviled by current police officers working in the field. Thus, as their careers have moved forward and officers are exposed to more critical incidents, there is an invisible cloud of resentment and distrust which builds a barrier

from seeking mental health support. Contributing to previous findings of this study found that the lack of mental health training allows the officer to suffer in silence and seek out maladaptive behaviors to address in an attempt to handle the occupational stress and trauma they are exposed to daily.

The results for the central research question may be accredited to the PFT. According to Mettler and SoRelle (2018), the PFT creates a shift in police culture based on organizational and unsecular changes in the area of law enforcement as the profession responds to the challenges of their own mental health wellness. The results of the central research questions indicated that the perceived barriers preventing officers from seeking mental health support is incased within both police culture as well as police organizations. One participant shared that "you cannot separate police culture from police organizations because the leadership is made up of police officers." These findings imply that there is bridge between the culture and the organization that creates an atmosphere that discourages police officers from seeking mental health aid.

SQ1

SQ1: How do officers describe strengths and weaknesses of their departments' policies and procedures related to employee assistance programs?

Results for SQ1 indicated that officers are not well aware of their departments' policies and procedures for dealing with work related stress. One participant indicated that they are not aware of any stress management policies or procedures for dealing with stress. Most of the police officers interviewed in this research are passionate in their career but they realize that there is a need for change in the culture.

The police profession is one of the most stressful careers in America (Sayed et al., 2015). If the officers are not well trained in the area of stress management, exposure to trauma, and PTSD the effects can lead the officers to idealized suicide. Maladaptive coping strategies can negatively affect the officer and spill over towards the individual's health, home, and life outside of their careers. Previous research showed that police officers may develop negative habitual patterns such as alcohol use (Violanti et al., 2015). Seven out of the ten participants in this research brought up alcohol consumption. Two officers said they were aware of danger of using alcohol to deal with stress and now they have seek out other de-stressing alternatives.

The current study findings for SQ1 addressed some of the misconceptions about the participants' agency policies and procedures for dealing with police occupational stress and exposure to trauma. One main criticism is the lack of understanding regarding the systems in place. In addition some of the participants implied that they mistrust the process because of a lack of confidentiality and discretion within their organizations as well as personnel. In this study participants reported the need for resiliency and stress management skills they are confident such training help them after prolong period within the police career.

SQ2

SQ1: How do officers describe strengths and weaknesses of their departments' policies and procedures related to employee assistance programs?

SQ2: How do officers describe their personal performance as it relates to policies and procedures implemented by agencies to address occupational stress?

In fact, participant C1 explained that although their agency has resources for mental health there is a well-founded fear associated with them. There was a perception of how an outsider trying to provide support and aid seems more like a foreign concept rather than a relief. Officers have been described as reticent to interacting apart from the policing domain whether for safety or comfort (Boivin et al., 2018; Paoline & Gau, 2017; Wang et al., 2010). In this study as well, participants indicated a high discomfort when receiving services from a non-law enforcement member due to their inability to relate to the police officer path.

Stigma associated with mental health services can impact one's social identity (Corrigan, 2004) and embarrassment and fear can discourage service utilization (Crank, 2014). Because of the nature involving the police field, the participants in this study all had to deal with stress in their own way. Patterson et al. (2014) found that having a support system in place for police officers was fundamental to keeping mentally healthy officers. Officers should have a program in place that they can seek out assistance without fearing or worrying about ridicule or repercussions. A finding in this study that is very disturbing is that only one of the participants knew of the mental health programs available to seek out assistance for stress or any other issue that was affecting them mentally, emotionally, and psychologically.

Collectively, the participants recommended that training should start at the academy level. Arensman et al., (2016) reported that police officers would be willing to engage in alternative therapeutic practices if offered by their academies, agencies, and departments. Some of the participants in the current study shared how their respective

departments have access to chaplains, employee assistance program (EAP), and peer

support groups. McDonnell (2009), the participants in the current study were aware of the

EAP accessible through their police department, but the findings from sub question 1 and

sub question 2 extended knowledge in the field as the participants provided reasons why

officers chose or fear not to use the program.

In the current study, participants noted that the employee assistance program is

not readily available to officers, or rather the participants do not feel that they can seek

out their support without serious consequences. One participant revealed that in order to

activate the assistance of EAP they had to explain that they were struggling with an

immediate significant crisis to a supervisor or head of Human Resources. The officer also

shared that they fear that the information would not be keep confidential. Thus, these

findings could be attributed to what Andersen and Papazoglou (2014) reported that police

officers might not seek out mental health professionals because they are afraid of being

stigmatized or facing negative reactions from their peers.

SQ3

SQ3: What are officers' recommendations for improving policies and

procedures regarding employee assistance programs that might deter officers from

suicide ideation?

The literature in Chapter 2 addressed the position that previous studies tend to

promote" officer wellness" for police officer; however, the studies lacked a clear path of

how to break the stigma and fear associated mental health support (Chopko et al., 2013).

The results of Sub question 3 indicated that current police officers understand the need

for stress management, exposure to trauma, PTSD and police suicide ideation. Findings related to Sub question 3 extended the knowledge in the discipline as it provides recommendations from police officers' perception of how to improve the policies and procedures for dealing with occupational stresses that might lead officers toward police suicide ideation.

Current study findings for SQ3 revealed that participants recommended their police organization should offer more immediate mental health support services. One participant suggested that after the police academy newly appointed officers should receive continual mental health support as part of the field training program and as part of their agency training. Participants noted that this type of stress management training is as critical as firearms training, driving, and legal updates. Another participant recommended that police organizations can support the mental wellness of each officer. One participant suggested that newly appointed officers should be better prepared to deal with stress management and critical incident support. Participant C8 stated, "Green officers, newbies should get the best training, best equipment, and the best of everything including preparing them for a Cop life." This includes starting to break the mindset of police culture in regarding the stigma associated with mental and emotional support.

Administrative Police Culture

An examination of the responses for this study regarding administrative support for law enforcement officers seeking mental health services demonstrated another possible barrier. Results from the study indicated that the law enforcement officers who participated do not perceive supervisors as placing importance on their mental health.

The current study also found that although agencies are providing various mental health avenues, the field supervisors do not support the use of such services. These findings were also supported in the literature, as Della (2004), found that law enforcement leadership does not actively encourage officers in seeking mental health services, and in fact can contribute to the stigma associated with them shunning away. The authors of the study concluded that such negative view of mental health services by police leadership can lead officers feeling inadequate within their professional roles, which can further impact the officers' mental health support, and those findings were echoed in this study.

An interesting finding within the current study was the theme of distrust and misunderstanding. Participants overall reported that they personally not feel confident in asking a colleague or supervisor how to access mental health services. Given the results from the current study, along with support from previous literature, it appears that the current police culture impacts law enforcement officers' perceptions and creates a barrier which prevents officers from seeking mental health support.

Threat to Officer Careers and Lives

Law enforcement officers are often hesitant to ask for services due to fear that it could have a negative impact on their careers (Caelli et al., 2003; Fox & Holt, 2018; Violanti et al., 2015; Wester & Lyubelsky, 2005). Another question that surfaced from this study's results, as well as previous literature is whether the threat to law enforcement officers' job were perceptions or reality.

The current study revealed that in a number of areas the threats had materialized due to the officer's firsthand experiences. Therefore, these threats were not just

perceptions, but for the officer a reality based on their personal experiences. Participant revealed that they had firsthand knowledge of other colleagues being placed on leave, being committed, having their guns, vehicles, and equipment removed, and ultimately losing their jobs when they were placed under the care of psychological services. These results lead to a deeper understanding regarding the hesitation to seek mental health support, which is supported by the research related to fear and negative impact perceived on the officers' careers (Violanti et al., 2015; Wester & Lyubelsky, 2005.

Development for Practice in the Law Enforcement Field

Law enforcement departments and organizations could benefit from the results of this current study, since it offers insight into police officers' perception of mental health support and the barriers based on both police culture as well as police organization that prevent them from seeking such services. The current study revealed that despite police departments efforts in improving their agencies' policies, and procedures for increasing awareness that mental health services are available many of their police officers often do not feel comfortable seeking such support. Russo et al., (2020) reported similar findings. Moreover, these findings demonstrated the need for law enforcement agencies to evaluate their current policies and procedures that encourages their personnel in seeking mental health services, especially after being exposed to a critical and or traumatic incident.

Police Officers' Perceptions are Their Reality

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of law enforcement officers working in the Tampa Bay region and the barriers based on culture and organization that prevent them from seeking mental health support. The findings of this

study indicated an overarching hesitation by law enforcement officer to seek mental health services. As previous research on the topic has suggested (Karaffa & Koch, 2015), the study also found that although law enforcement agencies are making strides in mental health services more accessible training should be offered to the next generation of police officers in an effort to change the police culture and organization.

The data collected for this study suggested that police officers perceptions about seeking mental health support were often more negative than what they had actually perceived or witnessed. Also this study found police leadership is affected by the police mindset also known as police culture. Future research endeavors should include more specificity in addressing these barriers and evaluation of how police agencies conceptualize perception and reality of these challenges. This could be achieved through a multitude of instruments to evaluate various components.

Recommendations

This was a qualitative investigation that incorporated elements of phenomenology, aiming to identify the barriers both -cultural and organizational- that prevent police officers working the Tampa Bay region from seeking mental health support. Exploring the officer's points of view allowed for a rich perspective of lived experiences which adds to what is currently known regarding the influence of police culture and police organization as they address the matter of the officers' mental health. Especially occupational stress, trauma, PTSD and leading to epidemic of police suicide.

Despite the expectations, the police officers in this study did not address the issue of changing their attitudes toward seeking out mental health support. However, the

participants insisted they want newly recruited officers to have the opportunity to be better prepared for the stress, trauma, and over obstacles they might face in the police career. Therefore, a recommendation for practice to implement.

Departments could also utilize the results of this study to identify the gaps in their policies and procedures regarding making mental health mandates. This may include components such as officers allowing officers' access to mental health services and support in an anonymous matter. This will be helpful in decreasing the stigma based on fear that seeking mental health services may negatively impact their life and police career. The current study identified from the officer's perspective their hesitation and reluctance to seek out mental health support. This finding was supported in a study conducted by Violanti et al., 2012), which offers imperative evidence for law enforcement departments to consider to address such barriers.

This current study offers findings that demonstrate the importance police agencies to evaluate their current protocols for officers seeking mental health services. Departments should offer assistance at various levels, including improving law enforcement morale, as well as evaluating the training received by newly appointed officers. This ultimately can deter the effects of maladaptive coping skills which could lead officers to complete suicide.

Changing mindset and culture will take time and effort, but is a critical step that needs to be taken. A key recommendation is to build a strong relationships between officers and their leadership to bridge the gap between field officers and management which is it crucial to break stigma associated with mental health support by redefining

police culture and the organization. I strongly recommend police departments develop polices based on the importance of mental health support for all their employees. Agencies should build a strong development programs the aim of which is to identify areas, incidents, and training where officers can seek out assistance without fear or worry that they would be classified as broken or damaged.

This study allows for more transparency for the general public, police administrators, field training officers, and police officers to understand that there should not be any fear or share when seeking mental health support. Some recommendations would be to review all policies and procedures with newly appointed officers and their families when joining the agency as well as providing additional support throughout their careers. Additionally, Maiorano et al. (2017) suggested that an aggressive social media campaign can effectively reduce the stigma associated with mental health services for the general public.

A suggestion for future research could include replicating this qualitative study in which the researcher establishes rapport with participants and conducts a semi-structured interview process to gain a more thorough understanding of law enforcement officers' subjective perspectives. However, the difficulty of conducting further research would be that many law enforcement officer distrust outsiders who are not familiar with their professional zone (Violanti et al., 2015; Wester & Lyubelsky, 2005), so having a researcher who is also an officer would help create trust.

Implications for Social Change

Findings of this study can encourage social change by informing police training centers, academies, and law enforcement agencies of the need to address the need for mental health policies, training, and over-all awareness. This study can inform police leadership of a perspective based on lived experiences of officers who have suffered because of the stigma associated with emotional and mental health support. The importance of this help can help police officers themselves to develop more effective and healthier coping mechanism.

By focusing on reducing the stigma associated with officers seeking mental health support agencies can improve the quality of life of their personnel as well as reduce some of the occupational stress associated with police work. Additional research in the area of training acceptance, implementation, and behavior change could bring for the inclusion of more understanding for support services for officers, their families, and communities regarding mental health and wellness. Also, the benefit of exposing newly appointed officers to mental health support assistance may perhaps help bridge the obvious gap of mistrust between officers and their organization.

In addition, the results of this study gives agencies an opportunity to listen to the officers on the field as well gives the officers a buy-in to promote change. Findings from this research study may also raise awareness of the lack of knowledge and understanding of the mental health policies, procedures, and guidelines that are currently available and how the officers respond to such. C5 shared:

I don't really understand what the rules for asking for counseling are. I know so many of us our hurting. We keep losing officers nationwide because of ambushes, attacks, illness, or suicide. It is very stressful and each day it gets worth. I had one of my squad members take their own lives. It has been a few years, but I remember like it was yesterday. I wish there was more that I could have done. This really haunts me. I was a supervisor and should had known better. I didn't know to activate any services. I wish I could go back, but that is impossible. Now I just want supervisors, and officers to be better prepared.

C8 stated:

As the world changes and more challenges come to law enforcement practitioners it is our responsibility to do better. I know it only takes a few years for the shine and smiles to be wiped out. After the new guys are exposed to the harshness of the streets they change. They are jaded and harden and getting to them is so hard. I have seen them at their breaking point. They are looking for guidance, help, and leadership. Everyone is vulnerable and everyone needs to be mentally strong.

Conclusions

My research intent was to promote understanding, raise awareness, and to clear misconceptions both cultural and organizational barriers that prevent officers working in the Tampa Bay region from seeking mental health support. This study supports that the lack of comfort, understanding, and knowledge of mental health services in law enforcement may be overcome by training, practice, and awareness. Results from this phenomenological study supported previous research findings that confirm there are

barriers that prevent officers from seeking mental health support and therefore not providing them with the proper training to manage stress among police officers.

The perceptions and experiences revealed by police officers in the study demonstrated the reality that law enforcement is lacking in the areas of mental health support based on the stigma created by the culture and the organization surrounding the law enforcement field. C6 stated, "We heard about mental health services available during roll calls, but no one talks about how to reach out without being stigmatized." Federal, state, municipal and local law enforcement agencies may find this study beneficial for promoting training and developing a system in place that will address the barriers that prevent officers from seeking mental health support. Investing in police officer wellness through policies and reforms can lead to higher work engagement, employment dedication, and improved performance (Crank, 2014). Thus, understanding the lived experiences of police officers may help build a bridge between stigma culture, and organization with dealing stress management, exposure to trauma, PTSD, and deterring police suicide.

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Appendix A: Letter of Organizational Request

Date:

Partner Organization Contact Information:

Dear (Partner Organization Name):

My name is Jessica J. Ziegler, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am researching for my dissertation on the topic of how do police officers in the Tampa Bay region describe the cultural and organizational barriers that inhibit them from seeking stress management, trauma, and PTSD interventions designed to avert police suicide. Law Enforcement's perception is critical for the study. There are a few studies that have discussed the positive and negative impact on stress management training from a police officer's point of view. Moreover, little is known about an officer's point of view, lived experiences, and perceptions as it relates to police culture and stigma associated seeking stress management help.

Although I am a Deputy Sheriff in Pasco Sheriff's Office, I do not have direct access to the population within your organization and therefore I need your assistance to conduct my research. I am respectfully asking you for an opportunity to speak to your troops and explain my study to fellow police officers at your department. I have taken the liberty to attach a flyer that includes all information detailing qualifications, participation requirements, and how to contact me directly as the researcher to be considered or learn more about the study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, confidential, and participants are and will always be free to withdraw from the process at any time.
I appreciate your assistance with this matter. I would welcome a telephone call or email from you to discuss any questions, concerns, or issues regarding this study or your role in the recruitment process. I can be reached at (813) 562-7271 or via email at Jessica.ziegler@waldenu.edu.

In advance, I thank you for time and I look forward to working with members of your agency.

Sincerely,

Jessica Jude Ziegler
Walden University Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Appendix C: Letter of Recruitment

Dear (Participant's Name):

My name is Jessica Jude Ziegler, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am researching for my dissertation exploring Law Enforcement's perception the barriers that prevent Law Enforcement Officers in the Tampa Bay region from seeking mental help and measures to prevent police suicide.

I realize due to the nature of your work that your time is precious, and I appreciate your consideration to participate in my study. If you choose to participate the process will consist of one face to face interview that will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes at a private meeting location and time that is convenient for you. Also, you will be given a consent form to review and sign before the interview. The form outlines your rights as a participant in the study and that all information gathered during the interview will be **kept confidential**.

If you have any questions regarding my study, please feel free to contact me.

If you are interested in participating in the study the first step is to complete the screening questionnaire below and return it to me via email at your earliest convenience.

In advance, I thank you for your assistance with my study.

Sincerely,

Jessica Jude Ziegler
Walden University Doctoral Candidate

Screening Questionnaire:

1. **What is your name and contact information?**

2. **Are you currently an active police/deputy sheriff employed in an agency in the Tampa Bay region who is employed fulltime, has successfully completed both FTO and one year probation and has at least two years on the force?**

3. **Would you be willing to share your perceptions regarding the barriers that may prevent officers from seeking mental health support which may avert police suicide?**

4. **If you decide to participate in my study, would you agree to sign a consent form and agree for the interview to be audio-taped (recorded) Please remember everything will be kept CONFIDENTIAL?**

5. **After the interview, would you be willing to verify the accuracy of the material from your interview transcript that will be emailed to you once the audiotape recording is transcribed? (Not required for participation).**