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Law Enforcement Officers' Experiences with Secondary Traumatic Stress and Coping While Working with Child Molesters

Aaliyah Blanding
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Aaliyah L. Blanding

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Review Committee

Dr. Ethel Perry, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty
Dr. Teaonna Watson, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2026

Abstract

Law Enforcement Officers' Experiences With Secondary Traumatic Stress
and Coping While Working With Child Molesters

by

Aaliyah L. Blanding

MA, Claflin University, 2019

BS, South Carolina State University, 2017

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

This study was focused on law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive model of stress and coping were used to examine how law enforcement officers manage stress, focusing on their cognitive processes and thought patterns. Using a basic qualitative approach, eight law enforcement officers who work with child molesters in the state of South Carolina were interviewed to hear their personal experiences.

Interviews were semi-structured interview questions via a video-conferencing platform.

The data were analyzed and coded using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis.

The study's findings confirmed that police officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters had emotional effects on law enforcement officers. Three main themes emerged from the interviews: secondary traumatic stress, coping mechanisms (positive/negative), and emotional turmoil. One subtheme was: avoidance/suppression. Social change can be encouraged through the findings by raising awareness and emphasizing officer wellness, mental health support, and de-stigmatizing conversations about mental health in law enforcement.

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Dedication

I dedicate this page to my immediate family (70). To my mommy Stacey, I love you so much. Thank you for instilling in me to always chase after my dreams no matter what circumstances I'm facing. I will always continue to thrive and make you proud. To my daddy Marvin, I love you so much. Daddy, thank you for always showing us tough love growing up. You taught me how to manage and keep pushing when things are not black and white. You never accepted failure and always told us to continue going even when we wanted to quit. Thank you for that. To my siblings, Ashley, MJ, and Damarion you know how I feel about each of you. It's we always discuss, once one of us makes it... it's a wrap. Just know I love y'all dearly and I wouldn't trade y'all for the world. Our bond is so unbreakable it gets scary because when things get crazy, I know I have y'all to reach out to and make my world better. I love y'all. To my nephew Jhaiden, truth be told I should have included you with the rest of my siblings because we were raised more like siblings than aunt and uncle. Nonetheless, nothing has changed. Like I always tell you, I love you and I'm proud of the young man you're becoming. Just know whatever you need, just know your sister/auntie got you only IF You tell me, you love me each time you see or talk to me 🍌🍌. Last but not least, Grandma Irene, like I said previously you hurt me deep and it was a major setback, but God needed you more with him than with us. I started my doctoral program with you here physically and unfortunately; I'm finishing it up with you spiritually. I wish you were here to see this achievement, but I know you are looking down on me and saying congratulations. I did it grandma and I love and miss you so much. I will continue to make you proud.

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I would like to acknowledge my dissertation chair Dr. Ethel Perry. Thank you for taking your time with me and being patient. It was a pleasure working with you and I am forever grateful to be blessed to have you as my chair. Your words of encouragement and knowledge helped me gain resilience and reassured me that I would complete this journey. Thank you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The situation that prompted this study is to understand law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. These cases can cause secondhand trauma as well as chronic stress for police officers (Denk-Florea et al., 2020). Investigators frequently experience stress due to the nature of their tasks as well as other negative emotions when working on cases that involve child sexual exploitation and abuse (Faisel, 2023). During investigations, law enforcement professionals (LEP) may deal with vast amounts of evidence containing millions of images and videos spread across multiple technology devices (Denk-Florea et al., 2020). Existing literature indicates that police officers experience traumatic stress when repeatedly exposed to materials involving children and sexual content. In a study with 63 detectives who worked in the Family Protection Unit in the UK, who primarily interact with child protection and abuse investigations, over half experienced STS symptoms, with 11% reporting high or severe symptoms (MacEachern, 2019).

Aside from the difficulty in viewing distressing material, this exposure may have severely impacted LEP's long-term welfare. Law enforcement personnel's welfare may become severely negatively impacted because of the contact with other people's traumatic experiences, which can lead to the development of trauma-associated symptoms. Law enforcement officers who work to deter online sexual criminality are indirectly exposed to traumatic events regularly (Bourke & Craun, 2011). Police officers have described being burned out, experiencing secondary traumatic stress, or vicarious trauma (Parkes et

al., 2019). But there is little literature that explores police exposure to sexual offenses and the impact it has on their psychological well-being.

The following sections in this chapter contain additional background information on law enforcement experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. The purpose, research question, conceptual framework, nature of the study, and definitions are also included. The chapter also discusses the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance as they relate to the current research.

Background

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is the problematic emotional and behavioral reactions that manifest from indirect exposures to traumatic experiences (Brady, 2017). Currently, the Fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) now identifies STS as a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that manifests through indirect exposures to traumatized populations as a result of work-related experiences (Brady, 2017). Work-related risk factors, including recurrent indirect contact with disturbing materials, low organizational support, and feeling overwhelmed at work are all linked with higher secondary traumatic stress and burnout in addition to lower levels of compassion satisfaction (Brady, 2017). Conducting investigations on child-exploitation may affect the well-being of detectives. Typically, cases of this nature involves both sexual abuse and violence, which causes emotional stress on law enforcement officers who must investigate these crimes. Over time, officers may become less reactive as they develop emotional insensitivity (Denk-Florea et al., 2020).

Coping strategies can help reduce secondary traumatic stress (Denk-Florea et al., 2020). To cope with such complex emotions, law enforcement officers remain objective by disengaging from their feelings during the investigations (Ahern et al., 2017). Further, some coping strategies used by police officers and civilian police staff in this study are categorized into three parts: those that involve avoidance of the material through minimizing exposure, those that seek detach from the reality of the offense or victim cognitively; and those where individuals focus on the process of undertaking investigative tasks or on their role as police officer as a shield against personal thoughts or feelings (Parkes et al., 2019). The use of humor, peer support, training/education, organizational support, mental and physical fitness, and encouraging a sense of control by some law enforcement officers may also foster their well-being outside of interactions with witnesses (Ahern et al., 2017). Law enforcement officers who express their traumatic experiences to their spouses and seek social support are less likely to experience psychological distress than their peers who choose not to disclose their traumatic experiences. Law enforcement officers who investigate internet child exploitation have described the importance of mentally preparing themselves before viewing traumatic images to get into the right ‘head space (Ahern et al., 2017).

Viewing distressing material harms law enforcement officers; however, not all members of law enforcement are affected. Multiple studies have shown that law enforcement officers within the same agency experience different levels of change in STS symptoms. Differences in the severity of impact were also found across agencies located in various countries (Denek et al., 2020). For example, the STS scores of a UK sample of

law enforcement officers were compared to a sample of law enforcement officers from the United States. It was found that 10.4% of British law enforcement officers scored in the severe category of secondary traumatic stress as compared to 15.3% of U.S. personnel (Denek et al., 2020). In addition, a larger proportion of British law enforcement officers scored in the low or no secondary traumatic stress category (36.9%) as compared to their U.S. counterparts (26.4%) (Denek et al., 2020). Personal factors, including the social support officers receive at work and at home, as well as the coping strategies they employ, actively shape these variations in impact.

The study was needed because it will provide knowledge about law enforcement officers' well-being when encountering child molesters. The study will also provide insight into how investigators can improve their proficiency when working with child sexual abuse cases and ways to mitigate STS and adapt healthy coping mechanisms.

Problem Statement

STS describes symptoms that correlate with PTSD (Greinacher et al., 2019). It can also cause depression and anxiety as well as feeling of helplessness, confusion, isolation, and symptoms of STS (Greinacher et al., 2019). Police officers are among the first to respond to critical incidents, which increases their exposure to emotionally challenging and unpredictable situations. Being exposed to life-threatening incidents, traumatic situations, working with survivors and their families, and often recovering the dead and injured may, over time, overwhelm the individuals' capability to adapt and cope, resulting in high levels of stress (Greinacher et al., 2019). Officers reported

becoming stressed when interviewing child sex offenders and would only show empathy towards them after they confessed to the crime.

Although researchers have investigated this issue, there is little on understanding STS in police officers who deal with child sexual abuse cases. With only three studies addressing STS in police officers, researchers still lack sufficient knowledge about officers' susceptibility to the adverse traumatic effects of investigating child sexual abuse cases. Most of the attention around the development of Secondary Traumatic Stress and Vicarious Trauma in helping professionals has focused on therapists and social workers. There is little to no research around the development of STS in police officers who investigate child sexual abuse (Hurrell et al., 2019). Increased exposure to childhood sexual abuse has been associated with higher levels of STS (Hurrell et al., 2019). Positive coping strategies, negative coping strategies, anxiety, and depression all have a strong, positive relationship with traumatic stress (Hurrell et al., 2019). Thus, research in this area is warranted. This study was conducted to understand how police officers experience stress and use coping strategies when working with child molesters.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of law enforcement officers with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters in the State of South Carolina. Police officers endure a lot throughout their time when working with child molesters. Most times, police officers do not seek professional help when working with sensitive cases such as child sexual abuse. This work can lead to stress, trauma, and some forms of PTSD (McMakin & LaFretta, 2021)

Research Question

What are law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters in the state of South Carolina?

Conceptual Framework

The transactional theory of stress and coping, proposed by Lazarus and Folkman, has been the framework for explaining stress and coping research over the past five decades (Biggs et al., 2017). Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping describes how people are continuously appraising stimuli in their environment (Biggs et al., 2017). This appraisal process elicits emotions, and when individuals perceive stimuli as threatening, challenging, or harmful (i.e., stressors), they experience distress that triggers coping strategies to manage their emotions or directly address the stressor (Biggs et al., 2017). During the coping process, an individual may experience a favorable, unfavorable, or unresolved outcome. When an individual has a favorable resolution of stressors, they may exhibit positive emotions; however, unresolved, or unfavorable resolutions result in distress, causing the individual to explore alternative coping options to minimize the stressor. Two coping strategies for managing stress are problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Coping involves constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding a person's resources (Biggs et al., 2017). Thus, this was an appropriate framework to explore law enforcement officers' exposure to STS through working on child exploitation cases and potential coping strategies for dealing with this stress.

Nature of Study

This study used a basic qualitative approach to understand Law Enforcement Officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. In conducting a basic qualitative study, the researcher aims to learn about and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these (Merriam, 2002). I employed a basic qualitative approach to examine how detectives interpret and make sense of situations involving child molesters. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with detectives in South Carolina who primarily work with child molesters. After conducting the interview, I transcribed them using a program in Microsoft Word.

Definitions

Child Molester: A person who sexually assaults or abuses children.

Child Sexual Abuse: interaction between a child and an adult (or another child) in which the child is used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2024).

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS): Stress deriving from helping others who are suffering or who have been traumatized (Greinacher et al., 2019).

Assumptions

It was assumed that each participant would understand the nature of the study and answer each question regarding stress and coping truthfully. I also assumed each participant would be a detective employed by an accredited police department and would primarily work on child abuse and sexual cases. Each participant was also expected to

share their experiences in depth, allowing me to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. These assumptions are necessary in the context of the study because I assumed each participant who voluntarily participated met all requirements and understood the study in its entirety.

Scope and Delimitations

This study's participants included police officers (detectives) who work on child abuse cases daily. In this study, I focused on their perceptions of STS and coping while working with child molesters. The study excluded any police officer who lacked experience in child abuse cases. I ensured that all detectives are certified police officers in the state of South Carolina, and there will be no biases or personal relationships with participants. All participants received a consent form, and it was explained to each participant in full for their understanding and transferability. Potential transferability emerged once the analysis revealed consistent themes and codes capturing detectives' emotional experiences with child molesters.

Limitations

The sample size is one limitation of this study. A sample size that is smaller than necessary would have insufficient statistical power to answer the research question, and a statistically nonsignificant result could merely be because of inadequate sample size (Andrade, 2020). To avoid having a small sample size, I posted a recruitment flyer for the study inside police departments in South Carolina to recruit participants. To avoid any biases that may arise within the study, I did not have a personal relationship with any of the participants, and I randomly selected participants.

Significance

This research addresses the gap in research on how law enforcement officers deal with stress and coping while working with child molesters. These results of the study can provide law enforcement officers with new strategies for coping. Additionally, additional resources for police departments can be provided to help mitigate STS and implement healthy coping skills for those who may be suffering from STS or PTSD. For example, the stress and trauma of the job negatively impact law enforcement officers and their families (Grant & turns, 2022). But solution-focused brief therapy allows law enforcement officers to focus on envisioning their desired future rather than on past experiences. Implementing various programs to support the mental health of police officers within the department would be beneficial for their well-being. Understanding the stressors affecting law enforcement officers allows agencies to identify and implement programs that best support their mental health.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the focus of the study, which was understanding law enforcement officers' experiences with STS and coping while working with child molesters. The chapter supports why this research topic needs to be explored further to have a clear and concise understanding of the mental state of police officers investigating child molesters. This chapter explained the purpose of the study, research question, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definition of key concepts, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations. These sections provided an overview and introduction to the study of law enforcement officers' experiences with STS and coping

while working with child molesters. Chapter 2 will discuss the literature search strategy used to gather information from previous studies on the research topic, conceptual framework, and literature review related to key concepts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study was conducted to explore how police officers in South Carolina cope with STS when working with child molesters. Police officers endure a lot throughout their time when working with child molesters. Most times, police officers do not seek professional help when working with sensitive cases such as child sexual abuse. This work can lead to stress, trauma, and some forms of PTSD (McMakin & LaFretta, 2021). In recent years, child sexual abuse cases have been on the rise. But law enforcement officers must maintain an unbiased persona when dealing with these cases. By doing so, this can cause stress and unhealthy coping skills amongst police officers. Many researchers have found that police officers working in child abuse and sexual assault investigations are at a higher risk of encountering poor mental health and experiencing burnout and secondary trauma (Hurrell et al., 2021). However, there is minimal research that explains the effect child molesters have on law enforcement personnel and how their mental health is constantly declining.

This chapter will summarize the extant research about how law enforcement officers cope with stress while working with child molesters and how it negatively impacts the mental health of those investigators who deal with child sexual abuse cases regularly.

Literature Search Strategy

I have restricted my research to the past 5 years when conducting literature research. Due to the topic becoming more prominent, I had to be very specific about the terms I was searching for, which included law enforcement and their perspectives. I

selected the following research databases: PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, International Security & Counter-Terrorism Reference Center, and SocINDEX. The key terms were used to select relevant research articles related to my topic: *Pedophile, Child Molester, sexually abuse child, Psychology and Children, Sex Crimes, Crimes against Children Child Sexual Abuse, Grooming, child sexual exploitation materials, law enforcement, Secondary traumatic stress, Internet crimes against children, Digital forensics, Child pornography, cognitive theory, moral injury, compassion, and burnout.*

Conceptual Framework

Lazarus et al. (1986) argued that the cognitive theory of psychological stress and coping is transactional, viewing the person and the environment as engaged in a dynamic, mutually reciprocal, bidirectional relationship. Researchers conceptualize stress as a relationship between the person and the environment that the person appraises as taxing or exceeding their resources, thereby endangering their well-being. The theory identifies two processes, cognitive appraisal and coping, as critical mediators of stressful person-environment relationships and their immediate and long-term outcomes (Folkman et al., 1996).

Folkman and Lazarus originally proposed the Cognitive Phenomenological Model of Stress and Coping; however, Patterson reintroduced the model in 2008. This model describes how to facilitate stress management groups for police officers. This study used the cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping as the framework for understanding law enforcement officers' experiences with stress and coping while working with child molesters.

The Cognitive Phenomenological Model of Stress and Coping comprises several key components, including anxiety, cognitive appraisal, and coping. Patterson (2008) hypothesized that stress and stressors represent a relationship between the person and their environment, in which the person appraises the situation as taxing or exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being. An individual's cognitive appraisal process determines the level of stress experienced. Cognitive appraisal is defined as the process that individuals use to assess the impact of a stressful event on their psychological or physical well-being (Patterson, 2008). Two forms of cognitive appraisal are associated with the theory, and both influence subsequent coping strategies (Patterson, 2008).

Primary appraisal evolves around what is at stake in a stressful situation. During a stressful event, an individual assesses what is at stake by considering their self-esteem, health, safety, or physical well-being, as well as threats to a loved one's well-being.

Patterson examined secondary appraisal by assessing whether a person can or cannot change a stressful event. According to Patterson, coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts that a person uses to manage specific external and/or internal demands that they appraise as taxing or exceeding their resources.

Moreover, Patterson (2002) designed a self-report checklist to gain a better understanding of the cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping, which acknowledges the roles of person variables, cognitive appraisal, coping responses, and stress outcomes. The checklist items originated from the Police Stress Survey, the Law Enforcement Critical Life Events Scale, the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, the Screening Score, the Epidemiological Studies' Depression Scale, the Ways of Coping

Questionnaire, and four items used to measure cognitive appraisal. These items were selected based on showing psychometric properties in previous research. Patterson (2002) found that adjustments to the CES-Depression Scale preserved the scale's psychometric properties. However, the present study obtained some low reliability values using the Ways of Coping Questionnaire, which is consistent with previous studies that have reported similar findings. Folkman and Lazarus (2008) suggested that reliability coefficients obtained for coping measures tend to be at the low end of acceptable ranges because, when different coping strategies are being measured simultaneously, an individual's use of one strategy decreases the chances that other coping strategies will be used.

As part of the cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping, problem-solving and emotion-focused coping have been identified as effective ways to cope during stressful situations. Problem-solving coping includes aggressive interpersonal efforts to change the stressful situation as well as efforts to solve problems related to stressors (Violanti, 2001). Emotion-focused coping tends to decrease stress and maintain emotional well-being, encompassing strategies such as distancing, self-control, escape, accepting responsibility, and reinterpreting stressors in a positive light (Violanti, 2001). When an individual's self-esteem is in jeopardy, using confrontive coping (problem-focused coping) is associated with greater self-control (emotion-focused coping), increased acceptance of responsibility (emotion-focused coping), more escape-avoidance (emotion-focused coping), and less seeking of social support (Patterson, 2008). When stressful events are appraised as changeable, individuals use more confrontive coping

(problem-focused coping), planful problem solving (problem-focused coping), and positive reappraisal (emotion-focused coping; (Patterson, 2008). Stressful events that are appraised as changeable are associated with the use of problem-focused coping strategies and less depression, and emotion-focused coping is associated with more depression (Patterson, 2008). Additionally, in response to stressful events perceived as unchangeable, individuals use more distancing and escape-avoidance (emotion-focused coping) as problem-focused coping is ineffective (Patterson, 2008). However, when a particular coping strategy does not fit or match the appraisal of a stressful event, the appraisals can have a potentially negative impact on psychological well-being.

Therefore, the use of problem-focused coping strategies in response to stressful events appraised as unchangeable is likely to result in feelings and expressions of frustration and anger (Patterson, 2008).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts.

Evolution of Child Molesters and Law Enforcement

A group of law enforcement officials first mentioned the term ‘grooming’ in the late 1970s to describe the seduction pattern of offender behavior that most professionals had misunderstood. Initially, sexual victimization of children focused on cases perpetrated by strangers (Lanning, 2018). Between 1975 and 1985, law enforcement personnel became more aware of acquaintance offenders and the challenges they presented to investigators. In 1977, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) 1977 established a specialized unit called the "Sexually Exploited Child Unit" to focus on cases that involve victims whose perpetrators are acquaintances. Eventually, other law

enforcement agencies around the country became aware of the specialized unit and soon established similar units within their departments (Lanning, 2018).

In 1982, a monograph was published by Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America addressing child molesters sexually assaulting the children within the organization. A forensic psychiatrist, Park E. Dietz, in 1983 observed, "For every paraphilia, there is some job or hobby that provides exposure to the preferred imagery, and paraphilics selectively gravitate to these activities as witnessed by the periodic scandals about pedophiles working with youngsters" (Dietz, 1983, as cited in Lanning, 2018 p. 1490). In January 1984, the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin published an issue centering on pedophilia. In this issue, two of the articles focused on the sexual exploitation of children and explained the concerns of offenders gaining access to victims through their occupation or vocation (Lanning, 2018).

Child Sexual Exploitation Material

Today, the use of the internet to engage in sexual offending has become a big issue in society. This societal issue increases stress among law enforcement personnel due to the distressing material they encounter. Offenders who engage in child sexual exploitation material differ from those offenders who have physical contact with a child. According to Christensen and Tsagaris (2020), offenders who engage in child sexual exploitation material are usually younger and less likely to be a racial minority. These offenders are usually very smart and have a great profession.

Previous research found that law enforcement and social attitudes may have a different perception of child sexual exploitation material. In an Australian study, the

authors found that over 90% of participants agreed that viewing such provocative images was harmful (Christensen & Tsagaris, 2020). The researchers asked participants what harm might result from child pornography, and 1 in 10 participants believed it caused no further harm. When the word "viewing" was replaced with the word "distributing", -1 in every 15 participants believed there was no further harm. The authors of the study suggested that these perceptions correlated with child sexual exploitation material being ethically neutral, disconnect from child abuse.

Effects of Child Sexual Abuse Cases on Investigating Officers

Proving child sexual abuse is an ultimate challenge for law enforcement personnel. Child sexual exploitation occurs when someone forces or tempts a child into sexual activity, including physical contact, penetration through rape or oral sex, non-penetrative acts, producing illegal child images, encouraging or forcing a child to watch sexual activities, or grooming a child online for abuse by a male or female perpetrator (Faisal, 2023). Police departments consider the investigation process multifaceted and categorize it as a special unit. The investigators must investigate victims, offenders, those who see illegal images of children, and inspect other potential materials that may be disturbing.

In the United States, the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation Act prohibits the sexual exploitation of minors by making it unlawful for any person to knowingly: (1) cause a minor to be filmed, photographed or recorded in any sexual act prohibited by this Act; (2) transport or mail any film or recording of such Act; (3) photograph, film or record such act; or (4) coerce, transport, or cause the transport of any

minor in interstate or foreign commerce for immoral purposes (Congress, 2023). The Police Federation is aware that the deterioration of mental health often occurs when investigating such crimes for police officers. Police officers in the United Kingdom rely primarily on the Professionalizing Investigations Program (PIP) to help with cases that deal with child sexual abuse.

PIP is a British Home Office-accredited program designed to equip police officers with the highest standards of investigative skills. The PIP structure comprises four investigation levels: PIP level 1, which involves priority and volume crime investigations; PIP level 2, which encompasses serious and complex investigations; PIP level 3, which involves major investigations; and PIP level 4, which involves the strategic management of highly complex investigations (Faisal, 2023). In the UK, a child abuse investigator should hold a specific qualification, such as the Specialist Child Abuse Investigator Development Program (SCAIDP). This program requires multi-agency training that includes specialists who deal with vulnerable populations. Faisal (2023) emphasizes that investigators handling such heinous cases must undergo the vetting system and be assessed by occupational health professionals for any mental health deficiencies.

According to The College of Policing, many police forces in the UK have role-specific psychological risk assessment programs for those in specialized roles. However, these roles are limited, and they leave investigating officers unsupported. Since the investigators are unsupported, they rely on themselves for resiliency. Faisal (2023) defines Resilience as a predictor, a process characteristic, and an outcome, and

emphasizes that it serves as a vital coping mechanism when dealing with sexual and violent crimes. Police officers who could have been victims of sexual abuse or a difficult childhood, including trauma, find it hard to deal with offenders and victims of sexual crimes (Faisal, 2023). Previous studies have shown that police officers' personal lives are affected during investigations. Some police officers have endured Vicarious traumatization and secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD) (Faisal, 2023).

Faisal (2023) conducted a study to investigate the impact on investigators of working on child sexual abuse cases. This study shows the importance of supporting the well-being of investigators and ways to improve efficiency while working on cases that involve child sexual abuse. The results of that study showed that the child sexual abuse investigation is an area linked with negative feelings, pressure, heavy workloads, burnout, and short staffing. Qualitative explorations resulted in various themes (Faisal, 2023).

Ahern et al. (2017) led a study to understand the impact child sexual exploitation may have on social workers' and police officers' well-being. The United Kingdom defines child sexual exploitation as any minor when young persons, or third parties, receive "something" (money, affection) in exchange for sexual activity. While conducting child sexual exploitation investigations, it can affect a police officer's well-being. Child sexual exploitation cases often involve both sexual abuse and violence, features that characterize the most stressful cases for officers (Ahern et al., 2017). Officers who investigate internet child exploitation must mentally prepare themselves before viewing any obscene material that may be traumatic.

All in all, the study had 40 participants (30 Law Enforcement personnel and 10 Social Workers). Participants described feeling helpless because of the nature of the crime and hearing the graphic stuff that was taking place amongst female victims. Some described feeling emotionless during the investigation process because of its graphic nature. Several participants experienced the emotional impact after the investigation. One participant stated “I think you are so focused on what you are doing and the questions you are asking and listening to what they are saying, trying to make sure you don't miss anything, making notes, you don't have time really for it to hit you then, and it tends to, for me anyway, after I dropped the child off, that you are so conscious of being there for the child that you don't really think about how it has affected you or how it's impacted on you... It would affect me more than when I am with the young people... Especially if it's been quite a long or a heavy interview, you can sometimes feel, for the rest of that day, or sometimes the following day, feel quite emotionally tired. (Ahern et al., 2017).

The researchers also asked participants how they psychologically prepare before interviewing victims, and a police officer stated that preparation involves managing the victim. Most investigators stated that they prepared for interviews by researching the cases and planning what questions to ask but neglected emotional preparation. Several explicitly reported that they did nothing to prepare themselves psychologically (Ahern et al., 2017)

Secondary Traumatization in First Responders

A systematic review by Greinacher et al. (2019) aims to provide an overview of the prevalence rates of secondary traumatization in first responders and to shed light on

corresponding Resilience and risk factors. The authors applied intrusion criteria which is as follows (1) participants had to be first responders working on site (Police Officers, firefighters, search and rescue personnel, or emergency paramedic team members), (2) secondary traumatization (secondary traumatic stress/vicarious traumatization/compassion fatigue), (3) English or German language original papers (Greinacher et al., 2019). Figley first explained the meaning of secondary traumatization. He describes secondary traumatization as stress deriving from helping others who are suffering or who have been traumatized. Figley believes individuals who are in contact with trauma survivors might develop a traumatic response without personally experiencing a traumatic event themselves. Symptoms may be provoked by either repeated or extreme confrontation with details from a traumatic event, without direct sensory impressions, often occurring at a delayed time (Greinacher et al., (2019).

In the late 1980s, Figley developed the first questionnaire to assess secondary traumatic stress. Before the questionnaire was designed, primary post-traumatic stress measures were used to assess both primary and secondary traumatization (Greinacher et al., 2019). Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) has symptoms that correlate to PTSD (intrusive symptoms, avoidance, hyperarousal, depressive, and anxiety symptoms. These symptoms are viewed as natural and inevitable consequences of the first responders' work environment (Greinacher et al., 2019). Greinacher et al. (2019) define compassion stress as a normal reaction to helping and working with trauma survivors. It covers the feeling of helplessness, confusion, isolation, and symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS). Over time, being exposed to compassion stress may lead to Compassion Fatigue

CF, a state of exhaustion and dysfunction, biologically and emotionally. When a person experiences compassion fatigue (CF), he/she is no longer able to feel and express sincere understanding, empathy, and support for others (Grienacher et al., 2019). In some studies, secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue are used interchangeably in context, while others define compassion fatigue as the combination of secondary traumatic stress and burnout symptoms.

Grienacher et al. (2019) believe that only a minority of first responders develop symptoms of secondary traumatization. Several studies have shown resilience factors that prevent first responders from developing symptoms of secondary traumatization. Social support is the most researched protective factor. A previous study found that social support had a significant positive influence on the mental health of first responders, exerting a more substantial effect than the factual support received (Grienacher et al., 2019).

First responders may be at a high risk of developing pathological secondary traumatization because of their job. Researchers have not thoroughly studied secondary traumatization in first responder. Grienacher et al., (2019) conducted one of the first reviews aimed at providing a systematic overview of the current literature on first responders' symptoms of secondary traumatization. This review examined secondary traumatization prevalence rates in first responders and shed light on corresponding Resilience and risk factors (Grienacher et al., 2019).

Previous researchers have established that policing is highly stressful, as police officers deal with the full range of social ills, including the effects of high unemployment,

political tension, and social deprivation (Cronje & Vilakazi, 2020). Multiple studies whose participants were police officers have indicated that police detectives report more severe indicators of psychological distress, secondary traumatization stress, than their counterparts who do not work with victims of sexual crime (Cronje & Vilakazi, 2020). Brouke and Craun (2014) found that most police detectives who are experiencing secondary traumatic stress have the following symptoms: (1) thinking about work when not intending to, (2) being easily irritable, (3) feeling emotionally numb, and (4) experiencing sleep difficulties. These findings indicate that trauma is present among police officers.

Understanding Moral Injury and Belief Change in the Experiences of Police Online Child Sex Crime Investigators

Little research is known about the psychological and physiological impacts of moral injury within an organizational context, such as Internet Child Abuse Teams (ICAT) (Tapson et al., 2021). ICATs constantly encounter trauma by viewing and grading graphic images of children being sexually abused. Tapson et al. (2021) conducted a study to explore the key features of contributing factors to moral injury and trauma as experienced by Internet Child Abuse Teams. Moral injury is derived from the collective knowledge of multiple researchers who studied military veterans. Based on participant narratives, these researchers categorized moral injury by defining three characteristic components: (i) a betrayal of what is morally right, (ii) by someone who holds legitimate authority, and (iii) in a high-stakes situation. Tapson et al. (2021) report that police officers experience at least 900 traumatic events throughout their careers. Extreme

exposure to work-related traumatic events impedes the ability of many police officers to cope.

Continual exposure to such graphic materials creates an environment in which symptoms of burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary trauma can occur. The authors of the current study mentioned that another researcher found that reviewing distressing material was not perceived by participants as being a sign of burnout or stress. However, it somewhat hindered the investigators from performing to their full potential on the job. ICAT investigators must place themselves in the role of the victim or perpetrators; however, exposure to constant human suffering erodes standard coping mechanisms, placing officers at higher risk of developing secondary trauma stress and disengagement from their emotions in order to remain objective (Tapson et al., 2021).

Doyle et al. (2023) investigated the impacts of organizational role and environmental factors on moral injury and trauma amongst Internet Child Abuse Teams. Researchers have noted that ICAT work hurts investigators' mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Researchers have found that ICAT investigators' mental and physical ill health adversely affects workplace performance, future career prospects, and can lead to premature retirement (Doyle et al., 2023). This evidence prompts a two-way process, where the organizational environment affects ICAT investigators.

Moral injury was first introduced amongst veterans who participated in the Vietnam War. Moral injury occurs when a person demonstrates, fails to prevent, or witnesses' events that contravene foundational moral beliefs and values (Doyle et al., 2023). Neglecting moral identity could destroy belief in one's own humanity and ability

to safeguard it in others, a breach leading to guilt, frustration, depression, self-harm, shame, and a sense of rejection. Researchers group moral injury into intrusive thoughts, negative appraisal, and emotional distress, including guilt, shame, and disgust.

There is limited research that explains how moral injury manifests among ICAT investigators and the impact of the organizational role and environment on modifying its influence. However, research where studies of moral injury amongst online child abuse investigators do exist, there is none on how it impacts organizational role and environment.

ICAT investigators perform tasks such as watching videos of young children being sexually assaulted and tortured and viewing graphic images to identify victims and locate perpetrators (Doyle et al., 2023). Additionally, they review several thousand suspect chat logs, web histories, and extracted technical data daily (Doyle et al., 2023). This evidence suggests that there is a need for effective management of moral injury among ICAC investigators.

The Psychological Well-Being and Coping Mechanisms of Law Enforcement Investigators vs. Digital Forensic Examiners of Child Pornography Investigation

Previous research explains how Law Enforcement personnel and digital forensic examiners working child exploitation cases are at an increased risk for experiencing psychological distress (Seigfried-Spellar, 2017). Seigfried-Spellar (2017) conducted a study to compare the psychological well-being, job satisfaction, coping mechanisms, and attitudes toward mental health services for individuals working as digital forensic examiners or investigators of child pornography cases.

There has been an increased number of law enforcement officers investigating child pornography cases and forensic examiners examining such images. In 2006, Child pornography offenses comprised 69% of the total number of child sex exploitation offenses referred for federal prosecution (Seigfried-Spellar, 2017). Since 2010, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has sent more than 143,000 notifications to electronic service providers regarding the appearance of child sex abuse images on public websites (Seigfried-Spellar, 2017). In response to the increasing number of children experiencing crimes via the Internet, a nationwide network of more than 3500 law enforcement agencies was created in 1998, known as the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task force. Since its conception, the ICAC task force has investigated more than 580,000 complaints of alleged child sexual victimization. In 2015 alone, they conducted over 54,000 investigations and 61,000 forensic exams, resulting in the arrest of more than 60,000 offenders. (Seigfried-Spellar, 2017).

Those working in criminal justice have proven to have psychological illnesses and high turnover rates because of the high stress and child sex crimes each one may endure. However, little research is known on work-related stress for child pornography investigations for digital forensic examiners. It has been estimated that 80%-90% of criminal cases worked by digital forensic examiners involve child pornography, and digital forensic examiners must view the child sex abuse images since the content of the images may increase the severity of the offense (Seigfried-Spellar, 2018). Digital Forensic examiners are involved in child sex crimes because they are needed for criminal investigations and because of the federal guidelines for sentencing and victim

notification. The findings of this study show a significant gap in the literature by comparing the psychological well-being and coping mechanisms for investigators and/or examiners of cases involving child pornography.

Summary

An extensive review of the literature shows the impact that child sexual cases have on police officers. These cases cause secondary traumatic stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental and physical health problems. This literature also shows how police officers cope when investigating such heinous crimes. Investigators who deal with CSC daily develop ways to communicate with the perpetrator without being biased and become immune to the graphic photographs that are present during the investigation of these cases. Previous studies have shown that there is a need for more support groups within police departments to help mitigate poor coping skills and feelings of burnout from the overload of CSC cases. In Chapter 2, the problem's relevance, theoretical framework, and law enforcement perception of child molesters were discussed. Chapter 3 will provide the methodology and data analysis plan.

Chapter 3: Research Method

There is little research involving how child molesters affect law enforcement officers (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2024). The work performed by law enforcement officers likely puts them at risk for developing secondary traumatic stress. As the number of child exploitation cases continues to increase, so too will the requirement for more trained individuals to investigate these complex cases. The lack of research on the most effective ways to support law enforcement officers in coping with their work is highly problematic (Burns et al., 2008). The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of Law enforcement officers with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. In Chapter 3, I will present the research design and rationale, the researcher's role, and the study methodology.

Research Design and Rationale

To address the research question in this qualitative study, the specific research design will employ a basic qualitative approach that includes in-depth interviews with police officers from an accredited police department in South Carolina. This basic qualitative approach will provide an understanding of police officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. This research design was chosen for this qualitative study because it aimed to understand the experiences of law enforcement officers.

Research Question

What are law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters in the state of South Carolina?

Central Concept of Study

The phenomenon under study is understanding how law enforcement officers manage secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. I will be investigating this problem by using the cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping proposed by Richard Lazarus and his colleague Susan Folkman. Lazarus explained that the nature of a specific stressful event or people's psychological responses to that event do not cause the stress response; instead, cognitive factors are the most important. He hypothesizes that it is people's perception of a crucial event that causes stress. The person's perception of the potential danger of an event and the ability to cope with it leads to stress. Galanis et al. (2021) define stress as a dynamic process resulting from external pressure. An individual experiences negative stress when they are unable to cope with a situation.

Police work can be a high-stress occupation and is considered a challenging profession. Researchers also categorize police officers as a high-risk group for mental health issues, as they experience post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorder, depression, suicidal thoughts, and behaviors. Being a police officer, you may experience significant job-related stressors and exposures such as violence, work injuries, job pressure and demand, lack of support, physical threats in the operational field, long working hours, burnout, and fatigue (Galanis et al.,2021).

Role of the Researcher

I am the only researcher gathering data for this qualitative study. The primary role of the researcher is to gather as much information as possible from the participants through their thoughts and emotions regarding the topic presented. The qualitative researcher gains access to the participants' natural environment and uses it as the primary research instrument to collect and analyze data (Clark & Veale, 2018). I understand that my role as a researcher is participatory. During the process, I ensured that all data collected from the participants remained confidential and secure.

As the vital tool for collecting and identifying data, I must remain neutral throughout the study to avoid contaminating the data. I must explain the principles and concepts of the theories that support the research process (Florczak, 2022)I conducted interviews to collect data for the research study. It is essential to recognize that the researcher must remain neutral, as their biases can potentially influence the data. To prevent bias, I minimized and disclosed my personal assumptions and beliefs. Clarke and Veale (2018) suggest that, as a qualitative researcher, it is beneficial to learn how to distinguish between objective and subjective observations. A great qualitative researcher engages conscientiously in a subjective perception of another person's experience in the context of their own experience (Clark & Veale, 2018).

Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003) believed there are potential reasons the researcher may become biased. Inadequate mental capacity during the time interviews are conducted may bias the researcher and alter the data. The researchers may become biased if they are not fully prepared to conduct interviews. For example, I have experience

working with investigators who must interact with child molesters and their victims, which may affect how I view data. I avoided being biased and kept all data in a journal to identify potential biases.

As a researcher, I am aware of the ethical issues and concerns that arise. Some common ethical issues and concerns include informed consent and confidentiality, balancing confidentiality with individuals owning their own stories, and determining the extent to which an interview must be approved in advance. I used a checklist to make sure I am within the ethical guidelines (Patton, 2014).

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The purpose of this section is to provide information to participants who are police investigators or detectives who work with victims of child sexual abuse and child molesters. The criteria for the participants must (a) be employed at a police department in the state of South Carolina as an investigator or detective, (b) must have at least 3 years of experience with interviewing child molesters and dealing with child abuse victims (c) must presently work or have worked with child molesters and child sexual abuse victims consistently. With permission, I asked the police chief if I could post recruitment flyers inside the break room as well as speak with a group of detectives on site about the research study. The intent was to have at least 10-15 investigators willing to participate in the study. Saturation is used in qualitative research as a criterion for discontinuing data collection and/or analysis (Quant, 2018). Considering the sample size, it is kept at approximately 10-15 investigators to increase the potential for saturation based on the

data collected and analyzed. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) recommended that fewer than 20 participants would help the researcher create a close relationship, and participants are likely to be more open and provide helpful information. This will help with meeting the saturation point.

Instrumentation

There are three types of interviews used in qualitative research: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Gill et al., 2008). For this qualitative study, I employed semi-structured interviews and developed a semi-structured interview study guide. I asked pertinent questions to help define the research topic. The semi-structured interview I conducted consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to share their emotions and experiences in relation to the research purpose. Semi-structured interviews have been proven to be a popular collection method because they are flexible and versatile. This method can be combined with both individual and group interview methods, and the rigidity of its structure can be varied depending on the study's purpose and research question (Kallio et al., 2016). One advantage of semi-structured interviews is the ability to establish reciprocity successfully between the interviewer and participant, allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions based on the participant's responses. The questions I proposed during the interview were those I had determined prior to the interview using the interview guide.

Research-Developed Instruments

Semi-structured interviews, as well as notes from my journal, were used to collect data. I constructed semi-structured interviews. Any research method or approach requires

accurate and concise research data. During interviews, the researcher should record and/or write detailed notes to ensure accuracy in the data. Banner (2010) believes that audiotaping and/or digitally recording interviews is a common way to gather data for your qualitative research. Audiotaping and/or digitally recording interviews preserves accuracy and the participants' words. To avoid any distractions during the interview, some researchers choose to write their notes and reflections shortly after the interview.

The creation of the interview structure allowed participants to gradually develop a level of comfort by discussing emotional and personal experiences in the researcher's presence. The interview schedule will have the following format: (1) scene-setting/procedural questions, (2) questions about the impact of work, most difficult aspects, coping strategies, support systems, (3) questions about positives/motivation to do the work (Parkes et al., 2019) (see Appendix A). Parkes et al. (2019) conducted a study exploring the coping strategies of UK police staff who are exposed to sexual offence material. Eleven police staff members completed a questionnaire and then participated in semi-structured interviews. I used the Socratic style of questioning, adopting a method from Parkes et al.'s (2019) study. The Socratic Style of questioning was chosen by the researcher, based on their professional expertise in interviewing individuals about their offending behavior and personal circumstances during parole/pre-sentence report interviews (Parkes et al., 2019).

Previous researchers argued that the validity of interview research is related to its appropriateness for studying what it claims to inform and its veracity in reporting (Coleman, 2021). Validity will be established by member checking. Member checking

involves verifying the accuracy of their understanding with participants during the data collection process (Coleman, 2021). I implemented fact-checking by echoing, paraphrasing, and inquiring about further information during interviews.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

First, I obtained permission from the Chief of Police at a police department in South Carolina to allow detectives from that department to participate in a qualitative study. Once that was approved, I asked the Chief of Police if I could post a flyer inside the police department (break room and on the bulletin board) inquiring for detectives to participate in the study. With permission from the police department, I asked to meet each detective who works with child molesters and asked them in person if they would like to participate in my study. Upon agreeing, I then asked the participants to sign their name, number, and preferred email address on a sign-up sheet that I had created, so that I could contact them for further details. If I did not get enough participants, I would have extended the invitation to regular patrol officers who have experience working with child molesters. I also kept a list of approximately two to three additional detectives in reserve to use if an interviewee was unable to complete the interview. These reserve detectives will fill the participant's spot due to their absence. During this time, I scheduled a convenient time for the participant to read and view the consent form via email and asked the participant to reply with their consent to participate in the study. The consent form contained details about confidentiality and guidelines in accordance with the IRB purpose at Walden University, ensuring that the participant's identity was protected and that they had the option to stop the interview at any time (Appendix B)

As the researcher, I collected data from the participants. The interview guide was used to keep myself and the interviewee engaged in the conversation. The participants had the option to participate in face-to-face interviews or interviews conducted via Zoom or Google Meet. Each interview lasted no more than 75 minutes. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder for those who chose to conduct in-person interviews. For those who chose to conduct interviews via Zoom or Google Meet, their transcripts were recorded via closed captioning. Each interview was recorded only once on the specified date each participant selected during the initial consent to participate in the study.

For debriefing, I asked each participant whether they had any further questions regarding the study. If so, the necessary information was provided. A debriefing sheet was available for the participants that included information about their mental health and different options they can take to get additional emotional support (Appendix C). I also asked the participants if they would like a transcript emailed to them for accuracy. If so, I emailed a transcript for them to review. Participants are not obligated to have their transcripts emailed to them; it is optional. There were no follow-up requirements after the interviews were conducted.

Data Analysis Plan

Each interview was either transcribed by hand or conducted using a video conferencing app (Zoom, Google Meet). The video conference was then converted into an audio file, and each file was labeled as D1, D2, D3, and so forth to maintain the confidentiality of each participant. To ensure the data is accurate, I read through each transcript to verify that the transcribed data aligns with the audio. I used Microsoft

Word's data analysis table to organize the data obtained for this study. Braun and Clark (2006) recommend following the six steps to achieve thematic analysis.

The first step is to familiarize yourself with your data. I familiarized myself with my data by reading each transcript multiple times. During the interviews, I took notes to generate ideas for future coding projects. This allowed me to become more comfortable with my data. During this phase, I gathered as much information as possible to process and categorize different themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The second step is generating initial codes. This step begins when I read the data and become comfortable with it, allowing me to formulate a list of ideas about what is in the data and what is noteworthy about it. While analyzing the data, I identified distinct patterns and categorized them with specific codes. I coded as many potential themes as possible to use them later in the process if needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step three involves searching for specific themes. I ensured that each theme produced derives from the data provided. On a separate piece of paper, I wrote down the name of each code and a brief description to help me organize the codes into theme piles (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Reviewing themes is step number four. I read each collated extract for each theme and decided if each code demonstrates the same pattern/theme. Next, I analyzed the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set. Once I was satisfied with the thematic map, I moved on to the next step in the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Step five involves defining and moving themes. In this step, I defined and refined my themes by identifying the core of each theme and establishing the aspect of the data

that each theme captures. Once I could describe the scope and content in a couple of sentences, then I knew I had achieved this step (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The final step is to produce the report. I finalized the report by ensuring that the analysis provides concise, coherent, and logical details of the data collected through the themes. There was sufficient evidence in the data to provide validity (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The participants described their experiences with stress and coping while working with Child Molesters. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, I refrained from introducing any bias to protect the integrity of the data being collected. The following sections will discuss the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

Credibility

Cope (2014) believes that credibility refers to the truth of the data, the participant's views, and the researcher's interpretation and representation of them. The researcher enhances credibility by sharing their experiences as a researcher and validating the research results with participants (Cope, 2014). I provided credibility by ensuring that the responses from the participants are aligned with the interview question, thereby ensuring accuracy.

Transferability

Transferability is explored through the demonstration of thematic patterns within participants' responses, using these themes to search for everyday experiences (Parkes et

al., 2019). Once there was evidence that the research findings could be correlated with other studies, situations, and/or populations, then the establishment of transferability was made.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the data over similar conditions (Cope, 2014). I employed the Triangulation method to achieve dependability by utilizing multiple sources, data, and diverse perspectives. Parkes et al. (2014) found the following themes during their research when interviewing thirteen UK police staff who are exposed to child sexual materials: 1.) Detachment, 2.) Avoidance, 3.) Process-driven- Professional role takes over, 4.) Mental Preparation, 5.) Audio-based strategies. Once my research revealed similar themes to those of previous researchers, I knew that I had achieved dependability within my study.

Confirmability

Confirmability is demonstrated when the researcher shows that the data originate from participants' responses, rather than their own biases or perspective (Cope, 2014). I demonstrated confirmability by describing how conclusions and interpretations were determined directly and illustrating that the findings were drawn directly from the data.

Ethical Procedures

This study followed the guidelines of Walden University's IRB regulations to promote confidentiality for each participant. The IRB ethics will confirm approval before participant recruitment, data collection, or access to the dataset. Due to the nature of the research question, no ethical concerns arose in this study.

Treatment of Humans

To have human participants, I obtained approval from Walden University's IRB. As aforementioned previously, I utilized 5-8 detectives from a police department in South Carolina. Each participant had the option to interview in person or via Zoom or Google Meet. Throughout the study, each participant was assured that they could stop the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. If a participant decided to end the interview early, then I would have contacted another detective who was in reserve for the study to see who was available to backfill the participant's absence. Participants were provided with a consent form via email once they agreed to participate in the study, and the researcher read the consent form aloud at the start of the interview. The researcher also omitted participants' demographics to emphasize confidentiality.

Treatment of Data

To protect data, the police department where the participants were recruited will remain anonymous. The data was stored on my personal computer, which is password-protected, and only I have access. All codes and identifiers were stored separately from all coded data. Data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the methodology of the proposed qualitative study. After reiterating the research question and purpose, I discussed the research design and its rationale. The research design and rationale included stating and defining the phenomenon of the study, as well as identifying the research tradition. The researcher also explained their role in depth, along with any potential ethical issues that may arise.

The methodology of this qualitative study included describing the process of participant selection, instrumentation, and data analysis. The researcher also discussed issues of trustworthiness, justifying credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I concluded this chapter without expressing any ethical concerns.

Chapter 4 will discuss providing results from the study and the implementation of the methods used for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Figley was one of the first to describe the phenomenon of secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Greinacher et al., 2019). Figley used this term to describe compassion fatigue. STS is most likely to occur when a person, over time, has seen a large quantity of traumatic experiences. This research was needed because repeated exposure to distressing materials can influence officers' emotional well-being and cognitive processing. Law enforcement officers are often categorized as personnel who may experience secondary traumatic stress (STS). It was essential to understand the experiences law enforcement officers encounter when dealing with child molesters. The purpose of this generic qualitative approach was to gain knowledge about law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. Current research on law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress in this field is limited, and only a few studies have examined the coping strategies law enforcement officers use to manage stress. The study focused on one research question. The study focused on one research question. The conceptual framework draws guidance from the cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman. The research question that guided this study is: What are Law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters?

In this chapter, the results of this study were explained. The chapter will begin by describing the research setting, followed by the participants' demographics. will also discuss the data analysis process and how it was used during the data collection.

Research Setting

For this research, the ability to have a confidential setting was not hard to acquire due to the participants having prior knowledge of maintaining a safe environment for the duration of the interviews. Videoconferencing (via Zoom) ensured that each participant was in a secure location before the interviews began. In total, eight participants completed the interviews. During the interviews, no organizational factors had any influence on the participants or the results.

Demographics

Each participant was a police officer in the state of South Carolina who worked with Individuals Accused of Child Molestation. There were two females and six males who volunteered to participate in the study. Two participants held supervisory roles, and the other six were senior police officers. Each participant had a different number of years serving their community and working on Child sexual abuse cases.

Data Collection

The research instrument for this study was an interview protocol consisting of 10 open-ended questions, as proposed by the researcher. The researcher asked the questions in a semi-structured interview with each participant. After receiving approval number (02-06-25-1055468) from Walden's IRB on February 6th, 2025, I began the collection process. I posted flyers inside the break room located in the Police Department.

The interview questions were used to capture the participants' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. There was a total of eight participants, and all interviews were conducted via Zoom. After an application within Zoom, each interview was transcribed and automatically saved by the researcher. Each interview took no longer than 65 minutes. The data was stored securely on the researcher's password-encrypted personal computer. Each interview was carefully checked for accuracy. Once each interview had been carefully checked, they were sent to each participant separately for member checking. There were no unusual circumstances while collecting the data.

Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I referenced Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. In an alphanumeric order, the participants were labeled as D1, D2, D3, and so forth to maintain confidentiality. Once I transcribed the interviews, I familiarized myself with the data. I read the interviews multiple times to get a better understanding of the responses. Once I was comfortable with the data, I started the process of creating initial codes by categorizing similar emotions and/or phrases. I coded and interpreted the data by hand.

Initially, I analyzed 227 codes. I analyzed the data again and was able to narrow it down to 106 codes. The codes were diminished based on whether a code had an alternate word with the same meaning that could be described within the category that was formed. For example, if a word was coded as minimization and/or suppression, those codes were coded once and categorized in the same group. In total, 106 codes were categorized into

11 groups, each comprising 14 categories. Next, I analyzed the validity of themes. The fifth step in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis involves defining and moving themes. The result of defining and moving themes allowed three themes to emerge. The last step in the thematic analysis includes finalizing. I created a codebook spreadsheet using Microsoft Word to organize the codes, categories, and themes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility was formed by member checking. All participants who participated in the study reported the accuracy of the transcript, and no changes were needed. There was equal engagement and contribution from all participants when responding to an interview question. Before and after each interview session, participants were asked if they had any questions or needed further clarification about the interviewing process. The researcher reminded participants of the purpose and intent of the research study to ensure alignment.

Transferability

Transferability was achieved through a clear outline of the requirements for participation in the qualitative study. Listing the requirements created an atmosphere that only involved those who are in law enforcement who work with child molesters. Specific participation requirements ensured adequate transferability for future research. The requirements were broad enough for other researchers to follow.

Dependability

I used the Triangulation method to achieve dependability by using multiple sources, data, and different perspectives within my study. I ensured that my transcripts were accurate and that my notes were aligned throughout each interview.

Confirmability

During data collection process, the participant and I had an interactive dialogue. Interactive dialogue confirmed accuracy amongst the transcripts. I asked open-ended questions and follow-up probes to clarify the meaning of participants' responses. I reassured participants that their confidentiality would be maintained and that I would remain neutral regarding my own personal beliefs.

Results

Three themes developed from the data analysis based on the research question (see Table 1). The eight participants were given ten semi-structured interview questions that explored their experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters.

Table 1

Emergent Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Secondary traumatic stress (STS)	Avoidance/suppression
Coping mechanisms	
Emotional turmoil	

Theme 1: Secondary Traumatic Stress

Each participant has been with the police department working with child molesters for more than three years. Throughout their career, it became evident that each participant reached a level of emotional maturity. This theme emerged from participants' responses, which described feelings of emotional detachment, emotional numbing, and/or reflecting on past emotional reactions. Although participants held different supervisory roles and had varying lengths of service, they all experienced at least one of the emotions. All participants were asked, "During your usual routine, when you see, hear, or read about sexual offenses with minors, how easy or difficult is it to stop thinking about it once you leave work for the day?" The participants shared the following:

D1- "It is not easy to forget about it and there are times I share the more sadden cases with my family because it hurts my soul that an adult could harm an incident infant or juvenile in some of ways that I have seen. I also read articles from other states, and I bring those cases back to my detectives as an open discussion."

D4- "When I first started the job, I was intrigued, and it was fascinating, so it was difficult for me to stop thinking about it. Most crimes you see on tv but to experience it in real time hits differently. With every case I would work non-stop just to put my mind at eased."

D7- "It's easy for me to let it go once I leave work now. Before, it was more heartbreaking and disturbing because in my head I can't understand why a person would want to harm an innocent child sexually. Looking at images stick with you, and it can be traumatizing."

Subtheme: Avoidance/Suppression

Some participants described suppressing and avoiding their emotions once the workday was over. They stated that it was easy for them to leave work at work and continue with their day. These participants also shared ways of how they cope to maintain a healthy boundary between work and home life. Participant D2 said the following, “Although it is a difficult incident, once I leave work. I don’t think no further about the matter.” Participant D3 shared the following:

D3- “It becomes easier. When I’m at work I do my work at work. I can’t explain it but I sometimes brain dump it until the next day. For my own sanity, I must leave work knowing that I did all I could do that day.”

As previously mentioned, most participants have a way to cope with work related stress. It was reported that most of the participants were heavy in sports, spending time outdoors, speaking with therapists, and/or writing in their journals to reflect and decompress.

Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms (Negative/Positive)

Participants mentioned that at one point in their careers, it became overbearing, leading them to abuse alcohol. The alcohol abuse was a result of the stress and exhaustion caused by the nature of their work. Participants described feeling angry and withdrawn with their family and friends. Participants mentioned using alcohol as a form of coping during the earlier stages of their careers. As they became comfortable and confident in their roles, their coping mechanisms began to evolve. The participants shared the following:

D3- “At first, I was mentally drained so I did not have much time with my family, and I would shut them out. I’ll come home, eat dinner, drink my beer and stay up watching tv or thinking about the next day. Especially if we had trial, I would be so anxious I couldn’t rest. With my friends, I would bring up the case a lot with them. They are all in law enforcement as well so majority of our conversation would lead back to police work.”

D6- “Initially, I think I was drinking a lot and not knowing my limit. After a long stressful day, I enjoyed having an alcoholic beverage to calm me. I would look forward to a drink once I got off. It got me through the day. Now, I don’t drink as much. I adapted to the culture. I don’t let certain things bother me.”

D7- “Well, my first marriage failed because I was bringing work home and my ex-wife did not like that. I was also drinking a lot. When I would be intoxicated, I would become emotional about things I could not control and wanted control over it. I became too much for her, so we got a divorce.”

However, not all participants had the exact coping mechanisms. Most participants adapted to a healthier style of coping to combat job-related stress and exhaustion. The participants conveyed different ways they cope when not dealing with child molesters. Participant D5 shared “I play basketball. That’s where I release all of my stress. When I am on the court, I don’t think about work at all. Even on the drive home. Work is the last thing on my mind.” The other participants disclosed the following:

D1- “As I continue to grow and advance, I try not to take the work home with me. I do sometimes use my close co-workers who are more understanding as an outlet

then I let it go because the next day is a new case as the unit works on the previous day's assignments."

D3- "I read. I enjoy reading self-help books and mysteries. I like to read maybe 15 minutes before bed and on the way to work since there is a lot of traffic, my wife downloaded an app called audible. I listen to that, and it calms me and take me out of reality. The help books keep me grounded. I read those and it actually helps me learn a lot about myself and other people."

D4- "As I continue to grow and advance, I try not to take the work home with me. I do sometimes use my close co-workers who are more understanding as an outlet then I let it go because the next day is a new case as the unit works on the previous day's assignments."

D8- "Like I mentioned before, I run and spend a lot of time outdoors. When I'm running, I think about the cases and things I could've said or done better. If it's an ongoing case, I think about the events and analyze it. It clears my mind, and I feel better afterwards."

Theme 3: Emotional Turmoil

A recurring theme that was present amongst the participants when asked how they felt about child molesters was emotional turmoil. All participants expressed their frustration, anger, confusion, or sadness when expressing how they felt about child molesters personally. Three out of the eight participants did not express feeling angry or confused; they wanted the child molester to take accountability for their own actions. The participants shared:

D1- "I don't have personal feeling for all convicted child molesters as a unit. Each case is different, and, in some cases, the offenders were once victims of child molestation also. It doesn't make it right to inflict this pain on others."

D3- "I believe that everyone is who they want to be no matter what happened each person have the opportunity to change and get help if needed. It is up to the person to want to do better. Child molesters should be punished for their actions. Even though they are put in jail, on the sex offender registry I think child molesters should have a harsher punishment. I accept them as a person, but I do not condone their actions. The infamous saying "hurt people hurt people" and I've realized every day that this is true."

D4- "I don't have personal feeling for all convicted child molesters as a unit. Each case is different, and, in some cases, the offenders were once victims of child molestation also. It doesn't make it right to inflict this pain on others."

The rest of the participants described feeling the following: D2- "I believe that child molesters should be sentenced to death. I have no sympathy for a person who hurts children for their own sexual pleasure. It's very sick and they should be punished for their actions." D5- "I can't stand a child molester. Throw them under the jail. It's sickening that an individual is attracted to a person who can barely write their name and have them perform such sexual acts. It's disheartening." D6- "I have a lot of rage when it comes to Child Molesters. I think they are disgusting, and their parents/guardians failed them at a young age. They all can rot in hell." D8- "Child molesters should die immediately after

being arrested proving that they committed such horrific crimes. That's all I have to say about how I feel about child molesters. They don't deserve to live."

D7- "It's a mixture between disgust, anger, and sadness. I say that because I am angry and disgusted that they would harm such innocent children. It also makes me sad because some child molesters are only a product of their own environment. No one took the time out to get them help or they kept it inside and decided to hurt others because of the hurt and the lack of support they received when it was happening to them. I'm opened minded when it comes to child molesters, but I still want them to be held accountable for their actions."

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings of this study: Law Enforcement Officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. This study revealed a complex mix of emotions, and the various ways law enforcement officers respond to them. The participants in this study shared their experiences, which led to three major themes. The themes include secondary traumatic stress, coping mechanisms, and emotional turmoil. All eight participants felt some form of these themes through their experiences while working with child molesters.

Chapter 5 will provide a deeper understanding of the findings presented in this chapter, as well as the study's limitations, recommendations, and implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to understand Law Enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. These experiences can help other law enforcement officers or agencies recognize the mental stress and exhaustion the job may cause and explore alternative ways to cope positively. This study was designed to answer this research question: What are law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters in the state of South Carolina? I used semi-structured interviews via videoconferencing to collect my data. The generic qualitative approach was utilized to record and analyze the experiences of law enforcement.

The results of semi-structured interviews revealed that law enforcement officers become emotionally unavailable when interacting with child molesters. The remainder of Chapter 5 presents the study's findings, which support the information provided in Chapter 2, discusses the limitations, offers recommendations for future research, outlines implications for social change, and concludes the study. The following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Secondary Traumatic Stress

Subtheme 1A: Avoidance/Suppression

Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms (Negative/positive)

Theme 3: Emotional Turmoil

Interpretation of the Findings

Chapter 2 provided insight about secondary traumatic stress being prevalent amongst police officers who have worked with survivors of child sexual abuse (Hurrell et al., 2021). The study's findings confirmed that police officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters had emotional effects on law enforcement officers. The three themes and one subtheme presented the findings from the semi-structured interviews.

Theme 1: Secondary Traumatic Stress

Participants discussed feeling emotionally detached at some point in their career when interviewing child molesters and/or seeing or hearing child sexual abuse materials. Participants describe feeling emotional or having a different outlook on life when it comes to their children or nieces/nephews because they know the danger that could possibly happen if they are not careful about who the adolescents are around. All participants described feeling some avoidance when conducting day-to-day routines in their work field.

Chapter 2 detailed how secondary traumatic stress is prevalent amongst police officers who have worked with survivors of child sexual abuse. All participants in this study demonstrated one or more symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. Previous studies confirmed that law enforcement officers scored higher levels of secondary traumatic stress than mental health professionals when using the Trauma Symptom Checklist (Hurrell et al., 2021). This theme confirms the past research that focused on

police officers not seeking professional help when working with sensitive cases, which can lead to stress, trauma, and some forms of PTSD (McMakin & LaFratta, 2021).

Subtheme 1A: Avoidance/ Suppression

One finding that emerged from the study, as revealed by the participants, was that they avoided or suppressed their emotions while at work. When law enforcement officers handle sexual child abuse cases, mentally, they emotionally cut all ties and work to try their best to catch the predator who committed the crime. Suppression/avoidance in law enforcement officers becomes second nature as their careers mature because of the traumatic things they endure while on the job. Previous literature (Gelderen et al., 2011) suggests that police officers frequently encounter emotionally taxing situations and human suffering. More recent literature, such as Thompson and Morton (2024), highlights how law enforcement officers suppress their emotions due to job-related stress and become emotionally detached to perform their duties effectively, as they often work in emotionally charged environments. Each piece of literature confirms that law enforcement officers avoid and suppress emotions.

Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms (Negative/Positive)

The second finding is that participants reported having both positive and negative coping skills to balance their workload when it becomes overwhelming. Five out of the eight participants mentioned that they employ some positive coping mechanisms to manage stress from their jobs. Participants mentioned that when they are having a stressful time, they engage in activities such as reading, journaling, running, seeking professional help, and playing basketball. Two participants disclosed leaning on peers to

get them through a rough day. Talking to their peers who have similar stories and understand the nature of the work helps some participants feel better about their decisions and the case overall. Three out of eight participants revealed abusing alcohol at one point in their career as a coping mechanism. The participants described feeling overwhelmed and stressed because of the workload and obscene materials. This finding confirms previous studies addressing high rates of alcohol use among law enforcement populations, signifying that officers' use and binge drinking stem from stress from the job (Dougherty et al., 2024). This study also confirms the Lazarus and Folkman approach, which distinguishes between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.

Gutschmidt and Vero (2022) conducted a study analyzing the coping styles of law enforcement officers. The results of that study showed that police officers would rather give each other advice, supporting one another emotionally, taking measures to improve the situation, developing plans, and discussing the problem. Law enforcement officers least frequently reported coping mechanisms such as drinking alcohol, seeking help from professional services, using official interventions, and venting negative feelings on one another.

Theme 3: Emotional Turmoil

The third and final theme revealed how law enforcement officers viewed child molesters. Not all participants felt anger, sadness, hatred, etc. towards child molesters. Just under half of the participants mentioned that they wanted child molesters to take accountability for their own actions and understand what they have done wrong, and that their actions are viewed as inhumane. Contrastingly, the rest of the participants felt

infuriated when it came to child molesters. The participants described that child molesters should be sentenced to death, harsher punishment, and thrown in jail. Emotional responses from the participants include rage, anger, sadness, bitterness, and disgust.

The emotional responses expressed by the participants in relation to the subject matter suggest that they may be experiencing moral distress. Although researchers most often use the concept of moral distress in the medical field. The emotions the participants described relate to moral distress. According to Lentz et al. (2024), Moral distress appears to be related to a myriad of reactions, including anger, loneliness, depression, guilt, anxiety, feelings of powerlessness, and emotional withdrawal. The response from the participants confirms the findings of the research study above. A separate piece of literature, conducted by Darmawan and Nuqul (2023), confirmed emotional turmoil among law enforcement officers. The researchers conducted a study with four police officers who investigated sexual violence cases against children. The authors of the study employed a phenomenological qualitative method, yielding descriptive data results. The results of this study showed forms of emotional transfer exist in investigators, such as pity, sorrow, sadness, crying, and anger.

Conceptual Framework

The cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping served as the conceptual framework for this study. Researchers Folkman and Lazarus first introduced the cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping, which Patterson later reintroduced. The theory behind the cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping speculates that cognitive appraisal and coping function to mediate the effects of

stress on well-being, and consists of several components: stress, cognitive appraisal, and coping (Patterson, 2008).

The study's participants supported the theory of the cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping. According to Patterson (2008), cognitive appraisal is the central theme for an individual's experiences of stress. Each participant had a different perspective when it came to how they handled stress and coping while dealing with child molesters. While handling these cases, law enforcement officers perceived these interactions as threats to their core values, sense of justice, or even self-worth. According to the cognitive phenomenological model of stress and coping, stress occurs when an individual's appraisal of a situation is taxing and exceeds their resources, potentially threatening to their well-being (Patterson, 2008). When asked what is rewarding about the job that makes you continue doing it, D1 stated the following: "When I can bring closure with an arrest to a case involving a child. To be innocent from birth and be violated by a known or unknown adult offender is so unfair." This response shows an example of a primary appraisal of the situation as a moral and emotional threat. This thought process could lead participant D1 to work harder to solve a case, which is an example of problem-focused coping.

Limitations of the Study

This study provided in-depth knowledge about law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. The first limitation of this study is the assumption that participants are honest about their responses during their interviews. Honesty could not be factually checked.

The second limitation is that participants are gathered only from the state of South Carolina, rather than from other areas in the United States. The potential bias from my experience in law enforcement did not occur. I reduced my bias by triangulation to cross-checking my findings.

Recommendations

This study was conducted to understand law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. Current research on this topic remains minimal, and scholars have yet to conduct a comprehensive qualitative study examining the experiences of law enforcement officers in this area. Based on the findings, recommendations for future research studies could explore how secondary traumatic stress and coping mechanisms evolved amongst law enforcement officers who deal with child molesters by conducting a longitudinal study.

Additional research can explore different levels of secondary traumatic stress and coping amongst those in other high-trauma specializations, such as child exploitation and homicide divisions, and compare/contrast to determine how secondary traumatic stress and coping mechanisms affect each division. Another research topic to explore in this study is to examine how the police department itself, such as its culture, mental health resources, and stigma around mental health services, affects how officers perceive stress and their reaction towards it. It would also be beneficial to analyze demographics such as gender, years of service, and previous trauma-related history to compare/contrast how officers experience and manage secondary traumatic stress.

Implications

This study offers many key implications for positive social change. This research can help people better understand the mental and emotional stress that law enforcement officers go through when working with child molesters. This study can also help mitigate the stigma around mental health in law enforcement. Acknowledging that well-trained officers are affected by the trauma they endure may help start open conversations about the need for mental health support.

Conclusion

This generic qualitative approach explored eight participants' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. The participants discussed their experiences as law enforcement officer. The study's findings yielded three themes and one subtheme. The following themes and subthemes are identified: Secondary Traumatic Stress, Avoidance/Suppression (a Subtheme), Coping Mechanisms (both negative and positive), and emotional turmoil. There has been no current research that explores law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping while working with child molesters. This study presents new information on understanding the awareness of mental health among law enforcement officers.

As an advocate for positive change, it was essential to understand law enforcement officers' experiences with secondary traumatic stress and coping to make positive change for law enforcement personnel who are mentally and emotionally suffering. The participants shed light into a new generation of law enforcement officers

and break the stigma around mental health. This study had law enforcement officers record going through traumatic experiences but managed to seek justice still and continue doing their day-to-day work. Additionally, this study confirmed the importance of mental health awareness within law enforcement agencies and supports future policy changes and programs.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What methods do you personally use to help you deal with any stress or negative experiences as it relates to work?
2. How has work affected your relationship with family and friends?
3. During your usual routine when you see, hear, or read about sexual offenses with minors, how easy or difficult is it to stop thinking about it once you leave work for the day?
4. What is rewarding about your job that makes you continue doing it?
5. What methods do you use to cope with seeing or hearing sexual offenses with minors?
6. Knowing the knowledge, you know about child sexual offenses, do you view the world differently? If so, how?
7. How do you personally prepare yourself mentally to do your line of work?
8. May you tell me about a time when you were interviewing a child molester?
How did it make you feel hearing, and seeing graphic images?
9. How do you feel about Child Molesters?
10. If any, what recommendations would you provide for your police department to help detectives who work with child sexual abuse cases overcome stress and adapt healthy coping skills?