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# Stress and Coping Abilities of SWAT Personnel in a Metropolitan Area of Florida

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Pedro Corpas

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Stress and Coping Abilities of SWAT Personnel in a Metropolitan Area of Florida

by

Pedro Corpas


MS, Saint Leo University, 2012

BS, Union Institute & University, 2010



Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice



Walden University

May 2018

Abstract

For decades, stress has been scientifically studied and found to have effects on the law enforcement community. Furthermore, scholars have thoroughly studied the correlation between stress and the law enforcement occupation which has been proven to affect their well-being. Although there is currently ample literature on stress and police officers, to date there has been little research on factors associated with stress and SWAT police officers. Using Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive theory of stress and coping as the foundation, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how SWAT police officers cope with stress while on duty and off duty and the factors that cause them stress. Participants included 5 retired police officers who were members of a SWAT team. Moustakas' framework design of phenomenological study assisted in identifying common themes that emerged from participant interviews. Study findings indicate that the primary stressor to SWAT officers was responding to high-risk missions or operations and that law enforcement agencies generally fail to provide the resources needed to cope with stress. In addition, the main coping resources used by tactical officers were self-initiated activities such as exercise, spending time with family, and hobbies (e.g., hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, and sports entertainment). The results of this study encourage positive social change by advancing recommendations to law enforcement leadership to develop coping resources for tactical officers that are specific to their unique needs. The study also increases awareness and knowledge of the coping resources that SWAT officers need and advocating for new programs and trainings aimed at reducing stress for them, which may prevent officer burnout and improve public safety response.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Mary, and to my children, Pedro and Lucas. Mary, thank you for always been supportive of my commitment to education and for your patience, understanding, caring, and love throughout this long journey. Pedro and Lucas, although both of you are young, thank you as I sacrificed precious time with both of you to work on my dissertation. I hope that one day both of you will understand the sacrifice I made and I hope one day each of you will follow my steps and you too will accomplish your PhD.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Hector and Maria Corpas. Thank you both for allowing me to be raised in the free world. You both left your families behind in Cuba to give me a better life; I don't have words to express my gratitude. Again, thank you and I love you both more than words could ever express.

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I would like to thank my dissertation committee for all their help throughout this journey. My chairperson Dr. Mark Stallo, my second committee member Dr. Richard Worch, and my University Research Review (URR) Dr. Tanya Settles; I thank all of you for what you do and for providing feedback during the entire process. Without your assistance and guidance this process would have not been possible.

I also would like to thank Dr. Raimundo Socorro (Miami Dade College) for your friendship and for providing priceless advice during my dissertation process; I will always be grateful.

I would also take this time to thank all law enforcement officers around the nation for your dedication and service. Although in the last decade we have been put to the test with such a negative rhetoric, thank you all for always maintaining the level of professionalism no matter the circumstances.

Lastly, I would like to thank the five retired SWAT members who volunteered to participate in my study. Your participation in this study will hopefully make a difference and bring awareness to law enforcement agencies and policy makers across the country to provide the necessary resources and tools to cope with stress to active SWAT members.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

**Introduction**

The occupation of police officer requires police officers to act in a professional and ethical manner no matter the situation at hand. This occupation is one of the most dynamic in any professional field in contemporary times. It has been well documented that the occupation of police officer is one of the most stressful occupations in current times (Carlan, 2007; Dollard et al., 2003; Zettlemoyer, 2006). The demands from the public, politicians, elected officials, and from the police force administration can be stressful for any police officer. Due to the nature of the job, police officers' actions are sometimes scrutinized, and this can bring more unnecessary stress to the occupation.

Police officers can be experience stress through different aspects of the job itself. For example, leadership and the leadership styles in the police organization can be contribute to stress (Carlan, 2007). In other words, supervisors and their behaviors contribute to the stress endured by subordinates (Dollard, Winefield, & Winefield, 2003). Other stressors attributed to the organization are how the administration manages the organization and how policies and procedures are enforced. Research on stress and the police occupation shows that stress can be caused by work-related factors (e.g., away from family, dangerous situations, work schedule, public scrutiny, public perception, and others; [see Marchand et al., 2015; McKoy, 2010; Kirschman, 2007; Stephens & Long, 2000]). Moreover, the difference between most occupations and the occupation of police officer is that police officers oftentimes encounter dangerous, life and death situations, in

their tour of duty and on daily basis (see Zettlemoyer, 2006), whereas in other occupations stress levels are incurred from other factors.

## Background of Study

Stress and the occupation of police officer is a well-documented research topic and has been studied around the United States and worldwide. There has being prior research on the organizational stressors of police officers (e.g., Brooks & Piquero, 1998; Buker & Wiecko, 2007; Morash, Haarr, & Kwak, 2006) that suggested that higher levels of stress are reported during critical incidents situations. On the other hand, prior studies have also been conducted on critical incident stressors of police officers where researchers found the negative outcomes associated with these types of stressors (i.e., post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], depression, substance abuse, etc.) and recommended that more research needs to be completed to understand how these officers cope with stress after being exposed to these critical incidents situations (Kirschman, 2006: Weiss et al., 2010).

Other professionals in the workforce do not encounter traumatic situations while working. Police officers can have multiple encounters with dangerous and traumatic situations daily (Pitaro, 2008). There are several factors that affect police officers with stress. For example, police officers can become isolated from the public and this causes stress (Pitaro, 2008). As a matter of fact, Pitaro (2008) contended that officers do become extremely isolated from the population outside of law enforcement and this creates a stressful environment. This feeling of isolation creates anxiety and even depression from

the police officers believing they are isolated from the public, family, and friends (Pitaro, 2008).

While the occupation of police officer has been documented to be one of the most stressful occupations, the SWAT police officer or tactical officer assignment can be considered to be even more stressful due to the extreme situations these officers encounter. Because of the nature of the occupation (e.g., away from family, faced with danger, irregular work schedule, etc.) and what the police officers encounter on a daily basis (e.g., homicides, violent stand-offs with offenders, high-speed pursuits, etc.), this occupation by nature appears stressful. However, tactical police officers (e.g., SWAT, Special Response Teams [SRT]) are specially-trained officers who engage in situations that regular police officers cannot handle, which makes these job of these tactical units even more stressful. It is not known how SWAT personnel cope with the stress that results from the situations they encounter while on the job or in their personal lives. In this study, I attempted to explore what SWAT personnel perceived from their personal experiences and determine what makes these units so stressful.

The purpose of this study was to better explore the stress and coping abilities of tactical police officers (i.e., SWAT personnel). How tactical police officers cope with stress in their personal and professional lives is yet to be determined; therefore, theoretical motivated research was required to help determine the stress coping abilities for these tactical officers. Exploring how these tactical officers cope with critical incidents situations and the stressors as a result of these situations, will have significant theoretical and social implications.

**Problem Statement**

Police personnel are faced with stressful situations on a daily basis and different sources of stress have been associated with the different types of police work (Russo, Engle, & Hatting, 1983). Although there has been past research completed on stress in different types of police work (e.g., patrol officers, undercover officers, university police officers, and game conservation officers; see Haddock, 1988; Girodo, 1991; Buckley, 1994; Walsh & Donovan, 1984), little research has been conducted on stress and the coping abilities of SWAT officers. Because of the nature of police work, police officers generally experience high levels of stress resulting from the daily situations they encounter. On the other hand, SWAT officers are faced with some of the worst situations in police work because of the risk associated with the types of calls SWAT personnel encounter. These situations are extremely dangerous and unexpected and SWAT officers are the only ones trained to deal with them (Marchand et al, 2015). It is not known how SWAT personnel cope with stress while on the job or in their personal lives; it is also unknown what activities they engage in to cope with stress while on and off duty. The theoretical foundation for this study was based on the cognitive theory of stress and coping (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how SWAT police officers cope with stress in their personal and professional lives. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to explore the common themes that emerged from the lived experiences of SWAT police officers, determine how stress obtained from

their experiences affected their personal and professional lives, and identify what

mechanisms they used to cope with stress. To accomplish this, I applied Lazarus and

Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory to help explain this phenomenon. According

to Lazarus and Folkman's theory, people use cognition to adapt to or cope with the

stressor as a result of a certain situation. The theoretical foundation for this study was

based on the cognitive theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the

results of this study will allow the SWAT officers and law enforcement individual to

learn these different coping strategies as they relate to stress in their occupation.

## Research Questions

My intent with this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how

SWAT officers cope with stress in their personal and occupational lives. The main

question that guided this study was the following:

What are the main causes of stress to SWAT personnel while they were engaged

in SWAT missions and operations?

The following sub questions will assist the main question in further guiding the study:

- How do SWAT personnel cope with stress while on duty?

- How do SWAT personnel cope with stress while off duty?

- What causes stress to SWAT personnel while on duty?

- What causes stress to SWAT personnel while off duty?

## Conceptual Framework

For the specific purpose of this study, I used in-depth phenomenological

interviewing as the main method for collecting data. The purpose of in-depth

interviewing is to have participants reconstruct their experiences and reflect on the meaning they make of those experiences, which for this study was the causes of stress to SWAT personnel and coping abilities they used to deal with it. Through the careful use of in-depth phenomenological interviewing, I explored the emergent themes of SWAT personnel in coping with stress and the coping resources or mechanisms used by these tactical police officers.

Moustakas' (1994) framework design of phenomenological study assisted in identifying common themes during my interviews of participants. I particularly focused on Moustakas' method of semi structured interviews in this study to explore the perceptions and experiences of SWAT police officers. Participants, who were retired SWAT police officers, offered their experiences and perceptions of stress and coping abilities in their personal and occupational lives. The phenomenological research design can reveal emergent themes and categories of action from the interview data gathered from the participants (Angles, 2007).

The process of in-depth phenomenological interviewing encouraged trust amongst the participants and me as the researcher, particularly in this study because I am a police officer. I collected date in this in-depth phenomenological study through the use of lengthy interviews with open-ended questions with each participant. The theoretical foundation for this study was based on the cognitive theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). I used the theoretical foundation for this phenomenological study to explore the common themes that emerged from the participants' experiences with the phenomenon. The phenomenological research approach uses open-ended questions to

understand the perspectives of participants and how they make sense of their experiences (Patton, 2002). Throughout in-depth interviews, the data I collected produced emerging themes.

## Nature of the Study

The research method and design I used in this study was the qualitative, phenomenological approach which allowed me to explore the lived experiences of SWAT personnel as it relates to stress and coping abilities (see Moustakas, 1994). The exploration of multiple perspectives allows the researcher to gain a better understanding of these experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The phenomenological design tends to describe common lived experiences of several persons regarding the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). In this study, I relied on lengthy open-ended interviews with a sample size of five retired SWAT personnel.

The qualitative, phenomenological design is an approach that involves the descriptions of lived experiences instead of an analysis of behavior (Moustakas, 1994). Similarly, Hank (2008) noted that phenomenology is a technique describing inexplicable experiences and fundamental meanings. The phenomenological design consists of conducting interviews with open-ended questions in order to obtain descriptions of individual experiences (Patton, 2002). Hank further explained that the phenomenological research design includes the assessment of people's personal experiences and their remembering and describing a description of the event. I also chose the phenomenological design because it is used to explore a phenomenon from similar

perspectives from those individuals that experienced it (see Patton, 2002; Worthington, 2013).

In the phenomenological design, the objective is to explore rich information about the participants' own experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). In order to accomplish this, researchers must conduct in-depth interviews with participants regarding their lived experiences of the phenomenon in question. The descriptions provided by these participants allow for a better understanding of the phenomenon in question from the perceptions and perspectives of those who experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). The data collected from participants can reveal what the participants have in common; it also identifies common themes and patterns and develops a description of the essence of the experience for all participants (Patton, 2002).

To be able to obtain SWAT personnel's perceptions and perspectives, the phenomenological design requires the researcher to conduct lengthy interviews. The main strategy of inquiry in the phenomenological approach is interviews. The phenomenological design sample size is typically between five to 20 individuals (Leedy & Ormrod 2010); SWAT teams are usually between 10 to 25 members. Prior work on the phenomenon of stress has been conducted on police officers but little research has been completed on stress in SWAT officers and how they cope with it. According to Patton (2002) the perceptions, perspectives, and lived experiences of people can generate useful data, and the phenomenological design explores lived experiences of people in order to understand the phenomena being study.

A few, if any other studies have explored the phenomenon of stress in SWAT police officers from the perspectives of the individual SWAT officers. SWAT police officers are exposed to some of the most horrific situations associated with stress. A police officer exposed to these tactical and dangerous situations is a new and yet unexplored stressor. The understanding of the lived experiences of SWAT police officers with this phenomenon may contribute to new and valuable information to the mental health profession and police agencies around the world which may assist in the diagnoses and treatment with psychological issues caused by this phenomenon.

## Definitions of Terms

The following are terms and phrases related to the study:

*Coping*: "The process through which the individual manages the demands of the person-environmental relationship that are appraised as stressful and the emotions they generate" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19).

*Critical incident*: An event that is so overwhelming to an individual that it has the power to prevent their ability to handle everyday stress (Malcolm et al., 2005).

*Emergency Response Team (ERT):* Another term used to indicate SWAT as well as SRT (Burnstein et al., 2008).

*Law enforcement officer (LEO)*: A sworn officer, having arrest powers, who works for a recognized law enforcement organization (Nasworthy, 2013). For this study, LEO's are individuals who are actively members of a SWAT team.

*Occupational stress*: The perception of the worker in regard to the demands of the job itself (Beheshtifar & Nazarian, 2003).

*Operational stress*: Stress caused by job responsibilities, duties, interactions, and association with the job policies and procedures (Arial et al., 2010).

*Organizational stress*: The interactions of issues (stressors) in the workplace that affects the individual worker in a negative way and the worker associates the stressor with the organization (Manning & Preston, 2003).

*Phenomenological study*: To analyze the meaning, structure and essence of lived experiences of a person, or a group of people, surrounding a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

*Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)*: Develops after a person experiences a terrifying ordeal involving physical harm or the threat of physical harm. This terrifying event can be witnessed, experienced, or the person is confronted with the event (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016).

*Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT)*: "Tactical units trained to perform exceptionally dangerous, high-risk, and counterterrorism operations outside the operations covered by routine training of patrol officers" (Compton et al., 2009, p. 831).

*Stress*: The "relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus, 1984, p. 10).

*Subculture*: "A group of individuals who generally share attitudes, perceptions, assumptions, values, beliefs, ways of living, and traditions" (Martin, 2011, p. 14).

*Traumatic event*: "Any event which has stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of either an individual or a group. They are

typically sudden, powerful events outside of the range of ordinary human experiences"

(McKoy, 2010, p. 12).

## Assumptions

Based on the focus of the present study, I assumed that police officers whether

active members of SWAT teams, retired SWAT members, active members of another

specialized unit, or just regular patrol officers, were exposed to levels of stress. It has

been well-documented that the police occupation is one of the most stressful occupations

in the work force. Moreover, another assumption was that due to the types of situations

SWAT members are exposed to (e.g., hostage situations, serving arrest warrants for

violent felons, active shooter situations, homicides, suicides, and others), SWAT

members provided essential information about their stress levels and the coping resources

they used.

Because of the factors explained in the previous paragraph, I also assumed that

the participants met the criteria for this study by being retired members of a SWAT team

who at one point in their career engaged in SWAT missions. I assumed that these

participants provided honest answers regarding the phenomenon in question and that they

were all forthcoming about how they felt as members of a SWAT team.

As I stated previously, the qualitative, phenomenological design is an approach

that involves the descriptions of lived experiences instead of an analysis of behavior

(Moustakas, 1994). With this in mind, there are assumptions associated with the

phenomenological design. According to Patton (2002), when using the phenomenological

design there is "the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experiences"

(p. 106). In other words, the common experiences and perceptions that people have experienced are understood through the same meaning as the lived experiences. These perceptions and experiences must be analyzed and compared in order to be understood and to identify the essences of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Lastly, I assumed the results of this study could lead to positive social change based on the findings. Based on these findings, it is assumed that law enforcement administrators and police makers will make changes to policies as they relate to the tools and resources SWAT members use to cope with stress. I assumed that new programs will be promoted to educate SWAT police officers how to properly and professionally cope with stress.

**Scope of Study**

The scope of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to better understand what coping resources SWAT personnel uses when faced with stress in their personal and occupational lives (e.g., departmental resources, personal resources [e.g., exercising], professional resources [e.g., counseling], or any other). For this study, I used purposeful sampling to select retired members of SWAT from those who volunteered for this study. I interviewed these participants to collect data to address the research problem. The phenomenological design was chosen for this study because as stated by Reiter et al. (2011), the phenomenological research approach involves empirical research for capturing person's lived experiences within the common shared experiences of the participants.

**Delimitations**

In this study, I focused on five police officers who were retired members of tactical teams (e.g., SWAT, SRT, TRT) in Miami-Dade County, Florida. This study was limited to obtaining the stress levels of SWAT personnel and how they coped with stress in their personal and occupational lives. In this study, I focused on a small population of SWAT personnel and the stress resources used by them while on and off duty. Another delimitation was that I focused only on how these SWAT personnel coped with stress obtained from the types of SWAT calls and situations they encountered.

**Limitations**

This qualitative, phenomenological study was limited to police officers who were retired members of tactical teams (e.g., SWAT, SRT, TRT) in Miami Dade County, Florida. Police officers across the United States who are active members of tactical teams might have different perceptions, views, and opinions on stress and coping resources. There were no female police officers who were retired members of these tactical teams in police agencies within Miami Dade County, Florida at the time of this study. Therefore, this study was limited to only male police officers' perceptions, perspectives, and opinions on stress and coping resources while on and off duty.

**Significance of Study**

By describing and analyzing how SWAT personnel cope with stress both in their personal and occupational lives, the results of this study provided an understanding of the resources used by these officers to cope with stress. Conducting research on how SWAT officers handle stressors inherent in their occupational lives and what resources they used

to cope with these stressors in their personal and occupational lives is critical to SWAT

officers' survival both physically and mentally. In reviewing numerous journal articles

that addressed the effects of stress on different LEOs by Haddock (1988), Girodo (1991),

Buckley (1994) and Walsh and Donovan (1984), I found little research conducted on

stress and the coping resources of SWAT officers.

The results of this study will not only benefit the participants, although retired

from law enforcement, but will also benefit other police officers that have experienced

similar stressors and who will be able to explore new resources to cope with stress.

Moreover, other law enforcement agencies could receive significant benefits from the

findings of this study by providing training sessions for their police officers based on the

results of this study. This study was also significant as it may well be the first study to

explore stress and the coping abilities of SWAT personnel.

## Social Change

It has been well documented that the occupation of police officers is stressful.

Being able to recognize stress among SWAT police officers will assist with the coping

abilities employed in the personal and professional lives of other tactical police officers.

Moreover, using the results of this study, SWAT officers may be able to determine

different strategies to relieve stress and other coping abilities and resources. Positive

social change may also occur after new measures for stress coping abilities are integrated

into other SWAT or tactical units across the United States and other countries. The goal

of this study was also to ensure that law enforcement organizations across the United

States invest in improving strategies and trainings on how to cope with stress for police

officers and specifically, tactical police officers (i.e., SWAT), who are constantly facing stressful situations on the field. Policy makers and police administrators should be able to provide the needed tools for law enforcement personnel as it relates to stress and resources to cope with it.

This research provided insight into how the employing of physical exercise helps SWAT police officers cope with stress. This information is vital for use by policy makers and police academies to implement new curriculum that will include ways of coping as it relates to physical exercise and physical fitness. Overall, the results of this research will benefit society as a whole not only police officers.

## Summary

The focus of this chapter was the introduction to the study. Understanding how SWAT personnel cope with stress in their personal and professional lives was the focus of this phenomenological study. In this chapter, I also covered important aspects of the study: Background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of study, definitions of terms, assumptions, scope of study, delimitations, limitations, significance of study, and a summary.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

**Introduction**

The purpose of this research study was to better understand how SWAT police officers cope with stress in their personal and professional lives. It is important to review past studies conducted on stress and the police officer occupation to incorporate literature that will support this study and its design. It is also important to understand what other researchers have concluded about the phenomenon of stress in the police officer occupation and how police officers cope with stress. By incorporating other past research in this study, I found and addressed a gap in the research on the topic and provided more information about stress and the coping resources with SWAT personnel which will add to the body of knowledge about stress and the coping resources with tactical police officers.

In this literature review, I examined studies focusing on the effects of stress on and the coping resources of SWAT personnel. To better understanding how stress affects these tactical police officers while on and off the job, specifically while these tactical officers were engaged in SWAT missions, it was important to review the coping resources these officers used. I used the coping theory of Richard Lazarus's (1984) stress theory as the theoretical foundation for this study. Lazarus described problem-based coping and emotional-based coping as the two types of coping strategies used by individuals when they encountered stress.

People tend to use problem-based coping when they feel they have control over the situation and they feel the situation to be manageable (Lazarus, 1984). On the other

hand, people tend to use emotional-based coping when the situation is not under control and unmanageable (Lazarus, 1984). Lazarus noted that emotional-based coping people tend to use strategies to regulate stress (i.e., avoiding a situation, distancing oneself from the stressor, accepting the fact that they failed, seeking professional support from a psychologist), or turning to substance abuse [i.e., alcohol, drugs, etc.].

### Literature Search Strategy

I used the Walden University online library database for the purpose of the conducting this literature review. The following databases were searched to gather literatute: PsycARTICLES, SAGE Premier, PsycINFO, PsycEXTRA, ProQuest Criminal Justice, Oxford Criminology Bibliographies, MEDLINE with Full Text, EBSCO ebooks, and the Dissertations and Theses at Walden Library. The term SWAT is not commonly used in research; consequently, I used the following key words used to search the databases: *police officers, retired police officers, law enforcement officers, stress, coping resources, SWAT, tactical police officers, stressors, drug and alcohol abuse, PTSD,* and *phenomenology.*

Because this research was aimed at better understanding how SWAT police officers cope with stress and due to the limited amount of prior research that has been conducted on tactical police officers specifically dealing with stress and their coping abilities, I focused on prior research conducted on the police officers and stress in my review of the literature. Furthermore, prior research conducted on military personnel and firefighting personnel were also taken into account for the purpose of this literature review. The literature reviewed included peer-reviewed articles and journals from the

previously-listed databases accessed through Walden University's library. Because there was limited recent prior work on this topic, older material was also included in this review.

## Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for this study was based on the cognitive theory of stress and coping; in other words, I looked at how participants were consciously affected by the stressor(s) and how they coped with it (see Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The theory was created by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who devoted huge portion of their research to this area of stress and coping. In this phenomenological study, I explored the emergent themes and common meanings of the lived experiences of SWAT officers and what coping resources they used to cope with the situations they encountered.

To date, it is unknown how SWAT officers cope with stress and the resources they use. It is not known if they use personal resources like exercising and sports. It is not known if they use department resources like a program developed specifically for SWAT members to cope with stress. And, it is not known if they use professional resources like counseling with a psychologist or psychiatrist. Applying Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory helped me explain this phenomenon. According to Lazarus and Folkman's theory, people use cognition to adapt to or cope with the stressor as a result of a certain situation. Coping is the ability to adapt or adjust to any change when a situation arises, thus an individual's own interpretation of the events can determine the ability to cope with the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The theoretical foundation for this phenomenological study inspired me to identify how SWAT officers cope with stress in their personal and occupational lives. This research was based on a theoretical basis from the lived experiences among SWAT members. It was important to understand the lived experiences of these tactical police officers to understand the phenomenon commonly experienced. As I stated previously, the phenomenological research design best suited this study because phenomenology involves gathering the lived experiences of a group of persons to describe what the participants have in common (see Seidman, 2012).

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory on stress and coping focused on stress transitions and social demands and how people cope with them. According to Lazarus and Folkman, there are different types of stressors and factors that may increase the amount of stress a person experiences, for example environmental or ecological factors. Further, Lazarus (1966) also gave special attention to phenomena in the environment encompassing different variables (e.g., cold weather, hot weather, night time versus day time, etc.) which creates stressors. The author found that environment when combined with other factors can create positive or negative results, but nonetheless, stress can be part of the outcome.

Moreover, stress has been classified as either controllable or uncontrollable based on perceptions, which can be different in every individual (Gronlund, 2007). From a theoretical perspective, the term stress has a relationship between the environmental stimuli, which can be positive or negative, and the biological responses (Ganzel, Morris, & Wethington, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). From this perspective, what causes

stress to one person may not cause stress to another. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1989), any event or situation, whether a minor event or a major event, influences the person's physical and emotional response and also the coping mechanism. The cognitive theory of stress and coping offers important insight into how people are affected by stress and the coping resources they use.

Understanding how SWAT officers cope with stress and what causes stress to them will provide critical insight for future studies and will add to the body of knowledge in this field. With this in mind, Lazarus & Folkman (1984), in their theory of stress and coping, pointed out that during any situation or event, an individual will appraise the event for personal implications, and this, in turn, will or will not create a stressor based on the assessment of the individual. The individual then will assess the different options (secondary appraisal) to determined coping options (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Interestingly, the theory of stress and coping addresses both, the primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. In cases where the event is appraised to be harmful or threatening in any way, the stressor will be a negative one (e.g., anger, sadness; see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). On the other hand, if the event is appraised to be nonthreatening, the stressor will be positive (e.g., cheerful, happy; see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Also, events that are appraised as threatening can be accompanied by negative emotional feelings such as fear and anxiety (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Situations or events that are assessed as non-challenging or nonthreatening will usually deliver a positive emotion such as pleasure or confidence (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Furthermore, in the theory of stress and coping, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explained that after the primary appraisal of the event is conducted, an individual will determine how to cope with it. Lazarus (1984) described two types of coping strategies used by individuals when they encounter with stress: problem-based coping or emotional-based coping. Problem-based coping refers to the effort made by the individual to modify the sources of the stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). On the other hand, emotional-based coping refers to the effort made by the individual to deal with and control the emotions in response to the stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). In this study, the theory of stress and coping assisted me in explaining and identifying the levels of stress and the coping mechanisms experienced by SWAT officers. The ways in which these tactical officers successfully appraised and coped with stress can positively influence the way SWAT officers around the nation personally and professionally deal with stress.

## Literature Review

### Tactical Police Officers and SWAT Teams

SWAT were first formed in the early 1960s by the Los Angeles Police Department and specifically by the chief of police at that time, Daryl F. Gates (Williams & Westall, 2003). At that time, the escalation of violence and riots in Los Angeles influenced Chief Gates to create the first SWAT teams in the United States (Williams & Westall, 2003). The idea of combating violence criminal acts and dangerous riots came at a time where police departments lacked resources of this type. Chief Gates and Los Angeles officials embraced this idea of creating a highly-trained unit which could quickly

respond to any emergency situation that normal police officers lacked the tools and resources for (Balko, 2006).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s more police departments across the country created their own police SWAT teams at local, state, and federal levels (Kraska, 2007). Since the original SWAT teams were created, law enforcement agencies began using their SWAT teams not only for emergency situations where the assistance of specialized training came into play but for the serving of warrants for wanted violent criminals and training other police officers in how to deal with tactical situations (Kraska, 2007). By the early 1990s, most police departments with 100+ police officers had some type of tactical police teams that in some instances were called SRTs or ERTs (Kraska, 2007).

The end of the 20th century was critical in the existence of tactical police teams across the United States due to acts of terrorism. Although some researchers have been critical of the formation of tactical police teams (see Balko, 2006, Kraska, 2001, 2007). Others pointed out that local law enforcement agencies should be prepared to act in the events of terrorism, active shooters situations, incidents of weapons of mass destructions, and others violent situations where police tactical teams have better resources to engage in these incidents (see Prince, Weiss, & Davis, 2011).

**The Stress Concept**

Stress is not a new concept; as a matter of fact, the concept of stress has been around since the early 1900s when Cannon (1929) was one of the first to research the mystery of stress. Cannon conducted experiments and concluded that the physiological changes the body experienced were the result of an association of stimuli with an

emotional arousal. Gore (2004) described stress as a physiological or physical reaction of the body that occurs when a person must adjust to changing circumstances, whether the condition is real or a perceived condition. By medical definition, stress is defined as, "any stimulus or succession of stimuli of such magnitude as to disrupt the homeostasis of the organism" (Blau, 1994, p. 33). Moreover, psychological stress is defined as "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19).

Although Cannon was the first individual to write about the concept of stress in the 1900s, it was Selye who began to use the term stress to refer to a harmful or adverse effect that stimulates an organism (Selye, 1936). Selye (1936) would also later identify and differentiate those harmful effects as stressors and the state of the organism in response to those effects as stress. Selye (1936) went into more descriptive terms about the process of an organism's response to stressors as a "general adaptation syndrome" which he described three stages: "alarm reaction stage, the resistance stage, and exhaustion stage" (p. 11).

In this study, I aimed to better understand how SWAT police officers cope with stress, and therefore, the three stages described by Selye were worth noting. According to Selye (1955, 1956), a stressor (or agent), is any effect that produces stress, and based on this, stressors can be unlimited. For example, Selye pointed out two different factors or conditions related to stress: internal and external. Internal factors are associated with conditions that have become part of the body or hereditary or also past experiences

(Selye, 1955, 1956). External factors on the other hand are associated with climate, diet, relationships, etc. (Selye, 1955, 1956). Both stress factors can be related to inner stressors or outer ones and in the case of SWAT police officers, both factors are relevant to this study.

**Stress in Police Officers'**

Stress has been well documented to be part of most jobs and it can accumulate to the point of a person experiencing health and psychological problems in the absence of proper coping resources. It has been well documented that the police officers' occupation is one of the most stressful occupations around the United States and worldwide (Brooks & Piquero, 1998; Buker & Wiecko, 2007; Morash et al., 2006). On a daily basis police officers encounter critical events which are disturbing in nature (life threats or physical danger) which causes stress. Most of these experiences that police officers are faced with are extremely stressful and can affect their physical, cognitive, and psychological well-being (Gallo, 2011).

There are a variety of types of stress associated with the performance of police officers that causes stress e.g., occupational stress, organizational stress, operational stress, and administrative stress (Parker, 2015). Police stress has been associated with physical but most importantly with psychological problems e.g., depression, alcohol abuse, suicide, and divorce rate (Dietrich & Smith, 1986; Hartley et al., 2007; Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Violanti et al., 2011). Furthermore, prior studies have been conducted on critical incidents stressors of police officers (e.g., Kirschman, 2006; Weiss et al., 2010) which suggests the negative outcomes associated with these types of stressors (i.e., post-

traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], depression, substance abuse, etc.) and which needs more research done to understand how these officers cope with stress after exposed to these critical incidents situations.

From the moment officers' put on the uniform and leave their homes they are exposed to stress. All police officers can endure different levels of stress and that depends on various factors i.e., high-crime area versus low-crime area, midnight shift versus day shift, administrative duties versus patrol duties, etc. The law enforcement profession can be a stress producing occupation due to the unique experiences a police officer encounters (Ostrov, 1986). Moreover, police officers cope with stress in different ways and some are affected more than others.

**Different Types of Stress Within the Police Officers' Occupation**

**Organizational Stress**

In the law enforcement occupation, there are several organizational stressors officers' can endure. For example, organizational stressor can result from bad management practices, not-clear policies and procedures, and inadequate or unfairly enforcement of rules (Toch, 2002). In large size law enforcement agencies organizational stress can be felt less than in small or medium size agencies due to the political influences and other internal factors. Prior research by Buker and Wiecko (2007) on organizational stress in law enforcement officers focused on police organizational layout and how management practices were rooted in bureaucracy. This included the conditions officers were exposed to, management practices, and ineffective supervision.

Although police organizations, for the most part, have a set of policies and procedures which assists in guiding its members, there are some law enforcement agencies that the bureaucracy affects this process creating stress to it members as a result. Reiser (1974) wrote about how the broad and excessive departmental rules and regulations often affected member's moral creating this a stressor. Also, rank-and-file officers were rarely included in the policy-making process which created a stressful situation. Internal organizational stress can be common and often occurs. For example, favoritism, which usually takes place as a result of a private relationship between supervisors and subordinates, can be a serious organizational stress (Shane, 2010). Shane points out that these practices created personal and emotional tensions, criticism, and complaints among subordinates and lowers moral levels within the rank-and-file.

Organizational stress can be attributed to both, external and internal factors of the police organization. Internal factors can be more difficult for officers to cope when compared to external factors. There are many organizational characteristics that can generate stress to officers e.g., lack of administrative support, bureaucracy, and lack of advancement opportunities (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006; Stinchcomb, 2004). Also, Toch et al. (2002) point out that one of the major internal factors generating stress to officers were lack of administrative support and inconsistency with discipline procedures and management.

**Operational Stress**

Both organizational stress and operational stress have some things in common. McCreary and Thompson (2006) designed the Police Stress Questionnaire-Operational

(PSQ-OP) which aims at determining common themes perceived by police officers and the authors included organizational and operational stressors associated with the overall stress of police officers. According to McCreary and Thompson, operational stress are stressors associated with a position e.g., police officer, in which the person can perceived stress through physical factors within that position e.g., back pain due to wearing a duty belt, ability to handle a traumatic event, etc. Operational stress can affect the officer's physical health and mental health and officers handle the stress in different ways depending the situation encountered (Garner, 2008).

Operational stress can be associated more with the organization and the way the organization is ran. Toch (2002) noted that departmental policies developed by upper management can be an operational stressor for police officers. Another stressor associated with operational stress is the role that politics play in the organization, specifically in small to mid-size police agencies. According to Hickman et al. (2011), an event like the death of another officer can be associated with operational stressor to officers but a greatest source of stress is changes within the organization and leadership styles. Despite that a greatest operational stressor sometimes comes from elected officials influencing the agency's administration, coping with the death or injury of a colleague, investigating a case where a child is the victim, responding to acts of terrorism, even firing the weapon, can all be associated with operational sources of stress (Webster, 2014).

**Occupational stress**

The police officers' occupation has been well documented to be one of the top stressful occupations in the labor field. The police officers' occupation is one that deals not only with acts of violence and dangerous situations but there are several contributing factors associated with this occupation that by nature produces stress. For example, officers' must work different work shifts, weather it rains or snows they have to perform the job and assist people in need, poor diets, sometimes lack of physical and mental training, and other factors that causes stress. All of these occupational factors that caused stress are also associated with physical health issues. For example, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, stomach disorders, back pain, hip pain, and others, are associated with the police officers' occupation and health issues (Quigley, 2008).

The nature of police work is one of the main causes of occupational stress and as mentioned previously it consists mainly of shift work, physical threats, dangerous situations, and other factors (Stephens & Long, 2000). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines occupational stress as the actions that emerge when an employee's needs, resources, and capabilities do not support job requirements (Center for Disease Control, 2008). Furthermore, the Center for Disease Control pointed out that public safety workers most likely will face stress from poor working conditions, lack of training and advancement opportunities, incompatible family work and family responsibilities, organizational issues, and financial factors.

The objective of this study is to better understand how SWAT personnel cope with stress in their personal and occupational lives and how these tactical officers cope with stress. Police officers on a moment's notice can respond on a cat on a tree call-for-

service or a violent confrontation where the officer's live is as stake. On the other hand, the occupation of SWAT members, for the most part, is responding to the worst situations police officers can encounter and therefore, SWAT members will be exposed to stress in almost every situation they are deployed. SWAT members can be exposed to traumatic scenes in most of the missions they respond to.

Dealing with traumatic events like the ones previously mentioned will highly cause stress. In his dissertation, McKoy (2010) noted that a traumatic event consists of "any event which has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of either an individual or a group are typically sudden, powerful events outside of the range of ordinary human experiences" (p. 12). As the result of their positions, SWAT officers will be exposed to the most stressful situations in this occupation and it is essential for these officers to have a need for stress management skills and coping resources to properly regulate those types of mental emotions.

For the most part police officers in their career will encounter more traumatic incidents than most individuals during their entire life (Kirschman, 2007). Because SWAT members are usually involved in critical incidents, they can be exposed to more traumatic events than the usual police officer. Similar to McKoy's definition of a traumatic event, Kulbarsh (2007) defines a critical incident as "any event that has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of an individual" (p. 1). According to Kulbarsh, after encountering critical incidents, police officers can experience negative psychological, emotional, and physical reactions, even days or weeks after the critical incident. Police officers will be exposed to critical

incidents at least once in their career (Kulbarsh, 2007). Many different types of events are categorized as critical incidents but Garcia et al. (2004) found that certain events involving death are associated with the most critical and stressful situations by police officers. For SWAT officers, the exposure to countless critical incidents and traumatic events throughout their SWAT career can display more severe stress reactions in the end.

According to Marchand et al. (2015), the frequent exposure to critical incidents that poses a threat to the officer's life e.g., gunfire, homicides, suicides, and other traumatic events can produce severe repercussions on the officers' psychosocial and occupational functioning. Police officers exposed to these types of events can even develop acute stress disorder (ASD) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Marchand et al., 2015). These critical events and traumatic scenes causes stress and these types of exposures can accumulate over time. Papazoglou and Andresen (2014) points out that future exposure to traumatic stressful situations can trigger the re-experiencing of traumatic symptoms from prior similar exposures. ASD and PTSD are not the only stress disorders officers can develop. Health issues are also common among police officers who are exposed to critical and traumatic events (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014).

Trauma-related stress can be associated with emotional suffering and social problems e.g., anxiety, substance abuse, prone for suicide, job burnout, memory problems, and as previously mentioned, PTSD (Chopko & Schwartz, 2009). SWAT members are a group of first responders which most likely encounter trauma-related stress as a result what they experience on missions. Chopko & Schwartz also noted that police officers who are usually exposed to traumatic events are more likely to experience

"long-lasting depression, fear when reminded of the event, guilt, tension, irritability, and nightmares" (p. 364). As a result of this, 12 to 35 percent of police officers can be diagnosed with the PTSD criteria (Chopko & Schwartz, 2009).

According to the Center for Disease Control, traumatic incidents can produce unusually strong emotional reactions that may interfere with one's ability to function while at a specific traumatic scene or it can interfere at a later time (Center for Disease Control, 2002). Many of the symptoms felt will vary but for the most part are a person may experience physical, cognitive, emotional or behavioral symptoms as a result of being exposed to a traumatic incident (Center for Disease Control, 2002). Table 1 below shows some of the symptoms mentioned previously due to exposure to traumatic incidents:

Table 1

*Center for Disease Control Source*

| Physical | Cognitive | Emotional | Behavioral |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chest pain | Confusion | Anxiety | Intense anger |
| Difficulty breathing | Nightmares | Depression | Withdrawal |
| Shock symptoms | Disorientation | Guilt | Emotional outburst |
| Fatigue | Poor concentration | Grief | Excessive alcohol consumption |
| Rapid heart rate | Memory problems | Fear | Inability to rest |

**Administrative Stress**

The fact that police officers can die while on duty is a reality that police officers are aware. Despite that reality, police officers faced a more frequent stressor on a daily basis and that is of the police administration. Superior officers, middle management, and upper leaders are more of a stressor according to Bennett and Hess (2007) than

understanding the death probability the job is exposed to. Many of the stressors brought up by the administration are due to having certain rules and guidelines imposed by the administration. According to Bennett and Hess (2007), many of the policies and regulations are made or updated without consulting with subordinates and this creates a common feeling among officers of loss of control which is an indicator of future stress.

Keeping in mind the definition described by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that stress "is a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 21), administrative stress can be endured from the organization's administration and its leaders. The combination of organizational, occupational, operational, and administrative stress, can affect police officer's job performance and their personal relationships (Burke, 1993; Finn & Tomz, 1997; Wilson et al., 1997). Furthermore, poor job performance as a result from stress from the administration can result in lawsuits associated with officers' job performance, and this affects the organization in a negative way (Finn & Tomz, 1997). Although officers' stress endured by the administration varies depending on the officers' characteristics i.e., age, rank, years of police experience, gender and even race, the organization gets affected if officers' performance is poor (Violanti & Aron, 1995).

Throughout their careers, police officers can work in different areas or specialized units. For instance, an officer can promote from patrol duties to investigative duties and this will bring a new administrative-based stressor to the officer. Promoting to new positions can be a positive achievement for police officers but with different

responsibilities the officers' must then adapt to the new position. New position within the agency means integrating to a new police subculture which is divided between the administrative culture within the agency and the subculture of officers. The administrative culture is based on the agency's mission, policies and procedures, and regulations set by the administration (Prenzler, 1997) whereas the subculture within officers is the norms, values, and beliefs set by officers (Prenzler, 1997).

**Coping Resources for Police Officers**

It was the researcher's interest for the current study to explore the stress and the coping abilities of SWAT personnel. Overall, the law enforcement profession has been well documented to be one of the most stressful occupations in the world (e.g. Brooks & Piquero, 1998; Buker & Wiecko, 2007; Morash et al., 2006). Past studies have focused on different types of stress in law enforcement (Parker, 2015), and the stressors felt by law enforcement officers are both personal and professional. It is vitally important for law enforcement officers to be able to use coping strategies and resources in dealing with any psychological or emotional stressors resulting from any traumatic event. Being able to cope with stress while on duty and off duty was discussed in this section as well as which coping abilities police officers should integrate to assist them in coping with stress.

It is important that law enforcement officers have the proper tools to cope with stress. Regehr et al. (2008) noted that there is literature addressing the association between performance and stress, which suggested that stress leads to low performance. The law enforcement occupation requires officers to be in good psychological and physical health in order to be able to perform their duties in an effective way. Although

law enforcement officers cope with stress in different ways, it is important for officers to be mentally stable to perform law enforcement duties. Many studies on stress and police officers have found the different types of emotional, psychological, and health issues associated with stress. Garner (2008) explained that there have been several studies that suggests that providing law enforcement officers with the proper coping tools for stress could lessen negative results in both health and psychological issues as well as in the performance of their duty.

Yun et al. (2002) noted that there is ample exploratory proof that some of the effects of stressors can vary depending on the person's coping strategies and coping resources. Interestingly, Yun et al. (2002) suggested that coping strategies can be organized into two different groups which are constructive coping and destructive coping. According to Yun et al., constructive coping deals more with cognitive-problem strategies i.e., talking and discussing specific stressful events with family members and friends, religion, and physical exercising. On the other hand, destructive coping relies on negative outcomes i.e., psychological and health problems. As mentioned previously in this research, substance abuse, excessive alcohol drinking, depression, are all examples of destructive coping. One of the most important coping strategies noted by Yun et al. (2002) is social support from family and friends.

It has been well documented that stress in the law enforcement profession comes from organizational factors versus external factors (Violanti & Aron, 1993). With this in mind, stress coping strategies and resources are essential in this line of duty. Coping is defined as "the overt and covert behaviors used by individuals to manage stressful

conditions, especially workplace problems that are appraised as taxing" (Haarr & Morash, 1999, p. 307). Coping with stress properly can be beneficial to both the officer and the organization and employing constructive coping strategies (see Yun et al., 2002) can have effective outcomes. Haarr and Morash also noted that sometimes law enforcement officers engaged in healthy coping strategies like exercising and hobbies whereas some officers engaged in unhealthy behaviors like cynicism, isolation, and substance abuse.

Morash et al. (2011) conducted a study specifically dealing with strategies to cope with stress in the police profession. Their study focused on alternative ways police officers cope with work-related stress in the United States and South Korea. Furthermore, Morash et al. (2011) study focused on the connection of various types of coping strategies to include problem focused and emotional focused. According to Morash et al., problem focused coping, similarly to constructive coping, deals with "family and friends support or making a plan of action and following it" (p. 92), which is an effective coping strategy. On the other hand, emotional focused coping i.e., pretending that nothing is wrong, avoiding others, is an ineffective coping strategy and, in some case, it increases stress levels (Morash et al., 2011).

Morash et al. (2011) study consisted of both men and women in both countries and the study was initiated in 2003. In the United States, for instance, 947 police officers from different police agencies agreed on participating in the study. Out of the 700 South Korean police officers, 675 agreed on participating in the study. Because the study involved two different countries with different languages, the questions on the survey

were translated by several different individuals who were fluent both in English and Korean. Furthermore, because the study focused on different stress coping strategies related specifically to work-related stress, the measure of work-related stress was tailored from Morash and Haarr (1995). These measures were designed as it relates to work-related stress, workplace problems, and coping strategies (Morash & Haarr, 1995).

In order to adequately evaluate the study, different number of scales were used for the as it relates to each category of measures. For example, in the work-related stress measure, a five-point scale was used with statements i.e., "The amount of unwanted stress on my job has had a negative effect on my physical well-being" or "My feeling is that I needed to get some special help in managing the stress of my job" (Morash et al., 2011, p. 94). Another example used in the study is related to workplace problems, a nine scale was used where indicators of workplace problems were address i.e., lack of advancement opportunities, lack of influence, language harassment t, sexual harassment, among others. Lastly, in the coping strategies measures, a seven scale was used and the strategies that were included were escape, expression of feelings, formal action, getting others to like oneself, keeping work records, and change job assignments.

In conclusion, Morash et al. (2011) study found that none of the measured strategies used appeared to decrease effects of stressors as it relates to coping strategies. On the other hand, the study found a persistent influence of workplace problems which suggested that workplace conditions were poor and needed to be improved. Consequently, the only measured coping strategy that significantly appeared to reduce stress for Korean police officers was keeping records. Also, the only measured coping

strategies that both countries had in common were suffering in silence, ignoring the situation, living with the situation, and avoiding superiors or co-workers. In conclusion, Morash et al. (2011) study in coping strategies of stress among police officers from the United States and South Korea, revealed none of the coping strategies measured reduced stress but instead they found that the level of workplace problems was the major stressor among police officers. This conclusion, coincidently and most importantly concurs, that the majority of stress endured by police officers come within the police agency and not from external factors (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006; Stinchcomb, 2004).

It is important to note that this study conducted by Morash et al. (2011) did not yield any coping strategies for police officers to cope with stress. Similarity, Haarr and Morash (1999) concluded similar results citing that "the literature on policing has neglected the relationship between stress and coping" (p. 307). Moreover, Haarr and Morash contended that in the general literature on stress coping strategies, however, there are more effective coping strategies to cope with stress.

## Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the most recent literature on stress and the coping resources in police officers and specifically as it relate to SWAT police officers and it also established a foundation for this study. Many of the topics that were discussed included the stress on police officers and the types of stressors within the police officers' occupation e.g., organizational, operational, occupational, and administrative stress. As noted previously, the law enforcement occupation has been well documented in prior studies to be one of the most stressful professions in the world (Brooks & Piquero, 1998;

Buker & Wiecko, 2007; Morash et al., 2006), but there is a lack of research on tactical police officers and stress.

Despite prior research on stress and police officers' reveals stress on police officers can be endured from different types of stressors i.e., internal or external, it is unknown what coping resources tactical police officers (e.g., SWAT, SRT, ERT) used to cope with stress in their personal and occupational lives. This creates a gap in the literature as it relates to stress and the coping abilities of SWAT personnel. It is unknown how SWAT personnel cope with stress on and off duty. It is also unknown what coping resources SWAT personnel use to cope with stress on their personal and occupational lives. This phenomenological study was designed to answer and to better understand these questions.

The theory on stress and coping was relevant to this study because it explores and takes into account the different ways people assessed and interprets an event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The literature has revealed how individuals respond to different events and that different people do not react in the same manner to stressful events. Also, the literature revealed that different of stress associated with the police officers' occupation but more research needs to be conducted on tactical police officers and stress.

Understanding how SWAT personnel cope with stress in their personal and occupational lives and combining past studies related to stress and law enforcement with the present study, will allow new theories to emerged for future studies and explorations. There are little or no studies that specifically address how SWAT officers cope with stress and the different resources they use to cope with stress. This study added to the

literature about stress and SWAT police officers and the coping abilities they used to

cope with stress.

Chapter 3: Research Method

## Introduction

In this chapter, I will focus on the research approach and methodology that will include participants, data collection, and data analysis. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how five retired law enforcement police officers who were members of a SWAT team coped with stress in their personal and professional lives. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to explore the common themes that emerged from their experiences with the phenomenon. I used open-ended questions to understand the perspectives of the participants and how they made sense of their experiences in this study. The phenomenological research approach aims at obtaining the principal of the individuals' lived experiences of the phenomenon and at the same time defining and discovering the phenomenon (Yuksel et al., 2015). The results of this study provided a better understanding of what causes stress to these tactical police officers while on and off duty. The results also assisted in better understanding what coping resources were used by these SWAT officers to cope with stress and to offer other coping mechanisms (i.e., treatments for stress).

In this study, I examined the stress and coping abilities of SWAT personnel. Past studies related to police officers' occupational stress and stress in different types of police work (e.g., patrol officers, undercover officers, university police officers, and game conservation officers; see Buckley, 1994; Girodo, 1991; Haddock, 1988; Walsh & Donovan, 1984) have been conducted, but there has been little research completed on the stress and coping resources of tactical police officers' (e.g., SWAT, Tactical Response

Team [TRT], and SRT). In this chapter, I will discuss the rationale for selecting this methodology; the sampling strategy; the instrumentation; and how I collected, organized, and analyzed the data in more detail.

## Research Design and Rationale

My objective with this qualitative, phenomenological study was to interpret the five participants' lived experiences with stress and explore how they coped with it. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the emergent themes of retired SWAT personnel and the resources or mechanisms they used to cope with stress in their personal and occupational lives.

My use of phenomenological interviewing in this study required retired SWAT personnel participants to reconstruct their past experiences and reflect on how stress affected their personal and occupational lives and how they were able to cope with it. The phenomenological research design addressed the research questions in this study because it allowed me to capture the lived experiences of participants through their direct perceptions and descriptions (see Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, the data collected from participants in the study revealed what the participants had in common through identified themes and patterns from which I developed a description of the essence of the experience for all participants (see Patton, 2002).

I focused on obtaining insight into and an understanding of the phenomenon based on the main research question and sub-questions. The main research question was and sub-questions were:

What are the main causes of stress to SWAT personnel while they were engaged in SWAT missions and operations?

- How do SWAT personnel cope with stress while on duty?
- How do SWAT personnel cope with stress while off duty?
- What causes stress to SWAT personnel while on duty?
- What causes stress to SWAT personnel while off duty?

In this study, I focused on the lived experiences of police officers who were retired members of a tactical response teams (i.e., SWAT, SRT, and ERT). The phenomenological approach is designed to discover the meanings and essence of a person's lived experiences (Patton, 2002). These retired tactical police officers explained how their experiences related to the phenomenon under study. The phenomenological research design allowed for the identification of patterns and themes (Moustakas, 1994) and tends to describe the common lived experiences of several individuals regarding a phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

The phenomenological research design is aimed at better understanding what is being experienced by an individual, and therefore, understanding what an individual means is essential in the process (Moustakas, 1994). By obtaining what a person has experienced, the researcher can deduce meaning from what the person provided. Moreover, the phenomenological approach is useful when the information obtained provides a detailed description of the lived experiences of individuals by in-depth interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi (1985) also believed that phenomenological research allows researchers to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon in question

as experienced by persons. This is done by conducting in-depth interviews with open-ended questions (Giorgi, 1985). My use of this research design was aimed at exploring the common themes of retired SWAT personnel, how they coped with stress, and what resources they used to cope with stress.

In qualitative research, there are five different designs which include narrative, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and phenomenological design (Rudestam et al., 2015). For this research study, I employed the phenomenological design. As described by Moustakas (1994), the phenomenological research design was appropriate for this study as it allowed me to describe and interpret the meanings of participants' experiences during their careers as SWAT members. This methodological approach focuses on describing the lived experiences of participants rather than generating theories about the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Based on Patton (2002), who noted that a phenomenon with little or no prior research done, the phenomenological approach is appropriate, I found the phenomenological research design appropriate for this study because there was little prior research on stress and the coping resources of retired SWAT personnel. In comparison with a quantitative study, the sample size for a qualitative study is smaller (Mason, 2010). In a phenomenological research study, between two and 25 participants are recommended (Klenke, 2008). For this study, I used five participants who were retired police officers and had been members of a SWAT team.

**Role of the Researcher**

My role for the present study was as the interviewer who asked questions in a way to better understand the phenomenon. I was the instrument for collecting all data

throughout the data collection process (see Moustakas, 1994). The data were not only

collected through face-to-face, semi structured interviews, but also through observations

and note taking. I recruited all five participants through e-mail and telephone

conversations. My role as an observer was to gain the best understanding possible of the

phenomena while collecting data and my role as an interviewer was to ask questions in a

way that led to my understanding of the phenomenon.

It is important to note that I have a broad background in the law enforcement

profession, and I was a prior SWAT police officer. Because of my law enforcement

background, prior SWAT background, and current role as a LEO, I may possess

unknown biases. Prior to collecting any data, I informed participants of my background,

and during the data collection of data, I maintained a high level of objectiveness.

Moustakas (1994) noted that in a qualitative, phenomenological study with the researcher

being the data collecting instrument, it is important for the researcher to understand

himself or herself and any biases and limitations that could occur. I did not recruit friends

and colleagues to take part in this study, and therefore, I did not have any personal or

professional relationship with the participants.

As mentioned previously, I have prior experience as a SWAT police officer and

this is the reason for this study. As a former SWAT member, I was able to experience on

a first-hand basis the stressors that are placed on SWAT personnel. Being a current LEO

allows me a better understanding of law enforcement protocols, policies, procedures, and

the police subculture as well. Being a current LEO, also could be a negative factor

because I have already formed some preconceived notions and biases regarding law

enforcement procedures, practices, and the police culture. Merriam (2009) and Moustakas (1994) suggested that researchers should give up their biases and approach the topic with a fresh eye, which I attempted to do while conducting this study.

## Methodology

The goal of this phenomenological study was to explore the common themes that emerged from SWAT members, their lived experiences, and how they coped with stress in their personal and occupational lives. In this study, I focused specifically on retired LEOs who were members of a SWAT team; therefore, the participants were selected through purposeful sampling. According to Patton (2002), "purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (p. 230). Patton also contented that studying information-rich cases allows an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study rather than a general understanding. My goal was to gather information-rich data from the retired SWAT member participants to better understand how they coped with stress while on and off duty.

### Participant Selection

The population of interest in this study included only retired law enforcement personnel who were members of a SWAT team and who had experienced the phenomenon. I used the purposeful sampling to identify and contact five retired LEOs who were members of a SWAT team at one or more times during their career. Moustakas (1994) contended that participants should have experienced the phenomenon and be willing to participate in the study. I initially contacted the participants via e-mail and

eventually contacted all five participants via telephone to further discuss details about the study with them.

Because I aimed at understanding how SWAT personnel cope with stress in this study, the purposeful sampling strategy was used. Purposeful sampling refers to a technique where the participants selected for the study have experienced the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Because these individuals have experienced the phenomenon first hand, they are able to provide rich, detailed information about the phenomenon which allows the researcher to better understand the phenomenon (Descombe, 2014; Patton, 2002). According to Merriam (2009), there are several variations of purposeful sampling to include snowballing, maximum variation, and convenience sampling. Using the purposeful sampling strategy, I selected retired law enforcement personnel who were members of a SWAT team and who had experienced the phenomenon. For this study, five participants volunteered to be participants. Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that researchers utilizing the phenomenological design interview between five to 25 participants who have experienced the phenomenon in order to collect data containing common themes. Similarly, Morse (1994, 1995) suggested that at least six participants should be included in a phenomenological research study. Lastly, Patton (2002) did not provide a specific sample size in a phenomenological research study, instead noting that in a qualitative study the sample size depends on the particulars of each study.

Prior to collecting any data permission was granted from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Through personal contacts within the law enforcement community, I e-mailed retired law enforcement officers who were members of a SWAT

team in Miami-Dade County, Florida. Included in this e-mail was a Recruitment Letter explaining what the study was about. Originally seven retired LEOs who were members of a SWAT team agreed to participate but at the last moment only five participated in the study. After this initial contact with potential participants, we agreed on meeting in person and scheduled a meeting for the interview phase. During this face-to-face meeting, participants were encouraged to ask questions about the study. Also, during this meeting and prior on collecting any data, I provided each participant with a Consent Form which each of them read and signed. Copies of the Consent Form were given to each participant prior to interviewing them. Participants were also informed that each interview was going to be audio recorded with two digital recorders. After each interview was completed, I addressed questions and concerns to participants. I them concluded the interview and thanked each participant for their participation.

**Instrumentation**

The goal of this study was to explore how SWAT police officers cope with stress in their personal and professional lives and the coping resources they utilized. Thus, obtaining the lived experiences from these individuals was essence for this phenomenological study. Gathering data through interviews was the main data collection tool for this study. Further, the instrumentation used for data collection in a qualitative research study employs interviews, analysis of documents, and analysis of observations (Grbich, 1999). The interviewing of participants allowed then to convey in their own words their perspectives and perceptions.

The following steps were used to collect data:

1.   I obtained approval from the IRB from Walden University prior to
     collecting data.

2.   Through personal contacts within the law enforcement community, I sent
     e-mails to retired LEOs who were members of a SWAT team.

3.   I obtained information about potential participants via e-mail. Each of
     these potential participants was sent a Recruitment Letter explaining in
     detail the goal of the study and the process.

4.   I met with each participant and prior to the interview, I provided a Consent
     Form which participants read and signed.

5.   I collected the data via face-to-face interviews with each participant. All
     interviews were audio recorded.

The main data collection instrument during the interview process was two digital

audio tape recorders. During all the interviews, all the information i.e., responses from

participants, interview questions, and any discussion that occurred during the interview

process was recorded for future analysis. Patton (2002) suggests the recording of data

during the interview process as it can be an important element of the data collection

phase. Patton noted that "some method for recording the verbatim responses of people

being interviewed is therefore essential" (p. 380). Similarly, Moustakas (1994) noted that

in qualitative, phenomenological research designs interviewing of participants is one of

the main tools for collecting data.

**Data Collection**

As stated previously, the target population for the present study were retired LEOs who were members of a SWAT team. The main data collection tool for this study was face-to-face in-depth interviews and note taking. The sample size for the present study was five retired LEOs who all were members of a SWAT team. In-depth interviews were pre-set for a maximum of two hours with each participant, unless the interview prolongs and the interviewer agrees to proceed further. Each interview took place at location chosen by each of the participants. Prior to the interviews, I provided participants with a Consent Form which they read and signed. All of the interviews were audio recorded as stated previously. After each interview was completed, I encouraged each participant to ask questions. I then thanked each of the participants for their participation.

**Data Analysis**

For the data analysis in a qualitative research study, there are several methods available for analyzing the data. During the data analysis, the researcher looks and compares for similar themes within the collected data. This analysis of looking and comparing similar themes allows the researcher to understand the thoughts emerging from the data. I conducted data analysis by transcribing the data verbatim and I then coded the data using the NVivo 11 software.

For this study, I first transcribed all interviews and I exported the transcripts to the NVivo 11 software for data analysis. The NVivo 11 software is a tool that allows the researcher to manage a large amount of qualitative data for storage and organizational

purpose. Furthermore, the NVivo 11 software does have the ability to establish common themes without having it done by the researcher.

For the data analysis I used the Moustakas (1994) modified Van Kaam data analysis strategy and manually code the data to analyze the information obtained from the interviews. In the qualitative phenomenological research approach, the modified Van Kaam data analysis allows the researcher to explore the phenomenon in-depth through the lived experiences of participants. Furthermore, the Van Kaam qualitative phenomenological approach involves empirical research for capturing person's lived experiences within the phenomenon and will describe the common shared experiences of those person's (Reiter et al., 2011). This will also help the researcher to identify and create coding schemes and analyze the collected data (Moustakas, 1994). These are the steps described by Moustakas (1994):

1. Listing and preliminary grouping.

2. Reduction and elimination.

3. Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents.

4. Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application.

5. Using the relevant validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co researcher and individual textual description of the experience.

6. Construct for each co-researcher an individual structural description and imaginative variation.

7. Construct for each research participant a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience. From the individual textural-

structured descriptions, develop a composite description of the meanings and

essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole (Moustakas,

1994, pp. 120-121).

**Issues of Trustworthiness**

One of the most important aspects of a research study is the trustworthiness of the

study. In qualitative studies the validity of the study is also known as credibility or

trustworthiness, and this allows the results of the study to believable (Creswell, 2008).

Moreover, it is also important for the researcher to provide a well-documented

methodology approach, research design, data collection tools, and data analysis

description which allows the results and conclusion to be believable. This process allows

for the study to overcome limitations in order for the qualitative study to demonstrate

credibility and trustworthiness.

There are several steps the research can take to ensure trustworthiness. The

present phenomenological design study aimed at better understanding how SWAT

personnel cope with stress and resources they used. Data was collected via in-depth, face-

to-face interviews. According to Moustakas (1994), triangulation is a valuable tool to

increase the trustworthiness of a study. Similarly, Maxwell (2005) noted that in a

qualitative research study, triangulation is a credible way in ensuring trustworthiness in a

study. For the present study, I used triangulation as a strategy to ensure the

trustworthiness of it.

Triangulation takes place by collecting multiple sources of data within the collected data to ensure that such data supports what is being studied. In other words, by using different approaches and sources e.g., note taking during the interview process, allowing the participants to read their transcribed interview for clarification, allows triangulate the trustworthiness of responses from participants and the responses can be corroborated. The process of triangulation ensures that by using other sources, the information obtained can corroborate with the data obtained from participants, the researcher is triangulating and providing trustworthiness or validity to the study (Creswell, 2009, 2013). As stated, I used triangulation to gather the data and to ensure that the study's findings are legitimate.

**Credibility**

In a qualitative research the formation of credibility is an important part of the study itself. The initial selection of retired police officers added to the credibility of the outcomes in some ways. All of these five participants were retired and had no ties to their previous law enforcement organizations and therefore increasing the truthfulness of their answers as it relates to the phenomenon in question. Moreover, the fact that these five retired participants provided similar responses to the interview questions, this added credibility to the study. The five retired participants were all SWAT members and experienced the phenomenon in questions which also added credibility to the study. All of the five participant interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed by them for credibility. All participants were provided with their transcribed interview for member

checking. This ensured accuracy by allowing participants to review their statements and made any changes.

**Transferability**

In selecting the participants for this study, I employed a strategy and selected the participants that were retired law enforcement officers and were members of a SWAT team to achieve perspectives of the phenomenon I have studied. Transferability was obtained in part by the in-depth data collection strategy. All of the information obtained in the interview process was described in detailed, which resulted in obtaining perceptions and descriptions of the accounts by participants.

**Dependability**

According to Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008), dependability refers to the data collection device that measures what it is designed to measure. Dependability was obtained primarily by coding all data obtained from the in-depth, semi structured interviews. Dependability was also obtained by the previous mentioned in-depth data and detailed research procedures which established dependability for this qualitative research study. This entire process was achieved by detailed records of all the interviews conducted, recording of interviews, transcribing the interviews verbatim, participants reviewing their transcripts, and the data analysis process.

**Confirmability**

All forms of biases were excluded by bracketing to ensured validity. This process allowed my personal opinions and past knowledge about the phenomenon was eliminated during the interview process. Confirmability was established by showing evidence with

the entire data gathering process and data analysis. I documented the entire research

process which afforded me the opportunity to establish confirmability as it relates to my

findings.

## Ethical Procedures

Prior to collecting any data, IRB approval must be granted from Walden

University. This study was conducted in accordance with Walden University's IRB

approval 02-03-17-0415558. All federal and the state of Florida's regulations were

followed to ensure ethical protection to the research participants. I completed the

National Institute of Health Office of Extramural Research certificate # 1271491 in

accordance with the research of humans. All guidelines provided by Walden University

prior to collecting any data were followed. Prior to participating in the research, each

participant was provided with a copy of the consent form which explains the scope of the

study and other information relevant to the study. It was my upmost importance

maintaining the safety, integrity, and best interest of those involved in the present study,

therefore, protecting the integrity and credibility of this study was a priority.

As stated previously, guidelines set by Walden University's IRB were followed to

ensure proper ethical procedures were met. The participants were only sough once

Walden University's IRB approved the data collecting process. Once each participant

read and signed the consent form, the data collection began. All participants were

informed prior to the interviews that each interview was going to be audio recorded with

two devices. Also, participants were informed that the recordings will be kept in a

secured cabinet for a minimum of 5 years and participants information will be kept

private and secured at all times. I informed all participants that once each interview was transcribed, each transcribed interview will be sent back to them to ensure accuracy. Lastly, I informed each participant that after the study is approved, I will send them a summary report of the research findings.

## Summary

The focus of this chapter was the methodology and research approach. Understanding how SWAT personnel cope with stress in their personal and professional lives was the focus of this phenomenological study. In this chapter, I also covered important aspects of the study: the research approach and design, the role of the researcher, the methodology of qualitative inquiry, sample size and selection, the instrumentation used for the study, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness and ethical strategies of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how five retired SWAT police officers coped with stress in their personal and professional lives. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to explore the common themes that emerged from their experiences with the phenomenon. In this study, used open-ended questions to understand the perspectives of the participants and how they made sense of their experiences.

I collected the data for this study through in-depth, face-to-face, semi structured interviews of five retired police officers who were SWAT members. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data were managed and coded using NVivo 11. Data were analyzed using the Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method of analysis. In this chapter, I will discuss the setting, demographics of each participant, the data collection method, how the data were analyzed, the results of the analysis, and how the results are identified as trustworthy.

## Setting

I used the purposive sampling strategy to collect data through in-depth, semi structured interviews with five retired police officers who were SWAT members. The interviews took place between December 18, 2017 and January 5, 2018 at different locations based on the participant's preference. There were no organizational conditions that influenced participants or their experiences at the time of the study that may have influenced interpretation of the study results.

**Demographics**

There were seven participants that volunteered for this study; however, only five participants agreed to participate. The five participants were retired police officers who were members of a SWAT team. All the five participants met the selection criteria, and they were all male participants. The demographic questions in this study included age, gender, race, ethnicity, number of years in law enforcement, number of years as a SWAT member, rank while in the SWAT team, marital status during years as a SWAT member, number of children during years as a SWAT member, and highest education completed.

**Data Collection**

Face-to-face, in-depth semi structured interviews, were the data collection strategy I used in this study. Once I received approval from Walden University's IRB, the data collection process began. The focus of the interview questions was to explore how retired SWAT personnel coped with stress while on or off duty and their main causes of stress. I served as the data collection instrument for this study and developed the interview questions. Prior to the interviews, I communicated with participants via e-mail and sent them the consent form for their review. The consent forms informed participants of what the study was about and advised them to either reply to the email or contact me if they agreed to participate in the study.

After obtaining agreement from the five participants, I scheduled to meet with them for face-to-face interviews at a place of their choice. The consent forms were signed and collected prior to the interviews; also, a demographic form was completed by each participant prior to the interview to obtain their background information. All participants

agreed to my audio recording of the interviews. Each interview lasted between 20 to 45 minutes and all interviews were recorded using two digital recording devices. Once each interview was completed, each participant and I reviewed the recording for accuracy. The data collection for each participant was completed without any unusual circumstances.

**Data Analysis**

I conducted the semi structured interviews using semi-open-ended questions which allowed each participant the opportunity to narrate their lived experience with this phenomenon as it related to the resources they used to cope with stress. The first step in the data analysis phase was to transcribe each interview verbatim. Once each interview was transcribed, I offered participants the opportunity to review the transcribed interview for any changes; no changes were made by any participant. I then used the NVivo 11 software to assist in the data analysis and coding. NVivo 11 allows the qualitative researcher to collect, code, and analyze data obtained from different sources including interviews (Rudestam et al., 2015). I reviewed each transcription to identify themes, common characteristics, and reoccurrences in the data obtained from the five participants using the modified van Kaam method of data analysis, as suggested by Moustakas (1994). Themes and similar patterns emerged within the data and were grouped together.

<div align="center">

**Evidence of Trustworthiness**

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Prior to conducting the actual study, I ensured reliability and validity for this study in several different ways. First, Walden's University IRB review process assisted in establishing the credibility of the study. Prior to the data collection, all required documents were approved by Walden's IRB, ensuring credibility and validity. Once

Walden's IRB approved the data collection process, I e-mailed the retired police officers from different police agencies who were members of a SWAT team a recruitment letter covering all aspects of the study. Because all the potential participants were retired police officers, participants were more at ease with participating in the study because they did not have concerns about how their participation could possibly affect their careers.

Furthermore, I took numerous steps during the interview process that increased validity and reliability. Being a police officer and a past SWAT member myself, I was conscious of my biases and preconceived notions. I used a concept suggested by Moustakas (1994) called *epoche* which is bracketing and "is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment" to ensure the validity of the process and accurate data collection.

Once I obtained and transcribed all dataverbatim, each participant was provided the opportunity to read their transcribed interviews and to make any changes and corrections if necessary. This process was completed before the data were analyzed. All participants reviewed their transcribed interviews, and no participant requested to make any changes. All participants were informed at the time of data collection that a copy of this study would be provided to them upon completion of the study.

**Credibility**

In a qualitative study, the formation of credibility is an important part of the study itself (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). My initial selection of retired police officers as participants added to the credibility of the outcomes in some ways. All of these five participants were retired and had no ties to their previous law enforcement organizations, and therefore, increased the truthfulness of their answers as they related to

the phenomenon in question. In other words, all five participants no pressure that

participating in the study will jeopardize their employment status. Moreover, the fact that

these five retired participants provided similar responses to the interview questions, also

added credibility to the study. The five retired participants were all SWAT members and

experienced the phenomenon in questions which also added credibility to the study. All

of interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were reviewed by the five

participants for credibility.

**Transferability**

In selecting the participants for this study, I employed a purposeful sampling

strategy and selected the participants that were members of a SWAT team to achieve

perspectives of the phenomenon under study. Transferability was obtained in part by the

in-depth data collection strategy. All of the information obtained in the interview process

was described in detailed, which resulted in obtaining perceptions and descriptions of the

accounts by participants.

**Dependability**

According to Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008), dependability refers to

the data collection device accurately measuring what it is designed to measure. I achieved

dependability in this study primarily by coding all the data obtained from the in-depth,

semi structured interviews. Dependability was also achieved by the previously mentioned

in-depth data and detailed research procedures. This entire process was achieved by  my

keeping of detailed records of all the interviews conducted, recording of interviews,

transcribing the interviews verbatim, participants reviewing their transcripts, and the data analysis process.

**Confirmability**

I excluded all forms of biases by bracketing to ensured validity. This process allowed my personal opinions and past knowledge about the phenomenon to be eliminated during the interview process. Confirmability was established by showing evidence with the entire data gathering process and data analysis. I documented the entire research process which afforded me the opportunity to establish confirmability as it relates to my findings.

## Results

Once each participant's interview was transcribed verbatim, I reviewed each transcript and analyzed the data using NVivo 11 and was able to identify a total of nine themes that emerged. The following subsections were organized as follows: central research question, Sub-question 1, Sub-question 2, Sub-question 3 and, Sub-question 4.

**Central Research Question**

The central research question was: What are the main causes of stress to SWAT personnel while they were engaged in SWAT missions or operations? From the analyzed data for this central research question, one theme emerged.

To answer the central research question, I asked all participants to describe what factors caused stress to them as they were responding to and involved in a SWAT operation. In this question, 4 out of 5 participants expressed their concern of responding to a SWAT mission or operation and not knowing what they were going to encounter

(e.g., a barricaded subject, being involved in a shooting, or having to kill a human being). Participants also shared the importance of being mentally and physically prepared as a team to accomplish the mission successfully. Overall, most retired SWAT members expressed the common theme of having to respond to a high-risk mission without knowing what the outcome was going to be.

**Theme 1: Responding to high-risk missions.** Four out of 5 research participants in this study shared that their main cause of stress was responding to or conducting a high-risk mission based on the information they obtained prior to engaging in the operation. Although SWAT missions can be categorized as being dangerous in nature, not knowing the level of danger prior to engaging in the mission can be highly stressful. Four participants shared that these types of missions were the most stressful and the main cause of stress when responding to SWAT missions represented 80% of the sample. For example, Participant 1 shared a story about responding to a hostage situation where the subject was holding a female hostage:

> I got a call one day of an apparent murder where the husband became irate with his wife and stabbed her to death, then barricaded himself in the back efficiency that he was renting…..As long as we have dialogue with the person we let it run, we'll continue to talk to them if it takes days and talk then so we can de-escalate the situation…..Shortly thereafter the negotiator was next to me and told me, his not talking anymore. I knew at that time that I probably had 30 seconds to make entry for the possibility that he tried to kill himself. I gave the order, they broke

in. Thank God they were able to go ahead and neutralize him without killing him. I felt stress there, a lot.

Participant 2 also shared a similar situation when responding to a high-risk operation in which another barricade subject was threatening to commit suicide:

An incident where we had an individual threatening suicide and I ended up being involved in a shooting and you know we come to find out later through the investigation he had written a suicide letter. So, it was a classic suicide by cop. And it's almost like forgive me but I'm going to say, damn you, damn you, why did you use me to do this. I think and I obviously, I cope and dealt with it but I think I would have coped and dealt with it a lot better if it was you know guys shooting at me. You know, that sort of situation where this guy used me as his instrument to commit suicide.

Participant 3 commented on a situation when also responding to a high-risk operation where he felt, as he calls it, "I could tell you the one incident that that I felt the most stress out of many…." And went on to provide the following story:

There was a subject in the perimeter that he had already shot at two officers….. So, I was the commander of the team and I arrived. I got all the pertinent information. I quickly felt this was going to be a very hostile type of situation….. They started moving in and just as just as they pass the wall. I'm watching them and I don't see the offender but I her two shots ring out. The whole team turned in a barrage of fire going in that direction and I could hear shots coming in the team's direction and I remember feeling completely hopeless at that point. I

remember hoping that none of my guys got hurt and I could do was watch…..I

waited to the sergeant on that squad started saying the subject is down, the subject

is down. And now my moment of stress change from my guys were OK, to I've

got to preserve the scene to make sure that it's investigated properly so my guys

don't get in trouble. ….That's probably the greatest stress that I felt.

Participant 4 also provided a similar example to the other three previous

participants in where he responded to a barricaded subject:

We also responded to a few calls were, you know, of course, an example was a

barricaded subject were the guy was armed with a gun and when we responded there, he

was going to be baker-acted…..And then once we made entry into the living room, the

person started shooting at us from a bedroom. So, of course that raises your stress level

up. That was one particular situation were stress level was pretty high.

**Sub-question 1**

How do SWAT personnel cope with stress while on duty? From the analyzed data

for this sub-question, three themes emerged. This section is prearranged as follows:

Theme 1: Exercising, Theme 2: Training, and Theme 3: Team work. Themes related to

the coping with stress while on duty are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Coping Resources with Stress While on duty*

| Themes | No. of occurrences (*N=5*) | Percentage (%) of occurrences |
|--------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Exercising | 5 | 100% |
| Training | 4 | 80% |
| Team work | 3 | 60% |

**Theme 1: Exercising.** Surprisingly all five participants shared their way of coping with stress while on duty in a very similar way of exercising, training, and working as a team which provided trust among team members. For the theme of exercising, all five participants described several ways they released stress by using different types of exercising. For example, Participant 1 said:

For example, reading publications on (NTOA) National Tactical Officers

Association to keep in tune with tactics and things along those lines….And man

worked out a lot, a lot of working out. I became a fanatical weight lifter, actually

as a policeman but I felt more so the need to do a lot more cardiovascular training

when I was in the SWAT team, a lot more. And I'll tell you, when I would go run,

you've got something called runner's high. I'm telling you I would often run like

the same trail and I would take off. Once I got warmed up I mean I was on

autopilot….It was like I was on a dream…..Oh and I'll be like this run is over but

my mind went someplace else. And I think that helped a lot. I really do.

Cardiovascular training more so the running than anything else but on a stationary bike in the gym put the headphones in there just go to another planet. Similarly, Participant 2 shared that when faced with stress on duty, he would exercise to release stress. Participant 2 said:

Uhh, go for a run, go for a run. You'd be surprised how much you can distress and think of options at least for me. Other people might, I don't know, hit the weights, other people my hit a punching bag. I always find it very therapeutic to go out for a run, two or three mile run. Participant 3 also shared the same coping mechanism as Participant 2 and stated:

I exercise extremely heavy. I exercise. I focused on something other than that, something that I enjoyed doing. That kept myself physically fit. Because of my personality I took it to the tenth degree. I started competing in triathlons and got along in adventure racing. I came in second place in the state championship for the triathlon. I would train four hours a day and that was all just to keep myself physically in shape. Participant 3 further added: Sometimes I needed to remove myself but most of the time I just went into the Gym and I'll work out. As a SWAT member in the city of ……you're entitled to an hour worth of exercise a day, so I would go into the gym and exercise. I did that quite often. Participant 4 stated:

So working out plays a big part into that. To me working out. I still work out. I'm very active. Working out to me is a stress reliever, if you want to put it that way….So, working out to me was big stress reliever. Participant 5 also stated that

 a stress reliever on duty was, "Work out, trained."

  **Theme 2: Training.** Similarly, to exercising, all participants shared that a coping resource while at work was training and maintaining good proficiency. All participants felt that keeping up with training would be beneficial for everyone in the SWAT team besides than providing a coping resource. Participant 1 stated:

  ….the autopilot takes over that time you can revert back to training. Participant 2

  similarly said, "My training worked because of all it all reverted back to training."

  This participant continued by saying, "Take a deep breath and revert back to

  training and experience…." This participant was asked if training and experience

  assisted him in coping with stress. Participant 2 stated, "Because it gets to a point

  when, I was involved in that officer involved shooting. I didn't even think you

  know, I didn't even think. Training automatically took over and was ABC."

Participant 4 stated how he felt when faced with stress on duty and that training was one of the coping resources he felt assisted him. Participant 4 said:

  In law enforcement we always revert back to training and being part of a team, we

  train a lot together. When Participant 4 was asked if training play a part in making

  him feel at ease in coping with stress, he responded, "100 percent, 100 percent.

  Like I said, being in a SWAT team we train a lot together, we trust each other a

  lot….The training….help me, you know, cope with stress that I had during my

  time in SWAT. Participant 5 stated that one of the coping mechanisms that helped

  him cope with stress was training. Participant 5 stated, "Well training helped a

  lot."

**Theme 3: Team work.** Exercising and training are two of the resources discussed that assisted SWAT members cope with stress; theme 3 also emerged as a coping resource used by some of these retired SWAT members. For example, Participant 4 said that training not only helped him cope with stress but:

Like I said, being in a SWAT team we train a lot together, we trust each other a

lot, because we see each other's abilities on the team, so we're used to training

together and we trust each other. You know we train to build confidence so we

really don't have to worry much about the other person next to us. Participant 5

related to team work as one of the coping resources for him. Participant 5 said, "We

focused to make it as team and come out as a team." Participant 5 expressed the

importance as working together as team would make him feel better as part of coping

with stress. Participant 5 stated, "When I'm on a SWAT operation, that family of SWAT

needs to stay together."

**Sub-question 2**

How do SWAT personnel cope with stress while off duty? From the analyzed data for this sub-question, three themes emerged. This section is prearranged as follows: Theme 1: Exercising, Theme 2: Family time/support, and Theme 3: Hobbies. Themes related to the coping with stress while off duty are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

*Coping Resources with Stress While off duty*

| Themes | No. of occurrences (*N=5*) | Percentage (%) of occurrences |
|---|---|---|
| Exercising | 5 | 100% |
| Family time/support | 5 | 100% |
| Hobbies | 3 | 60% |

**Theme 1: Exercising:** In the previous section, I provided rich information about how SWAT personnel cope with stress while on the job. In this section, I will describe the coping resources SWAT personnel used when faced with stress while off duty at home. For example, Participant 1, "As I said before, I became a fanatical weightlifter. I worked out a lot, a lot." Similarly, Participant 2 commented when asked about coping with stress at home:

Well, a couple of things I do. I still not have the same level, but I still try to maintain a good physical fitness program. I was a little lazy this morning, but I was in the gym yesterday morning and I was in the gym Monday morning….So, I was a little lazy this morning but I try to be in the gym every day.

Participant 3 also provided personal examples of the coping resources he used while at home:

Running, I love running. That's one of the things that I missed the most. I can't run because of my back. Running was to me everything. I used to run to the Orange Bowl, when the Orange Bowl existed I used to run wind sprints; mile

repeats. I would go to the gym, in the gym at the police station and I'd start lifting weights, I'd go running first and then lifting weights, and somebody would come in and saying, anybody wants to run with me, I'd run, and I come back and lift more weight. And if somebody else would ask if I want to run, I would run with them again. I love running.

Participant 4 also stated that working out while at home helped him released stress and assisted him in coping with it. Participant 4 said, "….and working out." And Participant 5 also said, "….and a lot of exercising while at home would help with the stress."

**Theme 2: Family time/support.** Five out of the 5 retired SWAT personnel interviewed, representing 100% of the sample, agreed that family time and family support played a huge part in helping them cope with stress. For example, Participant 1 provided this personal statement as it relates to coping with stress while at home:

And spending a lot of time with my daughter. I felt that when I would take my daughter to the musical and theatrical performances; she is into the arts. She dances ballet, she dances modern dance, she dances ballroom dances. Being able to be closer to like my girls, my daughter spending quality time with them….I would try to spend quality time with my family and loved ones. Participant 2 said, "….I try to really enjoy my family and devote my time especially my youngest daughter….devote your time off to your family." Participant 3 stated, "….and try to spend as much time with my kids as they could." Participant 4 stated, "…100 percent, spending time with the family something that I do every day. I mean, I enjoyed spending

time with my family….the family support those are the things that help me, you know,

cope with the stress that I had during my time in SWAT." Participant 5 stated:

"….spend a lot of quality time with the family, with my kids, my daughter….and

we stay together and we're a very close family. Even when they move out and

they're older now, we still keep in touch and we still do family values, family

events."

**Theme 3: Hobbies.** All participants shared their experiences with stress and

coping activities which included exercising and family support and spending time with

family. Three out of the 5 participants, representing 60% of the sample, shared hobbies to

cope with stress while off duty. Participant 1 stated:

For example reading publications (NTOA) National Tactical Officers Association

to keep in tune with tactics and things….But a lot of reading. A lot of reading. To

immerse myself in different things like I said do a lot of reading, uhh, I would say

watched to much pro-football I used that as an escape I guess…. Participant 2 also

provided examples of the hobbies that helped him coping:

I love to eat and I showed you recently a picture of a place I have in the

mountains. I concentrate on the opportunity to go up there and relax and I've

made some good friends up there, spend time with them, so the outdoors, I really,

really, really enjoy the outdoors, camping, hiking. I've done part of the

Appalachian Trail 50 miles and in five days where you live out your backpack. I

just, I look forward to that….You know, you like fishing, fishing, golf, golf,

hunting, hunting, camping, camping, running, running….Participant 5 stated that,

"I go hunting, fishing, bowling, just things to stay busy…"

**Sub-question 3**

What causes stress to SWAT personnel while on duty? From the analyzed data for this sub-question, one theme emerged. This theme received 4 out of 5 total sample population representing 80%. This section is prearranged as follows: Theme 1: Lack of support from the police administration/organization.

**Theme 1: Lack of support from the police administration/organization.** Stress can be attributed to many factors as it relates to the law enforcement occupation. This occupation has been studied in the past and it has been determined one of the most stressful occupation in the work force simply for the nature of the occupation itself. Participants referred to the lack of support from the police administration and organization as being one of the main reasons and factors that is attributed to the stress they felt when on duty. This theme received 4 out of 5 total sample population representing 80%. For example, Participant 1 stated when referring to the police administration:

I'll say additionally having to go ahead and it seemed to me because of budgetary constraints our unit was always considered like this….And so I took it personal when they wouldn't allocate what I felt were necessary funds for the team, for weapons. It took forever….But a lot of times on a day to day I felt that we didn't have enough equipment for the type of demands that were placed on us to do things more efficiently and more resourcefully….I think they could have allocated

more funds for us as far as equipment….Uhh, I want to say that it was absolutely

the administration… Participant 2 shared examples of how the administration

would made decisions which ultimately became a cause of stress:

There's a couple of things you know, organizational stress. What I'm saying is

that when I rose up the ranks my responsibilities became different. So, trying to

get the best equipment, the best training for the team when others in the

organization have no idea of what you've do. They had no idea why you need this

equipment. And I'll give you an example, we were purchasing a particular type of

rifle that we justified to here's why we need this as the paper goes up you know,

to see if is approved. It gets to the budget section, so obviously you need bullets

for the rifle correct? So, the budget people approved the bullets but they don't

approve the rifle….You know, that's one stress. Participant 3 stated: "I just wish

the department would have been focused more on the individual than on the

department itself." Participant 4 said, "But yea of course, there is stress in law

enforcement in general and with the SWAT team also when dealing with the

administration." Participant 4 added, "Stress can come for the administration."

**Sub-question 4**

What causes stress to SWAT personnel while off duty? From the analyzed

data for this sub-question, one theme emerged. This theme received 5 out of 5 total

sample, representing 100%. This section is prearranged as follows:

Theme 1: Call-outs.

**Theme 1: Call-outs.** In the previous section, many of the participants shared their experiences and the different factors that produce stress while on duty. For these two themes that emerged when asked the causes of stress while off duty, in other words, when they were home and not working. This theme received 5 out of 5 total sample, representing 100%. Participant 1 stated:

Uhh, when I was not working you always have to be worried about the fact that you get called out. You have to drop what you're doing, if you're in a wedding, if you're at a dinner party, if you were at the pool at the house with the kids just lying out hanging out. You would have to get up and run. A lot of time you would be on call and other times you know you wouldn't…..You're always subject to call outs. So it gets really bad you will have to respond no matter what….When you watch a football game, can't have drinks, can't do that. You can't do that because you're subject to call out and now you have to respond and you want to be 100 percent….So you worried about that. Participant 2 also shared his personal experience related to this theme and stated:

You know, the planning for certain events. And I'll give you a perfect example. My oldest daughter talks about it all the time. I think it was either Thanksgiving or Christmas Eve and you know we're getting ready to sit down to eat, and you know, the family is there. Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep. Back then it was pagers, the beeper, the beeper goes off. And sorry guys I got to go. So that causes stress you know. Participant 3 stated, "The only thing that would trigger the stress if I got a phone call…." Participant 4 was asked about being on call and he stated:

Yeah. That's always in the back of your head. You need to be listening to, back then we had pagers. We had to have the pagers with us and you know, if we were in a family function, we had to leave." Participant 5 said, "When I became a SWAT member the majority is in the middle of the night getting a call when you are with your family. If you're home sleeping or you're out at dinner and you get a SWAT call you've got to go." Participant 5 added, "Making sure like I said before if you get on a call out on my anniversary with my wife and we end up getting a SWAT call out. You're on the New Year's…."

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how five retired SWAT police officers cope with stress in their personal and professional lives. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to explore the common themes that emerged from their experiences with the phenomenon. One central research question and four sub questions guided the study. Data collection came via face-to-face, semi structured interviews. I used NVivo 11 which is a qualitative software tool to assist in the data analysis. According to Rudestam et al. (2015), data collected via interviews can be organize, sort, code, and analyze using the NVivo 11 software tool. I also used the data analysis steps adapted by Moustakas's (1994) modified Van Kaam method of analysis. A total of nine themes emerged in answering the central research question and the four sub questions.

Throughout these previous sections, themes emerged from each of the research questions which provided the different factors that caused stress to all five participants.

Also, research questions in this study yield an array of different coping resources these

retired SWAT police officers used to cope with stress in different settings. For example,

all participants shared different activities they used, i.e., exercising, to cope with stress

either when they were at work or in their home setting. Participants also described the

main factors that caused stress while at work but not responding to any missions.

In this chapter, I covered the setting, demographics, data collection method, data analysis

method, the evidence of trustworthiness, the results of the data analysis, and a summary.

In chapter 5, I revealed my interpretations of the findings, limitations of my study, my

recommendation regarding future research studies on this matter, the implications of

social change for this research study, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how five SWAT police officers coped with stress in their personal and professional lives. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to explore the common themes that emerged from their experiences with the phenomenon. In this study, I used open-ended questions to understand the perspectives of the participants and how they made sense of their experiences. All participants in this study were retired from law enforcement and had been members of a SWAT team.

I collected the data for this study via face-to-face, in-depth interviews as part of the qualitative, phenomenological design. All participants for this study were selected using purposeful strategy which allowed me to understand the phenomenon via addressing the research questions. I used the phenomenological research design in this study because it allowed me to explore the perceptions and common themes that emerged from the participants' response. Utilizing Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method of analyzing the data, a total of nine themes emerged.

All nine themes emerged from asking the participants the interview questions related to the main causes of stress in SWAT personnel while they were engaged in SWAT missions or operations, the resources SWAT personnel used to cope with stress while off duty and on duty, and the causes of stress to SWAT personnel while on duty and off duty. The findings of this study resulted in understanding the resources these tactical police officers used to cope with stress and understanding the main causes of

stress to them while engaged in a SWAT mission or operation and the causes of stress while they are at work and at home with their families.

The findings of this study also revealed that law enforcement organizations do not offer any type of resources to cope with stress, especially professional resources for these tactical officers. Stress can affect LEOs in many ways. According to Menard and Arter (2013), police officers are subjected to many different types of stressors due to the nature of their occupation. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), occupational stress arises when job demands surpass the individual's resources. For this reason, providing the tools and resources to cope with stress to SWAT officers can be beneficial for both the individual and the organization.

## Interpretation of Findings

I developed a central research question and four sub-questions to explore how five retired SWAT police officers coped with stress in different settings, their causes of stress while engaged in SWAT missions or operations and while at home or at work, and the coping resources they used when faced with stress. As I previously stated, the central research question and the four sub questions revealed nine themes.

### Central Research Question

The central research question for this study was: What are the main causes of stress to SWAT personnel while they were engaged in SWAT missions or operation? The results of this question showed that most participants perceived stress from responding to high-risk missions or operations. The types of missions some of the participants shared were, barricaded subjects, responding to a call were someone was being held as a

hostage, being involved in a shooting while in a mission, and having to kill another human being while engaged in a mission. Participants also shared that when responding to SWAT missions or operations, not knowing what to expect once they were near the location of that mission led to high stress levels.

According to Sundaram and Kumaran (2012), LEOs are subjected to both environmental and unpredictability that can cause a variety of both psychosocial and psychological stressors. An individual not knowing what to expect on a mission but knowing some information about a dangerous situation the person is about to encounter, can produce high levels of stress (Sundaram & Kumaran, 2012). Moreover, according to Ellrich and Baier (2016), encountering the uncertainty of the unknown can be very stressful for police officers. SWAT police officers in this study provided some examples in where some of the missions where non-life threatening but they also shared several missions where they felt their life was in serious danger. According to Vonk (2008), the type of calls that officers respond to, which can range from non-life threatening to a deadly force encounter, can created elevated levels of emotional stress. Similarly, according to Adams and Buck (2010), police officers experience high levels of stress when they engage with violent citizens in emotionally-charged situations that endanger personal safety.

The findings from the central research question can also be attributed to the participants' constant contact with suspects and the unpredictable incidents that can arise from SWAT missions and operations. The findings of McCarty et al. (2007) were in agreement, with the authors stating that a high level of stress among police officers is

attributed to constant contact with dangerous suspects and unpredictable incidents. They

noted that stress can also be caused by fear of the unknown, especially when engaging in

a dangerous situation like an armed barricaded subject. These findings explain the reason

the participants expressed similar themes when asked for the main causes of stress while

they were engaging in SWAT missions or operations.

**Sub-question 1**

Sub-question 1 was: How do SWAT personnel cope with stress while on duty?

While understanding the main causes of stress to SWAT personnel is important,

exploring the coping resources they used to cope with stress can assist with

understanding the resources that helped these tactical officers cope with stress. The

results from sub-question 1 indicated that all participants used more than one resource to

cope with stress while on duty. Three themes emerged contributing to those resources,

including exercising while on duty, training, and working as team or team work.

These findings may be recognized or attributed to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984)

theory of coping. According to Lazarus and Folkman, the process of coping begins with

the primary appraisal in which a person evaluates a stressful event and decides on what

resource will be employed to cope with the stress. The decision in the process of coping

then is called secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Secondary appraisal

involves the person's choice of coping strategy (i.e., exercising), which involves

emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman also stated

that coping is not a preset or unconscious behavior but instead a conscious behavior that

an individual decides to utilize when faced with a stressful event.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two types of coping strategies: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. In the example, I used in the previous paragraph, in the findings for this sub-question participants employed emotion-focused coping by exercising, training, and working as a team, which are all sources that they can control. According to Lazarus and Folkman, problem-focused coping involves active problem solving that strives to control the source of stress caused by external events, in this case, being on duty. Whereas, the individual may utilize emotion-focused coping when they feel that the stressor must be endured (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The findings for this sub-question also indicated that all participants used similar coping resources (i.e., exercise, training, and team work) when at work. The goal here was to maintain low levels of stress and to manage them by employing these various types of resources. This means that if the level of stress is kept under control, individuals can benefit from good health, positive social functioning, and confidence (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), poor health, social functioning, and confidence can be affected if coping skills are deficient. With this in mind, findings for this sub-question can be attributed to Lazarus and Folkman's theory.

**Sub-question 2**

Sub-question 2 was: How do SWAT personnel cope with stress while off duty? Until now, findings for this study have revealed that SWAT police officers employed several types of resources to cope with stress while on duty, in other words, when at work. The results of sub-question 2 indicated that along with all participants sharing that they utilized resources to cope with stress, several themes emerged that contributed to the

coping resources, such as exercising, family time or family support, and hobbies. The findings for this sub-question can also be attributed to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of coping.

Among the five participants for this study, all actively sought coping resources when faced with stress while off duty. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), emotion-focused coping may include adaptive strategies, like exercising, relaxation, seeking social support, and emotional disclosure. In comparing their responses to sub-question 1 and 2, all participants, 5 out of 5, representing 100% of sample population, agreed that an important coping resource is exercising. Whether on duty or off duty, all participants shared their experiences with coping and the main factors that caused their stress. Some researchers have suggested that exercising can have positive benefits and long-lasting impacts on individuals (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014). According to Adu-Gyamfi (2014), there is little pragmatic research on the stress-buffering results of physical exercise in relation to police officers' job stress. However, the results of this study support the correlation between exercising as a coping resource for stress.

The findings concerning this sub-question also revealed that family support and spending time with family was another coping tool. As stated previously by all participants in this study, one of the main factors and causes of stress is responding to high-risk, dangerous missions. It is important for these tactical officers to be able to identify resources or coping strategies to deal with this stress. The use of family time as a coping tool can be attributed to Lazarus and Folkman's (1987) theory of coping. Here, again, the emotion-focused coping was employed by all participants. The family time and

support in this case, involves the emotion-focused coping in which SWAT officers sought emotional support from loved ones (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). In other words, these tactical officers were trying to reduce the negative emotional response that is associated with the stress from work. Moreover, participants accepted that they could not change the particular stressor but through exercising this method, reduced their level of stress (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

The findings for sub-question 2 also revealed that hobbies, such as camping, hunting, and sports, were used as a coping resource by most participants. As described by Lazarus and Folkman (1987), individuals engage in a diversity of reasoning and behavioral attempts geared at managing their external and internal stressors. People use different strategies, thoughts, feelings, actions, to cope with situations that occur in daily life. As previously described, participants engaged in the emotion-focused coping strategy described by Lazarus and Folkman (1984, 1987). To this sub-question, 3 out of 5 participants representing 60% of sample population, used hobbies to cope with stress. For example, two participants shared their experiences of hiking, camping, and hunting when off duty as a coping resource. Similar to exercising and family time and support, their engagement in hobbies, whether camping, hunting, or hiking, appeared to play an important role in the lives of these tactical officers as a coping resource used on their off duty time. The coping resources are techniques and methods the participants used to alleviate some forms of stress as I have discussed in this section and in Chapter 4. Both the results of this study and the literature have suggested that police officers, whether in

specialized units (i.e., SWAT) or not, utilize peer support, exercising, family support, and hobbies to reduce stress.

**Sub-question 3**

Sub-question 3 was: What causes stress to SWAT personnel while on duty? The results of this sub-question showed that most participants perceived stress while on duty from a lack of support from the police administration and organization. Stress in correlation with the police occupation has been well documented in past research studies where the nature of police work has been explained as very stressful (Mayhew, 2001). All the participants stated that lack of organizational support affected them as employees. For example, Participant 3 said "I just wish the department would have been focused more on the individual than on the department itself."

Organizational stress can be classified as the worst stressor in comparison to operational or occupational stress (Hart & Cotton, 2003). Stress associated with the critical incidents can understandably be link to stress because of what police officers are faced on their daily occupational lives. But having to add another stressor, like organizational stress, make this occupation even tougher. According to Slate et al. (2007), organizational stress appears to be the most harmful type of stress to police personnel. Organizational stress can be associated with negative social impact on the community and the services police officers provide because of organizational stress (Slate et al., 2007).

The findings to sub-question 3 provided an insight of how SWAT personnel felt about the organization they worked for as it relates to the causes of stress on duty.

Morale, stress levels, performance, and productivity, can be affected by organizational

factor (Slate et al., 2007). Research has shown that organizational stress and stress

perceived from the administration can have long lasting effects in the police culture and

services they provide (McCreary & Thompson, 2006). Findings from this sub-question

can be attributed to organizational stress and the lack of support for SWAT police

officers when they were on duty. Hence, factors associated with organizational stress

sometimes depend on how the administration operates and runs the organization.

**Sub-question 4**

Sub-question 4 was: What causes stress to SWAT personnel while off duty? The

findings for this sub-question can be attributed to one theme that emerged: Call-outs.

Many forms of stress as it relates to the police officers' occupation are well known in the

research community. Organizational, occupational, and operational stress have been well

documented as the main stressors in the police officers' profession (Hakan Can & Hendy,

2014; Menard & Arter, 2013). For most professionals in the field including police

officers, spending time with family members, whether on a special occasion or just being

home with them, can be very rewarding and a stress reliever. And for most professional

occupations once you leave work, there is no reason for them to return to work in the

middle of the night or on weekends. But for police officers in specialized units, i.e.,

SWAT members, being on *call-out* is an extra stressor they must face.

The answers to this sub-question in which 5 out of 5 participants, representing

100% of sample size, answered that call-outs were one of the causes of stress while at

home and off duty. Kirschman (1997) points out the importance of family members and

spending time with family for law enforcement officers. As mentioned previously, many SWAT officers due to the nature of the SWAT call-outs, might missed special occasions with their families. Not only this creates stress for the SWAT member, but it creates stress for the entire family. Miller (2007) and Shannon (2010) explained that when a law enforcement officer must change family plans, weekend's plans, this may influence instability of home life. Shannon asserts that a career in law enforcement can place a huge stress of the family and marriage and as a result can cause a divorce. This correlation between family time as a coping tool can attribute to Lazarus and Folkman (1987) theory of coping once again. Spending time with family, as previously mentioned, is used as a coping resource for SWAT officers.

During the interview, I asked this question to participant 1, and this is part of his statement, "when I was not working you always have to be worried about the fact that you get called out. You must drop what you're doing, if you're in a wedding, if you're at a dinner party, if you were at the pool at the house with the kids just lying out hanging out. You would have to get up and run." Although SWAT officers at aware of being on call at any time of the day and on any given day, it appears that the mental state of being on call produces high levels of stress.

The findings for this sub-question can be attributed to Lazarus's (1991) theory of cognitive appraisal. This theory relates to this study because due to the external demands, being call-out and from the nature of being a SWAT member, these tactical officers' must appraise their surroundings and account for the impact which is place upon them because of the SWAT call-out. Let's keep in mind that people can appraise stress in

different ways, but the results of this study concluded that 5 out of 5 participants

perceived stress form the same theme.

## Limitations of the Study

The goal of this study was to explore how SWAT police officers cope with stress

either while at home or at work, and to explore what were the main causes of stress to

SWAT personnel while they were engaged in SWAT missions or operations. All the

participants were retired from the law enforcement profession, which is worth noting,

there were no strings attached or concerns based on being truthful when answering the

research questions. The findings of this study are limited based upon a minimal number

of participants. In contrast to a quantitative research study which the sample population

can be in the hundreds, qualitative studies only required several participants (Patton,

2002). Although the sample size for this study was five participants, it is worth noting

that not all police departments have active SWAT teams and police departments that do

have an active SWAT team, only have about 20 to 30 members in their SWAT team.

These specialized units only have a few active members in comparison with the size of

their agencies. Additionally, the main goal of this study was to explore the common

themes that emerged from each of the participant's answers.

The participants for this study were five Caucasian males with Hispanic

backgrounds. There were no limitations of gender or race and although e-mails were sent

to other retired police officers from different races, only these five participants agreed on

participating in the study. A limitation can be associated with the geographic location this

study was conducted which it was Miami-Dade County, Florida. The sample size

possibly reduces the ability of taking a broader look at the phenomenon and the findings in other area of the country. Also, the fact that I am a current LEO and I was in a SWAT team should be mentioned. Although I was conscious of my biases, my biases toward the phenomenon in question could have affected my ability to collect and analyze the data.

## Recommendations

Because the sample size of this research study was small, it is recommended for future research to expand the sample size population in other parts of the state and other parts of the United States. In other to better understand the causes of stress and the coping resources SWAT police officers used, it is also recommended that a future study be conducted in other geographical areas of the United States. As stated previously, there has been empirical research conducted on stress and coping resources of LEOs (see Brodie & Eppler, 2012; Buckley, 1994; Girodo, 1991; Haddock, 1988; Menard & Arter, 2013; Noblet et al., 2009; Walsh & Donovan, 1984), but not much studies have focused on tactical police officers, i.e., SWAT. It is recommended more research done on tactical police officers and the causes of stress and coping resources. This would allow researchers to compare how other SWAT police officers, whether active or retired, cope with stress and the factor that causes stress to them.

## Implications

Empirical research has shown that the police officers' occupation is one of the most stressful occupations in the field (see Brooks & Piquero, 1998; Buker & Wiecko, 2007; Mayhew, 2001; Morash et al., 2006). The goal of this research study was to make sure that the findings would make a positive contribution, first toward social change, and

second toward the literature. The goal of this study was also to ensure that law enforcement organizations across the United States invest in improving strategies and trainings for police officers' and specifically, tactical police officers. i.e., SWAT, who are constantly facing stressful situations on the field, in how to cope with stress. Policy makers and police administrators should be able to provide the needed tools for law enforcement personnel as it relates to stress and resources to cope with it.

This research provided insight on how the employing of physical exercise helps SWAT police officers cope with stress. This information is vital for policy makers and police academies to implement new curriculum that will include ways of coping as it relates to physical exercise and physical fitness. Overall, the results of this research will benefit society, therefore implication positive social change.

## Conclusion

The goal of this research study was to explore how five SWAT police officers cope with stress in their personal and professional lives and the causes of stress. To better understand what the causes of stress and the coping resources used by SWAT personnel, it was imperative to obtain the perceptions and lived experiences of SWAT police officers. Although there is little research done on SWAT personnel as it relates to stress and coping resources, ample research studies have been conducted on stress and coping of law enforcement personnel and this supports previous research findings (Brooks & Piquero, 1998; Buker & Wiecko, 2007; Mayhew, 2001; Morash et al., 2006; Powel et al., 2014).

Organizational and operation stress are responsible for most factors as it relates to stress within law enforcement occupation (Violanti et al., 2013). Therefore, the identification of these stressors within the police occupation is important for intervention purposes as well as training for the law enforcement community. As stated previously, there is existing literature that has focused on stress within the law enforcement occupation, but it has failed to provide more information on stress and coping mechanisms for tactical police officers. This research was aimed at exploring the causes of stress and coping resources of SWAT personnel. The central research question and sub-questions provided a better understanding of the causes of stress, coping resources, which SWAT officers experienced while on and off duty.

None of the study participants provided any evidence that they were either trained or provided any professional resources to cope with stress by the organization. Some of the participants did mention they, on their own, seek the necessary therapy to cope with stress with professional psychotherapist. Findings indicated that all the participants did used coping resources on their own, i.e., exercise, family support, and hobbies, but none of these resources were provided by the organization. It is hoped that this research study will lead policy makers and law enforcement administrators to provide awareness training, professional assistance programs specifically designed for stress and coping for SWAT officers, and further increase knowledge about the importance of the emotional and psychological wellbeing of law enforcement officers.

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