

**TRAUMATIC STRESS
IN POLICE OFFICERS**

TRAUMATIC STRESS IN POLICE OFFICERS

A Career-Length Assessment from
Recruitment to Retirement

By

DOUGLAS PATON, PH.D.

*School of Psychology
University of Tasmania
Launceston, Tasmania, Australia*

JOHN M. VIOLANTI, PH.D.

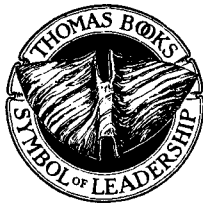
*School of Public Health and Health Professions
Department of Social and Preventive Medicine
State University of New York at Buffalo*

KARENA BURKE, PH.D.

*School of Psychology
University of Tasmania
Launceston, Tasmania, Australia*

ANNE GEHRKE, MS

*BG Institute Occupational Health and Safety
Dresden, Germany
German Federation of Institutions for Statutory
Accident Insurance and Prevention*



CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62794-9265

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© 2009 by CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.

ISBN 978-0-398-07893-5 (hard)

ISBN 978-0-398-07894-2 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2009016526

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*Printed in the United States of America
MM-R-3*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Traumatic stress in police officers: a career length assessment from recruit-
ment to retirement / by Douglas Paton...[et al.]

p. cm.

Includes biographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-398-07893-5 (hard)—ISBN 978-0-398-07894-2 (pbk.)

1. Police—Job stress—United States—2. Police psychology—United
States. I. Paton, Douglas. II.

Title.

HV7936J63T73 2009
158.7'208836320973—dc22

2009016526

PREFACE

If a comprehensive understanding of the nature and effectiveness of the police role in dealing with adverse trauma events is to be developed, it is necessary to empirically integrate such events into the police career path. At present, there is no comprehensive resource to address this issue. There is a growing recognition that stress risk can in some cases begin prior to police work and extend after retirement from police work. It thus becomes necessary to incorporate pre-employment and the retirement period into accounts of the psychological impact of policing. Similarly, the implications of the changing gender balance in police agencies needs to be accommodated. To date, these issues have not been explored systematically within a framework that embraces the whole career of police officers. Such an approach is essential if we are better able to understand the complex and changing interactions that affect the psychological well-being of police officers. This approach is based on the premises that:

- officers can experience both positive and negative outcomes as a result of confronting highly challenging events which may coexist
- these outcomes are influenced by different resilience and vulnerability mechanisms
- the organizational environment and practices, the family environment, and the societal environment introduce significant and independent influences on these outcomes
- changes in factors such as gender and ethnic composition contribute to issues that influence the nature of the organizational environment
- posttrauma outcomes are influenced by the interaction between individual, team and organizational levels of analysis
- positive and negative posttrauma outcomes are also influenced by factors that, over the course of officers' careers, commence prior to their employment and persist beyond the point at which they retire or disengage from police work

We propose with this book to develop a viable resource to explore interactive issues of trauma over the entire police career course. The book will draw upon empirical research to provide an evidence-based approach to traumatic stress risk management. We will start with police officer pre-employment experiences and conclude with a discussion of the implications of disengagement or retirement from the police role.

The contents of the proposed text will include:

- Incorporation of police trauma into a life-career course perspective
- Changing context and nature of police work (e.g., sources of trauma and uncertainty, community relations)
- Recruitment, selection, and socialization in the context of critical incident and terrorist work (e.g., pre-employment experiences, organizational influences on capacity to confront uncertainty, developing resilience within an organizational context)
- Changing gender balance in policing
- Training and development in uncertain times
- Managing risk, resilience, vulnerability, and adversarial growth
- Organizational context (e.g., management systems, organizational culture)
- Family dynamics and issues
- Team: inter and intraorganizational
- Health and mental health
- Consequences of long-term exposure to hazards
- Disengagement and retirement

We feel that this book is unique in two ways. First, the majority of volumes on police psychological issues do not differentiate with regard to career stage. Second, very few books reflect complex patterns of interaction between vulnerability and resilience characteristics that occur at individual, team, group, and organizational levels, as well as involving interaction between these levels. This book will be one of the first to pull these various threads together and provide a comprehensive account of the impact of trauma throughout the police career. This work will provide a framework that police agencies can use to develop their officers and their organizations in ways that enhance their capability to confront an increasingly uncertain future. It will also be useful as a teaching tool for police officers, mental health professionals, and supportive organizations.

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**TRAUMATIC STRESS
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Chapter 1

CONCEPTUALIZATION: THE POLICE CAREER COURSE AND TRAUMA STRESS

INTRODUCTION

The average career length of a police officer in the United States is approximately 20–25 years. Most officers complete their career paths for that period of time and then retire to civilian life. During this time, serving officers face the prospect of repeated exposure to potentially traumatic or critical events. Understandably, this aspect of police work has attracted considerable interest. However, most of the research into traumatic stress phenomena in police officers has focused on the consequences of specific events that are located at a single point in an officer's career. While informative, such brief snapshots (from a whole of career perspective) can provide only limited insights into a reality that will extend over decades and in which the events and the context in which events are experienced is evolving. Adopting a career-length perspective provides a more comprehensive approach to understanding how the implications of repeated traumatic or critical experiences and events unfold over time in the context of changing organizational and societal circumstances.

Adopting a career-length perspective makes it easier to appreciate a need to consider how traumatic experiences interact with one another over time and it increases awareness of the need to consider how changes in the nature of police work and the societal context in which officers and agencies operate over time can influence the kinds of incidents officers will have to contend with, their implications for well-being, and the need to develop interventions accordingly. For exam-

ple, increased recognition of the risk posed by terrorism has influenced how police agencies plan, how they deploy officers, and it has affected the resource and equipment needs required by officers. These changes, in turn, have influenced how officers interpret and respond to critical incidents and it has had significant implications for how officers and the police agency relate to society (see Chapters 8 and 9). The objective of this book is to demonstrate how adopting a career perspective can provide a more comprehensive conceptualization of traumatic stress processes as they apply to police officers and agencies and provide a framework that can be used to guide research and intervention agenda in ways that reflects the changes that can occur over the course of a police career that can span decades.

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a conceptual basis for understanding the impact of trauma throughout the career course of police officers. We will first develop a conceptual perspective of the police career, borrowing from the rubric of life-course theory (Elder, 1996). Second, we will discuss how pre-employment traumatic experiences influence officer's experience of the critical incidents they encounter as serving officers throughout their careers. Third, officers' assimilation into the police "role" and the impact of trauma within that role will be discussed. Fourth, this chapter considers how demographic (e.g., gender) and societal (e.g., terrorism) factors introduce significant changes into the context of policing in ways that affect the traumatic stress risk faced by officers. Fifth, the perspectives arising from the preceding discussions are integrated into a conceptual model for managing critical incident stress risk. Finally, the spillover of residual trauma into police retirement will be discussed. This chapter will also introduce some conceptual issues that can inform understanding of a life-course perspective on traumatic stress in police officers. Discussion commences with an introduction to the conceptual perspective that life-course theory brings to understanding traumatic stress processes in police officers and agencies.

THE LIFE-COURSE MODEL

The life-course perspective is an ideal conceptualization on which to base a police career model. In its simplest sense, the life course may be defined as the "duration of a person's existence" (Riley, 1986). (For

an excellent review of life course theory, see *Crime and the Life Course*, Michael L. Benson, Roxbury Publishing, 2001.) Elder (1985, 1996) a leading figure in life-course research, defines the life course as the interconnected trajectories that a person has as they go through life. A trajectory is a sequence of linked states within a conceptually defined range of behavior or experience. It is a pathway over the life span. As people move through this trajectory, they graduate from one level to another. Transitions are always embedded in trajectories, and the states that make up a trajectory are always linked to one another by transitions (Elder, 1996).

Life-Course Theory

According to Elder (1985), the life-course perspective is based on four central premises, which can be summarized as the following:

- Aging and developmental change must be viewed as continuous processes that occur throughout life.
- Trajectories in different realms of life are interconnected and have reciprocal effects on one another.
- Human development is influenced by social and historical conditions.
- Efforts to optimize human development through preventive or corrective interventions will be most effective if they are sensitive to the developmental needs and capabilities of particular age periods in the life span.

The first premise is simple to understand—as persons go through life, they change from beginning to end. There is no such thing as a “static” life, and this holds true for biological, psychological, and social change.

According to the second premise of the life-course perspective, trajectories in these different life domains are intimately connected and have reciprocal effects on each other (Elder, 1985). Biological change can effect social change, and psychological disruption (such as trauma) can affect us biologically and socially. The third premise that life pathways are multidetermined and influenced by social and historical conditions and changes (Magnusson & Bergman, 1990) is interesting. Our individual lives are linked to the lives of others in the sense that