

An exploration of former police officers' reflections on disenfranchised trauma and its bearing upon allegations and penalties for misconduct

Former officers reflecting on how unrecognised trauma shaped their behaviour and contributed to misconduct findings, explored through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and a person centred theoretical lens.

Key details

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Police region	North West
Collaboration and partnership	This research project is supported by the College of Policing bursary scheme.
Level of research	Masters
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Research context

Routine exposure to threat, violence and human suffering is embedded within everyday policing. Large-scale UK research indicates that more than ninety percent of officers report exposure to traumatic events, and approximately one in five meet criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

(PTSD) or Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) (Brewin and others, 2020). Trauma often emerges cumulatively rather than in a single moment, shaping emotional regulation, perception and interpersonal functioning over time. The development of the Police Traumatic Experiences Checklist, based on nearly five thousand officer-reported events, illustrates both the frequency and diversity of these exposures and highlights their persistent psychological impact (Miller and others, 2021).

Despite the prevalence of trauma, policing culture has historically discouraged vulnerability and emotional disclosure. Stigma around help-seeking, combined with organisational expectations of stoicism, continues to limit officers' willingness to recognise or articulate psychological distress (Velazquez and Hernandez, 2019). When trauma remains unacknowledged, coping strategies may become rigid or maladaptive. In certain circumstances, this can contribute to behaviour that conflicts with both personal values and professional standards, particularly when officers are under extreme psychological strain.

Aim

The aim of this study is to explore how former police officers understand misconduct that occurred during periods of unrecognised trauma. The research examines how participants retrospectively interpret the emotional, cognitive and organisational conditions surrounding their behaviour. The objectives are to explore their subjective experience at the time of the misconduct, identify the meanings they now attribute to those experiences, and consider the role of cumulative trauma, identity conflict and cultural expectations in shaping their actions.

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study seeks to develop a person-centred, ethically grounded understanding of the intersection between disenfranchised trauma, behavioural change and misconduct outcomes. By exploring these accounts in depth, the research aims to inform more compassionate and psychologically informed approaches to prevention, accountability and officer wellbeing.

Research methodology

This study adopts a IPA methodology, chosen for its commitment to exploring lived experience, meaning making and the personal significance of events as understood by the participant (Smith

and others, 2009). IPA is rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, making it well suited to research that seeks to understand how former police officers make sense of misconduct that occurred during periods of unrecognised trauma. The approach acknowledges a double hermeneutic, in which participants interpret their own experiences while the researcher engages in an interpretative process to understand those interpretations.

Data was generated through semi-structured, conversational interviews designed to create conditions of psychological safety, consistent with the values of the person centred approach. Rogers' emphasis on empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard informed the interview stance, ensuring that participants felt able to share complex and sometimes painful reflections without judgement (Rogers, 1961). Each interview was audio recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve nuance, hesitations and emotional tone. This depth of attention to participants' language is central to IPA's commitment to idiographic detail.

Analysis followed the stages outlined by Smith and others (2009). Initial close reading enabled immersion in each transcript before exploratory noting captured descriptive, linguistic and conceptual observations. Emergent experiential themes were then developed within each case, followed by clustering into personal experiential themes. Only after each case was analysed individually were cross-case patterns identified to generate group experiential themes that reflected both convergence and divergence.

This methodology supports a textured, interpretative understanding of how disenfranchised trauma, policing culture and personal meaning intersect in officers' narratives of misconduct. It enables both depth and sensitivity in examining experiences that are psychologically and ethically complex.

References

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