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Measuring Traumatic Stressors: An Investigation into Police Perceptions of Traumatic Incidents

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
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ABSTRACT

Traumatic experiences are an inherent part of many aspects of police work. Due to the personal and organisational costs they incur their impact is of growing concern to the New Zealand police. Recent research has indicated that reactivity is less a function of the type of event that officers' encounter and more a function of the event characteristics which officers are exposed to. The present study aimed to contribute to the definition of work related traumatic stressors among police officers. Fifty-two members of the New Zealand police were interviewed to examine their individual constructions of traumatic incidents, in order to gain an understanding of the factors which influence psychological morbidity following exposure to trauma. Taking an exploratory approach, the present study employed the repertory grid method to elicit officers' personal perceptions and constructions of traumatic events. Principal components analysis with varimax rotation led to the extraction and interpretation of six factors underlying police officers' descriptions of event characteristics: emotions, lack of control, work-related factors, training inadequacies, victim orientated, and aspects of death. The results highlighted the wide variety of incidents and event characteristics, which can be interpreted as traumatic among police officers. Despite the focus on traumatic events, the results also reflected the participants' concern with organisational and job stressors. The limitations of the research were mainly related to the small sample size and assumptions associated with the raw data.

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