

Running head: STRESS, DEMANDS, AND COPING IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

AN EXPLORATION OF STRESS, PSYCHOLOGICAL DEMANDS, AND COPING IN LAW  
ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

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A Master's Project

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by

KIRILL GRINCHENKO  
KEVIN O'CONNOR  
RASHEED SWINDELL

Dr. Mark Aoyagi, Master's Project Chair

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School of Professional Psychology,  
have examined the Master's Project entitled

**AN EXPLORATION OF STRESS, PSYCHOLOGICAL DEMANDS, AND COPING IN LAW  
ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS**

presented by Kirill Grinchenko, Kevin O'Connor, and Rasheed Swindell

candidates for the degree of Master of Arts

and hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Mark Aoyagi, Ph.D., Chair

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Artur Poczwadowski, Ph.D., Committee Member

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AN EXPLORATION OF STRESS, PSYCHOLOGICAL DEMANDS, AND COPING IN LAW  
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Kirill Grinchenko

Kevin O'Connor

Rasheed Swindell

Dr. Mark Aoyagi, Master's Project Chair

ABSTRACT

Sport and performance psychology (SPP) is a field that is rapidly growing, especially within the domain of high-risk occupations. In order to practice SPP competently with any population, a certain amount of domain specific knowledge is considered a prerequisite (Aoyagi, Portenga, Poczwarczowski, Cohen, & Statler 2012). The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the ways in which law enforcement officers experience stress and the demands of their workplaces as well as to explore the current coping methods used by law enforcement officers to cope with those stressors and demands. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008) was utilized with six law enforcement officers to examine the participants' experiences through semi-structured interviews. The following seven categories pertaining to stressors, demands, and coping resources emerged from the responses: (a) *administrative duties and expectations*, (b) *interacting with other individuals*, (c) *emotional/physiological regulation*, (d) *extensive preparation*, (e) *support system*, (f) *behavioral/cognitive coping*, and (g) *formal departmental resources*. The results of the study supported and expanded on the previous literature and informed a set of practical implications crucial to practitioners who want to develop domain-specific knowledge about and intervene successfully with law enforcement officers.

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### An Exploration of Stress, Psychological Demands, and Coping in Law Enforcement Officers

Police officers around the United States and around the world are charged with saving lives on a regular basis. Hays and Brown (2004) characterize law enforcement officers as individuals “whose performance not only involves risk to themselves but may also involve the risk of taking another person’s life” (p. 41). Law enforcement is unique from other performance domains due to a high expectancy of injury and illness as well as difficult shift work (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014-2015). Law enforcement officers are not only at risk from potential external threats, but are also vulnerable to a wide range of psychological and physiological symptoms of stress (Waters & Userry, 2007, Kirshman, 2006, Korre, Farioli, Varvarigou, Sato & Kales, 2014; Paton, Smith, Violanti, & Eranen, 2000). Aoyagi, Portenga, Poczwardowski, Cohen, and Statler (2012) conceptualize knowledge of a specific performance domain as a prerequisite in competent practice of performance psychology. In his review of literature, Woody (2005) proposed that practitioners must be aware of the unique aspects of law enforcement and work to lessen the effects of stress and to improve functionality. In order to competently practice performance psychology with a high-risk population such as police officers, it is important to first understand how police officers experience and interpret stress.

In their 2007 article, Waters and Ussery proposed a model describing the way police are affected by stress. The Police Stress Model (PSM) describes how a set of predisposing factors contributes to resilience and hardiness in police officers. Based on such factors and on hardiness and resilience, an officer may respond to stressful events in a variety of ways that can lead to one of three outcomes: (a) personal growth, (b) returning to the status quo, or (c) developing pathological symptoms. The PSM also addressed some of the formal coping resources that officers have available to them at different stages of the model. Predisposing factors in the PSM

(Waters & Usserry, 2007) include genetics, current state of health, environmental pressures, economic pressures, educational assets, family pressure, police culture, and worldview. Among the most relevant factors to the current study are ones that may be controllable or in some way influenced by the officer, department, peers, family, or a practitioner working with the population.

Many events that warrant the presence of law enforcement involve chaos and panic, and it is imperative that the officers be able to control themselves and others around them in order to execute their jobs effectively. Korre, Farioli, Varvarigou, Sato, and Kales (2014) designed a 22-item questionnaire in order to assess agreement between police chiefs and front line officers about which activities they found most stressful. Pursuit of suspects, witnessing traumatic events, responding to domestic disturbance calls, and providing emergency medical assistance were among the items rated as the most stressful (Korre et al., 2014). Additionally, they found a surprisingly high level of awareness among police chiefs about which activities the patrol officers found most stressful. Described as a chronic stressor (Waters & Usserry, 2007), the burden of having to regulate emotions during the wide range of stressors described by Korre and colleagues is conceptualized in an article by Adams and Buck (2010), where they discuss the concept of surface acting as a way to deal with civilians, perpetrators, and other law enforcement agencies. In their study, Adams and Buck (2010) found that surface acting contributes to emotional exhaustion and psychological distress.

The environmental pressures of the PSM (Waters & Usserry, 2007) include exhausting shift work, which affects sleep patterns and in turn contributes to fatigue. Sleeping during the day in order to make up lost hours of sleep may also contribute to missing family events, and losing time to spend with children and spouses. Fatigue and stress have been found to be major

contributing factors to spousal abuse, especially in uniformed patrol officers and narcotics officers, and traumatic events and organizational stressors may contribute to domestic disturbances, alcohol abuse, and risk for suicide as well (Kirschman, 2006).

In her influential book *I Love a Cop*, Kirschman also explained that support structures present in the lives of police officers are strongly affected by the presence of police culture. According to Paoline (2004), different cultures exist across departments based on location, demands, etc., and different cultures even accompany different roles within any department. Paton et al. (2000) posit that the context under which a police officer interprets his or her experience of a stressor is framed by the organizational climate in which he or she functions. They proposed that understanding the organizational climate is one of the keys to building a model of resilience in police officers. Because of the uncertain and hazardous nature of their profession, police officers rely heavily on each of their fellow officers to do his or her job correctly. This interdependence usually results in strong bonds between co-workers and occasionally even between peers across departments (Paoline, 2004). The bonds created between officers foster a sense of social support, which in turn cultivates officer resiliency (Kronenburg, Osofsky, Osofsky, Many, Hardy, & Arey, 2008; Paton et al., 2000). At times, these bonds can be so strong that officers may isolate themselves from family and friends in favor of their occupational peers (Kirschman, 2006; Kronenburg et al., 2008, Woody, 2005).

There are currently some systems in place that are designed to help police officers deal with stress and the demands of their jobs; however, most of the available support systems are retroactive and target post-traumatic stress. Malcolm, Seaton, Perera, Sheehan, & Van Hasselt (2005) describe a process called Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) and explain that it is a process designed to restore law enforcement officers to their “pre-incident level of

functioning". Although there has been little research examining the effectiveness of CISD, Kuykendall (2011) points out that police officers perceive a greater positive effect when CISD is performed by a mental health professional than when it is performed by one of their peers. Clark-Miller & Brady (2012) discuss religion as another method that some officers use to cope with situations involving death and they suggest that it can even be an effective way to reduce normal stress associated with law enforcement.

What research has been done in the domain of performance psychology and high-risk occupations suggests an upward trend in the use of proactive mental skills to combat stress and to help individuals deal with the demands of their jobs. For example, a growing amount of literature exists regarding the effectiveness of performance psychology linked with the military (DeWiggins, Hite, & Alston, 2010; Adler, McGurk, Bliese, Hoge, & Castro, 2011; Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011). In their book *Warrior Mindset*, Asken, Grossman, and Christiansen (2010) outline core mental skill training competencies and applications for peacekeepers. *Mindsighting* (Asken, 2013) extends a lot of material outlined in *Warrior Mindset* to applications in police and law enforcement operations. Additionally, Arnetz, Nevedal, Lumley, Backman, & Lublin (2009) conducted a study about the efficacy of a 10-week mental skills training program with 18 rookie police officers. The skills training program proved effective in both improving performance during a simulated critical incident situation and psychophysiological measures assessed after a 12-month period.

Although law enforcement, by nature of being a high-risk occupation shares a number of characteristics with armed service, there is a wide continuum of unique performance demands placed on law enforcement officers. The performance demands outlined in the literature range from organizational stressors from outside and within the department to acute stressors such as

apprehending perpetrators and dealing with constant uncertainty from potential dangers (Waters & Ussery, 2007; Aaron, 2000; Adams & Buck, 2000; Korre et al., 2014). Very little research exists, however, exploring the subjective experiences law enforcement officers have with stress and the demands of their workplaces. The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to examine the ways in which police officers experience stressors and demands and to explore the current coping methods used by such individuals to deal with and perform in the presence of stress.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

6 individuals in law enforcement we recruited and participated in the research. Professional roles included 1 Chief ( $n=1$ ), 1 Lieutenant ( $n=1$ ), 1 Detective ( $n=1$ ), 1 S.W.A.T. Technician ( $n=1$ ), and 2 Deputy Sheriffs ( $n=2$ ). 5 participants were male and 1 participant was female (mean age = 46.5, SD = 2.2). Each participant worked in the same state in the Western United States and had an average of 19.1 years (SD = 6.9) of experience working in law enforcement. Average service in current roles was 8.8 years (SD = 5.2). Participants were obtained through convenience sampling based upon proximity and professional connections. Six law enforcement officers agreed to participate.

### **Instrumentation**

An interpretivist epistemological approach was utilized (Schwandt, 1994; Smith & Osborn, 2008) and semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) were used as the method for data collection in order to draw on the participants' interpretations of their experiences in law enforcement (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). An interview script was developed by the researchers, consisting of multiple open-ended questions that facilitated dialogue between the researchers and participants and was designed to explore stressful aspects of the participants' jobs as well as how

they dealt with stressors. Examples of interview prompts included: “What are some things related to your job that you think are stressful?” and “How do you continue to perform your job effectively in the presence of those stressors?” Probing was routinely used as a means of encouraging further disclosure of relevant information. Examples of probing questions included: “Could you give us an example of that?” or “Please, if you don’t mind, could you expand on that?” Individual interviews lasted from 35 minutes to 60 minutes in length.

### **Procedures**

Approval from an institutional review board was obtained before the start of this study. A pilot study was conducted prior to the start of the study with a retired Army veteran with whom the researchers had a direct professional relationship. Researchers adjusted the interview script based on feedback from the pilot study participant in order to make questions more understandable and to eliminate redundant interview prompts. Participants were then contacted and obtained through convenience sampling via indirect professional connections to the researchers and based on proximity to the researchers. None of the researchers had an existing relationship with the participants.

Once participants were obtained, each was emailed a copy of informed consent and an in-person interview was scheduled at a location of the participant’s choice. A demographic questionnaire was filled out by and written consent was obtained from all participants prior to the start of each interview. Details of informed consent and confidentiality obligations of the researchers were reiterated to participants and participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. All participants verbally consented to audio recording of the interviews. Two researchers were present at each interview, and the three researchers rotated in a manner that allowed each of them to be present for at least three interviews. Interviews were

transcribed verbatim, while all names used (participants, cities, co-workers) were discarded and replaced with relevant labels. To adhere to confidentiality protocols, each participant was assigned a code name (i.e., P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6).

### **Data Analyses**

Each of the interviews was transcribed verbatim by one member of the research team. Interview transcripts were then checked against audio recordings in order to ensure accuracy. Analysis and coding were done through the use of *Atlas.ti* software. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used (Smith & Osborn, 2008), and all comments and notes were shared between researchers throughout the coding process. Thematic analysis was used to extract meaning units from the participants' responses that were then coded. Coded responses were then grouped into lower-order themes, higher-order themes, and subsequently into categories. Meaning units and lower-order themes were kept as close as possible to the language used by participants and higher-order themes and categories represented more abstract groupings based on similarities in the data.

Two members served as primary content analysts on each transcription while the third researcher acted as a peer auditor for each interview. Through this process, the researchers triangulated judgments about the content of the coding, and any diverging interpretations were discussed amongst all three researchers and checked against the data until an agreement could be reached. Two measures were taken in order to ensure trustworthiness of data: (a) The peer-auditing member of the research team performed the role of devil's advocate in addition to being a coanalyst, and (b) Lists of codes were sent to all six participants in order to corroborate the accuracy of data interpretation. With the assistance of a senior faculty member, thematic analysis skills and procedures were developed and enhanced. These procedures have been used

in past studies and proven successful by researchers who have analyzed qualitative studies with a team approach (Poczwadowski, Diehl, O’Neil, Cote, & Haberl, 2014).

## Results

Categories of Administrative Duties & Expectations, Interacting with Other Individuals, Emotional/Physiological Regulation, Extensive Preparation, Support System, and Cognitive/Behavioral Coping Techniques organized 14 higher-order themes. Formal Departmental Resources (as a category) comprised three lower-order themes. Thirty-seven lower-order themes emerged from 274 meaning units. For a hierarchical list of all categories and themes, see Figure 1.

### **Administrative duties and expectations**

All six participants mentioned administrative duties and expectations as stressful aspects of the job, and the five emerging lower-order themes were grouped into two higher-order themes (cooperation with other departments/officers and extensive/unpredictable workload).

**Cooperation with other departments/officers.** Cooperation with other departments/officers as an administrative stressor was highlighted by responses from all six participants and included the lower order themes of (a) settling for different standards/deadlines, (b) managing/being managed, and (c) delegating work. Specifically, four participants discussed settling for different standards/deadlines as an administrative reality that causes organizational stress. Participant 3 (P3) equated this truth in law enforcement to cooking a steak:

If you tell someone to make a steak, you can give them explicit instructions, but unless you do it, it’s not going to be the way you want it. It’s just not. It’ll be good; it may even be better than you make it, but it’s just not going to be the same.

Two participants discussed being in charge of other officers and trusting other officers to get the job done as a form of organizational stress and Participant 2 (P2) mentioned having a boss to “answer to at the end of every month” as a stressful expectation of the job. Closely related to managing others (yet emerging as a separate lower-order theme), delegating work to other officers was a duty assumed by individuals in leadership positions within law enforcement that was mentioned as stressful by just two participants.

**Extensive and unpredictable workload.** Five of six participants discussed extensive and unpredictable workload as a demanding aspect of the job, which was grouped into two lower-order themes related to never truly being off-duty and to long shift hours/working overtime. All five participants who discussed extensive and unpredictable workload as a demand of the job mentioned the idea that law enforcement officers are perpetually on-duty. As Participant 4 stated, “ You can be on your day off relaxing and doing whatever and if we have a major incident, you get called in. It’s the nature of the beast.” Four participants mentioned working overtime as a duty that they assumed regularly and that it was one they do not enjoy. Participant 2 recalled a specific instance in which he “was thinking [he] may not be going home for two days.” As a whole, the participants viewed administrative duties and expectations as harsh, typically stressful organizational realities of working in law enforcement.

### **Interacting with other individuals**

Interacting with other individuals emerged as a category encompassing participants’ descriptions of the stressors and tasks involved in how law enforcement officers relate to those other than their peers. Five lower order themes arose from the responses of all six participants, which were then grouped into two higher-order themes including (a) dealing with suspects/inmates, and (b) perceptions from outsiders.

**Dealing with suspects/inmates.** Four of six participants mentioned stressors tied to the uncertainty of dealing with suspects and inmates. Due to both environmental and human factors, each of those four participants described not knowing what to expect when engaging with such individuals. As Participant 2 stated:

There's always a concern, especially if you're going to somebody's house... If you're going to somebody's house, you have to be concerned about friends, family members, or weapons. That's why we always take a partner with us, because that's always a concern.

**Be in charge of the situation.** Despite the unexpected nature of any given situation, three of six participants articulated the importance of remaining in charge. Participant 6, who discussed dealing with convicts as an essential job duty, expressed, "This is schoolyard politics. The toughest dog runs the yard so you have to be that toughest dog. Be polite, be courteous, but be in charge." Dealing with individuals whom are not bound by the same standards of professionalism as law enforcement officers proved to be a difficult aspect of maintaining control of a situation ("I'll do everything in my power to make us more professional," P3). Two participants reported an added element of situational ambiguity based on the similarity in appearances of prison inmates ("Nobody has murderer tattooed on their forehead," P6) as well questions surrounding the motives of inmates ("I don't know which ones want to harm me," P5).

**Perceptions from outsiders.** Suspects and inmates are not the only individuals with whom law enforcement officers interact. As highlighted by the responses of three participants, the reality of speaking to civilians and the media is accompanied by its own set of demands. Three of six participants discussed difficulties around explaining their jobs and the things they see to civilians, citing that individuals outside law enforcement have a misconception about the

way things actually work (“They think the real world is just like the TV and movies they see,” P6). An additional two participants discussed another reality of interacting with the public involving navigation around the agenda of the public. Participant 3 jokingly mentioned that it requires a certain amount of knowledge and experience to interact with “reporters and their pens or citizen groups with their pitchforks and torches.”

### **Emotional/Physiological Regulation**

Five of six participants responded to interview questions by discussing the demands and difficulties surrounding emotional and physiological regulation. From 35 raw data points, seven lower-order themes emerged and were grouped into three higher-order themes including (a) coping with trauma/risk, (b) sensory alterations, and (c) arousal control.

**Coping with trauma/risk.** Coping with trauma and risk is a theme that was discussed frequently by five of six participants. Responses from the participants focused on three lower-order themes (knowing life is on the line, witnessing death, and seeing people at their worst) and were grouped together into the above higher-order theme due to their relationships to the high-stakes nature of law enforcement. Four participants mentioned knowing that life is frequently on the line; responses showed that participants were aware that the lives of citizens as well as their own lives are quite regularly in danger (“There’s an added factor that something serious could effect somebody,” P1; “I signed up as a cop to put my ass on the line” P3).

Three participants highlighted the unfortunate reality that serious danger sometimes results in loss-of-life. Responses illustrated that witnessing the death of strangers and even more so witnessing the death of peers is a devastating reality of working in law enforcement (e.g., “I had a homicide happen on my watch and it was the worst two weeks of my life,” P2; “When you see death, it’s pretty bad. Then, to identify it as a co-worker, that’s even worse,” P5). Responses

of three participants suggested that, even in the absence of danger or death, law enforcement officers regularly deal with individuals at their worst. As Participant 4 noted, “Everybody that we’re dealing with, we’re dealing with pretty much on their worst day.”

**Sensory alterations.** Consistent with the research purpose of examining how law enforcement officers experience stress, four participants described sensory alterations as manifestations of acute stress. All four participants who mentioned experiencing alterations talked about how their vision was affected. Three of those four participants described the onset of tunnel vision in stressful environments and one participant alluded to the onset of hypervigilance (e.g., “You get hard-focused in a tunnel and can’t see stuff happen out there,” P1 & P3; “You start to see everybody... You become aware of where everybody in the room is,” P6). In addition to visual alterations, two participants noted having experienced loss of ability to hear/comprehend relevant information (“I have gotten auditory exclusion,” P4) in their careers.

**Arousal control.** Responses of four participants discussed arousal control as a necessity in order to perform effectively as law enforcement officers. Each of those four talked about the importance of learning how to, as Participant 4 described it, “turn it on and off” at the beginning and end of shifts. A similar concept arose when talking about specific calls, and three participants mentioned the value of being able to shift into the correct mindset when approaching any given situation (“You have to put your game face on,” P6). The ability to regulate emotions and physiological reactions emerged as a vital demand placed on the participants; the coping resources used by the officers in attempt to meet such demands will be discussed later in this section.

### **Extensive Preparation**

Extensive preparation was organized as a category from five lower-order themes that were grouped into two higher-order themes including (a) awareness of the situation, and (b) relying on training/experience. All six participants discussed preparation as a key coping mechanism in ensuring that they perform their jobs effectively, yielding 38 raw data points.

**Awareness of the situation.** As discussed earlier in this section, uncertainty is one of many unnerving realities of working in law enforcement. When asked how they deal with uncertainty, five of six participants mentioned coping mechanisms that were ultimately coded as situational awareness. Three participants discussed one specific method of preparing for uncertainty that involved assuming the worst. When talking about prison inmates, Participant 6 discussed having the mindset that “everybody there is that one guy who’s trying to kill you.” By expecting the worst, participants prepared for any eventuality and, thus, ameliorated a certain amount of the aforementioned uncertainty that they face. Three participants discussed another method of battling ambiguity in familiarizing themselves with the environments in which they work. As Participant 3 put it: “I know where I’m going to be fighting; I’ve taken those times on the street to walk through businesses. If I have to do a building clear on something, I’ve been through it before.”

**Relying on training/experience.** Experience is a coping mechanism that was discussed by five participants. Four of six participants articulated a method of gaining experience through scenario-based training. Participant 4 noted: “When we get into that ‘Oh shit!’ scenario, we don’t rise to the situation; we sink to the level of our training.” By simulating certain situations in which they could train the correct response, participants reported “responding how [they] train” (P1, P4, & P6) as an asset rather than a setback. Although scenario-based training was discussed as an effective method of preparation, participants pointed out that not every scenario could be

trained for. As a result, it was equally as important to use the experience of other officers to their advantage. Four participants mentioned relying on their peers for such experience and three participants discussed the process of mentoring younger officers as an effective method of sharing knowledge. Participant 3 stated:

In the middle of the night when there's no sergeant around and you're sitting car-to-car with a senior guy, you're telling him how this happened and he's saying, "I had this one time and I did this." That's when [you're] going to learn the most.

### **Support System**

Support system emerged as a category containing 70 meaning units grouped into six lower-order themes and two higher-order themes including (a) family and friends, and (b) other officers as coping resources.

**Friends and family.** All six participants emphasized the role of a solid support system outside of law enforcement in their abilities to maintain a successful career. Four participants discussed a network of friends outside of their peers ("I find friends in all different demographics," P4) and how such relationships help them turn off the law enforcement mindset (as discussed earlier). It is important to note that, although family was largely discussed as a coping mechanism, four participants did mention their jobs as having stressful effects on their families. Participant 1 noted: "I'm sure it stresses them out. I'm sure they see me get a call on the phone and they say, 'Great. Here we go again.'" Additionally, Participant 6 commented on the "high rates of divorce... and domestic violence" among law enforcement families. Despite having discussed the stress on family, responses from three participants highlighted the family as the most essential support system they had and as a factor contributing to success ("My family, my wife, they all play into how I'm successful at what I do," P1).

**Other officers as coping tools.** Five participants pointed out that, due to long shift hours, they spent nearly as much time with their peers as they did at home. Consequently, the concept of brotherhood came up in all five of those interviews. Participant 2 summed it up:

You know it's really important for these guys to take care of each other... When you're out there and you are getting into situations that are dangerous and stuff, you rely on your peers and you become very close.

Along with relying on heavily on the law enforcement brotherhood, humor was another theme that arose in discussion with four participants. Due to the sobering nature of repeated exposure to trauma, death, and individuals at their worst, participants expressed developing a sense of humor that became implicit in their interactions with other officers. In the context of talking about trauma, Participant 4 was very aware that “the more [they] feel those emotions start to become real, the more [they] use humor to try to counterbalance that.” Additionally, the same four participants pointed out that the type of humor they used tended to be “very dark in nature, and as such it [got] misinterpreted a lot” (P3). Through both interactions/relationships at work and the development of a support network at home, all six participants made it clear that they rely heavily on those around them for continued success in their field.

### **Behavioral/Cognitive Coping**

Behavioral/cognitive coping referred to a set of all six participants’ methods of mitigating chronic and acute stress via lifestyle choices and cognitive habits. Six lower-order themes emerged from 39 raw data points and were grouped into three higher-order themes including (a) work-life balance, (b) implicit/explicit mental skills, and (c) exercise.

**Work-life balance.** Four participants discussed the importance of maintaining a balance between work and personal life. When asked how they achieve such a balance, three participants

mentioned having hobbies and interests outside of law enforcement (“You can’t be the job 24/7; you have to have hobbies,” P4; “On the weekends I do a lot of volunteering,” P5). Another important factor that contributed to work-life balance was taking time to decompress. Two participants discussed their hobbies as a means of doing that, while Participant 6 expressed simply taking an off day to decompress by doing nothing (“After that first day of just decompressing... then I can get out and do things,”).

**Implicit/explicit mental skills.** While work-life balance was discussed as a coping mechanism in mitigating the effects of chronic stress, five participants talked about implicit and explicit acquisition of mental skills as means of performing effectively under acute stress. Responses were grouped together based on their relationship to principles of sport and performance psychology, but participants discussed the acquisition of breathing and self-talk in different ways. Participant 1 discussed learning the importance of breathing through experiences in the field, while three participants mentioned formal education around the utility of deep breathing (e.g., “I discovered a program called HeartMath; it teaches you breathing,” P3 & P4; “One of the things that I liked is [my mental coach’s] breathing techniques,” P5). Of note, Participant 5, who reported using a mental skills coach for athletics, denied having any formal sport and performance psychology training related to law enforcement. Another three participants indirectly discussed self-talk as a mechanism to increase confidence and ensure the best chance of effective performance. No participants reported ever being taught self-talk formally, but as Participant 2 put it:

You know what I find myself doing? Talking to myself. Not literally, but I tell myself, “You know what? I’m good at what I do. I’ve been doing this a long time; even though I am not comfortable doing this, I know I can handle it.”

**Exercise.** Exercise came up in four interviews as an additional coping mechanism to mitigate stress. Similar to their comments about family, participants expressed elements of both coping and stress linked to exercise. Four of six participants reported that they utilized exercise as a means of reducing stress (e.g., “For me, one of the best stress management techniques is exercise,” P3; “I know exercise is a way that a lot of guys deal with stuff,” P2). Interestingly, only one participant mentioned physical fitness as a necessity for job performance. Two participants acknowledged difficulties in their abilities to exercise regularly. Due to unpredictability of workload and perpetual responsibility, those two participants indicated that it was extremely difficult to build exercise into their schedules.

### **Formal departmental resources**

All six participants reported being familiar with coping resources offered by their departments. Three different resources and programs were discussed, including (a) department/contracted counselors, (b) peer support, and (c) incentive programs for officer wellbeing.

Five of six participants mentioned knowing about counselors that were either embedded in their departments or were contracted by their departments; however, none of the five participants reported having ever utilized those services. Rather, peer support was a resource that was preferred by those participants. Peer support was described as a program in which officer-to-officer counseling occurs. Individuals could be trained to become a peer support team member, and one officer mentioned that shared experience and familiarity with the job contributed to choosing peer support over formal counseling. Finally, three participants mentioned that their departments contained incentive programs for officer wellbeing (e.g., “The department now

gives you time off if... you take care of your health," P1; "Officers get a... gift card if they work out consistently over a six month period," P3).

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to explore the ways in which law enforcement officers experience and conceptualize stress and the demands of their workplace, and (b) to investigate the current coping methods used by those individuals in order to ensure continued success in the presence of those stressors. This section examine the relationship between the results of this study and the current literature, discuss strengths and limitations associated with the current study, and offer practical implications and future directions for sport and performance psychology practitioners interested in researching and intervening with law enforcement officers.

### **Stress & demands**

Responses from participants in this study provided some support for some aspects of the Police Stress Model (Waters & Ussery, 2007). Shift work, long hours, and difficult schedules were reported by five of six participants, which resonated with environmental pressures described in the PSM. However, family pressure described in Waters and Userry's (2007) article was actually found to be a complex phenomenon comprising both elements contributing to stress as well as resilience. Further validating the in-depth analysis done by Kirschman (2006) in her book *I Love a Cop* are our findings about the complex relationship between police culture and support systems such as family and friends. Acute stressors such as traumatic experiences were reported by five out of six participants, supporting major points in current literature and research about contributing factors to police stress (Asken, 2013, Aaron, 2000, Korre et al., 2014, Watters & Ussery, 2007).

Supporting current understanding, chronic stressors such as hypervigilance and the high-risk nature of the job were also reported by participants in this study. Consistent with the findings of Korre and colleagues (2014), dealing with suspects was reported as a stressor by five of the six participants. However, being ready for the worst was found to be a coping strategy rather than a stressor. In support of research by Hayes and Brown (2004), understanding police and law enforcement presents a unique challenge. The way that participants in our study conceptualized perpetual risk of harm to themselves and others resembled a preparatory coping strategy as well as a stressor. Although some participants reported that they assume the worst when dealing with inmates, they also reported that this attitude helped them maintain a state of situational awareness. The only literature about the complex interplay between mental rehearsal, arousal regulation, and self-talk was Asken's (2013) book *Mindsighting*.

Emotional regulation was also found to be a consistent stressor (Patton et al. 2000). Notably, emotional regulation was described as both the ability "to turn it on and off" and putting on the appropriate face for specific situations. The idea of surface acting is discussed in research by Adams and Buck (2010), where they found that putting on the right face for the situation contributed to emotional exhaustion. Additionally, four of six participants described the difficulty of calming down from a state of high emotional arousal. Further supporting work by Asken (2013) are participants' reports about acute physiological symptoms of stress such as tunnel vision, auditory exclusion, and hypervigilance.

### **Coping Methods**

Despite what existing literature suggests (Malcolm et al., 2005; Kuykendall, 2011; Clark-Miller & Brady, 2012), participants did, in fact, discuss having used a number of proactive coping methods to meet the demands of their workplaces and to cope with the stress tied to law

enforcement (i.e. *extensive preparation & implicit/explicit mental skills*); however, the acquisition of such proactive coping methods was largely informal or they were developed as physical and tactical coping methods. Only two participants (P3 & P4), both of whom worked in the same department, mentioned formal training in what might be considered a performance psychology intervention (HeartMath). Despite mentioning the use of a biofeedback/breathing program, each of those two participants went on to assert that it's implementation is done informally and only recently became mandated training within their department.

Formal departmental resources was another dimension of coping explored in the current study that showed partial support for the previous literature. Similar to CISD (Malcolm et al., 2005; Kuykendall, 2011), two of three themes that arose from participants' responses (*departmental/contracted counselors & peer support*) were discussed as targeting post-traumatic stress. Additionally, a combination of participants' limited experiences with contracted counselors and more extensive knowledge around peer support corroborated the notion that post-traumatic interventions were more sought after when conducted by co-workers (Kuykendall, 2011). *Incentives for officer wellbeing* was a formal resource that was discussed as a proactive method of promoting the health of officers; nonetheless, it was a resource that was only mentioned by three officers and was also articulated as targeting physical (not psychological) coping.

Finally, the brotherhood among law enforcement officers emerged as a concept that supported findings from some previous literature and refuted the findings of other studies. Five of six participants mentioned that shared experience and values among law enforcement officers elicited strong bonds and a profound sense of interdependence between themselves and their co-workers (Paoline, 2004). At the same time, none of the six participants discussed isolating

themselves from family and friends in favor of their co-workers (Kronenburg et al., 2008, Paton et al., 2007; Kirschman, 2007). In fact, each of the participants mentioned their friends and/or families as playing crucial roles in helping them cope with the demands and stressors around their jobs.

### **Performance Psychology as a Proactive Intervention**

The results of the current study suggest little to no presence of formal proactive psychological intervention programs targeted at aiding law enforcement officers in coping with stress of their workplaces. Although performance psychology and its effectiveness has been analyzed in relation to the military (DeWiggins et al., 2010; Adler et al., 2011; Cornum et al., 2011), there remains little research on the applicability of such interventions in relation to law enforcement. However, current models do suggest performance psychology can be used as a resource to educate and train individuals in high-risk occupations (and more specifically law enforcement) in how to use mental skills in order to enhance their ability function successfully in stressful environments (Cornum et al., 2011; Asken, 2013).

Consistent with such suggestions, the current study revealed that certain performance psychology techniques are already being used. Most all of these techniques, however, have been developed implicitly through experience and informal mentorship. Whether embedded in a department or hired as a contractor, the presence of a performance psychology consultant could be a means of facilitating the development of mental skills and enhancing the efficiency with which law enforcement officers utilize proactive psychological coping methods.

### **Strengths & Limitations**

The participants in this study were required to be active duty law enforcement employees with a minimum of 5 years' experience. This requirement provided the researchers with not only

experience, but also with variety in terms of the roles that the participants held in law enforcement (i.e., Chief, Lieutenant, Detective, S.W.A.T. technician, and 2 Deputy Sheriffs). The variety in job roles elicited a wide range of experiences and interpretations based on those experiences.

Participants all worked in relatively the same geographical location, which made it possible for all interviews to be conducted in-person. This proved to be beneficial as body language and mannerisms provided added context to responses which helped inform the researchers when coding interview transcripts. However, because all officers function in the same area, the generalizability of the results is limited. Future studies on this topic might expand the geographical parameters to see if other regions are experiencing similar work related stressors. Although the researchers noted race and sex of the participants, the interaction between factors like race and gender and their effects on experiences of stress were not explored.

### **Practical Implications**

Although only one participant mentioned the importance of physical fitness, each participant emphasized the importance of being mentally sharp. Despite recognizing such importance, only two of the participants mentioned having tools within their departments designed to teach mental skills and none of the participants reported having experience with performance psychology consultants. Many principles taught in performance psychology emerged implicitly and participants reported having only gained mental skills through experience. A mental skills training program would allow young law enforcement officers to learn and acquire psychological skills early in their careers and could even change the way law enforcement officers train and perform. As a result, it is proposed that performance psychology

would not only be useful in law enforcement, but that it should be an integral part of every law enforcement department and training program.

Additionally, a needs analysis could be conducted across all high-risk occupations to determine if the need for performance psychology exists similarly to the need expressed in law enforcement. When speaking with police officers, common stressors and demands identified were: *administrative duties and expectations, interacting with other individuals, and emotional/physiological regulation*. If other high-risk professions experience similar stressors, they too could greatly benefit from performance psychology training.

### **Conclusion**

Police officers represent a unique population and performance psychology practitioners need to consider tailoring their interventions accordingly. Although there are some similarities between law enforcement and other performance domains, the high risk nature of the profession as well as the complex nature of performance demands and coping resources make this population distinct from others. Further research is necessary to better understand the complex relationship between performance demands, stressors, and coping resources. Practitioners seeking to work with law enforcement should account for individual, position, and different departments. Also, future research needs to determine the effectiveness of educational and psychological interventions with this population of performers, as the interviews in this study revealed emergence of implicit mental skills training resulting from experience. When tailoring mental skills training protocols with law enforcement, practitioners would need to account for the unique, subjective interpretations of stressors experienced by the population they are working with in order to improve not only performance, but also the overall well-being of this unique high-risk population.

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**Figure 1**

Categories, Higher-Order, and Lower-Order Themes from the Interview Data

**Administrative duties & expectations (6 law enforcement officers)***Cooperation with other departments/officers*

- Settling for different standards/deadlines (3)
- Managing/being managed (3)
- Delegating work (2)

*Extensive and unpredictable workload (5)*

- Never really off duty (5)
- Long shift hours/working overtime (4)

**Interacting with other individuals (6)***Dealing with suspects/inmates (4)*

- Don't know what to expect (4)
- Be in charge of the situation (3)
- All inmates look the same (2)

*Perceptions from outsiders (3)*

- Difficult for civilians to understand my job (3)
- Agenda of the public (2)

**Emotional/physiological regulation (5)***Coping with trauma/risk (5)*

- Knowing life is on the line (4)
- Witnessing death (3)
- Seeing people at their worst (3)

*Sensory alterations (4)*

- Tunnel vision & hypervigilance (4)
- Auditory exclusion (2)

*Arousal control (4)*

- Turning it on and off (4)
- Putting my game face on (3)

**Extensive preparation (6)***Awareness of the situation (5)*

- Assume the worst (3)
- Familiarize myself with the environment (3)

*Relying on training/experience (5)*

- I respond how I train (4)
- I rely on my peers (4)
- Mentoring younger officers (3)

**Support system (6)***Family & friends (6)*

- I have friends outside law enforcement (4)
- My job affects my family (4)
- I rely on my family to be successful (3)

*Other officers as coping resources (5)*

- Law enforcement is a brotherhood (5)
- I interact using humor (4)
- Dark/inappropriate nature of humor (4)

**Behavioral/cognitive coping (6)***Work-life balance (4)*

- I have hobbies/outside interests (4)
- Taking time to decompress (3)

*Implicit & explicit mental skills (5)*

- It is important to breathe (4)
- I tell myself I can do it (3)

*Exercise (4)*

- I work out to relieve stress (4)
- It is difficult to exercise regularly (2)

**Formal departmental resources (6)**

- Departmental/contracted counselor (5)
- Peer Support (5)
- Incentive programs for officer wellbeing (3)

*Note.* Category, *higher-order theme* and lower-order theme (with total number of participants reporting each theme).