EXPLORING THE MEANING OF TRAUMA IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

PhD (Psychotherapy)

in the Department of Psychology

at the

University of Pretoria

MARNA YOUNG

PROMOTOR: Prof Cheryl-Ann Potgieter

2004
DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis which I hereby submit for the degree Doctor PhD (Psychotherapy) in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at another university.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank

the participants who poignantly shared their experiences with me.

my promotor Prof. Cheryl Potgieter for her support, knowledge and perseverance.

all the police officers who, over the years, shared of themselves in therapy and taught me about trauma.

Buks and Ronel Annandale for their interest and support.

Ansie Gouws and Vanessa Graydon for walking this PhD route with me.

my mother for her love and the “mothering” of my child.

my husband Charl Annandale and daughters Klara and Natassha who constitute the meaning of my life.

_It takes so little, so infinitely little, for a person to cross the border beyond which everything loses meaning: love, convictions, faith, history._

_(Kundera, 1981)_
CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNINGS

1.1 Introduction 1

1.2 Case studies from the researcher’s therapy room 3
  1.2.1 Case study A 3
  1.2.2 Case study B 5
  1.2.3 Brief discussion of case studies 5

1.3 The aim of the study 6

1.4 Setting the scene 7
  1.4.1 The South African Police Service (SAPS) 7
  1.4.2 The concept of trauma 7

1.5 Outline of the thesis 8

CHAPTER TWO: THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICE AS SPECIFIC CONTEXT IN WHICH THE RESEARCH IS CONDUCTED

2.1 Introduction 10

2.2 The historical context of the South African Police (SAP) 10

2.3 The structure of the South African Police Service as organisation 12

2.4 Structural and strategic changes during the transformation process 17
  2.4.1 Impact of change and transformation on the police subculture 20
  2.4.2 Impact of change and transformation on individuals 23
2.4.3 The organisation’s response to the situation  28
   2.4.3.1 Trauma debriefing in the SAPS  29
   2.4.3.2 Suicide prevention programme in the SAPS  30

2.5 Concluding remarks  31

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF TRAUMA

3.1 Introduction  32
3.2 A brief overview of the historic construction of trauma  33
3.3 Shifts and developments in psychoanalytic thinking relating to trauma  36
3.4 Basic tenets of the psychodynamic approach  41
3.5 Theoretical concepts linked to a psychoanalytic construction of trauma  43
   3.5.1 Traumatic memory versus ordinary memory  43
   3.5.2 Trauma, memory and a sense of self  45
   3.5.3 Fear, pain and defences  47
   3.5.4 Avoidance, numbing and disassociation as defence mechanisms  48
   3.5.5 The role of meaning on the experiencing of trauma  50
   3.5.6 Meaning and perceived support  51
3.6 Conclusion  55

CHAPTER FOUR: OVERVIEW OF TRAUMA LITERATURE

4.1 Introduction  57
4.2 Trauma and stress in law enforcement agencies  58
4.3 Dynamics and variables specific to policing  64
   4.3.1 The “police personality” as variable  64
   4.3.2 Ambivalent feelings as variable in policing  65
4.3.3 The dynamics of addiction to danger and excitement in policing 69
4.3.4 The subculture or group phenomena as variable in policing 71

4.4 The effects of police work on officers 75
4.4.1 Alcohol abuse as a consequence of policing 76
4.4.2 Suicidal thought and suicide as a consequence of policing 77
4.4.3 Marital problems as a consequence of policing 79
4.4.4 The effect of traumatic experiences on police officers 80
4.4.4.1 Post-traumatic stress disorder as diagnostic category: A critical overview 82

4.5 SA psychology’s construction of trauma over three decades (1970-2002) 89
4.5.1 SAPS construction of trauma as an organisational health problem: Recent studies 92

4.6 Conclusion 95

CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 Introduction 97
5.2 Qualitative research 98
5.3 Social construction of narratives 102
5.4 The issue of reliability and validity in qualitative research 105
5.5 Collecting the data: Recruitment procedure and description of the participants 108
5.5.1 Recruitment procedure 108
5.5.2 Description of the participants 113
5.6 The instruments 113
5.6.1 Biographical data questionnaire 113
5.6.2 Career narrative 114
5.7 My reflections on the research and the process 116
CHAPTER SIX: RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction 125
6.2 What being a police officer means 126
  6.2.1 A dream come true 126
  6.2.2 Belonging to the police fraternity 130
  6.2.3 Feelings of ambivalence toward the work 133
6.3 Traumatic incidents 135
  6.3.1 Police officers’ perception of traumatic incidents 146
6.4 Organisational stressors 149
  6.4.1 Training 149
  6.4.2 Support and recognition 152
  6.4.3 Perceptions about commanders and management of the SAPS 155
  6.4.4 The impact of organisational stressors on relationships 160
  6.4.5 Coping skills 163
6.5 Transformation 164
  6.5.1 Racial tension 165
  6.5.2 Representivity 170
  6.5.3 Unclear line of command/cumbersome organisational structure 173
  6.5.4 The effect of the change 175
  6.5.5 Uncertainty and unfairness as stressors 178
6.6 Closing discussion 182
6.7 Concluding remarks 183

REFERENCES 188
Discourses on trauma in the South African Police Service (SAPS) focus primarily on the experience of traumatic events as the primary reason for the emotional difficulties that members experience. This study questions this dominant discourse and examines additional discourses that may contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of trauma in the SAPS. The research entailed a qualitative analysis of 15 essays written by members of the SAPS, with the aim of exploring alternative discourses on the experience of trauma by police officers. The participants included fifteen male officers from three units in the Gauteng region. The data were analysed within a psychodynamic frame, and findings suggest that police officers’ reactions to trauma are significantly influenced by factors other than mere exposure to traumatic events. The history of psychological trauma indicates that constructions of traumatic stress are strongly connected with cultural, social and political circumstances. Current psychodynamic thinking emphasises the meaning of the real traumatic occurrence, which causes trauma by changing a person’s experience of the self in relation to self-objects. The research results suggest that the sociohistorical circumstances in South Africa, the transformation effected in the police service, and political and structural uncertainty play an important role in contributing to an overwhelming sense of loss and uncertainty. Perceived losses include the loss of the supportive police subculture, loss of meaning in their work, loss of a sense of masculinity as well as loss of a sense of competence and agency. Findings further reveal that officers’ experience a sense of being overwhelmed, powerless and helpless in the face of these historical and organisational changes. These feelings generate significant anxiety and impact negatively on officers’ self-esteem. Feelings of omnipotence and invulnerability, which are necessary for effective coping in the policing environment, are negatively affected. Furthermore, without the existence of a supportive social group, this anxiety becomes uncontained and unmanageable.

Key words
Trauma, South African Police Service, traumatic stress, organisational stressors, police subculture, psychodynamic approach
OPSOMMING

Gesprekke oor trauma in die Suid-Afrikaanse Polisie Diens (SAPD) fokus hoofsaaklik op die beleving van traumatisering insidente as primêre oorsaak vir die emosionele probleme wat lede ervaar. Hierdie studie beveaagteken die dominante redevoering en onderzoek addisionele gesprekke wat mag bydra tot ‘n dieper begrip van die dinamika van trauma in die SAPD. Die navorsing behels ‘n kwalitatiewe analyse van 15 opstelle geskryf deur lede van die SAPD, met as doel om alternatiewe wyse van gesprek voer of praat oor die trauma wat hulle beleef te ondersoek. Die deelnemers is vyftien manlike offisiere van drie eenhede vanuit Gauteng. Die data is geanalyser in binne die psigodinamiese raamwerk, en bevindings dui daarop dat polisie offisiere se reaksies op trauma beduidend beinvloed word deur faktore buiten die blootstelling aan traumatische voorvalle. Die geskiedenis van psigologiese trauma dui daarop dat konstruksies van traumatische stres nou verband hou met kulturele, sosiale en politieke omstandighede. Huidige psigodinamiese denke beklemtoon die betekenis van die werklike traumatische gebeurtenis in die veroorsaking van trauma deur die verandering wat dit te weeg bring by die persoon se ervaring van die self in verhouding tot self-objekte. Die navorsing resultate dui daarop dat die sosiohistorisiese omstandighede in Suid Afrika, die transformasie van die polisie diens, sowel as politiese en strukturele onsekerheid ‘n belangrike bydraende rol speel in die oorweldigende gevoel van verlies en onsekerheid wat polisie offisiere ervaar. Verliese wat beleef word sluit in die verlies van ‘n ondersteunende polisie subkultuur, ‘n verlies van betekenis in die werk wat hulle verrig, ‘n verlies van die gevoel van manlikheid sowel as ‘n verlies van bewaamheid. Bevindings dui verder daarop dat offisiere oorweldig, magteloos en hulpeloos voel in die lig van historiese en organisatoriese veranderinge. Hierdie gevoeleens wek aansienlike vlakke van angs en het ‘n negatiewe invloed op offisiere seiewaarde. Gevoelens van kragtigheid, bekwaamheid en onkwesbaarheid, wat noodsaaklik is vir die effektiewe funksionering in ‘n polisie omgewing, word negatief geaffekteer. Sonder die ondersteunende kragte van ‘n subkultuur word hierdie angs vryvloeiend en onbeheersd.