

CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNINGS

1.1 Introduction

I would like to deviate from most traditional research and start at the non-traditional beginning, namely, my personal involvement in the research topic¹. I was trained as a clinical psychologist and have been employed in the Psychological Services Unit (previously called Behavioural Sciences) of the South African Police Service (SAPS) for twelve years, of which the last eight years were spent mostly in doing psychotherapy with police members. In addition to the main focus on psychotherapy, my duties also include crisis intervention, suicide prevention, trauma counselling, trauma debriefing and hostage negotiation. In recent years I have become aware of a dissonance between the official discourse on trauma of the South African Police Service and the individual stories which members disclose in psychotherapy. I became interested in exploring this further and it emerged as a topic for my doctorate. Some would argue that this is not the route which scholars embark on in pursuing academic research. However, Parker (1992) and others argue that research is always carried out from a particular standpoint, and “the pretense to neutrality is disingenuous”(p.13). It is always worth considering the position of the researcher, “both with reference to the definition of the problem to be studied and with regard to the way the researcher interacts with the material to produce a particular type of sense” (Parker, 1992, p.13).

In addition, others (Becvar & Becvar, 1996; Hoffman, 1988) argue that our stories are socially constructed and the way in which they are presented is determined by the audience which is being addressed. As researcher I am comfortable with both of the

¹ For some (e.g. Ratele, 2002, Potgieter, 1997) the use of the personal pronoun “I” is a politically transgressive gesture in the sense of violating scientific cannons of objectivity, rejecting the division drawn routinely between the everyday or anecdotal and academic theorisation. However, I accept that the production of knowledge is not universal and timeless but dependant of certain kinds of historically specific communicative acts, hermeneutic assumptions and power relations. The intended use of “I” is to affirm a selfconsciousness that researchers never occupy an unsullied, dispassionate position for they are inevitably always enmeshed in the research enterprise.

latter arguments and consider them complementary to each other. This stance is reflected in various contemporary South African research such as Potgieter (1997), De la Rey (1999), and Goldman (2003). My paradigm as psychologist is mainly grounded in psychoanalysis² and this influences my interpretations and analysis of content.

Some personal musings on the subject of trauma in the SAPS lead me to the following considerations. What seems to be emerging is that trauma (referring to the experience of a traumatic event) is blamed for most wrongs within the organisation. When commenting on issues such as the high suicide rate, the number of medical boardings, police brutality and corruption in the South African Police Service, the SAPS's spokesperson generally refers to the amount of trauma that police officials experience. Trauma is not offered as a reason in most of these instances, but rather as an explanation for the abovementioned behaviour. Media reports of traumatic incidents to which police members are exposed, with statements about the effect of trauma on police members, are the order of the day. For example, the heading of an article in Beeld newspaper reads: "Trauma in die polisie kan geweld kweek" (Trauma in the police may foster violence) (Trauma in die polisie, 2000). Another article (Otto, 2002) with the heading "When the price is too high ... Cops struggle to cope with stress on the job", implies that job stress and trauma are synonymous. The latter article further suggests that the experience of traumatic events is the main reason for emotional difficulties encountered by SAPS members. The implication of these and other similar constructions is that other factors which might contribute to or aggravate the experiencing of trauma is ignored in the official SAPS discourse.

² According to the Penguin dictionary of psychology (Reber, 1995) psychoanalysis is defined as 1. A theory of human behavior. 2. A doctrine associated with this theory. 3. A set of techniques for exploring the underlying motivations of human behavior. 4. A method of treatment of various mental disorders. Psychoanalysis was developed by Sigmund Freud but since then uniformity of viewpoint concerning what constitutes psychoanalysis no longer prevails (Arlow, 1992). Disagreements are so wide that Wallerstein (1988) raised the issue of whether there is no longer one psychoanalysis but perhaps several psychoanalyses. For the purpose of this study psychoanalytic thinking represents the broad spectrum of unified psychoanalytic theory (i.e., classical analytic theory with accretions from developmental, object relation, and self psychology theory).

At this stage it might seem as if I negate the effect of trauma on police officers. This is not the case. This thesis does not deny or belittle the harrowing impact that traumatic incidents have on police members. Nor does it disregard the number or horror of the scenes members attend, or the frightening and anxiety-provoking situations they experience. I do, however, believe that a broader exploration of contributing circumstances and processes might lead to additional discourses on members's experience of trauma. Trauma as research subject does not constitute a novel area of inquiry; however, I agree with Proust (cited in Gallmann, 1991) in saying: "*The real voyage of discovery does not consist in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes*" (p.254).

The following two case studies from my psychotherapy practice serve as apt illustration that despite the amount and severity of trauma which police officers experience through their work, they consider these as less destructive to their well-being than other factors that may be categorised as organisational stressors.

1.2 Case studies from the researcher's therapy room

1.2.1 Case study A

Captain G is a 37 year-old male who is married with one child. He presented in therapy with major depression, irritable and aggressive behaviour, anxiety attacks and suicide ideation. The clinical history indicates no previous personality disorder or psychopathological behaviour. Captain G has been a member of the SAPS for 16 years, was trained internationally and is highly specialised in the type of work he performs, namely the measuring of truths and lies in the South African Police Service³. The presenting problem which brought him to therapy is that he can no longer tolerate the lies, deceptions, injustices, corruption, nepotism and administrative "red-tape" within the organisation. He was promised a certain post and promotion which did not

³ In protection of the person's identity, this is the only information that may be disclosed.

materialise. Captain G has followed all prescribed routes to complain and submit grievances, but after more than three years he feels that he has not been heard. He seriously contemplates committing suicide in the office of the National Commissioner of the SAPS after sending letters concerning his grievances and a suicide note to the media. He believes (hopes) that if the National Commissioner or the general public were to know how bad the circumstances in the SAPS really are, they will inevitably change. His helplessness is vividly illustrated by this ideation; he feels that this is the only way that his voice will ever be heard and acknowledged by the organisation.

Captain G has been exposed to various traumatic incidences during his career. In one instance he attended a serious car accident on a remote dirt road and found a man and woman dead and entrapped in the wreckage. In view of logistical considerations it was decided to tow the wreck to the nearest police station and only then remove the bodies from the vehicle. Hours later, when the car was eventually cut open, the bodies of twin babies were found on the floor behind the front seats. Captain G still does not know whether the babies were alive at the scene of the accident, and whether they could have been saved if he had found them earlier. He remembers one of his first manslaughter cases in which an elderly man was killed in a motor vehicle accident. Captain G had to help undress the victim in the mortuary, and took care of the man's dog until family members collected it days later. He remembers with sadness the persistent howling of the dog. He recalls brutal interrogation techniques, cattle dying because their tendons were severed and numerous murder scenes of people butchered to death. Despite these and other traumatic incidents, captain G does not present with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He says that he can, and always did, cope with the work-related trauma. He has never participated in trauma debriefing and neither did he request therapy during his career. He experiences his work as meaningful and believes the latter incidents come with the territory of being a police officer. However, he despises the lies, deceptions, injustices, corruption and favouritism which he currently experiences in the South African Police Service. He cannot separate his identity from that of the organisation and seriously contemplates ending it all, not by resigning, but by killing himself.

1.2.2 Case study B

Inspector H is a 34 year-old male, married with one child. He presents with typical post-traumatic stress symptoms such as intrusive thoughts. He also experiences sleep disturbances, has recurring nightmares, suicidal thoughts and aggressive behaviour, and he abuses alcohol. He was stationed at the then Internal Stability Unit during the late eighties and early nineties and was as such involved in township riots, patrols and attacks. He saw many atrocities and participated in some of these, was often terrified of dying and traumatised by scenes of hatred, inhumanity, suffering and death. He strongly identified with the previous government's apartheid policies, which the police had to enforce. Because he dehumanised all people of colour in his mind and believed in the system he was enforcing, he did not experience atrocities against Black⁴ people as inhuman. This helped him to “cope” during those times. His psychological problems and symptoms arose with the change in the political and social systems. The terrifying and mostly subconscious question that he has is whether he is to be regarded as evil if other races are indeed human. In the past he ascribed a sense of meaning to the work he performed (however distorted this might sound today) and he protected the government that employed him (and in which he believed). His symptoms of traumatisation appeared with the loss of this sense of meaning.

1.2.3 Brief discussion of case studies

These two case studies indicate that the police officers do not construct the incidents in which they are exposed to trauma as unmanageable. Rather, other factors such as political transformation, the context of social and organisational change, personal insecurity and a perceived lack of social support are experienced as unbearable. These and similar cases prompted my interest in the current study. The two individuals referred to above are both White⁵ and raise the question of how Black people in the

⁴ Black is used here to indicate all people of colour that were previously disadvantaged.

⁵ White and Black are in widespread use in present-day South Africa and the meanings of these terms have been shaped by the apartheid history.

SAPS system might experience what is happening today. However, I do not have a relevant case study of a Black person and the focus of this dissertation is not on cultural and racial issues *per se* but rather on the meaning of trauma. Nevertheless, racial and cultural issues are embroiled in the South African situation and are embraced as such. Without it being stated as a prerequisite, participants in the current study represent various cultural and racial groups in the SAPS. It might further be hypothesised that White members' experience of the transformation process in the SAPS are more negative than their Black colleagues' experience thereof.

Mental health professionals may argue that Captain G and Inspector H suffer from delayed onset and/or accumulative exposure to trauma. Experts often claim that they know what it is that ails the patient even though the patient strongly disagrees, pointing to another complaint (Young, 1995). Without entering into a debate about patients' insight into unconscious processes and other related issues, expert voices are heard more strongly than that of the patient. This study intends the voice of this often unheard segment of society to be heard and respects these members' own experiences and beliefs as being valuable.

1.3 The aim of the study

The primary aim of the study is to explore how trauma experienced by South African Police Service members is constructed or "talked about" and made sense of. Questions and issues that are considered relevant to the primary aim are: which aspects in the working environment do *members* consider to be most stressful, traumatic and difficult to cope with; and, what is the effect of the change and transition processes on members' working experiences?

Given that the South African Police Service is the institution that is "studied" in relation to trauma, the next section provides some information on the SAPS and on the concept of trauma. A more extensive discussion follows in subsequent chapters.

1.4 Setting the scene

1.4.1 The South African Police Service (SAPS)

According to Van der Walt (2001), the level of crime has increased in South Africa since the process of transformation started in 1994. With this, the traumatising and suicide of SAPS officials has soared. Apart from other implications, the escalation of crime in society in general means an increase in the amount of traumatic incidences to which police members are exposed, as well as a heavier workload. The intensification of the fight against crime has made extra demands on the professional and emotional resources of the police (Thom, 1995). In South Africa members of the police service are challenged by various potential stressors such as the high crime level, organisational transformation and a lack of resources (Rothmann & Van Rensburg, 2002). Policing in South Africa is a dangerous job; for example, 114 members lost their lives in the line of duty from January 2003 to December 2003 (Holtzhausen, 2004). According to Botha (2002), the police officer of today is confronted with a myriad of anthropological-existential problems. “The country is still in a process of transformation, the South African Police Service is confronted with an unacceptably high crime rate and the individual in the organisation has to cope with extremely serious psychological problems” (Botha, 2002, p.48). The identity of the SAPS is undergoing an intense, mostly forced transformation process which has numerous implications such as a decay of the in-group identity (Van der Westhuizen, 2001), and feelings of uncertainty and insecurity (Nel & Steyn, 1997).

1.4.2 The concept of trauma

Trauma is currently a buzzword in both professional and laypersons’ language and as such its meaning often becomes vague. The term *trauma* literally means “wound” and until the late nineteenth century it referred to physical injuries (Garland, 1998). Popular discourse uses the word *trauma* at times to refer to an *incident* or happening that was traumatic, or to everyday *life stressors* like work pressure. Trauma is also used to refer to the *experience* of an event, for example something which is

experienced as being traumatic. Because the concept of trauma or “wound” refers to some kind of hurt that has been inflicted, the signs or symptoms of injury are often indicative of the trauma experienced. As such, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is often used as being analogous to trauma (with the added implication that no trauma has occurred if no symptoms are found).

For the purpose of this discussion the following two psychodynamic definitions of trauma are deemed important. Garland (1998, p.11) defines trauma as “an event that overwhelms existing defences against anxiety in a form which also provides confirmation of those deepest universal anxieties”. Lindemann (1944) defines psychological trauma as the sudden, uncontrollable disruption of “affiliative bonds” which alludes to the importance of social support. Disruption or loss of social support is intimately associated with the inability to overcome the effects of psychological trauma (Janoff-Bulman, 1985; Pynoos & Eth, 1985). Conversely, many people remain fairly intact after psychological trauma as long as their environment restores a sense of trust and safety. According to Krystal (1978), it is not the intensity of the experience but the *meaning* for the individual that “posed the challenge and generated the affective response” that caused the ultimate post-traumatic adaptation.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

Chapter one provides the rationale behind the study as well as its context.

Chapter two focuses specifically on the South African Police Service (SAPS) as the context in which the research is conducted. It discusses the historical context of the SAPS, the SAPS as organisation, the process of change and transition as well as some consequences of the transition process.

Chapter three focuses on psychoanalytic theory and concepts related to trauma. A brief history of trauma and a discussion of psychoanalytic thinking related to trauma is used both as a point of departure and to contextualise the chapter. The final section of the chapter constitutes a deliberation of key psychoanalytic concepts which are

relevant to the current research.

Chapter four explores and engages with the trauma literature in terms of the main aims of the current study. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section engages with the international literature's construction of trauma in relation to law enforcement and policing agencies. The second section explores the way in which psychology in South Africa has constructed trauma. This is done by reviewing empirical studies published in the South African Journal of Psychology (SAJP) over the last three decades. The recent study on trauma as an organisational health problem in the South African Police Service follows the SAJP overview. The latter study is discussed separately because it is the only study of its kind in the SAPS with specific relevance to this research.

Chapter five discusses methodological considerations and motivates the focus of the study. It outlines the research process by describing, in some detail, the procedures followed in the recruitment of participants, the procedure of data gathering, the analysis of data and reflections on the research process.

In chapter six the results and research findings are presented and discussed. The chapter ends with concluding remarks.