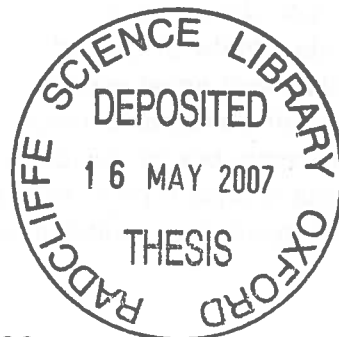


**A qualitative exploration of seeking psychological support in  
the police service: an interpretative phenomenological  
analysis**

Rowan Diamond

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology, validated by the University of  
Oxford

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### **Abstract**

**Aims:** This study aimed to develop an insight into the experience of seeking psychological support in the police service, specifically with a view to identifying the barriers and facilitative processes.

**Method:** Qualitative data were collected from eight police employees, using semi-structured interviews. Data from the interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

**Results:** Five superordinate themes and seventeen subordinate themes emerged from the data. The first superordinate theme ("The culture of the police force: fitting into the collective identity") described how participants fitted into the cultural demands of the job and the teams in which they work. Finding a way to integrate into the organisation whilst attempting to maintain one's individuality, and fitting in to the mixed expectations of the public were also described. The second superordinate theme ("Protecting the self") described ways in which participants protected themselves from emotional harm and the criticism of others. The third superordinate theme ("The acceptability of help") described participants' feelings about the legitimacy of their problems and whether seeking help implied weakness or was a tool by which to become stronger. The fourth superordinate theme ("Accessibility of help") described people's lack of awareness of sources of help, their feelings about the location of welfare officers and how this affected accessibility, and the importance of privacy and confidentiality. The final superordinate theme ("The importance of trust") described how trust was influenced by dual roles, valuing self-promotion over others and shared understanding between the help-seeker and the helper.

**Conclusions:** Multiple barriers to help-seeking were identified, at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and systemic levels. The role of the culture of the police was confirmed as an important factor in the decision about whether or not to seek help, via the formation of a strong identity. This culture influenced the way in which help-seeking was perceived at a systemic level, the most common attitude being that seeking help was weak. Methods through which participants protected themselves, the perceived accessibility of help and the level of trust in one's management and other sources of support also influenced help-seeking. Help-seeking in the police service needs to be encouraged with these issues in mind. Service implications and ideas for future research are presented.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 The Police Service and Thames Valley Police**

The United Kingdom is served by 60 police services. The current study focuses on Thames Valley Police (TVP), which was formed in 1968, amalgamating the police services of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, the City of Oxford and Reading Borough.

### **1.2 Stress and trauma in the police service**

Policing has typically been identified as a high stress occupation (Davey, Obst, & Sheehan, 2001; Collins & Gibbs, 2003) and police officers can be faced with stressful or traumatic incidents on a day to day basis. Indeed, stress-related disorders represent one of the two major causes of long term absence in the police (HMIC, 1997). Within each police role there exist specific stressors, according to the day-to-day activities. Operational police officers (police men and women working "on the beat") may experience traumatic reactions and stress due to exposure to situations such as assaults, shootings, fatal road traffic collisions, suicides, or conveying the news of bereavements (TVP Stress Management Guidelines). Due to this kind of exposure to traumatic events, police officers and staff may be vulnerable to developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Ainsworth, 2002). Anderson, Christenson and Petersen (1991) found that 6% of rescue workers, including police, met diagnostic criteria for PTSD several months after attendance at a fatal rail accident. Mitchell-Gibbs & Mitchell (1996) also found a high level of symptomatology for PTSD in a police population, compared to general population levels.

The police service is made up of a number of different professional roles. In addition to police officers occupying a variety of ranks, there are "police staff" (previously known as "civilian staff"). These are professionals, who are not trained police officers, working within the service, for example administrative and clerical staff, staff working in the photography department and staff working in the control room. Police staff, although not "operationally policing", may face similar situations to their uniformed colleagues (HMIC, 1997). For example, those who work on the front desk in a police station, or those working in the control room may face challenging or traumatic tasks. Police staff may also be vulnerable to PTSD through learning about traumatic events experienced by others. The diagnostic criteria for PTSD in the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) indicate that the disorder can arise vicariously in this way.

In addition to role-specific stressors, all employees of the police service may experience organisational aspects of their job as stressful, such as management systems, management style, the culture of the organisation and relationships with colleagues. Poor supervision, shift work and work overload are the most frequently cited as the major source of stress by police officers. Indeed, some research suggests that these organisational aspects can be perceived as more stressful than operational aspects of the job (Brown & Campbell, 1990; Hart, Wearing & Headley, 1995; Collins & Gibbs, 2003).

### **1.2.1 The impact of stress and trauma**

Stress and traumatic reactions can have long-term effects on the individual and the workforce as a whole. Sickness absence appears to be significantly higher in the police than in other fields of employment (HMIC, 1997) and has a major impact on

resources across the police service. In the TVP approximately 8-9 days per employee are lost due to sickness each year. Between December 2003 and November 2004 there were 485 occurrences of absence from work due to psychological causes. About 58% of these were amongst police staff, compared to 42% amongst police officers (personal communication from Corporate Health and Support Services Department, TVP, January 2005). A sizeable group of the police workforce do not return to work following an illness, or take early retirement (Collins and Gibbs, 2003). Home Office statistics reported by Davey (1996) indicated that nearly 60% of all retirements from the police service are on medical grounds and it appears that 26% of medical retirement in police services is due to psychological ill-health (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 1997).

### **1.3 The provision of psychological support in the Police Service**

The Police Service have recognised the level and effect of stress and trauma in their workforce and provide opportunities for members of the service to obtain help, over and above support via their GPs. As each police service has its own autonomy, the nature of the systems for responding to stress will vary to some degree by local organisation. However, every police service has an Occupational Health Department and also a Welfare Department, which form part of the Corporate Health and Support Service.

Police employees routinely go through occupational health when they begin working with the police. Each individual is informed about sources of help and information about getting help is readily available on the police intranet. Services will vary in what further psychological support they provide. Some services have funds to support specific access to psychiatry, psychology, counsellors and other specialists.

In the Thames Valley Police, individuals can self-refer to both the Welfare and Occupational Health Departments. It is also possible to be referred to occupational health by one's manager. Access to specialist psychiatric and clinical psychology services is available via Welfare and Occupational Health. These services, in turn, allow access to counsellors and other specialist therapists.

Thames Valley Police have a stress and trauma policy (Thames Valley Police, 2004) with a protocol for responding to traumatic incidents. This follows recent NICE guidelines on response to trauma (National Institute for Clinical Excellence, 2005). It involves a group or individual psychological review carried out by Welfare Officers and/or the Force Psychologist and follow-up at one month. Occasionally individual members of the service will be contacted by Welfare Officers, offering support.

### **1.3.1 The uptake of Psychological Support in the Police Service**

Despite the efforts of police services to raise awareness of these services there is a relatively limited uptake (Miller, 1995; Rennie-Peyton, 1996; Ainsworth, 2002). Rennie-Peyton (1996) found that many police officers who seek help for the first time have already been involved in several traumatic incidents for which they did not seek help. Indeed, police officers have a reputation for shunning psychological services (Miller, 1995).

In reporting on the health and trauma support services for New Zealand police officers, Jamieson (1992, cited in Stephens, Long and Miller, 1997) states that

*"It is a fundamental reality that these [services] are only as effective as the willingness of the staff to utilise such services".*

In order to increase the uptake of psychological support it is therefore imperative to develop an understanding of the factors that may facilitate or impede help-seeking, including the willingness of employees to use it.

There may be multiple reasons why members of the police service do not seek psychological help. Both theoretical models of stress and coping as well as empirical evidence about help-seeking provide some suggestions on how to understand this.

#### **1.4 The contribution of theoretical models**

##### **1.4.1 Transactional theory of stress**

The human response to challenging situations has been well-studied. Perhaps the most influential work in this field is represented by Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress (1984). In this theory, stress was described as "a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p21). This model describes the processes and behaviour of an individual experiencing stress.

Two processes of appraisal follow a stressful situation. Primary appraisal refers to an individual's appraisal of the problem. Secondary appraisal refers to the appraisal of the resources available to cope with the threat. When coping resources are perceived to be less than adequate for managing the situation, psychological stress is experienced. In this situation coping has two main functions; firstly to manage or alter the source of stress and secondly to regulate the emotional response.

These have been termed problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, respectively. The problem-focused strategies may include actively seeking ways to solve the problem, whilst emotion-focused strategies may include seeking emotional

support, expression of emotions, self-blame and emotionality (Vingerhoets & Van Heck, 1990). It has been proposed by many researchers that these are employed differently by different individuals and in different circumstances (eg Rosario, Shinn, Morch & Huckabee, 1988; Patterson, 2000). Individuals who are less likely to employ emotion-focused strategies, for example, may be less likely to seek psychological support. Whilst there are several other theoretical models of stress, the transactional theory of stress represents the most useful framework within which to conceive help-seeking.

#### **1.4.2 Illness representations**

The primary appraisal of the problem, as described in the Transactional Theory of Stress, involves making a decision as to whether the situation is or is not a threat. In the case of physical or even psychological health problems, this would involve recognising symptoms and deciding whether or not they represent a threat to oneself. Leventhal & Nerenz (1983, 1985, cited in Shaw, 1999) discussed the process of interpreting information about health threats and constructing an illness representation. This is made up of an individual's appraisal of the identity of an illness, the perceived consequences, the causes, the perception of how the illness will progress, and of whether there is a cure. An individual's perception of any of these aspects may prevent them from seeking help.

#### **1.5 Applying these concepts to help-seeking**

Shaw (1999) incorporates concepts from the theory described above into a model for understanding help-seeking behaviour in people who have urinary incontinence. He states that the experience of the health threat, the subsequent behaviour and the impact

the symptoms have are all based on the individual's appraisal of the situation, which is dependent upon many factors. These factors include an illness representation, an appraisal of coping resources and the perceived severity of the threat. This model acknowledges the importance of the psychosocial context within which the person is operating. This context includes socio-economic factors, social support, social norms, and external factors such as the mass media.

These concepts have largely been applied in health psychology to the study of help-seeking amongst people with physical conditions. Research has also been carried out in the field of help-seeking for more psychologically related problems.

#### **1.5.1 Mediators of help-seeking**

Research has suggested that help-seeking is a complex phenomenon (Galdas, Cheater & Marshall, 2005), which comprises multiple stages. These may include experiencing symptoms, evaluating the significance and consequence of those symptoms, determining whether they need intervention and would benefit from treatment, evaluating the costs and benefits of treatment and choosing a health care provider (Mojtabai, Olfson & Mechanic, 2002). The following mediators of help-seeking have been identified.

##### **i) Identification of need**

A key factor which influences help-seeking behaviour is the perception of need. Many people who have mental health problems also have a belief that their symptoms are temporary or not serious, and therefore don't seek help (eg Mojtabai *et al*, 2002). In an Australian study on reasons for delay in seeking help for mental health problems, Thompson, Hunt and Issakidis (2004) found that a lack of public mental health

literacy contributed to slow problem recognition. Consistent with this finding, Rennie-Peyton (1996) suggests that victims of PTSD do not acknowledge changes in their own behaviour, thus impeding their help-seeking. Putnam & McKibbin (2004) also specify that barriers to help-seeking for depression in the USA include employees' inability to recognise signs and symptoms. Many of these factors depend upon a belief about the issue or illness for which help may be needed. This would appear to support the theoretical framework described above.

The perceived need for help is influenced by the social context in which one is operating (Mojtabai *et al*, 2002). For example, individuals may find services inaccessible, may be embarrassed about seeking help or may fear stigmatisation. Putnam & McKibbin (2004) specify that barriers to help-seeking for depression in the USA include stigma, confidentiality and privacy concerns. The latter issue was also cited as a major factor in a study on help-seeking in alcoholics (Tucker, Vuchinich & Rippens, 2004).

## **ii) Gender**

Another factor mediating an individual's decision about whether or not to seek help may be an individual's gender. There is a growing body of evidence from the USA suggesting that men are less likely than women to seek help for psychological and physical problems (Mojtabai *et al*, 2002; Galdas *et al*, 2005) and men's resistance to help-seeking is well-documented (Rochlen & Hoyer, 2005). If seeking help for psychological reasons is accepted as an emotion-focused coping strategy, then this could be explained by early research suggesting that problem-focused strategies were a more common form of coping behaviour in men, whilst women employed more emotion-focused coping strategies (eg Vingerhoets & Van Heck, 1990).

Rosario *et al* (1988) discussed two theories that could account for gender differences in coping: socialisation theory and role constraint theory. Socialisation theory suggests that women are socialised to express their emotions openly and react passively, whereas men are taught to approach situations in a more active, problem-solving manner. In contrast, role constraint theory argues that gender differences in coping could be explained by gender differences in the likelihood of occupying different social roles. This theory would predict that if individuals occupy the same social role, gender differences in coping styles would disappear. Both of these theories were supported in research conducted by Sigmon, Stanton & Snyder (1995), suggesting that gender differences in coping are much more complex than initially proposed.

Researchers have also suggested that entering therapy is in direct conflict with a culture of masculinity (Rochlen & Hoyer, 2005). It has been identified in previous research that men tend to normalise their symptoms, thereby convincing themselves that they do not need help. This can be combined with feelings of "invincibility" (Galdas *et al*, 2005).

Rochlen & Hoyer warn that the vast majority of the literature that has explained men's underutilisation of services has been written from the perspective of psychologists and researchers, not from the men themselves. More research is required in this area, as well as in help-seeking in general to achieve a greater understanding of the processes involved (Galdas *et al*, 2005).

Thompson *et al* (2004) argue that factors which stop people seeking help and those that finally prompt them to seek help are not two sides of the same coin, thus meriting the study of both. This distinction is similar to that made by Vogel & Wester (2003), who describe "Approach factors", such as one's level of distress and how this

compares to others, and “Avoidance factors” which decrease the chances an individual will seek out services, for example feeling uncomfortable with disclosing information about oneself and the level of perceived risk of seeking help.

### **1.5.2 Factors that may influence help-seeking in the Police Service**

As identified above, policing provides individuals with a very specific array of stressors and perhaps, as a result, possesses its own environment within which to experience these. Factors which may influence help-seeking in the police service must therefore also be considered.

At present the majority of police officers are male, although efforts to increase the number of women in service are being made. This, along with the performance of traditionally “male” tasks, has resulted in the description of the police service as a male-dominated environment (Smith & Gray, 1983). Given the theoretical basis outlined above, the limited uptake of psychological support may represent the relative under-use or even discouragement of emotion-focused coping strategies.

Interestingly, Patterson (2004) found that the higher the educational attainment of police officers, the more officers employed emotion-focused coping and sought social support. The rank of the officer was also directly related to emotion-focused coping. Therefore, police with a lower educational attainment may experience greater barriers to seeking psychological support.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that help-seeking in the police service is avoided because employees may perceive that their chances of promotion will be affected if they seek help (Ainsworth, 2002), that information about them (including that they attended to receive help) will not be kept confidential, and that this information will be added to their record. These concerns were also reflected in the British Armed

Forces (Rona, Jones, French, Hooper & Wessely, 2004). These (sometimes mistaken) perceptions about what will happen if help is sought suggest an implicit assumption that it is viewed as bad or shameful to seek help for psychologically-related issues. This may be indicative of an organisational "culture".

"Culture" has been defined as the learned and shared norms of behaviour (Davey *et al*, 2001). Organisational cultures, and particularly police culture, have been described by many researchers (Brown, 2000). Earlier research by Smith and Gray (1983, cited in Brown, 2000) observed in the London Metropolitan Police "a cult of masculinity" in which feats of drinking, sexual conquests, physical strength and skill are regularly discussed and emphasised. More recent work supports this finding and suggests that the police are characterised by "a sense of mission, social isolation, secrecy, resistance to change and are overtly masculinised" (Brown, 2000, p250).

This masculine culture and "tough guy mentality" has been viewed as an adaptive defence in response to the routine and traumatic incidents to which police workers are exposed (Miller, 1995; Ainsworth, 2002). Coupled with this perspective is a bravado that does not permit the expression of emotions, stress or weakness. These cultural rules are likely to be learnt at an early stage in training, and younger officers "learn to bottle up their fear, sorrow and revulsion and to replace these with a show of bravado and practical competence" (Joyce, 1989). Indeed, emotional control could be seen as part of the officer's occupational identity, as demanded by the informal culture of the police. Brown (2000) describes the strong ethos of controlling emotions and indicates that training instils a sense that in order to do one's duty successfully one must suppress affect. This is perhaps the reason that Evans, Coman and Stanley (1992) describe a tendency for officers to show little caring or respect for others' feelings.

This is consistent with the finding that displays of emotions in British and Australian police officers were perceived as personally weak (Stephens *et al*, 1997). Mitchell-Gibbs and Mitchell (1996) found that British officers may hold negative attitudes towards emotional expression, which may prevent them from confiding in colleagues. Indeed, Stephens and colleagues (1997) state that the sharing of emotional experiences is an aspect of support that is not always found in police culture. These attitudes can hinder the therapeutic responses necessary to recover from exposure to traumatic events (Mitchell-Gibbs and Mitchell, 1996; Stephens *et al*, 1997). Negative attitudes to emotional expression were also associated with high scores of psychological distress and traumatic symptomatology (Mitchell-Gibbs and Mitchell, 1996). Indeed, it is well-documented that social support can be a protective factor against developing PTSD symptoms (Stephens *et al*, 1997).

The attitudes surrounding the expression of emotions, described above, may also be internalised and individuals may begin to believe themselves to be cowards or weak if they seek help (Miller, 1995). This leads to the expectation that therapy will be a humiliating experience.

The informal culture widely recognised in the past literature contrasts with the formal organisational culture of the police. Brown (2000) asserts that on the one hand police are supposed to play down the vicissitudes of their job and absorb any distress themselves, whilst on the other hand they are recognised as needing special treatment because policing is said to be amongst the most stressful occupations. The drive by the organisation to encourage help-seeking may have begun to influence the informal culture, however, and there is increasing recognition amongst younger officers that seeking help for personal stress is important and acceptable (personal communication, 2005).

Informal culture may currently remain a strong barrier to seeking help in the police service. However, the possibility of other existing barriers to help-seeking behaviour, which may be more powerful, has not yet been explored. In particular, the professional identity of individuals in the police service, in a strong, protective and helping role may make help-seeking difficult, as it may be seen as antithetical to such a role.

Working for the police can be stressful and whilst psychological support is provided, relatively few take it up. Models and existing literature suggest potential reasons for this, including the role of a “culture” in the police. However, it is clear that there is a limited understanding of help-seeking in the police.

### **1.6 Exploring experiences – methodological considerations**

Some understanding of help-seeking in the police has been gained through anecdotal evidence and some observational studies have also contributed to the knowledge base. In addition, questionnaire/survey-based research has provided very important insights into related areas such as stress in the police. However, questionnaires can often restrict participants’ answers to the options provided, thereby limiting the scope of studies somewhat.

The further use of a qualitative methodology focused specifically on seeking help in the police service can contribute to existing literature by providing a rich, descriptive account of the phenomenon (Smith, 2003), thereby deepening the understanding of the process and adding a new dimension to its study.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach involving detailed examination of participants’ “lifeworlds”. As such it is concerned with the individual’s personal experience, perceptions and understanding of a phenomenon and

the meaning they assign to this experience. In addition to this, IPA acknowledges the role of the researcher's own conceptions, which are required in order to make sense of the participants' personal world. Through a process of interpretative activity on behalf of the researcher, he or she gains an understanding of both the idiosyncratic and culturally constructed aspects of a person's world.

Through the phenomenological and interpretative aspects of IPA it can reveal unanticipated phenomena and constructs. This data-driven (as opposed to theory-driven) stance makes this exploratory methodology flexible and, it is hoped, freer from pre-determined notions that may accompany other types of research.

The potential for generating new constructs and theoretical understanding is particularly relevant to an area such as help-seeking, where there are relatively few theory-driven models.

The use of a flexible interview with limited structure, as employed by IPA, may facilitate gathering information from this professional group, as it has been found that gaining access to police officers' thoughts and feelings has been difficult in previous research (Walker, 1997). IPA is also particularly well-suited to this study because of its capacity to investigate human experiences within a cultural context.

### **1.7 Clinical relevance**

Given the recent attention in the police service to stress and trauma in their employees, and the high importance attached to the organisation's responsibility for their employees, it is particularly important to find out how the opportunities for help could be more accessible. Through gaining a rich understanding of the experience of seeking help, the organisation could potentially begin to address barriers and increase facilitating factors, thereby encouraging help-seeking. In turn, this could lead to

reduced personal distress and therefore a reduction in the numbers of police taking time off work or retiring early due to psychologically-related illness and distress.

### **1.8 Aims and Research questions**

The aim of this study is to provide an insight into how the social and cultural world of the police service is experienced and in particular, how this impacts upon help-seeking. Through the use of a flexible data collection technique and analysis using IPA, it is hoped that new information will emerge about the barriers and facilitators to seeking psychological support. To this end, the following research questions were identified:

1. How do police men and women cope with distressing experiences?
2. How do police men and women experience seeking psychological help or support via work?
3. How does help-seeking relate to professional identity?
4. What barriers are experienced by police men and women who seek psychological support at work?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Design**

A small sample, cross-sectional qualitative design was used, employing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

### **2.2 Participants**

IPA studies aim to find a closely defined group through the process of purposive sampling. This is necessary in order to ensure the research question is significant for each participant (Smith and Osborn, 2003). The study aimed to recruit at least eight participants.

Participants were employees of the Thames Valley Police of any rank or location who had received psychological help or support from a Welfare Officer within the service. Individuals were excluded from the study if they could not use the English language in a conversational style, if they were currently receiving therapy or psychological support, if they were probationers (police in their first two years of their career) or if they were members of the Special Constabulary ("Specials"). In order to maintain homogeneity across the sample, police staff in purely administrative posts that are not specific to police work, for example personal assistants, secretaries or Personnel Officers, were also excluded, as their experiences would not have been sufficiently comparable to that of police officers.

## **2.3 Procedure**

### **2.3.1 Recruitment of participants**

A series of meetings between senior Welfare Officers, the researcher and the researcher's supervisor were executed during the design and early implementation phase of the research. During these meetings the research was explained and discussed. It was decided that all potential participants would be contacted first through the Welfare Department. Welfare Officers who had not been present at the meetings were briefed about the research by the senior members.

Police employees who met the inclusion criteria were contacted by the Welfare Officer with whom they had had contact. Initial contact was made by telephone and the study was explained. If they were interested in taking part, and consented to be contacted by the researcher, they received a letter from the Welfare Officer informing them that they would be contacted by the researcher.

A list of thirteen names and contact details were then passed to the researcher and initial contact was made with the first ten people on the list by telephone. Following the provision of verbal information about the research, those who remained interested and fulfilled inclusion criteria were sent an information sheet (to an address of their choice) and were given a week to read it and decide whether they would like to participate. Further telephone contact was made and interviews were arranged with those who were interested/available to participate. If potential participants were not willing or available to participate, the next individual on the list was contacted.

### **2.3.2 Construction of the interview schedule**

Qualitative data can be collected in a number of ways but the semi-structured interview has been identified as the exemplary method for IPA studies (Smith &

Osborn, 2003). This is because it allows a flexible collection of data, where interesting and important areas, perhaps unexpected to the researcher, can be followed up.

An interview schedule was developed based on guidelines provided by Smith (1995) and following consultation with staff involved in the provision of Welfare support. Two police officers from a different police service who were personally connected to the researcher were consulted and provided feedback from the perspective of an interviewee. A pilot interview was conducted with one. Following these consultations and supervision with the study supervisor and an experienced IPA researcher, some minor changes were made to the interview schedule (Appendix 1).

Eight areas of questioning were identified on the interview schedule, each with an open-ended question. Additional prompts were listed under each area of interest in order to allow as much material as possible to be explored, and to ensure that each research question was explored fully.

Engagement in the interview was also facilitated by beginning with a straightforward, non-threatening question. A question designed to evoke a positive response was placed at the end of interviews in order to disperse any negative feelings that may have been generated by engaging in the interview. With the exception of these two questions, other areas of interest could be covered in any order, allowing flexibility and informality.

### **2.3.3 Interviews**

Participants were given a choice of places to be interviewed. Three opted to be interviewed at the Welfare Department, two at their place of work, two at home, and one in a neutral location. At the start of each interview the procedure was thoroughly

explained and there was an opportunity for participants to ask questions. If the participant wished to continue, a consent form (Appendix 3) and demographics questionnaire were completed.

As far as possible, the interview schedule was memorised by the researcher in order that it need not be referred to constantly. Following supervisory feedback on the pilot interview, the researcher adapted her style so that it was more flexible and allowed the participants a stronger role in determining how the interview proceeded. The researcher's aim was to establish rapport and trust with the interviewee whilst saying as little as possible, thereby allowing the interviewee to give novel insights into the area of interest.

As it has been found that gaining access to police officers' thoughts and feelings has been difficult in previous research (Walker, 1997) the researcher was prepared to offer prompts. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses through the use of neutral probes such as "can you tell me more about that?". Interviews lasted between 50 and 100 minutes. At the end of the interview participants were given the opportunity to debrief and ask questions. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim exclusively by the researcher.

#### **2.3.4. Data analysis**

Transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is concerned with learning something about the participants' psychological world and the meanings they ascribe to experiences they have had. One premise of IPA is that these meanings are not transparently available and therefore IPA requires a sustained engagement with the data. Throughout this process of engagement the researcher

strives to make sense of the participants' "sense-making", which inevitably involves a process of interpretation by the researcher (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

IPA is usually conducted using an idiographic approach, beginning with particular examples and slowly working up to more general categorization (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999).

#### **2.3.4.1 Initial coding**

Following transcription, the first interview was read and re-read to facilitate the researcher's familiarity with it. The left-hand margin of the transcript was used to make a note of what was interesting or significant about what the participant said. These comments comprised summaries of the text, associations or connections, and some initial interpretations. Comments on the use of language or contradictions in what a participant said were also noted.

#### **2.3.4.2 Identifying themes**

When this had been completed, the researcher returned to the beginning again and the right-hand margin was used to document emerging themes. The notes in the left-hand column and the data themselves were transformed into concise phrases, reaching a higher level of abstraction. This involved considering how the data related to psychological theory and making inferences about the nature and meaning of the experiences described. When a theme emerged for a second time, the same title was used to describe it (Annexe 1).

The emergent themes from the right-hand margin were listed with references to the text and connections between them were sought. Themes that clustered formed initial

superordinate concepts. In order to facilitate the clustering of themes, the researcher wrote down and cut up the list of themes and was able to reorganise clusters in explorative ways. Themes and theme clusters were checked against the transcripts to make sure they were representative.

These processes were then repeated for each transcript in turn.

#### **2.3.4.3 Analysing shared themes**

When this process was finished for each transcript, accounts from all participants were considered collectively. Themes were selected that could reflect shared experiences or meanings across participants, but also areas of divergence. During this process, some themes emerging from individuals' accounts were discarded, and some new ones generated. Eventually an inclusive list of themes (superordinate and subordinate) representing the experience of the group as a whole was generated. During this process and upon completion of it, transcripts were re-examined to check that interpretations and themes fitted the primary source material.

Finally a master table of shared themes was produced, comprising superordinate themes, subordinate themes and illustrative examples from the participants' accounts. This resulted in a final list of themes described in the results section.

#### **2.4 Credibility checks**

Stiles (1993) provides a set of guidelines for reviewing the quality of qualitative research. In order to enhance the credibility and rigour of this study the following guidelines were attended to.

#### **2.4.1 Reflexivity: researcher's perspective**

Good practice in qualitative research recommends disclosure by the investigator of his/her values and the experience he/she brings to the research (Stiles, 1993). This disclosure can help readers infer the meaning of the data to the researcher. The acknowledgement of one's personal experience may help the researcher eliminate any biases in the analysis.

The researcher is a 28 year old female trainee clinical psychologist approaching the end of the training course in England. Her primary therapeutic model used in training had been Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, although she had also used other therapeutic models. Prior to the current study, the researcher's knowledge and experience of the police service was minimal although she had an interest in the psychological needs of individuals in organisations where it is stereotypically "difficult" to seek help. The researcher had opted to undertake placements in a medium secure unit and in an Adult Mental Health setting where a number of patients with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder were treated.

The project supervisor worked in a consultative role for the police service and provided therapeutic input to some police employees. In addition to the information gained through supervision, the researcher's knowledge and understanding of working for the police and seeking psychological support in such an organisation was gathered through literature and discussion with other providers of help.

Supervision and meetings of an IPA group consisting of colleagues were used to highlight the researcher's biases. Reflections on the process of the research were noted in a reflective diary (extract in Annexe 2) and were revisited in order to remind the researcher of her experiences and biases.

#### **2.4.2 Grounding in examples**

In qualitative research the use of examples from the raw data enables researchers and their readers to link abstract interpretations with more concrete observations (Stiles, 1993). This increases the transparency of the process and enables the reader to consider their own alternative conceptualisations. Three psychologists (one with significant experience in IPA) and one lay person provided opinions on whether quotations fitted the interpretative sense the researcher had made of the material. The coherence of the narrative and the appropriate use of excerpts to explain the themes in the write up were enhanced through supervisory feedback.

#### **2.4.3 Reviewing the data with an additional auditor**

Smith and colleagues (1999) recommend discussing emerging analytic ideas with another researcher, as verbally articulating ideas about the data can facilitate the identification of relationships between themes. The researcher met with both her supervisors in order to discuss emerging themes and how these were eventually organised into an overarching table of themes. This process provided an audit of the analytic process, ensuring that themes were supported in the data and provided a coherent account of what had been described. One supervisor was a recently qualified clinical psychologist, experienced in IPA and employed as a research tutor on the training course. The other was a consultant psychologist experienced in working with the police (see 2.4.1).

Further credibility checks were carried out through meetings with a fellow trainee clinical psychologist researcher also engaged in IPA. This trainee psychologist was also in her final year and had also been trained in cognitive behavioural therapy as her

primary therapeutic model, although she had a special interest in systemic therapy.

Her knowledge of the police service did not extend beyond that of a lay person.

Over the course of four meetings, emerging themes were described in detail, using quotations from the transcripts. These themes and what the researcher brought to them were discussed, enabling the researcher to view the results and analysis from a broader perspective.

## **2.5. Ethical considerations**

The research proposal for this study was approved by the Thames Valley Police through presentation and agreement by management. In addition it was approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) and by the Research Sub-Committee of the University of Oxford Doctoral Course in Clinical Psychology (see Appendix 2 for letter). Management approval and indemnity was obtained from Oxfordshire Mental Healthcare NHS Trust.

### **2.5.1 Confidentiality and anonymity**

Each participant was assigned an identification number, the key to which was only accessible to the researcher. All transcripts were anonymised and identifying information removed from the transcripts used in the write up.

All tapes are to be kept in a locked cabinet at the Welfare Department. Tapes and transcripts will be stored safely for a minimum of five years following completion of the research (as per the British Psychological Society data storage policy).

The choice of locations for participant interviews allowed respondents to participate within an anonymous environment.

### **2.5.2 Informed consent**

Participants received detailed verbal and written information (Appendix 3) from the researcher and the Welfare Department before they agreed to meet for an interview. Upon meeting for the interview, information was provided again and there was an opportunity for concerns or questions to be raised. Each participant signed a consent form (Appendix 4) which explained each aspect the participant was consenting to, including having read the information sheet, voluntary participation, to take part in the study, to be audio-taped and for non-identifying quotations to be used in reports or publications. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

One participant specifically asked to see the extracts from her transcript that would be used in the write up. Two of the quotations were modified in light of this process.

### **2.5.3 Distress**

It was identified that some participants could find it distressing to discuss their experiences. In the event of this they were offered the opportunity to take a break or terminate the interview. If a participant felt they needed follow-up support, this was available through the Welfare Department with the permission of the individual concerned. Should a participant have revealed they were experiencing significant psychological distress, or they did not wish to have contact with the Welfare Department, contact (with the participant's knowledge) would have been made with their GP in order to enable access to other services.

This procedure was followed during one interview where a participant became distressed. She subsequently obtained follow-up support from the Welfare Department.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Situating the sample**

Thirteen people agreed to be contacted by the researcher after discussing the research with a Welfare Officer. Of these, two did not meet inclusion criteria, and it was inconvenient timing for a further two. Nine people were interviewed, one of whom did not fully meet inclusion criteria, although this was not clear until the interview began. The sample therefore consisted of eight participants.

The participants were aged between 27 and 48 with an average age of 40. There were three men and five women. All of the participants except for one were police officers. The average length of service was 16 years. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, no more information will be provided on them.

#### **3.2 Qualitative results**

Five superordinate themes were identified from the data, with seventeen subordinate themes. These are represented in table 1.

**Table 1: Table to show superordinate themes, subordinate themes and sub themes.**

| Superordinate themes                                                           | Subordinate themes                      | Sub themes                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>The culture of the police service: fitting into the collective identity</b> | Demands of the job                      | Problem solving                                                                       |
|                                                                                |                                         | Getting on and doing it                                                               |
|                                                                                |                                         | Being tough                                                                           |
|                                                                                |                                         | Always being on duty                                                                  |
|                                                                                | Team culture                            | Sense of team<br>Common attitudes                                                     |
|                                                                                | The challenge of individuation          | Being an individual as distinct from the organisation<br>Recognising one's personhood |
|                                                                                | Public perception                       |                                                                                       |
| <b>Protecting the self</b>                                                     | Using humour                            |                                                                                       |
|                                                                                | Wearing masks                           |                                                                                       |
|                                                                                | Bottling it up                          |                                                                                       |
|                                                                                | Denial of problems                      |                                                                                       |
|                                                                                | Detachment from emotions                |                                                                                       |
| <b>Acceptability of help</b>                                                   | Legitimacy of problems                  |                                                                                       |
|                                                                                | Seeking help – weak versus strong       |                                                                                       |
| <b>Accessibility of help</b>                                                   | Lack of awareness of support structures |                                                                                       |
|                                                                                | Location of welfare officers            |                                                                                       |
|                                                                                | Privacy and confidentiality             |                                                                                       |
| <b>Importance of trust</b>                                                     | Dual roles                              | Managers                                                                              |
|                                                                                |                                         | Welfare                                                                               |
|                                                                                | Valuing self-promotion over others      |                                                                                       |
|                                                                                | The importance of experience            |                                                                                       |

### **3.2.1. Superordinate theme 1: The culture of the police service: fitting into the collective identity**

This superordinate theme is made up of participants' views about their identity as employees of the police service. It gives a sense of what participants feel they are and should be, in relation to their chosen profession. The first subordinate theme describes the demands of the job, which require fitting into an established way of doing things. The second subordinate theme relates to the sense of identity provided by the team culture and the solidarity which is felt when an individual "fits in". The third subordinate theme describes the difficulty of fitting in with a culture or collective identity, whilst maintaining one's individuality. The final subordinate theme relates to the participants' struggle to fit into a confusing identity which is imposed upon them by the public; on the one hand, feeling depended upon, whilst on the other, feeling disliked.

#### **3.2.1.1 Subordinate theme A: The demands of the job**

The job of police officers is described as a problem-solving one, where individuals have to actively do things, whilst remaining tough. A further demand of the job which requires some fitting in to involves being on duty beyond one's duty hours. This subordinate theme is further divided into four subthemes, which will be discussed in turn.

##### **3.2.1.1.1 Problem-solving**

Participants strongly identified a sense of the type of work that constituted "real policing" and the attitude with which this work should be carried out. A clear defining feature of a police officer's job (as defined by both police officers and the member of

police staff) was seen as problem-solving and participants framed day to day difficulties as problems to be solved, illustrated below by Harry<sup>1</sup>.

*"Thames Valley Police is understaffed, actually we are under-funded, we don't have the right kit. So you're going out there knowing that you haven't got everything that you'd like so you're knowing that you're going out there to solve problems... the more problems that come along, the more pressure that you are under to try and solve the problems because actually that's your job, that's what you're employed to do" (P1, 552)*

This professional identity as problem-solvers relates to a sense of "invincibility" amongst police officers, as described by Graham:

*"And I think a lot of police men, and the women, come in and because they're dealing with society's problems, they think they're infallible and they think they won't have problems themselves, because they're fixing everybody else's problems, and if they can fix everybody else's problems then anything in their own personal life is also easy to fix, you know?" (P7, 523)*

#### **3.2.1.1.2 Getting on and doing it**

The problem-solving attitude described is strongly linked to a "can do" attitude, as described by Matilda below.

*"At the end, the world, which assumes that we can do everything, anything, right now... the can do people like myself believe we should therefore do those things" (P3, 535)*

This attitude is also expressed as a desire to get on and do things, and was shared by several participants. Matthew gave an example:

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers following participants' quotations indicate the participant number and the line number on which their quotation started. [Square brackets] indicate an action or the researcher's comments during a passage and ... indicates a pause or a redirection in the flow of a sentence.

*"I will take on the most boring mundane jobs, knowing that people have got to do it, knowing that I'll do it quicker than them because they'll make a song and dance about it" (P 2, 1186)*

The drive to achieve things quickly and efficiently may represent not only one's own motivation but also the expectations of others, contributing to the police culture. Getting on and doing things was linked to doing what is expected, as described by Matilda:

*"I think the expected is do something. That's a trap we can fall into as police officers, actually. Generally speaking that's probably the thing that underpins it all. People expect you to do something" (P3, 882)*

The perceived expectations of the police are further discussed in 3.2.1.4.

#### **3.2.1.1.3 Being tough**

The sense that police are people who solve problems and tackle a situation head on appeared to be related to an attitude of toughness. The environment is one in which being strong and tough is normal and expected and appears to lead people to the assumption that police "should cope". This was widely represented in participants' accounts and was illustrated by Matilda:

*"Police are big strong rufty, toughy things! People, men, female, whatever... "well, yeah, you know, I know it's there [Welfare Department] but I'm a copper, it's alright"" (P3, 521)*

Some participants conveyed the sense that their "tough" identity was necessary in order to be a police officer and perhaps as such, was reinforced by the type of work they did. For example, Linda described the necessity of being strong:

*"But certainly there is a degree of people within the police force that are very strong-minded and very sort of, you know, and I guess it's the job we do on a daily basis, you know, we haven't got time for people to stand there and argue in a situation, and we are used to going in and taking over because that's what we do, anyway" (P8, 566)*

Matilda suggested that this aspect of their identity develops over time:

*"When they get the hang of it, they're old sweats at 8 months, you know, "come on, seen the world, can do it all", so by the time it's two years, they've walked round the world, they know exactly what they're doing and they're invincible" (P3, 990)*

During the process of developing the "tough" identity, police employees may also "become different" to others. For example, Alison stated that *"we do think differently"* in relation to the way that police conduct themselves and cope with certain aspects of their jobs. It is suggested by several participants that this "difference" may in fact be shared with other uniformed organisations, whose employees also have to cope with some challenging situations. For example, Alison recognised a similar way of thinking in an ambulance man and Graham recognised it in the army:

*"I always think that the police and the army are very, very similar disciplined... with the uniform and the job that they do... It's seen as "I can't have this problem in my own personal life and do this job" and they try and separate it. You can't. You can't separate your personal life from your job" (P7, 736)*

#### **3.2.1.1.4 Always on duty**

Another demanding aspect of being a police employee that was raised by participants was the construction of boundaries between their home life and work life. Some participants, for example Anna, described how they have learnt to impose boundaries between a work and home life:

*"My phone goes back on in the morning, when I literally am leaving home to come back to work, umm, and I don't think about it. I used to lay awake at night worrying about court cases and the fact that I'd gone home and I hadn't done this and I hadn't done that, and now if I haven't done it, I haven't done it, you know" (P4, 498)*

Anna described that this ability to impose boundaries was something that she had learnt over time. Others described how work can permeate one's personal life. This, as described by Alison, can lead to a sense that working for the police is not just a job, but is more a way of life:

*"So you do find that work does sort of spill over into your personal life just... you know, by being there for your colleagues, and everything like that. It's not a 9-5 or whatever, it really does... it's a cliché, you know... it isn't just a job, it is a way of life to a certain extent" (P6, 305)*

This was further illustrated by Matilda. Despite a desire to leave the job behind at the end of the day and become a member of the public, police officers may find themselves "on duty" again with little choice.

*"Remember when I leave here tonight, I'm a member of the public driving home. Who happens to be a police officer. It can happen in front of my eyes, suddenly I'm that police officer again, dealing with that accident, dealing with that issue. And to a member of the public, it was just handy there was a police officer coming by. To this police officer it might be a total "ahh, typical, absolutely bloomin' typical, all I want to do is go home". But you don't have a choice. It's very difficult to have a choice" (P3, 1161)*

This sense of ongoing duty was also illustrated by Graham, who described being asked for advice from friends and neighbours who know he is a policeman.

### 3.2.1.2 Subordinate theme B: Team culture

The strong sense of team experienced by participants contributes to the construction of a professional identity and presents another area into which participants must fit. The collective identity is facilitated by common attitudes amongst colleagues. This subordinate theme is further divided into two subthemes, which will be discussed in turn.

#### 3.2.1.2.1 Sense of team

Participants' accounts suggested a culture of cohesiveness and team. The sense of closeness within a team is described by Harry, when he compared it to the closeness in a family:

*"When I was umm a shift officer, then the strength and bonding of the team... you are probably closer to the people you work with than you are to your immediate family. And it really is... you are living hand in glove" (P1, 461)*

This cohesiveness can facilitate a strongly supportive environment where problems can be shared and people look after one another, as illustrated by Alison:

*"It's just like a family environment, and everyone does just stick together and supports each other and... if anyone's looking a bit down, you know that there's someone around who'll go "are you alright?", do you know what I mean? It's nice". (P6, 152)*

However, in addition to the closeness and supportiveness of the team, the drawbacks of this culture were also raised, for example the occasional backstabbing, gossip and office politics.

#### **3.2.1.2.2 Common attitudes**

The team culture and cohesiveness is facilitated by shared beliefs and attitudes amongst police employees. These include not only beliefs and attitudes adopted as a result of fitting in and being a part of the culture, but also shared beliefs and attitudes that were in place before their employment with the police began. Common feelings of wanting to make a difference, having a community spirit and being a people person were reported as commonly shared characteristics, as illustrated by Graham:

*"there's a basic common thread that people have this wanting to help, umm, community spirit type thing... there's probably quite a lot of reasons why people join but I would think the common thread would be helping your community" (P7, 24)*

#### **3.2.1.3 Subordinate theme C: The challenge of individuation**

Fitting in to the police service involves a conflict between retaining one's own identity and being subsumed by the organisational culture. This subordinate theme is further divided into two subthemes, which will be discussed in turn.

##### **3.2.1.3.1 Being an individual as distinct from the organisation**

One aspect of fitting in with the professional identity of a police employee was retaining one's individuality in the face of a large organisation or service. Participants described a phenomenon whereby if employees of the police were told to do something, they did it, as Anna illustrated:

*"That was what the guidelines said I had to do, and so I did it" (P4, 999)*

However, when orders from management were received that clashed with what an individual believed, this put the individual in a difficult position, as illustrated by Matthew:

*"My problem is because of being uniformed and disciplined, if the governor said "OK we'll do this, but it will take a little while" I accepted it, rather than saying "actually, no, sir, that will not do", which is perhaps what I should've done" (P2, 985)*

Matthew also highlighted the power of an organisation where uniform and discipline, or following orders are essential.

In addition to the sense that being part of an organisation could impose sometimes unwelcome decisions on one's professional duties, participants also recognised the impact of being in an organisation upon the way police employees can speak. Matthew described this restriction:

*"Everyone's running in fear. You can not actually pass an opinion about certain things that you were able to before without being racist, without being anti-religious or anything else, but there are certain opinions you can not pass. If I don't like somebody I say "I don't like that bloke over there". Well you can't say that because he's gay. No, actually I don't like the person. I've never seen him at it in his bedroom, I just don't like the person. I have the right to say that. Or do I anymore?" (P2, 717)*

This conveys a sense that one can be defined by virtue of being in the police service, at least when at work. However, this sense is also carried over into one's personal life, too. Linda described how people she meets outside of work can sometimes make assumptions about her and change their opinion about her when she tells them that she works for the police. This can lead to a sense that her personal identity is subsumed by the organisation.

*"Well, hang on, I haven't changed just because, you know, I do it as a job, you know, it's not who I am it's just what I do for a living and that's it" and then people can't sort of decode... you know, between the two parts" (P8, 100)*

### 3.2.1.3.2 Recognising one's personhood

Another aspect of fitting into the organisation whilst preserving one's individuality relates to retaining one's sense of being human. Matilda recognised that this was a challenge in the face of the public's perception, because police officers are seen as different to others and indeed, not seen by some as human beings. She described how this affects the way that they are treated:

*"People think of it's OK for us to be abused. You know, it's alright to swear or kick or something like that...well, actually, I'm still a person under a polycotton shirt. Inside my body armour, I'm still a person. Why should it be OK?" (P3, 267)*

The desire to be seen as a "human" by the public is interesting, as participants described how difficult it is to see oneself as human, sometimes. Anna reflected the shared view that police employees are human and have normal lives.

*"Umm, and police officers aren't exempt, because that's the other thing, is, you know, like I said to you before we are human, we are human beings. We have normal lives, and this is a job, you know, that's at the end of the day, that's what it is" (P4, 1053)*

However, Matilda described how she has become more comfortable with the fact that she wears a "mask" that covers her humanity (see superordinate theme 2: protecting the self for further discussion):

*"What I think is over a period of time perhaps I have been less umm... feeling less robust, less invincible. Perhaps I've become more comfortable with the fact that over a period of time I've got a mask. I've got the exterior persona of a police officer. Inside I am a person" (P3, 965)*

There was a sense from some accounts that this realisation that one is a human with human limitations can come as a surprise.

#### 3.2.1.4 Subordinate theme D: Fitting in with the public's perception

This subordinate theme describes the struggle to fit into or around the public's perception of the police. Whilst their identity as police employees may make them feel depended upon, they may struggle to incorporate into their identity the perception that they are disliked by some in society.

Many participants seemed to share a powerful belief that their job was to provide a service to the community or the "public". However, this was sometimes perceived as difficult given the anti-police sentiment described below by Linda:

*"I was working at a bar at the time and I just went in for some extra money ... and a lot of people that came into the bar wouldn't talk to me afterwards, because they obviously... because you're going to be a "pig" or whatever, and you're a rozzar, or a pig or, you know, how could you switch to the police? And so a lot of people who have very anti-police... didn't want to know, so you do lose a level of acquaintances. Very quickly. And it's an awful lot of anti...you know, it's just their attitude towards police, so... very mixed. A lot of people didn't want to know. And now, if I go out socially and I don't know people, I won't say what I do for a living...because of the reaction you get" (P8, 83)*

Matilda described a feeling that although police were sometimes seen as unable to do the right thing, they are still relied and depended upon.

*"What that means is when you're at your lowest, when you're at your most desperate, you'll call on me, because you need help now. But if I give you a parking ticket, I am the enemy. And that's a frustration in as much as I feel I can never be... in the whole public's eyes, I will never be right. I will always be wrong, despite the fact... the best part, if you like, is that they'll still rely on you. If we lose that reliance, then we've*

*actually lost a thread of what policing actually is in the UK, but that's frustration in its own right. You can be hated almost on a daily basis, but still needed" (P3, 277)*

Many participants described the process of managing the public's perception of the police, and one participant described how winning over the public's trust and changing their views of the police could be the most rewarding aspect of policing.

### **3.2.2. Superordinate theme 2: Protecting the self**

The second superordinate theme describes the ways in which participants protected themselves both from being badly affected by a disturbing task, and also to some extent, from the criticism of others. Subordinate themes relate to the use of humour, wearing masks, bottling it up, denial and detachment.

Participants frequently described having to carry out very emotionally challenging tasks, for example, body recovery, attending fatal road traffic accidents, suicides and having to deliver a death message to a family whose loved one had been killed. This was combined with everyday events which were stressful such as feeling overworked and having to manage petty office politics. They described a variety of ways of coping with these events, which are summarised in this theme.

#### **3.2.2.1 Subordinate theme A: Using humour**

One way in which participants protected themselves from difficult situations was the use of humour. Alison described searching for something funny in an awful situation, as a way of making it less terrible.

*"Afterwards, you know, often the way of dealing with it is to try and sort of animate it, or umm, you know, you turn it into a joke, you know, the fact that this old lady that you found, basically was found dead on the toilet, and it's absolutely awful, you know*

*what I mean, and you know, you're very compassionate with the family, but afterwards you have a ... you try and find something funny about it. Do you know what I mean? And it just takes away the... how awful it is, that you've just been dealing with this family that have been so upset and devastated by the loss of their grandmother, or whatever"* (P6, 379)

Linda described how humour can also provide a necessary sense of release after a difficult situation.

*"And there's almost a sort of like "phew" and that's quite often how it comes out, or you know, from that side of things, so I know quite often we'll ... They'll be something said and ... you know, it's not supposed to be offensive by any means, it's just how else do people cope with such horrendous stuff that we're doing?"* (P8, 268)

Others found that humour was necessary in order to dehumanise a terrible job they were doing, which would otherwise be impossible. This is illustrated by Harry:

*"Umm, it's a way of covering up the grim facts. I'm not sure it's black... I'm not sure if it's... I'm not sure whether there's anything humorous in it. But it's a way of actually de-humanising, de-personalising what it is you're actually having to do. Because if you had to actually think about that as a living, breathing human being you couldn't finish a job... You just couldn't finish your job."* (P1, 926)

In addition to using humour as an immediate way of coping with a challenging situation, participants also reported that another sort of humour is employed in the police environment. This involves a practical joking side to the police described by Anna below:

*"You're always going to get the bravado and the mickey-taking. You're going to get that wherever you are. It is the culture. I mean, you're working with a load of jokers. I mean, all that they do all the time is joke and mess about and whatever"* (P4, 1037)

She went on to suggest that this joking can be a façade and in fact, those that are joking and messing about are sometimes the ones that are in most need of help:

*"But the unfortunate thing is, it's normally somebody that hides behind the joker, being the... you know, the centre of attention or you know ...They're normally the ones that have got the problems and they're insecure. You know, and you probably find that they hide behind that" (P4, 1042)*

### 3.2.2.2 Wearing masks

This subordinate theme describes a method of protecting the self through projecting an image to the world, which may contrast with one's real feelings. This may serve to protect one from other's criticism and may also have a role in protecting against getting too emotionally involved in situations. A further function may be to prevent oneself from recognising one's own emotions.

Harry described how the ability to feel one thing yet appear another is an essential skill which is taught during training.

*"You are taught to be an actor as a police officer. A lot of the training now is role play. And you are taught to be an actor. And you've got to be" (P1, 822)*

He suggested that this may be to do with feeling as though one is on display:

*"As soon as you put a tall hat on and you walk down by yourself down the High Street, you think that everybody in the world is looking at you. And they're not. You are as invisible as wallpaper. Um, but that doesn't help the feeling that everybody is actually out there looking at you ... so you end up putting on this, this public face. And when you go to court and you give evidence, you end up putting on this public, detached, unemotional face" (P1, 789)*

This was also identified by Harry as a necessary skill when dealing with certain types of people encountered in the job:

*"How adept police officers are, myself being at the top of the list, at putting this wall up. This public façade of when you're out dealing with drunks on the street, you can't show them fear. Ur, when you're out dealing with this little old lady who says she's been robbed, you've got to show empathy and concern and you are very, very good at acting. At um, putting up this false front, no matter how you're feeling personally"* (P1, 776)

This ability to act is not only applicable to situations in which police employees are dealing with the public. It was also identified as something which occurs inside the police station with one's own team mates or colleagues, as illustrated by Matilda.

*"Certainly for people who are big in themselves, big masks, big bravado, big "I am", actually they feel like a swidged jelly baby inside and they've got to get out of their shell, but they can't. To be able to believe and trust somebody will accept them as they are is mammoth for some people"* (P3, 738)

Participants indicated that the image of oneself being projected can almost be like a machine as opposed to a human. Matilda acknowledged that although she has an exterior persona as a police officer, this contrasts with what she is inside, which is human. She stated that:

*"That creates conflict in its own right, but it does ... mean I'm allowed to act like a person but nobody else has to know. No one has to know I've sought help. I think there's a big conflict with a lot of people who can't unhitch themselves from their masks"* (P3, 968)

Several participants described the way in which they were perceived by others in their team, through their projected image. Two participants said that they were viewed by

others as having a strong enough personality to be able to stand up to a difficult boss, even though in reality they struggled. Similarly, Matthew described the team's surprise that he should be the one to have problems.

*"Initially it was a big shock to people, they didn't expect it. I was always the one 'Come on, bring it on'" (P2, 33)*

The use of masks, which appears to be useful and protective in the day to day operation of one's job, can also get carried over into one's home life, affecting the way in which police relate to friends and family. This is described by Harry:

*"And then you realise that actually you're putting up this false front to friends and family as well" (P1, 781)*

### **3.2.2.3 Bottling it up**

A further way of protecting oneself from others' criticism is to "bottle things up". Carol recognised this as being a dominant strategy amongst police officers:

*"The majority of them I would say would try and keep it to themselves" (P9, 472)*

Anna recognised this as a reflection of the fact that the police service is largely a male dominated organisation:

*"What you've got to remember is you're dealing with an organisation that's mainly male, and it's always going to remain that way. And that is one thing that... women are far better at talking about things, whereas men tend to bottle things up and I think that... you're never going to get away from that" (P4, 159)*

#### 3.2.2.4 Denial of problems

Participants described a tendency amongst some police employees to dismiss or deny one's problems. This represents a further means of protecting the self, as denying one's problems allows one to continue functioning in a normal way.

Distinguishing between whether or not a problem has been recognised appears to be complicated, as illustrated by Anna:

*"Well, how can they ask for help, if they don't think that there's something wrong? And that's the other thing as well, you know, that a lot of people just run away from things that are wrong, rather than dealing with them, you know, and ... but you're never going to change that. People are always going to be... you know, if they don't identify there's something wrong, then how are they going to know that they need help to sort it out?" (P4, 906)*

Some participants described a denial whereby one can not recognise that there is a problem at a conscious level. For example, one participant stated that they should have sought help ten years ago, but that they didn't recognise at the time that they needed it. However, others stated that sometimes police employees can see that there is a problem, but acknowledging this is very difficult. Matthew described this process as though it is like a surrender:

*"You can see that there's a problem, but you're ducking away from it. Acknowledgement is actually turning around to yourself and saying "OK, yeah, I give up, I've got a problem"" (P2, 1136)*

Participants often reported that colleagues could recognise that someone has a problem before the individual themselves could see it. Graham suggested that this is particularly the case when people try to hide their problems:

*"Others will recognise someone's got a problem I think before the individual does. Especially if you're trying to hide it" (P7, 541)*

Interestingly, Linda described how, now that she has been to the Welfare Department for help, she can recognise problems in others.

*And you can see it in them. And they won't admit it's happening. And in fact now it's happened to me, I can see it in other people... but I wouldn't have seen it in myself, but a friend of mine who had had the same problem that recognised it in me and said you know, "you really ought to go and see a doctor" and all that sort of thing, and I said "oh, don't be so stupid" (P8, 495)*

It is important to note that denial is not a universal strategy and especially following help-seeking at the Welfare Department, individuals may be less likely to use this strategy. Matilda noted that some people learn how to recognise their problems:

*"Some people get skilled to the fact that they realise when... they just need to have a chat. They don't need full... you know... Welfare provisions, counselling... just need a chat with a normal human being who understands what policing does to you" (P3, 558)*

### **3.2.2.5 Detachment from emotions**

Denial of one's problems, as noted, may represent a means of carrying on, in the face of a challenging job. In addition to the denial of problems, the denial of an emotional response may in fact be necessary in order to protect the self from the very harrowing emotions that could be generated by some of the work that police employees deal with. One way in which participants seemed to be able to maintain a distance from their emotions was through a process of detachment.

Matthew described this process as being like compartmentalising experiences and locking them away:

*"I am like a series of post-boxes... I've compartmentalised everything ... And there are times when you can do what you like, but hypnotise me properly...that's the only way you're going to get through anything in here [gestures at head]. Because if the barrier's down I'll just keep it locked, I can compartmentalise anything" (P2, 391)*

He further described being so detached that he could sit for hours at a time just staring at a blank wall.

This detachment is also illustrated by Alison, who recognised that her feelings have become numbed:

*"You feel almost as though your feelings go a little bit, they become a little bit numbed, you know, your emotions and things. Umm, and it scared me to start with because I was like "well, what will happen when something happens in my family? Will I still deal with it as though it's sort of a job, or will I be emotional as I should... as I feel I should be?"" (P6, 395)*

The ability to detach in order to protect oneself also relates to the learnt control participants described having over their feelings, as described by Alison:

*"I do think my emotions and things are a lot more controlled now than they were before I joined" (P6, 405)*

It may be easier to detach oneself from a situation when a distance is maintained as Linda described:

*"And even though it's easy because you don't know the person involved, you've still got that massive amount of emotion, which you're taking on from the family and you just have to sort of stay slightly away from it" (P8, 146)*

The degree of detachment from one's emotional engagement was also present in the distinctive language used throughout the participants' accounts. Stark accounts of harrowing experiences contained sometimes gruesome language, for example the description of burnt human bodies as "crispy critters".

Instances of language that compared people to machines were common, for example descriptions of people as "broken" or "fixed", and the brain as "switched off" and "shut down".

This detachment appeared to be necessary to carry out one's job in the sense that one has to control one's emotions and detach oneself from personal involvement in cases.

### **3.2.3. Superordinate theme 3: Acceptability of help**

This superordinate theme consisted of participants' perceptions of how acceptable it was to receive psychological support. The acceptability of seeking and receiving help was dependent upon the perceived legitimacy of one's problems, in particular whether one's problems were big enough or relevant enough. The acceptability of help was also affected by the meaning with which the action of seeking help was endowed. Seeking help was seen as unacceptable if it was perceived as a weakness to need it, whereas when it was reframed as a means to make one stronger, it became more acceptable. The two subordinate themes (the legitimacy of one's problems and seeking help- weak versus strong) will be discussed separately.

#### **3.2.3.1 Legitimacy of problems**

Participants stated that there were some things for which they would not seek help, as they did not perceive these things as legitimate problems. For example, several participants agreed that Welfare was an acceptable means of getting help for work-

related problems, in contrast to more personal problems, for which one may seek professional help outside of the organisation. Similarly, some participants stated that one should deal with one's own problems, as articulated by Graham:

*"It's my problem, I'll deal with it. It was more personal than it was work-related"*  
(P7, 505)

Alison's quotation below suggests that the distinction between personal problems and work-related problems may be related to holding the job responsible for some work-related problems.

*"I see home life as something that I should deal with and if it's to do with work, well it's work that's made it like that, so maybe I can accept some help through work to deal with it"* (P6, 799)

Participants also highlighted a concern that one's problems may not be big enough or serious enough to warrant going to Welfare for help. Matilda recognised this problem through her experience of recommending the Welfare Department to others.

*"And it's almost a verification that it's big enough, it's important enough. And if it's important to them, it's probably important enough by a long way"* (P3, 598)

Some participants recognised that in order to go to Welfare, one's problem doesn't have to be enormous or "a show-stopping calamity" but are also aware that others may not realise this. Sharing this information was viewed by these participants as a means to increase people's uptake of support.

### **3.2.3.2 Seeking help: weak versus strong**

The meaning of seeking help or needing support is described powerfully in many accounts. When it was viewed by participants or others as weak, seeking or receiving help was accompanied by a stigma. This may be related to the way in which the

Welfare Department is perceived, for example one participant described a perception amongst others in the police service that the Welfare Department was "pink and fluffy". This may contrast to the professional identity of being strong and tough.

Many participants saw seeking help not only as implying weakness, but this also representing an inability to cope, as illustrated by Anna:

*"I don't know, I mean I suppose there's always going to be that stigma there, isn't it? Oh, you know, "you've gone to Welfare, you're weak, sort of thing, you can't deal with this"" (P4, 927)*

Furthermore, Carol described how others may jump to the conclusion that this, in turn, means that the individual should never have joined the police:

*"They don't want to be seen to be weak... ummm... or can't cope or things like that... and it would be , you know "oh, she can't cope, oh, you know, she shouldn't have joined the job in the first place"" (P9, 354)*

Linda recognised that the perception of seeking help as implying weakness not only belongs to one's colleagues, but also to oneself:

*"I think we don't... it's still viewed as a weakness to us, I think well, not even so much to other people I think it's to us as individuals I think it seems weak. I certainly saw it as such" (P8, 707)*

Participants reported a sense of failure when they had acknowledged that they needed to go for support. This was closely tied to a sense of letting people down, in particular one's colleagues. This was illustrated by Harry:

*"I couldn't handle any of my colleagues phoning up because I felt a failure in their eyes... I'd let them all down, urm, and for the first two or three weeks it was... I was a very sad case" (P1, 1152)*

These feelings can be understood in the context of a strong professional identity to solve problems. Difficulties are framed as “problems” to be solved and when employees of the police have these problems themselves, this was viewed as incompatible with their role as problem-solver. This was demonstrated by Harry:

*“ You’re actually creating this culture of “you’re paid to solve problems, what have you got a problem for?” Um, and so if you’ve got a problem, then rather than actually flagging it up, you try and say “well, hang on a second, it’s my job. Am I now saying I can’t do my job?”. So it’s... ur... our job is a problem-solving organisation. And it’s ... it’s very, very difficult to identify people who do have problems because they won’t actually come to you and say “I can’t cope”. They won’t do it” (P1, 558)*

Despite concerns about the legitimacy of smaller problems, it may be easier to go for help where the problem is regarded as less severe. In this case, the fear about being judged to be weak may be reduced. When participants described visits to Welfare Officers for small things, for example to use them as a sounding board for ideas, there seemed to be less concern about being perceived as weak. This is perhaps reflected by the way in which Matilda suggests to other people that they go to Welfare:

*“Why don’t you run it past them and see if they’ve got another take on it? ... [say that] you’ve contacted them and need to talk a few things through, or you just want to check back your plan” (P3, 489)*

Several participants observed that going to the Welfare Department for help had had some impact upon them, for example, recognising that they had come out a slightly different person at the end of it. Some participants also stated that going for help at the Welfare Department had made them feel like a stronger person. For example, Matthew said:

*"To be honest, it actually makes me realise I'm stronger than I thought I was" (P2, 1168)*

These changes may well influence the meaning individuals assign to the process of seeking help. Whilst Anna may have been reluctant to seek help initially, she now views it as a means of making her a better police woman.

*"Really that's [going to Welfare] the most appropriate thing to do because if you've got rid of the stress of one thing, you're more capable of being able to deal with something else, than the fact that you're carrying the baggage from whatever else it was that bothered you" (P4, 992)*

#### **3.2.4. Superordinate theme 4: Accessibility of help**

This superordinate theme encompasses participants' views and experiences surrounding the ease with which they could access help from the Welfare Department. Three main areas affecting accessibility were identified, each of which constitutes a subordinate theme. Firstly, accessibility is influenced by the lack of awareness of the support structures that are provided and what they can offer. The location of the Welfare Officers (ie whether they work close to other police employees or remove themselves) also has an effect on accessibility. Finally privacy and confidentiality concerns represent a major obstacle to the accessibility of psychological support services.

##### **3.2.4.1 Lack of awareness of support structures**

Several participants reported either their own or others' lack of knowledge about the help-seeking process and sources of support. There was some disagreement between participants over the extent of this knowledge: whilst some participants believed that

their colleagues would not even know where to go initially, others stated that people knew of the Welfare Department, but not exactly what its function was. Carol's initial experience of not knowing exactly what the Welfare Department could offer was common:

*"I mean, to be honest I knew Welfare existed, I didn't know the extent to how they could help you. I didn't know the extent of help that you could get" (P9, 535)*

This may particularly be the case for the younger people in the service, as Graham described:

*"But I think sometimes a lot of people, young in service, they just haven't got a clue. There's no... unless the problem hits them square in the face, "Welfare? Yeah... somewhere at headquarters, bunch of people". So, one they don't really know what it is, and it's only if they come to somebody like myself or if somebody else in the team says "you know, I think you should tap into Welfare". So I think the job misses an opportunity to use this as a flagship really, which I think it should be" (P7, 278)*

Matthew recognised that people's misunderstanding of the referral process may lead to an avoidance of seeking help:

*"If they feel they've got to go to their boss to refer, and they don't get on with that team leader or what have you, then you've automatically got that hurdle to get over" (P2, 1129)*

Alison suggested that her team may benefit from the Welfare Department making contact with the team and reminding them about the function of the Welfare Department:

*"Maybe just to raise people's awareness of their existence. Well, not their existence but what they're about again, do you know I mean?" (P6, 823)*

Indeed, this may be important, as one participant suggested that she didn't pay attention to an initial talk by members of the Welfare Department at her training, as she did not think she would need their services.

#### **3.2.4.2 Location of Welfare Officers**

Participants seemed to prefer an easily accessible service where it was possible to "drop in" and see Welfare Officers or "bump into someone in a corridor". They suggested that this allows one to get to know the faces, and facilitates an initial conversation, rather than having to find out the number and pick up the phone. Harry subscribed to this view and suggested that Welfare Officers should have offices on each of the Basic Command Units. He stated that this would increase trust:

*"Then the chances of someone actually... of you building up that trust with that individual would be greatly increased and the chances of someone saying "can I have a word later?" would be massively increased" (P1, 1105)*

The desired informality implied by this quotation is important to many of the participants and links to trust (section 3.2.5). Participants' accounts suggested that building up a rapport or personal knowledge makes it easier to seek their help when it is needed.

#### **3.2.4.3 Privacy and confidentiality**

Privacy and confidentiality were commonly raised as important issues when considering seeking help. However, organisational aspects in the working environment were seen to compromise this. For example, Matilda reported that privacy is very difficult to find in the police station:

*"But that's a key issue is actually the quiet time. And the confidence to know someone's not going to walk in while you're pouring your heart out. There's so few places, particularly constables can do that... And that might apply to police staff as well, who work in large office environments, which don't have any privacy, the ability to get free" (P3, 1035)*

However, it is not just the police station environment which is seen as a challenge to privacy, but also paying visits to the Welfare Department, as Graham illustrated:

*"Look at the location. We're here, medical pensions and health and safety is next door, occupational health is over here, is it the kind of place I want to be coming into?" (P7, 607)*

The reasons why one's privacy and confidentiality are so important to participants and their colleagues were often discussed. One major concern is that seeking help will affect one's future career progression. This is particularly a concern when Welfare is perceived as connected to the organisation, as illustrated by Graham and Harry.

*"Shit, this is part of the organisation, who'll get to know?" and I would think that's probably the question... if there's going to be a problem about individuals' Welfare, it's going to be, "If I do contact them, who gets to know?". And although they say "oh, it's confidential between you and the individual" that fear of "who will get to know? Will this affect my promotion? Will this affect me applying for support group? Will this affect... will this be on my record forever, that I've had stress and I'll never get promoted?" (P7, 579)*

*"Some of the things that you might be seeking help for could be very, very personal and you would be very reluctant telling it to someone who works for the organisation, urm, on the misunderstanding that actually someone within the organisation might be told it" (P1, 1070)*

Some participants felt that confidentiality was very difficult to maintain given the number of relationships that existed between work colleagues and the gossip that can pervade in the police environment.

*"Now, anything that went into that personnel office, you know, anything about anybody, what's to say that she wasn't telling him? And that's what I think a lot of people think about is who works in these departments and who's going to know? Where's it going to be written down, you know, what you say... who's going to know about it ... and, you know... I mean, the police service is... Well, probably not the biggest gossip grapevine, but most people want to know everything about everybody, I mean you know, gossip goes around like wildfire" (P4, 977)*

Despite reassurance by Welfare Officers, participants expressed doubt that seeking help would not affect the way they were perceived, as expressed by Carol:

*"Some people won't go because they worry that it will affect their job; if it goes on their personal record, will it stop any promotions? Will it... and it doesn't matter how much you say to people "look, it's not going to make any difference". At the end of the day, I think it does" (P9, 671)*

### **3.2.5. Superordinate theme 5: Importance of trust**

The final theme describes feelings of trust or mistrust in others and how this affects help-seeking at different levels of the system. This issue is important in relation to management and the wider organisation, the Welfare Department and also to one's colleagues. Trust is influenced by the occupation of more than one role at once, for instance managers having to evaluate performance but also offer support. A sense that some people value their own promotion over other people also affected the level of trust in a relationship. Finally, the extent of someone's experience was identified as an

important facilitator of trust. Three subordinate themes, dual roles, valuing self promotion over others and the importance of experience, are described below.

### **3.2.5.1 Dual roles**

#### **3.2.5.1.1 Managers**

Participants described the difficulty presented by the fact that managers were not only there to offer guidance and support, but also to assess and appraise one's performance. Matilda illustrated the difficulty this can present:

*"The inspector is the person who signs your annual leave form. That's a really good thing an inspector can do. In the event of no sergeants the inspector can sign the overtime form and that's a great idea for an inspector. A very important thing. They're the person who sells the complaint form. That's not a good role, if you're the recipient of the complaint form. So we've got massive barriers as managers, to actually work actively, stepping outside of but still remaining attached. So if you're not confident in yourself and you're seeking help from that manager, that's a hell of a hurdle to overcome" (P3, 230)*

Understandably, if people felt they needed to get help from a manager, discuss their problems, or get consent for them to go to Welfare, this put them in a difficult position. This is particularly the case given the perceptions outlined above regarding the acceptability of seeking support in the police service.

#### **3.2.5.1.2 Welfare**

Concerns about the dual role of the Welfare Department involve the degree of separation of management and the organisation from the Welfare Department. If an individual's trust in the wider organisation is incomplete and the Welfare Department

is perceived to be closely linked to the organisation, consequently the trust that people have in the process of seeking help through the Welfare Department will be affected. Harry explained the perceived connection between the Welfare Department and the organisation:

*"The Welfare Department is seen as part of Thames Valley Police, it is not part of... it is not seen as something separate from. Urm, and because it is actually paid for by Thames Valley Police and part of Thames Valley Police, then you assume the organisation knows; it doesn't, but you assume it does. It needs to have that front end as part of the police, because otherwise you'd never get anybody going to it, they're in a very difficult lose/lose situation, I think" (P1, 1085)*

This perceived connection may influence people's behaviour, for example making a call to Welfare, as Harry described:

*"The lack of organisational trust and lack of then personal trust because you don't know who you're talking to at the other end" (P1, 1068)*

This lack of trust due to the relationship between the Welfare Department and the organisation is further influenced by a perception of insincerity in the motivation of providing the service. Graham illustrated that the provision of help is perceived as a token gesture rather than to represent concern for employees:

*"So I think sometimes there is a perception in the police that Welfare is a... it's a tool that the organisation put there but it's like "well, we need to be seen as doing this" as a token gesture... I think they're under strength. I think it's a "oh, yeah, we've got to have this, so we'll have it, but we'll not resource it or give it the financial backing that it needs to make it function properly", so it's like a token gesture. They've sort of said "we've got a Welfare Department" and the people... all the Welfare Officers*

*work what I call extremely hard and their job is extremely difficult in today's changing police force" (P7, 226)*

He went on to describe that this perception leads to a mistrust amongst police employees:

*"But how would you do it [promote the Welfare Department], because if you were then seen as promoting it, they would say "Oh, there's a catch here, because they're promoting it ... It would probably go with the way police do things, you know, because if they want you to become involved with something they'll throw money at it and make it attractive and things, and when people do that, you know, they know they're throwing money at it, they know they're putting a lot of resourcing into it. Why? You know, it's a police thing" (P7, 358)*

### **3.2.5.2 Valuing self-promotion over others**

Another key factor influencing trust in others in the police service is the apparently common drive for one's own promotion. This is particularly identified by participants to be a barrier to trusting management, as they perceived that their best interests were not considered, as illustrated by Harry:

*"There is an innate mistrust, distrust of the organisation within the people. The staff do not trust management to have their best interests at heart" (P1, 1050)*

Several participants perceived managers to be more focused on their own promotion and less on taking responsibilities for problems. For example, Linda described:

*"But, personally, the people I think can make the best managers are ones that work their way up through, understand every level, ummm, and have done the job. And are prepared to look after those below them and aren't just thinking about "I need the next rank up and I'll be a yes person", and unfortunately that's tended to be what*

*there are, there's not terribly many strong managers. And certainly not people that are prepared to deal with a problem. Or take responsibility for one" (P8, 941)*

A potential contributory factor to this mistrust, and one which was well-represented in participants' accounts, may be the drive to meet performance figures set by the government and the organisation.

The feeling that managers value their own promotion over their employees' best interests can lead to feeling unvalued, unsupported, uncared for and unheard, all of which seemed to reduce trust. Harry described this relationship with the organisation:

*You are regarded as a number, you are... you feel unvalued, you feel urrr, you know that your immediate line, supervision and line management is with you and supportive, urr, and you know that as soon as you get beyond that level into the urr, onto the middle floor, that you become a number and actually they're not worried about you, they're worried they've got a gap. They're worried that that shift is now short of a driver. And it's PC who? (P1, 737)*

The importance of feeling valued was also addressed by Matthew:

*"Policemen need to feel valued and part of a team, especially when they've been through what I've been through. Well, yeah, we actually want to feel we're doing something constructive" (P2, 1309)*

### **3.2.5.3 The importance of experience**

Participants' accounts suggested that trust in others in the organisation seemed to be facilitated by a shared understanding between the help-provider and the recipient of help. This shared understanding seems to arise from having had similar experiences to one another. This made seeking support from colleagues easier than seeking support from others, for example one's family, as illustrated by Alison:

*"Even if they don't talk about it, you know, you feel safe...you feel safe around your work colleagues because they understand, whereas, like... I tried discussing things with my Mum, with my you know, with my family and things. They don't understand. They think they understand, but unless you're coming up against this sort of thing all the time, I don't think you do get a real understanding" (P6, 366)*

The importance of experience and the role this has to play in one's trust of others also applies to the relationship participants had with the Welfare Department. Several participants felt that talking to Welfare Officers was facilitated by their understanding of what the job was like. Harry illustrated this:

*"[Welfare Officer] can relate to that, because he's seen it. He's been there, he's done that, urrrr... if you go to the exploded body [Welfare Officer]'s been there, he's seen it. He knows what you're talking about. Whereas, with greatest respect, if you haven't actually been there and done that, if you haven't seen it, you can think about it, but it's very different thinking about it and actually picking it up" (P1, 884)*

Matilda contrasted seeking help from people with experience and understanding of one's role to seeking help from an outside agency, such as a GP:

*"[You] just need a chat with a normal human being who understands what policing does to you...Generally speaking, when people have spoken to anybody from Welfare, they don't have to explain what this policing thing is. There's no hurdle... If you went to your GP, you've got to make sure... do they understand what you do?" (P3, 560)*

Where trust in management is concerned, the perceived experience of managers is also important. Matthew suggested that experience is a vital quality, in order that the correct decisions can be made:

*"You advertise for this person who's come out of university, who's got this degree in... absolutely bugger all experience of anything but because they've... you know what I mean? Untried, untested decision-making" (P2, 330)*

The perception that managers are inexperienced may therefore deepen a sense of mistrust of those in authority. One participant suggested that this opinion may be reinforced by the fact that managers are only in one position for a short time, before they have to move on to broaden their experience. This means that the experience within that particular area of work is minimised and there is not enough time for a trusting relationship to develop.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1 Overview**

This chapter will begin by giving a summary of results, before discussing how they address the research questions. The relationship between these findings and those of existing literature will be considered throughout. This will be followed by some reflection on the methodology used and the limitations of the research. Finally, the implications for the service and for future research will be considered.

### **4.2 Summary of results**

In addressing the research questions, five superordinate themes emerged from the analysis. These reflected participants' accounts of their sense of professional identity and how they coped with the demands of the job, as well as their views and experiences of seeking help within the culture of the police service. Each theme is briefly summarised below:

#### **Culture of the police service: fitting into the collective identity**

This superordinate theme describes participants' views about their identity as employees of the police service. It gives a sense of what participants feel they are and should be in relation to their profession. The superordinate theme is divided into four subordinate themes; demands of the job, team culture, the challenge of individuation and public perception.

#### **Protecting the self**

This superordinate theme describes participants' ways of protecting themselves. This includes protection from being affected by a disturbing task and also from the

criticism of others. The superordinate theme is made up of five subordinate themes; humour, wearing masks, bottling it up, denial and detachment.

### **Acceptability of help**

This superordinate theme describes participants' perceptions of how acceptable it is to receive psychological support. There are two subordinate themes; the legitimacy of one's problems and seeking help: weak versus strong.

### **Accessibility of help**

This superordinate theme describes the ease with which participants felt they could access help from the Welfare Department. There are three subordinate themes including lack of awareness, the location of Welfare Officers and privacy and confidentiality.

### **The importance of trust**

The final superordinate theme describes participants' feelings of trust and mistrust in others. There are three subordinate themes including dual roles, valuing self-promotion over others and the importance of experience.

## **4.3 Addressing the research questions and interpreting the findings**

Each research question will now be taken in turn to describe how the emergent analysis contributes to this, alongside current literature.

### **4.3.1 Question 1: How do police men and women cope with distressing experiences?**

Participants described a number of different ways in which they coped with distressing experiences, mainly encompassed in the first two superordinate themes: "the culture of the police service: fitting in to the collective identity", and "protecting

the self". Many aspects of professional identity, as described by participants, could be viewed as methods of coping with the tough demands of their job, including managing distressing experiences.

### *The use of a professional identity*

Through the identity of a "problem-solver" (sub theme, section 1.1.1) and the resulting drive to get on and do things (sub theme, section 1.1.2), it could be argued that police employees have less time to engage with the distressing aspects of a situation. By taking their role seriously and investing a lot in being professional, it may be that, to some extent, they can detach themselves from what they might feel, were they to be involved in the situation whilst occupying another role. The identity of "toughness", identified in the current research (sub theme, section 1.1.3) and in previous research has been conceptualised as an adaptive response to the routine traumatic incidents experienced by police employees (Miller, 1995).

Janoff-Bulman (1989, cited in Brown, 2000) argues that individuals operate on the basis of benign, unquestioned assumptions about the world. The experience of a traumatic event may shatter these assumptions, providing the individual with the task of assimilating and integrating the new negative experience. The training experience of new police officers instils a sense of control over events and emotions (Brown, 2000) and combining these with notions of a just world leads to new police recruits feeling excited and enthusiastic about their career. As they begin their work and come across the tough aspects of policing, new police recruits may experience threats to their identity. Brown (2000) suggests that it is at this point when habituation can begin to take place and police find support from the coping devices offered by the occupational culture. The professional identity described by participants in

superordinate theme 1 may therefore be key to their ability to cope with distressing events.

### ***Using others for support***

The strong sense of team described by participants (subordinate theme, section 1.2) may represent an important way of coping with distressing experiences. Although participants acknowledged that not everyone discusses their problems with members of their team, their accounts gave a clear indication of how the team can adopt a surrogate family role. Work-related problems and personal problems are discussed, both at work and outside of work hours. The strong sense of safety that participants felt from being with people who understood what they've been through facilitates this process.

This is consistent with Graf (1986), who argued that the peer group and supervisors within the organisation are important sources of support. However, it is not completely consistent with research suggesting that police suppress affect and control emotions (Brown, 2000), even to the extent that they show little caring or respect for others' feelings (Evans *et al*, 1992). The current study suggests that there are situations in which one's own emotional expression and the encouragement of others' are acceptable, and furthermore, necessary.

### ***Being contained by an organisation***

In subordinate theme 1.3 (the challenge of individuation) participants described the difficulties of being an individual in a large organisation, where orders are accepted. However, the hierarchical organisation and "quasi-military structure" (Symonds, 1970) may provide some security and containment by removing responsibility.

### ***Boundaries***

In subordinate theme 1.3 (the challenge of individuation) many participants suggested that it was difficult to separate work from home and they felt that they were constantly on duty. However, others had learnt to impose boundaries between home and work. This may represent a way in which individuals can cope with distressing events at work. However, it was evident from some accounts that maintenance of these boundaries was very difficult. It is possible that in view of the understanding and support received from colleagues, in contrast to the lack of understanding shown by family members (identified in section 2.3.5.3), contact with work is prolonged well beyond normal shift hours.

### ***Protecting the self***

Many of the mechanisms participants described in superordinate theme 2 (protecting the self) may also represent useful ways of coping with distressing experiences. For example, the use of humour was regularly discussed as a way of coping. This is consistent with other research findings (eg Joyce, 1989; Brown, 2000). Fielding (1988, cited in Brown, 2000) states that off-colour humour permits a collective empathising with each other's feelings and represents a device which allows the discharge of emotion, without any loss of professional status. Its popularity as a method of coping can be understood given the strong sense of professional identity described (superordinate theme 1). Participants struggled with the fact that this type of coping was not always understood by others and could lead to friction.

The current study findings suggest that police employees are able to utilise both types of coping identified in the Transactional Theory of Stress. Problem-focused strategies are very much employed, as part of one's professional identity, whilst engaged with a distressing situation. Masks of professionalism, toughness and ability to cope may be

employed during these situations. When there is a degree of distance between the individual and the situation, more emotion-focused strategies such as talking through situations and acknowledging one's distress may also be employed. This appears to be inconsistent with Coman (1993, cited in Stephens *et al*, 1997), who showed that a sample of Australian police officers did not use emotion-focused coping. The present study suggests a more complex repertoire of coping methods, which are situation-specific. Further research is warranted in this area, but these findings suggest that some police employees are able to employ the emotion-focused strategies that may be necessary for engaging in psychological support.

Although one participant mentioned gender differences in general in the ability to talk about one's emotions or problems, it is surprising that this difference was not identified by others and did not represent a theme. One explanation for this is provided by the role constraint theory (Rosario *et al*, 1988). This theory predicts that for individuals occupying the same social role, gender differences in coping styles are not present. The current study therefore largely supports this theory.

#### **4.3.2 Question 2: How do police men and women experience seeking psychological help or support via work?**

Participants' comments represented in each superordinate theme suggested that more often than not, police employees are reluctant to seek psychological support from the Welfare Department. Possible reasons for this may be found in the attitudes and beliefs described in the superordinate theme "acceptability of help", in particular the subordinate theme "seeking help; weak versus strong". These attitudes and beliefs should be understood in the context of the professional identity described in

superordinate theme one. The relationship between these two themes will be discussed further under research question 4.

### *Seeking help – weak or strong?*

As described in “Acceptability of help”, participants’ accounts suggest that seeking psychological help is viewed negatively by others and even oneself, up until the point at which the help has been sought. Before this time the need for psychological support is synonymous with not being able to cope, letting people down and being weak. This is consistent with the finding that displays of emotions in British and Australian police officers were perceived as personally weak (Stephens *et al*, 1997) and research suggesting that police officers shun psychological services because seeking help implies weakness, cowardice or an inability to do the job (Brown, 2000).

However, participants’ views about the meaning of seeking support appeared to change once they had had the experience themselves. Several participants suggested that their perspectives had changed over time, perhaps as a result of seeking help. Following a visit or a conversation with the Welfare Department, participants had a firmer idea of the process of receiving help, on which to base any future decisions about its uptake.

### *Confidentiality*

The need or desire to seek help was also experienced as threatening to participants due to the concerns over confidentiality and the implications of other people finding out, as described in the superordinate theme “Accessibility of help”. This is highly consistent with anecdotal evidence and research (Ainsworth, 2002). This concern may be especially characteristic of disciplined, hierarchical organisations. Indeed, French, Rona, Jones & Wesseley (2004) found that lack of trust, fears about confidentiality and about jeopardising career prospects were amongst the major reasons why

members of the British Armed Forces would be reluctant to cooperate with a military health screening programme for psychological illness.

Traditionally, help-seeking research focused upon approach factors, to the exclusion of avoidance factors, although avoidance factors have now been shown to be as important as approach factors (Vogel & Wester, 2003). The risks involved in help-seeking are considered to be an avoidance factor and the concerns about confidentiality identified in "accessibility of help" would therefore constitute an avoidance factor. Indeed, the perceived dangers of opening up to another person may seem to some individuals worse than their actual problem (Vogel & Wester, 2003). The current research is consistent with this thesis and lends further support to the study of avoidance factors as well as approach ones.

#### **4.3.3 Question 3: How does help-seeking relate to professional identity?**

The acceptability of seeking help, as described in superordinate theme three, is clearly heavily influenced by the strong sense of professional identity described in superordinate theme one.

##### ***Police culture and identity***

The "police culture" identified in the literature is represented to a certain extent by participants' accounts in the current study. The attitude of "getting on and doing it" (subtheme 1.1.2) and the identity of police employees as problem-solvers (subtheme 1.1.1) are consistent with the "sense of mission" identified by Brown (2000). The strong expectations of the police employee as a "coper" (1.1.3) are held by the individuals themselves and also seem to be encouraged from others (as identified in "wearing masks"). The "tough guy mentality" (Ainsworth, 2002) and strong culture

of emotional control (Brown, 2000) represented in previous literature were also identified in these themes.

### ***The threat to one's identity***

The current study illustrates how this identity can become unhelpful when the problems to be solved are one's own and not somebody else's. When an individual realises that they have an unsolvable problem of their own, their perception of themselves is challenged (as identified in acceptability of help). This has been described as "cognitive dissonance" (Festinger, 1957) and the resulting confusion and discomfort may explain the delay in help-seeking behaviour.

If, as Miller (1995) suggests, some aspects of the police culture or professional identity represent an adaptive defence to the emotionally challenging aspects of one's job, to have to drop this defence in order to acknowledge the need to seek help may leave one feeling exposed and threatened.

### ***Help-seeking as a means to become stronger***

The threat to one's identity is only relevant when help-seeking behaviour is perceived as weak and representative of an inability to cope. However, if seeking help is re-framed as a means to becoming a stronger person and doing one's job better (as discussed in superordinate theme 3) then seeking psychological support may be more consistent with one's beliefs and values. Rocheln & Hoyer (2005) argue that in order to market mental health services to people, it is important to communicate that the norms that support the proposed action (ie going to receive help) do not conflict with their normative values. The service implications relating to this will be discussed in section 4.5.

#### **4.3.4 Question 4: What barriers are experienced by police men and women who seek psychological support at work?**

In order to be included in this research, participants had overcome any barriers they had encountered in seeking psychological support at work. However, they were all able to describe barriers which they themselves had faced or which they had witnessed others facing. Indeed, every superordinate theme emerging from this analysis indicates the possibility of barriers in the help-seeking process. These barriers seem to be present at an intrapersonal level (for example, ways of protecting the self) as well as interpersonally and systemically (for example, mistrust in the organisation). The way in which the barriers to help-seeking relate to one another are summarised at the end of this section.

##### ***Intrapersonal barriers***

The clash between individuals' sense of their identity and the need for psychological help represents an intrapersonal barrier. This is discussed in section 4.3.3.

Much of superordinate theme 2 (protecting the self) describes a detachment process of the self from one's work. This intrapersonal process may well account for the surprise participants expressed when they realised they needed psychological help. Help-seeking literature suggests that a major barrier to help-seeking for a variety of complaints is the perception of need (Mojtabai *et al*, 2002). The perception of need, in turn, is influenced by the illness representation an individual constructs. If individuals are able to detach and distance themselves as a coping strategy, it may well be that this prevents their recognition of their need for support.

The act of detaching from one's work may also prevent individuals from acknowledging the changes that they are experiencing. This may involve recognising

there is a problem, but without full acknowledgement of its meaning. This would be consistent with Rennie-Peyton's (1996) suggestion that victims of PTSD do not acknowledge changes in their own behaviour and with findings reported in Galdas *et al* (2005) where men delayed seeking help because they were normalising or rationalising their physical symptoms. These behaviours also represent barriers to seeking help that are imposed within the person, as opposed to at any other level.

When constructing an illness representation an individual makes judgements about the identity, cause, consequences and length of time of an illness. In the case of psychologically-related problems police employees face, these judgements may lead them to conclude that their problem is caused by personal problems, is small and insignificant or will go away. These perceptions may all influence their judgement about the legitimacy of their problems in relation to whether or not they should seek help for them (as identified in "acceptability of help"). Police employees' appraisals of their own situation can therefore present a barrier to a successful help-seeking outcome.

### ***Interpersonal barriers***

Ways of appraising a situation, amongst other things, can be reinforced by interactions with others. Plant (2001) describes ways in which supervisors may attempt to be helpful, which ironically can sometimes make things worse. She gives examples of supervisors advising that the best thing a supervisee can do is to put a difficult experience behind them and get "stuck into work" or advising people that they could go for psychological help but "*you* don't need that, do you?". On the other hand, when individuals' problems are validated by a respected other, they may feel empowered and justified to seek psychological support.

### *Systemic barriers*

Systemic barriers are those that are imposed upon the individual by the way in which the system, or organisation is set up. Many of the barriers incorporated into the theme of accessibility represent systemic ones. For example, participants in the present study reported that the location of Welfare Officers and the difficulty in getting private space to contact them could represent barriers.

The lack of awareness of the Welfare Department's existence or of what they can offer could also be considered a systemic barrier and one which was often reported by participants. This is consistent with research presented by Thompson and colleagues (2004), who found that, along with the lack of knowledge about mental illness, lack of knowledge of the available treatment made up the most highly endorsed reasons for not seeking help. Whilst police employees may get a more informed response and more specific treatment for psychological problems via the Welfare Department, they may presently be seeking help from their own GPs.

The systemic relationship between police employees and their managers/the wider organisation represents a barrier to seeking help, as described in the superordinate theme "Importance of trust". The current study suggests that the degree of trust in managers and in the organisation as a whole is influential in one's decision about whether or not to seek help from a work-related service. Even though it is not necessary to discuss a visit to the Welfare Department with one's supervisor, the lack of trust in supervisors was nevertheless cited as a barrier to help-seeking.

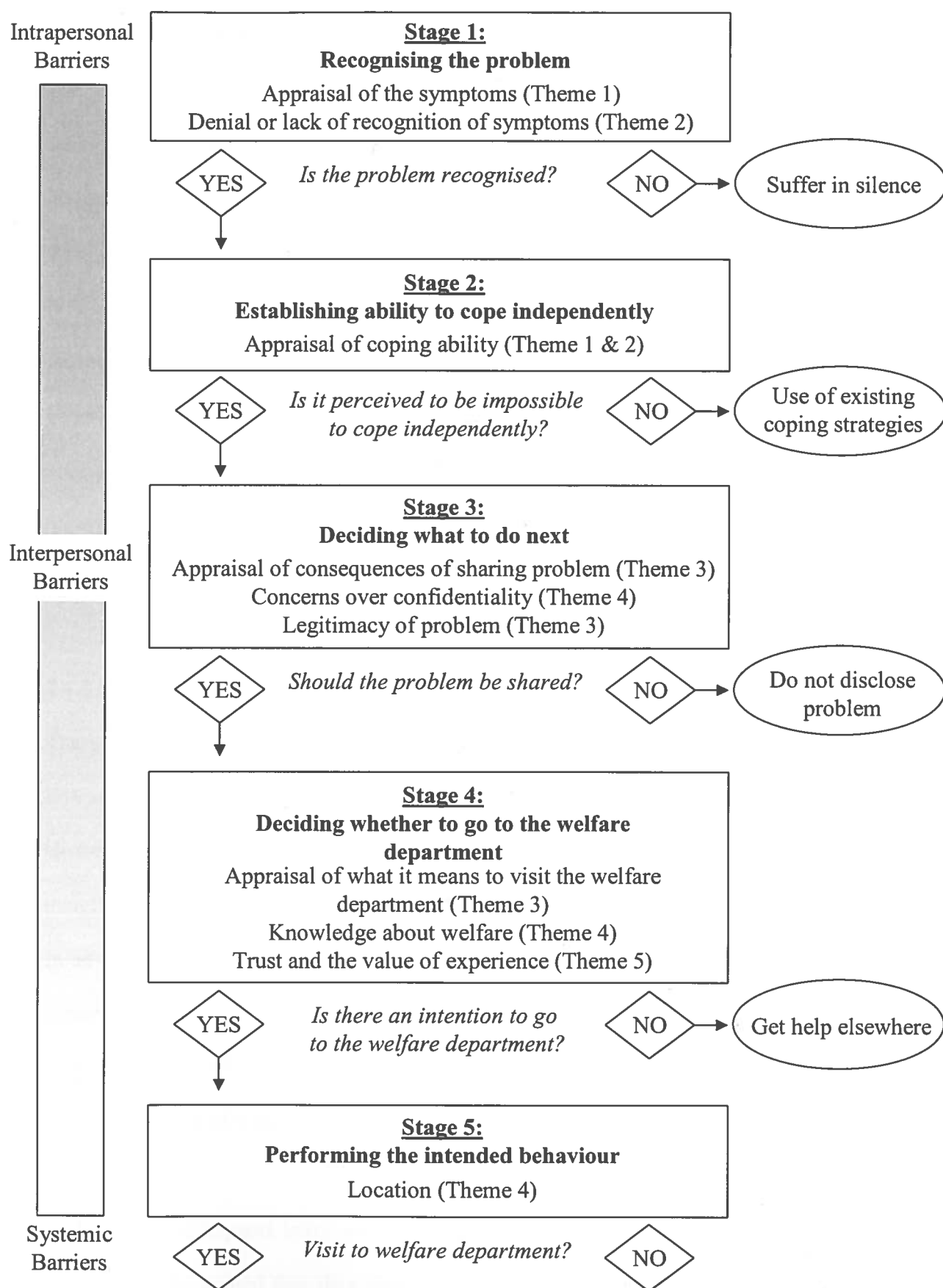
The ability to trust a direct manager enough to approach them regarding a problem appears to be related to the dual role of managers. A dual role was also identified by Rona and colleagues (2004) in military doctors. In the military health care system,

doctors have both a duty of care to their patients, but also a duty to safeguard the interests of the whole organisation. As a consequence, they suggest, servicemen may be less inclined to divulge personal information, as it may be seen to jeopardise their career prospects. This concern may also explain why the perception of sources of police help as connected to the organisation may represent a barrier to seeking support.

Anecdotal evidence (personal communication, 2004) suggests that the feeling of being unvalued and unsupported identified by participants can lead to a more confrontational attitude towards the Welfare Department, whereby individuals may feel that if they have not been offered support, they will not approach sources of support.

Figure 1 describes the process of help-seeking in the police and the barriers that may be encountered. In the initial stages of seeking help, for example, recognising the problem, the barriers are represented by intrapersonal processes. As the individual progresses through the help-seeking stages, the barriers become more interpersonal and finally more systemic. Each step in the model reflects issues raised in one or more of the superordinate themes.

**Figure 1: A framework of barriers to help-seeking in the police**



## **4.4 Reflection on methodology and limitations**

### **4.4.1 The value of IPA**

The use of IPA enabled a far-reaching and deep exploration of the experience of help-seeking in the police, a subject which has been relatively unexplored in previous literature. Each of the themes emerging from the analysis were useful in answering the research questions, confirming the applicability of the method.

IPA is designed to be used on a small sample, to permit in-depth qualitative analysis. However, using a small sample may limit the extent to which findings may be generalised. In addition to this, whilst the researcher utilised the aforementioned IPA peer group and supervision in order to make her aware of her preconceptions and biases, it is possible that some biases still remained. However, the emergence of unexpected themes enhanced the credibility of the findings.

### **4.4.2 Design and sampling**

The sample selected was sufficient for an exploratory study of this size employing IPA and the number of themes generated adequately addressed the research questions. However, the self-selecting nature of the sample may produce a selection bias and therefore may potentially weaken the transferability of the findings.

In an organisation where trust is an important issue and concerns about one's further career are common, the knowledge that this research would be presented in a report may have restricted the content of the interviews somewhat. It is also possible that others who were eligible to participate but did not choose to were mistrustful of the research.

Each of the participants involved in the research remained employed by the police, and it could be argued that they therefore represented people who had successfully

coped with difficult circumstances and, what is more, had overcome the barriers to seeking help. The experience of seeking help, itself, may have influenced participants' views. Whilst retrospective accounts are valuable, they may not be comparable to accounts by people currently experiencing the same barriers. The results can therefore not be generalised to other people who may be experiencing similar difficulties but who have not yet sought help.

It has been recognised that the roles taken on by some police staff and by police officers can be comparable and there can be similar pressures involved in the job (HMIC, 1997). For this reason some police staff met the inclusion criteria for the study. However, only one member of police staff who opted in met the inclusion criteria. The proportion of police officers to police staff recruited to the study may simply reflect the fact that there are fewer police staff involved in the type of work identified in the inclusion criteria. Although there were similarities across accounts, data from the member of police staff contributed less to some of the superordinate themes and differences between the police officer and police staff roles were apparent. To gain a greater understanding of the specific issues facing police staff, as opposed to police officers, further research is required.

The method used to recruit participants inevitably resulted in a sample of people who felt able to reflect on and discuss their help-seeking experiences. Although participants had a variety of experiences, by virtue of remaining in contact with the Welfare Department and then opting in to the study, a relatively good experience of seeking help could be assumed.

#### **4.4.3 Interview questions**

The interview schedule included questions which required participants to discuss how others experienced the help-seeking process. Whilst this provided additional information, it must be taken into account that these were not the experiences of the participants themselves and therefore perhaps should not be credited with the same value. Furthermore, during their interviews, some participants reported that it was difficult to answer for their colleagues, therefore suggesting that this line of questioning may have been inappropriate for the current group.

#### **4.5 Service implications**

This study has identified a variety of obstacles to help-seeking within the TVP. It is important to consider how these obstacles can be minimised and how future help-seeking can be promoted.

Rochlen and Hoyer (2005) respond to the underuse of mental health services by men through considering the "social marketing theory". This framework (Andreasen, 1994) adapts principles from general marketing theory with the aim of influencing behavioural decisions that improve health. Rochlen and Hoyer consider the principles of this theory to be relevant to men's help-seeking and they suggest that in order to help people move towards seeking help, the following interventions are necessary: increasing awareness, improving interest and changing inhibiting values. For providers of help, they state that the key questions in addressing these interventions are: What is it that the target population should come to understand? And what is the best way to deliver this message? Both of these questions will be addressed in relation to facilitating help-seeking amongst police employees.

#### 4.5.1 Information provision

Many perceived barriers to help-seeking could be minimised through the provision of information to police employees of all levels and there is evidence to suggest that the provision of basic information delivered in targeted educational campaigns serves to change attitudes (Mojtabai *et al*, 2002). Although police employees may receive training intended to prepare them for the psychological impact their work may have, this preparation may not have the desired impact, due to the culture of the organisation and the individual's belief that they will not experience difficulties. Police employees receive a presentation from the Welfare Department at the start of their training, but it may be that this is not sufficient given the importance of the message they deliver. Alternatively, it may be that the delivery of this message comes at the wrong time. New recruits may be convinced that they will not need the help being described to them and may not fully understand the strains they may have to cope with in the job. They may also be overwhelmed with information at a time when they are receiving it about many different topics.

Thompson and colleagues (2004) strongly advocate an increase in mental health literacy and the importance of this is confirmed by the current findings. A more in-depth presentation of the psychological difficulties that may be encountered, both relating to organisational stressors and also personal problems, could be delivered further on into the careers of police employees. This could include information about the prevalence of psychological difficulties, symptom recognition, and helpful or unhelpful behaviours when such difficulties are encountered. This would enable individuals to better recognise symptoms in themselves and in others, thereby reducing the barrier of problem-recognition and facilitating a faster approach to sources of help.

In addition to, or alongside an educational programme based upon mental health difficulties, information about sources of help could be presented once more. This should incorporate what can be offered, who can offer it, who may benefit from this and the degree of confidentiality. Given the findings of the current study it may be important to disclose details about individual Welfare Officers with respect to how much experience of police work they have encountered. This will serve to enable people to discover where they may find someone with a shared understanding or someone with neutral views. Providing some information about Welfare Officers may also demystify Welfare Officers and supply a more informal tone which may facilitate help-seeking.

Given the concerns raised by this research about the level of trust they can have in the Welfare Officers and the connection between the Welfare Department and the wider organisation, any information delivered about the service should also include an explicit message about the connection between the Welfare Department and the wider organisation.

#### **4.5.2 Method of delivery**

It is critical, given the potential for mistrust amongst police employees, to consider the nature of the delivery of these messages. Rochlen & Hoyer (2005) describe public awareness campaigns in which unique strategies are used to inform the public about mental health. These strategies include the use of first-person testimonials from members of the target population, the use of a rhetorical style that challenges the population to seek help and the acknowledgement of alternative symptoms of mental health problems. Social psychology phenomena were employed, such as ensuring testimonials were provided by sources who were credible to the audience and who

were perceived as similar. Given the findings of the present research, it may be difficult to find such individuals amongst the police employees. However, if a respected, successful figure, either from the police or a similar organisation, could deliver such a message, it may be much more powerful. These strategies could contribute to the normalisation of psychological distress within the police culture, thereby reducing the stigma and the perception of help-seeking as weak. Indeed the delivery of this message by individuals who are viewed as "strong" may further the opposing belief that help-seeking can, in fact, be a means by which to become stronger.

Furthermore, all information provided should encourage help-seeking to be conceptualised as a means to become stronger and do one's job better, rather than as a sign of weakness. This is consistent with Rochlen & Hoyer's (2005) assertion that in order to encourage help-seeking, providers should communicate that the norms supporting the action of help-seeking do not conflict with people's own normative values. Information provided should therefore be consistent with the identified attitudes surrounding professional identity.

Written information should be provided as well as verbal information, to increase its accessibility. Leaflets and advertisements for sources of help could be framed to appeal to the values identified by the current study. For example, information about sources of support may be more readily attended to if it is presented as a means of helping others. If information sheets or posters appeared to be providing information to police employees in order that they could direct troubled colleagues to appropriate sources of help, it may feel less stigmatising to pay attention and copy down contact numbers.

Opportunities for police employees to meet or interact with Welfare Officers, for example working with them, bumping into them or compulsorily visiting the Welfare Department, appear to facilitate later visits for the purposes of receiving support. These opportunities should therefore be encouraged, if this is possible without compromising the confidentiality of police employees. This subject could be considered for further research.

#### **4.5.3 Wider clinical implications**

The findings of this study have mostly been discussed in relation to the service in which it was conducted. However, they are also applicable to clinical psychologists working elsewhere. The psychologist's role in promoting mental health awareness has traditionally been secondary to their other roles but could be critical to an increased uptake of their services. This may be particularly applicable to psychologists working with other groups of people who are "hard to reach" or hard to engage in services. Although there may be multiple reasons for their reluctance to seek help, a combination of information provision and the visibility of information providers may go some way to reducing the barriers preventing their help-seeking. Where clinical psychologists occupy consultative roles for organisations they may be able to advise about other strategies similar to those described above to reduce barriers to help-seeking and encourage people to attend for help.

Barriers such as accessibility issues, for example the location of the source of help and confidentiality could be considered and modified where possible. This may be particularly important where psychologists are working in the same environment as the individuals to whom they are providing a service, for example, a staff support service in a hospital.

Once individuals in any setting have attended a meeting with a psychologist or expressed an interest in doing so, their perception of help-seeking should be explored and the process demystified. This may be especially important for individuals who had previously viewed help-seeking as weak.

#### **4.6 Research implications**

This is a small exploratory study, carried out with participants recruited from one police service. Therefore, the findings can not be considered as necessarily representative of other sectors in the same service, other police services, or indeed other organisations.

Nevertheless, findings provide useful guidance for further research and in particular for pursuing the study's findings by examining them in a larger group. Specific areas for future research are considered below.

##### **4.6.1 Other service personnel**

Similarities between the police service and other public service organisations have been suggested throughout this research. Similar research could be employed in some of these settings and, were findings were to be replicated, could inform policy development in a broader sphere.

##### **4.6.2 Police staff**

Members of police staff form a large proportion of police personnel in the Thames Valley Police Service and represent a valued part of the organisation. Given that only one member of police staff participated in the current study, it may be pertinent to conduct a similar study in order to explore the experiences of seeking help amongst

police staff. It is important to determine if there is a need for differing Welfare support provision for different employees or whether the same strategies suggested here are also applicable to other groups.

#### **4.6.3 Coping in police**

Some of these findings are not consistent with previous research, such as the extent to which police officers employ emotion-focused and problem-focused coping. More information about the type of coping strategies employed, and specifically the quality of the support gained from colleagues, is required to explore this issue further. The findings of the current study could be used to design a questionnaire, allowing information to be gained from a broader sample.

#### **4.6.4 Approach factors**

Vogel & Wester (2003) distinguish between “approach factors” and “avoidance factors” which are influential in the decision about whether or not to seek help. The findings of this study relate more clearly to avoidance factors. Future research could contribute to this field by focusing more specifically on the approach factors in this group.

#### **4.6.5 Locality of Welfare Officers**

The merits of basing Welfare Officers in individual police stations were raised in this study. However, the implications of increasing this provision are great in terms of the number of Welfare Officers needed and the confidentiality issues raised. Further research is needed to gain a broader understanding of these issues and how much support any changes would enjoy.

#### **4.6.6 Influencing behaviour**

Further research should be conducted on the applicability of models that pertain to influence behaviour in this group. One such model which could be helpful is the "social marketing approach" (Andreasen, 1994). Where relevant models are identified, they should be applied to this population and this process evaluated.

Any future research should be conducted with detailed consultation with police employees, as their unique perspective on how research is received is invaluable. This may be particularly the case for research which may be mistrusted, seen as a box-ticking exercise, or may be seen as posing a potential threat to confidentiality.

#### **4.7 Conclusions**

This study has described the help-seeking experience of eight police employees. Multiple barriers to help-seeking are identified, at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and systemic levels. The role of the culture of the police is confirmed as an important factor in the decision about whether or not to seek help, via the formation of a strong identity. This culture influences the way in which help-seeking is perceived at a systemic level, the most common attitude being that seeking help is weak. Methods by which participants protected themselves from the distressing aspects of their work, such as detaching from their emotional responses, may serve to prevent their recognition of problems. A variety of methods for coping with distressing experiences were identified, including the use of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. The perceived accessibility of help and the level of trust in one's management and other sources of support also influence help-seeking. The implications of these findings for the provision of Welfare support, and the marketing

of these services within the police are considered, with a view to increasing access to support systems.

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## Appendix 1:

### Interview Schedule

# **An Exploration of Seeking Psychological Support in the Police Service**

## **Interview schedule**

Introductions, provide information, take consent and answer any questions, demographics.

### **1. What made you want to work in the police?**

Prompts: What was it about the police that appealed to you?

What did your friends and family think about it?

Had you always wanted to be in the police or did a particular experience give you the idea?

### **2. a) What's the job like?**

Prompts: What's stressful? What's easy? What's the best/worst part? Surprises?

What's the environment like?

**b) What are most difficult aspects of your job? (Balance this with what do you like most?)**

Prompts: Can you give me an example of a difficult situation you've had to deal with in the last 6 months? Working with others: public or colleagues? Being an individual in an established group?

### **3. How do you cope when things get tough?**

Prompts: At home or at work? What do you do to get by? Can you think back to a stressful or particularly difficult episode and how you coped?

### **4. How do others in the police cope when things get tough?**

**(or Is there a "police way" of coping?)**

Do people cope with things differently? Do women and men cope in the same way?

### **5. Can you tell me about a time when you sought help following a stressful experience related to your job?**

Prompts: If you feel able could you give me a brief description of what the difficulty was?

How long did it take you to go for help?

Where did you go for help first?

Did you go for help anywhere else?

How did it affect you?

### **6. What's it like to seek help in the police force?**

Prompts: How did you feel about it?

What was the process like?

What did others think about it?

Was it easy to go ahead?

Was there a delay before you went for help?

What stopped you?

**7. a) What stops people from seeking help in the police force?**

Prompts: Is this the same for everyone, or is it just you? Is it just your job?

**b) How has seeking help affected how you see yourself? (tie in with answers to question 1 about wanting to start work in the police)**

Do other people see you differently?

Is there anything about being in the police that makes it particularly hard? (Identity?)

**8. What keeps you going?**

Or where do you get your strength from?

**Thank participant for taking part and re-raise issues of confidentiality**

Appendix 2:

Letter of approval

# University of Oxford

Medical Sciences Office

John Radcliffe Hospital, Headington, Oxford OX3 9DU

From Carol Green



## PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Ms R. Diamond  
Isis Education Centre  
Warneford Hospital  
OX3 7JX

Ref. MSD/IDREC/C1/8

22 August 2005

Dear Ms Diamond,

### CUREC checklist

I am writing to acknowledge receipt of your CUREC/1 form for your project 'An exploration of seeking Psychological support in the police service' which has now been lodged with the Medical Sciences IDREC.

The reference number for this project is MSD/IDREC/C1/8 and may I remind you that your project may be reviewed at some stage during an annual audit of projects.

You indicated that you would send me an electronic version of the form and I should be grateful if you could do this.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries about this.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Carol', followed by a horizontal line.

Carol Green (Miss)

## Appendix 3:

### Information Sheet

## **Information sheet**

02.08.05

**Title:** An Exploration of Seeking Psychological Support in the Police Service

**Researcher:** Rowan Diamond, Trainee Clinical Psychologist

**Supervised by:** Dr John Marzillier (Consultant Clinical Psychologist) and Dr Rachel Woolrich (Clinical Psychologist)

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Please take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

### **What is the purpose of this study?**

This research is about what it is like to seek support and emotional help in the Police Service. In particular, we are interested in what makes it difficult for police officers and police staff to seek or accept help internally. Through identifying these difficulties we aim to improve the process of seeking help in the Police Service.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been invited to take part as you have previously sought help via the Welfare Department. We are looking for ten people who have had this experience.

### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will be free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. A decision to take part or not to take part will not affect the standard of any care you may receive from the Welfare Department, now or in the future.

### **What will happen to me if I want to take part?**

You will be asked to meet with the researcher for a discussion, in which she would ask questions about your experiences. This will take up to an hour and a half and wherever possible will be arranged to take place in a setting convenient to you. For the purpose of the research this meeting will be audiotaped. This will aid the flow of the interview and facilitate a transcription.

**What do I have to do?**

If you would like to take part please inform the Welfare Officer who has contacted you. You will then be contacted by telephone to arrange a meeting time.

**What are the possible disadvantages/risks of taking part?**

There are no specific risks of taking part. However, you might be asked to discuss the reasons you sought help, although you can give as much or as little information as you like. You will be able to stop the discussion at any point if you feel distressed and appropriate advice or support will be provided.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

The information collected during this research will be used to advise the police service on how to make help easier to seek and accept. It may also provide them with new information about what prevents people from seeking help. Previous research experience suggests that you may find it interesting or helpful to talk about your experiences.

**Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

Yes. Only the researcher and the Welfare Officer who contacted you will know the identity of the people who agree to take part in this research. The transcripts will be anonymised and stored in a locked compartment at the Welfare Department. Access to the tapes and transcripts will be by the researcher, her academic supervisor and the examining body only.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of the study will be written in a report and submitted as part of the researcher's Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, in September 2006. The results of the study may also be written up in a peer-reviewed journal and a summary report will be shared with the Thames Valley Police Service. Quotations and information used in reports will be anonymised so that no one reading the report will know who took part.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

This research project is being carried out as part of the researcher's Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. This course is affiliated to the University of Oxford and the research will be carried out with the help of the Thames Valley Police.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been ethically reviewed by the University of Oxford's Research Ethics Committee. It has also been approved by Thames Valley Police.

If you would like any more information about the study please contact Rowan Diamond (Principal Researcher) on [Tel number].

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

## Appendix 4:

## Consent Form

## Consent form

**Title:** An Exploration of Seeking Psychological Support in the Police Service

**Researcher:** Rowan Diamond, Trainee Clinical Psychologist

**Supervised by:** Dr John Marzillier (Consultant Clinical Psychologist) and Dr Rachel Woolrich (Clinical Psychologist)

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 02.08.05 (version 1) for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time. My participation in this study will not affect any current or future treatment I receive from the Welfare Department or any related agencies.
3. I agree to having my interview audiotaped. This will aid the flow of the interview and facilitate transcription. I understand that tape recordings and transcripts of my interview will be kept in a locked compartment and stored at the Welfare department for 7 years after the end of the study before their destruction. Access to the tapes and transcripts will be by the researcher, her academic supervisor and the examining body only.
4. I understand that quotations from transcripts will be anonymised and may be used in reports.
5. I agree to take part in this study.

.....  
Name of participant

.....  
Date

.....  
Signature

.....  
Name of researcher

.....  
Date

.....  
Signature

## Annexe 1:

### Extract of analysed transcript

496 how do you know what reception you're going to get. You know, welfare's the safe  
497 one. Really.

498  
499 I: Do you think that might apply to Welfare as well, the not knowing what they will  
500 find?

501  
502 P: I think in some people's cases they don't think their problem is big enough for  
503 welfare. [Mmm] and I think that is a big... "it's not a catastrophe". "No, but it's  
504 grinding you down and it's taking a long time to resolve. Isn't that fairly wearing?"  
505 Um... I think people know it's there. I think there is a perception of weakness for  
506 some people, that they see that if they go for help... so perhaps they don't go soon  
507 enough, but by the time they've got to the manager, it's probably way down the line  
508 and well and truly within the welfare gambit. [yeah, yeah. So it develops...]. The  
509 situation has developed beyond the niggling problem and has now become an issue,  
510 which isn't necessarily all-consuming, but is impacting upon them sufficiently. If it's  
511 impacting upon them sufficiently for either anybody else to have noticed, now that's a  
512 biggie, or for them to actually say "I need some help", it's probably well and truly  
513 within the Welfare line. Welfare or occupational health. You know, it's gone beyond  
514 the trifling. Umm... I think welfare's relatively well known about because it's  
515 introduced at a very early stage in people's service. And I think people hope they'll  
516 never need it. I think some people are shocked when they first find that they come to  
517 the realisation that they are going to have to ask for help.

518  
519 I: Why do you think that might be?

520  
521 P: Because police are big strong rufty, toughy things! People, men, female,  
522 whatever... "well, yeah, you know, I know it's there but I'm a copper, it's alright".  
523 Actually I'm hurting inside, I'm like a jelly baby, and I feel absolutely rubbish. Well,  
524 if you can get over the persona and the mask that actually is a very useful thing in  
525 policing. "course I'm not scared", I'm absolutely petrified, but "course I'm alright". I  
526 mean, if you understand it for being a mask and you can realise that you might have to  
527 actually step out of your timid little shell and go "I don't like this" that's a big thing  
528 for some people. I think once you've done it once, you've got a better understanding  
529 of yourself. Ummmmm, and I think it comes back to an understanding of "you are  
530 only human". Do try and remember that".

531  
532 I: How easy is that for people to do?

533  
534 P: Mmmm. I don't think it's just police. I think it's common to most.. to the <sup>u</sup>human  
535 condition, if you like. But we are not super-beings. At the end, the world, which  
536 assumes that we can do everything, anything, right now, the can do people like myself  
537 believe we should therefore do those things and when we can't, we see ourselves as  
538 failing. [Mmmm]. We don't like failure. So, you know, you can start this wonderful  
539 cycle of grief over that. And if you actually step out of it and say "actually, I can only  
540 do what I could do, because that's all there was to do", that's quite serious for some  
541 people to have to do.

542  
543 I: What does it take for you to have to do that?

544  
545 P: Me personally? Or what I've seen?

Is it a legitimate  
problem?

Knowledge  
about welfare  
weakness-  
less acceptable

Knowledge  
about welfare  
Identity as  
a cop -  
won't need  
help

Identity as  
coppers / strong  
tough.

Mask-putting  
on a front

The experience  
can change you

Being a normal  
person / human

Being a normal  
person

Expectation  
of self -  
linked to  
identity?

think  
it's big  
enough  
now it's  
there  
help =  
weakness  
don't go =  
gets worse

welfare's  
well  
known  
Don't expect  
to have  
problems -  
shocked

police =  
big strong  
copper =  
coper  
inside is  
different  
pepp. you  
of shell  
only human

Expectation  
should be  
able to do  
everything  
sense of  
failure

## Annexe 2:

### Extract from reflective diary

## **Annexe 2: Extracts from reflective diary**

**25<sup>th</sup> October, 2005**

### **Meeting with project supervisor**

Meeting with supervisor. Concerns about homogeneity; men and women, police staff and police officers. Everyone's experiences are valid. They are all one group. We have no reason to believe they might be different from one another.

Feedback from pilot interview: A long time taken on beginning stuff, need more time on the actual help-seeking experience. Difficult to tell whether there was less here because he hadn't actually been for help.

**25<sup>th</sup> October, 2005**

### **Meeting with research tutor**

Feedback from mock interview – questions are a bit rigid – sticking to interview schedule too rigidly. Be more flexible and curious. I need to be using my clinical skills more. Choose open questions rather than making assumptions and asking for a yes or no.

**2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2005**

### **Arranging appointments with potential interviewees.**

Taking longer because people have odd shift patterns etc etc. Would really like to be able to transcribe directly after each one.

**7<sup>th</sup> November, 2005**

### **Meeting of the qualitative group.**

A practical meeting where we discussed methods of recording and decided who would pair up with who for credibility checks. Varying degrees of experience amongst us. Can sometimes sound like a massive daunting mountain to be climbed.

**15<sup>th</sup> November, 2005**

### **Conducted first interview.**

Think I spent too long being interested in stuff at the beginning which wasn't really to do with help-seeking. Seemed to be easy to talk and lots to say. Was pleased that a lot of stuff I had in my interview schedule came up without me having to prompt so it felt more like it was his ideas rather than me planting them there. Issues about trust came across and I felt I should check whether participant was happy with me using all of the information. I had expected to come out feeling as though I had conducted the interview like a clinical one, but strangely didn't feel like a therapist at all. I think I still have to use some more of my clinical skills. Perhaps because this area is so new to me and is nothing like the usual setting in which I work, the therapist thing doesn't come as easily. I really feel as though this project is going to be useful and feel a bit of pressure to do a good job.

**29<sup>th</sup> November, 2005**

### **Thoughts about interviews so far**

I have conducted four interviews now and feel that my questions are still not open enough. I wonder whether this is because the manner and the style of the people I am interacting with is quite straightforward and a bit critical of "wishy-washy" or pink and fluffy style conversation!

Some of the people I am interviewing did not decide to go to the Welfare Department on their own ie they had some prompting from others or were contacted by Welfare. However, I don't think this compromised the research as they are still seeking help and experiencing this process.

Today I interviewed a member of police staff who, it turned out did not really fit the inclusion criteria. I didn't really realise this until half way through the interview. I think I am going to have to write to him to let him know that his thoughts have been useful but won't be included in the main analysis. I will then also need to write to welfare officers and let them know that this has happened.

### **20<sup>th</sup> December, 2005**

#### **Thoughts about interviews so far**

Some of the major things that stand out from the interviews so far:

- Lots of talk about using walls/barriers/masks to hide behind
- Lots of appreciation for the welfare department
- Lots of talk about service and duty
- Lots of issues concerning relationship with management

It has been good to get people who are managers as well as people who are managed ie people of different ranks. It is striking how participants talk about really awful things. I didn't understand the words being used at first (eg "crispy critters" for burnt out corpses) and it sounded as though they were talking about an every day annoyance. I suppose for them this is every day work, from which they need to maintain a sense of distance.

### **31<sup>st</sup> January, 2006**

#### **Transcribing some interviews**

It makes me cringe to hear myself ask a question which is closed or leading. Hopefully I am doing this less now. I think these questions could be asked in a better way, but the danger is that I would then lose the flow that seems to come quite naturally when we're talking in an interview. I noticed my own reaction to listening to horrendous stories – it's almost as if I'm shutting down emotionally, too. I'm interested that the gruesome details come out so easily, but I suppose that's an effect of having a very effective coping strategy to deal with this.

### **7<sup>th</sup> February, 2006**

#### **Reflection on an interview**

The participant became distressed during our meeting today. She volunteered to complete the interview but I'm not sure how easy this was for her, with hindsight. We were able to follow the procedures set out for these circumstances and that was satisfactory. This may have affected the content of the interview quite a lot, as we spent less time talking directly about the items on the interview schedule.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2006**

#### **Transcribing interviews**

This is taking such a long time! I am quite pleased that I am doing it though, as I feel as though I am really getting familiar with the data. It can be quite frustrating if someone says something that I just can't pick up.

One participant was explaining that people sometimes don't go to the welfare department because they don't think their problem is big enough. This made me wonder about a systemic process that may be occurring. Given the perception that

welfare should only be for big things (because otherwise you are a bit weak) it may be that people only report to their colleagues that they have been to welfare when they went with a big problem. This may perpetuate the myth that welfare is only for big problems, even though it may be that people are going with perceived smaller ones but just not reporting it.

Struck by the report by a few participants that they can't answer for their colleagues. This compromises the validity of my questions in which I ask people to imagine what stops other people from seeking help.

Also interested in the fact that one participant who went through training recently couldn't remember whether the welfare department had given a talk during her training. This may have implications for the way in which the welfare department publicises itself.

**8<sup>th</sup> May, 2006**

**Impromptu meeting with Welfare officers at the welfare department.**

One welfare officer told me that he had had reports back from a participant saying that he had been impressed with the research. This is really encouraging and just what I needed to hear to keep me going!

**10<sup>th</sup> May, 2006**

**Analysis**

This is going to take a long, long time! I have spent some time on the first few transcripts, summarising in the left hand column. It is really hard to just keep this to summarising and not start interpreting already. I feel as though there are going to be hundreds of potential themes emerging and already feel quite overwhelmed by this. I have signed up to an IPA forum which is an email group for people interested in IPA. It is useful to get emails from others who are using IPA, particularly one which commented that it is not a question of **if** you feel out of control and overwhelmed during analysis, but **when**. Phew.

**15<sup>th</sup> May, 2006**

**Analysis**

I have completed left and right hand margin coding and have written each potential emerging theme from interview one (200!) on a piece of paper. I am now playing with these bits of paper to try and make sense of how they fit together. I am finding this quite helpful, although quite time-consuming.

**22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2006**

**Meeting with IPA buddy**

Talking through my preliminary analysis on one or two transcripts has helped me to make sense of it a bit more. My buddy can see where I've got my ideas from, which is reassuring. She is a few steps ahead of me, and I am ready to begin credibility checks for her work. It is nice to imagine that I might get to that stage soon!

**13<sup>th</sup> June, 2006**

**Meeting with project supervisor**

Spent a long time talking through my table of themes (which is enormous!). It was really encouraging that the themes make sense to my supervisor, who has spent a lot of time working with the police. It really helps to explain my themes and where they have come from. This process has challenged a few of my ideas and confirmed others.

**18<sup>th</sup> June, 2006**

**Beginning to write up**

I have begun to think about writing up my introduction. I revisited my dissertation proposal for inspiration and was very pleasantly surprised to find that what I had written fitted really well with what I was beginning to find.

**28<sup>th</sup> June, 2006**

**Writing up results**

I have enjoyed writing up the results section and feel surprised at how easy it has been. I suppose this is testimony to the validity of the results.

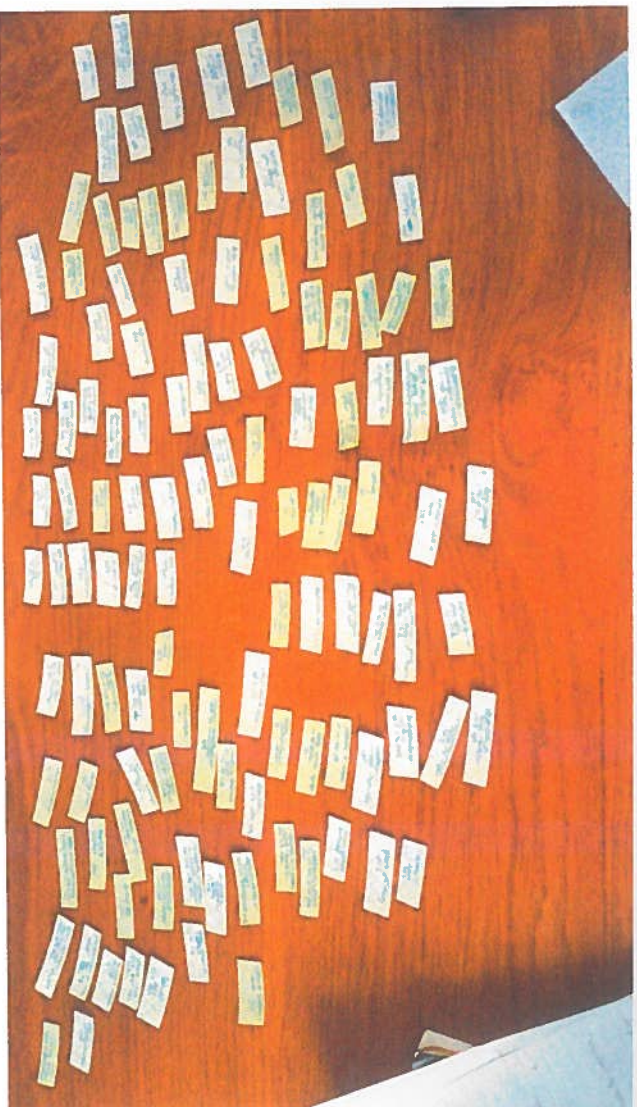
**3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2006**

**Writing up the discussion**

It feels really important to do justice to the discussion but feels difficult to write the main body of it. However, I have really enjoyed considering the service implications and really hope that some of the ideas will be useful.

### Annexe 3:

Photos of analysis in progress



a) Analysis of one transcript



b) Analysis of all transcripts. Each transcript is represented by a different colour