

**An exploration of female frontline officers' experiences of potentially traumatic events:
an IPA study.**

**Thesis submitted to London Metropolitan University in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology**

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September 2023

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Abstract

Background: Recent research findings have indicated damaging consequences of occupational trauma among police officers (Brewin et al, 2020), with higher rates of PTSD and C-PTSD found compared with the civilian population (Baker, 2020). The likelihood of gender differentiation has been recognised, however studies utilising clinical measures, have produced inconclusive findings (Brewin et al, 2020; MacEachern et al, 2019; Syed et al, 2020). **Aims:** The present study provides novel insights into female officers experiences of potentially traumatic events within response policing in the UK. **Sample:** Purposive sampling was employed to select participants for the study and recruitment carried out through a snowball method by approaching the researcher's existing contacts within the participating UK police constabulary. Emails were sent to officers identified as occupying 'frontline' roles, with posters placed around police bases and canteens. Potential participants completed a screening survey to ensure homogeneity and that interviews would not be harmful to the officer's psychological wellbeing. **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five officers, in different ranks, who had significant exposure to potentially traumatic incidents at work, two pilot interviews were conducted to develop/inform the interview schedule and ensure overall trustworthiness and utility. All participants opted for online access, which was offered to ensure convenience, flexibility and minimum demands on time, whilst acknowledging the possibility of less non-verbal information being gathered. **Analysis:** Interviews were analysed employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to move beyond the correlational data currently available. **Findings:** All participants fell below the clinical threshold on psychometric measures, yet during interviews over half reported trauma-related symptoms, including significant and ongoing changes to their personality. The findings indicated a clear influence of the police culture on female officers' coping strategies; particularly their emotional expression and processing and on the interpersonal support they received from peers and from

superiors. Participants were critical of the optional nature of psychological interventions, within the culture of invincibility, whilst further factors hindering engagement emerged as fear of losing control of emotions and traumatic stress is 'part of the job'. There were calls for mandatory debriefing, periods of leave for rest and recuperation following critical incidents and annual psychological screening. Findings are pertinent to police organisations and the therapeutic community, and a wealth of recommendations have been highlighted.