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Child abuse investigation

An in-depth analysis of how police officers perceive and cope with daily work challenges

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the current study was two-fold: to explore police officers' perceptions of the daily challenges involved in child abuse investigation and how those challenges affect their ability to undertake child abuse investigations, and to explore how these challenges are managed on a daily basis.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employed a qualitative research design. In-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of 25 police officers working in child abuse units across three Australian states.

Findings – Inductive thematic analysis revealed that heavy caseload and collaboration with other professional groups are two key sources of negative work stress frequently associated with child abuse investigation. Further, despite the provision of organisational strategies aimed at reducing work stress, the officers tended to rely predominantly on informal coping mechanisms.

Research limitations/implications – This study has raised many questions for further research aimed at developing interventions to assist police organisations in managing work stress.

Originality/value – This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the key challenges associated with child abuse investigation and the coping mechanisms employed for overcoming these challenges from the unique perspective of police officers authorised to investigate child abuse.

Policing can be a stressful occupation. While there is some debate about whether police work is more or less stressful than other occupations (Hart *et al.*, 1993), it is well established that police officers are exposed to daily stressors (Biggam *et al.*, 1997; Brown and Campbell, 1990; Brown *et al.*, 1999). Work stress can obviously affect the psychological wellbeing of professionals in both positive and negative ways (Hart *et al.*, 1995). For instance, some types of stress can facilitate performance, enhancing a professional's level of motivation and job satisfaction (Greller *et al.*, 1992). However, other types of stress can have adverse consequences not only for the health of the employee but also for the entire organisation (Lambert *et al.*, 2003). The impact of negative stress is particularly pronounced in those professions such as policing, where the skills, ability and knowledge of the employees are essential to the quality of service offered (Balfour and Neff, 1993).

One area of police work that exposes employees to negative stress is child abuse investigation (Violanti and Gehrke, 2004). This is indicated in both case law as well as the clinical literature on vicarious trauma[1]. In recent years, several common-law psychiatric injury claims have been made against police organisations for failing to "take reasonable precautions" to reduce psychiatric injuries among employees who are exposed to crimes against children. One successful case involved a female Australian police officer who was awarded $750,000 in compensation for mental injury – she was diagnosed as suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (*New South Wales* v. *Seedsman*, 2000). In the clinical literature, the association between exposure to client's trauma materials (e.g. child sexual abuse) and trauma-related symptoms (e.g. sleep and/or mood disturbance, suicidal thoughts) among professionals is well established (Cornille and Woodard Meyers, 1999). The risk of such symptoms seems to be heightened among females (Kassam-Adams, 1995; Martin *et al.*, 1986), those with a personal history of childhood maltreatment (Follette *et al.*, 1994; Kassam-Adams, 1995) and large caseloads (Brady *et al.*, 1999; Kassam-Adams, 1995; Schauben and Frazier, 1995). Further, one study suggested that law enforcement professionals have a higher risk of psychological injury from exposure to traumatic case material than mental health professionals (Follette *et al.*, 1994). The explanation proposed was that law enforcement professionals are less likely to seek therapeutic intervention to prevent or moderate their stress reactions to case material.

Exposure to traumatic material, however, is not the only type of negative stress that child abuse investigators are exposed to. The process of investigating and prosecuting child abuse is, by its very nature, a complex and demanding area of work. In particular, child abuse investigation is associated with heavy caseloads (Anderson, 2000), short deadlines (Anderson, 2000), and high staff turnover (Graef and Hill, 2000). High workload, in turn, can lead to other organisational problems such as inadequate supervisory support (Samantrai, 1992) and blurred boundaries of roles (Markiewicz, 1996). Obviously not all employees who are exposed to these pressures develop negative symptomatology (Cornille and Woodard Meyers, 1999). However, there is increasing pressure on organisations to ensure that the risk of psychological injury is minimised for all employees and that strategies are implemented to ensure early identification of trauma symptoms and effective intervention when they occur (Bell *et al.*, 2003).

So what strategies should police organisations adopt to minimise the detrimental effects of negative stress from high caseload and exposure to traumatic case material? At present, the current literature offers little basis to answer this question. The majority of research has focused solely on the measurement of stress symptoms among various professional groups using objective clinical assessment tools (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2001, for a review). There has been relatively little examination of the nature of the stressors and the ways in which employees perceive and respond to these stressors. Further, prior stress-related studies among professionals who work with child abuse victims have generally included social workers and therapists (Anderson, 2000; Cornille and Woodard Meyers, 1999; Horwitz, 1998; Shapiro *et al.*, 1999; Stevens and Higgins, 2002). When police participants have been recruited, they have tended to involve those officers who are not regularly exposed to cases of child abuse or specially trained to work in the area (Biggam *et al.*, 1997; Brown and Campbell, 1990; Brown *et al.*, 1999; Martin *et al.*, 1986; Toch, 2002; Violanti and Gehrke, 2004).

The current study addresses the limitations in the existing literature by exploring in detail police officers' perceptions of the challenges involved in conducting child abuse investigations as well as their coping mechanisms. The participants involved police officers from a number of different child abuse units, who individually participated in interviews that elicited in-depth information about their daily job experiences. While the interviews were open-ended, they aimed to identify which stressors (if any) the officers perceived to be negative and the strategies that helped or hindered the officers' ability to cope with the stressors. We propose that officers' perceptions of their work experience is crucial background information for the development of intervention programs, even though they do not provide an objective measure of their coping. For example, qualitative interviews can provide insight into officers' perceived level of support for current intervention strategies (e.g. the provision of internal mental health services). Further, preoccupation with negative work stressors will likely influence officers' ability to function effectively and to fulfil essential tasks associated with child abuse investigation.

Method

Participants

The participants included 25 police officers, located across three eastern states of Australia. All of these police officers were currently working in the area of child abuse investigation and were responsible for responding to complaints of suspected abuse (both current and historic cases). The participants were recruited with the assistance of managerial staff in 14 different child abuse investigation units. Managers were approached initially, to explain the purpose of the research and to seek the names of potential participants. After receiving a list of names, potential participants were invited to partake in the individual interviews. All of the officers consented. The final sample size was determined by data saturation, that is, when no new information was being obtained about the topics of inquiry (Sim and Wright, 2000).

We intentionally recruited a diverse sample of participants, using a technique referred to as "maximum variation sampling". This method enabled the researchers to examine the breadth of the phenomenon of study and to identify themes that were common across a wide range of child abuse investigators (Patton, 1990). Demographic details, which were sought from the participants at the time of the interview, confirmed that the sample was indeed heterogenous. It consisted of 14 female and 11 male police officers, with approximately equal numbers of officers from three eastern states of Australia. Within each state, participants came from

diverse areas including metropolitan units (n=15), large rural centres (n=6), and small rural centres (n=4). Further, the officers level of experience in the field of child abuse investigation ranged from 2 months to 17 years (M=5 years), and in the police force in general, 3 to 24-years (M=12 years). The ranks of the officers ranged from constable to detective sergeant[2].

Procedure

The individual in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author, and ranged in duration from 40 to 100 minutes. All interviews were conducted at the participants' workplace, except in one case where the participant preferred to meet in a local café. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to generate discussion about a range of themes identified in the academic literature as likely to be important lines of inquiry (e.g. victim empathy). The participants were initially invited to talk about how they had come to be working in the area of child abuse investigation and their perceptions about their job and experiences. When negative stressors were volunteered, the interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on how these challenges affected their ability to carry out their role as child abuse investigators, as well as the way they responded to these challenges. Importantly, the interviewer did not presume that the participants faced challenges that had a negative impact on their psychological well being.

A number of steps were taken to ensure that the participants had the autonomy to direct the discussion toward experiences and concerns that were personally relevant, and to attribute their own meaning to these experiences. First, the themes outlined in the interview schedule were broad in nature. Second, a recursive or conversational style of interviewing was used allowing the researcher the flexibility to pursue any lines of inquiry raised by the participants that were not outlined in the interview schedule. Third, the interviewer was a largely passive participant in the conversation at all times, asking only broad open-ended questions to encourage further elaboration and to seek clarification.

Data management and analysis

All of the interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim and double-checked for accuracy. The interview data were organised, coded and analysed using the qualitative software program N6. The analytical process of identifying themes, categories and interrelationships within the data set was informed by principles of grounded theory (Browne and Sullivan, 1999). That is, the themes were inductively derived and grounded within the dataset. Additional insights gleaned from the empirical literature helped to shape the analysis and situate the current findings within the context of the broader research literature (Layder, 1993).

The coding process commenced with the authors reading a subset of transcripts to discuss and debate emerging themes and to develop a coding scheme. The value of multiple coding is not to do with the degree of concordance between the researchers, but rather in the content of the interpretive discussions (Barbour, 2001). Such discussions aided in refining the coding scheme to ensure that it adequately captured the content of the interviews. The N6 software program enhanced the sophistication of the analysis by facilitating the retrieval and analysis of individual themes as well as any interactions occurring between themes. For example, sources of negative work stress could be investigated according to the officers' state of employment. This "interaction" revealed that despite minor differences that reflect the

various states procedures and policies, for the most part, the stressors were similar in all three states.

Results

All the participants spoke freely about the challenges they faced when conducting child abuse investigations. Further, while no participant appeared acutely distressed at the time of the interview, each identified that their job involved multiple daily challenges that were potential sources of negative stress. Although a range of negative stressors was identified, the discussions tended to focus on two stressors; the heavy caseload and professional collaboration. Interestingly, the contents of the children's disclosures were not perceived to be a significant source of negative stress even though the participants were aware of the detrimental impact that sexual, physical abuse and neglect has on children's development. Many participants explained that a certain degree of desensitisation occurs (except in extreme cases such as abuse resulting in death) which enables them to function in an empathetic yet detached manner. The task-focused and criminal aspect of policing was seen to assist the participants to remain emotionally distanced from child victims to varying degrees:

I think that you need to maintain your professionalism. That really helps with coping because you realise that you've got a job to do. You need to do a really good job of the investigation and a really good job of the court brief. If you focus on the victim and the witnesses and not on the effect it has on you, it seems to help (Female Detective Senior Constable).

For other participants, the emotional distance from victims was implied by the fact that the client group did not feature prominently in their discussions about work-related challenges. Each of the two main stressors identified by the officers is briefly described in turn, followed by a description of the participants' perceptions of how these challenges were currently being managed.

Heavy caseload

Heavy caseload was identified as a major source of work stress among all but four of the participants. As illustrated in the quote below, the continual cycle of child abuse notifications and the urgent nature of these cases were an ever-present source of pressure for the participants:

I guess the immediate stress for me is the continual work coming in, and not being able to get on top of it … Staff are going out, doing one job, coming back and immediately getting another job and going back out again. They never really catch up on their paperwork. That is a big stress for me as a supervisor (Female, Detective Sergeant).

Interestingly, the only participants who did not highlight the heavy caseload were from metropolitan offices in a state (Victoria) where police officers have a narrower role in the investigation of child abuse. In Victoria, the officers provide an initial response (they compile a brief of evidence containing witness statements and any forensic evidence) in the investigation phase. Cases that are deemed suitable for criminal trial are then passed onto Criminal Investigation Unit (CIU) detectives who are responsible for instigating prosecutorial action. In the other states, the officers (usually detectives) undertake all aspects of a criminal investigation. This finding, however, should not be taken to mean that the system in Victoria reduces work-related stress. The metropolitan Victorian officers reported that collaboration

with detectives did sometimes create stress (this is discussed in next section), and they expressed the desire to have greater involvement (as in other states) in all aspects of the criminal investigation.

The primary reason why the participants perceived the heavy caseload to be a negative source of stress was that it could potentially compromise the quality of their investigations by reducing the time allocated to cases and to training and supervision. Although the participants did not cite any objective evidence to indicate that their work was impeded by time limitations, they frequently reported feelings of guilt associated with having to prioritise their workload. Another emotion sometimes associated with the high workload was resentment that child abuse work was "under-valued" compared to other areas of policing, not just in Australia, but globally. In other words, many of the participants perceived that the units in which they worked were disadvantaged in terms of resources because child abuse investigation was awarded lower priority than other crimes such as homicide and drug trafficking. Feelings of anger and resentment were exacerbated among the rural participants who perceived that they were additionally disadvantaged because of their physical isolation:

We [the officers in my unit] are geographically disadvantaged out here. We don't have a forensic medical officer, yet we still have to take sexual assault victims to a doctor within 72 hours. It is not uncommon for us to be driving a victim to the city in the middle of the night. Officers in the metropolitan region don't have that added burden (Male Senior Constable located in a small rural centre).

Among all officers, the perceived consequences of negative feelings associated with high workload were decreased job satisfaction and reduced longevity of employment.

Collaboration with other professionals

The second major source of stress identified by the participants was the need to collaborate closely with other professionals when undertaking child abuse investigations. This topic was awarded at least the same amount of attention during the interviews as the heavy workload. Obviously professionals within the child abuse area (e.g. medical practitioners, child protection workers, police officers, prosecutors) do not work in isolation. A coordinated effort across and within organisations is needed to compile all evidence required to protect abused children and to prosecute offenders while minimising the need for children to be repeatedly interviewed about their abusive experience. The focus of discussion regarding professional collaboration was directed primarily toward child protection service (CPS) workers and legal professionals (e.g. prosecutors, defence lawyers, solicitors, judges, magistrates). This is not surprising, given that these professionals collaborate most intensely with police officers from child abuse units.

So why was collaboration with other professionals perceived to be a source of stress? Two main reasons were provided. First, stress arises from disagreements among professionals about whether there is sufficient evidence to pursue a case of child abuse. While such conflicts reportedly arose among professionals within police organisations, and between police officers and prosecutors, they were particularly prominent among police officers and CPS workers. This was perceived to be due, albeit in part, to the high level of collaboration between these organisations (i.e. each state of Australia adopts a model of joint investigation between CPS and police organisations) and to different organisational missions. Child

protection because of its welfare, rather than criminal focus, adopts a different standard of proof than that adopted by police organisations:

CPS workers don't seem to understand the constraints that we have because they have a lot more flexibility and scope than we have. They don't have to prove things – for them, everything is on a balance of probabilities … So they can take kids out of a home because they *think* they're being abused whereas we have to actually *prove* it (Female Plain Clothes Senior Constable).

Further, it was noted by several police officers that CPS and police organisations attract very different "kinds" of people, due in part to the different nature of the work and recruitment criteria across the two organisations. In Australia, police participants are generally older and more experienced in their job than CPS workers by the time they are recruited to specialty child abuse units. Further, some participants reported that law-enforcement, by its very nature, encourages a more "black and white" way of thinking compared to social work:

Although we're working with the same child, the average CPS worker and police officer are *very* different people. Police officers are much more black and white in their thinking and our perceptions of cases are therefore often quite different to those of CPS workers (Female Plain Clothes Constable).

Second, conflicts sometimes arise from collaboration because of the different governing and operating processes between organisations. With regard to CPS workers, such operating differences included; incongruent office hours between agencies (which sometimes led to delays in investigations[3]), misunderstandings regarding the criteria for referring cases to the police, and inconsistencies with regard to the level of autonomy in decision-making awarded to different professionals. The participants felt that CPS workers are not entrusted with the same level of autonomy compared with that of police. Decisions must be supported by CPS team leaders, which can cause delays for police when both police and CPS workers require joint action.

With regard to legal professionals, conflicts usually result from frustrations about the legal system *per se*. The participants frequently complained about the different standard of questioning expected from lawyers versus police – while best-practice guidelines in investigative interviewing consist of open-ended non-leading questions, cross-examination largely comprises leading and closed questions that aim to confuse and intimidate the child witness and to identify inconsistencies in their testimony. Another frequent complaint is that the prosecution of sexual offences against children is such a complex, unpredictable and challenging area of law. The reasons for decisions passed down by the court are not easily understood by, or explained to police:

I don't usually get to hear the child's evidence. At the end of the trial the solicitor or barrister closes the case and then moves straight onto the next one. I don't usually get to hear the criticism out of a matter, nor do I get a critique of my interview. How can I improve if I'm not being criticised? (Male Detective Senior Constable).

The above-mentioned conflicts need to be considered within the context that the participants' feel a great sense of responsibility for the outcome of cases. Without evidence to the contrary, participants assumed that negative outcomes (i.e. cases where the prosecution did not proceed or the court dismissed charges on the basis of insufficient "particulars") were due to

inadequate briefs of evidence or witness statements. This in turn provoked feelings of guilt and anxiety among the participants. In most part, uncertainty with regard to the legal professionals' reaction to their interviewing led them to use a more specific or direct line of questioning in the hope that more evidence would increase the chance of particularisation:

Getting feedback about what is best practice in relation to the specific problems that you encounter is very important … I agree that you need to be open-ended when interviewing children but one thing that isn't taken into account is the need for closed questions to get specific information … You need to close those questions down at some point to cover those particular elements, proofs and peripheral matters that you *know* will be *very* important (Male, Detective Senior Constable).

Mechanisms for reducing work stress

Each of the participants in the study identified strategies that had been implemented by their organisations to minimise the detrimental effect of work-related stressors. While a variety of strategies (both formal and informal) were discussed, the main strategies included the provision of internal mental health services (at no cost to the participants) and co-training and co-location of police and CPS workers. Interestingly, these services were met with mixed feelings. On the positive side, co-training and co-location were seen to enhance professionals' understanding of the different organisational missions and to promote more acceptance and respect of the organisational boundaries, as well as communication between professionals jointly assigned to each case. Further, it enabled a sharing of each professional's powers (e.g. police officers can take out apprehended violence orders and child protection workers have access to children's medical records) to get the necessary information for each case. However, the downside of co-location is that it encroached on the participants' sense of professional autonomy and provided more opportunities for personal tensions due to inherent differences in the way the two professional groups' perceived cases:

I think if I was co-located with child protection workers, it would be more difficult because I'd have to be much more careful about what I said in the office (Male Detective Senior Constable).

With regard to psychological services, many participants acknowledged that they were reluctant to seek formal psychological counselling. They identified a stigma attached to mental health services (i.e. seeing a psychologist reflected an inability to cope). Further, many of the participants were fearful of the potential negative repercussions from having visits to a psychologist noted on their work record, even though they knew the service was supposed to be confidential. The participants' reluctance to use psychologists was unlikely to be due solely to their experiences with such professionals. Few officers had actually seen a psychologist before and the officers who were mandated to attend quarterly psychological sessions expressed similar concerns to those who had not used the services:

I couldn't go and talk to them [psychologists] because you don't know what they're going to do. I don't want to lose my job … That's a fear I know all police have, which is wrong. The service is there for you (Male Detective Sergeant).

All of the participants clearly articulated their preference for informal coping mechanisms. While the participants identified a host of personal and social coping strategies, collegial support, office humour and the use of alternate rewards for measuring job success were

perceived to be most beneficial in diffusing work tensions. Each of these coping strategies is briefly described in turn.

Collegial support

Fellow police officers were perceived by all participants to provide a less threatening avenue for debriefing. The perceived benefit of talking to colleagues was that they knew first hand, the stressors of working in child abuse investigation and could offer advice (which was readily available when needed) based on their own similar experiences. This helped to normalise the participants' emotional responses. Further, colleagues could offer practical support by sharing the participants' caseloads during periods of major stress, to prevent an accumulation of cases:

If anything bothers us we always just talk to each other. As long as you can talk to your office mates then you'll be fine (Male Plain Clothes Senior Constable).

Personally I only talk to people in here [the office] about things that are bothering me. I'd rather talk to someone who knows what I am talking about than go home and talk to someone who really doesn't understand (Female Senior Constable).

Office humour

Humour was viewed as a highly valuable strategy in releasing work stress and in maintaining a working atmosphere that was light-hearted. Maintaining a positive mood and releasing tensions was achieved by making jokes, laughing with colleagues in a bantering fashion and seeing certain aspects of the case work in a comical light. While black humour (i.e. the juxtaposition of morbid and farcical elements to give a humorous effect) might be seen as inappropriate to outsiders, participants emphasised that the intent was never derogatory nor was amusement achieved at the expense of child victims:

There's probably black humour in the office and I've found that to be common in areas like child abuse. I suppose you could liken it to nurses who have a very different humour to other members of the public. It's their way of dealing with the stress of the incidents that they confront all the time. It's not a derogatory thing (Male Detective Sergeant).

Interestingly, one officer who had only recently commenced working in child abuse recalled her initial attitude to the way that the casework was sometimes described and how her attitude had changed over time, to a point of recognising that black humour actually serves as a buffer to internalising children's traumatic experiences.

Measurement of job success

Finally, many participants highlighted the importance of measuring their work success using alternative criteria to the number of charges or convictions. Several participants considered that their role was more dynamic than just that of child abuse investigator. It involved the ability to relate to and help people in the face of adversity, and to protect children. Further, the participants perceived that they were required to fulfil multiple roles such as that of counsellor, victim liaison officer and police public relations officer. These multiple roles allowed the participants to seek job satisfaction from alternate indicators such as client

gratitude, praise from superiors and colleagues who acknowledge their hard work, and better police-community relations:

I love the work. It's terrific … I remember the first few weeks I started working here [child abuse unit]. I couldn't believe that people actually thank you for the work you do. It's very satisfying. I think this is the most satisfying role I have fulfilled in the police force (Female, Senior Constable).

Discussion

Consistent with past research involving other professional groups (Anderson, 2000; Cornille and Woodard Meyers, 1999; Horwitz, 1998; Shapiro *et al.*, 1999; Stevens and Higgins, 2002), all the police officers in this study perceived that child abuse investigation work involved many daily stressors. The two main sources of stress within our heterogeneous sample were heavy caseload, and the need to collaborate with other professional groups (particularly CPS workers and legal professionals). The fact that these are distinct challenges for police officers is not a unique finding of this study. Concerns about the high caseload of child abuse investigators have been expressed in numerous previous papers (Aarons *et al.*, 2004; Anderson, 2000; Bull and Milne, 2004; Kebbell and Milne, 1998). Further, numerous authors have highlighted the tensions that arise from inter-agency collaboration in the area of child abuse investigation (Brandon *et al.*, 2005; Reder and Duncan, 2003). Collaborative tensions are inherent in child abuse work within those countries where key professionals such as doctors and teachers are mandated to report suspected child abuse, and where joint investigation between CPS workers and police officers is required (Lloyd and Burman, 1996).

The major contribution of this study is that it has described the perceptions of a diverse sample of police officers who work predominantly in the area of child abuse investigation. Overall, the work-related challenges arising from high workload and inter-agency collaboration were not viewed as positive challenges. Rather, the need to provide briefs in a timely manner and to share expertise with different professional groups was viewed as a negative challenge, which decreased the officers' sense of job satisfaction. It is likely that these perceptions or attributions were mediated (albeit in part) by the strategies utilised by the officers to deal with conflicts or pressures when they arose. The coping strategies reported by the current participants included:

- debriefing and sharing of caseload with immediate colleagues;
- workplace humour; and
- de-emphasis of the law-enforcement job aspect and a focus on the multiple roles of child abuse investigators.

It is possible that these strategies could be exacerbating the level of professional insularity and conflict between different professional groups (Woody, 2005). Indeed, humour and the strong sense of camaraderie between police may act as a "double-edged sword" serving to further isolate and discriminate police officers from outsiders (e.g. other professionals, family members and the community) (Brown and Campbell, 1994; Mulkay, 1988; Skevington and White, 1998; Woody, 2005; Young, 1995). Further, the strategies may be regarded as reactive rather than constructive in nature. In other words, while the strategies adopted by the officers could be effective in diffusing feelings of tension when they arise, they do not address the underlying source of tension and thereby do not reduce the likelihood of it recurring. The

continual cycle and repetitive nature of work-based conflicts and pressures could exacerbate professionals' feelings of being powerless, inconsequential or incompetent.

So what strategies would be more effective for dealing with the challenges of high workload and inter-agency collaboration? The prior literature related to the management and planning of children's services suggests that strategies are needed that facilitate three aspects. These include:

1. accurate identification and interpretation of conflicts among all involved parties;
2. effective communication; and
3. the development of feasible solutions (through sharing of resources and expertise, Brandon *et al.*, 2005).

According to Woody (2005), psychologists could play a valuable role in the development of strategies (e.g. problem-solving strategies), which could assist in overcoming work challenges. Further, regular case-conferencing between key stakeholders (including police investigators, child protection workers, prosecutors, and medical practitioners) offers another established method of achieving these goals (Scott *et al.*, 1995). Such meetings could provide a forum for open discussion about potential problems and for brainstorming strategies that would enable the professionals to work more effectively. The potential benefit of regular case-conferencing is heightened by the fact that the conflicts reported by the participants were tangible or largely practical concerns such as a lack of critical feedback, inappropriate referrals and incongruent office hours.

The likelihood of regular case-conferencing reducing inter-agency conflicts and increasing productivity would be increased if attendance and provision of reports was compulsory (i.e. not dependent on time constraints or whether professionals perceive that feedback is required). Further, for critical feedback to be most effective, case-conferences between legal professionals and police officers would need to be held while the content was fresh in the professionals' memories (i.e. at the end of a trial or when a decision is made to drop the charges or discontinue a case in question). While mandatory case conferences would be costly in terms of time and resources, the cost would probably be offset by a significant reduction in stress-related work claims by police, which reportedly cost the state of Victoria (Australia) $6.5 million in 2004 (Dowling, 2005). Further, stress-minimising interventions could enhance professionals' work performance in other critical areas.

Another contribution of this study is that it has raised questions about the perceived occurrence, or lack thereof, of vicarious trauma among police officers who investigate child abuse. Irrespective of the personal characteristics of the officer (e.g. background, level of experience, gender), the cases themselves were not perceived to be a major source of stress for the participants. This finding is in contrast to prior studies involving CPS workers, therapists where a strong association has been found between exposure to client's trauma materials (e.g. child sexual abuse) and trauma-related symptoms (Cornille and Woodard Meyers, 1999; Violanti and Gehrke, 2004). Overall, the current study raises interesting questions for researchers regarding why such an association was not evident in this study. Do these findings reflect an inability among the officers to accurately identify the source of negative work stress and/or the impact of negative case material (e.g. denial or projection)? To what extent does the nature of police work (which is very task focused, and criminal rather than welfare focused) offer police officers protection against trauma-related symptoms? Given the results of recent psychiatric injury claims (*New South Wales* v.

Seedsman, 2000) where police organisations have been criticised for not taking adequate precautions to reduce psychiatric injuries among employees exposed to crimes against children, further research is urgently warranted.

More research is also warranted regarding the issue of work-based humour and social support within police organisations. What is it about these informal strategies (if any) that assist in minimising the sombre nature of child abuse investigation work? Obviously, these strategies promote a sense of social solidarity and morale within team networks (Pogrebin and Poole, 1988), however, the precise value (if any) in mitigating the adverse effects of stress has not yet been empirically demonstrated. One recent longitudinal study has demonstrated that supervisory support, as opposed to peer support, is more critical for ensuring job satisfaction and longevity of employment within police organisations (Kalimo *et al.*, 2003). Perhaps the effect of different types of support is moderated by communication style such as the ease with which police professionals talk about their own psychological symptomatology and the quality of the relationships in general between staff and their supervisors (Stephens and Long, 2000).

In conclusion, this study provided an in-depth account of the key challenges confronting child abuse investigators, and how these professionals respond to these challenges on a daily basis. While the sample recruited in the current study was small, the participants were from diverse backgrounds and the findings (apart from the absence of discussion relating to victim empathy) were relatively consistent with the broader international literature involving similar professionals who respond to complaints of child abuse[4] (Anderson, 2000; Brandon *et al.*, 2005; Reder and Duncan, 2003). Owing to the rich yield of data provided by qualitative methodology, this study has raised many interesting questions for future research aimed at developing interventions to assist police organisations in managing work stress. Managing work stress is not only essential for protecting the wellbeing of individual employees (and maintaining duty of care obligations), but it is also fundamental for the overall functioning and efficiency of police organisations (Cotton and Hart, 2003).

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