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**“I put my ‘Police-head’ on”: coping strategies for working with sexual offending material**

**Abstract**

This paper explores the coping strategies of UK Police staff who are exposed to sexual offence material (SOM). Eleven Police staff completed a questionnaire then took part in semi-structured interviews. Themes were identified using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This paper explores the theme ‘Coping strategies for working directly with material’, focusing on the most common strategies employed: ‘Detachment’, ‘Avoidance’, and ‘Process-driven’ approaches. Links between coping and different features of SOM are examined, including victim characteristics and audio content. The impact of organisational factors which make coping strategies more or less effective are also explored, along with potential sources of support.

**Key words:** sexual offending material; Police; emotional regulation; coping strategies; interpretative phenomenological analysis

Exposure to material relating to sexual offending is a key feature of the role of Police Officers and civilian Police staff, particularly in teams such as public protection units, CID, and specialist online child abuse investigation teams. The dramatic increase in reporting of child sexual abuse over the last four years (Bentley, O'Hagan, Raff, & Bhatti, 2016) and the proliferation of offences such as producing indecent images of children, online solicitation and grooming (Bryce, 2017) means that the volume and intensity of direct exposure to sexual offence material for professionals is increasing (Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2015). Exposure includes viewing indecent images of the sexual abuse of children, interviewing victims and perpetrators of sexual offences, watching and reading online communication

within perpetrator networks, and reading electronic communications in which victims are being groomed by perpetrators (Wolak & Mitchell, 2009). In order to support Police staff in undertaking their duties, it is important to understand the strategies they use to cope with exposure to this material, the usefulness of these strategies, and the organisational factors which may help or hinder the efficacy of the coping mechanisms employed.

Within the small body of literature exploring Police exposure to sexual offence material, the focus has primarily been on examining the impact the work has had on the psychological well-being and behaviour of staff. Police samples examined in previous studies are primarily US based 'Internet crimes against children' task force staff (Craun, Bourke, & Coulson, 2015; Wolak & Mitchell, 2009) or Internet Child Exploitation (ICE) team members (Powell, Cassematis, Benson, Smallbone & Wortley, 2015). Impact has been framed in terms of Burnout (Maslach, 1981), Secondary Traumatic Stress (Figley, 1995) or Vicarious Traumatization (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). The DSM – 5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) now recognises that those who are repeatedly exposed to trauma through hearing or seeing the event indirectly as part of their work are more vulnerable to PTSD, and makes specific reference to sexual assault and exposure to trauma through various media. The updated definition of PTSD therefore arguably renders the construct 'Secondary Traumatic Stress' obsolete in the context of research exploring exposure to sexual trauma in the workplace.

Factors found to affect coping ability in professionals working with sexual trauma include personal trauma history (Way, VanDeusen, Martin, Applegate, & Jandle, 2004) and high levels of rumination and empathy (Clarke, 2011). Lower levels of negative reactivity have been linked to greater emotional intelligence (Sandhu, Rose, Rostill-Brookes & Thrift, 2012; Dean & Barnett, 2010) and having a positive perspective, for example the belief that individuals have the capacity to change for the better (Slater & Lambie, 2010). There are

inconsistencies within the literature regarding the impact of factors such as the length of time a person has spent in a role involving sexual offences. Some studies show higher levels of negative sequelae for less experienced practitioners, while others indicate a greater impact for those who have spent many years in the role (Steed & Bicknell, 2015). Highly experienced staff have shown signs of permanent emotional hardening or dulling due to the cumulative effects of working with trauma material (Sandhu et al, 2012), which may in itself be seen as a coping strategy.

When reviewing studies of practitioners who work directly with perpetrators of sexual offences and those who work only with the materials relating to the sexual offences, Leicht (2008) identified a marked difference in coping strategies. Those who work closely with the offender but not the victim, such as Probation Officers, tended to employ *emotion-based* coping strategies, such as separating the offender from their behaviour, attempting to understand the motivation to offend, and recognising some clients as also being victims by looking at their personal history of abuse. Those who had little or no contact with the offender as part of their role, such as Police staff examining computer-based evidence of offending, tended to employ *problem-solving* coping strategies, including humour, varying their workload, and keeping firm work/life boundaries. Nash's 2014 study of Police 'Offender Managers', who have much more contact with perpetrators of sexual offences than most Police roles, found that officers identified changes to their assumptions about offenders, finding themselves able to see the individual and their crime as separate entities. This indicates that different strategies for coping with the work may be as much a product of the specific role the person undertakes as it is a result of the organisational culture. There remains a paucity of data around how individuals actually approach their work in a way which attempts to insulate them against psychological distress, while maintaining professional efficacy. This paper provides empirical data to further illuminate how Police staff approach working with traumatic sexual material, and explores how

these strategies may be impacted by organisational and operational factors.

Within the coping literature, distinct clusters of strategies have emerged. Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, (1989) developed the COPE inventory, which involved the development of 14 separate coping factors. 'Task', 'Emotion' and 'Avoidance' strategies are identified within Endler and Parker's (1990) Multi-Dimensional Coping Inventory (MCI) too, while Roger, Jarvis and Najarian (1993) built on this work with their Coping Styles Questionnaire (CSQ). CSQ introduces the concepts of 'Rational Coping', 'Emotional Coping', 'Avoidance Coping' and 'Detachment Coping'. 'Rational' coping strategies include working out a plan for resolving the situation, whereas 'detached' coping strategies involve approaches such as not taking things personally. These types of strategies are both described as adaptive. Conversely, 'emotional' coping (e.g. feeling overpowered by the situation) and 'avoidance' coping, (e.g. trusting the resolution of the issue to fate) are described by Roger et al (1993) as maladaptive strategies.

Using the COPE tool, Bourke and Craun's (2014) study of the coping strategies of child exploitation investigators found that those who used denial based coping strategies were at greater risk of Secondary Traumatic Stress, which is analogous with current definition of PTSD symptomatology (APA, 2013). Riolli and Savicki's (2010) study of Iraq war veterans found that it was not the number of strategies available to the individual that dictated coping ability, but the discrete effectiveness of the strategy selected. This suggests it is the efficacy of the individual strategy rather than having a range of strategies to choose from which improves coping ability. Within the current study, patterns of coping styles were explored using a grounded, 'bottom-up' approach, rather than by fitting responses into any pre-existing coping framework such as the clusters which form the basis of the COPE, MCI or CSQ tools.

The Process Model of Emotional Regulation (Gross & Thompson, 2007) is a useful tool in the exploration of direct coping strategies used by Police staff during exposure to SOM. 'Coping' overlaps conceptually with emotional regulation, albeit the former having a specific focus on alleviating stress responses and the latter on regulating the types of emotions experienced and expressed at a given time (Gross, 2015). The idiosyncratic experience of Police staff who are frequently exposed to highly traumatic material means that direct coping strategies *during* exposure can be seen as taking on the characteristics of the short-term 'fix' provided by emotion management techniques. All five types of emotional regulation strategy defined within the Process Model have relevance to the current study. However, 'attentional deployment', 'cognitive change' and 'response modulation' have greater applicability to the circumstances of the current population than situation selection and situation modification.

Attentional deployment may include *distraction* techniques or *concentration* techniques. The former involves focusing on less emotive elements of the situation, or moving attention away from the situation entirely. Distraction techniques may also involve the person deliberately managing their internal state by invoking specific pleasant thoughts or memories as a way to guard against an unwanted emotion such as anxiety surfacing. By contrast, concentration techniques involve attention being purposefully directed towards the emotional features of a situation. (Webb, Miles & Sheeran, 2012). Cognitive change strategies involve the individual making changes to the way they appraise or interpret an emotional situation, either in terms of the significance of the situation itself or in one's own capacity to manage the demands it presents. (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Attentional distraction and attempts to change cognitive appraisals of highly emotive situations are both key features of strategies employed by officers in the current study during their direct exposure to SOM.

Response modulation seeks not to change the focus of attention in an emotional situation or to reappraise it, but merely to change the feelings, behaviours or physical responses

once these reactions are well-established (Gross, 2015). Response modulation in its most common form – suppression - is key to exploring the general coping strategies of a Police sample. The focus of this regulation strategy is on two main areas: indirect coping strategies involving the use of alcohol, exercise or relaxation, and the inhibition of the outward expression of emotion. Attempts by Police staff to manage their emotional responses to the material have clear links to Hochschild's (1983) concept of 'emotional labour', which describes the process of presenting a certain persona in order to fulfil organisational expectations or 'display rules'. In order to do so, staff may engage in 'surface acting' by modifying their outward expressions to hide their true feelings, which may include fear, sadness or shock. This aligns with the 'suppression' element of Gross and Thompson's (2007) emotional regulation framework. Alternatively, in order to maintain the presentation they feel is expected of them, staff may engage in 'deep acting', where the feelings themselves are modified by changing the focus of their thoughts (Grandey, 2000). 'Deep acting' utilises one of two strategies identified in emotional regulation theory: the aforementioned attentional deployment or cognitive change approaches.

In the current study, the efficacy of the strategies used to regulate emotion both during and after exposure to traumatic stimuli will be explored. Reference will be made to the self-reported negative impact of working with sexual offence material (such as intrusions and changes to schema), which persist despite the deliberate deployment of coping strategies. Consideration will be given to the nature of the exposure itself, which can involve rapid viewing of a large number of unconnected images of sexual offending one after the other. These appear as traumatic snapshots of abuse rather than contextualised events with a beginning, middle and end. This unique, non-linear nature trauma exposure defies the routine application of what would be considered standard treatment approaches for the management of psychological harm as a result of trauma, such as imaginal exposure or imagery rescripting

(Hackmann, 2011; Rusch & Grunert, 2000). Alternative methods of helping officers to improve their ability to cope will therefore be considered.

## **Method**

A complex interaction of personal, professional, organisational, social and cultural factors informs each person's unique responses to being exposed to sexual offending material. For this reason, a phenomenological approach was chosen for the initial phase of the study, namely Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The sensitivity of the subject meant that participants needed to feel confident that the researcher understood the challenges and complexity of their roles. It was therefore important to use the small body of existing research into Police experiences of working with sexual offending to inform the open-ended questionnaire, which in turn served to inform the interview schedule. This precluded a 'Grounded Theory' approach where the literature is reviewed only after the primary data is gathered (Banyard, Dillon, Norman & Winder, 2015) and where theory is generated exclusively from this corpus of data. The research objectives were to capture participants' experiences of working with sexual offending and how this affected their internal and external worlds, rather than a primary focus on deconstructing the language used to describe their experience. For this reason, narrative analysis was deemed unsuitable.

IPA allows the 'lived experience' of participants to be explored in depth valuing each person's experiences as a distinct contribution to a greater understanding of the subject matter. Ecological validity is the central tenet of this approach; the voices of participants are heard through direct use of quotes in reporting the results. An emphasis on participant accounts does not mean simply describing of the data; IPA is a hermeneutic approach which demands that the researcher explores theoretical and conceptual meanings which can be drawn from the data.



(Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Transferability is explored through the demonstration of thematic patterns within participants' responses, using these themes to search for common experiences. These will be further explored across a wider sample in the second phase of the research. Reflexivity is a key element of IPA: while cultural competence was a pre-requisite for generating trust and rapport with participants, it was recognised that the lead author's experience of the topic could also potentially lead to confirmation bias. To avoid this, a series of reflective logs were completed throughout the data collection and analysis processes, to allow personal thoughts and feelings to be examined and acknowledged separately from the participants' responses. Ethical approval for the study protocol was obtained from the institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants were required to sign a consent form prior to the data collection process, and were given a debrief sheet at the end of the process which outlined local and national sources of support that could be used if their participation had resulted in any adverse effects.

### *Participants*

Participants comprised 11 individuals who work for the same UK Police constabulary. Teams which held potentially suitable participants (i.e. those in regular contact with sexual offence material) were initially identified through the main project liaison, who was a senior Police Officer within the constabulary. Inspectors and Sergeants in these teams were then contacted, and they either permitted the researcher to talk to their team members in person about the project, or forwarded the information sheet to their teams via email. The intended participant number was eight due to the chosen methodology; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is designed to facilitate deep analysis of the experiences of a small number of participants. Eleven participants were ultimately interviewed as new themes were still being

generated following the completion of the eighth interview. Three participants worked in a dedicated online child abuse team, four in Public Protection Units (PPU), two of these within a child abuse team, one within a Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) team, and one within a domestic abuse team. Four participants worked within Criminal Investigation Division (CID) teams. Two of the participants were Detective Sergeants, seven participants were Detective Constables (DCs), and one was a civilian investigator. Therefore the roles of the participants were heterogeneous. Six participants were female and five were male. Ten participants self-identify as White - British and one as Mixed - British. Eight participants were parents and ten were in long term relationships.

### *Open-ended questionnaire*

A questionnaire was created with eight open-ended questions relating to the overarching research question: 'How do criminal justice practitioners experience exposure to sexual offence material?' These were:

1. 'What techniques do you personally use to help you deal with any stress or negatives you experience as a result of your work?'
2. 'How, if at all, has your work affected your relationships with your family/children/friends?'
3. 'When you see, read or hear about sexual offences as part of your role, how easy or difficult is it to stop thinking about it when you have left work?'
4. 'What motivates you to continue to work in this field?'
5. 'What techniques do you use to cope when seeing/hearing information about sexual offences on a regular basis?'
6. 'Do you think about the world differently since working with sexual offending? If so,

how?'

7. 'What do you think of the support you are given to do your work? *Think about training, supervision, equipment, your environment, time, staffing etc.*'
8. 'Which aspects of having to work with sexual offending material do you find particularly difficult or troubling?'

Three of these questions are relevant to an exploration of coping styles: Question 1 relates to general coping strategies, question 3 to participants' ability to mentally separate themselves from their work, and question 5 asks participants to think about specific strategies they use when directly exposed to SOM.

The responses to the eight questions formed the basis for the interview schedule. As the interview expanded on all questionnaire responses, the questionnaire data will not be reviewed separately here.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

The structure of the interviews was formulated to allow participants to gradually develop a level of comfort with discussing their experiences with the researcher, who was unknown to all participants at the start of the study. This was particularly important given the sensitive nature of the topic (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The interview schedule therefore took the following format:

- Scene setting/procedural questions
- Questions about the impact of the work, most difficult aspects, coping strategies, support systems
- Questions about positives/motivation to do the work

The Socratic style of questioning was informed by the lead researcher's professional expertise in interviewing individuals about their offending behaviour (including sexual offending) and their personal circumstances within parole/pre-sentence report interviews. Specifically, open questions placed the interviewer in the role of 'naïve enquirer', which encouraged the participant to interrogate their own mental processes and reactions, valuing them as an expert in their own unique experience. The interview schedule itself was used as a guide, detailing the types of questions that may be relevant to ask the participant based on the research aims and their responses to the questionnaire. However, the priorities identified by participants were the primary force that shaped the interviews, and probing questions were targeted at areas that participants highlighted themselves. The sharing of meaningful experiences was encouraged by asking participants to recall specific incidents that have stayed with them or cases which were particularly memorable. This method echoes Flanagan's (1954) 'Critical Incident Technique', which has been used with a similar sample of Police 'Internet Child Exploitation' team members by Burns, Bradshaw, Domene and Morley (2008). Questioning around a specific notable incident was also recommended to the author by Anke Ehlers, co-creator of the Cognitive theory of PTSD (personal correspondence with author, 2016). Allowing participants to explore their reactions to a concrete event - rather than asking them to speak in general terms - prompts a greater level of specificity. This helps to increase the authenticity of the account of the feelings and thoughts which were experienced.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author. Transcripts were sent to each participant to allow them to verify the records as an accurate representation of the interview, or to redact any information they were not comfortable with sharing more widely.

The data was then subject to the stages of IPA outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The IPA methodology, unlike grounded theory, does not preclude the reading of related theoretical and empirical literature before data collection. The lead researcher had some pre-existing knowledge of the coping literature beforehand, but this was not reviewed directly before the study commenced. This was intended to avoid the risk of organising the data into pre-existing themes. Instead, the naming of the themes was based purely on the information given by participants, using their own language wherever possible in order to name the theme. Each interview was analysed in isolation, with no initial attempt to relate them to interviews that came before or afterwards in order to remain faithful to the individual's experience. Each participant's data was read and re-read, in order to identify themes and subthemes. These were typed onto individual slips of paper to allow the researcher to physically work with the themes, organically creating different groups and re-ordering these groups until they form a coherent overall shape. The final groupings were then transferred into a table of themes for that participant. Using this table and a copy of the transcript, NVivo 11 was used to highlight passages of text and code these, which allowed a coding structure of superordinate themes, themes and subthemes. Once this process was completed for all 11 participants, the themes were collated and transformed into a master-table themes to identify commonalities. These, as well as the specific responses provided by participants, were used as the basis for survey items within phase two of the current research. The survey phase of the research will be reported upon in future publications.

## **Results**

Thirteen superordinate themes were identified by the analysis, within which a number of themes and subthemes were identified (see Appendix 1). The superordinate theme 'Coping'

consists of eight themes. Coping strategies for working directly with the material and General coping strategies had by far the most individual pieces of data coded to them (115 and 91 respectively). Due to the depth of analysis and reporting conventions required for IPA studies it is not possible to report on both these themes in a single paper. The focus of this paper is on 'Coping strategies for working directly with the material'. This theme refers only to working with sexual offending material, whereas participants talked about general coping strategies in the context of other types of stressors within Police work as well as their work with SOM. The direct coping strategies theme contains five subthemes:

Detachment

Avoidance

Process driven – professional role takes over

Mental preparation

Audio based strategies

'Detachment', 'avoidance' and 'process driven' coping strategies had approximately four times the number of individual references within the interview data than did mental preparation and audio based strategies. Therefore, the main focus of the paper is on the three most prevalent strategies. Although these mental processes are very closely linked and potentially definable as variations of distancing techniques, the three strategy clusters have sufficient differentiating elements to be considered independently. The terms 'Detachment' and 'Avoidance' were chosen as the most appropriate names for two types of strategies employed by the participants, based on the language they used when describing the processes. These terms are identical to two of the factors in Roger et al's (1993) Coping Styles Questionnaire (CSQ). The use of

detachment-based coping strategies by Police staff working with SOM is also identified by Burns et al, 2008, who define it as 'dissociation and compartmentalisation'.

The 'Process driven' approach may be seen to mirror the CSQ's 'Rational' cluster, although in fact the process driven strategies of the current study align more closely with this tool's definition of 'detachment'. In turn, detachment strategies in the current study focus on self-talk used to distance the self from the reality or immediacy of the material rather than the act of being task-orientated.

### *Detachment-based coping strategies*

Detachment strategies relate to participants distancing themselves from the traumatic stimulus, for example by pretending the victims in indecent images are not real or otherwise detaching from the reality of the material:

*"It's probably just my way of dealing with it, just become very une- become emotionally detached from it... Look, look at it as fact. And try and...not forget that it's a child, but try to not allow that to... affect you."* **Martin**

Another example of how participants detached from the material was making sure the sound was switched off when viewing a video of sexual abuse. This helped to avoid connecting on multiple sensory levels with the victim or the offence:

*"...because you're in the room with them then aren't you? You're there, in the place, whereas on a computer screen it's there [frames hands in front of her] it's detached. But the sound draws you into the place where it happened."* **Paula**

Speckens, Ehlers, Hackmann, Ruths and Clark (2007) found that those who exhibit signs of PTSD are more likely to experience sensory stimuli such as visual and auditory reminders of

the trauma. It is reasonable to propose that by minimising auditory exposure to SOM, officers may reduce their likelihood of experiencing intrusive thoughts or sounds.

A number of participants described greater difficulty in detaching from moving images as these are direct depictions of the acts of abuse.

*"It's like when you watch a film, you kind of get drawn into that, don't you? And [pause] and, it's, it's the same I think with a video, in that...you feel the emotion..." Verity*

*"[Although] you're actually watching the...physical offence taking place on the still images...that detachment's maybe removed slightly, because it's a moving image. And it's more tangible in a way isn't it? It's harder to remove yourself isn't it because you are actually watching the offence taking place aren't you?" George*

This indicates that the movement of the video makes the offence seem more real and that strategies such as pretending the victim is not real is more difficult in these circumstances. A further example of a detachment strategy was outlined by **Verity** when she described the reason she would never talk about the nature of what she has seen, even to other colleagues who work in the same role:

*"I don't like to say specifically, in detail, what I've seen, because somehow it makes it more real. Whereas if I don't...I don't say it, I don't talk about it, that's just something very skewed, that I've seen... that's not... real, somehow?"*

**Katrina** described the process of detachment as being linked to the way in which she performs the task, using the example of transcribing a victim's statement. This response arose when she was anticipating her reaction next time she would be required to work on a sexual offence case:

*"It's...whether I'll be able to find...somewhere I can just shut it off as if it's not real, in your mind. I know it is real, but like, kidding yourself that it's not... if you stop for a minute and*



*you realise what you're typing...you'd think- oh, this is absolutely awful... [mimes fast typing] Because it's just words, isn't it? You're just kidding yourself...not kidding yourself, but you're- you're just writing a story..."*

This method of coping is reminiscent of Horowitz's (1983) description of initial reactions to trauma exposure, where the immediate shock reaction is replaced by denial in order to protect the person from 'information overload' (Brewin, Dalgleish & Joseph, 1996). When the barrage of sensory information involves the sounds and sights of sexual abuse, individuals cannot easily assimilate this material into their existing schemata.

For some participants, detachment was achieved by adopting a mindset where emotions such as empathy were consciously suppressed by refusing to think about the consequences of the offence upon the victims:

*'If I started to think about who this child is, where they are, what the conditions were as to how this image took place, how they were feeling at the time...If I perhaps started to turn on that empathy, then I'd find it more difficult. And that's why I think for detachment, I can turn [empathy] on and off.'* **Liam**

This approach is subtly different than pretending the victim isn't real: instead it relies on refusing to connect with their emotional experience.

Other Detachment-based coping strategies include participants avoiding looking closely at the victim, particularly their eyes, or pretending written material is a 'story' rather than engaging with the material as the description of something that has actually happened to a specific person. This allows them to psychologically detach from the victim and the harm caused in order to retain professional distance and, in the long term, 'cope' with repeated exposure to details of sexual offences (Bourke & Craun, 2014). Sandhu et al (2011) report similar distancing or detachment strategies in their study of professionals working

therapeutically with people with intellectual disabilities who had committed sexual offences. They found that participants avoided thinking about a particular victim as being related to a perpetrator's account, in order to make victim seem less real. This served to reduce their distress and their feelings of empathy for the victim while hearing about an offence. This type of compartmentalising was important not just in order to manage their feelings about victims, but also to enable practitioners to continue to work with those who had committed the offence without viewing them as 'evil' and therefore untreatable (Leicht, 2008).

*Known Versus Unknown Victim – Challenges to detachment-based coping strategies*

A particularly interesting theme was identified within the data entitled 'Known versus Unknown Victim', which describes the difficulties participants experienced in coping with cases where they had to view indecent images after they already interviewed the victim of these offences. A unique aspect of Police work with sexual offence cases is that staff may be required to interview a child or vulnerable adult about their victimisation, interview the perpetrator of the offences, and potentially view indecent images of the abuse taking place. Implementation of coping strategies such as detachment were identified as much more problematic when officers had to see and hear information about the sexual abuse of a child that they had been in direct contact with:

*"I think it's harder because I... I can't, you can't switch off that kind of empathy.... you've had to do things that you would do with your own children; sit down, colour with them, you're talking about things in their room... So...already within your mind's eye, you have a mental image of who this child is, what their interests are and things. So if you're then having to view images that involve them, you can't just switch off that empathy. You've kind of,*

*already got an idea of them, and you're then starting to think about...how what has happened to them would have affected them. And how they felt at that moment in time."* **Liam**

*"It stays with you longer. Because you can put a personality on the image, you're meeting the person that you've seen suffer...cos this person videoed this abuse of this child [pause]*  
*So...that impacts on you more, that's the reality."* **Jim**

Interestingly, some participants in the current study differentiated the status of victims that were already known to them through a contact offence, describing them as 'tangible' victims:

*"Again, it's harder when there's a tangible victim. I think you [pause] when you don't actually...know the child that's involved, you can to a certain extent maintain that third wall [frames screen shape with hands]."* **George**

The act of investigators trying to psychologically distance themselves from unknown victims was particularly well-illustrated by Anna in her use of the phrase 'stock-photos';

*"It was perhaps more so if you were dealing with photographs of victims that you had dealt with first hand, erm, that it had a greater psychological impact than, erm, perhaps what appeared to be stock photos, or things that had clearly been downloaded off the internet."*

The idea that any image of a child used for sexual gratification is a 'stock photo' – a generic image which can be utilised for multiple purposes - seems at first to minimise the seriousness of the offence related to that image. In her interview, Anna decried those who trivialise the viewing of indecent images, demonstrated the utmost empathy for victims and has clearly been significantly negatively impacted by her own exposure. Therefore her use of the phrase 'stock photos' is not an indicator of her lack of concern about victims who she does not know: Anna is finding a way to distance herself from the individuality of each victim by connecting less with images which are not 'first generation'. This is simply a strategy she uses to cope with the sheer volume of material she is exposed to.

It may be easier to fully conceptualise the sexual abuse of a child depending on the proximity of the event - in time and place - to the person perceiving it. Victims depicted in abuse images or accounts of contact sexual offences are certainly a 'tangible' victim at the time of the offence, both to the person investigating the case and to the person responsible for the abuse. However, they are often kept at psychological arms-length and therefore made as intangible as possible by offenders seeking to avoid feelings of guilt (Jung & Daniels, 2012). Professionals may understandably perceive victims in indecent images who they have never met as less tangible when seeking to minimise their feelings of distress.

#### *Avoidance-based coping strategies*

Nine participants, including all six women, described using avoidance-based coping techniques which involve putting off the work, deliberately blocking unwanted thoughts, or avoiding engaging cognitively at any level while working with sexual offence material:

*"I try not to let anything run through my head"*

*"You don't want to think too much about it. Because it, it, it's awful"*

*"You just- want to do anything to not have those, those thoughts again, you know?"*

*"I put things in a mental box and not think about it."*

These are all clearly cognitive avoidance strategies. An example of a physical avoidance-based strategy is outlined by **Ryan**, when talking about having to re-watch several times a video he had found particularly distressing, of a baby being raped:

*"The shock of it isn't there, but it's still, it's one of those where you have to turn your head away. And then just quickly stop because you know what's coming next and it's not good, it's not nice."*

Having physical control over the material is clearly of importance for this person's coping ability. The degree of control a person has over the nature of their exposure is naturally greater when viewing indecent material or listening to taped interviews, as this can be stopped and started at their own discretion. In a live interview situation with either a victim or suspect, deliberately stopping the individual mid-flow is precluded by the need to sensitively gather accurate and unfettered accounts.

### *Process Focused Coping*

All participants described variations on the theme of focusing on executing their tasks as an investigator or focusing on their identity as a Police Officer in order to avoid engaging on an emotional level with the content of the material. This was coded as 'process-focused' coping. In many cases, examples involved the viewing of indecent images of children (IIOC), where participants focused on determining categorisation with the minimum possible amount of scrutiny of the content of what they were seeing:

*"If we go through a category A where it's a child that's being abused by being penetrated in some way, then I'm looking to see is there any penetration, and if there is, then bang, straight away it's out of my view and I'm on to the next one."* **Ryan**

*"When I look at an indecent image of a child, and I don't think of the child, and I don't mean that in a, in a crass way, I mean it as in I'm looking at what the offence is: is it evidential, can we use it."* **Paula**

This strategy had a strong overall emphasis on participants thinking purely as a professional and trying to keep personal thoughts and feelings at bay. Some participants described this as using their 'professional head' or 'Police head', or as being a mental switch that could generally be turned on and off at will:

*“When I am actually viewing them I’ve just got my professional head on, I’m thinking ‘Right, that’s indecent, that isn’t, that is, that isn’t and that’s how serious it is.’” Nicole*

An interesting facet of the concept of participants utilising a ‘professional head’ is the idea that an ‘investigator’s instinct’ takes over and that this is a separate entity to the person themselves:

*“They’re not that human being sat there looking at a horrific image of a child being raped, they’re investigators.” Jim*

Some participants recognised that their strategies for dealing with the work were effective in helping them during the immediate situation, but ceased to be useful outside of those circumstances. This idea was well illustrated by **Anna**:

*“I think initially, you’re trying to establish what’s happened, so you’re thinking with your Police head. And you’re getting them to describe in as much detail, everything... as much as they can possibly remember and, and you’re going into a lot of detail, but you’re thinking with your Police head. I think it’s afterwards, when you start thinking about the words that they’ve actually said...”*

The process-driven strategy of focusing on evidence gathering while fully immersed in her professional persona protects Anna from engaging on an emotional level with the material. Anna as a private person left alone with her thoughts enjoyed no such protection: she found herself subject to a range of negative symptoms that ultimately led to her being unable to carry on in the role.

#### *Operational and organisational factors which challenge coping ability*

Participants identified a number of organisational policy factors which made it more difficult to cope. Chief amongst these were workload issues, both in terms of the high volume of

material attached to each case, and for some individuals the high number of cases they held at any one time. This served to drain their reserves of energy or resilience, making direct coping strategies less effective. This was articulated by **Verity** as a gradual erosion of self:

*"It's just that kind of chip-chip-chipping away. You know, you build yourself up, you deal with it, but then you come in that little bit further, further down, do you know what I mean?*

*How it gets harder to build yourself up all the time."*

Others felt that their ability to cope with the work was compromised by the fact that they were only able to view indecent images at Police headquarters, resulting in some people travelling for up to an hour each way. This caused them to spend much longer than they felt comfortable with viewing indecent images, and made it harder for them to switch off at the end of the day. Reasons given for their extended viewing of material included pressures from superiors to be back at their divisional base, a self-identified awareness of the workload that awaited them back in their own office, and a simple desire to 'get it over with', i.e. reduce as far as possible the number of days on which they would be viewing indecent images:

*"I do have breaks. Erm [pause] yeah, I do have coffee breaks. Erm [pause] but I also, rightly or wrongly, try and do as much in one hit...which I know is perhaps not the best...but I think it's the lesser of two evils. Because I don't want to keep- because you dread it. You dread-*

*'oh god, I've got to go to high-tech crime unit'. You dread it."* **Verity**

There was evidence from some participants that they were being asked to undertake certain tasks which directly interfered with their ability to use their chosen coping strategies. A key example was having to repeatedly look at the same indecent image or video in order to write a description of it, or because of others' reluctance to do so:

*"I've had to part-view it on at least ...3 occasions, I think it was. Once at the headquarters...then show the suspect in the video part of the video er, and then had to go*

*through it with his solicitor. The barrister said, erm, "I'm not paid enough to view those videos, or those images. You're going to have to go away, view them, and describe in a statement what it is, and send it to show the Court."* **Ryan**

Repeated viewing and having to analyse the video to create a written description had caused Ryan extreme difficulty in forgetting this material, and preventing him from using his commonly employed coping strategy, which was to avoid thinking too much about what he was seeing and hearing.

Supervisor attitudes and their level of knowledge about sexual offending work were found to be crucial in either improving or hindering officers' ability to cope. Some supervisors recognised the importance of debriefing if they saw that a staff member had particularly struggled with some material:

*"My Sergeant is very wellbeing focused, and if you are just having one of those days where - 'that job, there's just too much, and it's really nasty stuff, I'm not looking at that today, boss, is that okay?' 'Yes, that's absolutely fine'."* **Paula**

Others felt supervisors would not recognise that staff members may benefit from a discussion about what they had been exposed to that day:

*"It depends on the individual supervisor. I can think of a couple, I can think of some that I've had that probably would, but then I can think of others that it just, just would not occur to them. Would not occur to them, to sort of say, you've been to headquarters, you've, you know, you've been doing whatever job, 'how are you?'."* **Jasmine**

Some participants had a very negative experience of senior staff support due to their minimisation of the work:



*“You know, I remember, I was going doing a viewing, and a boss, and I won't mention names, but [they said] ‘oh, what you doing today? Oh, are you off viewing porn?’ And I just thought ‘you have no idea’.”* **Jasmine**

Paying ‘lip-service’ to supporting officers was another concept that emerged within the data in relation to coping:

*“I have seen other [supervisors] who will...show that bit of empathy and understanding and care but you just know it's superficial, because the next day they're back to how they were, or half an hour later throwing the person another job.”* **Martin**

Officer's ability to cope with their exposure to SOM can therefore be enhanced or depleted by the actions and approaches of their superiors.

At the time of the study, the constabulary in which participants worked had a policy of seconding detectives to work on incoming sexual offence cases for a period of three months at a time. During their secondment, officers could expect to be involved in all aspects of the investigation, from interviewing victims and suspects to viewing online images of abuse. Likewise, investigators in the specialist online sexual offence team were required to conduct interviews as well as analyse the computer-based evidence. This resulted in frequent exposure to abuse images of victims who the person had already met, which was described as particularly difficult by a number of participants. This policy has now been reviewed, partly due to feedback provided as a result of the current research.

## **Discussion**

The coping strategies employed by Police officers and civilian Police staff in the current study largely fall into three categories: Those which involve avoidance of the material through

minimising exposure; those which seek to cognitively detach from the reality of the offence or victim; those where individuals focus on the process of undertaking investigative tasks or on their role of Police officer as a shield against personal thoughts or feelings. Having to work with written or visual SOM from a case where the victim is known to the officer (e.g. through having interviewed them) makes it particularly difficult to employ preferred coping strategies. Other operational challenges which impact upon coping ability include repeated exposure to the same material, being asked to write descriptions of images, having to travel a long distance to view material and the overall volume of material and cases. Coping strategies identified within the current study are mirrored frequently within studies of other practitioners exposed to trauma. In their work with Paramedics, Avraham, Goldblatt and Yafe (2014) found physical and emotional detachment from patients to be key to their ability to cope with critical incidents. There was clear evidence that paramedics relied on a task- or process-focused approach and on their professional role in order to perform difficult tasks without becoming overwhelmed. Sandhu et al. (2011) found that sexual offending treatment providers used similar avoidance strategies to stop thinking about the victims' experiences, while professionals in Severson and Pettus-Davis's (2013) study limited the amount of exposure to material about the offences, in order to feel able to work with the perpetrator.

The Process Model of Emotion Regulation or ER (Gross, 1998) is a useful framework with which to further examine the coping strategies employed by Police officers and civilian Police staff. The three main coping strategies employed by officers tend to involve both 'Attentional Deployment' and 'Cognitive Change'. Within 'Process driven' approaches, officers focus on the procedural and technical aspects which aid evidence gathering and analysis, fixing their attention upon aspects of the trauma material that can help build a case against a perpetrator or identify a victim. This involves both of the key features of distraction strategies: altering the direction of gaze or picking up on specific auditory cues, while changing

their internal state by concentrating on their role identity as a Police officer or civilian investigator. They also engage in cognitive change by trying to remove the emotion from the situation, instead focusing on achieving a successful outcome to the case.

Some of the 'Avoidance' strategies involved attentional deployment: limiting the amount of time spent with the material to the minimum required to process the evidence. Other participants directed their attention away from particularly emotive aspects, such as victims' facial expressions within indecent images, while some tend to physically looking away from the screen in anticipation of something particularly unpleasant being presented. In addition, some types of avoidance involve cognitive change: disengaging by shutting off any personal thoughts or feelings or securing them in a mental 'box'. Several avoidance strategies are closely linked to cognitive change elements; participants sought to entirely avoid thinking about the nature of what they were seeing or hearing by using thought blocking techniques, or avoiding behaviours or situations which may trigger recollection of distressing aspects of cases.

'Detachment' strategies seem mainly to utilise variations of 'Cognitive Change': changing the appraisal of the situation or distancing themselves from it to reduce the emotional significance. The cognitive detachment strategies used by participants in the current study include pretending that the victim or the account of the offence is not real, or feeling less connected to victims who have only been seen in an indecent image than those who they have met in person. Turning the sound off in an indecent video could be seen as both facilitating cognitive change by making the offence seem less real, or as being a form of attentional deployment by reducing the level and type of stimulus encountered. This may also partly explain why participants found moving images more distressing and harder to detach from than still images, as motion rendered the victim more life-like.

It is clear from participants' accounts of their work that there is little opportunity for emotional regulation to be achieved via 'Situation Selection', as working with sexual offending cases forms an integral part of their role. However, there was some scope for 'Situation Modification': staff could exert some control over the nature of exposure, such as turning the audio off when viewing videos, or doing as much work as possible in one sitting to avoid having to return on another occasion. Therefore, while 'Situation Selection' is not a frequently employed option in managing emotional reactions, there is some scope for Police staff to slightly modify the traumatic situation to reduce its impact.

The current sample is not sufficient to allow numerical comparisons to be made between the use of direct coping strategies and persistent negative psychological outcomes: this will be further explored with a much larger sample of Police staff within the second phase of the current research. However, it is possible to make some initial observations about the interplay between these two factors. None of the main three coping strategies protected participants from subsequently experiencing negative consequences. The most prevalent amongst these were intrusive (i.e. unwanted and spontaneous) thoughts and images of sexual offences, increased suspiciousness about others or general cynicism, and concern for or over-protectiveness of their own children. Of interest for further study is the finding that participants who articulated the most difficulty with intrusive thoughts and images and those who identified the most significant changes to their relationships with others made noticeably more comments regarding their use of avoidance-based coping strategies.

Ehlers and Clark (2000) argue that a failure to properly contextualise trauma experiences (for example by blocking unwanted thoughts about the incident) can increase the likelihood of intrusive images or thoughts recurring. This is said to be a result of memories of the trauma not being suitably 'fixed' to a specific place and time and therefore triggered at random or by a broad range of potential stimuli. The avoidance and detachment strategies

described in the current study, such as avoiding mental engagement with what the image is depicting, or pretending a verbal statement is a story rather than an account of real events, may mean that the experience remains insufficiently processed and therefore unresolved (Foa, Steketee, & Rothbaum, 1989). Use of process-driven coping strategies, such as acting in a mechanistic way to deal with the material merely as evidence to be sorted through, falls directly within Halligan et al's (2003) description of 'data-driven' processing, which can lead to trauma experiences remaining cognitively 'free-floating' rather than attached to a particular case or incident. Police staff may be particularly at risk of disarticulation of context around the trauma they are witness to, simply by virtue of the nature of their exposure. The most difficult type of contact with SOM described by participants involves the repetitive viewing of hundreds of images depicting different victims in different settings, experiencing a range of different abuses. The fact that these are often interspersed with other extreme and traumatic images such as mutilations, beheadings and acts of bestiality means that the psychological shocks remain novel, eliciting unpredictable and unpleasant emotional and physical responses.

A large proportion of trauma studies refer to the effects of blocking a single traumatic experience such as an assault, accident, or natural disaster (Foa & Riggs, 1995; Horowitz, 1983). Police staff involved in analysing sexual offending material have repeated and long-term exposure to potentially traumatic incidents and are therefore more similar in profile to combat veterans who are a frequent subject of PTSD research (Grupe, Weilgotz, Davidson & Nitschke, 2016). As found by Riolli and Savicki (2010) in their study of Iraq war veterans, the traditional distinction between coping strategies that are emotionally based and those that are problem-based is not useful for a population that faces chronic exposure to trauma or frequent extreme workplace stressors. An element of 'self-preservation' may be at work when choosing coping strategies under circumstances where the trauma is not a discrete event but an ongoing part of working life. Indeed, participants in the current study indicated that the coping strategies

helped them to function in their role on a daily basis, managing the impact of the nature and volume of the material they were required to examine. As a defence mechanism, dissociating from certain aspects of traumatic situations can in fact be an adaptive rather than maladaptive strategy as it allows the person to maintain personal integrity (Schimmenti & Caretti, 2014). However, it is notable that most participants identified having intrusive thoughts or mental images about the work when they were not directly in contact with sexual offending material, and in many cases these were persistent over time. This suggests that while detachment and avoidance strategies may help the officers during the exposure itself, they may be less useful in managing the effects of exposure outside of this direct contact with trauma material.

There continues to be a lack of definitive evidence of the efficacy of Mitchell's (1983) Critical Incident Stress Debriefing as a response to Police trauma exposure. Some studies have found that by requiring individuals to re-live a traumatic incident in such a formal and structured way can actually have an adverse effect on subsequent wellbeing (Rick & Briner, 2012). In addition, the trauma exposure experienced by Police staff working with SOM is persistent and pervasive rather than being a discrete trauma event. Therefore, a range of methods for facilitating proper exploration of thoughts and feelings about the work needs to be made available. These may include the use of a reflective diary, regular peer support sessions, and clinical supervision, which is mandatory in most professions who routinely encounter the detail of sexual trauma in the course of their work. The dynamic nature of the role means that location, time restrictions, and the officer's preferences about the other people involved in providing the support will all play a part in which methods are utilised at different times.

While the College of Policing's (2017) guidance on psychological risk management does not give specific recommendations for supporting staff exposed to SOM, it does offer some helpful general guidance on dealing with psychological risks involved in Policing. The recommendations correlate with the findings of the current research, where managers have a

responsibility to foster a culture which encourages openness about psychological wellness and distress. Participants in the current study identified the support of peers as their most valued asset in order to cope with their exposure to SOM. They almost universally identified that individual supervisor attitudes and approaches made the difference in whether individuals chose to share any difficulty they were experiencing. In a number of cases, participants cited examples of supervisors who they felt would not take their concerns seriously and who they would never consider approaching about struggling to cope. Participants who felt their direct supervisor understood the challenges of sexual offence cases and were open to discussions about them felt this enabled them to do their job with greater confidence and improved overall wellbeing. If Police staff are encouraged to communicate about their experiences, the process of meaning-making, assimilation, and exploration of emotional responses can be undertaken in a managed way, rather than individuals relaying on the immediate strategy of blocking or avoiding unwanted thoughts. As well as feeling able to have regular discussions with line managers and colleagues, it may also be beneficial for officers to be taken through a debriefing process following a particularly difficult incident, consisting of 'normalisation', 'guidance and coping', 'future planning', and 'disengagement' (Busuttil & Bussutil in Black, Newman, Harris-Hendriks & Mezey, 1997). This process recognises that the situations they Police staff are routinely exposed to are far outside of the normal range of human experience, allowing for validation of adverse reactions as an expected consequence of their work.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the current study**

As a small scale qualitative study, the current findings are not, nor were they intended to be, generalizable to the wider population of Police Officers who examine sexual offence material. As a cross-sectional rather than longitudinal study, it is not possible to assess the long-term

effectiveness of the strategies employed in terms of reducing unwanted psychological consequences. Although participants varied in age, relationship status, parental status, gender, role, and length of time working with sexual offences, there is no way of knowing whether their views were representative of the Police constabulary staff more broadly. Indeed, there may have been value in focusing exclusively on one type of Police role - such as specialist online sexual abuse team staff - in order to increase depth of analysis rather than breadth of role experiences. However, the identification of themes made possible through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allows for a targeted exploration of the lived experience of individual staff members. These themes have been used as the basis for survey questions which are being tested on a larger sample of staff. Data from this survey will be further analysed to determine the transferability of the themes to other samples. IPA has, however, facilitated a deeper understanding of the experiences of the 11 participants in a way that values their unique perspectives. It has also provided much needed insight into the challenges that UK Police staff face in working with sexual offence cases.

## **Conclusion**

The current study shows that while Police Officers and civilian Police staff have developed strategies to allow them to cope with the day to day realities of exposure to sexual offence material, these are a short term solution and do not necessarily prevent them from experiencing pervasive negative consequences. Notwithstanding the importance of these coping rituals, attempts to dissociate or mentally distance themselves from traumatic material could potentially compromise the person's appraisal of the offence in question (Ellerby, 1997). In addition, routinely avoiding full exposure to the material could put the accuracy of evidence gathering at risk (Sandhu et al., 2011). Both types of strategies may also serve to block



cognitive integration into the individual's experiential narrative, which has the potential to cause unwanted psychological consequences (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Police staff should be supported to develop strategies that protect them both during exposure to traumatic material and, crucially, once the protection of the professional role, investigator's instinct, or 'Police head' is no longer available. To offset the tendency to subsume thoughts and feelings about their experiences, staff should be encouraged to articulate their responses. This should occur in a timely manner and in an environment that they feel is safe from judgement, such as with others who understand the nature and pressures of working with sexual offence material.

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Appendix 1: Master table of themes from IPA

| Overarching themes            | Themes  | Subthemes   |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Coping                        | <p>Coping strategies for working directly with the material</p> <p>General coping strategies</p> <p>Adaptations to coping strategies</p> <p>Expectations of being able to cope</p> <p>Reluctance to admit or hiding the fact you are not coping</p> <p>Factors which negatively impact on coping ability</p> <p>Parental status as a variable in not being able to cope</p> <p>Signs that someone is not coping</p> | <p>Avoidance based strategies</p> <p>Detachment</p> <p>Mental preparation</p> <p>Process driven – professional role takes over</p> <p>Actively addressing issues</p> <p>Avoiding socialising with Police officers</p> <p>Develop resistance to the work</p> <p>Escapism or avoidance, mental or physical</p> <p>Externalising thoughts about the material</p> <p>Humour</p> <p>Mindfulness</p> <p>Physical exercise</p> <p>Relaxing</p> <p>Sense of perspective</p> <p>Spending time with family or friends</p> |
| Impact of working within role | <p>Behavioural or physical changes</p> <p>Changes to interpersonal relationships</p> <p>Increased self-consciousness or self-awareness</p> <p>Parental decisions affected by knowledge</p> <p>Cognitive changes</p>   | <p>Irritability, moodiness</p> <p>Sleep disruption</p> <p>Cynicism or increased suspiciousness</p>  |

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
|  | <p>Personality change or significant life changing effect<br/>Cumulative effect<br/>Desensitisation</p> <p>Delayed reaction to material or delayed recognition of impact<br/>Combination of work and personal stressors<br/>Info about sexual offending intruding into home life<br/>Intrusive images<br/>Intrusive thoughts<br/>Indelible memories of cases<br/>Journey of responses to the work<br/>Less difficult aspects of the work<br/>Most difficult aspects of the work</p> <p>Negative feelings</p> <p>No identified change since doing the work or no reaction to material<br/>Not fully understanding own reactions<br/>Self-awareness of difference between own reactions and other people's</p> | <p>Immunity<br/>Unshockable<br/>Person desensitised or has lack of reaction to SOM<br/>Minimisation of seriousness of sexual offending<br/>Opinions about desensitisation</p> <p>Worst aspects are unexpected</p> <p>Anger<br/>Annoyance<br/>Being upset<br/>Powerlessness<br/>Sadness<br/>Shock<br/>Visceral reactions e.g. disgust, revulsion</p> |
|--|--|---|

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|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Greater awareness of sexual offending | <p>Cynicism versus accurate knowledge about sexual offending</p> <p>Holder of secret knowledge</p> <p>Offender denial, minimisation, stock answers</p> <p>Personal insights or opinions about sex offenders</p>   |  |
| Nature of working with SOM            | <p>Duration of exposure to SOM</p> <p>Frequency of exposure to SOM</p> <p>Having to repeatedly look at or hear the same SOM</p> <p>Immersion in material</p> <p>Impact of technology on amount or nature of SOM</p> <p>Needle in a haystack</p> <p>Process focus, non coping related</p> <p>Range of sexual offending material</p> <p>Saturation point</p> <p>Volume of SOM</p> <p>Working with both the victim and the perpetrator</p> |  |
| Organisational factors                | <p>Ability to choose how and when material is viewed</p> <p>Anticipated future issues</p> <p>Choosing to opt out of viewing images</p> <p>CJS issues</p> <p>Comparing SO work with other difficult Police tasks</p> <p>Feelings about or priorities for own staff team</p> <p>Impact of or opinions about the policy on SO work</p>   | <p>Hierarchy of CJS</p> <p>Length of criminal justice process</p> <p>Opinions on sentencing</p> <p>Process causing further distress to victims</p> <p>Professional issues within CJS</p> <p>Being asked to describe images</p> <p>Forcing people to do SO work</p> <p>Having to go through all images, not just a percentage</p> |

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|                                    |  |  |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
|                                    | <p>Interplay between SO content and other workplace stressors</p> <p>Leaving the role</p> <p>Negative or difficult organisational issues</p><br><p>Perceptions of PPU work</p> <p>Police culture</p> <p>Pressure to get it 'right' and consequences of getting it 'wrong'</p> <p>Public perception of Police</p> <p>Public Protection or SO work different from any other type of Police work</p> <p>Route into working with SOM</p><br><p>Working environment</p> | <p>Having to go to HQ to view images</p> <p>Tenure</p><br><p>Feeling like a commodity, replaceable</p> <p>Lack of job related 'wins'</p> <p>Pressure to do SO work</p> <p>Risk of unintended consequences</p> <p>Staffing problems</p> <p>Workload</p><br><p>How choice to do role impacts on people's ability to cope with SOM exposure</p> |
| Personal and professional identity | <p>Certain type of person can do role</p> <p>Personal versus professional self</p> <p>Police Officer identity &amp; qualities</p> <p>Professionalism including professional façade</p> <p>Qualities required for doing the role</p> <p>Self perception vs perception of others</p>   | <p>Investigator's instinct</p>   |
| Positives of the work              | <p>Elements of the work that are enjoyable</p> <p>Positive comments about staff</p> <p>Reasons for doing the work</p>  | <p>Motivations relating to power or other negative connotations</p>  |

|           |  |   |
|-----------|--|---|
| Support   | <p>Counselling service<br/> Feeling there is no-one who understands available to provide support<br/> Own triggers for seeking support<br/> Peer support</p> <p>Preparation and training<br/> Problems with organisational supports<br/> Reluctance to seek support<br/> Suggestions for improvements to support, training etc<br/> Supervision and management</p> <p>Support outside work setting</p> | <p>Desire to support peers<br/> Learning from more experienced colleagues<br/> Limitations of peer support</p> <p>Checking up versus support<br/> Perceptions of higher managers<br/> What makes a good supervisor<br/> Being unable to fully talk to friends and family about work</p> |
| Victims   | <p>Victim shame<br/> Needy victims<br/> Known versus unknown victims</p> <p>Empathy for victim's experience<br/> Connecting with victims through their expressions or voices<br/> Relating victims to own experience or life<br/> Victims normalising or not realising the abuse was happening</p>   | <p>All victims equally important<br/> Known victims now safe, so easier to switch off from<br/> More difficult to work with IIOC involving known victims</p>  |
| Worldview | <p>Other people's responses to sexual offending work<br/> Lack of emotion or not being able to relate to emotionality<br/> Lack of empathy for colleagues including those who struggle with the work</p>   |   |

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|                   | <p>Logical mindset</p> <p>Stereotyping general offenders</p> <p>Feelings about how work has changed them negatively</p> <p>Lack of comprehension of other's actions or choices</p>   |  |
| Negative Concepts | <p>Arduous journey</p> <p>Breaking point</p> <p>Contamination</p> <p>Depravity, deviance &amp; brutality</p> <p>Devastation of self</p> <p>Horror</p> <p>Isolation</p> <p>Looking ahead with fear, dread, trepidation</p> <p>Mental and physical claustrophobia</p> <p>Nightmare-like</p> <p>Phobic avoidance</p> <p>Stigma by association</p> <p>Terrible treasure hunt</p> <p>Tidal wave</p> <p>Twilight world</p> <p>Unwanted gift or nasty pass the parcel</p> <p>Vicarious trauma</p> |  |
| General concepts  | <p>Balance of different elements of the work</p> <p>Catching the offender out - gotcha!</p> <p>Decompression or decontamination period</p> <p>It is like a game</p> <p>Justice</p> <p>Looking back at work different than being in it</p> <p>Precious information</p> <p>Resilience</p> <p>Retaking control or ownership of things affected by SOM</p>   |  |



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|                    | Self-preservation<br>Sense of responsibility<br>Separation of work and home life<br>You have to do it to truly understand it   |  |
| Top level concepts | Contradictions or anomalies within interview<br>Euphemising<br>Indications that researcher is being treated as an 'insider'<br>Lightbulb moment<br>Odd word choice<br>Parallel responses between staff and offender or victim<br><br>Reasons for taking part in the research or desire to help researcher<br>Significant use of explicit sexual offence language<br>Social desirability<br>Understatements<br>Unusual verbal delivery<br>Unwillingness to talk about topic | Hierarchy of roles like hierarchy of offenders<br>Parallel depersonalisation<br>Parallel reactions to victims<br><br><br>Flat, list like or robotic delivery |

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