

Exploring the causes and rates of police suicide in the Western Cape: A thematic analysis

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ABSTRACT

The number of police suicides in the South African Police Service is more than five times higher than that of other police populations. Police officers play an important role in protecting the community, thus the health and well being of police officers is important. Minimal qualitative research has been conducted on police suicide in South Africa. The primary aim of this study is to obtain a holistic understanding of the contextual events – namely the psychological, physical, occupational and social events – preceding and during the death of four police officers. In this study, four cases of suicide were identified and two participants per case were interviewed. The subjects were chosen from police stations throughout the Western Cape, South Africa. A qualitative thematic analysis was performed in order to identify the vulnerability factors that make police officers susceptible to suicide. This in turn will provide police personnel with a better understanding of the causes of police suicide and enable preventative measures to be put in place. Five themes were found to be associated with police suicide in South Africa: causes of suicide, namely relationship problems, financial problems and work related problems; counselling services; gender; signs of suicide and the role of firearms as the method of suicide. The results from this study will be used for further research and to aid suicide prevention programs.

Keywords: police (official, officer), law enforcement, suicide, suicide ideation, South Africa, gender, occupational stress, depression, suicide mortality, post traumatic stress disorder.

INTRODUCTION

What is the problem?

Suicide is a sensitive and mysterious topic which often leaves people confused, especially when it is committed by the same people that are trained to serve and protect our community. The men and women of the police service put their lives at risk everyday to protect and save the lives of the community, and yet there is such a high rate of suicide within the service. What would possibly lead them to take their own lives? Police suicide is commonly misunderstood, misrepresented or ignored. Police play an important role in holding society together. They are faced with traumatic situations; that unfortunately can become unbearable. This can lead to depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and burnout, often resulting in them taking their own lives. In 2009 a Kuilsriver Constable, aged 27, shot his 2 year old son with his service firearm and then killed himself. In the same year an Inspector from Claremont station killed his three children and shot himself in the presence of his wife. In this case he did not die and is now being held on three accounts of murder (Nicholson, 2008). These kinds of incidents are becoming more prominent and interventions need to be put in place in order to decrease the number of police suicides. Despite the wealth of research that has been done on police suicide, it still remains a complex problem.

What has been done in the past?

Leenaars et al. (1997) and Beck, Kovacs, and Weissman (1979) state that there is no universal definition for suicide. This lack of definition poses a problem for researchers. Suicide is a tripartite concept consisting of suicide ideation, attempted suicide and completed suicide; these can be further divided into intentional and non-intentional suicide. While these concepts overlap, there is a need for each concept to be defined independently to ensure more accurate findings (Baumeister, 1990).

These three concepts are evident in the dominant theories on suicide which derive from either sociological or psychological perspectives. The psychological theorists attribute personal characteristics as the cause of suicide. Psychological theories first proposed by Freud (1916/1920, as cited in Baumeister, 1990) state that the cause of suicide is aggression turned inwards. This theory may be relevant to police as they have limited ways of releasing their

aggression. Other psychodynamic theories, suggest that police suicide is a displacement of their homicidal impulses (Heiman, 1977). Furthermore psychological theorists propose that personality traits, cognitive factors and the individuals past can predispose them to suicide (Stack and Kelley, 1994). However the psychological theories are not mutually exclusive and the sociological theories on suicide are also important.

The sociological theories, state that suicide is caused by a lack of social integration and social influences. Heiman's (1975) study supports this, showing that the suicide rate is lower amongst London police than New York police because London police are more socially integrated. Throughout the literature there have been multiple sociological factors noted as the causes of suicide. Rosenthal and DiMatteo (2001) theorised that legal, discriminatory and cultural variables act as moderating variables in police suicide. Nelson and Smith (1970) attributed sociological problems to police suicide namely: work factors; relationship problems; PTSD; depression; alcohol abuse and accessibility to firearms.

Research has found that the primary cause of police suicide is the stress that police officer's experience due to the nature of their work (McAafferty, 1992). It was found that work overload, trauma at work and the change in working hours, due to shift work are all contributors to suicide. Organisational factors have also been found to be another cause of stress which in turn leads to suicide. These are organizational culture; inadequate resources; insufficient remuneration for services rendered; lack of recognition; lack of promotions, and limited availability of support and counselling services. In conjunction with this, studies have found that misconduct and involvement in corruption have led police officers to kill themselves (Schinderette & Bacon 1991).

Violanti (1995) has developed theories to explain how factors that are specific to police work make police officers susceptible to suicide. He found that police officers have a reluctance to seek help, for two main reasons. Firstly, they do not want to appear vulnerable to their colleagues; secondly, they perceive themselves as problem solvers who should not, therefore have problems themselves. This lack of help-seeking leads them to feel isolated, which leaves them vulnerable, with suicide becoming a viable option.

Violanti (1997) developed a psychological cognitive theory of police suicide. He theorised that police officers are socialized into specific ways of thinking; namely, dichotomous thinking. Their cognitive process is restricted to right or wrong with no grey areas. This thought process is applied to their personal life, thus, when police contemplate suicide it is difficult for them to consider alternatives; making them more susceptible to suicide. Furthermore, this theory suggests that the police role requires depersonalization of work situations. This depersonalization can lead to a lack of meaning and a sense of isolation, which in turn leads to increased suicide rates (Violanti, 1997). He recently discovered that shift work often results in irregular sleep patterns which may offset internal biological rhythms, leading to physiological and psychological disturbances (Violanti et al., 2008).

Violanti (1995) noted that frustration and helplessness experienced at work was another cause of suicide. He theorises that police officers enter the police service with the idea of rectifying the community and achieving positivity and goodwill. As they progress in their careers, they realise that this idealism cannot be achieved and their perception of the world changes. The shattering of this assumption of being 'superheroes', can lead them to feel helpless which may result in suicide. Their reason for committing suicide is to regain the power and control that they previously thought they had, and escape from the continuous exposure to negativity and suffering (see e.g. Cantor, Tyman & Slater, 1995). In addition, police officers experience pessimism from the community. As a result of this they experience frustrations and may look for alternative ways to cope. When all else fails suicide becomes an option (Berg et al., 2001; Loo, 2003). However, Kappeler, Blumberg and Potter (1996) agree with Ivanhoff (1994) that too much emphasis is placed on job stress, and that other factors need to be taken into consideration.

Research has shown that due to the nature of police work, such as the long working hours and close involvement in community matters, police officers' domestic circumstances are strained. As a result, relationship problems manifest and have been noted as one of the major causes of suicide. The psychodynamic theories have also noted the importance of relationship problems in police suicide. It is theorised that police officers displace their frustrations, such as burnout onto their loved ones. They attribute their work failure, to themselves and their partners, creating relationship problems (Jackson & Maslach, 1982). Pines and Arenson (1988) found that

a combination of work and relationship burnout, leads officers to thoughts of suicide. Rosenthal and DiMatteo (2001) found that relationship problems were the primary cause of suicide in 57.6% of police suicide cases. A study conducted in Queensland, found that 34.5% of suicides were attributed to domestic problems (Cantor, Tyman & Slater, 1995), and 11 out of 35 suicide cases were due to marital or sexual problems in the Canadian study (Violanti, 2004).

Other factors have been related to police suicide, such as the time the study was conducted, for example civil disorder and rioting in Northern Ireland affected police suicide rates (see e.g. Armour, 1996, as cited in Hem, Berg & Ekeberg, 2001). A study done by Wagner and Brzeczek (1983) in Chicago found that 60% of officers that committed suicide abused alcohol, which highlights the association between alcohol abuse and police suicide (e.g. Lester 1992).

One common factor in the majority of studies reviewed reported the significance of firearms as a method of suicide. The study done on New York police found that 93.8% of officers used firearms to commit suicide (Friedman, 1967). By comparison, Roussow (1999) reported that in South Africa 80% of police suicides were committed using a service firearm. It was also found that 68% of completed police suicides are not carried out at work. In light of these results, the practice of allowing police to take their firearms home should be questioned.

Why is it a significant issue in the field?

Unfortunately, in South Africa the impact of police suicide is only felt when a police suicide occurs, and the media publicises it. There is then a hype around the issue of police suicide for that time period, but soon overshadowed and lost by political agendas. Studies have proved that police suicide rates are significantly higher than the rates of other occupations, and much higher than that of the general population (Violanti, 2008). The fact that there has been a number of inconsistencies in the rates of police suicide, globally, with some studies reporting extremely high suicide rates and other studies reporting no suicide rates act as an impetus to study suicide amongst police in South Africa. No matter how small the problem may seem, the fact that police officers to date are still committing suicide means that it is an area that should be paid attention to. Police suicide does not only affect the deceased, it also affects the moral and work ethic of the deceased's colleagues, creating guilt, remorse or disillusionment amongst

colleagues. Thus, more research around coping and prevention of police suicide needs to be done.

There has been minimal research done on police suicide in South Africa. Statistics on South African police suicide, reported that: unmarried Black and Asian male Constables between the ages of 24 and 29 have the highest suicide rate. The use of an African or Asian home language was also seen to be a strong barometer of suicide. Most officers were likely to commit suicide between six o'clock in the evening and midnight. The most common regions for police suicide were the Northern Cape, Mpumalanga, North West Province and Gauteng (Pienaar, 2002). There are theories suggesting that the amount of violence and the type of violence that South African police officers are exposed to, are a predictor of suicide. However, this needs further investigation (Kopel & Friedman, 1997). Rossouw (1999) also found that suicide rates were highest amongst officers that did visible policing. However, due to the limited research conducted on police suicide in South Africa it is difficult to assess the validity of these findings.

Minimal research has been done on the actual causes of police suicide in South Africa. Police suicide prevention programmes are based mainly on Western theories. There are numerous cultural and political differences in the nature of policing in South Africa that Western theories do not take into account. The only information available is from media statements and newspaper reports such as the Citizen and News24, which mainly report the statistics of police suicide and not the causes. Thus there is no valid local benchmark against which one can assess suicide causes. Psychologists and counsellors are therefore in possession of limited scientific research and information to guide police suicide prevention programs (Pienaar, 2002). In order to implement adequate suicide prevention programs a holistic understanding of the multifaceted nature of police suicide is required.

METHOD

Design

Qualitative methods were used for the purpose of this research. Qualitative research provides detailed and meaningful information about the complex nature of human phenomena. It provides a rich understanding of a specific social context, and the opportunity to obtain insight into an individual's lifestyle and coping mechanisms that may not be accessible through quantitative methods (Babbie & Mouton, 2006). It acknowledges that there are multiple truths, which are dependent on the circumstances surrounding the individual (Hayes, 2000). Qualitative research is suited for this study, as suicide is a subjective issue that requires a fuller understanding of an individual's world. Therefore, the researcher is able to elicit themes around the contextual factors surrounding suicide, as well as the stated causes.

Participants

Five cases of police suicide were identified from police stations across the Western Cape and the sample consisted of two participants per case. A total sample of ten participants were interviewed. However, two participants asked to be withdrawn from the research, as they were unsure whether they were allowed to speak on behalf of the police service. This sample size was chosen due to time constraints and the limited scope of the study. The participants that were interviewed were colleagues of the deceased, namely the work partner and the supervisor in charge of the deceased at the time of the suicide. In cases where this was not possible, a colleague and superior that were on duty with the deceased were interviewed. The reason for selecting the work partner and supervisor as the participants is that they would have been in contact with the deceased preceding the suicide and thus, may have more insight into the causes and contextual factors surrounding the suicide. Through this method, six male officers and two female officers were selected. Other demographic features of the participants were not of any significance, as the purpose is to understand the subjective factors and stated causes surrounding the suicide and not to generalize the findings.

Recruitment

The recruitment method entailed a combination of convenience and purposive sampling (Babbie & Mouton, 2006). It was convenience sampling in that the researcher had access to police suicide records in the Western Cape, thus making the sample readily accessible. From these records, the researcher approached different police stations throughout the Western Cape, and asked if any police officers will be willing to participate in the study. A total of 15 police stations were asked to participate in the study, of these, only four police stations agreed. The sample was chosen on a purposive basis as is evident in the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned below.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Participants were selected according to the criteria of being the work partner or supervisor of the deceased. Another inclusion criterion was that participants must be able to speak English. The researcher is English-speaking and had limited resources, and so, was not able to source a translator. A brief description of the purpose and procedures involved in the study was sent to any potential participants, so that they were fully aware of the requirements and nature of the study before they participated in it. The researcher obtained informed consent from the participants (see appendix B), before arranging an interview time with the participants. The sample is too small to be generalized to the greater population; however the aim was to obtain participants from a diverse geographical range of police stations. The reason for this is that there could be differences noted in the stated causes of suicide at different police stations across the Western Cape.

Data Collection

The data was collected from police stations throughout the Western Cape. The method of collection was one on one, face to face, semi-structured interviews (see appendix A) conducted with colleagues of the deceased. Semi structured interviews were chosen as they allow a topic to be explored further, whilst maintaining the focus of the research (Hayes, 2000). The interviews were audio-recorded, except in one case where the participant was not comfortable being audio-recorded so the interviewer made notes. The focus of the interview was on the verbal interaction

between the participant and researcher; however, the participant's non-verbal features such as body language and facial expressions were also noted.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in a location agreed upon by both the researcher and participants, namely, at the police station or at the participant's home (Yorkston et al., 2008). The interview questionnaire consisted of six open-ended questions. The number of questions was flexible and more unplanned questions were added depending on the progression of the interview (Flick, 2002). The interview ended with a debriefing and an opportunity for the participant to express any concerns or questions relating to the study. The researcher provided the participant with a pamphlet, listing counselling services that are available to the participant should such a need arise.

Data Analysis

The method of analysis used for this study is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves finding, analysing and reporting patterns within the interview data that is relevant to the topic of study, it is not a linear process, rather it is a recursive process, thus the researcher constantly moved back and forth to identify patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher familiarised herself with the data by going back and forth between the data and the research question. The researcher coded the data and then developed proto-themes. The data was then explored further to clarify the proto themes, and then the final themes were coded. The analysis took the form of an inductive approach- as minimal research has been done on causes of police suicide in South Africa, hence no prescribed coding frame was used (Flick, 2002).

REFLEXIVITY

Qualitative research requires considerable reflection on the part of the researcher throughout the research process. Reflexivity in this study is important as I am currently a reservist of the South African police service hence; this research has personal resonance for me. As a result I was aware of my own subjectivity and how it affected the research process.

Before I started the research, I made sure I was aware of the benefits and downfalls that my role as a reservist and a researcher could play. Firstly, I may be more sensitized to the topic; I am able to understand the police terminology and cultural norms more readily than a researcher that has not had any experience in the police service. Secondly, I felt myself becoming involved in the interview as a reservist and not as researcher, so I had to detach myself. Another important factor that came up for me was that there was the participants would say something and at the end they would say... as you should know. At first I would not question them further because I did know what they were saying, however I realized that if I was a lay person I would probably have not understood the unspoken communication that went on between the interviewee and myself.

Lastly, the fact that I am female and there was such a strong interplay between male and female police officers may have influenced the nature of the interview. The male police officers may have felt intimidated by a female researcher; thus they may not have shared as much information with me as they would with a male researcher.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis was done in order to find themes that were prominent in the transcribed material. Interviewing police officers that knew the deceased and face many of the daily problems is the first step in understanding the lived experiences of police officers, and the factors that contribute to police suicide. The themes in the analysis are direct accounts of individuals that had close interaction with the deceased. While we will never know the actual cause of suicide, there is a strong congruence in the police officers stories. Their stories should therefore be taken seriously as the stated causes provide useful insight into police suicide. This is an exploratory study as minimal research has been conducted on police suicide in South Africa.

Five major themes were coded. The most salient theme was the causes of suicide; but also counselling services; signs of suicide; gender and the role of service firearms as a method of suicide were coded. The themes will be listed in order of salience. Each case has been labelled case 1 to 4 and each participant was labelled 1 or 2. Therefore, the quotes will be referenced as follows e.g. (case 1.1) which means case 1 participant 1.

Causes of Suicide

Four main causes of suicide were evident. In all the cases, the deceased committed suicide mainly due to relationship problems. However, it was noted that this was not the only problem, and that financial and work issues played a role as well.

Relationships

The role relationships play in the cause of suicide has been widely documented throughout the literature, with studies reporting that 57.6% of police suicide cases are due to relationship problems (Rosenthal and Dimatteo, 2001). The account of one participant illustrates this:

Before he shot himself he told his wife that he can't cope with the way his life is turning out, and the people around him are not who he thought they were, and told her that she must look at their two daughters every single day for the rest of

their lives and tell them that she was the reason he killed himself and then he shot himself, through the head with his gun.(case 3.2)

A plausible explanation was given as to why it appears to be relationship problems:

Could that not be the reason why we perhaps have family and relationship problems, because you can't speak about it at work, and you can't really speak about it at home, so you take it out on your family or girlfriend or boyfriend? But what I meant when I said that it is more family than police is that because the issue at the house is not that big but because of something that happens at work then the issue in the house becomes big and gets blown out of proportion (case 2.1)

This sentiment is supported in the research done by Jackson and Maslach (1982), who found that there is a strong relationship between work stressors and relationship problems. Thus, counselling services need to consider family interventions as part of their suicide prevention programs.

In three of the cases the deceased also killed other individuals.

he did try and speak to his lady, she did tell him that she is cheating. She did jump out of the car and he did shoot at her, he did shoot her three times and she did die. He then shot him through the head. (case 1.1.)

While there is minimal literature on police officers killing loved ones, it appears to be a common trend in suicides amongst South African police officers, so, it is a possible area for further research. Everstine (1998) highlights that suicide is sometimes carried out in order to hurt another person. This could provide insight into why the officers killed their loved ones as well.

Financial

Financial troubles were another prominent stated cause of suicide. This was expressed by a number of the participants. It was evident that they felt that they do not earn enough money, considering the nature of their work.

because of the poor salaries that police officers receive he could not afford accommodation so most of the time he was sleeping by this friend and by that pal, in fact most of the time nobody knew where he was actually sleeping and that led to many other problems like drinking and you know and then he stole his colleagues phone and stole his car and he made an accident with the car that was the major trigger. (case 2.1)

The financial problems faced by police officers are not widely documented. This problem is specific to South African officers (Roosendaal, 2002). South Africa has one of the highest crime rates in the world, but yet their officers earn amongst the lowest salaries, with a Constable receiving a mere R6500 a month. Police officers, like civilians, have a basic instinct for survival, when you work so closely with death and at the same time are trying to ensure your own survival, it can sometimes become unbearable as one police officer commented:

In the service we are paid peanuts honestly you will get a shock if I were to tell you how much we paid... it is enough to support one person, not a family or even a couple. It is hard trying to figure out how you going to put food on the table everyday and on top of that dealing with people in the communities problems (case 2.2)

Combined with this, was an underlying tone that there was a lack of appreciation from management's side which was noted as a precursor for suicide:

nobody really cares about us we are just a number here and shame if you a Constable you are nothing, even as Inspectors we are nothing, as long as the police as a whole has a good face, the individual in the police does not matter (case 2.1)

This lack of appreciation from management was a common theme and is referred to later in the text when counselling services are discussed.

Work Factors

There seemed to be a lack of consensus around whether work factors were a cause of suicide. Work factors were divided into three components: trauma, workload and ranking. One of the Captains stated his opinion on the role of work, as a possible cause of suicide:

there is a lot of pressure at work, there is a lot of conflict around, there is a lot of stuff but it is very rare to find members committing suicide because of the work related issues, it is very very rare that you find it, you see the work itself it can be handled because that is why the majority of us can handle the work up to this stage, you see work as far as the workload nobody can commit suicide as far as the workload because it is manageable (case 1.2).

This statement contradicts the vast majority of literature on police suicide (e.g. Pienaar, 2002, Violanti, 2008). A different perspective, which is more congruent with the literature was given by a Constable lower down the ranks, thus attributing the treatment from management as a cause of suicide.

it is a bit of both but it is not what we see that is not the problem mos, the problem is the way in which we are treated like crap, like nothing like the scum of the earth that is the problem. (case 5.1)

This was reiterated by another colleague:

what we take home is what comes from management so it is not like taking your work home you see because if they give you problems it is not like directly work related but it's like you feel so angry and that is also what you take home. (case 3.1)

When questioned about the trauma, it was stated on numerous occasions that traumatic experiences at work were not the cause of suicide:

No I don't think the trauma or other things that you experience have an impact on committing suicide. (case 3.1)

It was stated that police officers are trained to cope with the trauma of work and that is why it is not a factor:

It is not a nice experience but it does not mean that you must regard the service as not a nice place to be or you must decide to commit suicide because you partner

was shot, its...it's not necessary, you see it is normal routine for the police... if you work for the police you can be expect to be shot at anytime, even if you are not working as you are walking out of this office you can be shot at anytime, like anything can happen to anyone at an anytime so we are ready. (case 1.2)

There appears to be disagreement on whether or not the trauma of work does contribute to suicide. This is an assumption, but, it could be that police officers become so neutralized to the stimuli that they experience at work, that eventually they cannot make the connection between the trauma of work and how it impacts their lives. I say this, as there was constant reference by all participants to the trauma that they experienced at work, and implications that it is difficult to deal with, but it was not stated that it was a cause of suicide:

The biggest problem is there is no one to speak to about things that happen at work, we see colleagues die, we see raped woman, we see beheaded children, we see drugged up teenagers, we see woman beaten to a pulp, we see dead bodies in ditches, we see mangled bodies in accidents, we see burnt bodies in houses, we shoot people dead, we get shot at, isn't this enough to make anyone go crazy? (case 2.2)

A plausible explanation was given by one of the participants as to why police officers may not view work problems as a major cause of suicide:

it appears at face value very little is work related when it comes to committing suicide, however, the situations that we experience at work may trigger thoughts of the suicide.... You experience very traumatic things at work and you do not realise it but it does affect you, even if it is not the major problem in your life it will make that major problem worse. (case 2.1)

Another participant noted that police officers will not state that work factors are a possible cause of suicide, because they are protecting the face of the police:

As police officers we will protect ourselves at any cost, that is why it is easier to blame it on relationships then on financials which are not directly related to work, or on actually work problems, that way we stay clear of the media and negative publicity that surrounds the police (case 2.1).

The idea of protecting the face of the police was brought up in the theme about counselling services; hence it is clearly an issue that needs to be investigated further. Another possible explanation could be related to the idea of 'real men' which will be discussed further in the text:

You get these guys the so called "macho men": some scenes are horrific. When you see these things they stay in your mind for a long time. It does affect most police officers, but we have it in our minds that we are a man so we can't speak to people, so the stuff it builds up until we can't take it anymore (case2.2)

Hart (1995) stressed the importance that the workload has on an officer's wellbeing, which was expressed by some of the participants:

Sometimes you take the workload home, that's where the problems start... because then you are engaging in the work 24/7, you are at work the whole day then you must go home and carry on with the work some more...it is those guys that deal with a lot of paper work on top of patrols. Dealing with the stuff we see at work it is bad but once your day is done you go home and forget about it. Those guys can't forget because they taking the work home with them (case 2.2).

The lack of promotions was another sub theme:

when people are putting their lives at risk it becomes a lot more personal than any other promotion you know you feel you deserve more credit then what you were getting, and

with a promotion does not only come more respect but more money too so it cuts a lot deeper than you think. I am sure that this contributed to his suicide. (case 3.3)

These two themes are explained by Leenaars (1991), he explains that at different developmental stages in one's life, an individual has certain expectations of where they should be and require a certain level of achievement. If this level is not accomplished, then suicide becomes an option. While this theory is not scientifically proven, it provides a reasonable explanation.

There was a constant reference to ranking in the police service. The lower ranks commented that they were ill-treated and were not heard, this lack of attention was a possible cause for suicide:

We have meetings about it, but nothing gets done about it because we are nothing right now. We are just a bunch of Constables driving around, making arrests saving the world by ourselves and getting killed for it, that is why most of the Constables commit suicide... As you get higher up the ranks you become more relaxed, so Constables get a lot of work so most Constables take their lives, (case 5.1).

Lastly it appeared that the change in shift work was a significant cause of suicide:

When he was removed from the shift he became negative he was sent to work at court. Now many people will view court as being the lowest of the lowest, the way we see it you only go there because of punishment. So according to him that's what it was, and not just that, it didn't only affect work it affected his personal life, it was seen as a demotion and an embarrassment for him... and the next thing I heard he shot himself (case 5.2).

From all the participants' accounts, it appeared that it was not a single work factor, but rather a combination of work factors that led to suicide as one participant stated:

Nothing gets right in the police you wait for your money, you wait for your overtime, the vans doesn't work they are always unsafe, you make accidents and its always your fault but the vans they are all soema broken and stuff like that and they never fix it even though we have meetings and stuff like that, and then it goes to your head because you talking and talking and nothing happens and you want to make a difference in the world but you can't (case 5.1)

One of the Constables summed up nicely that it is a combination of the work stressors, financial problems, and lack of support that influenced their decision to commit suicide;

I think our job, because of what we are doing, risking our lives every day, putting our personal lives on hold for everything. We get called at all times of the night to scenes. Sometimes we even have to fill other peoples shifts on our off days because otherwise who is going to do it? And for what we risk, I think we get paid too little. Our job is such a big part of our lives, and it affects us so badly how can they not give us more. I feel the authorities don't recognize the fact that we are such a vital part of society, if we weren't here honestly what would happen? Our society would just collapse by itself and people don't recognize that, they just take it for granted. So sometimes, we feel we not worthy of recognition from society, form our partners, or from our company, so the combination of these factors may lead to suicide. (case3.3)

Freud's theory of aggression and feelings of helplessness can explain to some extent why police officers get to this point. The constant pressure of trying to make a difference but not gaining any recognition, eventually becomes too much and when they have no other options left, then suicide becomes an option.

We all want to find a way just to end our problems. The attempted suicides are the cries for help. Unfortunately in this service you can scream your head off for help, no one will even look your way (case 2.1).

Counselling Services

In a number of the studies the participants made explicit reference to the fact that police officers are human beings and they also face the daily problems that every other human being does:

Besides being a policeman at the end of the day you are only human (case 2.1).

Furthermore it came across, that the police officers felt as though no one cared about them, that they constantly had to protect the community, but yet there was no one there to protect them:

They don't give you transport, they don't care about your safety at all, that's the difference between civilians and police no one cares about us you just do your job, you get killed its fine (case 5.2).

Another officer expressed that it is not only physical protection that they need, but that they also need emotional protection and counselling, as they not only have to deal with their own problems but they also need to deal with civilian problems, which ties into the idea of them being human too:

You dealing with all these personal issues at home but yet you must come work and you must deal with the same issues...you must now to solve for other people when you yourself might also be going through such a thing, so you yourself, as a policeman, cant phone another policeman to come and solve your problem but yet it is your duty to solve other people's problems (case 3.1).

This idea of needing emotional protection created an underlying theme that there are inadequate counselling services. There appears to be mixed feelings around this issue. From managements perspective it appears that they do not feel suicide is a major problem as they provide adequate counselling and that there are greater problems that need to be addressed. This was expressed by one of the Captains:

There is enough attention being paid to the issue of suicide, that is why it is not a regular thing it is not a big issue, because if there was not enough attention paid

to the members, say the members were not getting proper counselling or proper referral then we definitely should have been sitting with a lot of suicides (case 1.2)

This was supported by research done by Mabe (2004) who found that there are adequate resources for police officers, such as a twenty-four hour helpline. However, the officers were not making use of the help lines due to the stigma attached to counselling. Interestingly, in the next breath the Captain admitted that there was a problem, but stated that the onus was on the lower ranks to act upon it:

But you see suicide in the police is not a new thing you can go to any office and you will see there are letters that have been circulated since 1999 or 1991 because it is a regular problem it is continuous so we need to constantly remind the members, but you see when we circulate these handouts they do not always read them. (case 1.2)

The sentiments of police officers lower down the ranks paint a different picture; they do admit that there are counselling services available; however, they feel that the counselling services are under resourced, and so do not meet the needs of police officers. For example:

I think the resources are limited because you get somebody that is stationed at an area and when you talk about an area it's stationed from Wynberg up to ohhh where is it now, its way out of Cape Town. You have social services and they must cover a big area, which is the main problem. Then of course sometimes they are contacted and they just don't come. (case 2.1)

Further in the interview the participant provided an example of the type of counselling that they receive:

Like my friend I told you that tried to commit suicide a few weeks ago, he is back at work the counselling that they did, they just moved him from one shift to another, that's his counselling that it (case 5.1).

It is evident that there is disagreement between management and the lower ranks with regard to counselling and suicide. Management need to clarify their role in the physical and emotional protection of police officers. On the other hand, the lower ranks need let go of the stigma attached to seeking help and take responsibility for their own well being (Mabe, 2004).

There was a strong sense that even though there are counselling services, police officers feel that they cannot speak about their concerns as their confidentiality would be broken:

*We do have EAS- employee assistance something services, but in the police if you now go and speak about a problem then tomorrow everyone knows your problem.
(case 3.1)*

Cantor, Tyman and Slater (1995) explained how police officers will do anything to protect the image of the police. It came across that the public will never truly understand how police officers are really treated, as one of the main concerns of the police service is portraying a good face to the public rather than looking after their employees:

Do you think the statistics and reports are real? Of course they not, but you see the thing is nobody really cares about us, we are just a number here and shame if you a Constable you are nothing, even as Inspectors we are nothing, as long as the police as a whole has a good face, the individual in the police does not matter.(case 2.1)

This provides a useful insight, indicating that the lower ranks are admitting that the false publicity and fake statistics given to the public are a major problem. So, if we can address the issue from the lower levels, we might be able to change the mentality of protecting the police. Future officers would feel that they are not just part of a publicity campaign, but that each of them are important. The lack of resources and confidentiality have hindered police officers faith in the counselling system, and discouraged them to talk about their problems. This could be one of the reasons why they commit suicide. As the officers stated suicide is the last option when you have nothing else to turn to. Therefore the efficiency of counselling services in South Africa needs to be redressed. There is a need for the counselling services both to hear the voices of the police officers and to meet their needs:

As police officer you go for training at the beginning, but I feel what they fail to mention is that they say that we do have people on sight to help you, but the psychologists need to put more emphasis on how you can help yourself, because at the end of the day only you know what is actually going on inside you. I mean personally I don't find blood and guts disturbing, it's the emotional side that gets to me but it may be different for someone else... So I mean if they actually helped us to figure out how we can help ourselves that would be so much better, then we could actually... we could rely on ourselves because at the end of the day we are the only people we can rely on. (case3.3)

There is no doubt that there is a cry for more adequate resources, as many of the police officers expressed that they have contemplated suicide. An inspector who had been in the service for 15 years said:

I can reassure you that there is not one police officer in this service, working for over 5 years that has not contemplated suicide. (case 2.1)

Some of the officers that were interviewed commented that they had considered committing suicide:

You see I think about it a lot, like a lot a lot... Recently I wanted to kill myself say two months ago. (case 3.1)

Three out of the eight police officers interviewed expressed their suicidal thoughts, this surely emphasises the importance of providing efficient counselling services and creating a culture of trust in the police service.

Signs preceding the suicide

In most of the cases there was an indication that the deceased wanted to commit suicide. Many suicidologists (e.g. Smith, 1989) agree that 80% of the time, a person that commits suicide will indicate their intent beforehand, either consciously or unconsciously. These signs differed in most of the cases, in one case it was mainly behavioural signs:

Some of the members they are always active at work, coming at work early, their performance is at a high standard but all of a sudden you see that the guys is changing, start to come later, come in at 12 with an alcohol smell, his eyes are red, his behaviour is changing, the guy is not performing, booking off sick and all. So you have to pay attention on that situation, and check what could be the reason for him to change his behaviour... Umm those are all the signs that there is a problem that something has happened. So to prevent the question of reaching a stage of suicide, the best thing is to call the member in. (case 1.1)

Another officer noted that it may not be through visible signs, but that purely by listening to the change in the content of what the individual is saying you can pick up that there is a problem (Richman, 1986):

Some of them becomes silent but most importantly some of them talks constantly about problems, they will talk problems and you can hear at that point you must immediately take his firearm away...You see a police officer won't like just randomly talk about a random problem. If they talk about their problem, they talk about a few months of problems coming up all at once, then you know now it is something that you need to worry about (case 5.1).

Pienaar and Rothman (2002) state that suicidal ideation is an important indicator of police suicide and should be taken seriously. In many of the cases, before the police officer committed suicide, they indicated that they had suicidal thoughts:

he spoke about committing suicide once but in a joking way, so we just laughed it off (case 2.1).

This provides a crucial insight into suicide prevention programs- namely that there are a number of signs that need to be taken seriously.

Gender

Gender was another important theme throughout the interviews. The literature states that the suicide rate is higher for males than females (Loo, 2003). However there have been no studies that have researched the interplay between male and female officers and how this affects suicidal

tendencies. Although only two females were interviewed as compared to six males, the stereotyped differences in gender and the stated role that it plays in suicide was significant.

They still regard females as being the weaker sex even though it can be argued that they are not. But at the end of the day let's call a spade a spade, the females are the inferior sex because they let the males do the hardest part of the work. (case 5.5.)

This came across in two subthemes: the interplay between male and female officers; and the concept of a 'real man'. When asked about the causes of suicide, without being prompted in anyway, male police officers noted that woman police officers are less likely to commit suicide because they work inside, thus they are exposed to less traumatic events.

Most of the time, like my partner today, I will do the talking and she will do the writing. So they not actually that involved in solving the problem, but most of the time they not even working outside they are either working inside or on the offices and stuff so they don't have to deal with the bad side of the police work they mostly are just with the paper work. (case 3.1)

Female police officers painted a different picture, agreeing that whilst they may not be involved in the physical work as often as the men, for them the emotional work is far more draining:

Because I am a woman police officer we can't always be on the physical side of things, we have to step back at times and we have to... you know take some of the people that have been abused and I have to comfort them...and obviously as a woman you are expected to be more comforting and more motherly to them. As a result you get the full front of their trauma and you almost there living it with them. (case 3.3)

There could be two possible explanations for this interplay. The first explanation could be that the male officers are trying to justify the reasons for there being a higher rate of male than female suicides. Secondly, they could be aware of the effects that the nature of their work has on them

as there were numerous occasions where they spoke about the trauma of their work, but due to the idea of being 'real men' they are not willing to admit to this trauma.

Another theme that was mentioned by both sexes was that women want to grieve differently to men, but are silenced by the culture of the police service:

besides their police problems they don't talk about that stuff to their friends and family members, especially the guys, because we are so shy to talk about if the ladies they don't want you anymore and stuff like that, we feel it is a disgrace especially in the police service because the guys will laugh at you, you see that is the biggest mistake that we are doing, but the females they will talk about it and they good at crying, but you see the males they keep their stuff inside and as a result their anger is growing (case 1.2).

There was a feeling amongst the women that they would like to share their thoughts and feelings openly. However they were constrained by the mockery of the male police officers, and so conformed to the unsaid rule of 'not speaking about their problems'. They therefore resorted to silent communication:

I think amongst the woman there is this understanding but it is so unsaid, it is just this silent look that you know I can grieve with you, because woman grieve differently. Its more emotional but because we are in an environment with so many men its different, because there is no room for you to portray that without being seen as the weaker sex, or being made fun of so it is more just a... you know, hand on your shoulder or a quick hug but that's it there is just no time to just sit and really talk without the men mocking us (case3.2)

The issue of gender was not only evident between the male and female police officers, but it was also one of the most significant factors in non-attendance of male police officers at counselling sessions, as demonstrated in the following statement:

The guys don't use them they think they are macho and the counsellors are female, why should they speak to females about their problems, I don't know if

you do research on it but that could be the reason for them coming to the decision of them taking their own life, because what man wants to tell a female his problems.(case 2.2)

This notion of not attending counselling was reinforced by the frequent referral of being a ‘real man’. This referral of a ‘real man’ is relevant to South African police officers, and should be explored further in order to understand how this affects the well being of male police officers. Firstly, there is a stereotype that police officers are ‘real men’,

He did kill himself. The police is made from real men, real men don't kill themselves real men deal with problems (case 1.1).

When questioned about what constitutes a real man, one police officer said:

A real man is independent well at least he thinks he is independent, which means he thinks he the alpha male and they only need advice for certain things and never need advice for other things, whereby now when he is brought into this position, whereby now he has to ask for advice, he doesn't want to be subservient to anyone and he ends up killing himself (case 5.5).

It became apparent that when this ideal of being a real man is broken down, that is when suicide becomes an option:

The men in the police force have an image of themselves like they are macho, and strong, and sexy and untouchable. Many a times this image is challenged and they realize that at the end of the day they are just human like the rest of us and like us woman. When this image is challenged some of them don't know how to deal with it that is when suicide becomes a possibility. (case 2.1)

Service firearms

The use of service firearms as a method of suicide has been widely documented in the literature with as much as 80% of police officers killing themselves with their own gun (Roussouw, 1999). In all the documented cases, except one case, the deceased used their service firearm to kill themselves or their partners.

He took out his service firearm and actually killed himself on the scene where the paramedics were there to attend to him (case 2.1)

One officer gave an explanation of why service firearms play such a vital role in police suicide. For this officer it was a statement of power:

It just shows you that I am powerful. I am not going to hit you or anything, the gun is the easiest way because I got it and at the same time I am taking my work for a poes and taking my girlfriend at the same time for the same thing, because I am using my gun which represents my work and I am killing and killing and killing easy way out bitch ass niggers. (case 5.1)

For another officer, it had nothing to do with power but rather with the accessibility and practicality of using a service firearm:

It is easy access, it is the closest weapon, it is the quickest method and it is easy to load...we know the ins and outs of our guns, that is why we use them, we know where and how to shoot to make it lethal. (case 2.2)

There appeared to be mixed feelings around the issue of police officers taking their service firearms home. All the participants indicated that they felt that it was important to take their firearms home, but that police officers need to be monitored. The words of one of the officers sum up the general consensus around access to service firearms when officers are not on duty:

I am in uniform and you are getting robbed in front of me by the guy who has got a knife and I do not have my firearm, my firearm is at the office you are expecting for me to get up quickly and come and help you, but I can't come and help you because the guy has a knife and he is stabbing you in front of me, because I don't have a firearm what are you going to say about the police? It makes a bad impression, those are the reasons why we must have firearms when we go home...

So yes it is a big issue but it is necessary. Let alone the fact that at the end of the day we get some bad results sometimes like a police officer killing himself, the main objective is to protect the community and to protect themselves and their families (case1.2).

The themes in combination

While each of the themes was addressed independently there was a definite overlap between them, and thus it can be said that there are a combination of factors that can lead to suicide. Violanti (2004) noted that there is an association amongst these factors, and that suicide cannot be attributed to one factor, but through a combination of intervening variables. For example:

Socially we have a lot of problems meeting people and trusting people. It's not easy to just get up and go and be normal in society, and like go out and have a good time with your friends because you always aware of the dangers, you always aware of what could go wrong... And you know in our personal lives too there are so many cases you know, where people believe that their partners are the best, they believe that their uncle or aunty or father is the best but yet these are the ones that turn against them and do these horrific things to them.... Then there is the side of domestic problems between girlfriend and boyfriend and husband and wife, you see as a police officer you sort of expect your partner to be supportive and caring and just understanding of your job because after all this is, this is your vocation in life... So now I mean when you feel that you can't be supported by your partner and you can't be understood, you feel ostracized from them this is probably why people tend to look for other alternatives like suicide (case 3.2).

CONCLUSION

This study, unlike previous local accounts of police suicide, has gone a step further and provided an introspective account of the experiences of suicide in the police service, rather than simply analysing statistics. The study was conducted in the Western Cape, South Africa. Eight police officers were interviewed, in order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the contextual factors surrounding the suicide of the deceased. The participants were also interviewed on their perceptions of suicide, and the factors that they felt lead police officers to commit suicide.

From the analysis it is clear that police suicide is a complex problem, it highlights the difficulties that the police services face in combating the high suicide rates, as they need to take into account the multifaceted nature of suicide. The causes of suicide influence each other, thus a holistic prevention program needs to be implemented that takes into consideration how work and financial problems can lead to relationship problems and the combination of these can lead to suicide.

Suicide prevention programs need to ensure that there is more interaction between management and the lower ranks, to encourage open forms of communication, in order to obtain a better understanding of the subjective experiences of the officers, by understanding the thoughts and feelings of the lower ranks and the factors that make them vulnerable to suicide. In conjunction with this, police officers need to foster a culture of trust in the police service and be able to speak openly without being stigmatized. The prevention program needs to address the issue of gender inequality and change the officer's perception of what it means to be a 'real man', by encouraging them to attend counselling. However, it is not enough to simply counsel police officers; the programmes need to incorporate the officer's family as part of the prevention program. This could be done either through monthly meetings with the families to discuss any problems that have arisen, or through written correspondence between the police service and a family member of the officers. Lastly, attention needs to be paid to the salaries police officers receive. If management does not have the resources to compensate them sufficiently they need to arrange meetings so that they can reach an agreement where both parties are satisfied and where the officers feel appreciated.

The themes that were found in this study are congruent with the literature in that work, relationship and domestic problems are all stated causes of suicide. Whilst there is minimal research done on financial problems it was an important theme in this research. Thus, the role that financial difficulties plays in suicide is a possible area for further research. Another area for further research is the theme of gender, namely; in the interplay between male and female officers, as well as the stereotype of being a 'real man' and speaking about problems in the police service as there is minimal literature done on this relationship.

Police officers are a vital part of our community, however, there is a lack of empirical and reliable evidence on the topic, and further research needs to be conducted in order to understand the subjective experiences of police officers nationwide. Further qualitative research needs to be conducted in South Africa to assess whether the five stated causes of suicide that were found in the Western Cape are applicable to other parts of South Africa. The information found in this study provides useful insight into the causes of suicide. However due to the small number of participants interviewed it is difficult to generalise the results to police stations throughout South Africa.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

Thank-you for agreeing to do this interview about police suicide. Your participation in this interview is purely voluntary. I would like to start with a few general questions on police suicide and then discuss the suicide of the deceased.

- a) [Name of interviewee] Generally speaking what are your perceptions on police suicide ?
- b) What do you believe are the major factors that lead police to commit suicide?
- c) What are your thoughts on the topic of police suicide in South Africa in particular?
- d) With regard to [Name of the deceased] what factors do you believe contributed to his/her suicide?
- e) How would you describe [Name of the deceased] physical and mental state at the time of the suicide?
- f) How well did you know [Name of the deceased] social or personal circumstances? Can you describe any social or personal factors that you believe may have caused [Name of the deceased] to commit suicide?
- g) If any, what are the family circumstances that you feel may have contributed to [Name of the deceased] suicide?
- h) Can you describe any work-related factors that you feel influenced [Name of the deceased] to commit suicide?
- i) Do you have any further comments or queries that you would like to discuss before we end the interview?

Thank-you for your time, if you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

APPENDIX B

University of Cape Town
Department of psychology
Consent to participate in research study

Purpose

I invite you to participate in an Honours research project on police suicide. This is an exploratory study that aims to identify contextual factors associated with police suicide in South Africa.

Procedure

You will be required to answer a few questions on the suicide of a colleague. These questions will be asked in the form of an interview. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes but will be adapted according to the nature of the interview. The data collected in the interview will be used in the research project.

I, agree that the interview data which I provide to..... on this date may be tape recorded and used for research purposes, provided that my identity is not revealed by the researcher.

I also agree that extracts from the recording can be used in the reports relating to that research, providing that confidentiality is respected in all cases.

Voluntary participation

I am aware that I will be interviewed on the topic of suicide which is a sensitive topic and that participation in this study is voluntary, thus, I have the right to terminate my participation in the research at any time.

I have been provided with a pamphlet containing the contact information of counselling services should the need arise during or after the interview process.

Queries

Any queries relating to this study should be directed to

Miss Cordelia Wellington

0827838125

(Signed).....

