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*Corresponding author: Eva Langvik, Psychology, NTNU Fakultet for samfunnsvitenskap og teknologiledelse, Norway, Trondheim
E-mail: eva.langvik@ntnu.no

Reviewing editor:
Heng Choon (Oliver) Chan,
Department of Social and Behavioral
Sciences, City University of
Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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Hoping for the best but unprepared for the worst? Explorative analysis of police students' encounter with child abuse investigation

Eva Langvik^{1,5*}, Lea Loncar^{2,5}, Ingrid Steen Rostad^{3,4,5}, Ylva Eraker^{3,5} and
Ingvild Saksvik-Lehouillier^{3,5}

Abstract: Child abuse investigation can include complex stressors increasing the risk of secondary trauma among police professionals. This study explores the preparedness of police students about to engage in child abuse investigation tasks during their recruit period. We did semi-structured interviews with 19 police students to explore the students' expectations and resources they relied on to cope with stress. Through thematic analysis, five themes emerged: 1) a worthy challenge and a valuable experience; 2) absence of concern about the burdens of "a job to be done"; 3) "Gotta' work it out!"—physical activity as the default coping mechanism; 4) seeking social support—the importance of talking to someone; 5) education on stress management is limited to operational stress. The results support increasing students' preparedness for child abuse investigation through knowledge about potential risks, normal reaction to adverse situations, and a focus on effective coping strategies beyond physical activity. The results call for improved and more diverse stress management education in the police, with an emphasis on evidence based coping strategies and reducing stigma associated with mental health help seeking.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Eva Langvik and Lea Loncar

Lea Loncar is a Ph.D. candidate writing her thesis on police employees working with child abuse investigation, focusing on stress, mental health, coping and debrief.

Eva Langvik is the supervisor and project manager of several research project on occupational health among police investigators and first responders, including this Novice police project. The Novice Police project is part of a larger study that addresses the main challenges and resources among police employees investigating child abuse, emphasizing the role of organizational factors in understanding occupational health among this group of employees.

Ylva Eraker was a scientific assistant on the Novice Police project, while Ingrid Steen Rostad and Ingvild-Saksvik Lehouillier are members of the research group, with expertise in organizational psychology, sickness-presentism, and shift-work tolerance.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

There is a high need for police investigators to deal with the rapidly growing cases of child abuse. Investigating child abuse is a challenging task for police professionals with high risk of impaired health. Further, studies report of barriers to mental health help seeking among police employees. We interviewed 19 police students who were about to engage in child abuse investigation to explore their expectations. Our findings revealed that students were confident that they would deal with the job and expected that they should be able to manage the stress. Their main coping strategies were working-out and talking to colleagues and family. Focus on stress management in their education so far was limited. They seldom made use of available resources at the police station (e.g., supervision). The results call for improved stress management education and suggests that reducing stigma associated with mental health help-seeking should especially target police recruits.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Criminology and Criminal Justice; Higher Education

Keywords: police stress; police trauma; police recruits; child abuse investigators; police onboarding

1. Introduction

Police work ranks high amongst the most stressful careers (Anderson et al., 2002; Gershon et al., 2009; Goodman, 1990; Liberman et al., 2002; Syed et al., 2020). The main stressors in police work arise from operational sources such as threatening or violent episodes, yet organisational sources can also be stressful, such as internal communication, workload, or lack of reward or appreciation (Amaranto et al., 2003; Shane, 2010; Violanti et al., 2017, 2016). The magnitude of stressors in police work (Martinussen et al., 2007) provides a high risk of burnout (Basinska & Wiciak, 2012; Berg et al., 2006; Kurtz, 2008) and turnover (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Wareham et al., 2015). The literature suggests that the police occupation, due to daily acute or cumulative stress, can seriously impair the physical and psychological health of police officers (Queirós et al., 2020b; Violanti et al., 2017, 2018). Such repeated stress can eventually lead to disease, chronically affecting both physical and mental health and well-being (Cieslak et al., 2014; Parkes et al., 2018; Violanti et al., 2017).

Police investigators are often exposed to traumatic stories of suffering and traumatised victims, including victims of child abuse, as well as a demanding workload, which increases the risk of health impairment like secondary trauma (Craun & Bourke, 2015; Doyle et al., 2022; Krause, 2013; Perez et al., 2010; Purba & Demou, 2019; Violanti et al., 2017). Exposure to child victims is known to be particularly distressing (Sanchez et al., 2019; Skogstad et al., 2013; Wolak & Mitchell, 2009) and prone to increase the health risk for police investigators (Bourke & Craun, 2014; Violanti et al., 2016). Further, chances for secondary trauma increases in cases where children are involved (Berge, 2005). Working with sexually offensive materials can have a substantial impact on a police employee's way of seeing the world (Parkes et al., 2018), and research indicates that cases relating to children are specially distressing for officers with young children of their own (Morabito et al., 2021).

Child abuse cases are dramatically increasing on a global scale, due to technology development leading to unprecedented levels of child abuse materials overwhelming police resources (Fortune et al., 2018; Killean et al., 2022). Recent pandemics has further escalated child abuse in many countries (Ellis et al., 2021; Kovler et al., 2021). Research shows that child abuse cases are rated as one of the worst stressors for police, surpassing even homicide (Violanti et al., 2016). However, organizational factors are also reported to be at least as important as exposure to adverse materials (Fortune et al., 2018). An increasing pressure on the police to deal with the magnitude of child abuse cases, represent a major stressor for police professionals. At the same time, there is in general lack of guidelines, training and preparation for such type of work (Internet Child Exploitation Investigation; ICE; Powell et al., 2015).

For special unit investigations of child abuse cases, organizational stressors can impair performance, and the stress more often resides in how the work is organized rather than the adverse content (M. B. Powell et al., 2013; Doyle et al., 2022). The most serious long-term or chronic disorders attributable to the job are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Asmundson & Stapleton, 2008; Soomro & Yanos, 2019) and secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD; Foley et al., 2022; Hurrell et al., 2018; MacEachern et al., 2019), both characterised by flashbacks of adverse events either experienced (PTSD) or indirect exposure to the trauma of others (STSD). Typical symptoms include irritability, sleep disorders, concentration difficulties and mood swings. Repeated exposure to adverse details or traumatic events, as in the case of a child abuse investigation increases the risk of experiencing secondary trauma (Berge, 2005; Doyle et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2014; MacEachern et al., 2019).

Although there are several health concerns, the exposure to trauma and empathy-based strain can, in some cases, lead to positive outcomes such as personal growth and a feeling of a higher purpose and meaning in life (Cohen & Collens, 2013; Manning-Jones et al., 2015).

Some researchers argue that mental health problems in the police occupation is no more prevalent than in other occupations (Van der Velden et al., 2013), and one study (Powell & Tomy, 2011) found no difference in life satisfaction between special unit investigators and general population. However, reaction to stress among police officers can differ depending on individual factors such as vulnerability (Marmar et al., 2006), lifestyle (Lee et al., 2016) and coping mechanisms (Bourke & Craun, 2014). Another factor to consider is the stigma about mental health issues in police culture (Emsing et al., 2022). Police officers report concerns about being perceived as weak or unfit for the duty if they would seek mental health support (Burns & Buchanan, 2020). Such barriers can hinder reporting concerns or seeking psychological services. Clearly, organisational factors such as debriefing practices or stress-management interventions impact the magnitude of stress reaction (Paton & Norris, 2014). Resources within the police organisation seem to play a crucial role in posttraumatic stress reduction (Burns et al., 2008; Paton & Norris, 2014), while police culture and adequate onboarding seem to have the potential to strengthening the employees and foster the development resilience as a preventive health measure (Cohen et al., 2019; Fortune et al., 2018). Hence, there is a need to focus on how well prepared the police officers encountering the field of child abuse investigations are in terms of stress management and coping strategies.

Research suggests the police students' practice period to be especially stressful and demanding (Belur et al., 2019; Patterson, 2016), and a useful approach to understand police stress and resilience is to explore police students engaged in their work practice period (Clifton, 2020; Kaiseler et al., 2014; Ramey et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2010). The onboarding period is a crucial formation phase where recruits are introduced to existing practices, and the students' perspective and process of adaptation therefore allows insights into the process of learning, the activation of coping mechanisms and the establishment of stress management while they are integrating into the occupational culture (Clifton, 2020; Inzunza & Wikström, 2020). For police recruits, both traumatic events and organizational stressors impact their mental health (Huddleston et al., 2007), and the role of education and training among recruits is, therefore, especially important (Emsing et al., 2022).

2. Coping strategies and resources among police employees

For police officers, physical activity is often utilized as a coping mechanism (Bourke & Craun, 2014), and physical fitness combined with sleep quality is considered an important protective factor against mental health impairment (Gerber et al., 2014). Ineffective or malfunctioning coping strategies associated with increased trauma symptoms and stress reactivity are usually rooted in suppression or avoidance (Can & Hendy, 2014; LeBlanc et al., 2008; Queirós et al., 2020a). Social support is considered one of the most important and effective means of coping, enhancing mental health among police officers (Berg et al., 2006; Milliard, 2020), yet the police profession struggles with openness about mental health support (Jetelina et al., 2020).

Research on resilience as a personal resource in police stress management has no clear agreement on which factors are crucial for developing robust and healthy police professionals (Andrew et al., 2014; Janssens et al., 2021) and studies of risk for PTSD and trauma for police recruits also call for more research on vulnerability, coping and resilience (Koch et al., 2017; Patterson, 2016; Ramey et al., 2017). The complex demands of modern policing seems to lack a prescriptive route for increasing the psychological preparedness of recruits (Blumberg et al., 2019). However, research offers insights into how efficient coping strategies contribute to emotional and physiological self-regulation through adaptation to complex changing environments and social demands (Crawford et al., 2013). Literature suggests task-oriented models of coping which includes action (LeBlanc et al., 2008); progressive relaxation and mental imaging methods (Arnetz et al., 2013); self-regulation, especially through

breathing techniques (McCarty & Atkinson, 2012); humour (Papazoglou & Andersen, 2014); and mindfulness-based training (Andersen et al., 2015; Chen & Grupe, 2021).

Social and organizational resources available in a police environment might play a crucial role in supporting police professionals in their encounters with work demands. According to the job demands-resources model (JD-R) of burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001), vulnerability to stress leading to burnout arises when experienced stress or stressors in the environment are greater than the available resources. A negative spiral of lacking resources and motivation in meeting with high job demands may lead to stress and negative health development as well as avoidance or withdrawal from work tasks (Bakker et al., 2003). There is a mutual influence between job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), where with sufficient resources professionals can more easily meet demanding tasks with motivation and engagement, spinning the spiral in a positive direction towards personal and professional growth (Demerouti et al., 2001).

The JD-R model has been part of organizational stress research across different types of organizations as well as in police stress research (D. Acquadro Maran et al., 2020; Frank et al., 2017). Studies suggest that younger police officers rely more on disengagement strategies and in general use a lesser variety of strategies than older employees (Bonner & Brimhall, 2021). In the context of this study, the focal point is to explore the students' resources, especially lessons acquired during education and on-site practise. In this study, we aim to identify what type of job demand and stressors students encounter, how they cope with job demands, and what kind of available resources they use to balance those. Addressing stress management among police students might help research and police practice in improving onboarding strategies including stress management.

3. Study objectives and research questions

The research on police students' expectations or stress coping regarding adverse investigation work is scarce. This project focuses on identifying the educational and organisational resources police students rely on in their dealing with stress. The specific aim of the study is to explore students' preparedness for the stress and demands during their work transcribing videotapes of investigative interviews with children, as a part of the investigation of child abuse. By exploring expectations of stress and demands in encounter with child abuse cases, we aim to identify areas of improvement relevant for education and organisational resources. The study addresses the following research questions: *What are the students' expectations of working with an investigation into cases of child abuse? What are the available educational and organisational resources students rely on to manage stress?*

4. Method

In their probationary training period, police students are employed by the Norwegian police authority where they are supervised and face a police work environment, duties, and challenges, both as operational and investigative police trainees—a process similar to the Swedish police trainee probationary period (Emsing et al., 2020).

This study utilizes a qualitative research design exploring students' experiences with work-related stress in the trainee period. A qualitative research design is considered flexible and suitable for exploring complex human phenomena such as experiences, beliefs, motivations, meaning creation or social practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2018). Qualitative design is evolved as a well-established and integrated approach in social sciences including psychology (Camic, 2021). Interviews offer in-depth data that is carefully compared and contrasted allowing emergence of meaning and themes that are central to participants (Kvale, 1994; Yeo et al., 2013). Previous studies on stress in police work has benefited from use of a qualitative approach (Eddy et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2014; Rabbing et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2006), and in line with those efforts, the

current study aims to explore and identify central themes related to stress in police work as faced by the police trainees.

5. Participants and procedure

To allow for in-depth exploration of police students' expectations and preparedness for child abuse investigation practice, we applied semi-structured interview technique that is preferred for in-depth conversation about specific topics, and to follow up on topics brought up by subjects (Kvale, 1994; Yeo et al., 2013). Our participants were 19 police students in their second year of Police Academy. The age ranged between 20–30 years, and 10 of the participants were females and 9 were males. The students had voluntarily signed up for a paid extra activity which was transcribing investigative interviews with children who were possibly victims of child abuse.

We interviewed the students at the police station where they were located, and the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The semi-structured interview guide included questions like “What are your expectations engaging in special unit investigation tasks of transcribing interviews with children?” and “What do you typically do when stressed?” Follow-up questions would contain prompts to encourage more in-depth elaboration, like “if transcribing the interview would cause you to experience discomfort, what would you do?”

The project was approved by the The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD; ref. 824773). Participation in the study was voluntary, and all informants gave their signed informed consent to participate, did not receive any compensation for participating and were told they could withdraw from the project at any time without penalty.

6. Data analysis

Interviews were tape recorded, and audio data was deleted after transcription and anonymisation. NVivo R1 software was used, and thematic analysis was applied as an analytic strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015). We followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) we identified and familiarized ourselves with the data; 2) generated initial codes; 3) we searched for themes, collating the initial codes into categories and overall themes by identifying repeated patterns of meaning across the codes and the dataset; 4) we reviewed, defined, and named each theme in a way that was consistent with the data and finally defining and naming themes; 5) we identified the essence of the themes which included defining and refining the themes. Table 1 provides an example of the analytic process.

7. Results

In the analysis, five main themes emerged: 1) a worthy challenge and a valuable experience; 2) absence of concern about the burdens of “a job to be done”; 3) “Gotta’ work it out!”—physical activity as the default coping mechanism; 4) seeking social support—the importance of talking to someone; 5) education on stress management is limited to operational stress.

8. A worthy challenge and a valuable experience

Without exception, the informants expected the task of transcribing special victim interviews to be demanding. However, they feel that it brings value to their education and practice:

Table 1. Example of the analytic process from transcript to final theme

Transcript	Identified codes	Theme
“You never know how you react before you try it” (P17)	Uncertain about own reactions to such work	Absence of concern about the burdens of “a job that needs to be done”
“it might have been ... something else if I had children myself too ...” (P18)	Being less vulnerable if you do not have children	

So yeah, it was really that, I thought that, yeah, throw yourself into it, and it's also a very valuable experience. (P5)

They also expected this experience would give them valuable knowledge. In the end, they weighted the knowledge acquired more heavily than the possible demanding aspect of this work. This remark represented the typical students' view:

I did kind of think that this is going to be challenging, eh ..., but I hope that the knowledge I get outweighs that load. (P12)

The students expressed a genuine motivation for gaining insight into the area of investigation, especially the work involving working with children:

I assume it is going to be really tough ... to hear ..., but I would really like to get some insight about the work they do, towards children. (P19)

The motivation to transcribe special victim interviews is learning a new aspect of police work, gaining new knowledge, and getting the experience. As one of the informants said:

But ... in a way, I look forward to it, because I think it will be very interesting and educational, and in a way, to see how it is done and how it is managed and all that. (P15)

9. Absence of concern about the burdens of “a job to be done”

Although students assume the task will be demanding, they do not know much about what to expect, how to approach the task, or how concerned one should be. As one informant expressed it: *You never know how you react before you've tried it. (P17)*

Students seem to be less aware of possible reactions or the emotional impact the work might have: *I haven't given it a lot of thought actually. (P2)*

However, some of the students did have some concerns that the work might be more challenging than expected:

I assume I'll probably think about it ... when I sit there then, that it might be a little stronger than I think ... but right now, it's a bit like “No, it's fine [laughing].” (P10)

One of the students speculated that the situation would be different from just reading or hearing about these types of cases in the media:

I think it gets more uncomfortable when you hear a voice from a person who has been exposed to such things, or if you get to watch a video [of the investigative interview]. (P6)

The majority of the students considered themselves as fit for the task and perceived themselves as less vulnerable as they did not have children. As one of the students responded to the question concerning how they would react:

“I do not have children myself, so ... it might have been ... something else if I had had children myself ... ” (P18)

The prevailing attitude was that the students felt robust enough to engage in child abuse investigation cases and complete the task successfully:

I also know that ... eh ... personally, I believe that I should be able to ... that I have, in a way, my own resources to cope with that (...). Also, there is also a lot of work, and a lot of

impressions and, uh, a lot that happens all the time then, so in a way, you have to deal with having some pressure on you. (P17)

Furthermore, there was a common impression among the students that one is expected to manage stress effectively, as it is simply a part of the police job:

Eh ... because you are ... for sure before you apply to the police academy, you understand that it is part of the job to handle stuff somehow. (P9)

10. “Gotta’ work it out!”—physical activity as the default coping mechanism

The informants described the coping strategies they use to manage negative work-related experiences. Physical activity, such as working out, clearly emerged as a means of “resetting”:

Going on a mountain hike for example. I really like to go mountain skiing and such and then you ... Reset yourself in a way. (P12)

Physical activity was seen as a mean of distraction, to just get their minds off things that have happened and worries about possible future work challenges:

I usually go to work out, and just listen to music, because then I think of something completely different. I also play handball, where there, I just think about what is there. I do not think about what has happened or what is going to happen. (P15)

One student described the positive effects of working out, especially during periods of stress:

But it [exercising]helped a lot for my mental health. I have been so much more ... I’ve been sleeping better at night. (P16)

Although few of the students had experienced very stressful events thus far in their on-site practice, their regular modes of coping with stress were working out, but also through talking to family, friends, and colleagues.

11. Seeking social support—the importance of talking to someone

The students have access to the health care service in the same ways that the other employees have, and all students have their dedicated supervisor. For the job transcribing the interviews, there is a designated person organizing the work and being available for questions. The students praise the work environment at their practice site, with helpful and friendly staff, and good social dynamics:

(...) The one responsible for the on-site practice is great, the supervisors are very competent, those who work here are very competent. Everyone is just very nice and welcomes you. (P16)

Most of the students had not yet been exposed to any dangerous or potentially traumatizing work-related experiences that could rise concerns about their well-being. However, they did express a view that they should talk to someone *if* they encounter something significantly stressful. As one of the informants said:

In a way, I can start to think that I use a lot of energy to think about it, and that I may have to contact someone and talk about it, but I have not done it so far. (P15)

The students presented a clear preference for talking about stressful cases mostly with co-students and colleagues at work that have police work experience and are familiar with the cases they are working on.

(...) it's just that there is someone I can talk to about it, who can, uh, yes, someone with some experience, or someone who knows the case or, just to clear my mind, it is also, yes, it's like that here. [There is also] debriefing opportunity, as an option anyway. (P17)

Students are also seeking support with family and friends. However, due to confidentiality rules, there is a limit to how much can be shared:

I have a sister that I talk to a lot, but eh, in this context, it is not the best thing to talk about with a sister. (P14)

As talking to family and friends is less available as a resource, the supervisor and colleagues become more important, but this outlet seems not to be fully utilized:

We can also use a supervisor, but, yes, well, yes, he is there, and he has at least organized it in a such a way so that I can come to him if there should be any need for it. (P14)

Besides formal reporting, valuable informal interaction with a supervisor often happens in the police car while driving. The car drive seems to be an important resource and possibly a more available source for support and debriefing than formal channels:

Even if it's nothing ... it's not a formal conversation, that conversation in the car after a mission just is kind of ... finish talking about it, so you do not come home and ... and think about it then (...) Also it is to ... talking in the car afterwards, about what we thought was fun, what could have been done better, what was difficult with this, what impressions are we left with? (P18)

Other examples of coping strategies included mental preparation, such as worst-case scenarios:

(...) the thought that things can ... in a way, worst-case-scenario thinking and mental preparation and that is in a way something you should have in the back of your head. (P13)

Some of the students also describe methods of distraction, by keeping themselves busy (avoidance techniques). One of the students does, however, express some doubts of the effectiveness of such a strategy:

So if there is something, then I just have to keep myself busy [smiles], but again it's stupid to stay busy just to not think about that, because then you head towards a breakdown in the end. (P15)

12. Education on stress management is limited to operational stress

When asked about stress in the police work in their education so far, the students refer to a brief introductory psychology course, vaguely recalling themes such as stress responses:

We have psychology as a separate subject ... we do have, eh ... but I feel we have just stopped by ... psychology. (P8)

According to the students' account, the emphasis in the psychology course is on operational stress, and how to manage individuals (victims or arrestees) in a difficult situation or persons with a mental illness:

(...) but there was more focus on others, how to handle situations when they [the perpetrators], for example, are mentally ill. It was not so much about how to, in a way, move on or take care of yourself, if you struggle with something. (P15)

The majority of the informants do not recall much about coping strategies from the class. However, some of the students mention the importance of physical fitness in the police occupation:

I don't recall whether it [stress management] was addressed. It might have been, in a way, to get rid of stress, but I think it was more related to being physically fit, in case you needed to run after someone. (P15)

Regarding investigation, the focus on stress management and occupational demands were marginal:

We haven't talked about stress when it comes to office work and investigating cases (...) I remember a PowerPoint slide mentioning investigative interviews with children, so we have been introduced to it, but not in-depth ... how it affects us. (P3)

The focus on operational tasks when it comes to stress management resonates with a general leniency among the students to prefer operational tasks:

But it's probably kind of like you would rather be out there, than on investigation. That there is more going on outside, and that's kind of what you ... want to do. (P11)

Although the students recall a marginal focus on coping strategies and psychological stress in their education, they also describe a system of support in the police organization that they trust will take care of them if needed. Further, some students had noticed improvements regarding acknowledging the importance of mental health in the police occupation:

We are very focused on that at [the Police Academy], that if you are in pain or struggling with something, come to me, it's fine, so ... yes, I feel that culture has changed a bit though. And there has been more focus on mental health, and it has helped a lot, I think. (P5)

13. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how police students felt about stress management at on-site practice and their expectations concerning working with investigations of child abuse cases. A further aim was to identify available educational and organisational resources that students could rely on to manage demanding work tasks. The practice period can be especially stressful for police students (Belur et al., 2019; Patterson, 2016), and investigations of child abuse are described in the literature as a particularly distressing aspect of police work (M. B. Powell et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2019; Skogstad et al., 2013; Wolak & Mitchell, 2009)

We know that efficient coping mechanisms are important protective measures (Bourke & Craun, 2014), while substantial barriers against mental health-seeking are often present in the police culture (Burns & Buchanan, 2020; Emsing et al., 2022; Jetelina et al., 2020). It is important to understand how recruits experience, expect, and manage mental demands and stressors with such premises and aim for urgent commitment to protective health practices throughout a career (Blumberg et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2019).

The results show that the police students, although recognising the task as demanding, had no major concerns about future involvement with child abuse investigation cases. On the contrary, they felt fit for the task. Meanwhile, research shows that even experienced investigators have adverse reactions if exposed to disturbing content over a longer period (Risan & Madsen, 2019), increasing the risk of secondary trauma (Berge, 2005; Doyle et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2014; MacEachern et al., 2019; Violanti et al., 2017). Although any experience with a child-abuse investigation will be time-limited for the students, the stress management strategies they learn and apply in the practice period might shape their future strategies for better or worse. The police recruit period is crucial for adapting and internalising stress management strategies that will be

enhanced and used in police work (Clifton, 2020; Fortune et al., 2018; Inzunza & Wikström, 2020). Therefore, it is especially important for them to learn and apply strategies that are evidence-based and efficient at an early stage of their career.

Although the students acknowledged that the forthcoming exposure to the field of child abuse investigation might be demanding, the general opinion was that they felt competent and that they will manage. Such confidence was not based on preparedness and training, but rather on general assumptions and beliefs rooted in police culture expectations. The police students' main approach was to keep a professional distance when approaching "a job to be done". The students also considered themselves as having an asset, as they had no children themselves, and that those with children are more vulnerable to the negative impact of such work. Although some studies suggest that having children can increase the distress (Morabito et al., 2021), the literature in general suggests that support from family is an important buffer to negate the impact of working with child abuse (Perez et al., 2010). However, relying on family relations alone is not optimal as research shows that adverse work on child abuse investigations can negatively impact family dynamics and parenting style (Doyle et al., 2022).

The students in this study appear to function under the assumption that police officers are resilient to various stressors and extreme situations. Such a common stereotype is frequently addressed in police work research, with some variations depending on country and culture (Inzunza & Wikström, 2020). The results from the current study indicate that students assume that stress resilience is a capability expected of them to become professional police officers, rather than a trained capability, thus reinforcing established stereotypes. Such beliefs might hinder mental health literacy and self-care and result in the use of maladaptive and sub-optimal means of coping. The use of emotional and social support coping is directly related to the level of education of the police officer (Patterson, 2000), hence it should be a focal point in the education and training. Students are potentially more vulnerable than experienced officers, especially in meeting with the high demands of child abuse investigation work. The results from this study show that the students were not sure what to expect in terms of reactions, and only a few students expressed any concerns about it. The issue that arises is that potential stressful reactions might not be communicated to professional channels. Studies point towards a lack of acknowledgement of vulnerability in the police profession (Blumberg et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2019), which is unfortunate as it does not take stress management seriously by utilising professional support that can assist in healthy processing of traumatic events and building personal resilience. A recent Swedish study points to the concern of vulnerable police recruits and calls for interventions targeting the stigmas of poor mental health (Emsing et al., 2022). Reluctance to seek help among police employees as well as police recruits, might lead to repeated and unprocessed stress culminating in chronic disorders (Asmundson & Stapleton, 2008; Queirós et al., 2020a; Soomro & Yanos, 2019; Violanti et al., 2017) or secondary trauma (Foley et al., 2022; Hurrell et al., 2018; MacEachern et al., 2019). Secondary trauma especially represents a health risk for child abuse investigators (Berge, 2005; Burns et al., 2008; Craun, Bourke, Coulson et al., 2015; Doyle et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2014; MacEachern et al., 2019). With sufficient resources, professionals can meet demanding tasks with motivation and engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). By mastering the investigative work procedures well through proper guidance, the chances for students to experience positive coping would be more likely, hence increasing motivation to engage in such work in the future, which is an important recruitment stance.

Among available resources that the students refer to, physical activity clearly stands out as the preferred stress-relief method. Research indicates that physical training at police work has a positive effect on stress reduction (Bourke & Craun, 2014; Gerber et al., 2014). Yet, although physical activity can be effective in reducing stress and boosting mental health, a reliance solely on this coping strategy could still be insufficient.

To meet the demands of the work, students seldom refer to learned strategies from their education, except for coping through mental preparation. Such a strategy provides a broader

context and creates an internal map of possible scenarios which increases preparedness for the task and activation of resources. However, none of the students mentioned transferring such a technique for the job of transcribing interviews with children in investigations of child abuse.

The lack of expectation or concerns regarding the content of child abuse interview transcriptions, suggests that there are reasons to question their psychological preparedness for the task. The students did not mention evidence-based self-regulation strategies like progressive relaxation (Arnetz et al., 2013), breathing techniques (McCraty & Atkinson, 2012), or mindfulness-based training (Andersen et al., 2015; Chen & Grupe, 2021) as part of their preparation, thus narrowing their resource toolbox. Meanwhile, research on moral injury and trauma among child abuse investigators advocates for psychoeducation and practice-based solutions, including longer breaks, decompression facilities, and work-rotation (Doyle et al., 2022).

Some of the recruits used avoidance as a coping method, which in the literature is described as an ineffective or malfunctioning strategy (Bakker et al., 2003) associated with increased trauma symptoms and stress reactivity (D. A. Acquadro Maran et al., 2018; Can & Hendy, 2014; Gershon et al., 2009; Haisch & Meyers, 2004; LeBlanc et al., 2008; Queirós et al., 2020a). Therefore, it is important to address coping strategies early in police training and redirect students towards more effective options, including social support, debriefing, and stress-management education.

Social support represented an important resource for students in this study. One learns the norms of police culture (Belur et al., 2019; Patterson, 2016) and establishes bonds and trust with peers and supervisors. Social networking can be an essential buffer for work-related traumatic stress for police employees (Berg et al., 2006; Milliard, 2020). Although the students are aware that they should talk to someone in case of a traumatic event or if they are upset, they often express hesitation to address sensitive issues with supervisors or counsellors. Their preference is often to approach peers or to network outside of work, such as friends and family as they are part of a more familiar social sphere. Although peer support contributes to mental health and reduces barriers and stigma towards seeking help (Milliard, 2020), resources might be somewhat limited for obtaining advice from a less experienced or inexperienced network, rather than professional support. Furthermore, such a practice eventually places strains on relationships such as friendships and family (Blumberg et al., 2019).

Hesitancy to talk to a supervisor about sensitive issues is most likely rooted in culture, norms, and stigma (Burns & Buchanan, 2020; Emsing et al., 2022; Hofer & Savell, 2021; Milliard, 2020) where the threshold to reach out for work-related stress conversation is higher in hierarchical organisations such as the police (Blumberg et al., 2019). The results of this study suggest that the space of trust and establishment of a bond is created with a supervisor usually in informal operational settings, such as in a moving car. The students had so far not encountered any severely distressing incidents, and the majority of them had not started their job transcribing investigative interviews with children. Although the results indicate that the right resources are there for debriefing in case help is needed, the question remains whether the students would proactively seek such help as counselling. From the literature, it is evident that seeking help for mental health is associated with a stigma in the police occupation (Jetelina et al., 2020). It is an unfortunate pattern hindering early intervention that could prevent later, serious malfunctioning.

Another central finding is the dominant reliance on physical activity as a resource of coping with job-related stress, while the demands associated with exposure to others' trauma appears to be somewhat underestimated by police students, creating again a mismatch between resources and demands. According to the JD-R model, the mismatch between demands and resources results in a process of health impairment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The repertoire of coping develops during the police career and working at a task other than field operations is associated with active coping strategies, such as seeking emotional support (Bonner & Brimhall, 2021), suggesting that the students will develop these skills during their career.

The literature emphasises education, training and psychoeducation as significant buffers against the negative impact of exposure to child abuse material (Perez et al., 2010). However, our results suggest that training and education at the Police Academy concerning this subject is marginal. The students recall stress management being addressed in their training, however, references to investigation work were minimal or non-existent. According to the students, the training emphasis was on operational stress. This might not always be transferable to complex child abuse investigation work, as it requires another skillset for coping (Bourke & Craun, 2014; Fortune et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2006). Investigation is also perceived by students as less dangerous and therefore less stressful. The students' attitude toward investigative work might influence their motivation for preparedness for stress and hence result in less activation of resources than when they need to meet an unpredictable crime scene in operational work. Furthermore, the students in this study just briefly mentioned moral purpose, while purpose and meaning are important buffers to burnout and protective factors when facing human suffering (Blumberg et al., 2019; Brady, 2017; Morabito et al., 2021).

Although mental health problems are prevalent in the police occupation (Jetelina et al., 2020; Milliard, 2020), the results indicate that the education concerning mental illness is limited to how to handle an imbalanced or stressed person at the time of arrest. Police stress management is less addressed. In order to seriously address burnout among police investigators, the focus should be directed towards adjustments in police education as well as onsite practice for trainee police officers to emphasise stress management whether involved in operations or investigations as a preventive health measure.

14. Limitations

As the students interviewed were in their second year of study in a three-year program, it is reasonable to assume that many of the gaps regarding stress management might be addressed in their later education and their remaining practice. Further, most of the students had so far not encountered any distressing episodes and had not had their first experience of exposure to a child abuse investigation. However, we have captured the moment when the students were about to engage in the field of investigation child abuse, and we were interested in learning the specifics of their preparedness for the task at the given point of time and exploring their expectations.

15. Implications

Based on the results of our research and the literature reviewed, we suggest a more proactive approach in the police officer education to increase their preparedness for the adverse tasks of child abuse investigation through awareness about potential reactions and a focus on effective coping strategies. Informal settings such as riding in a car seem to offer more availability to address topics related to stress management, suggesting that it is important to consider the police culture and barriers for mental health help seeking, also among students. Evidence-based coping strategies should be a part of the curriculum as a means of increasing the students' resources that they will need to adequately cope with adverse tasks. Students would also benefit from more specific stress management training, with an emphasis on portraying feelings of stress as a normal reaction to adverse situations, rather than as a vulnerability.

16. Conclusion

The results indicate that the police students were rather oblivious to possible consequences associated with exposure to potentially disturbing content in their upcoming work in the special victim unit transcribing investigative interviews with children. Their knowledge about the demands of such work is limited to a stereotypical expectation that police work implies preparedness for adversity. Although the focus in the education has been limited to operational stress, they feel confident that they will manage the work well, even though they do not know which specific

coping strategies to use. Avoiding reliance solely on physical activity and broadening the focus on stress reactions beyond operational work might leave the students more prepared for the daily challenges and the diverse types of stress in police work. Barriers preventing them from talking to a supervisor is reduced in informal settings such as riding in a car, which is an opportunity to raise and address stress-related issues for the students.

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Author details

Eva Langvik^{1,5}

E-mail: eva.langvik@ntnu.no

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4056-9459>

Lea Loncar^{2,5}

Ingrid Steen Rostad^{3,4,5}

Ylva Eraker^{3,5}

Ingvild Saksvik-Lehouillier^{3,5}

¹ Psychology, NTNU Fakultet for samfunnsvitenskap og teknologiledelse, Norway, Trondheim.

² Psychology, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet, Norway.

³ Psychology, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet Fakultet for samfunns- og utdanningsvitenskap, Norway.

⁴ BI, Norwegian business school, department of leadership & organization.

⁵ Norwegian university of science and technology, department of psychology.

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