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# An emotional exit: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the drivers for leaving and mental health of ex police officers

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the emotional labour of ex England and Wales police officers and charts the impact upon their mental health and pathways to leaving their roles. Utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis this paper focuses on the unrestricted voice of officers who have left the service and are no longer bound by the 'feeling and display rules' of their profession, thereby offering a unique perspective not often captured by work and stress research. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with seven ex-police officers. Four key drivers for leaving (Consequences and Trust, Self-Sacrifice and Worthlessness, Relationship Breakdown, and Dissociation and Depersonalisation – a culture) intersect as powerful detrimental narratives, illustrating damaging organisational expectations of emotional suppression leading to avoidant coping and emotional alienation, with officers expressing a range of dissociative behaviours. Organisational policy and procedures, and the attitude of senior officers and supervisors send clear signals that emotional expression is a weakness. Implications for theory and practice are illuminated and the paper provides a mapping that illustrates numerous examples of damaging organisational expectations about emotional suppression that accumulate over time and impact individual and organisational consequences.

## 1. Introduction

Recent figures published by the Home Office (2023) identified a 'noticeable change in the proportion of *[police]* officers leaving via normal retirement', showing that voluntary (not including normal or medical retirement, death or dismissal) resignations within the police service of England and Wales are up from 42 % to 50 %, with an overall leaver rate of 6.6 % - the highest since records began, with recent research highlighting the role of organisational justice in officers' decisions to leave (Tyson and Charman, 2023).

It is readily accepted that police officers and other emergency service employees encounter stressful and distressing situations on a regular basis (Pink et al., 2021; Beehr et al., 1995) and that this can be linked to negative mental health outcomes (MacEachern et al., 2018). The heightened distress as a result of these traumatic events leads to burnout and absenteeism (Magnavita and Garbarino, 2013). It is also acknowledged that many police officers ultimately leave their jobs as a function of the emotional distress they have encountered and the impact on their health (Charman and Bennett, 2022). Yet much of the research that examines emotions at work does so from the perspective of those working within their roles at the time of data collection. Indeed, the very nature of police culture

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means that coping strategies employed during service may make the sharing of reflections about emotions at work difficult for employees when they are still in post (Lennie et al., 2021).

Therefore, there is a need for further work to understand the organisational and individual drivers that push employees to leave a stressful role such as policing, as well as to ascertain what happens to employees after they have left a role, organisation or career that has become damaging to them. Building on the work of Charman and Tyson (2023) who examine social identity and disrupted identity in the role of police officer choice to leave the organisation, this paper addresses this need from the perspective of mental health outcomes by utilising Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to unearth perspectives from police officers who have left their roles. This technique is considered an important tool for revealing emotionally sensitive experiences in challenging and stressful occupations as it seeks to uncover the sensemaking of participants as they reflect upon their experiences (Lamb and Cogan, 2016). In drawing on the retrospective reflections of those who have left the police force we make a number of pertinent contributions to extending our understanding of emotional suppression and damaging health outcomes as routes to exit.

Existing research shows how police officers use dissociative behaviour as a maladaptive coping strategy, and in order to comply with an organisational culture that restricts the processing of trauma through the demand for continual suppression of emotions beyond the organisation and into the family home (Rees and Smith, 2007; Lennie et al., 2019). Recent studies have found that emotional numbing, emotional exhaustion (Davies et al., 2022), detachment from others (Parkes et al., 2018), desensitisation, and isolation in social settings (MacEachern et al., 2018; Lennie et al., 2021) were all significant outcomes of police work, which increased over time and exposure (Parkes et al., 2012; MacEachern et al., 2018). Officers avoid admitting that aspects of their work are upsetting, believing that any expression of emotion would be seen as a weakness or an inability to cope (Parkes et al., 2018; Watson and Andrews, 2018). So significant is this impact on officers that MacEachern et al. (2018) argue the need for further research exploring the cultural norms that influence officer coping.

Through the examination of lived experience of those who have left policing, this paper maps organisational culture through emotional labour to psychological outcomes, highlighting how the culture around emotional expression and suppression not only hinders coping but also creates an environment that increases the likelihood of experienced PTSD, through dissociation and emotional numbing. Within this we challenge the assumption that police officer mental ill-health is a direct result of the nature of their work, and therefore inevitable, but rather an outcome or organisational culture that prevents healthy processing of trauma and active help seeking behaviour.

### *1.1. Police culture in England and Wales*

Policing in England and Wales has experienced a changing landscape over the last 30 years, moving away from law and order and 'police forces' to the commodification of policing and an emphasis on service provision and 'police services' (Watson and Andrews, 2018). This change has resulted in a rise in managerialism and consumerism, with a focus on targets and professionalization (Stafford, 2016). This tension between customer service and crime fighting has led to a role which sees officers alternating between the need to be 'nicer than nice' and 'tougher than tough', simultaneously demonstrating compassion to the victims of crime they seek to protect, whilst suppressing authentic emotions when dealing with conflict and aggression (Daus and Brown, 2012; Watson and Andrews, 2018). The demands of policing reflect the typical machismo police culture which is borne out of a working role that is traditionally grounded in violence, danger and authority, and undermines emotional expression, perpetuating mental ill-health stigma (Bell and Eski, 2015; Watson and Andrews, 2018).

This would seem an enduring culture and though there have been some elements of change over the last decades, such as the decline of the 'blue wall of silence' to be replaced by the 'code of self-protection', key elements such as cynicism, the notion of the police family, and 'them and us' remain (Reiner, 2010; Charman, 2017 & 2024). With this comes a notion of the need to 'fit in' and to conform to existing cultural norms – with conformity identified as one of the enduring themes of police culture, which in itself is a barrier to cultural change, through fear of self-isolation (Charman, 2024). Indeed police identity is one of steadfast elements of police culture, normalising a long hours culture and a masculine attitude of unwavering commitment to the job, beyond the needs of one-self, police culture is maintained through everyday expression of operational policing that is steeped in 'an exaggerated sense of mission' (Silvestri, 2017:17) and with an acceptance of ill-health consequences that accompany it (Turnball and Wass, 2015; Silvestri, 2017).

### *1.2. Emotional Labour*

The continual requirement to supress emotion on behalf of the organisation was seminally conceptualised by Arlie Hochschild (1983) as Emotional Labour, whilst studying flight attendants and debt collectors. Emotional Labour is articulated through feeling and display rules - organisational expectations and standards that regulate the employee emotional expression and suppression in line with role requirements (Hochschild, 2003; Reiner, 2010). Often these rules are implied and learned through observed behaviour.

Employees can comply with feeling and display rules in two ways - surface acting or deep acting. Surface acting is considered as the physical, outward, and visible expression and suppression of emotion. Deep acting is the employee 'capacity to intentionally regulate their emotional experiences so as to bring forth or create internal states of arousal' (Wharton, 1999:160). This creates a sense of duality within the worker as emotional exchanges with agents outside of the organisation become a commodified interaction, designed by the organisation and delivered by the employee (Brook, 2009). As a result, employees experience an alienating loss of ownership and control of their emotions through the codification of organisational feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983). Indeed, it has been observed how the demands of emotional labour can mean that workers can become 'robotic, detached, and un-empathetic' (Albrecht and Zemke, 1985 cited in Wharton, 1999:162).

### 1.3. Emotional dissonance and dissociation

There is growing documentation of dissociation and traumatic experiences within policing, highlighting the prevalence for peri-dissociation and PTSD outcomes in police officers (McCaslin et al., 2008; Galatzer-Levy et al., 2011; Shakir et al., 2021).

Indeed, dissociation within police officers was examined by Aaron (2000) and is described as a form of psychological avoidance: 'the splitting off from awareness, thoughts, feelings, or memories' (Aaron, 2000:439). Using the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES) (Bernstein and Putnam, 1986) and the Police Stress Survey (Spielberger et al., 1980, cited in Aaron: 439), dissociation in police officers was found to be a maladaptive coping strategy leading to poor psychological outcomes. Significantly, it was found that it was not the stressor that led to an increase in negative outcome, but the avoidant style of coping that led to increased psychological distress (Aaron, 2000).

In furthering our understanding of the damaging psychological consequences of engaging in emotion work, it is helpful to explore dissociation as an important behaviour which is employed as part of emotional labour. At its extreme, dissociation disorder can be diagnosed by features such as being detached from the self or aspects of the self, such as feelings (hypoemotionality), giving examples such as: "I know I have feelings but I don't feel them" (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 302). This is reflective of the alienation of emotional labour when the employee experiences a detachment of their true feelings from the ones they are expected to display on behalf of the organisation (Brook, 2009).

Lanius et al. (2010) identified the dissociative subtype of PTSD: a detachment from the overwhelming emotional content of the experience of trauma. Often this gives a sense of compartmentalisation and leads to cognitive fragmentation or emotional detachment from the trauma. PTSD patients with prolonged trauma experience (e.g. combat trauma or emergency service workers) are often characterized by dissociation. Those experiencing dissociative PTSD will show abnormally high emotional modulation and regulation in response to trauma memories, including subjective disengagement from emotional content of trauma memory though depersonalisation or derealisation. Considering Aaron's (2000) findings it could be suggested that the high levels of dissociation in police officers (as a maladaptive coping strategy and consequence of trauma work) could not only contribute to developing PTSD but could also prevent post event processing and therapeutic interventions. It is our assertion that dissociative behaviour is not only a maladaptive strategy for coping with prolific exposure to traumatic events, but also a requirement of police culture expressed through feeling and display rules.

### 1.4. Organisational leavers: ex-officers

Employees who have left an organisation offer a unique perspective that is rarely captured in organisational research. While psychosocial stress in the police has been related to turnover intentions (Adams and Buck, 2010), accessing the stories of those who have turned those intentions into action is rarely achieved. It is only by conducting research with these ex-employees that a dynamic understanding of the longer-term consequences of emotional labour can be built (Tuckey et al., 2012). Research with ex-officers also offers a unique perspective on subjects that may be considered difficult to discuss while active employees, for example, racism in the police (Uhnoo, 2015) or provide access to groups who would otherwise not be accessible, such as undercover officers. People who have left the workforce are also able to provide insight into the drivers that eventually resulted in their decision to leave. In particular, the focus on the voice of officers who have left the police service and are no longer bound by the 'feeling and display rules' of their profession brings to this study a unique perspective of the unrestricted voice, no longer in fear of the repercussion of expressing their true experience and emotions, a perspective not often captured either in academia or by the police service itself. In doing so we answer the call of MacEachern et al. (2018) and explore the culture of policing and how it influences officer coping, and theoretically advance the theory of emotional labour which we link to dissociative behaviour as a psychological outcome.

### 1.5. Method: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Work and stress research has evolved in recent times to explore qualitative and more nuanced methods that elicit deeper and richer accounts about the lived experience of a range of psychological (and physical) ill health phenomena and how they intersect with work. Recent work has for example signalled the importance of IPA methods in uncovering return to work experiences (Neilsen and Yarker, 2023) and trauma (O'Rourke et al., 2025). Although it is a less often used methodology within the policing literature, recent studies have demonstrated its useful application when dealing with sensitive subject matter such as those experienced within the police service and its value for understanding individual experience within context (Lavis, 2025). IPA is also a key methodology with an 'idiographic commitment to the detailed analysis of experience case-by-case' this ensures the individual experience is still represented within the final report, whilst the convergence and divergence of data are still articulated (Smith, 2017: 303). Recognising the successful application of IPA in the health literature we choose to utilise this methodology to yield similar complexities in a sample of police officers who have left their role due to ill health.

With a theoretical underpinning of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, IPA is specifically interested in how people make sense of, and attach significance to, their lived experience of phenomena; exploring the meaning-making processes applied within individual relational, cultural, and temporal perceptions (Smith et al., 2009). It has been used as a qualitative method in studies that explore challenging climates and well-being impacts (Lamb and Cogan, 2016) and in the exploration of lived experience of workers with long covid (Nielsen and Yarker, 2023). The emphasis of this exploration is to give voice to many realities, and endeavours to uncover rich, previously untapped narratives, within context. Furthermore, IPA accepts the existence of multiple realities created through subjective interpretation, with the act of description itself being an interpretive process (Lennie, 2019). It is this endeavour to

uncover rich, previously untapped accounts, within context, that supports the desire of this study to understand how emotional labour operates within the police service and contributes to emotional experience and psychological outcomes.

### 1.6. Sample

This sample was part of a larger mixed method study that involved longitudinal data collection focussing on serving and ex officers. Purposive sampling was undertaken, identifying a small sample size of seven ex-police officers and 11 serving officers. Though both serving and ex-officers answered the call and were interviewed, it is the data set of ex-officers that we focus on in this paper due to the unique nature of the population sample and findings. Though the participants were all male, this was not a specification of the invitation to participate. Participants reported a length of service between 5 and 30 years and who retired within 10 years of being interviewed. Again, being a retiree was not a specification of the invitation and as is described within the research findings, not all participants reached normal retirement age with some choosing to take medical retirement. The sample population for this data set was restricted to ex-officers recruited from the England and Wales police network via social media advertising and through the lead authors connections as an ex-serving officer themselves. Though not intentional, the all-male sample provides an insight into an often-silenced group that find speaking about psychological ill-health challenging due to gender norms and the attribution of emotional experience and expression to weakness. Here we give space to otherwise unheard male voices.

A small sample size is typical for IPA studies, which has a specific epistemological commitment and is not looking for generalisability, and indeed, rejects the concept of reduction (Smith and Osborn, 2008; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Nielsen and Yarker, 2023). Here, quality of data is of first importance, representativeness is secondary (Smith, 2004).

Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Business and Law Human Research Ethics Committee of Manchester Metropolitan University. Each participant was emailed a participant information sheet and the interview questions prior to the interview. Informed consent was obtained in line with ethical guidelines. Each participant was interviewed once and interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min and were either conducted face to face or over the phone by the lead author.

### 1.7. Procedure

A phenomenological interview strategy was selected as this supported the capture of detailed and in-depth description of lived experience. Interview design was informed by an earlier study that used audio diaries to capture officers lived experience of emotions in work and therefore focussed on using open questions which allowed participants to provide answers in their own words, exploring feelings, perceptions and understandings of the emotional labour phenomena (Roulston, 2010). This was used to provide flexibility and harnesses the lead author's ability to modify questions in response to participant answers (Smith and Osborn, 2008). This meant that the lead author could guide the interview through follow up questions to cover areas of interest that were generated out of an earlier phase of study that utilised an audio diary method of data collection. This overall structure and concept of the interview was informed by Bevan (2014), engaging the participant in the three phases of Contextualisation (situating events in participants life world context), Apprehending the Phenomenon (detailed focus on the particular experience), and Clarifying the Phenomenon (through imaginatively varying aspect of the phenomenon to the lead author's understanding of the experience).

### 1.8. Analysis

The interviews were transcribed by the lead author who undertook an idiographic approach to the analysis through the reading and re-reading of each case, where descriptive and conceptual notes were made which highlighted the emerging themes. Clusters of themes were drawn out of the notes and cross-checked against the original text. This was an iterative process establishing an intensive relationship between the researchers and individual text. A table of themes was drawn up for each transcript, and the clusters were named. These represented the subjective Subordinate themes; and a summary interpretation of each participant text (Smith and Osborn, 2008). From here the lead author undertook the analytical process of interpretation and reflection across each whole; selecting textual excerpts and organising and prioritising Superordinate themes across the data.

Although this study sought to identify elements of emotional labour within ex-officer's lives, this did not drive the interpretation, and the themes identified are inductive and reflect the perceived phenomenological experience of the participants as articulated themselves. The aspects of emotional labour identified are drawn out within the descriptive analysis and finally drawn together within the summary, where the interpretative work is related back to the emotional labour construct.

## 2. Findings and discussion

Reflecting the guidance of Nizza et al. (2021) the findings are presented as an unfolding narrative, supported by interpreted extracts from participants drawing out the experiential nature of the data set. Attention is paid to individual words used and interpreted (particular attention is paid here to the physical metaphor) within the context of the lived experience of policing culture of emotional expression. First, the narrative explores the concept of leaving the organisation and provides some contextual information about participants' narratives surrounding their reasons for becoming organisational leavers. Next, each theme is discussed in turn.

### 2.1. Reasons for leaving

The first thing that became apparent was that six of the seven ex-officers had suffered with mental ill-health and five out of the seven gave mental ill-health as either the key reason for leaving or a key contributing factor. Three had medically retired with PTSD or Depression (later diagnosed as PTSD) and Anxiety, and Depression:

> Stephen 'I was retired with chronic Post Traumatic Stress … but alongside that there was severe depression anxiety and panic disorder. Everything has come from job related incidents, so I have had nothing record as sort of being outside of work or prior to work or something at home.'
>
> Sam 'I was medically retired with severe depression and anxiety. It just all took it's toll on my mental health.'
>
> Alex 'I retired officially because I retired with depression, I was misdiagnosed because I didn't just have depression … I struggled for years and then I got a proper diagnosis of PTSD … and finally things started to slot into place.'

Three had completed their full 30 years of police service (which at the time was the full length of a police career before retirement could be considered), and one stated that stress was a consideration in their choice to retired, and then they were later diagnosed with PTSD (six months after retirement):

> Tony 'It was probably several reasons it was really getting to the stage of time to retire, and I also considered the fact of the stress, from the fact that it was stress from the job and afterwards, probably about six months I was diagnosed with PTSD anyway.'

And of those, one had taken time off for depression (though this was not considered a direct contributing factor to their retirement, although emotional suppression was a key theme throughout their career):

> David 'I had two periods of fairly bad depression … which result in quite a lot of time off work … it certainly was that sort of thing where you were expected to get on with it and not talk about it.'

One took medical retirement through an existing physical injury, as a way out rather than disclosing their mental ill-health, which they had diagnosed as PTSD once they had left the organisation:

> Pete 'That said though, and I am being absolutely honest with you here, it was a way out, rather than actually going down that route which was the mental health route … '

This last quote from Pete reflects how some of the ex-officers chose to communicate their emotional experience though physical metaphor, this is highlighted through the following narrative.

**Table 1**
Superordinate and subordinate themes of ex-officers.

| SUPERORDINATE | SUBORDINATE |
|---|---|
| **Consequences & Trust:** | • Fear of being seen as weak by supervisors/senior leaders<br>• Being viewed by peers as unpredictable and unreliable<br>• Expressing distress or seeking support signals inappropriateness for role and promotion<br>• Opening up about mental ill-health halts career<br>• Help seeking behaviour leads to isolation<br>• Officers do not trust other officers with their true feelings<br>• Officers learn to supress true emotions to avoid isolation and/or being discredited |
| **Self-Sacrifice and Worthlessness:** | • Strong sense of vocation placing organisation before themselves<br>• Isolated in their work ethic, physically and culturally.<br>• Officers needs are secondary to that of the organisation/investigation/public<br>• Public belief that officers lives are secondary to their work<br>• Officers feel dehumanised by the organisation and the public they work for – and try to live up to this 'ideal'<br>• There is no time between jobs to process emotions<br>• Single crewing increases sense of isolation and loss of belonging |
| **Relationship breakdown:** | • There is no sense of police family – everyone for themselves<br>• Peer relationships do not have time to develop to point of trust due to lack of time together<br>• Supervisors are not trusted or are unempathetic and enforce feeling rules of emotional suppression<br>• Teams are disparate and rarely spend time together, this has eroded trust<br>• Family members expect officers to be less emotionally affected by family events<br>• Officers protect family members from the emotional aspects of work<br>• Officers are never truly open about their emotions with their family |
| **Dissociation and Depersonalisation – a culture:** | • Officers feel that their inability to show emotions reduces ability to openly empathise with victims and provide the service they believe is appropriate<br>• Officers who are less empathetic are successful in their careers<br>• Depersonalisation of people outside of the organisation is the norm and expected as a sign of belonging: 'them and us'<br>• Officers learn avoidant coping through observing others (learned dissociation)<br>• Officers feel abandoned and unvalued by the job |

Table 1 illustrates the superordinate and subordinate themes of ex-officers. This is used as a structure to present the IPA findings, where this part of the paper proceeds to consider each superordinate theme in turn. We position these as key drivers of organisational leaving for the ex-officers.

### 2.2. Consequences and Trust

Ex-officers identified Consequences and Trust as a significant issue, though this maybe be because for some ex-officers the consequences were career ending and ex-officers often felt abandoned and let down by the organisation:

> Sam 'I have just been chewed up and spat out and all of a sudden I am retired or medically retired and its like – whoa, where did that career go … my health is knackered and it is all thanks to the job and they have just left me to rot.'

Sam uses the phrases 'chewed up and spat out' and 'left to rot' as physical metaphors for their psychological experience. A process that is repeated throughout the narrative and indicative of the lack of available or acceptable language around mental ill-health within policing but also the disabling effect had upon them. Here Sam makes sense of his psychological experience as a resource that has been used up and discarded.

It was clear to ex-officers that opening up about their mental distress, or seeking support in their role was viewed as a weakness and it was only at the point of being 'over the edge' that any help would be forth coming (reflecting the research of Parkes et al., 2018), and then this would more likely see officers isolated and removed from their team and roles as a consequence. There was a strong sense that seeking out any form of emotional support was not tolerated, and officers who did seek out help or acknowledged their mental distress were seen as unfit for their role, and a hindrance to the organisation, reflecting the findings of Daus and Brown (2013). Indeed, ex-officers expressed themselves as if they were an expendable resource to be almost consumed by the needs of the organisation, and again Sam talks in physical terms of his psychological experience:

> 'It is the injustice of it, we all joined the job for justice. I joined it because I wanted to help people and I think that we all did, and no matter what you do, or you did, it is – oh we will have your foot tomorrow, because we have had your leg. It is just awful, and then there is no justice, it is a total injustice in the way that treat us or treat me especially.'

… and once they were suffering, or expressed any need for help they were no longer of use, or worse still, presented a risk to the organisation:

David 'There has always been an organisational attitude that … people who have issues with mental health that perhaps they were more of a risk.'

This perspective of an expendable resource was experienced by Stephen who did seek help from their supervisor when they initially recognised that they were struggling, unfortunately the supervisor appeared to be out of their depth and almost ignored the matter:

> 'Once I came truthful about my problems there was still no help there, it was like – oh well, but you still need to do this.'

Unable to continue, Stephen drove themselves home, returning six weeks later to be placed in a desk role. Still there was no support forthcoming and the nature of the new role further increasing their sense of isolation. Eventually they were retired out of the organisation with work related chronic PTSD.

The ex-officers also expressed an almost silencing stigma around emotional expression that stemmed from an attitude of distrust around those that expressed any emotional response, which echoed the findings of Pascaik and Kelley (2013). One officer who was removed off their team felt that he was being set aside as different – 'I don't want to be the weird one.' Ex-officers felt that not only did their supervisors view them as weak and unfit for the role, but their colleagues also viewed them as unpredictable. This led to further isolation as peers avoided working with officers who had discussed their personal emotions:

> Stephen 'I think that anyone showing any sort of emotions is a danger to them … you can't be trusted … you might do something different.'

The ex-officers felt increasingly isolated when they expressed any emotional response or mental ill-health. They were literally avoided, either by peers or by their senior officers, increasing the sense of abandonment and worthlessness:

> Sam 'They work you like a mine pony, they work you until you collapse and then once you have collapsed they don't offer you anything and then they get rid of you and that is how I feel … it was like I didn't exist anymore.'

This belief that ex-officers were worthless to the job was also reinforced by the career consequences to help seeking behaviour or expressing distress. Ex-officers recounted circumstances where they had lost their role, lost their 'ticket' (authority to carry a firearm, or command an incident etc) or had been prevented from entering the promotion process. One officer recounted how their ex-wife had been prevented from applying for a firearms post due to a period of post-natal depression, 18 years previous.

> Pete 'You can't be honest here, because it will just wreck your career … if I had gone in and said – listen, I need help, I need you know some proper psychological support, psychiatric support, that would have been it anyway, I wouldn't have been getting on, I wouldn't have been getting promoted.'

Stephen spoke about how difficult and uncomfortable it was to 'numb' themselves and recognised the numbing managed to spill into their private lives, affecting how they responded to people and events within their family or social lives. This is an example of active dissociation as avoidant coping – learnt and reinforced through the police organisational feeling and display rules:

> Stephen ' … so trying to turn myself into that numb person … you are just numb … and then it goes home with you … and it is only just now, even with the kids … you start to realise – oh that emotion is back … '

As a result, there is a significant loss of trust in both the organisation and individuals. Whether it is trusting supervisors as to how they will respond to help seeking, trusting that the organisation won't stifle your career, or trusting that an individual entrusted with your wellbeing genuinely cares about you and your welfare. Here we identify how a lack of openness leads to mistrust where a culture of fear, distrust and isolation pervades organisational relationships:

Alex 'The trouble with counselling it is that it is connected to the organisation and you never ever truly trust the independence of the counsellor.'

### *2.3. Self-Sacrifice and Worthlessness*

Self-Sacrifice and Worthlessness often contributed to ex-officers' decision to leave through an increasing sense of isolation from their colleagues, but also the felt need to do more and more in the name of their chosen vocation. The phrase 'self-sacrifice' is used here to demonstrate officers need to *give of themselves*, again in a very physical sense. Ex-officers talk of police work as a vocation, of a love for the job that they had, and a desire to help others. This leads officers to put themselves before others continuously. Indeed, they often feel that their needs are secondary to that of the organisation, often staying long hours, giving extra commitment and time outside of their standard role, and delivering an excellent service to victims, despite their own mental health struggles. Often there is a sense of responsibility that well exceeds the limitations of their roles and capabilities:

> Pete 'it takes a massive chunk out of you, but you don't realise it at the time, you do it because it is the right thing.'

> Stephen 'Pretty much every shift I would come home and just constantly worrying and thinking about the thing and I ended up having nightmares … '

Sadly, officers recognise that they are 'going the extra mile' and that this is eroding their health and ultimately contributing to their choice to leave:

> Sam 'I have always got on with things and that is partly why we have come to where we are now, because people who don't do things never seem to have mental health problems.'

> Pete 'I was not well for a long time, but you can't do anything about it unless you actually shuffle over the edge and you are completely broken and you just end up hanging on and though you need to seek help, you just don't.'

In the above examples Pete reflects Sam's use of physical metaphors to represent the impact of policing on their mental health, indicating a depletion in their resources ('chunk out of you') but also as an injury ('completely broken'), again relating mental distress to a physical experience.

Ex-officers feel that this view of officers being 'less than human' and secondary to the organisation is perpetuated by the public and the organisation. The media is seen to play a huge part in this, with complaints about being outed for eating in public repeated. There is a real sense of pain as to how officers are treated within the press, and how this influences the public:

> Stephen 'you hear about people complaining about police officers eating … they are not thinking that there is a person there, there is no emotion, it is just a uniform, you are just a badge … '

> Pete 'there is still a perception that we are superhuman, and that we are not people, and that when they see an emotional response it is quite hard to reconcile that.'

This finding builds upon the work of Pogrebin and Poole (1991), Daus and Brown (2012), and Aaron (2000) in that officers are depersonalising or dissociating as a way of coping but also in compliance with the feeling and display rules. There is a stark contrast as to how officers are dealt with when they are suffering and how officers are expected to deal with members of the public:

> Stephen 'If someone was bawling out their emotions in a living room because they had been raped, they would talk to them … so why when a police officer has a problem do they just go – right, paper work out … '

> Tony 'nobody sort of came along and sat me down and said, you know – you have had a rough job here, are you okay, do you need anything? Never really happened.'

A change of policy to a default position of single crewing vehicles (Houdmont et al., 2019) has increased the sense of isolation of officers as they spend the majority of their day on their own. Remote working and isolation has already been shown to impact on mental health, particularly when linked to psychological distress (Van Zoonen and Sivunen, 2022). However, single crewing and the intensity of demand placed upon officers, dispatched to a relentless number of jobs, signals that there is no space for their emotional responses, increasing the dissonance between emotional experience and operational requirements:

> Tony 'You could be really, really struggling with a four handed RTC and there is nothing there, you are just expected to get on with it, you have left the job, told dispatch that you have gone … and you are ready for the next job and it is right, can you go to this shoplifter detained. It is like yesterday's newspaper, it is just gone, it is weird, and these are the type of things that stay with you.'

And after delivering death messages:

> Tony ' … you do what you have to do, you go out to the car and if you are single crewed, I sat there at times and think – oh dear lord. And then the radio goes and you are off on your next job again, so you file that away and you get on with it … '

> Sam 'I have got back into my patrol car and drive off and had to stop and probably choke back the tears, and I have managed to keep them in check.'

Interpreting Tony's physical metaphor of 'yesterday's newspaper' indicates how officer's emotions are considered to be nothing more than rubbish, to be discarded. A view that reflects Sam's interpretation of how he was treated by the organisation: 'chewed up and spat out' and 'left to rot'. Within this view Tony demonstrates an awareness of the psychological toll of not being able to process experiences on; 'these are the type of things that stay with you' and acknowledging a sense of derealisation 'it's weird'. Despite the emotional disconnect expected of officers, this is a contradictory demonstration of awareness of how the requirement for emotional dissonance and dissociation is damaging.

### *2.4. Relationship Breakdown*

Building on the sense of isolation from working long hours, ex-officers felt unable to build relationships with colleagues and supervisors – which again often contributed to the decisions to leave the organisation. Ex-officers recalled sensing a loss of team and recognising the need to be with a colleague for some time before they can develop strong social support;

> David ' … a lot of it is about personal relationships. 'Unless there is someone that I really trusted I always felt quite uncomfortable about telling them how I was feeling.'

> Pete ' … it is all down to those individual relationships and I suppose cops are naturally untrusting and letting people in within the organisation is always going to be tough.'

Participants reported physical changes to the running of the police service that have added to this loss of family and belonging that once underpinned the service and an officer's support network:

> Pete 'You have seen it sort of dismantled as well of any sort of, sense of corps belonging with the closure of police training schools … you felt that you were a collective part of something … there was a community of purpose … '

> And again Pete 'There is not that sort of environment, that sort of safe decompression environment where people who serve and work together can actually go and relax together and actually informally debrief … '

Previous research has shown (Lennie et al., 2021) that despite the belief that an officer will benefit from being sent home after a traumatic incident, it is often that officers will continue their emotional suppression with their loved ones. Ex officers talk of families and the need for them to be protected from the realities of policing, but also from the burden of worrying about their officers:

> Alex 'for me it wasn't so much shame it was more guilt where you didn't want to burden somebody. you don't want to burden your family members with your feelings.'

However, this leads to an increase in distance between an officer and their family, leading to the eventual isolation of the officer in the home, and the potential damage or breakdown to family relationships. Alex goes on to talk about meeting his ex-wife after 20 years: 'she said to me, you never talked to me ever about what happened to you in the police service.'

> Jon 'If we were in a time machine … I would try perhaps to be a little bit more inclusive and more conscious of the affect that my job had on the family.'

> Pete 'I didn't want to burden her with all that shit … you can see why an awful lot of marriages go down the tubes in the cops because they don't want to burden somebody else with that.'

### *2.5. Dissociation and Depersonalisation – a culture*

In response to the cultural challenges that ex-officers identified they often adopted maladaptive coping mechanisms, again contributing to the increasing sense of ill health and their decision to leave the service. This paper has identified significant stigma around emotional expression within the police service. Ex-officers have articulated high levels of dissociation, depersonalisation and emotional suppression, and even empathy is restricted to stoicism and a professional cold front. For those compassionate officers, supressing a natural desire to reach out to others in distress can be, in turn, significantly distressing for them. One ex-officer, Stephen, was supporting a rape victim and they felt that they were actively prevented from supporting the victim by supervisors and an inflexible application of policy. They had requested to further support the victim by driving them to a hostel within which social services had secured them a room, this was due to the risk he felt was presented by the perpetrator. However, this was denied due to the hostel being outside of the geographical area of work. Their subsequent response of trying to deal with the victim in a more human way led them to feel vulnerable to criticism, but also guilty for the way that they were restricted in helping further:

> Stephen 'I wasn't allowed to use my emotions at any point … Me trying to bring my emotions into that was just a complete no, we don't do this, it is just a no go, this is what the paper work says, so this is how we deal with it … that is so hard for someone who is quite emotional with the work and wants to help someone and you can't bring it in'

This significant emotional complexity appears challenging for the officers to navigate, particularly when they are unable to discuss their emotional responses.

Here Alex articulates clear rules around emotional display, and it isn't just policy and procedure that restrict officer's ability to acknowledge and act on their emotions, the relentless nature of the work eventually causes officers to disassociate from their emotions:

> 'you get that constant, constant flow where eventually the job actually desensitises you itself, it unintentionally desensitises you, you can't cope otherwise … I lost the ability to feel emotions for years.'

> Stephen 'the best way not to struggle with it was to try and push it away … '

This, ex-officers believed, was exactly what was expected of them by the organisation, the media and the wider public, and was often learnt through observing and engaging in the behaviour around them:

> Alex 'I had lost my ability to be scared, I used to go gung-ho into situations, okay I came out unscathed, but I had this *no fear*, which suited the job.'

> David 'you laugh at things that aren't really very funny, everybody just gets on with it.'

Indeed, ex-officers learnt that some emotions were more acceptable than others, and became adept a displaying the required emotions, again another example of the use of surface acting:

> Stephen 'when you are worried and scared and stuff then you would have to try and figure that out, and if it was, because of violence or whatever … rather than scared if you show anger you know.'

However, this emotional suppression clearly took its toll, with ex-officers articulating a number of dissociative symptoms:

> Stephen 'I would try and think – how can I stop myself from feeling so anxious and bad about it … so you are trying to turn yourself into a numb thing for that period.'

> Tony 'you become two people, you become that policeman on duty whose job is to do what he is being paid for, and then the second person is the man that goes home to wife and kids, and you know the wife says to the husband – how was the shift? It was fine, usual garbage but it was fine. What he doesn't say is that there was a five-car collision the driver was drunk … '

However, when ex-officers do realise that they have become ill they have felt abandoned by the organisation, often increasing the sense of isolation, and sending a clear message to other serving officers who may be in similar positions.

> Sam 'I never got any help in the ten months I was off sick, I didn't get anything, I didn't get any phone calls … It has left me a shadow of my former self, because, I don't know what the hell to do next.'

## 3. Discussion

Fig. 1 illustrates a mapping of the superordinate themes unearthed in the IPA analysis. This illuminates how the four key drivers of leaving intersect as powerful detrimental narratives for ex-officers and taken together illustrate numerous examples of damaging organisational expectations about emotional suppression that cumulate over time and impact individual and organisational

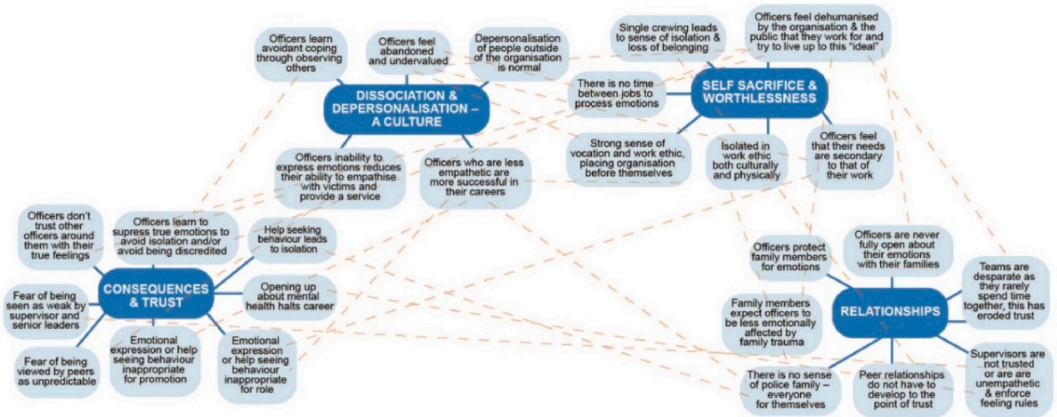


**Fig. 1.** Integration of super and subordinate themes.

consequences.

In returning to our earlier discussion of organisational leavers and their unique perspective in reflecting retrospectively on their experiences of organisational life since their separation from it (Charman and Bennett, 2022; Charman and Tyson, 2023) we suggest that a consideration of police officers' emotional difficulties as reflected upon after they have left the organisation offers a contribution above and beyond that that can be garnered from those currently employed. We situate this from the perspective of emotional labour in that the feeling and display rules that once prohibited expression of emotion are removed and once they become leavers, participants feel able to unburden themselves of their experiences which is both illuminating for the researcher and simultaneously cathartic for participants (Lennie et al., 2021). This enables an important contribution that is of relevance to the context of policing given the aforementioned emotional constraints that may obscure the collection of emotional reflections from serving officers, but is also insightful for work psychology per se where we typically learn little about how employees reflect upon the difficulties within their roles and chart their impact on decisions to leave, aside from studies that track common prospective or attitudinal measures such as 'intention to quit' (Nowark, 2020). Specifically, a number of interesting dimensions are drawn from the analysis of those reflecting back upon a prior workplace circumstance where participants accounts work to craft a narrative of events that shape their eventual decision to leave their roles and the consequences for their health. The capture of this unique perspective is supported by the use of IPA which has previously been used to study topics such as the experience of sensitive and stigmatised illness within organisations, drawing out otherwise hidden narrative of the interaction between self and the organisational context (Nielsen and Yarker, 2023).

Using the concept of Emotional Labour and identifying feeling and display rules perceived by ex-officers, this study has explored how the requirement to supress emotional experience contributes to a culture of avoidant coping and emotional alienation. This results in officers expressing dissociative behaviour including: active and none active numbing, personality splitting, and depersonalisation. The attitude of senior officers and supervisors, along with organisational policy and procedures send clear signals that, for officers, emotions are to be denied. Feeling rules dictated that emotions are weakness and officers are expendable. Time, space, environments and relationships are all engineered to the need of the organisation alone, removing the physical possibility of emotional expression and processing, if ever it were permitted. A strong sense of duty and the desire to protect sees officers placing themselves and their mental wellbeing secondary to all other beings, including, and perhaps most importantly, family and friends. This leaves officers without an available space within which to process the emotions they experience in relation to the trauma they are exposed to within their work. As a result this leaves officers splitting off from their emotions and compartmentalising as a way of coping, and out of necessity to comply with emotional display rules. However, it has been identified how dissociative behaviour, such as displayed by officers, is linked to an increase in PTSD, more so for those (such as police officers) exposed to repeated trauma (Murray et al., 2002; Lanius et al., 2010). This is perceived by participants as a consequence of the organisational and social requirement to suppress their authentic emotions.

This study demonstrates how the England and Wales police service and public require emotional labour from police officers, expecting an almost complete suppression and denial of emotion – with very limited emotional display permitted. However, it is perhaps this very expectation that is leading to the significant increase in PTSD and mental ill-health within our police service where 1 in 5 police officers and staff are suffering with PTSD or CPTSD and (Brewin et al., 2022) and in the year 2024–2025 17,752 officers were signed off sick with stress, depression, anxiety or PTSD. An increase of 22 % in the last financial year and an increase of 182 % over the last 12 years (Sweeting and Bennie, 2025).

### *3.1. Implications for research, and policy and practice*

With this study we directly address the recent rise in interest in police turnover, stimulated by the growing figures in officer voluntary turnover (Charman and Bennett, 2022; Home Office, 2023; Tyson and Charman, 2023). Importantly our data illuminate how harrowing workplace experiences impact on the lived experience of attrition and leaving, from the viewpoint of those who have already left. Utilising the concept of emotional labour, we demonstrate how the requirement to suppress experience through stigmatisation and personal consequence can be a driver towards ill health and the choice to leave. We suggest that further work is needed to explore how these variables converge to create both positive and negative outcomes with regards to leaving and staying (Nyhan, 1999) and suggest that further work may like to unpack these challenges longitudinally and with multiple methodologies.

We challenge the notion that police officer mental ill-health is unavoidable and the natural consequence of the nature of their work. Instead, through our data we identify organisation cultural requirements of suppression that drive officers to avoidant coping behaviours, further heightening the risk of long-term mental ill-health such as C-PTSD. At an organisational level we recommend a review of policy and procedure that leads to an isolating and restrictive response to employee help seeking behaviour, including the removal of officers from key roles and promotion processes, and advocate a move towards a more tolerant approach to emotional and mental health that sees officers supported within their current teams, without the withholding of privileges and progression opportunities. Operationally we suggest the investment of time in team relationships, demonstrating a value in the individual whilst allowing officers and staff to develop supportive and trusting relationships, which can aide emotional support and the disclosure of emotional distress at an early stage. From a leadership and management perspective, we recommend the early identification of overwork and the recognition, advocation and facilitation of space for self-care and processing of experiences. Leaders and managers need to actively shift from a culture of emotional suppression to one that legitimises and supports psychological well-being as part of operational effectiveness. This may include modelling openness about emotional strain, encouraging help-seeking without penalty, and regularly checking in with team members to identify signs of overwork or distress early. Managers can further support well-being by setting aside time for recovery and reflection and foster peer support within teams, encouraging communities of practice, shared learning and individual validation of experience.

We appreciate that from an organisational perspective these recommendations are challenging. However, considering the current concerns around recruitment and retention, ill-health and long-term sickness we believe that there is a step change required in the approach to officer emotional wellbeing and mental health to sustain policing into the future.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**S.J. Lennie:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **S.E. Crozier:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **A. Sutton:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration.

## Data accessibility statement

The data for this study is held in an online data repository and can be found at: 10.21954/ou.rd.25549402 (link to go live on publication)

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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