

## Psychological Stress and Coping Strategies among Child Pornography

### Police Investigators: A Qualitative Analysis<sup>1</sup>

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#### *Abstract*

Police officers face a multitude of on-the-job dangers and stressful situations. Although numerous publications exist on the psychosocial burdens experienced by police officers in general, very few studies have thus far assessed how the investigation of child pornography affects the officers involved. Accordingly, this study examines the extent to which police officers whose working hours are characterized by the investigation of child pornography are personally affected. Furthermore, it also considers coping strategies that may relieve psychological stress. Given the lack of information available, qualitative interviews were selected as the most suitable methodological approach. The results demonstrate that not only the content of the child pornographic material, but also the massive data volumes involved and the confrontation with all manner of other deviant material, can be particularly onerous. Coping strategies can be divided into workplace (on-the-job) strategies (e.g., developing certain viewing strategies) and leisure time strategies (e.g., sport). From an organizational point of view, the interviewees felt a lack of support and respect among their supervisors for the work they are doing. The results have significant implications for police leadership culture and suggest that both more research and better training and care concepts are required.

Keywords: police, stress, child pornography, coping strategies, emotional impact, police organization, cyber crime

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## 1. Introduction

Research on the topic of stress in the police force dates back to the end of the 20th century. The bulk of this research has been conducted in the English-speaking world (e.g., Anderson, Swenson, & Clay, 1995; Brown & Campbell, 1990; Stinchcomb, 2004). Broadly speaking, the research has been general in nature (see Gershon, Barocas, Canton, Li, & Vlahov, 2009), concentrating on taxonomies of stress factors and – especially since the development and dissemination of Critical Incident Stress Management by Everly and Mitchell (1997) – highly stressful situations or traumatic events. Few studies have examined the topic of police stress in relation to the investigation of child pornography.

Among those studies that exist, Burns, Morley, Bradshaw, and Domene (2008) conducted a qualitative interview study with 14 investigators of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The authors differentiated between the effects of the investigative activity (e.g., physical and emotional stress), strategies for looking at the material (e.g., mental preparation), personal strategies (e.g., hobbies), as well as mitigating factors (e.g., organizational and private support) and risk factors (e.g., a lack of understanding at the social level). Stevenson (2007) also carried out a qualitative interview study (albeit with only 12 respondents) with police officers of so-called “on-line units” who were, as such, confronted with graphic child pornographic material (they were not “purely” investigating officers). This study concluded that support from superiors and the broader police organization as well as close bonds within the investigating team were particularly important for those investigating the material. Perez, Jones, and Englert (2010) relied on a mixed-method approach. In the quantitative questionnaire, 28 investigators participated, in the qualitative interviews the number was 21. The authors were particularly interested in how secondary traumatization and burnout<sup>3</sup> could be associated with the investigation and viewing of child pornography. Social support from third parties was again found to be an important factor in the context of well-being. Investigators who felt their work has a positive impact were also likely to exhibit a higher level of psychosocial functioning. A more detrimental effect thus emanated from a perceived lack of support by partners or supervisors. In an Australian study, telephone interviews were conducted with 32 investigators of child pornography (Powell, Cassematis, Benson, Smallbone, & Wortley, 2014). Overall, only two of the interviewees reported suffering from psychological stress. The remaining interviewees did not identify any negative effects. In the qualitative analysis, this result was connected with three aspects: a) adequate selection of staff, b) poor coping strategies such as refusal to work or displays of aggression, and c) functional coping in the form of information exchange with colleagues, in which (dark) humor also plays a role, supporting social cohesion and short-term emotional relief.

Further English-speaking findings exist in the form of a short report about a survey by Wolak and Mitchell (2009). In her investigation, Harms (2011) focused on whether the investigation of child pornographic material entails a stigmatizing effect that can be associated with negative emotions such as guilt and shame. At the same time, she was interested in the potential negative impact of investigating child pornography cases in terms of secondary trauma and burnout (Harms, 2011). Her findings were based on an online survey of approximately 100 “special agents working at several U.S. federal law enforcement agencies” (Harms, 2011). A connection between confrontation with child pornographic material and burnout or secondary traumatization was only found to exist in exceptional cases (Harms, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> The controversially discussed term “burnout” is used here whenever it is used in the quoted material; the respective conceptual understanding will not be discussed.

In German-speaking academic circles, there are currently no published studies about stress and coping strategies for police officers specifically involved in child pornography investigations. However, findings from broader studies about work-related stress in the police force are available. In a non-representative survey of 159 police officers, Scheler (1982) investigated the average degree of stress associated with various lines of police work. Among 37 police activities, the highest levels of stress were associated with the use of firearms, followed by searching for dangerous items, informing next-of-kin about a death, and physical confrontations. Wagner (1986) correlated the findings of Scheler (1982) with the frequency of occurrence. According to this method, handling aggressive persons ranks first, as this is a very common occurrence in police life and one that, at the same time, is placed at the top end of the aforementioned Scheler (1982) scale. Conversely, the use of firearms and informing of next-of-kin about the loss of a loved one are less detrimental as, although considered particularly stressful, they occur less frequently. A more recent study by Klemisch (2006), in which the author conducted a survey-based investigation of 344 police officers at the police academy of Baden-Württemberg (Klemisch, 2006), found that the suicide (or attempted suicide) and injuries of a close colleague as well as potential personal exposure to duty-related violent injury were the most burdensome situations. Situations in which children suffer (through injury or mistreatment) were also judged as particularly onerous. Steinbauer, Jagsch, and Kryspin-Exner (2002) likewise concluded that accidents involving children are especially burdensome for the involved law enforcement personnel. As investigators of child pornography are confronted with footage of child abuse for prolonged periods on a daily basis, it is thus conceivable that psychological stress would be a likely result. Of course, these general findings about police stress cannot directly be applied to police investigators responsible for viewing and documenting child pornography, since their working day can be very different to that of other police officers. In the investigation of child pornography, the officers are continuously exposed to picture and video material which often shows serious crimes against children. Although the officers have to clarify facts concerning a crime in the past, it is almost as if they are witnessing the offenses in the present. Moreover, the focus of many studies, as well as most of the literature on police stress published in the English-speaking world, is often on the confrontation with traumatic events and resulting posttraumatic stress disorders (e.g., Latscha, 2005).

The Internet has led to an ever-increasing incidence of cybercrime and, especially in the area of child pornography, the distribution, exchange, and collection of material. The growing number of charges for possession of child pornography (Bundeskriminalamt, 2016) and media references to Internet child pornography (Zeit online, 2016; see also Department of Justice Canada, 2013) are thus not surprising. Irrespective of the validity of these data, they highlight the increasing amounts of pressure that are being placed on police officers to investigate cases of child pornography. But what is the impact of this relatively new area of responsibility on the investigating officers? Do they see their work as onerous? If so, how do they deal with the potentially stressful impact their work entails. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine these questions for the first time on the basis of data from interviews with German police officers.

## **2. Research methodology**

Given the aforementioned lack of research in this specific area, a qualitative methodological approach in the form of semi-structured interviews was considered to be most suitable for obtaining information about a relatively new research subject (Breakwell, 2000). The less that is known about a phenomenon, the greater the need for an explorative approach (Oswald, 2013). We conducted a semi-structured interview. First, we asked for information about the participants' background (such as their age, length of service, duration of employment in the investigation of child pornography). Based on the English literature, the interview then continued with

open questions about stress, coping strategies, collegial exchange, and organizational assistance.

The study<sup>4</sup> was conducted in Baden-Württemberg where there are 12 police precincts. A total of five opted to provide interview partners. Due to data protection, the police precincts involved in this study are not specified. However, a certain geographic distribution with regard to the different police precincts was achieved and data were collected from both male and female police officers. Initially, eight individuals were contacted with the request to participate in the investigation; three declined the offer. On average, the respondents were 50 years of age, had worked in the police force for 32 years, and had been involved in the investigation of child pornography for  $M = 10.4$  years.

The interviews were carried out by a police officer within the framework of his final bachelor's thesis. The interviews were conducted onsite in each of the interviewees' offices, audio-recorded, and later transcribed. The duration of the interviews was between 18 and 43 minutes. The resulting body of data was analyzed in accordance with the method of structured qualitative content analysis, as described, for example, by Kuckartz (2016) or Mayring (2010).<sup>5</sup> In this primarily deductive approach, the data were structured and analyzed according to predefined aspects, i.e., statements were assigned to specific identified categories. This deductive method was then supplemented by an inductive approach, in which independent categories or subcategories were carved out irrespective of the previously defined thematic complexes.

### 3. Results

Overall, the following main categories could be identified:

1. Level of stress experience,
2. "On-the-job" coping strategies,
3. Social support,
4. Coping through sport,
5. Organizational and structural perspectives, and
6. Latent ambivalence.

#### 3.1 Level of stress experience

First, the extent of the emotional burden of the activity was asked about. The perceived stress ranged from "is not a burden for me" (Interview 3) and "if we refer to the child pornographic content, then I would say hardly for me" (Interview 4), to "I would say strong to extreme" (Interview 2).<sup>6</sup> Basically, the quote from Interview 1 summarizes how the police investigators perceive the strain in general:

I wouldn't say that it kept me up at night, though you do take it home with you into your private life.  
(Interview 1)

Over the course of the conversations, the discussion became more explicit and differentiated. Whether stress is felt depends, on the one hand, on the *nature of the material* with which the

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<sup>4</sup> The project was conducted under the direction of the first author during her employment at the Police Academy of Baden-Württemberg, Villingen-Schwenningen.

<sup>5</sup> To begin with, the content rules for the texts were determined and paraphrased in order to provide a higher level of abstraction and to develop a category system (results). This, as Mayring (2010) envisages, results in iterative re-verifications of the categories using the initial material (interviews). In this sense, the procedure corresponds to a qualitatively content-analytical approach, with the assistance of which superordinate categories are worked out. Later on, the content-analytical technique of explication (close context analysis) is used (see Mayring, 2010). The independently conducted analyses of the authors resulted in a consensual text and category understanding. Thus, reliability of the results can be assumed.

<sup>6</sup> We provide anchor sentences assigned to the interviewees in order to underpin the identified categories.

investigators are confronted and, on the other hand, the *physical amount* of child pornographic material viewed.

### 3.1.1 Nature of the material

While confrontation with child pornography can induce stress, this is most pronounced when dealing with deviant pornographic material in general rather than child pornography:

The screening of the material itself is also very stressful, since we not only see that [child pornography], but all sorts of variations of different sick shit, some of which really makes you want to throw up. (Interview 2)

For me, it is often the other sexual preferences of the accused that make the job more stressful. This is the case, for example, with sadistic or bestiality pornography. (Interview 4)

... in the case of all the shit and piss images that an accused might have, after spending all day looking at such pictures then – yeah – it weighs on me. (Interview 1)

The stress intensity also depends on whether picture material or videos are being viewed. The latter are understood to be more stress intensive as “a video [...] is simply much closer to reality” (Interview 3).

For me personally, the worst experience was when I watched a video and the response from the child was audible. You could hear the child screaming and trying to defend itself. (Interview 3)

It is not possible to simply forget videos that “display particular brutality” (Interview 2). One interviewee states that although “the content has gotten worse [...] more and more videos, which are also much more intense and harder”, the most stressful situation is “when I come into personal contact with the victims” (Interview 5). Two interviewees also reported that the strain is higher when the spoken dialect heard in the videos makes it clear that the “victims live near here [...] and that the abuse takes place here. [...] You don’t forget something like this” (Interview 2).

### 3.1.2 Physical amount of material

Of particular importance is the amount of data the police investigators have to manage. Depending on the nature of the images, “it is more the mass of pictures” (Interview 1) and “the increasing data volume” (Interview 4) that induces stress.

In the end, what is stressful for me is only the processing: not the picture material or the video material, but how I finally get this case worked through. And it’s not just the one case, but several cases. At the time, I realized that, just as I mentioned before, I simply was not stressed by the nature of the pictures but by the task of processing them all. (Interview 3)

It is also simply the extreme amount. [...] We often have up to three terabytes of information on hard drives that needs to be evaluated. (Interview 2)

Thus, the strain of viewing child pornographic material in itself is almost forgotten about due to the pressure of having to assess and collate an almost unmanageable amount of data. These vast amounts of data bring about stress in another way, namely that investigators have to “squat for hours before a PC” (Interview 2).

There are millions of pictures and you can really feel it on your posture when you sit in front of a PC for hours. (Interview 2)

Investigative activity in cases of child pornography can therefore have not only mental but also physical effects.

### **3.2 On-the-job coping strategies**

Investigators develop certain coping strategies that can be built into their day-to-day work routines, namely *screening strategies* and *objectification*.

#### **3.2.1 Screening strategies**

Almost all of the five respondents use special *screening strategies*. In the case of well-known material, this means “flying over material” so as not to have to “see everything in detail” (Interview 2). “You look at the pictures mostly in several galleries” (Interview 3). It is also reported that videos are generally evaluated without sound (Interviews 2 and 4), although one investigator commented that “whenever possible, then with sound” (Interview 1).

#### **3.2.2 Objectification**

Some of the respondents report on the connection between *objectification* and the construction of a *protective screen, shield, or wall*.

What helped me a lot is simply shielding myself. I do not see the actual image any more, but only the thing [...] Yes as a thing, I evaluate the picture only as a thing. Of course, it is clear that behind every picture is an instance of sexual or serious sexual abuse. One is already frightened and thinks, “What’s that asshole doing with the child” but I see the image rather as a thing. I just do not let it get to me anymore [...] My strategy is simply a kind of protective screen, which I have unconsciously built up. (Interview 3)

You simply need to build a sort of wall. It’s a matter of objectification. You cannot die with every child [...] You have to build a kind of wall and, of course, show a degree of practicality as well. (Interview 2)

A certain habituation effect with regard to the subject matter also occurs over time (Interviews 1 and 2).

Furthermore, the *sorting strategy* described by some of the respondents can be considered as a form of objectification of the material: “I begin by simply sorting” (Interview 2). “The first time around I sort out what’s irrelevant and what’s relevant, the latter I sort into certain areas” (Interview 1). For others, this objectification is evidenced by the emphasis on *methodological and procedural aspects*: “You think less emotionally, and more about the case at hand. You simply ask whether it is child pornography. It’s like any type of manual work” (Interview 4). It is more a question of whether sexual abuse is visible in the picture and, if so, determining how old the victim likely is (Interview 3). This is similar to Interview 5, with the strategy here being to see if “I just [...] I just got enough for prosecution” or to “see if a sexual abuse is present”. At an abstract level, these on-the-job strategies manage and mitigate feelings that could potentially be triggered by the material. This makes it possible for investigating officers to not get too close to the content and to reduce the stress-potential of their investigative activity. Insofar, these strategies could all be labelled emotional strategies.

### **3.3 Social support**

Social support emerged as an important aspect for stress management. This refers, on the one hand, to *support among direct colleagues* involved in child pornography investigations as well as, on the other hand, *support among family members*.

Concerning *support among direct colleagues*, Interview 1 notes: “We talk and discuss very, very intensively. Each of us have our own certain skills and knowledge, someone knows something here, and someone else knows something there, and we exchange ideas with each other”.

The significance of mutual support in the form of professional exchanges becomes clear in further statements:

And, of course, what makes it easier for me is that I have colleagues who also work the same way and we naturally cooperate with each other and complement each other and ultimately exchange ideas between ourselves and discuss things. (Interview 4)

What is most important for me is that I stay in conversation with my colleagues who investigate the child pornography with me and that we support each other. If I have to work on it on my own, which I have done on a previous occasion, then the strain can be enormous. Therefore, the mutual support and the ideas of the other are very important. We get to our goal by working together. We achieve that goal together.

Interviewer: Can one say that the exchange with colleagues in this area is very important? Interviewee: Yes, very important, which is something I would like to really underline. (Interview 3)

“We talk about it, of course” is also reported in Interview 5, “but more for the reason that I [...] simply want to pass on my experience. But not that we have to talk about it now to deal or cope with the matter”. Interview 2 adds that exchanges are generally of an objective nature and that it can be difficult “to open up to colleagues in a psychological manner”. In principle, the exchange among colleagues is therefore predominantly of a technical nature. Another form of social support occurs in the *family*. Here, police officers can “simply recoup strength” (Interview 3). “It is important that I have a balance with my family at home, in order to be able to process the strain of handling the cases” (Interview 3). But this is not the same as “taking the work home with you into the family” (Interview 2). At home, work “isn’t really a big issue” (Interview 4). “You sometimes talk about it if you’ve seen something really bad, but you don’t go into detail” (Interview 5). An important support role that the family offers is in many ways distraction: “Personally, I have a very busy private life and you simply don’t think about work then” (Interview 1).

Thus, the family unit fulfills a number of functions such as proving a distraction, regaining energy, and feeling accepted and balanced. It is not, however, a place where the detailed content of the work is discussed.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.4 Sport

In all of the interviews a special emphasis was placed on the coping strategy of sport. Physical fitness is emphasized as extraordinarily “important” (Interviews 1 and 2). Sport is something that helps with stress management (Interview 5). Sport is important to keep fit, but first and foremost it is important as it helps “to clear your head” (Interview 2). The respondents suggest a strong connection between physical fitness and mental health. Sport is a distraction, an important stress management strategy, and a means to provide mental and general stability:

... physical fitness is very important in order to remain stable when dealing with the subject matter. Without this physical fitness and stability [...] it would be much harder for me. (Interview 3)

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<sup>7</sup> Against this background, the question of the influence of parenthood on the handling of child pornographic investigations (and vice versa) is interesting. Four of the respondents have their own children. The two male respondents with children deny that they are thus more affected by the nature of their work. In fact, they presume that it is an advantage to have your own children because, for example, one can better estimate the age of the victims. The two female officers, however, considered the strain of viewing the material more severe as “you can imagine it better”, that is, you have someone who could live out your worries. All of the officers raise awareness of the dangers of the Internet and social media with their children.

... it is important that you keep yourself physically fit, to be resistant to stress. It is also simply better to be fit in order to cope with the tasks of the police. This is important. Also for your mental wellbeing. (Interview 4)

Physical activity is also considered as an essential form of compensation for the predominantly sedentary nature of the investigative activity (see 3.1.2). “We search premises from time to time but mostly we are just sitting” (Interview 2).

### **3.5 Organizational perspective**

The police officers clearly distinguish between their colleagues who, like themselves, work in the investigation of child pornography cases, and others in the police force but above all their superiors, with three sub-categories being found to exist: *lack of support from superiors*, *supervision*, and *training*.

The *lack of support* was reported by almost all interviewees. Interview 3 postulates that support might be less forthcoming “because superiors have no insight into our work, unless they explicitly ask”. The person interviewed in Interview 4 also feels that a supervisor “cannot really help one here” because – as suggested in Interview 2 – “the superiors in this area quickly reach their limits”.

For me personally, it is the way how our subject is dealt with and the lack of support. [...] Sometimes you just feel that you are left out in the rain. Sometimes you are confronted with the statement that you just look at pictures [...] It is always said that if there is a problem then you can come to me, but nothing happens. (Interview 2)

“The strain is created by a conglomerate of external pressure, lack of support, or lack of attention” observes the police officer in Interview 2. In Interview 4 it is also mentioned that support from above is “sporadic”. “When they hear something from the outside, then they come to you and realize that there is something there and that they could ask”. The superiors “think of you from time to time and then forget again”.

The lack of understanding and concern for officers investigating child pornography is also made clear by the following statement: “You might be feeling the strain, but that doesn’t mean you necessarily want to stop doing the job. But what you hear is that you will be moved elsewhere within the force” (Interview 2). In addition, such statements illustrate the desire for more respect and better chances of promotion. It must however be noted that one interviewee perceives growing support from superiors. It was noted that the technical equipment as well as the reputation of those handling child pornography has improved, perhaps because the topic is “more openly discussed by the general public” (Interview 4).

*Supervision* is consistently rated as positive, as is the fact of having the possibility to partake in supervision sessions “The supervision [...] was very good. We want to maintain this” (Interview 1). In Interview 2, the experience with supervision is also perceived as “very positive” and can be used to exchange ideas with colleagues:

I was already involved in a supervision with a colleague. It was important for me, because I could talk about my problems with the others. Especially in the field of processing [...] At that time, I realized that it wasn’t the pictures that were putting a strain on me, but rather their processing. (Interview 3)

On the subject of *training*, the situation is different, with criticism being raised about there being too few opportunities:



What would be great for us would be more intensive trainings. In my opinion, there is currently not much offered. Specifically in the field of child pornography, what do we need, what do we need to know? Something is missing. (Interview 1)

It is often the technical challenges, brought on by rapidly changing new technical developments that push investigators to their limits. In contrast to supervision, the importance of which has in the meantime reached the managerial levels, and which is even “arranged from the top” (Interview 2), “there is virtually no training” (Interview 5) – a sentiment shared by all respondents.

### ***3.6 Latent ambivalence***

Although the respondents answered that they do not feel under stress, the content analysis method of the close-context analysis (see above, methodology) reveals that the intense and constant confrontation with child pornographic material is a challenging task with the potential for stress. However, the investigators use diverse strategies outlined above to cope with the specific challenges and demands this work entails. This is seen with particular clarity in Interview 3: On the one hand the interviewee reports “Now that I am supposed to say that the material is extremely stressful, I cannot”. On the other hand, the interviewee admits that there are strategies that have helped a lot: “What has helped me a lot is simply the building up of a shield. I no longer see the real picture, but only the thing”. Also the statement that it was worse when the audio was turned on during the viewing of one video shows that the material is stressful to watch and that strategies need to be put in place to cope. This latent ambivalence was also apparent in Interview 2, where the respondent did not want to talk about “where I have my problems”. The existence of problems and stress are thus acceded to, but at other points in the interviews coping and handling strategies are reported. This makes the latent ambivalence more apparent, as too does the emphasis on the importance of coping strategies. Likewise, this latent ambivalence can be seen in the wish for increased appreciation and recognition by superiors. After all, the investigators, sometimes consciously, sometimes latently, are exposed to an activity with special – also emotional – challenges that require certain reactions: From both themselves and from third parties.

## **4. Discussion**

The aim of this qualitative study was to provide a deeper insight into the impact viewing child pornographic material has on investigators and the strategies that can be used to cope with the resulting stresses and strains. This has so far been an under-researched subject. An exploratory approach was chosen to conduct the study in order to identify a large bandwidth of responses. What the study was unable to do was to identify the concrete emotional and physical effects of work-related stress: a shortcoming that Szymenderski (2012) identified in many studies on stress in the police force. The investigation makes no claim to representativeness. It should also be borne in mind that this type of investigation is subject to self-selection processes which likely influence the outcome. It is possible that only individuals better able to cope with their investigative work took part. Nevertheless, some parallels can be drawn with regard to the existing research findings.

A central finding of the present study is that it is not necessarily the child pornographic material that is the biggest burden, but rather the massive “data volume” (Interview 4) and “all sorts of variations of different sick shit” (Interview 2). This result is in line with the findings of Burns et al. (2008, p. 24): “The sheer volume of investigations and the level of depravity are among the most distressing factors”. In Perez et al. (2010), these two aspects were also in the foreground for the majority of respondents.

In the present study, the investigators were able to cope with their challenging tasks thanks to a number of functional coping strategies. Above all, sport and social support – the latter both at

home and via colleagues – were among the most important of these coping mechanisms. In addition, they apply certain strategies when viewing the material. Effects such as sleep disruption, nightmares, headaches, or feelings of being unable to fulfill family responsibilities or other tasks, as evidenced, for example, by the respondents in the Burns et al. study (2008) were not shown among the respondents in Baden-Württemberg, although it must be added that this was not asked about in a structured way. Interestingly, similar coping strategies could be identified in the Canadian study. These include the use of certain viewing strategies, a focus on objective facts, and the creation of an emotional shield (Burns et al., 2008, p. 25: “to shut down their emotions”). The positive distraction provided by after-work sport and hobbies was also identified in this study, although it should be emphasized that in the Baden-Württemberg sample the emphasis on physical sporting activities was made clearer. Sport is considered an important health-promoting stress management strategy (see, for example, Gerber, Lindwall, Lindegard, Börjesson, & Jonsdottir, 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is also believed to be an all-round coping strategy for police officers in general. In this respect, the athletic demands placed on police can be a possible resilience factor. In a recent study from the UK, Roach (2016) also reports on the importance of physical fitness as compensation for police officers in highly burdensome investigations (in this case, child homicide).

In any case, the results of Burns et al. (2008) suggest that the aspect of secondary traumatization should be discussed in connection with the investigation of cases of child pornography, as the material viewed consists of traumatic events that must be witnessed on a daily basis by the investigating police officers. However, authors who have thus far dealt with this type of investigative activity (Harms, 2011; Perez et al., 2010) were unable to arrive at clear conclusions concerning the traumatic potential inherent in such investigative activity. Connections with other variables seem to exert an important influence on this traumatic potential (Harms, 2011), for example, generally perceived public mistrust (as suggested by Perez et al., 2010). In addition, in the study by Perez et al. (2010), the support of friends, family members, and co-workers are highlighted as the most important coping strategies; these are augmented by the ability to “leave work at work” (Perez et al., 2010, p. 120) and the involvement in hobbies. “Having a strong family” and “having friends” were reported by Wolak and Mitchell (2009) to be a protective factor in more than 80% of respondents and sport in the case of 63% of respondents. Although less emphasis was placed on family support in the present study, the respondents nevertheless noted that family plays an important role in relation to their mental well-being, although the police officers did not primarily look for their own family members as interlocutors. Further research would be needed on the latter subject to determine to what extent this is associated with functional or dysfunctional coping strategies. On the one hand, it is conceivable that this is a functional distraction strategy. In the work of Szymenderski (2012), too much emotional relocation from work into private life was associated with a higher burden on the family. In this respect, measured communication about onerous experiences at work can certainly be regarded as protection of the “family as a private retreat” (Szymenderski, 2012, p. 397). On the other hand, the lack of exchange can become a dysfunctional strategy if it is a sign of emotional isolation and rejection of stressful experiences (see also Szymenderski, 2012).

Speechlessness about the emotional side of the investigative activity is a phenomenon not only found in our study. Regarding collegial exchanges, while it was emphasized how important these are, the conversation content was mainly focused on (investigative) technical discussions rather than emotional content. In a still male-dominated profession, the “policeman” image may play a role: “Policing is still very much the boys’ club mentality... you do not talk about your problems, you do not show weakness” mentioned one interviewee in the study by Powell et al. (2014, p. 36). In the study by Klemisch (2006), more than 80% of the participants were male.

And in 2010, about 87% of the criminal investigators in Baden-Württemberg were male (Innenministerium Baden-Württemberg, 2011). In this context, Wolak and Mitchell (2009) emphasize that police training should not only cover technical content, but also teach officers to learn to talk about stress. This could promote the constructive expression of emotions<sup>8</sup> that are generally considered a functional coping strategy in the context of coping with stress (Laux & Weber, 1990). Some of the officers interviewed by Wolak and Mitchell (2009) also complained about consequences for their own sexual life<sup>9</sup>: a neglected aspect in the other studies, including our own study. This is perhaps partly due to the difficulty of addressing this topic in smaller qualitative studies.

Organizational police support was mentioned in the investigation by Burns et al. (2008) as an important factor identified by the interviewees.

Training opportunities, having the right equipment, proper supervision, and access to psychological support allowed participants to cope more effectively and focus more completely on their investigations (Burns et al., 2008, p. 26).

In the present study, the positive perception of organizational support was mainly seen in the area of supervision.<sup>10</sup> Concerning training, the respondents would have wished for more courses and considered themselves to be at their technical limits. The findings of Krause (2009) strongly suggest that this type of investigative activity can create frustration through rapidly evolving technical challenges coupled with a lack of support. The need for greater appreciation, support, and more respect for the nature of the work on the part of superiors can thus be highlighted as important organizational findings of this study. In contrast to Burns et al. (2008), this protective factor was missing amongst the current study's respondents. In Perez et al. (2010, p. 120), the respondents also wanted "more concern from management" and linked this to experienced stress. In Harms' (2011) study, some of the US investigators also noted that they simply wanted more recognition that their job could be psychologically stressful; it was also noted that it is important that supervisors keep an eye on the mental well-being of their employees. Likewise, police officers in the Stevenson study (2007, p. iii) complained of "poor management": supervisors simply did not understand what working with such cases meant. In addition, the treatment of those who work such investigations was said to be disrespectful (Stevenson, 2007, p. 37: "weirdos", "freaky people"). With regard to the way third parties view their work, it is thus possible to establish the finding that many investigators, as in the study by Burns et al. (2008), feel stigmatized; a matter to which Krause (2009) also draws attention. In the Baden-Württemberg interviews, a similar picture was found to exist, especially when one hears phrases such as "you only look at pictures" (Interview 2). Overall, a lack of appreciation is therefore recorded, which contributes to stress levels and feelings of being overburdened.

The, on the whole, "positive" findings with regard to coping strategies presented here may be due to the fact that those investigators who volunteered to participate in the study felt less stressed. The location of the interviews may have also played a role, with the interview in the own staff rooms perhaps not providing the necessary confidentiality for some. However, since many of the results presented here are consistent with other research findings, the validity and reliability of the present results must be regarded as given.

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<sup>8</sup> This means neither impulsive emotional expressions nor the suppression of emotions.

<sup>9</sup> In the study by Stevenson (2007), the impact on one's own sex life was raised by half of the respondents.

<sup>10</sup> Building on the previous point, Behr (2006) emphasizes that supervision only works if there is a "reflective culture" (p. 162) and that the police officers involved must have the ability to properly formulate and communicate their feelings.

## 5. Conclusion and implications

Overall, despite the lack of research on the topic of child pornography investigations, it can be seen that there are some major results shared across different studies in the types of stress experienced by police officers and the various coping strategies that can be used to mitigate them. A key finding of the present study points to the importance of organizational aspects – greater support, more training opportunities, heightened emotional recognition and appreciation for the difficult investigative work from superiors – could all contribute to a further reduction in stress levels and are therefore of preventative importance. These findings corroborate those of Burns et al., 2008, Perez et al., 2010, Powell et al., 2014, and Stevenson, 2007 and can even be considered as an adaptive strategy of emotion regulation (see Westen & Blagov, 2009). The extent to which the interviewed target group perceives currently available measures within the police force, such as psychosocial and counselling services, as pertinent to stress minimization was not explicitly inquired about but was also not proactively mentioned by the respondents as part of their coping strategy. A positive aspect in this context was the importance attached to supervision, which – in the opinion of the investigating police officers – is rightfully made available to them by police management.

Confrontation with this type of pornographic material has the potential to lead to secondary traumatization and – through the accumulation of material viewed and the perceived lack of support – possibly burnout (see Perez et al., 2010). This has many practical implications and perhaps investigators should be given the opportunity to engage in different tasks from time to time. The feeling that you have control over the activity you do at work is also to be considered a protective factor and should therefore not be neglected at the organizational level. Examples could be to give these investigators the authority to decide whether they want to work in the field at all (Krause, 2009), when to do what, when to take a breaks, how to get mentally prepared for the work, or how to take over the leadership of your own investigation (see Burns et al., 2008).<sup>11</sup>

The expressed and identified burdens are not to be regarded as weaknesses or shortcomings. Rather, they can be assigned to functional coping strategies and the ability to express feelings. Likewise, benign defensive processes, as described by the respondents, for example, in the form of screening strategies and family distractions, can be understood as adaptive emotion regulation and coping strategies (Westen & Blagov, 2009; see also Laux & Weber, 1990)<sup>12</sup>. In addition, the already mentioned control over stressful situations is a hallmark of functional coping strategies (Westen & Blagov, 2009). However, the fine line between adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies can indeed be very narrow when, for example, defensive processes result in avoidance or withdrawal (see Westen & Blagov, 2009).

As a matter of fact, the stress and burdens created by this type of investigative activity cannot be completely eliminated. Rather, research on the matter is about reducing these negative effects through specific measures and strategies. The results of this study, as well as other comparable studies, make it clear that personal suitability for the work is a decisive factor. This includes, on the one hand, whether a person has functional coping strategies to deal with the investigated material as well as other strategies such as sport and social support. On the other hand, certain qualities are associated with suitability, including investigative experience, competence, and reflectiveness (see Perez et al., 2010; Powell et al., 2014). Particularly noteworthy,

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<sup>11</sup> It should be nevertheless noted at this point that the duration of the confrontation with child pornographic material does not seem to contribute per se to the experience of stress (see Harms, 2011; Stevenson, 2007; or alternatively Perez et al., 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Lazarus & Folkman (1984, p. 150) also emphasize the importance of cognitive, emotional stress reducing processes such as “avoidance, minimization, distancing, selective attention, [...] and wresting positive value from negative events”.

however, is the need for functional structural support from the police organization – regardless of questions of suitability.

For only if child pornography investigators are able to develop functional processing and balancing strategies and find appropriate support can they cope in the long run. Krause (2009, p. 23) speaks of the need to provide this professional group with “special care and feeding” to ensure a personal and professional level of functionality. Moreover, as Powell et al. (2014) note, it is also necessary to change police culture to better enable police officers to constructively express their feelings without this being seen as a weakness. Such findings are in line with Edelman’s (2010) conclusion that so far there has been too little research on the connections between the investigation of child pornography and the possible psychological consequences, such as secondary trauma or dysfunctional coping strategies, as well as the role counseling and supervision can play. Further studies may be able to more keenly identify the specific effects and emotional burdens associated with this type of police investigative activity.

## 6. Literature

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