

University of Nevada, Reno

**Law Enforcement Officer-Involved Fatal Incidents: A Phenomenological Study of  
How Law Enforcement Officers and Their Spouses Perceive and Describe the  
Experience of an Officer-Involved Fatal Incident**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling and Educational Psychology

by

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May, 2014

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entitled

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to seek the perceptions and descriptions of law enforcement officers and their spouses who have experienced an officer-involved fatal incident. A review of the literature revealed that most inquiries into the nature of police stress and trauma are quantitative in nature. This study contributed to the existing body of research through inclusion of the voices of those who have experienced, and have been impacted by an officer-involved fatal incident. This study was interpreted through the theoretical lenses of transcendental phenomenology, existential theory, and family systems theory. Data collection relied predominantly on semi-structured, recorded interviews along with the identification of artifacts retained by participants. The participants included six law enforcement officers and their spouses. Data analysis utilized a transcendental phenomenological model developed by van Kaam's (1959/1966) and modified by Moustakas (1994). The study identified two themes pertaining to the lived emotional experience of an officer-involved fatal incident (OIFI), four themes pertaining to coping strategies, and four themes for meaning making.

Keywords- Law enforcement stress, officer-involved fatal incident, qualitative, phenomenology, coping, trauma, gratitude, meaning making

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **Opening Vignette: My Personal Experience with an Officer-Involved Fatal Incident**

On July 23, 1977 at about 4:00 A.M., my partner and I were dispatched to an “unwanted guest” call. As we walked up to the front of the house, several people ran out to greet us. They were upset and excitedly told us “he has a gun” and ran back into the house before we had a chance to stop them. We followed them into the house and turned down a hallway. At the end of the hallway was a room. The people who had greeted us outside were now grouped together around the open doorway to that room. Suddenly, emerging from the crowd, we saw a man holding a gun in his right hand. His left hand was handcuffed to the right hand of a young female. We later learned that the perpetrator was a former police officer from the Philippines. His wife had left him and had returned to her parent’s home. That night he came to retrieve her with the aid of handcuffs and his duty weapon.

When the perpetrator saw us he went into a crouching stance, and raised the gun toward us. As the first shot rang out the gunman disappeared from view as his father-in-law stepped in front of us, blocking our view of the perpetrator. We could not return fire without risking shooting the innocent people gathered at the end of the hallway. My partner and I assessed the situation instantly, and made the same decision simultaneously. The perpetrator fired several shots. All I heard were “pops” as he fired his gun. Realizing that we could not return fire, we retreated from the hallway to find cover.

My partner brought out a female who had been shot in the abdomen. She was the perpetrator’s mother-in-law. We cleared the home of everyone with the exception of the suspect and his hostage. After help arrived, my sergeant asked me to go back inside with

him to rescue the father-in-law. In an act of courage that was unsurpassed during my 33-year career, the sergeant crawled down the hallway to try and rescue the man who laid mortally wounded - half in the hallway and half in the room that contained the perpetrator and the hostage. I covered the sergeant from the end of the hallway. The hostage kept yelling for the sergeant not to proceed, warning that the perpetrator would shoot him. The sergeant reached the wounded man and began dragging him toward me and to safety.

My entire focus remained riveted on the open doorway of the room containing the perpetrator. As the sergeant dragged the father-in-law past me, I quickly glanced down and saw that the man was dead. He had been shot in the heart. He died so quickly that there was very little blood. In that moment I felt overwhelming guilt. The father-in-law had taken a bullet that was meant for my partner and me. When I exited the home I saw the man's body lying on the lawn of a neighbors house underneath a "for sale" sign. It was an absurd scene and only added to my feelings of guilt. Neither my partner nor I ever fired a shot. We did not shoot the mother-in-law or kill the father-in-law, yet I felt responsible.

Negotiators eventually convinced the perpetrator to surrender, and his wife was freed, unharmed. Later, she would testify at the trial that her husband was only defending himself after we fired our weapons at him first! When things calmed down, I called my wife to let her know that I would be late coming home. I explained what happened, and did not want her to worry when the story hit the news. Her casual, distant response felt uncaring. It was a harbinger of things to come. I know now that she had no way of comprehending what I had just experienced. We were disconnected.

I had recurrent dreams of the incident, and my behavior changed. On my next duty day following the shooting I walked out of the briefing room at the police department, and down the wide hall toward the exit to get my patrol car. As I approached the door, a Filipino man entered the building from the outside and walked toward me. My mind sensed imminent danger. I instantly “cleared leather.” I drew my gun on this poor man who, as it turned out, was the janitor. I quickly realized what I had done and replaced my weapon. There were several officers around me at the time, and none of them ever said a word to me about the incident.

Counseling would have been in order, but it would not come until many months later. During those months my marriage deteriorated. The impact devastated my family. Was that incident solely responsible for the demise of my marriage? It was not. I do believe, however, that the incident activated, and punctuated issues that had hidden beneath the surface, created new issues, and was directly responsible for the posttraumatic stress symptoms that I experienced, and acted out in my life. The experiences I have had since with other police officers have taught me that the symptoms that impacted me after this traumatic experience were by no means uncommon.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This vignette, while my own personal story, is but one example of thousands of critical incidents that are experienced by law enforcement officers (Alexander & Walker, 1996; Borum & Philpot, 1993; Follette, Polusny & Milbeck, 1994; Gersons, 1994; Kureczka, 1996; McCafferty, McCafferty & McCafferty, 1992). These critical incidents underscore the need for researchers in the fields of criminal justice and counseling to understand how best to prepare law enforcement officers for traumatic events and how

best to treat them in the aftermath of a traumatic experience (Beehr, Johnson & Nieva, 1995; Borum & Philpot, 1993; Gilmartin, 1986; Maynard, Maynard, Hamilton, Mccubbin & Shao, 1980; McCafferty et al., 1992; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Woody, 2006). My marriage did not survive, but I did, with the help of a knowledgeable, and empathetic counselor. I remarried and have happily remained so for 34 years. However, appropriate and timely intervention may well have mitigated the damage and hurt experienced by my family and me. Following my retirement from law enforcement in 2004, I returned to university to become a marriage and family therapist. This research reflects my commitment to my brothers and sisters in law enforcement, to further our understanding of how traumatic events are experienced and processed by law enforcement officers, and their spouses, and how best to respond to their emotional and psychological needs as counseling professionals.

Every citizen has a vested interest in the psychological and emotional well being of those who are the stewards of our safety, and in whom we place great responsibility and trust (Bartol, 1996). Law enforcement is an inherently dangerous occupation. According to the most recent Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) 2012 report on officers killed and assaulted, 48 law enforcement officers were feloniously killed in the United States in 2012; 47 were killed accidentally in the line of duty, and 52,901 were assaulted. According to Mann and Neece (1990), it is estimated that 12-35% of police officers suffer post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with various levels of psychological disabilities. These statistics, while sobering and dramatic, do not fully capture the wide range of possible traumatic events that are encountered by law enforcement officers on a daily basis in the United States, nor do they reflect the impact these events have on the

spouses and families of these officers (Beehr, Johnson & Nieva, 1995; Borum, & Philpot, 1993; Alexander & Walker, 1996; Maynard et al., 1980).

A review of the literature reveals that most inquiries into the nature of police stress and trauma are quantitative in nature (e.g., Alexander & Walker, 1996; Beehr, Johnson & Nieva, 1995; Borum & Philpot, 1993; Follette, Polusny & Milbeck, 1994; Gersons, 1989; Gilmartin, 1986; Mann & Neece, 1990; Maynard et al. 1995; McCafferty et al., 1992; McCaslin et al., 2006; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Waters & Ussery, 2007; Woody, 2006). The quantitative research studies cited here are important and provide valuable insights into the experience of law enforcement trauma and treatment options. Despite the abundance of quantitative literature, there is a paucity of qualitative research studies in this arena. There is a need to hear the voices of the law enforcement officers, and their spouses because we need to understand both the uniqueness, and the commonality of how traumatic events are perceived, and experienced by individuals and those closest to them (Alexander & Walker, 1996; Beehr, Johnson & Nieva, 1995; Borum & Philpot, 1993). A much-needed solution to this dilemma in the field is to use a qualitative approach to explore how law enforcement officers, and their spouses describe and understand traumatic events encountered on the job.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to fill a void in the literature by using a qualitative approach to explore how law enforcement officers and their spouses experience and process an officer-involved fatal incident (OIFI). In this study, I use a phenomenological lens to examine the participants' experiences. Knowing how law enforcement officers, and their spouses perceive and experience an OIFI may expand our options for

mitigation, and treatment of emotional and psychological harm. Knowledge gleaned from this work will be helpful to counselors to understand the unique phenomenological experience of law enforcement officers and spouses whose stories are told here. The following question guides my research study: How do law enforcement officers and their spouses perceive and describe the experience of an officer-involved fatal event?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Officer-Involved Fatal Incident.** An officer involved-fatal incident (OIFI) for the purposes of this study is any incident involving two or more people in which a law enforcement officer is actor, victim, or custodial officer where a fatality occurs. This definition is adapted from the Officer-Involved Critical Incident Protocol issued by participating law enforcement agencies in El Dorado County, California. See Appendix A for an expanded definition of circumstances anticipated by this protocol and applicable to this study.

**Law Enforcement Officer (LEO).** The definition of a law enforcement officer varies depending on the federal, state, or local statutes within defined political jurisdictions. For the purposes of this study, a law enforcement officer is defined as any person duly sworn with police powers to carry out the enforcement of laws and ordinances within his or her jurisdiction.

**Spouse.** A spouse for the purposes of this study is defined as the lawfully married husband or wife of the police officer, significant other, or life partner.

### **Overview of Dissertation in Chapters**

Chapter two provides the background for the study. It is divided into two major sections: a review of the related literature, and a description of the theoretical lenses of

the study. Chapter three provides the context of the study, and a description of research methods. The chapter is divided into five major sections: the design of the study; the researcher's background and role in the study; participants and site selection; sources and data collection procedures, and data analysis. Chapter four, five and six contain the results of the study. Chapter four addresses the emotional experience of an officer-involved fatal incident (OIFI). It is divided into two main sections: the lived emotional experience of an OIFI, and a synthesis of the emotional experience of an OIFI. Chapter five addresses the coping styles and strategies described by the participants. It is divided into four main sections: a description of individual and couple coping styles and strategies; the role of counseling in the coping process; the role of agency leadership in the coping process, and a synthesis of the coping strategies. Chapter six addresses the meanings and essences of an OIFI. It is divided into three main sections: meanings as constructed by the officers and spouses; meanings embedded in a sense of professional competence and training, and a synthesis of the meanings derived from an OIFI. Chapter seven is the concluding chapter and presents a discussion of the findings of the study. It is divided into six main sections: a summary of the major findings; implications for the field; theoretical implications; limitations of the study; future direction of research, and closing remarks.

## II: BACKGROUND OF STUDY

This chapter provides background for my study. It is divided into two major sections: a review of literature related to my study, and an overview of the theoretical lenses I use to frame my work. I present the review and discussion of the literature first because it establishes the foundational and key texts that provide the basis for this study. Then I present the theoretical lenses that frame the study. The focus of my research concerns a specific and extreme form of stress encountered by law enforcement officers and their families: officer-involved fatal incidents (OIFI).

### **Review of Related Literature**

I present three sub-sections pertaining to a review of the literature. The first sub-section focuses on the literature pertaining to law enforcement stress and coping. I categorized the literature in this sub-section according to the focus of the research. I first present literature focused primarily on stress and coping for the law enforcement officer (LEO). Then I present literature focused on stress and coping for spouses and families of LEOs. The second sub-section focuses on the literature pertaining to trauma and emotional resilience. The third section focuses on literature pertaining to the role of gratitude in emotional resilience to trauma. These three areas are important to the field of counseling because they provide mental health professionals with a context in which to treat law enforcement officers, their spouses and families. They also became important to my work as I undertook the study.

### **Law Enforcement Stress and Coping**

**Research focused on the LEO.** I begin this section by examining literature focused on the sources and effects of stress and coping pertaining to law enforcement



officers (LEOs). Scholars (e.g., Follette, Polusny & Milbeck, 1994; Gersons, 1989; Gilmartin, 1986; Mann & Neece, 1990; McCafferty, McCafferty & McCafferty, 1992; McCaslin et al., 2006; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Woody, 2006) have studied the stress of police work and the consequences of stress on the physical, emotional, and psychological health of law enforcement officers.

Gilmartin (1986), a police psychologist, takes the position that law enforcement officers learn to be hypervigilant about their environment, and have difficulty deactivating this heightened state of awareness when they leave work and return home. According to Gilmartin (1986), law enforcement officers learn to view the world as a dangerous and threatening place. Hypervigilance leads law enforcement officers to seek excitement, which may take the form of promiscuity, substance abuse, and emotional exhaustion outside the work environment. Law enforcement officers frequently engage in telling “war stories” to satisfy the need for excitement and the narrowing of social circles to exclude all but other law enforcement officers, leading to an “us versus them” existence.

Gersons (1989) examined the emotional consequences of stress on police officers (N=37) in Amsterdam, The Netherlands after serious shooting incidents between 1977-1984 using semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The author noted that shooting incidents in the careers of law enforcement officers are rare, but carry with them the prospect of serious emotional outcomes, including symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and that most officers seek refuge in denial. Gersons noted that the public view of law enforcement officers is not in keeping with reality. The public, according to Gersons, believe that law enforcement officers are well equipped to deal

with dangerous situations, and that shootings are a routine experience in their work lives. Shootings are not common; they are rare. Gersons found that PTSD symptoms often go undetected by others until the officer attempts, or completes a suicide. The results of Gersons' research showed that 85% of the participants described their respective shooting events in, "...an extremely intense, clear and precise manner" (p. 249). All recalled vivid images of the event. Only 3 of the 37 participants were free of symptoms, and 46% met the full diagnostic criteria for PTSD. The most prominent symptom was recurrent, and intrusive recollections. Gersons reported that 67% of the participants experienced hypervigilance and constricted affect as an immediate aftereffect of the shooting. These two symptoms had a significant effect on the officer's behavior, and her or his relationships with partners, friends and colleagues. Those friends and colleagues did not recognize the connection between the shooting event and the behavioral changes until sometime later. None of the officer participants sought treatment from doctors, mental health professionals, or social workers. Gersons attributed disinterest in seeking help to the law enforcement culture of distrust of those outside the profession.

Woody (2006) makes the case for the stressful nature of law enforcement work, identifying a number of specific stressors that he places under four "critical sources." Those sources include the ambiguous framework in which discretionary decisions are made, the danger of dealing with lawbreakers, public suspicion and disdain, and the lack of community and organizational support. Law enforcement officers operate in difficult conditions, and must make life and death decisions with little or no time for reflection, much less consultation with peers and supervisors (Kirschman, 2007, 2012). Law enforcement officers exercise a great deal of discretion while enforcing laws that are

sometimes ambiguous, and the rules for applying those laws change with every new court decision. Like Gilmartin (1986), Woody makes the point that law enforcement officers become isolated from community and family. Although the focus of Woody's research is the LEO, he offers several suggestions for interventions with law enforcement families. Those interventions include, among others, helping the law enforcement officer examine the appropriate application of values and attitudes prevalent in the law enforcement culture, helping the law enforcement officer identify values that can enhance both social relationships and job functioning on the street, helping the law enforcement officer learn how to have meaningful relationships outside of the law enforcement culture (Kirschman, 2014), and helping family members understand how each one participates in the law enforcement officer's primary support system (Woody, 2006).

According to McCafferty et al. (1992), the consequences of the stressful nature of police work include suicide, marital and family problems, sexual problems (e.g., impotence and promiscuity), unnecessary risk taking, isolation from friends outside the law enforcement community, callousness, and alcoholism. Sources of stress include citizen complaints, the judicial system, hostile attorneys, the employing agency, exposure to death and carnage, and shift work. The authors agree with Gilmartin (1986) that stress is often manifested by hypervigilance, a sense of mortality, and an expectation of a shortened lifespan. McCafferty argues that constant exposure to hostility, anger, aggression, depression and tragedy requires the use of all adaptive mechanisms to cope. Emotional numbing and isolation from the community are often the outcomes of a stressful and hostile work environment.

Follette et al. (1994), surveyed law enforcement officers (N=46) and mental health workers (N=225) to examine the effects of exposure to trauma as it related to treating and investigating child abuse. The researchers investigated the phenomena of work-related PTSD or burnout in law enforcement officers. Three measurement instruments were used: the Therapist Response Questionnaire (TRQ), the Law Enforcement Response Questionnaire (LERQ) and the Trauma Symptom Checklist-40 (TSC-40). A comparison between mental health professionals and law enforcement professionals based on the TSC-40 scores indicated that “law enforcement professionals reported significantly higher levels of trauma symptoms...than did mental health professionals (p. 278). The researchers also found that, “Law enforcement officers involved in stressful crime assignments such as homicide and narcotics and disaster related rescue work are at an increased risk for developing PTSD symptoms” (p. 276). In fact, law enforcement professionals were more distressed on all measures of psychological symptoms than mental health professionals. Law enforcement officers do not reach out to psychological resources to the same extent as mental health professionals. This includes couple and family therapy. The researchers discovered that law enforcement professionals rely more on their spouses (not more than mental health professionals though). Further, law enforcement officers with childhood abuse histories (CAH) reported higher use of coping skills than NCAH, but also reported more negative coping, including substance abuse, isolation, and avoidance.

Maia et al. (2007) conducted a study of Brazilian police officers (N=157) assigned to an elite unit to (a) determine the current prevalence of posttraumatic stress symptoms, and (b) to compare groups with, and without posttraumatic stress symptoms in

terms of indicators of psychosocial functioning and of physical and mental health. The research subjects volunteered to be part of the study. They were asked to complete a questionnaire to determine socio-demographic variables, utilization of health services along with physical and mental health indicators. The researchers used a Brazilian version of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist-Civilian Version (PCL-C) to screen for posttraumatic stress symptoms. The PCL-C was used to determine the presence of full PTSD according to the DSM-IV criteria. The researchers also used the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) as a general measure of psychological well-being. Each item on the GHQ-12 receives a score of 0-3, with a maximum score of 36. Higher scores imply worse mental health. Statistical significance was tested for differences between full PTSD, partial PTSD, and no PTSD. The results were statistically significant where  $p \leq 0.05$ . The researcher found that the prevalence in the sample of full PTSD was 8.9%, and that partial PTSD was 16%. There were five times more divorced officers with full PTSD, than there were with officers without that condition. Additionally, officers with full PTSD regarded their health to be poorer than those without PTSD. In line with those findings, officers with full PTSD reported consulting with medical staff twice as often as those without PTSD, and medical admissions were 4.6 times higher. The group with full PTSD had much higher GHQ-12 scores (recall that higher scores indicate worse mental health) than the group without PTSD. Lastly, the full PTSD group showed significantly higher lifetime rates of suicidal ideation. It is interesting to note that the results of this study are reflective of the rates of full PTSD for New York City police officers 18 months after 9/11 (8.8% compared to 8.9%). Likewise

the prevalence of partial PTSD in this study was 16% when compared to the New York City sample of 15.0%. The similarities are remarkable.

Mann and Neece (1990) examined how PTSD manifests itself among police officers, and whether or not law enforcement officers could receive worker's compensation for PTSD suffered from law enforcement related activities. The authors reviewed the extant literature to explore those two questions in the context of law enforcement culture. The authors estimated that 12%-35% of police officers suffer PTSD with various levels of psychological disabilities. They claim that PTSD is the 5<sup>th</sup> most common referral problem presented to police psychologists. The authors found that law enforcement officers are confronted with an apathetic and often hostile public, negative media coverage, and violent individuals who do not play by the rules. The authors pointed to the Police Stress Survey (PSS) developed by Spielberger, Westbery, Grier, and Greenfield (1981) which lists 60 potentially stressful law enforcement situations. The most stressful situations identified by the PSS are violent situations, and the use of force, especially fatal situations, or being called to the scene of a battered or dead child. The authors argue that the stressful nature of the police environment may indicate a higher likelihood of PTSD among law enforcement officers than with other occupations. The authors found that law enforcement officers share similar traits that include maintaining self-control in the face of stress, and blocking out emotions. Law enforcement officers feel that they must be in control even when they feel they are not. The public also expects law enforcement officers to maintain control. The authors recognized that law enforcement officers cannot avoid past traumatic events because they continue to operate

in the same environment where past traumatic events have occurred. They simply cannot distance themselves from those experiences.

McCaslin et al. (2006) assessed whether reports of personal threat, "...of the single most distressing duty-related critical incident experienced by a police officers during the entire course of their career contributes to the prediction of greater peritraumatic distress and posttraumatic symptoms" (p. 592). The participants in this study (N=662) were police officers from New York City Police Department, Oakland Police Department, and San Jose Police Department. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling and were selected by the personnel departments of each agency. All participants were mailed packages containing letters of invitation, letters of support from the police unions and department administrations. Participants who returned the completed packet were reimbursed \$100.00. Five measures were used to collect the data: The 10-item Peritraumatic Dissociative Experiences Questionnaire (PDEQ) was used to assess dissociative responses during and immediately following trauma exposure. The Peritraumatic Distress Inventory (PDI) is a self-report questionnaire that was used to assess dysphoric emotional states. The Impact Event Scale-Revised (IES-R) was used in conjunction with the "most disturbing critical incident" section of the survey. The Mississippi Scale for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (MCS-CV) was also used in conjunction with the same question. Finally, the Critical Incident History Questionnaire is a 34-item self-report measure designed to produce a measure of cumulative exposure to critical incidents. The classification of narratives provided by the participants was divided into five categories: personal life threat; duty-related violence, encountering physical or sexual assault victims, exposure to civilian death, and other. Those five categories were

collapsed into two categories: high and low personal threat. Not surprisingly, the results of the study demonstrated that those officers, "...whose most distressing critical incident involved personal life threat or duty-related violence reported higher levels of dissociative symptoms at the time of the event" (p. 595). Personal life threat also produced great levels of hyperarousal symptoms on the IES-R than those involving exposure to a civilian death. Likewise, after collapsing the categories to high and low personal threat, the results indicated that those incidents involving high personal threat were associated with higher peritraumatic emotional distress and dissociation, and greater levels of current hyperarousal symptoms than those with low personal threat. The important implications of this study are the relationship between experiences of high personal threat and the manifestation of symptoms of "...fear, and dissociative responses and lasting anxious arousal symptoms" (p. 596), and the need to identify these officers for the purpose of early intervention and remediation of symptoms.

It is clear from the literature that the many sources of stress encountered by law enforcement officers creates an environment for emotional distress ranging from hypervigilance (i.e., the world is a dangerous place), to substance abuse, domestic violence and suicide (i.e., the world is intolerable). The areas of hypervigilance, isolation, coping, sources of stress, resistance to counseling support, organizational support, making life and death decisions, manifestations of posttraumatic stress symptoms, and creating meaningful relationships outside of the law enforcement culture became important to my work as I undertook this study. This research study explores these areas through the lived experience of law enforcement officers, and their spouses. The



implications of this research could provide valuable information to law enforcement officers, their families, law enforcement leaders, and professional counselors.

**Research focused on the spouse and family.** The studies cited thus far make valuable contributions to understanding the physical, emotional and psychological effects of the particular stressors encountered by law enforcement officers. Most research into law enforcement stress focuses primarily on the individual officer (Follette, Polusny & Milbeck, 1994; Gersons, 1989; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; Mann & Neece, 1990; McCafferty et al., 1992; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Waters & Ussery, 2007; Woody, 2006). There are fewer research studies that focus on how law enforcement stress affects the spouse of the law enforcement officer, or to what extent stress impacts the marriage relationship (Alexander & Walker, 1996; Beehr, Johnson & Nieva, 1995; Borum, & Philpot, 1993; Kirschman, 2007; Maynard et al., 1980). Research supports the common sense notion that marriage and family relationships do suffer as a result of law enforcement stress (Gilmartin, 1986; Kirschman, 2014; Kureczka, 1996; Maynard, et al., 1980; McCafferty, et al., 1992; Waters & Ussery, 2007).

Kureczka (1996) examined critical incident stress in law enforcement. He wrote that, “Every year, hundreds of officers experience intense, traumatic events that can have serious long-term consequences for them, their families, and their departments” (p. 11). He noted that most studies of law enforcement stress focus on post-shooting trauma. Kureczka expanded the discussion to include all critical incidents, which he described as, “...any event that has a stressful impact sufficient to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of an individual” (p. 11). He identified critical incidents to include:

...line-of-duty deaths (LODD) or serious injury, a police suicide, an officer-involved shooting in a combat situation, a life-threatening assault on an officer, a death or serious injury caused by an officer, an incident involving multiple deaths, a traumatic death of a child, a barricaded suspect/hostage situation, a highly profiled media event, or any other incident that appears critical or questionable (p. 11).

Kirschman (2012) found that what makes for a critical event is not what actually happened, but how the officer views the event. Whether or not an officer develops symptoms following a critical incident is a function of the degree to which the officer personalizes and takes responsibility for the outcome (Kirschman, 2012). Kureczka noted that such events fall outside of the usual human experience. He noted that law enforcement trauma could have a profound effect, not only on the officer, but on the family as well, noting "...traumatic events can have serious long-term consequences for them [the officer], their families, and their departments" (p. 11). Kureczka found that family members could become targets of misplaced emotions of anger, depression, frustration, grief, insecurity, confusion, and disillusionment. He determined that up to 85% of all first responders experience critical incident stress, and that law enforcement officers resist seeking counseling for fear of being stigmatized, and out of mistrust for outsiders, including mental health professionals.

Beehr et al. (1995) provided valuable insights on the impact of law enforcement stress on the spouse, the LEO and how individual coping techniques impact the marriage relationship. The authors surveyed police officers and their spouses (N=177) from two metropolitan areas regarding stress and coping. They examined how stressors were

processed through four coping strategies: problem-focused, emotion-focused, religiosity and rugged individualism. Within the contexts of these four coping techniques, or strategies, the researchers gave attention to three particular law enforcement difficulties: divorce potential, drinking behavior and suicidal thoughts. This study was insightful in demonstrating the effectiveness of various coping techniques and how officers and their spouses utilize coping strategies individually, and together to overcome the negative effects of law enforcement stress. The authors found that police officers and their spouses might tend to cope in the same manner, rather than in complementary ways. They discovered that the officer's coping techniques might have beneficial effects on spouses. With respect to religiosity, the authors found that the officer and spouse use of religion in coping with stressful situations tend complement each other. The use of religion was positively related to the use of two other coping techniques: problem-focused and emotional-focused. Additionally, the religiosity of one spouse had a beneficial effect on the other. Finally, the authors found that police officers and spouses use a multiplicity of coping techniques. In spite of their findings, individual and couple coping strategies, while often effective, are not always sufficient to avoid relationship issues.

Borum and Philpot (1993) took a systems approach to examining the particular stressors in law enforcement and how they affect dyads and treatment strategies in counseling. The authors identified three major sources of stress in law enforcement: organizational influence, peer socialization influences and the police role influence. These authors add to the knowledge of how tightly knit and exclusive the law enforcement culture can be, and how that culture serves to isolate law enforcement officers from the community, and sometimes their own families. They point out that the

boundaries around work relationships are stronger than the boundaries around the marriage relationship (Kirschman, 2014). The authors cite Gilmartin (1986) to highlight the important influence of hypervigilance, and the need to control it as a factor in marital relationships. The authors found that the personalities of law enforcement officers change with time and exposure to police work. Attitudes, views and opinions also change, creating the potential for confusion and conflict within a marriage relationship. The authors reported that law enforcement officers become increasingly reluctant to express emotions, which is a protective strategy at work, but can be destructive at home. Police officers struggle to shift roles between work and home, creating the potential for conflict. This research represents a rare instance of allowing the voice of the researched to be heard. The authors quoted a spouse responding to how her husband had changed since entering the law enforcement field. She said, “His outlook on things has changed, his views, his opinions, his personality. He’s changed and, and we’re not changing together. And that frightens me a lot” (Borum & Philpot, 1993, p. 124). The authors highlighted the almost inevitable isolation from the rest of the community as law enforcement officers become distrustful of almost anyone outside the law enforcement community. They cite problematic behaviors including substance abuse and promiscuity. Law enforcement spouses play a vital role in work related stress and how it is processed within the marital relationship and the family (Kirschman, Scrivener, Ellison & Marcy, 1992).

Alexander and Walker (1996) studied spouses (N=400) of police officers in the United Kingdom. This quantitative study confirmed their hypothesis that spouses and families of law enforcement officers are affected by police work. While this observation

might seem obvious to those of us who have worked in law enforcement for years, the study nonetheless adds to the field of knowledge of police stress. The authors noted, "...there is little doubt from this study that police work comes home silently in so many ways" (p. 244). Notably, researchers discovered that some marital relationships are actually strengthened by the pressure of police work. They go on to emphasize that this fact is only a "bonus" and does not diminish the corrosive effect that police stress places on spouses and families.

Maynard et al. (1980) randomly selected female spouses (N=42) of police officers in a large Midwest police department to assess the effectiveness of certain coping skills in an effort to develop appropriate interventions in counseling. The authors surveyed the participants of the study utilizing the Inventory of Coping Strategies, Family and Police Career Form W (McCubbin, Maynard & Maynard, 1978). The researchers then interviewed the participants to assess the effectiveness of certain coping skills. The researchers revised the instrument to focus on three main coping areas: social support, family resources and psychological techniques. Based on the result of the survey, Maynard, et al. (1980) identified four coping patterns: developing self-reliance, adapting to demands of the profession, building social support and role maintenance. Four types of coping strategies emerged as helpful to the overall healthy functioning of law enforcement families: wives attending to their own needs for self-reliance and personal growth, developing social support within the greater community, accepting the demands of the law enforcement profession and providing leadership within the family to promote family cohesiveness and individual growth.

Waters and Ussery (2007) examined the history of law enforcement stress research. The authors discussed hypervigilance, and law enforcement culture as it relates to resistance to seek help, distrust those outside the law enforcement culture, negative coping, domestic violence, and suicide. They found that law enforcement officers are at higher risk of suicide than the general population, but speculated that statistics underestimate the scope of the problem. They cited two studies (Field and Jones, 1999, cited in Hackett and Violanti, 2003) that found that the suicide rate for Federal Bureau of Investigation agents is 116% above the general population. The authors found that the divorce rate among law enforcement officers ranges between 50%-80%. They offer a model of police stress, and they discuss the effects of police culture on families. I will extract only what is pertinent to how the law enforcement culture impacts the family, as other topics have been well established in this literature review.

Waters and Ussery (2007) discuss how police culture affects family identity, domestic violence in police families, suicide and divorce. They argue that the dangerous nature of police work places families in constant fear for the health and safety of the officer. A spouse has no idea what the officer will face on any give tour of duty, nor does the officer. Spouses tend to surrender their own identity in favor of the police identity so tightly held by the law enforcement spouse. The stresses of police work often intrude into the home and foster tension.

Kirschman (2007) points out that domestic violence is, “the best-kept secret shame of policing” (p. 159). She cites fatigue due to shift work, long hours, hypervigilance and the need that law enforcement officers have to control situations at work as contributory factors to domestic violence in police families. Kirschman took the

position that statistics on domestic violence in law enforcement families are difficult to assess because officers and their spouses are not likely to voluntarily admit to abuse. A criminal charge of domestic violence would likely cost an officer his or her job, and deprive the family of an income. Additionally, domestic violence laws preclude those convicted of domestic violence from possessing a firearm. It is only safe to assume that law enforcement families are not immune to domestic violence. Kirschman (2014) challenges the “myth” that the rate of divorce among law enforcement officers is significantly higher than the general population. In fact, she cited studies (Miller, 2007) that indicate that marriages that survive the first three years of a law enforcement career are at no greater risk than the general population, and that second marriages are even more stable.

These studies clearly demonstrate that stress experienced by LEOs, “...comes home silently in so many ways” (Alexander and Walker, 1996, p. 244). The areas discussed in this literature became profoundly important as my research explored the lived experiences of spouses of LEOs following an officer-involved fatal incident (OIFI). Of particular interest for this study was Kirschman’s (2007) finding that the degree to which an officer experiences emotional distress is a function of the degree to which the officer personalizes, and takes responsibility for the outcome. This finding has significant implications for an officer who has experienced a fatality, and for the spouse who provides primary emotional support. Also of interest were the sources of stress for spouses, and the coping strategies employed by them. This study extends the literature by exploring the lived experience of the spouse of a LEO involved in an OIFI, and how the couple interacts to cope with the experience.

All of the studies cited thus far are quantitative (Beehr, Johnson & Nieva, 1995; Maynard et al. 1995; Alexander & Walker, 1996; Follette, Polusny & Milbeck, 1994; Gersons, 1989), utilizing surveys, interviews and self-report instruments, or descriptive research (Borum & Philpot, 1993; Gilmartin, 1986; 1992; Mann & Neece, 1990; McCafferty et al., 1992; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Waters & Ussery, 2007; Woody, 2006). Most studies focus on the individual officer (Follette, Polusny & Milbeck, 1994; Gersons, 1989; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; Mann & Neece, 1990; McCafferty et al., 1992; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Waters & Ussery, 2007; Woody, 2006), while fewer studies address both the officer and his or her spouse and family (Alexander & Walker, 1996; Beehr, Johnson & Nieva, 1995; Borum, & Philpot, 1993; Maynard et al., 1980). The voices of those directly involved in law enforcement stress are rarely heard, and when they are heard, it takes the form of a quote or two in support of the researcher's interpretation of the events and consequences.

Many of the studies focused more generally on law enforcement stressors. For instance, Borum and Philpot (1993) examined stress across organizations, peer socialization and the police role. Maynard et al. (1980) looked at a whole host of stressors and how coping skills were effective. Alexander and Walker (1996) surveyed participants about law enforcement stress in general. Gilmartin (1986) argued for a hypothesis that law enforcement creates a learned perceptual set that ultimately causes the officer to alter the social and physiological manner in which he or she interacts with the environment. Sheehan and Van Hasselt (2003) introduced a new instrument to aid in detecting the earliest onset of stress in law enforcement officers: the Law Enforcement Officer Stress Survey (LOSS). Waters and Ussery (2007) highlighted a number of law



enforcement stressors, and Woody (2006) makes a case for the stressful nature of law enforcement by examining a number of specific stressors.

On the other hand, a few researchers are more focused and specific regarding the particular type of law enforcement stressor. For example, Follette, Polusny and Milbeck (1994) examined the stress that law enforcement officers encounter when investigating child abuse. Gersons (1989) explores the emotional and psychological effects in the aftermath of a shooting incident. McCafferty et al. (1992) examined how law enforcement stress results in higher incidence of suicide among police officers when compared to the general population. None of these studies focus on the lived experience of law enforcement officers and their spouses following the officer's involvement in an officer-involved fatal incident.

Qualitative research studies are needed to capture the voices of those who directly experience the stressful events and their consequences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). While the research studies cited in this introduction call for future research in many areas, none specifically call for qualitative research, and none address the issue of voice. Beehr, et al. (1995) begins to approach this idea, at least tangentially, when they consider whether or not the researcher or the researched ought to bring particular stressors to the study:

A second coping measurement issue regarding the use of stimuli for respondents to consider while reporting their coping activities is whether the stimulus should be provided directly by the researcher or directly by the respondent. The respondent provides the stimulus if he or she is asked to think of a recent stressful situation and to report his or her potential coping behaviors in response to it. This

should have the advantage of obtaining information about actual situations. It also has the disadvantages, however, (1) of letting respondents, with their own biases and attributions, decide what stress is, (2) of potentially choosing an unrepresentative set of stressor situations (e.g. ones the respondents thought they coped with successfully or ones that are socially acceptable in some way), and (3) of potentially not being a middle-range approach (if this is desirable), because the range of situations chosen as stimuli is uncontrolled and unknown. (pp. 21-22)

Beehr, et al., (1995) provided the respondents with a stressful vignette and then asked questions in a survey format based on the vignette. One vignette was intended for the spouse, the other for the law enforcement officer. Both vignettes were rather benign in terms of criticality of the circumstances (the officer vignette concerned a supervisor finding fault with the officer's on-duty behavior, the spouse vignette concerned the LEO coming home irritable and emotionally drained). Their apparent discomfort with allowing respondents to decide the agenda reflects a quantitative bias that calls for control of the research environment. However, the fact that they asked the question at all suggests a perception on the part of the researchers that voices and lived experience of those researched might be important.

In response to the first concern presented by Beehr, et al. (1995), allowing respondents to decide what stress is "...with their own biases and attributions" I would challenge the researcher's epistemological notion of what is, and where truth is found (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Nodding, 2007). Who better to decide the truth of "what stress is" and how it is experienced and processed than the one doing the experiencing? Their second concern is expressed through the lens, and perspective of quantitative research.

The word “unrepresentative” is the key here. Quantitative researchers require representative samples in order to generalize to the larger population (Cohen, 2008; Field, 2009; Sprinthall, 2007). A qualitative approach to what is stressful and how the person experiences it shifts the focus to the participant’s interpretation of his or her lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The third concern presented by Beehr, et al. (1995) appears to be a problem for quantitative researchers. This issue concerns range and control. In this case, the researchers acknowledged that allowing officers to choose their own stressor situation would create an unacceptable range of possible situations and negate finding a “middle-range” approach. Consequently, the researchers crafted the scenarios for purposes of control. A qualitative approach is more concerned with what can be learned from the one being researched to establish the truth of the matter, as the participant perceives it, and the lessons that can be learned (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). That said, Beehr et al., (1995) invite a solution to this problem about who decides what a stressful situation is and how it is experienced.

The purpose of this study is to discover how law enforcement officers and their spouses, perceive and describe the effects and consequences of the law enforcement officer being involved in an on-duty fatal incident. I will not simply attempt to fill an experiential void left by quantitative methodologies, or to bridge a gap between the voice of the researcher and the researched. Qualitative research springs from a fundamentally different epistemological foundation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The truth of a lived experience is found in the voice of the one living it, along with his or her own values and biases and those of the researcher presenting it to the world. Life is a subjective

experience (Husserl, 1931). My goals are (1) to refine what is already known about law enforcement stress, and how it affects the officer and the family by learning directly from those who did the experiencing, (2) to enhance our knowledge of how best to prepare law enforcement officers and their families for the consequences of trauma and (3) how best to treat them and bring about healing in a counseling environment. My research study will seek to add to the existing body of literature through inclusion of first-hand accounts of informants' lived experience and the meaning those experiences carried for them.

### **Trauma and Emotional Resilience**

In this subsection, I present an overview of literature pertaining to trauma and emotional resilience. The experience of an OIFI has the potential to be a traumatic event. The word "potential" is important to the discussion because most law enforcement officers, indeed most human beings, are not traumatized, but demonstrate considerable resilience in the aftermath of a potentially traumatic event (PTE).

Bad things happen, and they happen often. Traumatic experiences are interwoven into the fabric of our lives. Trauma is defined in the dictionary as an emotional wound or shock that creates lasting damage to the psychological development of a person (The American Heritage College Dictionary, 2004). Trauma is experienced when a person encounters a threat such that the experience overwhelms the person's ability to cope, and produces feelings of intense terror, helplessness, horror, and a sense of loss (Johnson, 2002). Law enforcement is not the most hazardous occupation in America, but the difference between law enforcement and other occupations that report more on the job physical injuries is that those workers do not face the constant threat that someone will intentionally murder them for their choice of profession (Kirschman, 2014). Not all PTEs

result in posttraumatic stress disorder, and there is growing evidence that most people exhibit emotional resilience in the aftermath of a potentially traumatic experience. This is true of military veterans, law enforcement officers, and civilians.

During the past 15 years, scholars (e.g., Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno, Westphal, & Mancini, 2011; Bonanno, Westphal, & Mancini, 2012; Johnson, 2002; Kirschman, 2007, 2014; Meichenbaum, 2012) have studied emotional resilience to potentially traumatic events. According to Meichenbaum (2012), about 20% of people living in North America will experience a traumatic event in any given year. He estimates that 60% of all people will experience trauma during a lifetime. The good news, according to Meichenbaum, is that 70% of those people will suffer no lasting negative emotional effects from a traumatic experience. Most people are resilient.

Resilience is an innate capacity to cope with stress, even extreme stress (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno, Westphal, & Mancini, 2011; Bonanno, Westphal, & Mancini, 2012; Meichenbaum, 2012). Meichenbaum (2012) points out that the vast majority of military personnel returning from deployment, about 70%, exhibit indications of resilience, and do not suffer long-term emotional suffering. He writes that most military personnel do not return from deployment with "...invisible wounds" (p. 11). Military veterans from WWI to the present day, as a group, are able to carry on with their lives, function normally, and are well adjusted. Meichenbaum goes on to say that about 70% of veterans describe their military experience as very meaningful. Veterans find meaning in their relationships with their colleagues that can be characterized as a "brother/sisterhood" (p. 13). Combat veterans credit their experience with teaching them how to better cope with adversity, and report increased feelings of self-confidence, accomplishment, and

independence. This is not to claim that resilient people do not experience emotional suffering. What Meichenbaum (2012) does claim is that resilient people (and that is most of us) exhibit lower levels of symptoms, and continue to function in appropriate, and healthy ways. He identified five characteristics of resilient people. Resilient people bolster positive supportive relationships, experience positive emotions and regulate strong negative emotions, adopt a task-oriented coping style, are cognitively flexible, and undertake a meaning making mission. The concept of meaning making refers to the conscious effort to extract meaning and purpose from adverse experiences.

About 90% of the world's population engages in religious or spiritual practices. Meichenbaum (2012) defines spirituality as, "...your personal connection with meaning and purpose in your life through something greater than yourself" (p. 163). Frankl (1984) studied his fellow prisoners in concentration camps and concluded that those who survived the experience were those who found meaning in their lives.

Bonanno (2004), examined resiliency in the face of loss, and trauma. He questioned whether we, as researchers, have underestimated the human capacity to be resilient after a traumatic event. He found that most people are resilient in the face of what he termed "potentially traumatic events," and that prior research has focused more on those victims of trauma who exhibit pathological symptoms. Further, Bonanno noted that prior research has pathologized resilience as denial or absent grief instead of recognizing the innate capacity of human resilience. Kirschman (2012) argues that policing is a family affair, and that what occurs at work intrudes upon the officer's spouse, children. She defined resilience in the context of a police family as, "...the ability to struggle well and bounce back in the face of adversity" (p. 172). Police family

resilience is compromised by the sense of invulnerability, the need to be strong, and the rugged individualism that many, if not most law enforcement officers exhibit (Beehr, Johnson, & Nieva, 1995; Kirschman, 2014).

Bonanno et al. (2011) identified resilience as, "...an outcome pattern following a PTE [potentially traumatic event] characterized by a stable trajectory of healthy psychological and physical functioning" (p. 513). The authors conceptualized four possible trajectories following a PTE. The first trajectory is, resilience. A resilient trajectory is marked by, "...transient symptoms, minimal impairment, and a relatively stable trajectory of healthy functioning even soon after the PTE" (P. 514). The second trajectory is recovery. Recovery is marked by elevated symptoms, and functional impairment following the PTE, and gradual recovery over time. The third trajectory is, chronic distress. Chronic distress is marked by a severe elevation in symptoms, and functional impairment that may last for years. The fourth, and final trajectory following a PTE is delayed distress. The authors describe delayed distress as a modest elevation in symptoms following a PTE, followed by worsening of the symptoms over time. The most prevalent trajectory is characterized by resilience (35%-65%), followed by recovery (15%-25%), and then by chronic (5%-30%) and delayed (0%-015%) distress.

Meichenbaum (2012) found that positive emotions can be intentionally produced, and they can, "...quiet and undo the harmful effects of traumatic experiences, and they can also broaden possible opportunities in life and build upon capacities and resources" (p. 66).

Bonanno et al., (2011) identified several resilience promoting factors. They include personality, demographic variation, proximal and distal exposure, social and

economic resources, past and current stress, worldviews and meaning making, and positive emotions. Two of those factors, worldviews and meaning making, and positive emotions are of particular interest to my research. How we view the world and our place in it seems to influence our ability to cope with a PTE (Bonanno et al., 2011; Bryant & Guthrie, 2007). The meaning we attribute to any stressful event also influences our attitude toward our circumstances (Frankl, 1984), allowing for more adaptive coping (Park et al. 2008). Bonanno et al. (2011), found that positive emotions are particularly salient following a PTE and demonstrate efficacy in adaptive coping.

Meichenbaum (2012) identified five “fitness areas” for coping with trauma that include physical fitness, interpersonal fitness, emotional fitness, cognitive fitness, behavioral fitness, and spiritual fitness. Interpersonal, emotional, and spiritual fitness are particularly relevant to this study. Interpersonal fitness refers to the capacity to create, and engage in positive relationships. The law enforcement culture is notorious for its exclusivity. Cops tend to socialize with other cops, and exclude most others, creating a breeding ground for negativity, a narrowing of social experience, and restriction of support possibilities. Kirschman (2014) encourages law enforcement officers to expand their social circles to include friends and associates who are not law enforcement officers. She argues that doing so helps to defeat the “us versus them” mentality that is endemic in the police culture.

Meichenbaum (2012) defines emotional fitness as, “...the ability to enhance positive emotions, self-regulate and transform negative emotions...” (p. 65). Positive emotions do influence our ability to cope with potentially traumatic events (PTE). Law



enforcement officers work in an atmosphere of intense negativity, and require the ability to foster positive emotions for emotional and psychological survival (Kirschman, 2014).

These studies (e.g., Bonanno, 2004, 2011; Kirschman, 2012; Meichenbaum, 2012) are particularly relevant to this research. For instance, Meichenbaum (2012) identified characteristics of resilient people including the ability to foster supportive relationships, access positive emotions, and find meaning in potentially traumatic situations. Bonanno (2004) observed that researchers have underestimated the human capacity for resilience, and have tended to view resilience following trauma as denial or absent grief. Kirschman (2012) observed that law enforcement is a family affair. The job of a law enforcement officer will intrude on the home and family. Kirschman noted that stereotypical characteristics of law enforcement officers could hinder family resilience. For instance, she identified rugged individualism as a characteristic that interferes with family resilience. Bonanno (2011), proposed four trajectories following a potentially traumatic event: resilience (most frequent trajectory), recovery, chronic distress and delayed distress. His work provides a conceptual framework from which we can view the process of healing following a potentially traumatic event. Finally, Bonanno (2011) identified worldview and meaning as factors, among others, that promote resilience following a potentially traumatic event

This study extends the existing literature on resilience in the aftermath of a potentially traumatizing event, specifically, an officer-involved fatal incident (OIFI), by demonstrating how law enforcement officers and their spouses generate positive emotions, especially gratitude, and engage in interpersonal and spiritual fitness. This

study will add to the literature by including the voices of the spouses of law enforcement officers following an OIFI.

I turn now to an overview of the literature pertaining to the emotion of gratitude, and its influence on coping and meaning making in the wake of a potentially traumatic event. This area in the literature became important to my work as I undertook my study.

### **Gratitude**

Gratitude is of special interest to this study as a positive emotion that research has demonstrated is particularly influential to successful coping with a PTE. Over the last decade scholars (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006; Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, 2009; McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002; Vernon, 2012; Vernon, Dillon & Steiner, 2009; Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010; Wood, Joseph & Linley, 2007; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley & Joseph, 2008; Young & Hutchinson, 2012) have demonstrated that gratitude is negatively associated with depression and symptoms of PTSD, and positively correlated with resiliency following trauma and overall sense of well-being.

Vernon (2012) studied the "...associations of proactive coping with PTSD and anhedonic depression..."(p. 114). Gratitude is included in proactive coping. The study sample involved traumatized college students (N=169). Among the findings, gratitude was "...negatively related to PTSD symptoms beyond the effects of gender and trauma history, which were positively related to PTSD" (p.124). The study also found that gender was not a factor, and that both men and women who reported greater levels of posttrauma gratitude also reported lower levels of PTSD symptoms. These findings were consistent with other studies (Vernon, et al., 2009) that found that posttrauma gratitude

was negatively associated with PTSD symptom level among 182 undergraduate women with trauma histories.

Kashdan et al. (2006) studied the influence of gratitude in Post-Trauma Stress Disorder in a sample of Vietnam War veterans (N=42), including patients diagnosed with PTSD and a control group of comparison veterans (N=35). The authors concluded that gratitude is significantly lower in people with PTSD. In a two-sample study, Wood et al., (2007) surveyed 236 college students and found that gratitude correlated positively with emotional and instrumental social support, positive reinterpretation and growth, active coping and planning, while gratitude correlated negatively with behavioral disengagement, self-blame, substance abuse, and denial.

A later two-sample (N=156, N=87) study by Wood et al. (2008) supported a direct model in which gratitude led to higher levels of perceived social support, and lower levels of stress and depression. Gratitude, according to Wood et al. (2008), appears to directly encourage social support, and protect people from stress and depression.

Finally, Young and Hutchinson (2012) reviewed the emerging literature on gratitude and found that trait gratitude positively associated with positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, and optimism (McCullough et al., 2002). Conversely, they found that gratitude is negatively associated with stress and depression. Young and Hutchinson (2012) also found a strong relationship between gratitude and a belief that life is meaningful, understandable and manageable (Lambert et al., 2009). These studies demonstrate a growing body of knowledge that suggests a strong relationship between gratitude and posttrauma growth and resiliency.

The literature is clear that gratitude, as a positive emotion, plays an influential role in promoting resilience among the samples studied. It is also clear that gratitude is associated with meaning making. This study extends the literature on gratitude by exploring the role of gratitude in promoting resilience, meaning making, and posttraumatic growth among the participants.

I now turn to the presentation of literature pertaining to the three theoretical lenses I use to frame the way I analyze and interpret the meanings and essences of the participants' lived experience of an officer-involved fatal incident.

### **Theoretical Lenses: Transcendental Phenomenology, Existential Theory and Family Systems Theory**

I present three subsections pertaining to the theoretical lenses used to frame this study. The first sub-section focuses on the literature pertaining to transcendental phenomenology. The second subsection focuses on the literature pertaining to existential theory. The third subsection focuses on the literature pertaining to family systems theory.

I explore the lived experience of how law enforcement officers and spouses perceive and describe traumatic events through the theoretical lens of transcendental phenomenology, existential theory, and family systems theory (Buber, 1970; Descartes, 1977; Frankl, 1984; Gurwitsch, 1966; Henggeleer, & Borduin 1990; Hoffman, 1981; Husserl, 1931, 1977; Ihde, 1977; Keen, 1975; Kockelmans, 1967; Lauer, 1967; Lowrie, 1962; May, 1983; Minuchin, 1993; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981; Moustakas, 1994; Nichols, 2008; Schmitt, 1967; Sharf, 2004; Schutz, 1967; Smith, 2003; Yalom, 1980). Transcendental phenomenology is the primary lens through which descriptions and perceptions of experience are apprehended in the context of subjective openness

(Descartes, 1912/1988; Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). The existential lens helps provide a thematic context for understanding how individual officers process, transition and emerge from the experience of an officer involved fatal incident (Sharf, 2007). Family systems theory provides the lens and a relational context to discover how law enforcement officers and their spouses negotiate the stressful outcomes of officer involved fatal incidents as a couple. All of these theories conceptualize human beings in the context of the dialectic of aloneness, interdependence and intersubjectivity (Descartes, 1977; Frankl, 1984; Hoffman, 1981; Husserl, 1931, 1977; Ihde, 1977; Keen, 1975; Kockelmans, 1967; May, 1983; Nichols, 2008; Sharf, 2007; Schmitt, 1967; Schutz, 1967; Yalom, 1980).

### **Transcendental Phenomenology**

Transcendental phenomenology is founded on the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Philosophers Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Franz Brentano influenced Husserl's development of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Smith, 2003). The quest to solve the epistemological question of certainty of knowledge motivated Husserl, as it did Socrates, Plato and Descartes before him, to seek a new philosophical perspective (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2003). The concepts of perception, intentionality, noema, noesis, intersubjectivity and epoché are important to understand Husserl's (1931) transcendental phenomenology.

For Husserl (1931), perception is viewed as the primary source of knowledge. Smith (2003) wrote, "Perception in the full sense of the word involves, for Husserl, an explicit 'seizing' of an object, a turning of attention on to something." Perceptions constitute the only source of knowledge that cannot be doubted (Moustakas, 1994).

According to Lauer (1967) "...what I think, feel and perceive constitutes the only source of certainty" (p. 155). Our perception of an object in the world is dependent on our subjective experience of it (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2003). According to Husserl (1931), all experience is subjective and is unique to the one doing the experiencing. The act of perceiving is inextricably connected to the concept of intentionality (Moustakas, 1994).

Intentionality refers to the orientation of the mind towards an object-the object exists in consciousness in an intentional way (Kockelmans, 1967; Moustakas, 1994). Every intentionality is comprised of a noema and a noesis (Moustakas, 1994). Noema constitutes the "what" of an experience (Ihde, 1977). It is the pre-reflective "perceived as such" (Husserl, 1931, p.260) and is manifest in a detailed textural description that explicates the unfolding, and uncovering of what is being presented to consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Noesis is the co-joined twin of noema and constitutes the "how" or the "way" the phenomena is experienced (Ihde, 1977; Moustakas, 1994). Noesis is manifest in a detailed, reflective structural description provided by the one doing the experiencing. Embedded in the noetic phases of experience is meaning. According to Husserl (1931), "Every intentional experience...harbors[s] in itself a 'meaning' of some sort, it may be many meanings..." (p. 257). There is a noema for every noesis, and the relationship between the two constitutes the intentionality of consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, I explore the phenomenal experiences of participants as they interact with other people, including me. Intersubjectivity is another important concept in transcendental phenomenology.

Husserl (1977) recognized that we experience the world of others. It is through empathy that we are able to experience the other (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2003). The “other” exists apart from me in the manner of a “co-presence” (Husserl, 1977; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2003). It is through empathy that we are able to “pair” with another (Husserl, 1977; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2003). According to Moustakas (1994), “pairing” is an intentional act that brings us in “communion” with the other and makes each accessible to the other (p. 37). Schutz (1967) makes an important contribution to this discussion of intersubjectivity when he makes clear that my knowledge of your experience remains my own lived experience of you. Schutz (1967) writes, “My lived experience of you are constituted in simultaneity or quasisimultaneity with your lived experience, to which they are intentionally related (p.106). Husserl’s (1931) idea of understanding the phenomenal experience of others is found in the concept of epoché.

What distinguishes transcendental phenomenology from other human science research models is the researcher’s engagement in a disciplined and systematic process to set aside, or bracket judgment and suppositions in a process Husserl termed, epoché (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Smith, 2003). Epoché is a Greek word that means to approach knowledge non-judgmentally (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2003). Epoché is an intentional act of not relying on the “natural” way of perceiving things (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). In the natural attitude, we embrace knowledge in a judgmental way; we view phenomena through the filter of our experience, our suppositions, our beliefs and values (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché represents a new way of looking at the world of phenomena so that we may learn to

distinguish and describe what is before us. We set aside what we know, including our judgments and our past experience with the phenomena (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994).

Professional counselors use a similar approach to bracket judgment, and preconceptions to gain an appreciation of how clients uniquely see and understand experience, including meanings attributed to those experiences (Conte, 2009). Through epoché we attempt to transcend our egos and see things through the eyes of the other, or in the case of this research, through the participants' eyes. Epoché is a necessary first step in transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), epoché "...requires the elimination of suppositions and the raising of knowledge above every possible doubt" (p.26). This process involves setting aside what is known, personal experience, beliefs and biases. The researcher listens to descriptions of experiences by research participants, in a naïve way, as if hearing and experiencing for the first time (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Smith, 2003). Perception, intentionality and epoché are ways in which we encounter and listen to another. The concepts of perception, intentionality (noema and noesis) and intersubjectivity are enacted through the core processes of transcendental-phenomenal reduction and imaginative variation. They constitute the ways the researcher coalesces what has been learned into the what and how of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental-Phenomenal Reduction is a process that leads to a detailed textural description of the phenomena, including the meanings and essences of the experience through the eyes of the one doing the experiencing (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2003). It is called "transcendental" because it seeks the pure



ego, to see the phenomena naively. It is “phenomenal” because it reduces experience to mere phenomena, and it is “reduction” because it leads back to the source of the meanings and essences of the one doing the experiencing (Schmitt, 1967).

Transcendental phenomenological reduction describes the “what” of the experience and looks not only at the external object of the experience, but the internal act of consciousness and the interrelatedness between subject and object (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental phenomenological reduction is a pre-reflective description of what appears in consciousness and reduces the experience to meaningful themes (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1931) wrote, “...every experience in the stream which our reflexion can lay hold on has its own essence open to intuition, a ‘content’ which can be considered in its singularity in and for itself” (p. 116). In phenomenological reduction it is the essential nature of the phenomena as it presents to consciousness that we seek to describe (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). Notably, phenomenological reduction is not only a way of seeing things through the eyes of another, but a way of listening in a way that allows for accurate empathetic understanding, and has direct application to the practice of psychotherapy (Moustakas, 1994; Rogers, 1961).

Imaginative variation is a process that leads to a description of the structural nature of the experience, or the way in which the phenomena was experienced along with meanings and essences (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). It is a reflective process that brings to bear the use of, “...every assistance of the imagination, sense, and memory; to intuit distinctly (Decartes, 1977, p. 57). Husserl (1931) wrote how the Eidos, or pure essence of a phenomena can be known, not only through, “...the data of experience, data of perception, memory...but just as readily also in the mere data of fancy (Phantasie)” (p.

57). Ultimately, the textural essences of transcendental phenomenological reduction and the structural essences of imaginative variation are integrated to create a textural-structural synthesis of the essences and meanings of the phenomena that are the subject of this study (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Existential Theory**

The philosophical roots of existentialism are found in the writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (Marino, 2004; Sharf, 2007). Lowrie (1962), referred to Kierkegaard as the grandfather of existentialism. Existential psychotherapy began in Europe in the 19th century as a reaction to Freud's emphasis on biological drives and unconscious processes. Psychiatrists became more interested in the person in front of them and what was happening to that person (Sharf, 2007). They wanted to see patients as they really were apart from the theoretical "prescriptions" of psychoanalysis (Sharf, 2007). Instead of prescribing, or imposing "techniques" rooted in psychoanalysis, these early pioneers were more interested in exploring the awareness and attitudes of their patients toward issues of living (Sharf, 2007). Yalom (1980) approaches existential psychotherapy as two people being in the world together. Buber (1970) conceptualizes this relationship as an I-Thou relationship between two individuals. The I-Thou relationship is a dialogic encounter between to people that is characterized by mutuality and reciprocal love (Watson, 2006). Buber's idea of an I-Thou relationship may be thought of in terms of what Rogers (1961) described as the unconditional positive regard the counselor holds for the client. In the context of the counseling relationship both Yalom (1980) and Rogers (1961) differ from Buber in terms of reciprocity. As such, they view the counselor-client relationship as one in which there is no expectation on the part of the counselor for reciprocity from the

client. Rugala & Waldo (1998) captures best what I hoped to achieve in my relationship to the participants of this study when he writes of the moment that represents "...the deepest self of the therapist [researcher] meets the deepest self of the client [participant]."

I selected existential theory because of its focus on the transitions that individuals encounter as they emerge, evolve and become (Sharf, 2007) and the life themes associated with being in the world including, living and dying, isolation and belonging, freedom, responsibility and choice as well as meaning and meaninglessness (Sharf, 2007; Yalom, 1980). When law enforcement officers experience traumatic events, there is often an encounter with one's own mortality and the ultimate concern with non-being (May, 1983). These are moments when an officer may become more acutely aware of his or her own being in the world (Yalom, 1980). The idea of being in the world captures the capacity of human beings to reflect on their existence and their ultimate demise (May, 1983; Yalom, 1980).

Law enforcement officers often feel isolated following a traumatic event (Borum & Philpot, 1993; Follette, et al.; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; McCafferty et al.; Waters & Ussery, 2007). This isolation can be self-imposed and may impact relationships within the law enforcement community, the community they serve and, more profoundly, isolation from family members (Borum & Philpot, 1993; Follette, et al.; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; McCafferty, et al.; Waters & Ussery, 2007). Existential theory recognizes three types of isolation: interpersonal, intrapersonal and isolation from the world (Yalom, 1980). Loving relationships are a way of bridging existential isolation (Frankl, 1984; Yalom, 1980). When an officer experiences a traumatic event all three types of isolation (interpersonal, intrapersonal and from the world) are possible. Because

of the encapsulated nature of the law enforcement culture, and its emphasis on physical and emotional strength, officers are less likely to seek assistance from mental health professionals (Borum & Philpot, 1993; Gilmartin, 1993; Kureczka, 1996; McCafferty, et al., 1993; Waters & Ussery, 2007). Officers may not confide in colleagues for fear of being viewed as weak, and may not confide in family members in an effort to protect them from grief (Borum & Philpot, 1993; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; McCafferty, et al., 1992; Waters & Ussery, 2007). A central concern of my research is the meaning that law enforcement officers and their spouses attribute to their perceptions of the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident.

Traumatic events can affect how meaning is interpreted, diminished or deepened. While one officer may process a traumatic event through spiritual beliefs that deepen faith and anchor hope, another may interpret the same event as an example of the absurdity of life and the triumph of evil in the world. Existential theory recognizes each individual's right and obligation to make choices, construct meaning and the responsibility that attend those choices (Frankl, 1984; Yalom, 1980).

Existential theory posits that individuals have the responsibility to seek fulfillment of their potential in mortality (Frankl, 1984; May, 1983; Yalom, 1980). Law enforcement officers make instantaneous decisions that have the potential for life and death (Rivard, Dietz, Martell, & Widawski, 2002). There is no escaping the responsibility for those decisions. Officers also make choices following the experience of a traumatic event that have consequences for their mental and emotional well-being and the health of the relationships with those closest to them (Alexander & Walker, 1996; Beehr et al., 1995; Borum & Philpot, 1993; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; Maynard et al., 1980; Woody,

2006). The responsibility for these decisions may not be as clear and may be influenced by culture, capacity for resiliency, organizational demands and policies, the strength of existing relationships as well as unconscious processes (Beehr et al., 1995; Borum & Philpot, 1993; Follette, et al., 1994; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; Mann & Neece, 1990; McCafferty, et al., 1992; Waters & Ussery, 2007).

Existential theory is useful to conceptualize how individuals respond to and change in the context of emerging through life's trials (Sharf, 2007; Yalom, 1980). However, systems theory is better suited to conceptualize and explain the dynamics of marital and family relationships (Hoffman, 1981; Nichols, 2004). Both theories are presented here to provide a context in which the phenomenological experiences of those researched can be understood.

### **Family Systems Theory**

A system is an organized whole and the parts that comprise a system are necessarily interdependent (Minuchin, 1985; Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990). Systems theory began in the 1940s when researchers sought to construct theoretical models to describe the interdependence of mechanistic parts working to sustain a larger whole (Nichols, 2008). The human body is a good example of this principle of systems theory. The body is an organized whole that consists of elements essential for its survival-the circulatory, nervous system, digestive system, etc. Each element possesses unique characteristics for its own functioning, but is necessarily dependent on the other elements for its survival and the functioning of the body as a whole. These elements exist in relationship to each other and are interdependent (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990). The whole is always greater than the sum of its parts (Nichols, 2008). As such, individuals

and their behavior can only be understood within the context of relationship with other family members (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990). For instance, a spouse's anxiety or depression may be understandable outcomes in light of the distant behavior of the other spouse (Borum & Philpot, 1993; Follette, et al.; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; McCafferty et al.; Waters & Ussery, 2007.)

Systems theory posits that systems are circular rather than linear in causation (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990; Hoffman, 1977; Nichols, 2008). Linear causality is based on the Newtonian model and adopted by medical, psychodynamic and behavioral disciplines (Nichols, 2008). In the world of objects, linear causality provides useful explanations for how the world and the universe operate. However, as Bateson (1979) learned, the principles of linear causality are not sufficient to explain human behavior, especially within the context of interdependent family systems (Nichols, 2008). The concept of circularity views human behavior in the larger context of chains, or sequences of interactions (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990). If an individual strikes a billiard ball, the behavior of the ball could be exactly predicted based on the force and angle of the strike (Nichols, 2008). On the other hand, if an individual were to kick a dog, the dog may react in any number of ways. If the dog bites the individual, the individual may react in any number of ways and may well alter the way in which he approaches the same dog again. So it is with human beings in family relationships: person A influences person B who in turn influences person A (and possibly person C) in an endless chain of linked transactions (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990).

Systems employ feedback loops that serve to maintain equilibrium, or homeostasis (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990; Hoffman, 1977; Nichols, 2008). All families

have rules, rituals, roles and expectations that are the outcome of family dynamics and serve to maintain equilibrium. When rules are changed, rituals rejected or ignored, roles violated or expectations unmet, families seek to restore equilibrium (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990). Bell (1977) developed a model of dyadic homeostasis and proposed that dyads maintain equilibrium through transactions and that there exists an acceptable range of behavior that, if violated, will prompt a homeostatic reaction in the spouse who senses disequilibrium, or a threat to the established order (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990).

Families, as individuals and systems, are in constant evolution and change (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990; Hoffman, 1977; Nichols, 2008). Families that adapt as they evolve tend to be healthier than those that fail to recognize and adapt to changes in individual members and family circumstances (Hoffman, 1981; Nichols, 2008). Healthy families are able to balance the need for stability (homeostasis) and adaptation necessary to accommodate change. My study demonstrates how the couple participants adapted and responded to the stress of an officer-involved fatal incident.

Family systems consist of subsystems (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990; Hoffman, 1981; Nichols, 2008). Like the analogy of the human body mentioned earlier, families consist of component parts that are conceptualized as subsystems. They include the marital dyad, parental, and sibling subsystems (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990; Hoffman, 1981; Nichols, 2008). Subsystems carry out functions that serve to maintain the larger family system (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990). Minuchin (1993) noted that subsystems are distinguished by generation, gender, age and function (Henggeleer & Borduin, 1990). The marital dyad is the most basic family subsystem.

When systems theory is applied to family therapy, the therapist no longer views individual behavior in isolation, but rather looks for patterns of interaction (Nichols, 2008). Family therapists view systems through the lens of the family as a living system that is creative, and resilient (Nichols, 2008). Families, in this context demonstrate equifinality, or the ability to reach goals in a variety of ways (Nichols, 2008). Families demonstrate plasticity through morphogenesis, the ability to initiate and create change (Nichols, 2008).

In this study, systems theory informs how couples influence each other as they process impactful events in their environment, both individually and as a dyadic system that seeks to both maintain equilibrium and adapt to change. Research has demonstrated that traumatic events impact the individual officer as well as the officer's spouse and family (Alexander & Walker, 1996; Beehr et al., 1995; Borum & Philpot, 1993; Follette et al., 1994; Gersons, 1989; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; Mann & Neece, 1990; Maynard, et al. 1980; McCafferty et al., 1992; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Waters & Ussery, 2007; Woody, 2006). Systems theory provides a theoretical lens for exploring how traumatic events are lived, processed and experienced within the dynamics of family relationships. Transcendental phenomenology, existential and systems theories offer a rich understanding of how the individual participants in this study subjectively experienced the event as well how they experienced the event within the context of committed relationships.



## CHAPTER III: CONTEXT AND METHODS

### Design

This research study is specifically designed to investigate the participants' experience of an officer-involved fatal incident. The following research question guided this investigation: How do law enforcement officers and their spouses perceive, and describe the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident? A transcendental phenomenological framework was selected to address the research question because it captured the lived experience of the participants through the direct descriptions by the participants (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). According to Sharf (2004), "Phenomenology [e.g. transcendental phenomenology], as it was developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), has been part of the evolution of existential psychotherapy" (p. 158). Phenomenology (Descartes, 1977; Gurwitsch, 1966; Husserl, 1931, 1961, 1977; Ihde, 1977; Keen, 1975; Kockelmans, 1967; Lauer, 1967; Moustakas, 1994; Schmitt, 1967; Schutz, 1967; Smith 2003) and existential psychotherapy (Buber, 1970; Frankl, 1984; Lowrie, 1962; May, 1983; Sharf, 2004; Yalom, 1980) seek to understand the subjective experience of the other, while minimizing preconceptions and assumptions (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Sharf, 2004; Smith 2003).

The participants in this study are law enforcement officers who have experienced an officer-involved fatal incident and their spouses. The design of this study is intended to examine the descriptions and perceptions of the informants from as many angles as possible, "...until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). The meanings, and essences derived from the descriptions of the participants' experiences with officer-involved fatal incidents adds to

the body of existing literature which currently lacks the voices of law enforcement officers and their spouses. A central goal in this study is to provide professional counselors with information and insight that would inform and enhance their ability to effectively treat law enforcement officers and their spouses who have experienced an officer-involved fatal incident.

### **Researcher Background and Role**

My interest in this topic stems from my personal and professional experience as a police officer for over thirty-three years. I have personally experienced officer-involved fatal incidents, and I have associated with many law enforcement officers who have experienced traumatic events. Most have survived their experiences physically, emotionally and psychologically intact. Some have not, and none were unaffected (Gersons, 1989; Kureczka, 1996; Mann & Neece, 1990; McCafferty et al., 1992; Waters & Ussery, 2007).

The emotions and cognitions from daily experiences in law enforcement cannot be easily left at the office at the end of the day. Spouses and families of law enforcement officers are affected by the trauma experienced by the officer (Beehr et al., 1995; Borum, 1993; Maynard et al., 1980; Woody, 2006). The encapsulated nature of the law enforcement culture creates a law enforcement community that includes other law enforcement personnel and their families, and excludes just about everyone else (Borum & Philpot, 1993; Gilmartin, 1986; Neece, 1990; McCafferty et al.; Waters & Ussery, 2007).

As a former police officer, I am aware that law enforcement officers are reluctant to discuss traumatic events with civilians. As a researcher, I relied on my former career to

create trust and gain access, thereby breaking through the usually impenetrable “rubber fence” that family systems theorists note cannot be penetrated by outsiders (Hoffman, 1981). As part of gaining trust, I honored the law enforcement officer through strict anonymity as part of my ethical responsibility to do no harm, and in keeping with the treatment of human subjects (Glesne, 2011; Moustakas, 1994).

My ethnic and specific career background is as follows: I am of European descent; a middle-class retired law enforcement officer, and a licensed marriage and family therapist in the State of Nevada. I maintain a private practice in Reno and Minden, Nevada.

My experience as a police officer had the potential to impact my interpretation of the participants’ stories. I did experience a degree of countertransference as I listened to participants’ stories. Countertransference occurs when counselors project their emotional reactions or behavior to their clients (Gladding, 2007).

Counselors are trained to recognize countertransference to avoid the inappropriate imposition of the counselor’s experience with similar situations. Conte (2009) asserts that countertransference is inevitable. He encourages counselors to step outside of themselves in a psychic process he terms the “analytic self” to achieve self-awareness. Conte (2009) describes the analytic self as a metaphor to view the interaction between counselor and client from an objective position. Taking the view of the analytic self is consistent with the phenomenological lens (*epoché*) through which the participants’ stories were interpreted and analyzed in this study. I was careful to monitor my thoughts and feelings in response to those stories to help separate my experiences from those of the participants.

### **Participants and Site Selection**

The participants for this study were six law enforcement officers in the United States who had been involved in officer-involved fatal incidents, and their spouses (N=12). Dukes (1984) recommended interviewing 3-10 subjects for phenomenological studies. According to Patton, there are no recommended sampling sizes in qualitative research and the appropriate number of participants is dependent on the particulars of each study. The target population for this study was law enforcement officers and their spouses. The law enforcement culture tends to be closed to those who are not part of that culture (Gilmartin, 2002). I know this to be true from my own experience as a former law enforcement officer. As a researcher, I knew that finding research participants would be challenging. I established a goal of recruiting five law enforcement couples, and I was fortunate to recruit six. For the purposes of bounding this study (Stake, 2005), other parties to the event such as dispatchers, peers, supervisors, children and extended family and friends were excluded from the study to allow the focus of the study to remain on the participant couples.

Participants were sought through snowball, or chain sampling and began with a posting on the Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy Associates (FBINAA) website describing the research project and soliciting volunteers to become participants. The posting was accomplished with the permission of the Executive Director of the FBINAA. I received emails from interested law enforcement officers, both active and retired, from all over the United States. Two of the participant couples were recruited from this source. I limited the selection of participants to a 1000-mile radius from Reno, Nevada for logistical and budgetary reasons.

I also asked well-placed individuals whom they knew who might have experienced an officer-involved fatal incident (Patton, 2002). One participant couple was recruited through this method. I contacted the heads of several local, state and federal law enforcement agencies seeking referrals. I also recruited participants through my law enforcement contacts throughout the United States and from mental health professionals with whom I am in contact. The final three participant couples were recruited through my direct contacts. Participants represented law enforcement officers from municipal, county and federal agencies. Participants were employed by law enforcement agencies in Colorado, Nevada, and California. All of the law enforcement officers in this study were currently employed as peace officers at the time of the interviews.

Essential criteria to become a participant in this study were adapted from Fraelich (1989) as described by Moustakas (1994). The criteria included the following: the participants must have experienced the phenomena. In this case, the participant must have experienced an officer involved-fatal incident as a law enforcement officer, or spouse of a law enforcement officer. The participant must have an interest in understanding the nature and meaning of the phenomena. The participant must be willing to participate in a lengthy interview (1-2 hours in duration) and be willing to participate in follow-up interviews. The participant must be willing to provide permission for the interviews to be tape-recorded and provide consent for the data to be published in a dissertation.

I prepared a statement describing the nature and purpose of the research study (see Appendix B) that was provided to each potential participant (Fraelich, 1989). When prospective participants were identified and had the opportunity to read the aforementioned statement of purpose, I conducted a 10-20 minute pre-interview by phone

to determine that the individual met the essential criteria for participation in the study (Fraelich, 1989). I provided each participant with preliminary instructions that informed the individual that I would be willing to share with them the specific data that I used from their particular interview in the study, and that I would remove any identifying information. Additionally, I informed the participants that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process (Fraelich, 1989).

Participants were offered a choice of interview venues. Primary consideration was given to locations that provided quiet, private, comfortable settings, and that were available (Glesne, 2011). I deferred to the participant's needs and circumstances (Glesne, 2011). The interview sites offered included the participants' homes, law enforcement facilities, my counseling office, or neutral locations selected by the participants. The interview sites had to allow for privacy and audio recording without ambient noise that might compromise the recordings and data (Glesne, 2011). Five of the six participant couples elected to be interviewed in their homes. One couple elected to be interviewed in my office to avoid the distraction of children.

A brief introduction of participants is provided to help the reader connect with each participant couple and their stories. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the identity of the participants. *Eric and Laura*. Eric is employed by a rural law enforcement agency in a western state. He has been married to Laura for almost three decades. Eric and his partner were dispatched to a domestic violence call at a local establishment in 2010. When they arrived they pulled up next to a vehicle not knowing it was the perpetrator's car. Eric was riding in the passenger seat of the patrol car. The perpetrator immediately began shooting at Eric and his partner with an AK-47 assault rifle before

either had the time to exit their patrol vehicle. Eric's partner was fatally wounded as Eric rolled out of the car to avoid incoming rounds. Another officer shot and killed the perpetrator as Eric was coming back up to engage him. The fallen officer left a widow and small children. Laura heard the dispatch and the subsequent calls for help, and "shots fired." She raced to the scene a short distance from their home.

*Lisa and Jon.* Lisa and Jon were in a relationship at the time of their officer-involved fatal incident and were married at the time of the interview. Lisa and Jon (now retired) were both law enforcement officers employed by the same agency at the time of the incident, and both were present at the incident. In 2001, Lisa was assigned as a hostage negotiator with the goal of freeing a 10-year-old child who had been kidnapped by her non-custodial parent and boyfriend. The incident came to an end after negotiations failed and the SWAT team removed a tent in which the perpetrators were holding the child. The parent had murdered the child by cutting her throat. Jon was assigned as a canine officer and left the crime scene before the body was discovered.

*Bill and Judy.* Bill and Judy have been married for almost 20 years. Bill is a veteran law enforcement officer employed by a medium sized municipal law enforcement agency in the Western United States. In 2007, Bill confronted an armed man who had fired a handgun several times in a downtown area. Bill shot and killed the man after the man raised his firearm toward Bill. Bill later learned that the perpetrator's gun was empty at the time of the shooting.

*Larry and Diane.* Larry and Diane have been married throughout his 30-year plus law enforcement career. Diane works in the medical field. A large city police department employs Larry. In 2002, Larry was in his office at a substation when he heard another

officer calling for help in the parking lot of the police facility. Larry hurried to the parking lot where he saw a female, appearing to be a “soccer mom” holding a handgun. Larry shot and killed the female when he saw her shoot the officer who had called for assistance.

*Frank and Ann.* Frank is a veteran law enforcement officer employed by a federal law enforcement agency. Frank and Ann have been married for about 20 years. In 1997, Frank was working with local law enforcement agencies, when they attempted to arrest an armed felon. Frank stopped the perpetrator’s car in a shopping center parking lot. The perpetrator exited his vehicle on the passenger side, and began firing a gun at the officers. Frank returned fire, killing the perpetrator. The perpetrator’s mother witnessed the shooting. No law enforcement officers were wounded in the exchange.

*Dave and Pat.* Dave and Pat have been married for 20 years. Dave is employed by a rural law enforcement agency in the Western United States. In 2003, Dave was called to a hostage event as a member of the agency’s SWAT team. An armed man had entered a retail store and had taken several customers and employees hostage. After negotiations broke down and shots were heard from inside the store, Dave and his team entered the store to make an arrest. Dave confronted the armed perpetrator, and at close range, the perpetrator turned the gun on himself and committed suicide.

### **Sources and Data Collection Procedures**

The primary data collection sources were formal audio taped, semi-structured interviews with the participants (Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2002). I conducted initial interviews in person at a location of the participants’ choosing. Long interviews are the norm in phenomenological research studies (Moustakas, 1994). I utilized pre-established



questions designed to evoke a comprehensive description of the phenomena and its meanings for the participant (Glesne, 2011; Moustakas, 1994), while leaving room for new questions that could emerge during the interviews (Glesne, 2011; Maxwell, 2005).

Follow up questions that arose during the interviews were used to add context, encourage dialogue and collaboration, and to capture the unique experiences of the participants (Glesne, 2011; Stake, 2005). Glesne noted that interviews exceeding an hour in length might produce diminishing returns. Therefore, I planned for initial interviews of an hour in length with follow up interviews of 30 minutes. In fact, interviews lasted about two hours on average. Additional brief interviews by phone, or in person were contemplated, but were not necessary because of the depth of the initial interviews (Glesne, 2011).

Each participant couple was interviewed together to avoid the possibility that an informant might disclose information to me that the informant did not want to disclose to the partner. By interviewing the couple together I avoided becoming the “secret keeper.” Three sets of questions were developed to elicit the lived experience of the law enforcement officer, the spouse, and the couple. Those interview questions can be found in the Appendix B. Participants were asked if they retained any artifacts of the event(s) that may have meaning to them or may add further light on their descriptions and perceptions of the experience. Figure 3.1 was used to track interviews and insure that appropriate data had been collected.

Figure 3.1. Interview Tracking

Source	Interview Date	Setting	Duration	Field Notes	Artifacts
Eric and Laura	7/8/12	Home	2:31	Yes	Yes
Frank and Ann	7/18/12	Home	1:46	Yes	No
Larry and Diane	8/6/12	Home	2:12	Yes	Yes
Lisa and Jon	8/23/12	Home	2:40	Yes	No
Dave and Pat	8/30/12	Home	2:06	Yes	Yes
Bill and Judy	9/14/12	Office	2:23	Yes	No

Interviews occurred over a two-month period. I created field notes after each interview. I transcribed the recordings from the first three interviews. I hired a professional transcriber from another large university to transcribe the final three interviews after securing permission from the IRB. Artifacts were sought and collected when possible.

### **Data Analysis**

I selected a model of phenomenological data analysis presented by Moustakas (1994) that represents a modification of van Kaam's (1959/1966) method of analysis. This model consists seven of steps. The overall purpose of this model is to reconstruct the informants' lived experience with an officer-involved fatal incident. The essential task of data analysis requires that I seek to understand the informants' experience from their unique perspective. Not only is it important to understand what an informant experienced, but how it (the phenomena) was experienced through the informant's eyes. The seven steps in this data analysis model are:

1. Listing and preliminary grouping. The first step in this model requires that the researcher list every expression relevant to the phenomena experienced. This is the process of horizontalization. Horizons in phenomenological investigations are descriptions of “perceptions of experience” and every horizon is initially treated with equal weight (Moustakas, 1994). An example of a horizon might be, “as the gun was raised in my direction, everything suddenly went into slow motion.” Horizons are grounded in the phenomena experienced and give it its distinctive character (Moustakas, 1994). As one might expect, there are no limits to horizons, and they can change over time. Horizons provide the pre-reflective “as given” textural description of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). After I identified all horizons, irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping statements were eliminated, leaving only the “invariant constituents of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994). I then clustered invariant constituents into common themes.

To accomplish this first step, I transcribed the first three interviews, and then listened to them again to check for any errors in the transcriptions. I repeated that procedure with the three transcriptions completed by a professional transcriber. I then listened to the recordings as I read along with the transcript looking for horizontal statements, treating all horizons as having equal weight and value. I made notes in the margins of the transcripts about what appeared to be themes emerging in the text. I then transferred all of the horizons to a separate document for each participant. I then reviewed each of those “horizon” documents a second time, writing additional memos in the margins.

2. Reduction and elimination. The second step involves the process of determining the invariant constituents contained in the description of the phenomena experienced. The researcher arrives at invariant constituents after eliminating irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping statements (Moustakas, 1994). The process of determining invariant constituents, "...point to the unique qualities of an experience..." (Moustakas, p. 128). There are two tests in this model to determine invariant constituents: Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it? Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience. The researcher eliminates expressions that do not meet these two requirements. Following Moustakas' two-pronged test to identify invariant constituents I compared each statement to the following question:

- (a) Does this statement constitute a moment of the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?
- (b) Is it possible to abstract and label the statement?

To accomplish this second step, I employed the use of qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, HyperRESEARCH, to further analyze the data. I read the transcripts again after they were downloaded to the QDA software. When analyzing the data, I utilized an open coding process (Maxwell, 2012). Open coding involves scanning the textual sources (transcribed interviews) for ideas, and concepts while developing, and labeling categories. I approached the transcripts inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data without superimposing any constructs. I used codes to group like wording, concepts and ideas that assisted in managing the data analysis process. I did not allow the

use of QDA software to take the data analysis process out of my hands, or become automated (Lewins & Silver, 2007). The initial coding process generated over 100 codes. These codes represented the invariant constituents of an officer-involved fatal incident.

3. Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents. The third step calls for the researcher to cluster and label related invariant constituents. They become the core themes of the experience. I collapsed and combined codes of participant descriptions and perceptions that were similar in nature, as well as eliminating codes that were simply not supported by the data across the larger sample. I conducted a data audit to determine the level of support for any given code. The number of codes was reduced to 75 with 30 accompanying themes.

4. Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application: Validation. The fourth step is the process of examining each invariant constituent and its accompanying theme against the entire record of the participant's transcript to confirm:

- 1) That it is manifest in unequivocal terms in the record, or at least compatible if not unequivocal, and 2) if the invariant constituent does not meet this standard it is not germane to the participant's phenomenal experience and should be eliminated (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

I prepared a document for each informant that reflected invariant constituents and its accompanying theme, and compared it against the transcript of the informant. Once again, I eliminated codes that were not supported by the data. This latter process involved a data audit to determine the level of support in the data for any given code. Twelve codes, with thirty-four sub-codes were eventually identified as being supported from the data. From that data, three themes emerged: the emotional experience of an officer-

involved fatal incident, coping after the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident, and the meanings derived from an officer-involved fatal incident.

5. Textural description. This step is the process of transcendental phenomenological reduction. It is a detailed description of the “what” of the experience as the phenomena was presented to consciousness (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 2003; van Kaam, 1959/1966). This step is designed to examine the context in which the phenomena were experienced. A textural description is, “...an abstraction of the experience that provides content and illustration, but not yet essence (Patton, 2002, p. 486). It includes “...thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes” (Moustakas, 1994, p.47). I used verbatim examples from the informants to support and describe what the informants experienced within the context of the three themes described above.

6. Structural Description. This step in this model is to provide a detailed description of “how” the phenomena were experienced by the participants. A structural description, “...provides a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience...” of an officer-involved fatal incident (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135). A structural description is, “...a way of understanding how [informants] as a group experience what they experience” (Moustakas, p. 142). A structural description, “...contains the ‘bones’ of the experience...” (Patton, 2002, p. 486). According to Patton, in a structural description the researcher “...looks beneath the affect inherent in the experience to deeper meanings for the individuals who...make up the group” (p. 486). I provided a structural account of the “underlying dynamics” of the experience that explain how thoughts and feelings were associated with the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident, including the meanings and essences ascribed by the informants (Moustakas, p. 135).

7. Composite Description. In the final step, the researcher develops a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole. This final step in the process represents a synthesis of all the data collected and analyzed to capture the meanings and essences of how the participants as a group experienced the phenomena of being involved in an officer-involved fatal incident (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; van Kaam, 1959/1966). I provided a synthesis for each of the three themes (emotions, coping and meanings), as well as a synthesis of the essences of the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident across all informants and themes.

According to Moustakas (1994), the organization and analysis of data begins when the researcher sets before him or her transcripts of the interviews and examines them using the "...methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis" (p. 118). The procedures involved in phenomenological research methods includes horizontalizing, listing of mean units, clustering of common themes, developing textural and structural descriptions, integration and synthesis to arrive at the essences and meanings of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher, according to Stake (2005), shares the responsibility of the readers' interpretation of the study. The researcher fulfills this responsibility with, "...redundancy of data and procedural challenges to explanations" (p. 454) through the process of triangulation. Triangulation is the method of using multiple perspectives and data sources to clarify meaning. I triangulated through data sources such as recordings of newspaper articles, investigative reports, obituaries, legal transcripts, and artifacts retained by the participants. Triangulation using multiple data sources added perspective, context and

clarified meaning (Stake, 2005). I used field notes to record my immediate impressions following an interview as well as my own reactions to the events described.



## CHAPTER IV RESULTS: The Emotional Experience of an OIFI

*It's just something you never forget, never forget. ~Eric*

The purpose of this research study was to examine the descriptions and perceptions of law enforcement officers and their spouses of the experience of a law enforcement officer-involved fatal incident. As discussed in depth in chapter two, I used a transcendental phenomenological lens to analyze the data. A transcendental phenomenological lens is the scientific study of the appearance of things as they appear to us in consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology is a subjective approach that is not concerned with facts, as such, but with meanings and essences of experience (Moustakas). I chose participant couples based on the status of one, or both spouses being an active, or retired law enforcement officer, and having experienced an officer-involved fatal incident. Five of the six couples in the study were married at the time of the fatal incident and remain married at the time of this study. One couple was in a committed relationship at the time of the fatal incident and later married.

This study examined the experience of both the officer and spouse as it related to their individual experience of the event, and their experience of the event as a law enforcement couple. I constructed three major themes from the data. Each theme is presented in separate chapters. Those themes include the descriptions of emotions experienced by the law enforcement officer and the spouse, and how emotional experience changed over time (chapter four); coping styles and strategies described by the participants on an individual level and on a couple sub-system level (chapter five) and the meanings and essences derived from the experience as it related to each individual participant as well as meanings that impacted the couple dyad (chapter six).

In this chapter (i.e., chapter four), I present two major sections pertaining to emotion. The first section focuses on the lived emotional experiences of an officer-involved fatal incident. The second section is a synthesis of the lived emotional experiences of an officer-involved fatal incident. I begin the first section below by presenting an overview of the participants' emotional experience. I then present each couple's emotional experience of the event followed by a summary of each couple's experience.

The order in which the participants are presented is based on the law enforcement officer's description of the degree to which they experienced emotional distress. No attempt was made to make fine distinctions in regard to the degrees of emotional impact, other than to the extent that the officers described a greater or lesser degree of emotional distress. Those law enforcement officers who reported greater degrees of emotional distress include Eric, Lisa, Bill, and Larry. They are presented in that order. Two law enforcement officers, Frank and Dave, reported lesser degrees of emotional distress. Additionally, the participants are presented as couples. Separating the stories of the law enforcement officer and the spouse would create a sense of disjointedness. By presenting the dyadic experience, the reader will more easily grasp their individual and couple experience of the event-a major goal of this research study. I provide a brief summary of the participants and their unique officer-involved fatal incident preceding the presentation of the data in each case to establish a context for the reader.

## **The Lived Emotional Experience of an Officer-Involved Fatal Incident**

*And then for a little while I just listened to him breath. Because I felt so lucky that I could still hear it~Laura*

Interviews with all of the participants of this study elicited emotional responses and memories of emotions experienced at the time of the incident and following the event. Law enforcement officers (LEO) and their spouses described their individual emotional experiences of the event as well as how those emotions affected their marriages. It was not uncommon for both the law enforcement officer, and the spouse to display emotions during the interviews about events that occurred years before. Experiencing powerful emotions and processing those emotions was a major theme in this study.

Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the most common emotions experienced and described by participants in this study, including fear-terror, sadness (distress-anguish), gratitude, anger and surprise (startle). Figure 4.2 provides another way of summarizing the emotions reported and experienced by participants based the percentage of participants who reported the specific emotions of fear, sadness, gratitude, anger and surprise.

While emotions accompany our everyday experience, emotions experienced during a law enforcement career can be profound and lasting. Gilmartin (2002) wrote, “The cost of the journey can be measured in several ways...The cost, unfortunately, can also be tabulated personally in failed marriages, children in trouble, and life views dominated by negativity, social isolation, and alienation from fellow human beings” (p 5).

Figure 4.1

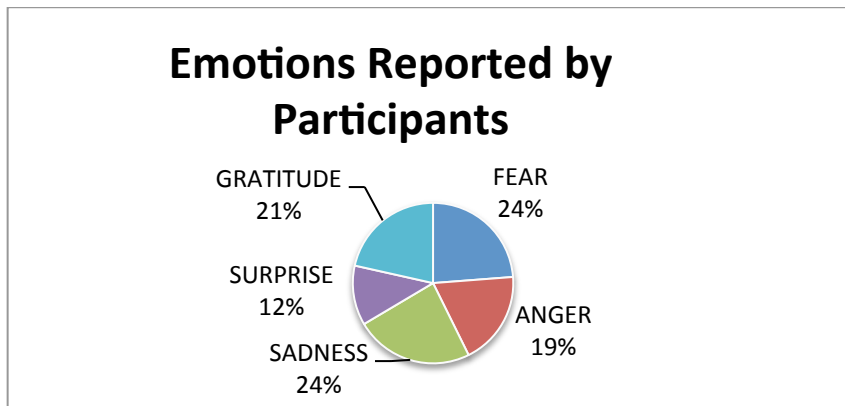
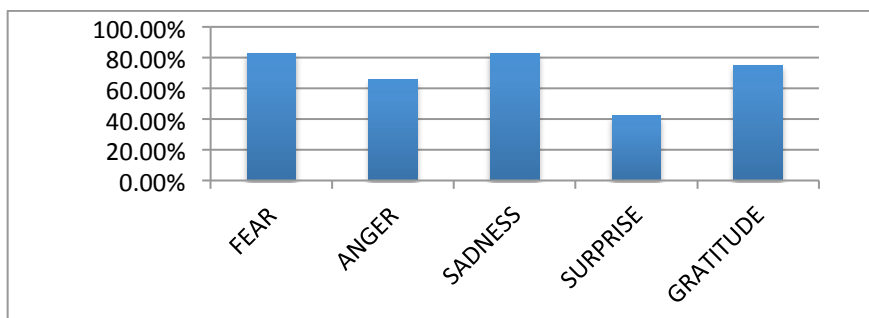


Figure 4.2. Percentage of Participants Reporting Discrete Emotions



According to Izard (1991), an emotion "...is experienced as a feeling that motivates, organizes, and guides perception, thought and action" (p. 14). He identified the discrete emotions as interest-excitement; enjoyment-joy; surprise-startle; distress-anguish; disgust-contempt; anger-rage; shame-humiliation, and fear-terror. Participants described every one of these discrete emotions. Gratitude, shame and guilt are also treated as basic emotions (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010).

**Eric and Laura: "I was just devastated by the whole thing..."**

Eric and Laura had been married twenty-seven years at the time of the interview. Eric was a veteran law enforcement officer when he and his partner responded to a

domestic dispute at a gas station/casino. As they arrived on the scene, the perpetrator began firing at Eric and his partner at close range with an AK-47. Eric's partner was killed by the perpetrator's gunfire.

Eric lost his partner in a violent exchange of gunfire that lasted three seconds. In that span of time his partner and the perpetrator were killed and Eric's life changed forever. Eric described experiencing the emotions of fear, sadness and anger immediately after the gunfire stopped and beyond. He described the scene as he and his partner arrived and then what it was like for him as he went to his partner's aid:

...as soon as we pulled up a small white car with the suspect in it got out of the vehicle with an AK 47 and started firing multiple rounds at our patrol vehicle. Ian was hit, I think about 4 or 5 times. Right at about the time he was putting the vehicle in park I had jumped out of the passenger seat in an attempt to get some cover and get out of the vehicle. I came back up with my gun and it was over ...When I'm at [fallen officer's name], I wanted him to talk to me so I knew he would be okay. Yeah, I guess it's kind of hard to explain. I was just devastated by the whole thing I just wanted him to talk to me...kneeling down by his side and trying to get him to talk to me while the ambulance got there. I think that at that split second before the ambulance got there that I didn't know where he had been hit. I knew it went through his vest, but I couldn't see any blood. You know what, en route to the hospital, everything about it, waiting at the hospital, seeing the pain in the family's faces was just horrible.

The fallen officer never did regain consciousness and Eric described the scene immediately after the fallen officer was flown from the scene. He said, “We were hugging each other and I was crying. I kept saying ‘damn it’ over and over.”

Two years later, Eric said that he continues to experience sadness over the shooting and loss of his partner. He described his concerns for the family of the fallen officer:

It’s been two years and if I sit here and think about it long enough I’ll get a lump in my throat. It’s just something you never forget, never forget. The first thing that came to my mind when it first happened, well not the first thing, but shortly after that you think about his family. Is his family going to be taken care of? That was my main concern. Will his family be taken care of?

Eric’s experience with the shooting was frightening and existential at the most fundamental level. The fear he experienced became hypervigilance and manifested itself in various ways. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, Eric would not venture outside of his front door without being armed:

I didn’t want to go out front unless I had my gun in my pocket. How ridiculous is that? You don’t want to go in your front yard with all these trees. Nobody could see but I didn’t want to go out into the front yard unless I had my gun with me. It was madness.

When Eric eventually returned to work he would take his shotgun out of the rack and lay it by his side:

I went back at about two and a half months I went back. I don't really think I was ready to go back. The shotgun wasn't in the rack. It was in the passenger side. I felt it needed to be out because it was more firepower in case I needed it.

Eric also lubricated the hinges on the doors of his patrol car to insure a quick exit:

So when I was ready to go back to work I cleaned up the squad car, it was kind of silly, I WD40'd the hinges because I felt that I didn't want there to be any holdups on this door if I needed to get out again. It was craziness, absolute craziness...I think a couple of weeks went by and the shotgun went back in the rack where it was supposed to go.

Laura described her emotions when she learned that Eric greased the doors of his patrol car:

He told me about greasing the hinges and that made me cry because, when I think about how my husband straps on a bullet proof vest and carries a gun to work everyday, I'm thinking, damn, he shouldn't have to be that fearful in his job that he's getting the fricking doors ready on his car to make sure he can make a quick exit. It's the reality of their job.

Eric concluded after the shooting that he must be alert at all times and reflected on all the times before the shooting when he should have been more alert:

...even now I think of all the times in the past when I wasn't as alert as I should have been, so because that happened now I'm like crazy alert now, for no reason. ...So yeah I've been on edge since then, still to now. I don't think that has died down...it hasn't really calmed down yet. Domestic calls are pretty much high alert. But then I should have always been, I guess. You question

yourself... You're real careful. You don't take any chances, not that you don't take chances, but you're just alert because you don't want anything to happen... Probably more alert than I need to be, but I don't want to take a chance anymore. In other words, after going through that you need to be vigilant, on high alert for every call. Just simply for every call.

Laura expanded on Eric's remarks and described how the fear, manifesting as hypervigilance, persists to this day:

He said he still gets, when he first went back to work it was real bad, but he still gets cottonmouth when he goes on a domestic. I don't know if that will ever change for him or if it's lessening now.

I asked Eric if there is ever a time when he could relax. He replied, "The only time is when I walk in these doors, right here... When she's here and we're together, that's when I'm happy."

Laura observed Eric's increased anxiety and hypervigilance when he had to fire his weapon for the first time at the range before returning to duty, and at the funeral for the fallen officer. She noted how their roles changed as the person she viewed as her protector became the one needing protection:

I think I was more watching [Eric] because he's always been a very strong man. He's a cancer survivor and going through his treatments, he didn't once cry, but going through this with [fallen officer] I saw him crumble and to watch the things he went through... he had to fire his weapon again before he went back to work, so we went out to the desert together and he was... that was hard for him. At the funeral, when they did the 21-gun volley, he jumped out of his skin because he



wasn't expecting it. Just little things like that. I was watching someone who had always been my protector and he needed protecting at that point so it was a change...

Laura described how Eric remains hypervigilant to this day at restaurants, school functions, and even at home:

I tell you, he still whenever we go to a school function or to a restaurant, he has to sit near the door or way up high where he can easily get out or where he can see everyone...that became more prominent after [fallen officer]. Would you sit in your recliner with a gun on your end table?...Fairly quickly afterwards I noticed that he was hypervigilant. He wouldn't go outside without his gun. He'd be on high alert, listening for sounds, looking if anyone was walking down the street. It took a while to get him to go from the picnic table out there to the center of the yard where he planted the tree and one of the reasons we discussed that was I had mentioned it to him, but I wanted him to take off with it and I knew it would make him walk 50 feet further away from the house and get in a more exposed area and if he could make it through that then it would be a baby step to get out there and life again.

Laura's experience of this event was unique in this study because, unlike the other spouse participants, she heard her husband dispatched to the scene while listening to a police scanner at home. She heard the calls for help, and then drove to the scene of the shooting. She clearly recalled the first moments when she learned of the event:

I heard 'shots fired, officer down.' To this day, that term gives me goose bumps. I stood there and everything stood still as if what do I do?...I grabbed my keys and I

have a very fast little sports car and I used every bit of its power to get down to [location], it's just down the street and around the corner.”

When Laura arrived she saw a fire truck and [Eric's] patrol vehicle. She described the sights and sounds she encountered, including a dead suspect laying on the ground with a surviving officer nearby, bullet holes in her husband's patrol car and the sounds of a helicopter hovering above the scene. She described her desperate attempts to locate Eric:

I could see bullet holes in it, but I couldn't tell...to me it looked like it was covered in bullet holes and then I saw [other surviving officer's name] standing there and the suspect was dead on the ground...and I'm just standing there yelling for [other surviving officer's name]. I didn't want to get too close but I'm yelling out [other surviving officer's name] name to find out if [Eric] was still there or not. And, all I can hear are the helicopter blades and I'm just yelling and yelling. It seemed like forever and [Eric] came walking up to me and the front of his uniform had blood all over it. At first I was thinking, was that [Eric's], but in my heart I knew it was [fallen officer's name] because I saw [other surviving officer's name] and I saw you, but [Eric] was having a really tough time...

Laura left the scene at Eric's request and out of respect for his wishes and needs at the moment. But, it was not easy and she described the anxiety of having to wait the long hours until she could reunite with Eric. She described trying to soak the fallen officer's blood from Eric's uniform and the impact of experiencing a traumatic death:

So, as I was leaving I saw that some detectives were showing up and the Sheriff and everyone else, so I knew that he had plenty of people here now. I went home and had to just hold my breath until I heard from him again, which was hours later

because they did take him up to the department for a debriefing and I went and picked him up and, like I said he had blood all over his uniform and when he got home he took his uniform off and I remember I sat his uniform to the side first and I think the next day I tried to soak Ian's blood out of the uniform and that was hard. Just knowing what [Eric] must have endured.

Laura repeatedly noted that she was and continues to be grateful that Eric survived and came home that night. She said, "...I count my blessings a lot. He's number one on the list."

Laura, like other spouses in this study, expressed her feelings about the public's lack of appreciation for what her husband and all law enforcement officers do on their behalf:

I get angry and upset with the public knowing that there are people out there that...they don't know my husband, they don't appreciate the fact that he risks his life for them every time he leaves our house and he does it for, he does it to put food on the table and a roof over our head, but...I don't know how I can express that one enough, but no amount of a paycheck that he earns for strapping on that vest and putting that gun on every morning could ever replace it. I know it's one of those things when you're serving the public you expect it, it's part of your job. But, if anything were ever to happen to him I think it would be hard for me to find a belief and faith in the general public again, cause there is just so much bad out there. I have no patience for people who complain about cops.

Laura described her emotional pain and how she hid her emotions from Eric because she did not want to add to his burdens:

But I cried a lot when [Eric] wasn't looking. Every time I saw the news I would have to struggle to hold back tears and I kept thinking how blessed I was that he was home with me, but the same time there was someone else, there was no way to escape their grief. I wondered how [name of fallen officer's wife], his widow is doing.

Laura no longer listens to the scanner, saying, "...sure I can turn on the scanner again and hear him calling in, but I don't want to be tied to that and at the same time be so fearful that I'm going to hear the same thing again."

Laura did not escape the anxiety and fear that accompanied the trauma of almost losing her husband. She described losing sleep, and listening to Eric breath in his sleep, grateful that he had survived the shooting:

I think right afterwards I didn't sleep well only because I was listening for him.

And then for a little while I just listened to him breath. Because I felt so lucky that I could still hear it. As time when on I could begin to believe that he was still there and that he was going to be there so I could rest...it really ticked me off that there are people out there that would risk hurting the thing that means more than anything to me in the world...there are times when I have had such a tight, trying to hold such a tight grasp on where he's at, and what he's doing, just to make sure he is safe, that it probably drives him nuts.

Laura acted on her fear by taking Eric's safety into her own hands following the shooting and began researching safe ballistic vests:

One thing that was interesting was that while he was still on admin leave, I'm checking out his vest and checking what level of protection it has and it wasn't

you know, it was...harsh language could have gotten through that vest so I wasn't pleased. So I obtained one of those level 4 military vests. It was 30lbs and it looks like you're wearing one of those down ski jackets and I told him that he wasn't going back to work unless he wears this. And he knew that it wasn't reasonable...But I was determined that that was what he was going to do. So we're kind of bounding it off each other. I'm demanding that he wear this thing and he says, no I have to be able to do this job...if I'm that fearful I shouldn't be doing this job.

Laura let go of the idea that Eric should wear a 30 lbs. ballistic vest, but she continues to experience fear that she could lose him. She said, "I'm terrified that I could lose you any day you go to work. I'm terrified you might not come home." Laura said that she just wants Eric, "...to understand what it's like for a spouse to think everyday, is he going to come back in through the door? Eric has noticed changes in Laura:

She's always said, be safe, be careful, but I think she says it a lot more now.

Things like be careful, pay attention to the calls. She's really worried. She's been really worried since then. I can see it in her actions and words that she says.

**Summary-Eric and Laura.** Eric was the only law enforcement officer in this study who lost his partner in a deadly encounter with a violent perpetrator. The time that elapsed from their arrival on the scene until the incident was over was a stunning 3 seconds. In that compressed time frame, Eric's partner and the perpetrator were killed. Eric experienced the sights, sounds and perception of an imminent threat to his life. He experienced the deep sadness of losing his partner, and grief for his partner's wife and family. He experienced the emotion of fear that manifested in certain behaviors, such as

lubricating the hinges on the doors of his patrol car, and removing the shotgun from the rack and laying by his side for quick access. Two years after the shooting, Eric continues to value officer safety and remaining on the “razor’s edge.” Law enforcement officers learn by training and by experience that the world is a dangerous place and that hypervigilance keeps one safe (Gilmartin, 2002).

Laura was the only spouse in the study who experienced the crime scene first hand. She described the fear that motivated her to race to the crime scene to make sure that Eric was alive and well. Her level of fear was manifested through research into safer body armor, creating rituals, and simply listening to Eric breath while he was sleeping. She experienced deep sadness that another officer’s spouse had lost her mate, but profound gratitude that Eric survived.

The next participant couple to be presented in this section is Lisa and Jon. Lisa expressed significant emotional distress following her OIFI. Lisa and Jon were “significant others” when their officer-involved incident occurred and later married.

**Lisa and Jon: “We’re superheroes. And you know, we didn’t save one.”**

Lisa and Jon are the only couple in this study who are both law enforcement officers and shared the experience of the same officer-involved fatal incident. Lisa and Jon were called to the scene of a hostage incident that involved a 10 year-old child/victim, the child’s non-custodial mother and her boyfriend. The adults had abducted the child from the custodial parent in another state. A police officer located the perpetrators camping in a tent at a local campground, and the perpetrators refused to surrender. Lisa was assigned as a hostage negotiator at the event, while Jon was assigned

a perimeter position with his police canine. During this event the mother murdered her 10 year-old daughter while officers surrounded their tent.

The death of a child was particularly difficult to process, and Lisa had developed a personal relationship with the child victim in this case. The relationship was not direct, but nonetheless compelling. Lisa was assigned to take custody of the child once freed. In preparation to accept the child, Lisa contacted the child's relatives to learn as much as possible about the child. Lisa would use this information to help the child feel comfortable with her. Lisa recalled the anger she experienced upon seeing the murdered child's corpse:

[Fellow negotiator] is talking to him and they keep saying, you can hear the SWAT guys now saying, you know, send [victim child] out. Send [victim child] out. And he's all, I don't think she can move. I don't think... and then you keep hearing a little girl saying, I can't move my legs. It sounds like the little girl and I hear, okay, she's gonna be coming out. They pull that tent off and you can see full rigor. There's no way she was coming out. It was the mom sounded like a little girl and I think she pretty much fooled everybody, that that was a little girl yelling I can't move my legs. And then they, and I remember hearing the mom yelling as they're trying to handcuff her, you're hurting me. You're hurting me. And that initially made me angry and I'm looking at the little girl and that was so ugly and I look out the side of my eye and I see [name of officer] with his gun like this, coming at the tent and this thing is over. I'm like, oh, this ain't good.

The reality that the child had been murdered was a shocking experience. Lisa's immediate reaction was anger, followed by fear as another traumatized officer advanced

on the suspects with his weapon at the ready. Lisa turned her focus to the officer, effectively intervened and the officer stood down. That officer did not recover and later retired.

The interview with Lisa revealed an officer who cares deeply about the welfare of her colleagues. Lisa discussed how she and Jon had different perspectives based on their respective assignments that night, and how their emotional responses were necessarily different. She shared how, 10 years later, listening to the tape recordings from the scene still elicit a strong emotional response and how other officers continue to struggle:

It's probably much different for me than [Jon] because I've presented this case all over. And I've listened to the bug tapes and the negotiations over, and over, and over again and it certainly doesn't make me numb. It still stirs me. Every time, especially when it comes down to the assault on the tent and listening to the newscast. They interviewed a lot of the campers and I still can hardly, I try to tune out when that part comes in our presentations and stuff cuz it's just still just [I insert, 'Gut wrenching']. Yeah. No matter how many times I hear it but all the little things that happened along the way I've had so many opportunities to sort those, through those and turn them up where I don't think [Jon's] had near the opportunity that I have to replot it over and over again. But yes, it's still especially, what bothers me is all the damage it did to a lot of people in our department. [Officer's name] will still tell you she can hear the death scream, not knowing it at the time. You know, why didn't we run in? You know, who would know?



Lisa commented on the emotional damage suffered by her colleagues: "I hate that. It makes me so angry that those people did that to the people that I care about."

When asked directly how the death of the child affected her emotionally, Lisa talked about the emotions of anger and sadness:

I was just angry. I was, I was just angry. Sad that, you know, that it happened but I was angry because we threw a lot of resources at this to try and help and you always hope for, you know, a positive outcome. And so I was angry that it didn't turn out that way.

Lisa had the unenviable assignment to make death notifications to family members of the victim child, a tall assignment after having experienced the trauma of the child's unexpected death and with images of the girl's body fresh in her mind. She recalled the fear she experienced as she contemplated making those calls and then how she was able to cope:

...I remember the huge dread of telling the family members on the phone...And so I made at least five calls, you know, one after another and not a lot of time to spend a lot of time talking to them...And the whole time while I'm talking to them...it's going through my mind, what happened? Cuz I still don't know what happened in the beginning. You know, and it was easier to think about what happened than to think about what I was actually telling these people. You know, cuz I'm hearing the screaming and the crying on the other side...

Lisa's drive home after the incident that day was consumed with thoughts about what happened as she tried to figure out what went wrong. When she arrived home she discovered a scene that triggered images of the crime scene and her emotions overflowed:

I come home and I'm coming down the hill and...still trying to figure it out. I get here and one of the dogs here had took one of my daughter's chickens and mutilated it. Tore it up everywhere and, you know, I don't, this is so unlike me but I went after that dog and I kicked him half to death. And at the time, I mean that's not me but now I look back and it's like, that was about the little girl. So I don't like to talk about this part but it was like I couldn't save her, do anything but I'm gonna kill that dog for hurting that chicken. So I don't like to talk about this part really...Yeah so that was, that was ugly. You know, created my own ugliness here but I was like, I was gonna get even with them and I did it that way and it was just awful. Still ashamed of that. But the dog was fine.

Lisa discussed telling her daughter what happened to her chicken, her private thoughts she did not share with her daughter, and the symbolism of the slaughtered chicken:

...God, you know. So we talked about the chicken. Of course, she was hysterical and I'm thinking, wow, you have no idea what I just saw earlier. You have no idea, you know, and picking up that chicken was really almost symbolic. It was like, oh, God, you know. Here, I thought I didn't have to deal with the little girl cuz I'd been avoiding it and now I'm dealing with... you know...

Lisa left no doubt that her expression of anger with her dog was directly related to inability to rescue the victim child in this case.

The day following the incident, Lisa arrived at work and had to pass the suspect's' vehicle, which was parked in such a way that officers had to walk by it to enter the building. Seeing the suspect's' car triggered an emotional reaction in Lisa. She discussed her emotional reaction and how focusing on the car provided a distraction from

the anticipated content of the debriefing that was about to occur. She also discussed her feelings of helplessness to “fix anything,” but she could fix the situation with the car:

I remember though coming in the next day for the debriefing and I saw that car sitting there and I wanted to kill somebody for having that car parked in our sally port [secure, controlled entry to police facility]. You couldn't get in the station without walking right on top of it. It was right next to where the watch sergeant parks or the chief's spot. I'm like, what is that supposed to be? A trophy? Or why is that there? I mean, I hid behind that tire for hours and I couldn't believe that it was right there in our face. And that might've been a diversion, too, because I'd rather deal with that car, being pissed off at that than deal with what we're gonna talk about in there. I don't know, but I remember coming through the doors and I don't know who I talked to. I said, you need to get that car out of there, like I had the authority to make that decision. You know... You could see the little girl's stuff in it. You could see... I'm like, what the... you know. Again, I think it was a diversion, probably in my mind, not knowing it at the time but like I can do something about this. I can't fix anything else. So... I remember feeling relieved when I saw it gone.

Jon was not exposed to the traumatizing images that Lisa experienced because his assignment kept him at a distance. He was released just before the SWAT team assaulted the tent. Nonetheless, he was invested in the outcome, and he shared the anger he felt after learning that the child had been killed:

I was just angry... Sad that, you know, that it happened but I was angry because we threw a lot of resources at this to try and help and you always hope for, you

know, a positive outcome. And so I was angry that it didn't turn out that way... I just, I was, I was drained. I was tired physically from standing all night long. I was tired mentally from trying to stay vigilant all night long. And I was tired, once I got the news, I got tired emotionally, that this didn't turn out the way that it, you know, we hoped. And so I remember going home and taking a couple of Excedrin PMs and trying to get some sleep before I had to come back... Yeah. You know, going back to the previous question just real quick, you feel let down. You know, you, you, you know, Jesus Christ, we're cops. We're superheroes. And you know, we didn't save one. And so you feel let down. But you know, it was such a long drawn-out thing, I just, you know, you're just drained.

**Summary-Lisa and Jon.** The emotional impact of this incident was greater for Lisa than Jon by virtue of their respective assignments. Lisa worked to extricate the child from the tent, and she expected to rescue the child. Through the process of learning about the child, Lisa began to develop an indirect relationship with her that would have allowed her to connect with the child upon rescue. Lisa learned so much about the child that she began to feel as though she knew the child. The shock of seeing the child's dead body has had long-lasting effects. Lisa also developed a relationship with some of the child's relatives and was assigned the task of informing them of the child's death. She described how difficult that task was, especially after having just witnessed a grim crime scene. Jon was sad that the child was murdered, and expressed disappointment that they [law enforcement] were unable to rescue her, referencing the image of law enforcement officers as "super-heroes."

Lisa also discussed the role that her agency played in complicating her ability [and by reference, the ability of other officers] to emotionally heal. She believed that a detailed, well-organized, mandatory briefing would have facilitated the sharing of knowledge, a common understanding of the facts, debunking of rumors and false information, and emotional healing to officers following a tragic outcome.

I now turn to Bill and Judy. I interviewed them in my office at their request. At the time of the interview, Bill had been a law enforcement officer for sixteen years and they have been married for eighteen years with four children. The officer-involved incident on which we focused occurred in 2007.

**Bill and Judy: “It’s just knowing that it wasn’t...a fair fight [when] I pulled the trigger.”**

Bill shot and killed an armed male in a downtown environment after the man had fired several rounds in the air and then pointed the gun at Bill. Two days later, Bill learned that the perpetrator’s gun was empty at the time Bill shot and killed him. At the time of this shooting, Bill was a veteran police officer and former U.S. Marine. Bill also discussed an officer-involved fatal incident from 1997. He described how the incidents had a cumulative emotional effect on him.

Bill was profoundly emotionally affected as a consequence of his shooting. Sadness, anger and guilt were the emotions that were most prominent for Bill. Reflecting back on the incident, Bill knows that he acted properly given the information he had available to him at the moment of decision. Bill described a scene in which he confronted a man who had been firing a handgun in a downtown area and was holding the gun when

Bill ordered him to put it down. Bill described his plan to use less than lethal force, but circumstances did not allow for that:

And I'm yelling tase him, tase him, tase him. Unfortunately, he moves down, grabs the gun, starts coming up. I shot him at the same time the other two officers fired their Tasers. He goes down and immediately goes down and then we move in to basically take him into custody, put handcuffs on him. And I ended up shooting him right in the chest, hit his heart and he bled out and died.

However, when Bill discovered later that the perpetrator's gun was empty at the time of the shooting, he experienced a deep sense of sadness:

At the time [immediately following the event], I didn't have any [emotions]. It when I reflected back later that that bothered me. At the time, I just, you know, it was all business. What... what's difficult for me is that the gun was empty when I shot him... When he [lab tech] told me it was empty... man, that killed me. That was tough. So it wasn't until learning that that really I started having a difficult time... I lost it even on the phone, when the guy told me. The same thing everyone tells me and I know. It's a good shoot. Didn't do anything wrong. It is what it is, you know. But just knowing, you know, that was pretty critical. So as soon as I got the phone call, and as soon as, because I think it was building up in me, as soon as I heard that, it was... that's when the emotional, that's when it started becoming very difficult to deal with... the reality is at the time that I shot and killed him, he wasn't a threat. I can say that because his gun was empty... that was the first time I kinda lost it emotionally. Broke down, started crying... I lost it even on the phone, when the guy told me. The same thing everyone tells me and I

know... So as soon as I got the phone call, and as soon as, because I think it was building up in me, as soon as I heard that, it was... that's when the emotional, that's when it started becoming very difficult to deal with... It's just knowing that it wasn't... a fair fight at the moment I pulled the trigger. That's what it boils down to. It was a one sided fight and that bothers me... Seeing him writhe in pain like that, watching him. Blood was everywhere. And I'm standing right over him. And still gets me to this day.

Bill's memory has faded little since the shooting. He described the poignant, agonizing scene as the perpetrator desperately struggled for his life. His recollections are infused with the knowledge, acquired post-incident, that the perpetrator's gun was empty when he shot him:

I recall everything with clarity. You know, as far as looking back, things that stick out or watching him before we got the cuffs on, watching him claw at his chest, it's tough... Cuz he was in a lot of pain before he died. And I did it to him. That stands out.

The sad feelings remain with Bill to this day, as do feelings of anger that the perpetrator placed Bill in the position of having to use deadly force and take his life. Bill sought as much information as he could about the perpetrator:

He left a suicide note. Investigation found out later that he was down on his luck. Think he was 57, rough, kinda, I don't know if he had financial troubles or... he just kinda gave up, you know. And I was mad at him, still am, that he didn't just do it himself. Clearly a suicide by cop.

This was not Bill's first officer-involved fatal incident and the cumulative effects of both incidents became clear after the most recent incident. The 2007 incident was the focus of the interview, however, as we began to address the first incident that occurred 15 years earlier [1997], Bill asked to take a break to gain his composure. He said, "that one's gonna be tougher." When Bill left the room, Judy provided context for the first incident that Bill would describe. She told me that Bill was a new law enforcement officer at the time and he was assigned to a rural part of the state:

...I can't even put words into that really cuz we were both so new that it didn't, it didn't have the effect on me till later, I think. Probably similar to him but it was kind of an unusual combination of brand new trooper and we were out in [town] and we were with a bunch of, I mean, these guys were just crusty. And I mean that with love. But they'd been on the job for so long and those remote areas with high-speed accidents and things like that are subject to some pretty gruesome events. So unlike [city], as odd as it sounds cuz that was, you know, first person shooting event, I think [town] has had a much longer lasting effect on him because I think there wasn't that, anyone to talk to and it was someone, it was something completely out of his control. Well, I guess he'd argue not completely out of his control but it was just a, one of those moments that I think really pushed us into our, our faith, having to recognize that. Needing to make some sense of things. And understanding that. That's his, his bracelet on his arm is for [fallen officer]. So yeah, that whole time was ugly. It was just so many very intense things happening in a period of two years that I don't think there was honestly really a whole lot of time for him to process it the way he needed to. Until the



shooting happened. I think that's why he says that surfaced because it was a time that required him to be completely emotionally raw and think about it. And so all of these other things kind of came into play and started processing through. I think that's why that's really key.

The topic of the cumulative effect of repeated exposure to trauma emerged during interviews with both Bill and another participant, Larry. Although the cumulative effects of exposure to multiple traumatic events are not the focus of this study, such cumulative effects are well documented in the literature (Maia et al, 2007; Neylan et al., 2002; Weiss et al., 2010).

According to Bill and Judy, the most recent officer-involved fatal incident allowed powerful emotions and unresolved grief to re-surface. Bill described how repressed negative emotions from that first incident unexpectedly returned:

I had that traffic accident just kinda put so far back and I just put that thing away. I didn't, I mean we didn't talk about it. We didn't... I couldn't even tell you how things just kinda started coming back. After the shooting, I don't know if my defenses or walls that you put up in your head to compartmentalize things were torn down at some point and I couldn't tell you the process, Rich. It just came, it just came back...Came roaring back.

Bill was working for another agency when the first incident occurred in 1997, 10 years before the most recent shooting incident. Bill was investigating an injury traffic collision late in the evening when another officer from a different jurisdiction assisted him. When the other officer arrived, Bill was laying a flare pattern. The other officer volunteered to relieve him of the task of setting out flares so Bill could continue with his investigation.

There came a point during the investigation when the other officer was not responding to radio calls. Bill walked up to the freeway overpass to look for the officer. There he discovered that the officer had fallen off the bridge and lay dead below:

...And I remember looking down at him and seeing it. Seeing the uniform lying there. It was tough. And I did have nightmares about that one. And my nightmares were, you know, that I pushed him.

An investigation later revealed that the deceased officer was forced over the side of the bridge when a large truck jackknifed on the slick roadway. Bill expressed his belief that he would have been the one who was killed, but for the assistance offered by the deceased officer:

Yeah. Cuz I, you know, that was, that was me. Had he not taken those flares, that would've been me. Without a doubt...And, and what haunts me to this day is that man, if I was doing, setting those flares up, I wouldn't be here right now. There's no question. No question. I was going out to set those flares up and he died with the flares still clutched in his hand that I gave him. So...

Bill's emotions were palpable as he spoke with reverence of his fallen comrade. It is not unusual for a survivor to experience feelings of guilt, believing that his own life was spared at the expense of another (Grossman, 2008).

Judy clearly recalls both incidents and the fear she experienced when she was first notified that Bill had been in the most recent fatal incident. She said that she was at home with her children, and she had sent Bill a text an hour before when she received a call on Bill's phone, but the voice on the other end was that of another female officer:

And not long after that, within an hour, I get a call back on his phone and, you know, hey, babe, and it was one of the other officers on the scene. And of course, I was immediately sick to my stomach. You know, you're programmed, if another officer calls you while your spouse is at work, that's not good. Particularly not on their phone... We knew each other and was like, [Bill's] okay, [Bill's] okay. Well, that sends me even further. Don't start the conversation off with he's okay cuz obviously he's not... I was excited, he called back and it's someone else announcing that he's okay which immediately, things are not. Yeah, stomach is all over the place and heart's pumping.

Like other spouses in this study, Judy had to deal simultaneously with her emotions (fear and anxiety), the knowledge that her husband had just been involved in a fatal shooting, and take care of her children. At first, Judy's immediate thoughts, driven by emotion, were to go to Bill's side immediately:

My mind is immediately thinking, you know, where's the car seat? How am I gonna load her up and tell the other kids that are school. You know, processing things that way, like I need to go see him. Yeah. She, he's okay, he's okay. He was in a shooting. It just got worse as she's talking, telling me these things and I'm thinking, do I need to be there? Do I need to come be there with him? No, he's okay. We're talking to him. [Judy], honestly, he wasn't touched. So I'm like, okay, I can, I can step back a little bit and breathe. It was tense. Not to sound cold at all, my mind was not on the victim at all. Or the shootee, the whatever. It was on him. My only concern at that point was his wellbeing and that he was, he was okay. So you know, long day. He had to go through all of his interviews. I

was still kind of in the dark. Everyone's sort of surrounded around him. And I go into that overdrive. I think most moms and law enforcement wives do. You know, I'm straightening the house up because I know other people are probably gonna come down with him. You know, making, just going on with daily things. That's, you have kids. They can't come home and have you be a complete train wreck. Life continues on. So when he came home, he was okay. No marks or anything on him and it was fine...there was definitely anxiety and fear but I can't explain it. I mean, I have to say honestly, I think that's, faith kicked in long before we recognized it because it was just hearing the reassurance but knowing that he was okay. I, I guess it is kinda cold to some people, I have to set that, I have to take that and I set it right there, aside, while I'm making sure that everything else is, is maintaining composure...I was trying to maintain my composure and not let on that, you know, our whole world had completely shifted at that moment...

At that point all Judy could do is take care of what was in front of her and anxiously wait for Bill to come home. She described the anxiety she experienced for Bill's welfare and the relief she felt when she realized he was not injured:

It was a relief [when Bill arrived home]. I mean, things were in their place. My job was to make him comfortable and make sure that... Yeah, I mean, kind of. You know, I think any spouse, you know, your spouse has just gone through something traumatic. You're, you are kind of checking at that point kind of more emotional marks. Are you okay? Are you...you know, you're coherent, you're functioning. Just all those silly little checks that you go through in your head. But once he was home, I was okay.

Judy started to notice emotional changes in Bill after he learned that perpetrator's gun was empty at the time of the shooting. She described her anger at the local district attorney's office for taking two years to complete their investigation and issue their findings, and the toll it took on Bill:

You know, developments started to kind of come to the surface with the, you know, lack of any ammunition left in the gun. That was really, it was driving him nuts. He was, he was sad. He was angry. You know, the whole gamut of those emotions. I think any... that we all experience when we've lost something. You go through the happy, the sad, the moving on with things. Honestly, that's where the whole situation with the DA. To this day, I'm furious with them. The total lack of protocol, the lack of professionalism as far as I'm concerned on their part, the lack of any follow-through. Not recognizing the extreme nature of the situation. And, and complete disregard for the effect that it had, and I'm gonna be selfish at this moment and say on our lives, over those two years, not allowing him that closure was tremendous. To the point that, and I never told [Bill] until like a year ago, that I was starting to get my ducks in a row and look for an attorney. That I was about to call [police chief] and I didn't know what I was gonna say but all I wanted to say was don't take this like an ultimatum but you've got a week to fix this or I'm gonna do something, cuz I was tired of sitting around, being the supportive wife, watching my husband try and be as diplomatic as he was being, struggling with the lack of closure and lack of common decency. That was, that was more difficult for me than the shooting itself. It was a total lack of decency they showed my husband.

Like other spouses in this research study, Judy's view of the public changed. Before marrying Bill she had not known anyone in law enforcement. She came to appreciate the sacrifices made by law enforcement officers through Bill's experiences and her own as the spouse of a law enforcement officer. She described the emotion of disgust with what she perceived as a lack of appreciation for what law enforcement officers do:

...it's definitely changed my view of public's view of his profession...I, we have a, we have a culture that's just all about, you know, doing whatever we want and, you know, it's that famous little cliché of, you know, there's never a cop around when you need one. They're just kind of these convenient goats all the time. You know, everyone, you always wanta rip on them. You always, and compared to the, we're fascinated with them on all the shows we watch but, you know, people rarely have anything positive to say about cops. It's always, you know, if budgets need to be cut, well, what the heck do they do anyway? So my, my perception of public's perception has, has shifted a great deal. I find myself being very protective when someone, or you know, in media, because in our world, no one does that. You know, have something negative to say about cops or immediately slams a cop when something happens and, you know, they are obviously at fault. That bothers me because we have, we as a society do not embrace the very people that help to afford us the rights that we take, we take for...Granted, thank you. On a daily basis. We just assume that's just what we get for being here. You know.

**Summary-Bill and Judy.** Bill described two officer-involved fatal incidents that were suffused with the emotions of sadness, anger, and guilt. In the first instance, Bill

believed that a fellow officer died in his place. In the second, Bill suffered guilt for having shot an unarmed man.

Judy's emotional response to learning of Bill's officer-involved fatal incident involved fear that he was wounded, or worse, followed by relief that he was uninjured, followed by anger that her husband had to endure exoneration by a painfully slow bureaucracy. Judy also experienced that pain of supporting her police officer husband as he experienced the anguish of killing a man who appeared to be a deadly threat, only to learn that he was no threat at all.

I now turn to Larry and Diane. Larry has been a law enforcement officer for over thirty-five years and has been married to Diane for thirty-seven years. They have four children. The incident discussed occurred about 10 years before the interview.

**Larry and Diane: "I think the feelings I felt were just, fear."**

Larry described two officer-involved fatal incidents in his career, one at the very beginning of his career, and the one that occurred late in his career. In the first instance, Larry was a rookie officer when he was called to respond to an in-progress robbery at a retail store. When Larry arrived, an armed perpetrator aimed a gun at Larry at point-blank range. Larry shot and killed that suspect. In the latter incident, and the one that was the focus of our interview, Larry shot and killed a female perpetrator in the parking lot of the police facility where he was assigned after he saw her shoot a fellow officer. Later, Larry discovered that the perpetrator had also shot and killed her lover in the same parking lot moments before he arrived at the scene.

Larry was sitting at his desk near the end of the workday when he heard an officer call for help. He realized that the officer was located in the parking lot just outside of his

office. The officer calling for help worked for Larry, had just ended his day, and was preparing to get into his car and go home when a vehicle pulled up with a male and a female occupant. It became obvious to the officer that the male and female were involved in a dispute. The situation quickly devolved and the female, who was armed with a handgun, confronted the officer. When Larry arrived on the scene it took him a few seconds to recognize what was happening and to identify the threat.

Larry identified two sources for his emotional distress. One was the stress of having been involved in a shooting, especially one that involved another officer being wounded, and having to shoot a female who he described as looking like a “soccer mom,” and the second source of stress being his agency’s treatment of him following the shooting. He identified the latter as the greater of the two. Larry described his initial emotional reaction after witnessing the female perpetrator shoot his fellow officer. He described feeling fear for the officer’s life, and his delay in taking action because he did not initially identify her as a threat:

I think the feelings I felt were just, fear. That’s probably when I felt the most fear. It’s just I didn’t want to see anything happen to him. In ways you think well maybe if I would have shot her before she had a chance to shoot him. All those things go through your mind. But, I didn’t identify her as a threat until she lowered that gun. So I didn’t have an opportunity to do that.

Diane remembered that Larry was devastated after the shooting by the stress and fear. She recalled that Larry was initially confused when he saw what appeared to be “a soccer mom” with a gun:



I think what you kept saying was that she looked like a soccer mom, she looked like some kids soccer mom you know and then two things: you thought [wounded officer] had been killed and then she was just a soccer mom you know and the whole incident was just surreal...I think he was just devastated over the whole day. It was just a level of stress and fear. All these things that he thought was going on, thank goodness [wounded officer] was alive. The woman wasn't just a soccer mom. She had issues, and everything ended up turning out okay. But I don't think when you came home at the time you even knew that yet... You thought, you didn't know what she was doing, you didn't know the man she was with, you didn't know that he was there and, yeah and I remember when he came home he just kept saying, I didn't know, I felt like I didn't know what was going on but I didn't have any choice but to shoot her because she had the gun and she was shooting at someone and he thought it was [wounded officer].

Diane went on to describe how the emotional distress and Larry's inability to sleep adversely affected, not only Larry, but their family life as well:

Well, he had trouble going to sleep. He would fall asleep in front of the TV and then wake up and stay up longer than me and I would go to bed. It's like the whole routine of our lives was totally up side down because his sleep patterns were really bad and he was tired all the time. He didn't have any energy to do things in the evenings. We still tried to maintain our workout schedules at the gym and try to do things like that, but because he was tired I think he just didn't have the energy...sometimes our level of communication was really difficult.

That was after the shooting and that was a change. Just because he wasn't sleeping, he wasn't getting enough rest, he wasn't getting any support and so everything all together was just having a raw nerve.

Following the shooting, Larry was able to reflect about the outcome. He initially felt confident about his actions and was relieved that he and the other officer survived the shooting. Larry then explained that the confidence he once enjoyed began to erode into anxiety and depression as he encountered a hostile work environment following the shooting. Larry explained that after the shooting incident he experienced poor treatment from his leadership that may, or may not have been related to the shooting. Nonetheless, the treatment he received from his leadership impacted him on an emotional level:

I think initially I felt pretty, I was up, I felt, not excited, but I felt really confident and really great about the fact that we were all successful and that we all lived.

It's unfortunate what happened to the male and to the female [the female perpetrator and the lover she killed] because nobody wants to be in that position, but I felt good the fact that we all survived and we made it past this. After that, after a while with the administrative stuff I started really having doubts about my abilities and everything and it just, I think in a way it formed a lot of feelings of depression after that, you know?...So I became anxious and that became a major problem.

Larry said that he continues to feel anxiety when he is reminded of the event. He avoids the location of the shooting and reacts emotionally and physiologically when he sees the officer he was trying to protect:

First of all, I still can't see [other officer]. When I see [other officer], my stomach gets upset. Physically I feel nauseated and everything. I don't like going by the location it happened. If I can avoid it, I do. It's still that heightened sense of anxiety. I just don't like being around there. There will be times when it will come back to me and everything.

The shooting took place in the parking lot of the police facility where Larry worked everyday. Returning to the scene of the shooting every day affected Larry's ability, not only to come to work, but also to feel safe at his workplace:

So after that shooting, first of all, it was difficult pulling in the station parking lot everyday and seeing it. It felt like, you know when you're watching a horror movie and their walking down a hallway and there's that music, boom, boom, boom, behind you? Kind of a spooky movie? That's what it felt like going to work.

Larry said that it took months for his agency to respond to his requests for a transfer. Following the transfer, Larry discovered that he had lost his sense of safety in any police facility, not just the facility where the shooting occurred, and described how that affected his behavior at his next assignment:

Yeah, I asked within a week or two after the incident [to be transferred] because I just had a hard time going, you know it's not as if it happened 30 blocks away, it's in your parking lot...And so every time I pulled in there I'd see it again so I said I need a change. And the response to me was, well I just need to see what your doctor would say, what steps you've taken to help yourself and I need to see something in writing. Everything was a wall...It affected me quite a bit because

when I left there I was assigned to the juvenile bureau and part of my responsibility was headquarters security, so I had responsibility for security at headquarters so I became kind of the nag down there. You know, I made sure all the cameras were upgraded and we put additional monitors in the offices to see what was going on around the building. I lost that sense of security at a police facility.

Larry felt abandoned and mistreated by his agency in a way that left lingering feelings of bitterness:

In police work your only good for what they need you for that day. Everything else is secondary for them. They could care less... You find out there isn't. Only your buddies, just a couple of guys you have through your career. You probably can count on one hand as many close friends as you've had through law enforcement now that you had then.

Diane observed that Larry suffered from depression and sleep deprivation, primarily because of the stress he experienced with his agency leadership:

...I think he went through a really deep depression after that shooting and the lack of support that he got... He wakes up a lot and, well he started more then and then its gotten, it just hasn't ever gone away. I wouldn't say it's gotten worse; it's just never gone away.

Diane found that the best way she could help after the shooting in the police parking lot was to allow Larry to talk and process his emotions. She also offered context and perspective to Larry:

Yeah, I would say yes. There was a level of anxiety and what can we do and just letting him talk about it over and over and talking, you know he needed to just keep verbalizing it with his friends on the phone and talking about it with me...And, I just kept reinforcing to him that it's a job, it's not defining who you are as a person. You have to let it go and I just kept trying to support him in that way. I know this is a big part of your life and you have these friends and this career that you like, but it was stressful and frustrating for me because I leave my job. I come home and I have my life. I only work there because that's what I like to do for work...The job came home with him. And any, I think we had a lot of talks about, because of what was going on with the administration there he seemed to be more defensive generally about things. I'd say something to him, just a rebuttal on something that he would say and he'd say, why do you have to attack me? I'd say, it's not an attack, it's just, I'm just saying this. It's not an attack against you. So it was really hard. I mean I think the shooting heightened his sensitivity stress wise and then the department just added more icing to the cake.

Diane was at home when she received a call from Larry to let her know that he had been involved in the shooting in the parking lot. She recalled that she reacted with calm and relied on her training as a nurse:

He called me and said before you hear on the news I was in a shooting. I have to go talk to them downtown. I'm okay and I gotta call you later or something. It was very short... It was just one of those things again. Since I didn't really know what the particulars were I wasn't sure what really happened in the shooting. He

said, "I was involved in a shooting" so I wasn't sure what had happened. He could have just witnessed it. I wasn't really sure and I was thinking the same thing as what we were talking about is, well he probably went out of his office again and he just should have stayed in his office... I'm a nurse and so I don't panic you know. So, I'm used to sizing up situations also in a different manner...so it's like, okay I'll wait until I get all the information and see how things go.

Diane recalled that when Larry arrived home following the shooting that he was emotionally distressed and confused. She became aware at that moment that recovering from this experience was going to take a long time:

Yeah, he was pretty upset. He was pretty upset when came home as compared to the first shooting. He felt really bad and he kept saying, that's what he kept saying over and over I thought she killed [wounded officer], I thought she killed [wounded officer]. And then I didn't really realize what was going on. He was still all so confused and trying to put it all together in his mind. He just looked stressed and exhausted over the whole incident... Then it was more of, oh boy, you know this is going to be a long go.

Diane recalled how the experience changed her view of Larry's job and the feelings of resentment that emerged as a consequence:

It changed a lot [Diane's view of Larry's job]...I said it is becoming all-consuming to you... I became very resentful...it's like it reared its ugly head again of how the department can be so all consuming to him... it's like here we go, it's the police department again taking over our lives and that's all we talk

about. We eat, breath it, sleep it, or not sleep it and I got really resentful for a long time. And now we do other things.

**Summary-Larry and Diane.** As Larry and Diane prepare to retire, they looked back on this event as a very stressful time in their lives. Their description of the emotional toll that it took on Larry, and to a lesser extent, Diane, was demonstrable. Larry was initially distressed that he shot a woman, and that one of his officers was wounded. When he saw the dead male (the perpetrator's lover) he initially thought he had killed a passerby. Larry's emotional distress was compounded when his agency failed to support him after the shooting. He lost sleep, and family life was disrupted. Larry also described, as did Bill, the cumulative effect of multiple traumas. He described how the most recent shooting immediately elicited emotions experienced at the traumatic loss of his colleague and friend years earlier.

Diane, calm and not prone to over reacting by nature and by professional training, was nonetheless affected by Larry's experience. She supported him through this difficult time and lived with the disruption in their lives. She grew to resent Larry's job, the time it took away from family life, and especially the lack of support by the agency, having witnessed Larry's dedication to the job.

The next couples, Frank and Ann, had been married for twenty years at the time of the interview, and have two children. Frank is a veteran law enforcement officer. Frank described an event that occurred about fifteen years before the interview in which he shot and killed an armed, wanted felon.

**Frank and Ann: “Oh my god, this could happen again.”**

Frank is employed by a federal law enforcement agency and was assisting local law enforcement to apprehend a wanted felon. When officers attempted to arrest the suspect in a public parking lot, the suspect began shooting at the officers. Frank shot and killed the suspect in the presence of the suspect’s mother.

Frank described an enduring memory from the shooting and explained that he had never shot anyone before this incident, “...seeing him dead. I’ve never shot anyone before. I’ve seen other people killed, but not that freshly, so that stands out.” When asked about the emotional impact of the shooting, Frank said:

...the first night I think I woke up a couple of times and I ended getting up just because I wasn’t sleeping that first night with just some images of him being dead, laying there dead, just once or twice I think.

Frank was very grateful to the suspect’s mother whose actions may have saved lives. He expressed remorse, and guilt that he never reached out to her to thank her:

...the one disappointment in myself is that I never did reach out for his mother. On the ten year anniversary, [officer’s name] had contacted me a couple of days before and we ended up meeting with him and [officer’s name], [officer’s name] couldn’t make it and we had breakfast at [name of restaurant]. We decided we were going to send [perpetrator’s mother] some flowers and a thank you note. [Name of officer] handled all the logistics and we all signed the note and we heard that it was something that she really appreciated because I’m sure she was observing the anniversary 10 years since her son died, was killed in front of her,



basically. So, that's something that I feel that it took 10 years for me to say thank you to her, that I feel disappointed in.

The shooting changed the way that Ann views Frank's job. She is more anxious/fearful now that Frank could be involved in another shooting:

No, it never occurred to me and ever since then I think about that when he leaves the house. Oh my god, this could happen again. Somebody could be shooting at him. I didn't know that...It's a little unsettling...It doesn't last very long and it's not that same as when he goes to the office. When he gets called out in the middle of the night, he's done these hostage-negotiating things he does now where he's called out a lot on those. That's unsettling...He tells me don't worry. I'm the guy in the armored car now, not the one with the battering ram. I think, oh god, I didn't need to know that either. That's what he used to do too. He has done a very good job of not telling us what he does and he just explained that to you...Because now I know that it isn't like it is on TV and he puts himself in some pretty precarious situations. He's done a lot, you go to hostage situations a lot and now, so yeah, I do worry more because I know the potential for him being injured or killed is much greater than I ever realized...I think, I don't know if this event, but maybe this started it, I realized how much of what [Frank] does, I don't know. And, that worries me. Sometimes I feel a little left out. Sometimes I don't know when [Frank] is out of sorts if it's because of work. I think he carries a lot and doesn't let on. So, that part to me is bothersome that I cannot help him because he doesn't share it. But, that's kind of how the relationship has gone and I'm getting used to it.

**Summary-Frank and Ann.** Frank was able to experience this deadly encounter with minimal emotional distress. Yet, it was a major event in his career and one that he will never forget. His feelings for the perpetrator's mother were evident in his expressions of remorse and guilt for not communicating his gratitude for her life-saving efforts that day.

Ann's emotional experience of the event evolved quickly from her initial naiveté about the level of danger Frank had experienced to a new awareness and understanding of the hazards that Frank encounters on the job. That awareness elicited anxiety she had not previously experienced, and remains with her to this day.

The next couple is Dave and Pat. They have been married for over twenty years and have three children. Dave discussed an incident that occurred about nine years before the interview in which a hostage taker committed suicide in his presence.

**Dave and Pat: "This was the first time that anybody died right in front of me."**

Dave was called to the scene of a hostage situation at a local pharmacy as a member of a SWAT team. The perpetrator was armed with a handgun and was holding several employees, and customers hostage. Hostage negotiations went on for about four hours before the SWAT team made entry following what they thought were shots being fired. Dave was the first to come face to face with the armed perpetrator and was preparing to fire his weapon when the perpetrator pointed the gun at his own head and committed suicide in front of Dave.

Dave recalled the anxiety he experienced as he waited outside of the building while he and the other members of the SWAT team prepared to make entry and confront

the perpetrator. As he assessed the situation he concluded that it was likely that he would have to kill the perpetrator:

When I first pulled up and there was some guys already there, kinda in the stack [officers lined up in preparation for entry] as the entry team...And so as I got the rest of my gear on and made my way to them...I just, I remember how they were standing. I remember what part of the sidewalk...and the building they were on. And...I got up there and [name], who was the sergeant at the time, one of the team leaders. He put me in behind [name]. And then he said, you know, if this guy starts shooting people, you guys go in and kill him. And you know, at that point in my mind, that's when I knew. I said, all right, this, you know, this guy's not leaving here...And so I'm in the stack and I can remember thinking, you know, for not the first time in my career but the first time in a long time that, okay, I'm probably gonna have to kill somebody today. He's in there, he's shot twice. He has a gun. He's taken hostages...

Dave described going through mental rehearsals to prepare for a confrontation with the armed perpetrator:

...and I really thought that we were gonna end up killing him. And so, in my mind, I'm getting my mind ready...So I just remember...all right, get your game face on. Get ready to go.

When Dave did enter the building to confront the perpetrator, he was focused on the job he had to do, and to remain safe. Dave did, in fact, confront the armed perpetrator inside the pharmacy. Dave described the moment of confrontation and his experience seeing the perpetrator commit suicide:

He's facing me, probably of a distance of maybe ten feet or so, turns, walks away. I bring my rifle up and got an M4, Colt M4, bring my rifle up and I'm taking the slack out of the trigger and I'm shooting this guy. I'm gonna shoot him. And all of a sudden, I hear this pop and he just falls to the ground and then this huge pool of blood. It's a cement floor. It just starts flowing out of him and I'm thinking to myself, what, what happened, you know. And then it, then I, you know, then it registers, oh, he shot himself. I never heard the bang. I never really saw him bring his hand up to, you know, to bring the gun up to his head. And he shot himself in the temple. And that was it. Me and the guy behind me, [name], we grabbed him, cuffed him real quick, secured the thing. Had medics come in. Was obvious he was dead... This was the first time that anybody died right in front of me, you know.

Dave described how the suicide affected him and his perceptions of his role in the incident:

You know, it, it, I don't remember having, I didn't have nightmares. I don't remember putting a lot of thought into it. I reviewed...my training and stuff like that and I was pleased with myself that I was ready and in the mindset to do my job and felt if I had shot him, I'd've definitely been justified...

Pat commented on Dave's unflappable nature when it comes to the job, "...I've hardly known anything in law enforcement, or anything in his job that's made him moody at home. Like most of the time I don't know anything's even happened."

Pat recounted how she first learned that Dave had been called to respond to a hostage situation as a member of the SWAT team. She was at work when she received a call from Dave. She received the information as if it was just another callout:

And so [Dave's] like, well, there's a hostage situation at the pharmacy and I sent the girls down to [name of friend]. And like okay, be careful, you know what I mean? I guess I'm naïve because I'm always, see you at dinner, you know...I never get nervous...I don't like go [intake of breath], you know what I mean?...I'm pretty even keeled about it. We don't talk about it much and I haven't ever really had situations that have made me nervous. Even if I knew about them in advance.

Pat recalled that when Dave arrived home following the incident that he had blood splatter from the perpetrator on his uniform and she described how she handled the situation, again, with the same aplomb with which she accepted that Dave was about to confront an armed hostage taker:

And you had to have been relatively close because he had, you had blood splatter on your clothes when you came home...So I...I don't ever remember thinking anything about it and I don't know...I'm always one that's just kind of preoccupied with what's... You know, I have the three little kids and I'm like, you know, he comes home and he explains it to me. I'm like, great job. Undress in the garage. I'm making dinner...

Pat's emotional state changed from calm to anxiety about how close the perpetrator was to Dave when he asked her to help him with his uniform, and finally, the relief she

experienced when he came home because the incident was over and Dave was not harmed:

He goes what should I do? And I remember thinking, it was like, ugh, undress in the garage, you know what I mean, because he did have... I mean, I recall there being more than I would've thought on his uniform, on that thing. And he's like, come here, and so then I, we kinda did this and...it was more of like that kind of reaction and then...I didn't realize how close he was when the guy shot him... It was more of like, oh, my gosh, ugh...Kinda like oh, how close were you? What did he do? Why were you there, you know what I mean? I'm always like why were you the first one in? Why were you so close...I always like the details...It's always...a relief because at that point, it's done, it's over...

**Summary-Dave and Pat.** Dave had time to mentally and emotionally prepare for the possibility, even the probability that he would have to take the gunman's life. He had trained for this situation many times as a member of a SWAT team and as an experienced law enforcement officer. He experienced the emotions of anxiety and fear as he entered the building, but with intense focus on his assignment. Dave expressed the emotion of surprise when the gunman suddenly turned his gun on himself and committed suicide only feet from Dave. Dave had never seen a person die before that day. Following the event, he reflected on his performance, and his training and concluded that he had performed well in accordance with his training. Dave expressed sadness that the perpetrator died, but recognized that he had no part in that death.

Pat had been the spouse of a law enforcement officer for 17 years at the time of this interview, and described herself as never getting nervous, although she did betray a

certain amount of anxiety when she discovered how close Dave had been to the perpetrator-close enough that there was blood splatter on Dave's uniform when he came home. Pat did not experience emotional distress as a consequence of this incident, nor did it affect their relationship.

### **Synthesis of the Emotional Experience of an Officer-Involved Fatal Incident**

The section of chapter four that you just read explored the lived emotional experience of the officers and their spouses. This section is a synthesis of those emotional experiences. Recall that the most prevalent emotions described by the participants were fear, sadness, gratitude, and anger. No two officer-involved fatal incidents are the same. Each has its own set of facts that establish context and meaning for the participants. The uniqueness of the event, and the resiliency of both officer and spouse influence the level of emotional distress, as does the relationship between the law enforcement officer and the decedent (perpetrator or victim). In the synthesis I present two major themes I constructed from the data. The first theme below involves the relationship between the law enforcement officer and the decedent as a factor in emotional distress. The second theme focuses on the motivating influence of emotions on the law enforcement officer and the spouse.

#### **Relationship Between the Officer and Decedent as a Factor in Emotional Distress**

The data in this study suggested that the context of the relationship between the officer and the decedent [perpetrator or victim] is a factor in the degree to which the LEO experiences emotional distress. The notion of relationship in this context, and as it emerged in the data, refers to the officer's perception of the deceased immediately before the death occurred, as a consequence of events leading up to the death, or how the

perception of the relationship between the officer and the decedent changed after the fact.

Other scholars (Ekman, 2007; Gladwell, 2005; Gottman, 1999; Wolfram, Adger and Christian, 2007) argue that we make judgments about people after only listening to a few words (Wolfram, et al.), or by observing body language, and facial expressions (Ekman, 2007; Gladwell, 2005). Gottman (1999) studied language that couples use when discussing interpersonal issues, and he has demonstrated that he can predict whether a couple will divorce within five years after only listening to a 15-minute conversation between the couple. Ekman (2007), studied minute facial expressions that reveal emotional states. As we encounter the other, we hear words, tones, inflections, and observe body language and facial expressions that provide us with information about the other. In some cases, it only takes a split-second to perceive this information and make judgments about the other. Those judgments may include whether the other is happy, sad, angry, fearful, or if they present a danger to us. Gladwell (2005) refers to this process of instantaneous perception as “rapid cognitions” that often occur at a subconscious level. The data in this study supports the findings of these scholars. Law enforcement officers in this study formed relationships with the decedents (perpetrators and victims) based on just this kind of information, and in some cases those relationship were formed, and altered in a matter of seconds based on their perceptions in the moment. I will now explore the relationships that each officer formed with the decedents, and how relationships were shaped through their perceptions of the decedents. The data supports that notion that those relationships influenced the level of emotional distress experienced by the officer.

Three of the law enforcement officers fired their weapons and killed the



perpetrator. Two of those officers described profound emotional distress (Larry and Bill), while one, Frank, described minimal emotional distress. Larry shot and killed a female that he initially perceived as a “soccer mom,” and indeed, not even a threat. There was a momentary sense of guilt. Larry described experiencing the emotions of fear/anxiety, and sadness/depression over an extended period of time. Bill shot a man who he later discovered was defenseless. Bill described experiencing the emotions of sadness, anger, and guilt. Frank, on the other hand, shot and killed a man whose identity was known as a clear and imminent threat to him and other officers. Larry, Bill and Frank were clearly justified in their actions according to law. The one factor in the data that seems to explain why Larry and Bill suffered significant emotional distress, and Frank experienced minimal emotional distress, is how each perceived their relationship to the perpetrator leading up to the shooting, during the shooting, or after the shooting.

In Larry’s case, the data supports the conclusion that he suffered significant emotional distress as a consequence of the treatment he received at the hands of his employing agency, but the data also supports the idea that his initial perceptions of the perpetrator amplified his emotional experience of the event. Larry’s initial perceptions of the perpetrator, and his relationship to her was one of police officer and non-threatening female. Those perceptions and the context of Larry’s relationship with the perpetrator suddenly changed when she lowered her gun at another officer and shot him. The relationship changed to one of police officer confronting an armed woman intent on killing another police officer. When Larry arrived home, hours after the event, he expressed his anguish to Diane, over and over again, that she (the perpetrator) looked

like a soccer mom. Larry also commented that the perpetrator's gender made the experience that much more difficult for him.

Bill was not emotionally distressed after shooting and killing the armed man who, after repeated warnings to drop his gun, pointed the gun at Bill. Bill's relationship to the perpetrator was one of police officer confronting an armed man intent on killing him. Bill was confident that he acted appropriately to a deadly threat, and that he had done all in his power to convince the perpetrator to surrender. Bill became emotionally distressed only after learning that the perpetrator's gun was empty at the time Bill shot him. Bill described the instantaneous onset of sadness, guilt and grief as he learned the new information. At that moment the context of the relationship changed to that of police officer shoots defenseless man. It made little difference to Bill that he could not have known that the perpetrator had fired all of his shots before their encounter.

Frank knew that he was pursuing a known felon. When he finally encountered the perpetrator face to face, the perpetrator instantly began firing at him and other officers. The context of the relationship was one of law enforcement officer confronting a man who presented a clear and present danger to his life and the life of other officers. Frank responded appropriately by shooting and killing the perpetrator. The context of that relationship never changed. Frank lost sleep the first night because he had killed another human being. Following that night he did not suffer emotional distress.

Three of the officers were "non-shooters" (Eric, Lisa and Dave). Eric and Lisa described significant emotional distress. Eric lost his partner when the perpetrator shot him with an AK-47 assault rifle. Eric described experiencing the emotions of fear/anxiety, guilt and sadness. Lisa lost a child with whom she had formed an indirect

relationship with over the course of a long hostage negotiation. It is not inconsequential that Lisa had a daughter of similar age at the time of the incident. She described experiencing the emotions of startle/surprise, fear, anger, sadness and distress/helplessness. Dave described minimal emotional distress, although he described the emotional experience of fear/anxiety. The death in his case was the result of the suicide of a person with whom Dave had no relationship, and one who presented a clear and imminent threat to the lives of the officers and civilian hostages.

Eric knew the victim, although they were not close friends. The context of their relationship was defined by their roles as fellow officers. They had never been in combat together before this shooting. Eric and his partner encountered an armed perpetrator who surprised them and instantly opened fire with an AK-47. Eric's partner was hit and was mortally injured at the scene. Another officer killed the perpetrator within 3 seconds of the initiation of gunfire by the perpetrator. The context of the relationship between Eric and his fallen comrade was now defined by survivor's guilt. Eric felt as though he did not fulfill his responsibility to protect his partner.

Lisa did not know the child victim before her OIFI. However, she was assigned to take custody of the child after the child was released or rescued. To facilitate a smooth reception of the child, Lisa gathered as much information about the child as she could from the child's relatives. Lisa gathered enough personal information about the child that she felt as though she knew the child. The context of relationship was defined by Lisa's knowledge of the child, and her responsibility to rescue and protect the child. In fact, the purpose of gathering the information was to help Lisa come to know the child in a personal way so that when she received the child she could help the child form a

relationship with her more expeditiously. When Lisa saw the child's bloody body the context of the relationship instantaneously changed, and was defined by Lisa's sense of responsibility to the child. It was a profound moment for Lisa.

Dave did not know the perpetrator, but had considerable time to reflect on his training and experience to know how he would deal with the perpetrator if confronted. Dave was mentally and emotionally prepared to kill the perpetrator, if necessary. Dave knew the perpetrator was armed and that he was holding and threatening hostages. The context of the relationship was defined by Dave's responsibility to confront the armed perpetrator and to rescue the hostages. When the moment of confrontation did arrive, Dave saw a man holding a gun. The context of the relationship was defined by a life-threatening encounter with the perpetrator. Dave prepared to shoot the perpetrator when the perpetrator committed suicide. The essential relationship of Dave to the perpetrator never changed throughout the ordeal, and he did not suffer emotional distress. The common factor present among those informants who described significant emotional distress was the experience of guilt.

According to Izard (1991) the emotion of guilt is so basic to human nature, and so necessary to the development and maintenance of social norms that it will develop in any culture. He cited three psychological conditions necessary for the development of guilt. They are, "...1) acceptance of moral values, 2) internalization of a sense of moral obligation to abide by these values, and 3) a sufficient self-critical ability to perceived discrepancies between actual behavior and internalized values" (p. 362). People typically feel guilty when they believe they have done something wrong, broken a rule, have violated their own standards or beliefs, or feel guilty for failing to fulfill a responsibility.

There is a strong relationship between one's sense of personal responsibility and the feeling of guilt. Izard's (1991) work is so poignant in the situations of the officers in this study whereby a person may judge him/herself as wrong when, in fact, the person was not wrong, or had no opportunity to act differently. It is the perception of wrongdoing, or failing to fulfill one's responsibility that gives rise to feelings of guilt. Eric could not have saved his partner. Bill had no other choice but to shoot and kill the perpetrator. Lisa could not have saved the child. Larry shot a woman who looked like a soccer mom, but in reality she was an armed perpetrator intent on killing another officer. He had no other choice but to shoot her. I will now explore how the emotional experience of the participants affected their cognitions and behavior.

### **The Motivating Influences of Emotions**

Relying on Izard (1991) I argue that emotions serve to organize perceptions and thoughts, and that emotion motivates behaviors and actions. This theme includes two sub-headings. The first sub-heading addresses how this theme (i.e., the motivating influence of emotions) applies to the law enforcement officer participants, and the second sub-heading addresses how this theme applies to the spouses of those officers. It is not only crucial to understand the emotional experience of an officer-involved fatal incident, but also how those emotions influence perceptions, thoughts, and behavior.

**The law enforcement officers.** Eric was surprised by a sudden, and deadly barrage of gunfire directed at him, and his partner at close range. Perceptions of a deadly threat and the fear for his life motivated him to immediately seek safety. Within 3 seconds the gunman was killed and the immediate threat ended, but the perception of the threat and the danger it presented did not end. Fear motivated Eric to have a weapon

nearby at all times, even while watching TV at home. Fear prevented him from venturing into his front yard, even while armed, for some period of time. When he returned to work, perceptions of danger rooted in the shooting experience motivated him to oil the hinges on his patrol car doors to facilitate a quick escape and he removed the shotgun from its rack for quicker access. Eric disclosed that he is much more vigilant about his safety on the job two years after the incident. Sadness motivated Eric to construct a memorial to his fallen partner in his front yard, and to reach out to the officer's family directly and through his spouse.

Bill was initially satisfied that he had acted appropriately when he shot an armed man who pointed his gun at him. Although Bill believed he acted according to training and within the law to protect his own life and the lives of others, he was sad and angry that he was placed in a position to kill the man. That all changed the following day when Bill learned that the man's gun was empty when he shot him. The gunman had fired all of his bullets before the confrontation with Bill. Bill was overcome with sadness and guilt that he had killed a defenseless man. Bill continued to know that his actions were appropriate given the circumstances and the information he had available to him at the time, but his emotional experience of the event deepened profoundly. Mental images of the dying man clutching at the wound in his chest took on new meaning for Bill. He knew the shooting and the agony was unnecessary, even in the context of a "good" shooting. His perception of the entire event changed. Bill was motivated to seek solace by taking time away from the area to process his feelings. He was motivated to read all he could about the taking of life by law enforcement officers and military personnel. He was

motivated to learn all he could about “suicide by cop.” Bill was also motivated to delve more into his faith.

Larry was initially confused when he encountered a woman with a gun in the parking lot of his police facility. His first perception of the woman was that she looked like a “soccer mom,” and that she might be a member of a task force. His confusion was quickly resolved when the woman raised her gun and shot another officer. The emotion fear for his life and that of the other officer motivated him to shoot the perpetrator. Larry’s emotions of fear and anxiety organized his thoughts and actions to motivate him to find out as much information as he could about the perpetrator, and the circumstances leading to the incident, but that information was not forthcoming for a few days and when he arrived home he was very anxious about what had occurred.

Larry continued to experience sadness as he came to work everyday following the incident. Returning to the scene of the shooting elicited memories and emotions of the shooting. Those emotions motivated him to seek a transfer to another facility. He became angry as his requests were ignored for months. Eventually, Larry’s perceptions of lack of support by his agency increased the emotion of anger, motivating him to seek professional counseling and to take action to defend himself from his agency. Larry had difficulty sleeping, which persisted to the day of the interview. He was motivated to use those sleepless hours to research and prepare his case against his agency. The fear that translated to feeling unsafe at his workplace generalized to other police facilities where Larry was assigned. That fear motivated him to find ways to improve safety at those facilities.

Lisa was initially startled to see the child's bloody body, and slashed throat of the 10 year-old victim at the campsite. Surprise and shock quickly turned to anger as she realized that the child's parent had murdered the girl. Lisa experienced sadness and grief at the loss of this child with whom she had developed a relationship. Lisa's emotional experience demonstrates that emotions are not experienced in a linear way, but almost simultaneously as surprise, anger and fear were experienced seemingly at once. Lisa's fear was elicited when she perceived another officer (sniper) continuing to advance on the perpetrators with weapon at the ready and appearing intent on taking action. Fear motivated her to successfully intervene with the other officer. Lisa described dread/fear of having to make one call after another to the child's relatives informing them of the child's death. She described her distress/anguish at doing so. The emotions Lisa experienced organized her thoughts and her perceptions in such a way that when she arrived home to discover that her dog had killed her daughter's chicken, that the dog and chicken were perceived as projections of the perpetrator and victim. Lisa's anger, and grief motivated her to discharge her emotional energy on her pet dog. Lisa's emotional distress motivated her to gather as much information as she could about what had occurred and to analyze how she and the team could have performed more effectively. She was motivated, and continues to be motivated 11 years after the event to travel to cities in the U.S. and Canada training other hostage negotiators based on this one event. Lisa's own experience with emotional pain motivated her to seek out other officers and tend to their emotional wounds following the incident.

Frank and Dave described minimal emotional distress from their respective officer-involved fatal incidents. Frank described experiencing fear for his life and that of



other officers at the scene as a wanted felon began shooting at them in the parking lot of a grocery store. Frank explained that he had never killed another human being before and lost sleep that night with images of the man's body. However, he was satisfied that his actions were appropriate and lawful. He was relieved that no innocent persons were wounded or killed. Frank described feelings of gratitude that the perpetrator's mother intervened in a way that may have saved law enforcement officers from injury or death. He described experiencing sadness that he has never personally expressed his gratitude to her. Frank's gratitude for the mother motivated him to participate with other officers in sending expressions of their collective gratitude to her. The distress that Frank experienced at taking a life motivated him to process his experience with peers who had been through similar circumstances. He explained that those conversations were the only counseling he needed. Frank's satisfaction with his decision-making motivated him to cooperate with the investigation that followed because he did not believe he had anything to hide. He was motivated to tell his story.

Dave described the experience of anxiety and fear as he mentally prepared for an encounter with the armed hostage taker. Dave's existential anxiety motivated every thought, and action he would take leading up to, and including his confrontation with the perpetrator. During the several hours wait from the time of his arrival at the scene until he entered the store he mentally rehearsed his every move, believing that his encounter with the perpetrator would be deadly. When the time came to make entry Dave was prepared, and performed according to his training. When Dave did encounter the armed perpetrator he was prepared to use deadly force, but was surprised when the perpetrator took his own life.

I now turn to how emotions experienced by the spouses of the law enforcement officers organized their perceptions and thoughts to motivate their behavior.

**The spouses.** Three of the four spouses (Laura, Judy and Diane) of the law enforcement officers who described greater levels of emotional distress (Eric, Bill and Larry) also described greater levels of emotional distress and described greater levels of distress in their daily lives. The spouses of the two law enforcement officers who described the least degree of emotional distress (Frank and Dave) similarly described minimal emotional distress and less disruption to their lives. The data supports that emotions experienced by the spouses organized their perceptions and thoughts to motivate their behaviors.

Laura's experiencing of her spouse's officer-involved fatal incident was more direct than the other spouses participating in this study. Laura was listening to the police scanner at home, and actually responded to the scene of the shooting moments after it occurred, and she knew the officer who was killed. She described how the emotions of fear and anxiety that gripped her upon hearing the words, "shots fired, officer down," organized her thoughts and actions. Fear and anxiety motivated her to immediately drive to the scene of the incident, which was a very short drive from her home. She described her fear that Eric might not return home from work one day. These emotions guided her behavior in the days, weeks and months that followed.

Laura described how the emotions of fear and sadness motivated her to help Eric and herself heal emotionally. She described how she would hide her tears from Eric so as not to add to his burden. She described how she helped Eric to venture further and further

away from the home. Laura described how sadness motivated her to reach out to the fallen officer's widow, and create memorials and rituals enacted to keep Eric safe.

Judy described the fear and anxiety she experienced after receiving a phone call from another officer on Bill's cell phone informing her that Bill had been involved in a fatal shooting. She described how she was motivated to join him, but constrained by the responsibilities of being a mother and caring for her children. Judy described the relief she experienced when Bill arrived home, and the profound sadness she felt for Bill after he discovered that he had killed an unarmed man. Judy described how she was motivated to pursue her faith and her relationship with Bill with renewed vigor and purpose. She described how anger motivated her to a decision to contact the police chief about the delay in the findings of the criminal investigation that would eventually exonerate Bill. Judy also described how her emotions guided her to help Bill heal emotionally from the incident.

Diane described herself as a calm, composed and analytical person, who through her training as a nurse is not given to panic. Indeed, she did not panic when she received the call from Larry that he had been involved in a shooting. After Larry's arrival home, Diane knew that recovery from this shooting would be a "long road." Diane was motivated by her emotional distress for Larry to help him by being a supportive presence and a good listener. She helped him prepare his case against his employing agency. Diane also described feelings of anger/resentment toward the agency and Larry's job in general for intruding into their family life. In response to her feelings of resentment, Diane was motivated to move on with her life, and protect her family from the disruptions related to Larry's struggles post event.

Ann, Pat and Jon described the least degree of emotional impact and family disruption following their spouse's respective officer-involved fatal incidents. Ann described herself as naïve about the dangers of law enforcement at the time of Frank's shooting, and Frank as a "stoic fellow" who erected a wall between his job and his family. As the events of Frank's shooting unfolded, Ann became aware that the shooting had placed Frank in mortal danger and that his job did, in fact, present dangerous scenarios. Ann's new awareness constituted a paradigm shift for her. Ann's emotions of anxiety and fear motivated her to be more anxious, especially when Frank is called out on special assignments. Ann now requests that Frank call her at the conclusion of every special assignment to reassure Ann that he is safe.

Pat, like Diane, described herself as one who "never" panics. Indeed, when Dave arrived home, he was not emotionally distressed. Pat's major paradigm shift occurred some months later during a serendipitous meeting with one of the hostages from the incident. During that meeting the former hostage offered heartfelt gratitude for her husband's actions. Pat suddenly realized that what she accepted as another day in the life of a police officer was a profoundly life-changing event for the former hostage. The encounter with a former hostage/victim motivated Pat to become empathetic for victims of crime, and she began to reflect on her spouse's occupation and how his work impacts the lives of others. Pat did not suffer emotional distress from the incident, nor did she experience disruptions to daily life or her relationship with her spouse.

Jon represented an outlier for this study. He is the only spouse who was a law enforcement officer at the time of the incident and was also at the scene of the crime. Jon described strong emotions for the loss of the child and empathy for Lisa. He described

how he is motivated to support Lisa as she travels North America to train other law enforcement hostage negotiators.

It is not enough for those treating law enforcement couples following an officer-involved fatal incident to have an accurate, and empathetic understanding of the emotions experienced by the officer and the spouse. Counselors and therapists must understand how those emotions influenced the perceptions, thoughts and behaviors post event. Eric is a classic example of how the emotion of fear caused him to be hypervigilant to the point that he could not walk into his front yard unarmed, or how he needed to lubricate the hinges of his patrol car to facilitate a quicker exit in the event he experience another deadly encounter. These behaviors have implications, not only for the officer's well being, but also for the well being of the spouse, the marriage relationship, and the officer's family as a whole.

The emotional experience of an officer-involved fatal incident is core to the understanding of it, as are the functions of those emotions to organize the thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors of the participants. The relationship between the law enforcement officer and the descendant appears to play an important role in determining the degree to which the officer experiences emotional suffering. Likewise, there appears to be a relationship between the degree of emotional suffering of the officer, and that of the spouse, including the degree to which that relationship and daily family functioning are affected.

CHAPTER V RESULTS: Coping Styles and Strategies of an Officer-Involved Fatal  
Incident (OIFI)

*We think we're super human, we're not...Bill*

In the last chapter, I presented the lived emotional experience of the informants following an officer-involved fatal incident. The most common emotions described by the informants were fear, sadness, anger, and gratitude. I argued that the degree of emotional distress experienced by the law enforcement officers was related to the relationship the officers formed with the decedent, either before, during, or following the incident. Lastly, I argued that emotions organized the informants' perceptions, and thoughts and also motivated their behaviors, drawing on Izard (1991).

In this chapter, I present four major sections pertaining to coping. The first section focuses on individual and couple coping strategies. The second section focuses on the role of counseling in the coping process. The third section focuses on the role that agency leadership plays in either supporting, or hindering emotional recovery through the agencies' policies, practices and procedures. The fourth section is a synthesis of the chapter that will include an examination of themes pertaining to coping styles and strategies of the informants following an OIFI.

**Descriptions of Individual and Couple Coping Strategies**

The first step in understanding how the participants emotionally survived the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident is to examine individual and couple coping strategies. For the sake of consistency, the informants will be presented in the same order as in chapter four. The format will consist of descriptions of individual coping strategies, followed by strategies employed by the couple. Examining individual and

couple coping strategies is important to understand the dynamic that exists within the context of individual and couple emotional survival.

**Eric and Laura: “And even to this day, (Eric) uses that tree as his therapy...”**

**Individual coping strategies.** Eric’s car partner was killed in a barrage of gunfire from a suspect wielding an AK 47 assault rifle. The incident lasted a total of 3 seconds from the time of the first shot to the final shot that killed the suspect.

Eric is a quiet man and recognizes that he and Laura cope with things in different ways, but that they respect how each copes. Eric erected a memorial to his fallen partner in the front yard of their home. “I planted a tree out here in the front yard for [fallen officer]. There’s a stone I laid out there for him and I see it every time I leave and come home.” Of that memorial, Laura said:

[Eric] is a man of few words. The words that he does speak is usually just repeating himself so he needed to plant that tree. And even to this day, [Eric] uses that tree as his therapy... [Eric] was off for the two-year anniversary I saw that he put flowers on the memorial we put out there. Sometimes I catch him out there just standing in front of the tree, and I’m sure he’s talking to [fallen officer]...that is [Eric’s] therapy and so that is something that has helped him a lot.”

Laura spoke of other ways that Eric copes with the event that include attachment to the uniform and the boots that he wore on the day of the shooting:

He also does other things that for him, help him. To me they seem a little odd, but I figure it that helps him I need to let him do it. That uniform he wore that day, he still wears it. It still has a couple of spots of [fallen officer’s] blood on it that we can’t get out. He still wears it. I’m not real

sure exactly why, his boots he wore that day. We bought him a brand new pair of boots, and he wore them a little while but then he put on the old boots cause they got a little more scuffed on the toe of one of the boots from when he was scrambling around on the ground and he told me that it was just important to him to have those on.

According to Laura, these uniform items are reminders of the need to be vigilant at all times.

Recall that Laura drove the short distance from her home to the scene after hearing her husband dispatched to the call and then, “shots fired, officer down!” She arrived to see Eric’s partner wounded and dying on the ground along with the dead suspect. She encountered a dazed husband who was struggling just to do his job. To cope with the traumatic effects of this event, Laura has an abiding appreciation that her husband survived and how quickly life can change. She discussed her grateful attitude, rituals she has instituted as part of their routine and the use of superstition intended to keep Eric safe:

One thing I’ve said to [Eric] numerous times is that I thank God everyday that he’s still here. I listen to everything he says because I’m fully aware that it might be the last time I hear his voice. Yes, there are times I get ticked off, but I try to never let him walk out the door without saying, I love you. We’ve got little totems around the house that we think are supposed to help keep him safe. He’s got a gargoyle up there that looks over him and that’s supposedly to help with safety. I put a Mezuzah at the back door and he’s supposed to rub it before he goes out to be safe. I used to write inside his vest, right over his heart. I’d just write the



initials of all of us and our boys. Just little superstitious things like that that we do more now.

Laura said that she has created memorials that include a photo of the fallen officer and a sculpture for herself and the fallen officer's widow and mother. Another way that Laura copes is to count her blessings. She is fully aware that her husband could have easily lost his life in this event and is grateful for every day that she has him. Laura described how she would listen to Eric breath while he was sleeping to reassure herself:

I think right afterwards I didn't sleep well only because I was listening for him.

And then for a little while I just listened to him breath. Because I felt so lucky that

I could still hear it... As time when on I could begin to believe that he was still there and that he was going to be there so I could rest.

Looking back, Laura is able to have some closure, in large part because she did go to the scene and saw that the suspect was dead. She described the gratitude she feels for the deputy who shot and killed the perpetrator before her husband, and/or other innocent lives were taken:

And I feel that the terror that I felt initially when I was trying to find that [Eric] was there, I think it's now become more gratitude picturing him walking towards me. That was better than sitting at home and have a squad car show up like so many spouses fear... so for [Eric] to come walking up to me, even covered in blood I knew he was upright and breathing.

Laura was plagued by thoughts of the fallen officer's widow and found closure by writing the widow a letter. She described taking the letter and the memorial she created to the fallen officer's widow as a way of reaching out and demonstrating support:

Yeah, I wrote the letter on [date]. I had to let my words kind of come together a little bit before I could even figure out what to say to his wife. Because the primary thing, and it is in the letter, that kept going through my mind was, there but for the grace of God go I and that was just plain...crazy and for me, writing letters comes easy... But by the time I was done I felt like my soul was a little bit lighter, and I bought [Fallen officer's spouse] and his mom each a little sculpture, let me get it. I bought them each this sculpture and it's called "hero" and I gave them each the letter. And that was our way, kind of like our olive branch to go to both of them and let them know how much we appreciated their sacrifice, but at the same time let them know that we would always be there. It was a very difficult visit, but after that I think that we kind of shrunk back into our little cocoon and the department kind of took over with it.

At the two-year anniversary of the shooting, Laura wore a memorial T-shirt to commemorate the passing of the fallen officer. The T-shirt allowed her to express her feelings without necessarily engaging in conversation. She commented, "The two-year anniversary...I'm really quiet. I just wore a memorial T-shirt for Ian. I don't say anything about it; I just want people to think about it when they see my shirt." Laura then described both the comfort and the frustration she experienced seeing the community line the streets of the motorcade to honor the fallen officer, and wondering why it required the death of a law enforcement officer for people to appreciate the work that they do on the community's behalf:

I watched them come down the freeway and you see that that one side of the freeway is closed for the motorcade to go through and you see people pulled off

on the side of the road saluting or putting their hands over their hearts, you like, God why is it that everyone can show appreciation now.

Laura did not want to be misunderstood on this point. She noted her appreciation of the public's support, but lamented that it takes such a tragedy to "...get people to wake up." Laura felt overwhelming support from law enforcement agencies represented at the funeral. She described her perceptions this way:

[I was]...feeling that brotherhood at that time, not only from this department but from every department within driving distance. They were all represented. They had their squad cars and the bike officers and then when they headed into the funeral it was not only the officers, but it was also the National Guard that his unit from there and the lengths that they went to give [fallen officer] the recognition he deserved just blew me away. That was very helpful to me from the department's point of view.

Looking back on the unfolding events of the day of the shooting, Laura has found closure. She described it this way:

I'm glad now, looking back on it that I was able to see what I saw because it helped me to get some closure. I was ecstatic to see that [name] had been there and that crack shot that he is, blew that monster away so that he couldn't kill my husband, turn around and kill [name] and then go into the casino and kill people. I think being able to see the suspect's face before they covered him up and me knowing what death looks like I could look at it and say, pardon my language, but that fucker suffered, even if it was for a split second. But, I was glad that he was gone because I didn't want to trust the justice system for something like that. He

got justice in that parking lot. That helped me know that at least karma's a bitch. And I feel that the terror that I felt initially when I was trying to find that [Eric] was there, I think it's now become more gratitude picturing him walking towards me. That was better than sitting at home and have a squad car show up like so many spouses fear...so for [Eric] to come walking up to me, even covered in blood I knew he was upright and breathing.

None of the participants in this study turned to extended family for support. Eric said, "They don't really understand. Even though my mom and dad live next door, they just don't. I love them because they are my parents, but they don't understand. They don't know what it's like."

Laura echoed Eric's sentiments and explained that her extended family is spread out around the country and that "...there's no way for them to grasp the whole, everything that you experience..." Of her co-workers, Laura said, "A few of my co-workers watched the motorcade and supported me, but I don't think that unless you've gone through it that they can truly understand."

**Couple coping strategies-Eric and Laura:** Laura and Eric have discussed this event a great deal. Those discussions have been part of their coping. They depend on each other for mutual support; however, it is not always as easy as having a conversation. Eric is quiet and Laura prefers to process. Like any couple, they have their disagreements. Laura described their conflicting coping styles in processing. Laura explained that she wants to talk through issues, while Eric just wants to move on:

Of course, as a woman I want to sit there and keep discussing it. I've got to have that closure before we stop arguing. And he's like; let's just start over. Doesn't

want to discuss it...So every now and then we have a hiccup over that, but we manage to make it through...Usually the only way I can get closure is if I keep poking him to make him argue, or if we end up just waiting until that pile of dirt under the rug is built up so much that you know there is a big blow up over it. But even the big blow up doesn't normally last long and I get it out and then we can start over, but [Eric] describes himself as an on-off person, and when he decides to shut himself off to an argument he does it and I'm still here fuming...he always says that we have a good life that we have everything to be happy about, that we shouldn't be arguing about anything.

Eric provided his perspective about their different coping styles and explained that he no longer has the patience he had before the shooting:

Well, I don't have the patience I used to have, I don't get angry, but I don't have the patience I used to have and I think that has affected us from dealing with so much stuff on the street if that makes any sense...For me, if we get into an argument I want it to be over, like fast, because there is so much other junk that goes on outside you know that we deal with, that people deal with, problems to deal with that we don't need to argue...I try to be as understanding as I can and she does the same and we end up getting through it.

Laura provided context for Eric's observations that he has diminished patience. She pointed out that Eric came away from his shooting with a new perspective on life in general and has little patience for conflicts that he views as trivial, or at least not important in the overall scheme of things:

I don't think it's so much patience. When something like that happens you want to focus on the positive when you're home and you don't want to think about negative things. And if something negative comes up, just get that out of here, I just want to laugh and enjoy this time and if I were to be particularly witchy he'll say, let's just start over you know, he doesn't want to talk rude or anything like that. Some times are more difficult than others but when you've been through so much bad you don't want to experience anymore of it.

Eric agreed with Laura and added, "For me it's just, she tells me all kinds of stuff and I accept it, I don't let it bother me and that's to me the success of being together..." Eric shared his perspective that life is too short to argue, especially with his best friend (Laura), a lesson deeply felt following the shooting and the death of his beat partner.

Over time, Eric commented that he and Laura have made accommodations in the way in which they handle conflict:

I think we're probably cruising at the same spot right now... We argue, we get over it, we make up. I've come to the conclusion that if you don't argue, you don't care. I try to be as understanding as I can and she does the same and we end up getting through it.

Laura and Eric adapted their relationship to the trauma of the officer-involved fatal incident. Laura treasures every day that she has with Eric, knowing how close he came to being a fatality in the incident. That realization has altered that way she views their time together and apart, and she offered her thoughts on what it takes for a law enforcement couple to survive an officer-involved fatal incident:

For me, I would say being able to watch him walk out the door in the morning, to kiss him and say goodbye, and be safe. If I hadn't, and if we hadn't successfully gotten through that I don't know that I would be able to let him walk out the door. I have to trust that, I have told him many times since [fallen officer] was killed that [Eric's] strongest, most effective weapon that he has is right here [pointing to her head] and if he's got that clear and he's thinking well, then I know he will come home to me. I'm human and there are times when I probably give him something that's on his mind when he goes to work, but for the most part I think that success shows that you respect the danger of your spouse's job and trust them enough to let them walk out the door and go do it.

In the context of coping with the effects of the shooting on their relationship, Eric and Laura commented on the interview process itself and how it functioned to give them a voice. Laura said, "I think it's nice to have the opportunity to do this because I don't know of anytime or anywhere that they would have stopped to think about the spouses." Eric added that:

That's the first thing when I read the email, I said this is perfect, this is an opportunity, not just me to be able help out but for [Laura] to be able to help out, to tell her side, tell it from her viewpoint, to tell what was on her heart and her mind and how she felt about it was important to me. I'm glad that you're here...And we haven't opened up to anybody else.

Eric emphasized the importance of his relationship with Laura as a coping factor. He said, "I just needed some time to pass that I could just think myself and talk with my best friend." He clarified that his "best friend" is Laura. He went on to say:

She's fully supportive any time I want to talk, she's there; she's ready every time. My problem is that I don't want to talk about it. She's always been there and been supportive with anything I need to talk to her about.

Laura expanded on how she helped Eric cope, especially in the immediate aftermath of the event. She also discussed her insights into her husband and what she observed him do to cope:

For me again, just in the early days just being a quiet, supportive presence for [Eric] to know that I was there for him to lean on, but not expect him to talk about it because there are not words to describe what that feels like and the whole thing is just so larger than life and everything that happens, he has his own way of looking at it and taking it in and I've got mine. In the early days it's not the time to try and force him to talk and then later on however he chooses to deal with it I have to respect that too instead of telling him you have to go see a psychologist and you have to talk about this. I knew that oiling the hinges and planting that tree was his way getting through it so I just have to step back and let him do it.

**Summary of individual and couple coping-Eric and Laura.** Eric and Laura demonstrated coping strategies that are both similar and dissimilar. Eric and Laura both created memorials to Eric's fallen partner. But, Eric is a quiet man and Laura needs dialogue to process her feelings. Conflicts occur from time to time as Laura seeks closure on issues when Eric would prefer to avoid contention. Both have gained a greater appreciation for life and their life together. Each manifests his or her appreciation for life in different ways. Eric believes that life is too short for contention and avoids contentious discussions. Laura is aware that her husband could meet the same fate as his fallen



partner and will not allow him to leave the home without exchanging loving sentiments.

The only conflict centers on Laura's need to process and Eric's need to avoid. Their bond is sufficient to allow them to recognize and respect their different coping styles.

**Lisa and Jon: "...I went through it a million times in my head."**

**Individual coping strategies:** Lisa and Jon were employed by the same agency and were both present at the same officer-involved fatal incident. They experienced the event from very different vantage points. Jon, a canine officer, stood post all night to ensure that the suspects remained contained within the established perimeter. He had virtually no contact with the suspects or the child victim. He did hear the child cry and has wondered since the incident if his dog's barking precipitated that response. He coped primarily through recognition that the parent, not any action by law enforcement, was responsible for the child's murder, and by focusing on the events of 9/11 instead of the child's death.

Lisa, on the other hand, was intimately involved with the perpetrators, and especially the child victim. As part of her assignment as a hostage negotiator, she learned about the child from family members and prepared to receive the child once she was rescued-an outcome she anticipated. She was present at the shocking moment that the girl's bloody body was revealed. In that moment, Lisa had the presence of mind to recognize that another officer assigned as a sniper was emotionally distraught and appeared as though he would shoot the suspects. She intervened and diffused the situation. That officer later retired as a direct result of this incident, according to Lisa.

Lisa coped with the incident in four ways. First, she was motivated to analyze the incident with a focus on improving performance in future negotiation assignments. She

read all the reports generated about the incident and reviewed her actions in detail. Second, she responded to requests from other agencies to provide training and to share her knowledge about lessons learned from the event. Third, Lisa is an advocate for addressing the emotional needs of officers affected by the trauma of officer-involved fatal incidents. Fourth, she takes responsibility for her self-care through exercise and riding horses for relaxation.

Immediately following the event, Lisa coped with the traumatic scene she had just experienced through an intense mental review of what occurred. She said:

...I went through it a million times in my head. I mean, from the minute I was driving home. You know, what indicators did I miss that this little girl probably wasn't alive. So I started trying, I'd say just immediately, as I'm driving home, trying to figure out, number one, I still didn't know about Jon and [another officer] and I was very worried about [another officer]. I didn't know how it was affecting them. So that was on my mind so I was going between that and trying to figure out how I missed that that little girl was dead all the time I was talking to the people ten feet away from me...But I just, I started trying to think through it and I think that helped me a little bit, to keep going back through it in my mind.

In the days, weeks and months that followed the incident Lisa found solace in activities she always enjoyed while she continued to process the event. She commented:

So I'm asking questions and when I would spend time doing that would be running and riding my horses which is stuff I did anyway but I found that was a place that is more normal and I felt good. I'd be out running, I'd be thinking...

During those times she focused on solutions to address deficits she perceived in the operation. She tried to focus on positive things she, and the agency could do, instead of ruminating on the negative aspects of the event:

You know, it was more just a better place to put my thoughts instead of thinking about how awful this thing was and wallowing in it, the actual ugly...kept trying to move away from that and think about stuff that actually could yield a result...It was motivational for me. I immediately saw, man, we could do things better. Our peer counseling program, I've gotta get on that.

Lisa reached out to other agencies for ideas and sought more training to improve not only her own level of competence, but also that of her negotiation team. As Lisa reached out, she started getting requests to present to other negotiation teams around the country.

Lisa's motivation was not only to improve operations, but also to emphasize the need to care for officers who have been involved in a traumatic event:

So when I use the word motivational, that thing, because I've had to present it so many times, every time I present, it becomes motivational again...I'm talking about a lot of those things in my presentation on how to take care of your people in your department. What you need to do. Most negotiators are good at talking to people. Like you were picked as a negotiator for a reason. Your job doesn't end when that call out's over. Okay, your job is to go back and you see that cop sitting there, hey, how are you feeling. You know, and I mean, so I'm still motivated by that incident. You know, I'll be motivated in November when I go talk to Texas about it. To try and help people realize that there's something they can do when you feel like things didn't work out and you've done all you can do

cuz there's still more ... very few people who've been in critical incidents have the opportunity I've had to go out and help other people.

Jon took a different approach to coping with the unacceptable outcome of the event. He said, "I think, for me, I try to put stuff just... somewhere and just move on." Jon explained that the incident occurred immediately following September 11th. He was able to assume an external focus, and empathize with the people killed and injured in that event as well as the experience of the first responders to that incident. Doing so helped Jon to move on from his own experience with the child's death.

Jon also differentiated between his experience and Lisa's experience of the event. He acknowledged that Lisa formed a deeper emotional attachment to the victim child than he did by virtue of his assignment that kept him at a distance. He knew nothing of the child, nor did he see her body.

**Couple coping strategies-Lisa and Jon.** Lisa and Jon pointed out that what distinguishes them from other couples in this study is that they are both law enforcement officers, working for the same agency and were both present at the event, albeit in different roles. They understood the event, the players, the organizational dynamics, and can leave things unsaid. At the time of the interview, Jon had been retired for a few years. When Lisa comes home from work in a bad mood, Jon does not have to ask, "He just knows," according to Lisa.

Lisa and Jon's level of communication and understanding is based on common experience that allows them to cope without long conversations about the work environment. However, their common bond as police officers does not always facilitate open communication.

In a somewhat paradoxical fashion, Lisa described her hesitancy to discuss a certain aspect of the event because she was unsure how Jon was affected. Her hesitancy was related directly to the fact that both were law enforcement officers, employed by the same agency, and participated in the same event. Lisa explained that she was reluctant to discuss allegations that Jon's canine frightened the victim child. Lisa described how she wanted to talk with Jon immediately following the incident and to make sure he was okay:

I remember when I first got released from the scene to go back to the station, I was very much looking forward to seeing [Jon], just to make sure that everything was fine, to find out if he was feeling bad because the allegations about the dog and stuff. And I was so disappointed when I heard that he had went home. I was like, this really sucks and I was just hoping to see [Jon] and he's gone home. What do you mean they've gone home?...Hey, it's 9/11, and it was the same impulse. Like I need to talk to [Jon] about this, you know. In that moment...I had that identical impulse, to reach, yeah, to reach out to him and it was unavailable to me and that was a very hard thing. It goes back to what I was saying before. When something happens to us, good, bad, traumatic, exciting, you know, we wanta reach out and tell somebody. Hey, I just got this. I just won that. Or oh, this just happened. I just got in a wreck.

Lisa needed to process and make sure that Jon was okay. She went on to talk about specific officers who she was concerned about because of the respective roles they played at the scene. But, Lisa had a specific concern about (Jon). There had been allegations that

the barking by Jon's canine frightened the victim child and irritated the perpetrators. Lisa did not know what Jon's emotional response was to that allegation:

I think I was, I don't wanta use the word afraid but you know, with the intel I had, knowing they were saying that the dog scaring [victim child]. That's why she was screaming. Cuz that was the negotiation that was going on out there. The dog's scaring her. Like oh, boy, I don't wanta talk to [Jon] about that. You know, not wanting to bring all of that back up. I think it was just in the beginning not something I wanted to, to talk about that. I mean, I didn't know how badly it affected him or, you know, was kinda waiting to see if he said anything. I know, you may not remember, but I remember talking to you about how angry I was with the department about the car and the little things and, you know, that sort of thing. So I mean, there was some conversation but actually sitting down, at least on my end, talking about feelings of how it made me feel or whatever, that really didn't occur.

Jon recalled that the officer-involved fatal incident occurred during the early stages of their relationship and that Lisa had a tendency to keep her feelings to herself:

...She, she keeps... she, a lot of times, at the beginning of the relationship, she kinda a lot of times kept to her own counsel and so it wasn't until as we've, we've gotten along that we share a lot more stuff and I don't ever remember it affecting her...I think a good part of it could've been, is we had two different jobs at this incident.

Jon explained that he and Lisa did not see each other at the incident and that they had different roles to play. He speculated that had they been together at the scene their level

of conversation afterwards might have been different. Jon referenced another shooting incident familiar to me to make his point:

So had we been on a beat together, going to a call together, say it would've been her and I at the [another incident]. We'd probably talk about it a little bit differently than, than we do about this because we were both, you know, for, you know, put in harm's way, directly in harm's way. That guy was calling the cops, you know [referring to another incident]. Yelling at the cops and was gonna shoot the cops. So that type of incident is different than this campground incident because we were in two different places and we had two different jobs...And you were there and so, and so as far as, you know, had she and I been on... had she been on the next tree [referring to officers using trees for cover at the other incident] or had I been negotiating with her, we might have different ideas. We might have talked about this differently but we had, we were in two different places. You know, even though we were at the same incident, we were at two different places and we had different jobs. You know, my job was just to be quiet and send the land shark [police canine] when somebody came out of that tent.

Lisa addressed the need to provide training for the spouses of law enforcement officers. She also talked about what she did to address the need to provide coping skills to spouses:

I finally got it approved to do a spouse program. We had like six new officers at the same time so I brought in all their spouses and I talked about the critical incidents program and what to expect and we talked about, you know, gun safety in the homes and we went through everything. It was so wonderful and I'm on a

first name basis with the wives that were involved and they understand what's gonna happen in critical incident protocol so they don't have to ask their husbands a lot of questions. They'll know it's okay, this is how it happens. There's not, you know, cuz they're confused. They're scared.

Lisa cited an example involving a critical incident that was monitored from a scanner by at least one spouse in another jurisdiction as another motivating factor in putting on training classes for spouses:

His brother got shot and was coming over the scanner and all the cars are coming up and down through town and the wives were at the back door at that sheriff's department going berserk cuz nobody knew who was pinned down, who was shot, who was killed, what was gonna happen. And when I heard that and I'm hearing [name] story and stuff, I'm like, I gotta do something at the PD cuz there's no reason these wives and few husbands we have shouldn't have the opportunity to understand what's gonna happen in the big thing. And it was great.

Lisa contrasted how coping in their relationship, as a law enforcement couple differs from a couple in which only one spouse is in law enforcement:

What I think would be different between he and I than some of your other spouse/officer, non-officer/spouse is a lot of things I can...say or don't say to him, I can leave things unsaid. Like for instance, [incident name], since that's kinda what we're mainly talking about, he knows about that. I don't need to go into details. He knows how important it is for me to go away and teach. That's very inconvenient for the marriage cuz I leave for a week at a time and go different places. But he doesn't even question or ask. And if he were a regular



spouse, why do you gotta go talk about that thing again? He has an understanding, not only because he was there but he gets all the dynamics that go into these sort of things and being a law enforcement officer. When I come home off the job and something bad has happened, he doesn't have to ask. He just knows, you know, that this is what happens. He knows the players because we worked the same agency which might be different than two officers, two different agencies. I mean, I can say a name, he goes, okay. We don't have, I mean, there are so many things that are unsaid between us that we both know so it's that, okay, well, we don't need to spend three hours talking about why this is bad.

**Summary of individual and couple coping-Jon and Lisa.** Jon and Lisa were the only participant couples who were both law enforcement officers. In addition, they met and worked at the same agency. Their perspectives on the couple relationship, how they were affected by the incident and how they cope present a unique landscape for this study. Lisa coped with this officer-involved fatal incident by mentally rehearsing the events and analyzing every aspect of law enforcement's response to it. She coped by providing ongoing training throughout the United States based on this incident. She also coped by advocating for the emotional wellbeing of other law enforcement officers and their families through officer and spouse training. Lisa also engages in self-care through exercise and activities she enjoys. One coping strategy she wanted to employ immediately after the incident was talking with other officers involved in the incident. That opportunity was not available to her because officers were sent home to avoid overtime expenditures. Ultimately, she took it upon herself to contact her fellow officers individually, and engaged them in one-on-one conversation about the officer-involved

fatal incident. Her preference would have been to meet with everyone in the same room directly after the incident. Jon coped with the failure of law enforcement to rescue the child by simply avoiding it. He redirected his attention to the events of 9/11.

**Bill and Judy: "...sometimes good people have to do difficult things."**

**Individual coping strategies.** Bill had a difficult time processing and coping with the fact that the suspect's gun was empty, but he knows to this day that given the same set of circumstances, he would make the same decision again.

Immediately following the incident Bill needed to get away to process the event. He explained how he needed to create space to reflect on the shooting:

I had to, I had to just get out so I, my son and I hopped on a motorcycle and we did a road trip on a motorcycle and it was probably the best trip I had but I had a lot of time to think and it was during that trip that I really started kinda processing everything and sorta started to deal with it... Yeah, just kinda needed to get out. Needed to sort of process some things on my own... But what that did is it just allowed me time to think. And... piece everything together. I replayed this thing thousands of times in my head during the whole trip, just trying to, you know, remember specific details and everything.

Judy was quick to note that following the event, Bill was actively involved in learning all he could about officer-involved fatal incidents:

Oh my goodness. He was very proactive. I would say just over the couple of years, I think out of necessity to address frustration and kind of processing things, but like I said, he was very proactive with... Let me turn that around. His friend was very constant with him. They talked frequently. So he spoke to him. He, you

know, read books on...different angles of the subject. Certainly I can tell he paid attention when he saw things on the news... You know, you read an article and you wanta read it and you wanta get all the details and keep processing those kind of things. He did a lot of reading though. I just have to interject there, to say that he really, this was not a sitting and stewing on his own.”

She also noted that Bill actively sought out the aid of a close friend who was older, more experienced and had been involved in officer-involved fatal incidents. Judy said, “I mean, he had particularly one friend that was, in my mind, instrumental in helping him to process that, not just with faith but with shared experience.”

Bill expanded on Judy’s comments and described his relationship with two senior officers and how his association with them helped him cope with his shooting:

Well, with me, I think a lot of, if you know [name], he and I would carpool to [city]. He works for [agency], too. And [name] been in a number of shootings...I think a lot of, [name] he and I would carpool to [city]...Amazing. Been in a number of shootings. Very strong faith and [name] kinda was my guy to talk to on that hour long ride home every night after work in the year, two years after the shooting...so you know, my, those two guys were kinda my peer group, specific to the shooting. And just, you know, it’s invaluable bouncing things off, bouncing feelings, frustrations, hearing their struggles they went through. Different incidents, different make-up for all three of our shootings but similar, similar issues, you know, struggles, things of that nature.

It has been two years since the shooting, and it still evokes emotion when Bill tells his story, but he has found peace with it. Bill tells of a comment made by senior officer immediately following the shooting that provided a context that aided in his coping:

You know, Rich, I put it to bed. Other than obviously right now, I, it's not something that comes up. We certainly don't talk about it. So I really don't, sitting here right now, obviously was, I had some difficulty talking about it. But really, you know, I think, I feel like I'm in a good place with it. I'm still upset by it. I'm still upset that I had to do what I had to do. [Name] said something to me about five minutes after I shot this guy and it stuck with me and he said, sometimes good people have to do difficult things. That's all he said. And that made a, it impacted me. I never told him that. But it did. It made me realize, okay, I was in a situation that sucked and I had to do... what I had to do. And praise the Lord, I'm here. Pray for that guy. And, but you know, by and large, I'm, it doesn't come up. I just kinda trek on.

Bill also received support from the deceased's family. They contacted the agency to reach out to Bill, and the agency functioned as a go between to protect Bill and passed along the information. Bill commented:

Well, you know, the family of the guy I shot wanted to reach out to me and I was glad. I got a call from one of my sergeants and he said, hey, the family called. They wanta let, they want you to know that they're, they support what you did, and that meant a lot to me...which helped quite a bit. They actually wanted to get in touch with me but my department said, you know, they shielded me.

After being assured that Bill was unharmed, Judy necessarily turned her thoughts and focus on what was before her. She described how she coped as a wife and a mother at a moment of crisis:

Once I had determined that he was fine, he...was not on the receiving end of any injury, they had to go through an interview process...but he was okay, I was okay... I mean, and I think, you know, that's the part I think as a wife and primarily as a mom. I mean, having kids, that's just not an option, to be a mess and bouncing all over the place and, yeah. That was it. There were other things going on. I had to address this, I had to make sure he was okay, and then I needed to, I needed to take care of the other things that were creeping up on my quickly.

Judy was anticipating the arrival of family members who were flying in from out of town. She had the children to care for, and now had to deal with a husband who had just shot and killed another man. Judy, however, is no stranger to the critical events that accompany her husband's law enforcement career. Bill interjected that Judy is "...pretty seasoned" when it comes to dealing with the after effects of tragic events he brings home. Judy said that the things that Bill did to cope with the effects of the shooting helped her as well. She commented, "They allowed me to continue on with my daily life and not be quite as affected by it...It allowed me to be sort of oblivious of it, with the exception of a few moments, and I think that's wonderful."

**Couple coping strategies.** Coping for Judy and Bill involved turning to their faith and toward each other as a support system. Judy explained:

Honestly, I think, again, that's why acknowledging faith and pursuing it was so key for us because it gave us, it gave us a support system beyond each other that

we can really look to and draw on when we need that. Instead of kind of sealing up when we're struggling with things and then waiting and trying to find a good time to talk or vent or whatever. That's been tremendous for us. It's given us a tremendous sense of balance...it was processing things, talking about things. For the most part, we do a lot of that.

Since the incident Bill has looked more toward Judy for support:

Well, I know for me, I certainly lean on her more than I did. I think in the past probably four or five years post this event, I have appreciated her, leaned on her more, depend on her more than I think I did before. And I don't know if that's just a combination of faith or recognizing my own mortality more. When I first started this job, I would sit here and look you in the eye and swear that I was bullet proof.

Judy pointed out that the shooting was a "blessing" for them because, "...it was a culmination for so many different things. Because it was that final, you know, smack in the face that we needed to really pursue faith. And pursue each other in a way that we'd never done before."

Bill was also able to find the silver lining in an otherwise painful event:

Yeah. So I think, you know, I think the positive effect resulting from the incident was the fact that it was a huge kind of push towards faith and then from faith, we have sort of a renewed commitment to each other based on our faith and what, how our faith basically commands us to interact as a husband and a wife. So, I guess in a roundabout way, the incident though faith has had a positive impact on us just because we're trying to be more faithful in God's eyes with respect to our marriage and how husband and wife and fathers and mothers interact and how we

interact with each other, how we interact with children, with our children, with respect to faith.

Bill and Judy are veterans when it comes to dealing with trauma experienced through Bill's work in law enforcement. This is not to say that they did not suffer from the stress of the incident and the subsequent investigation. Judy talked about the effects of the stress of having to wait two-year years for a final determination from the investigating authority and how they coped through dialogue:

There was, the length of time that it took, there was a sense of, of absolute powerlessness that was imposed on us, that I, I don't think we deserved. I don't think you deserved that. I don't think our marriage deserved it. I don't think any officer that goes through that deserves that sense of being completely at someone else's whim. That bothered me more than anything. It was processing things, talking about things. For the most part, we do a lot of that. I think most law enforcement would agree there's some, you just don't talk about some things but that lack of common decency will forever hold a little bit of a bitter spot with me.

Bill and Judy discussed the role of their Christian faith in coping with the shooting as a married couple and how that faith strengthened their relationship, allowing their marriage to survive and grow through the experience. Bill had this to say about his faith and how he believes that other officers and their marriages would benefit:

Well, I look, I look to faith. And I would encourage any of these new cops, if they don't have solid faith in Christ, that man, what a difference that makes, I think. Being a cop before my faith, being a cop after, huge difference...And so...I would encourage, gently encourage exploring that. If that's not a factor in their

life, I would explore that because you know, it is a commission. And you're gonna be exposed to a lot and you're gonna be asked to do a lot and it's gonna take a tremendous toll on you and if you don't have, if you don't come from this position, come at this profession from, in my mind, a position of faith and have that strong, rooted belief and understanding, it's gonna be very difficult. And I've seen guys go out on both sides. I've seen the drunks, the bitter, pissed off 30 year vets leave angry, the alcoholics. I've seen people process things different, in different ways that I don't think are as healthy and if you, man, you have to have in this job that you're stepping into, these are the young kids we're talking about, you have to realize that it is, it's almost, it's warfare. Spiritual warfare. And if you're not prepared... I mean, we put our vests on, you know, we clean our gun. You know, our officer safety is at a high level but we're not preparing ourselves for the spiritual fight that we're about to engage in, it's gonna catch up and I've seen it end bad for some and I've seen those that have faith. It seems to be different for those so I guess as a Christian, I'd be remiss if I didn't push that. And so that's what I would, that's what I would say.

Judy added to Bill's reflections, confirming the critical role that faith has played in their lives as well as the need to cultivate a friendship within the marriage relationship:

...without our faith, I could argue, I mean, we wouldn't be here right now...It is absolutely responsible for this new chapter in our lives, with all of the craziness that we've had...I don't, as a couple or be willing to discuss this. Any, any of those possibilities. But I would also say, you know, if we were talking to a panel of young people already given the fact that I agree just as strongly that faith is



necessary for a multitude of reasons, for the spouses, because you need something to lean on. You need to be able to make reason out of things and you're not always gonna have people that can do that for you. But I would also tell people to cultivate...the friendship aspect of their relationship because husbands and wives do not always come together. That part of things doesn't always make sense when you're under stress, when you're a cop. That's a, a husband and wife relationship as, you know, we're all brought up to believe it's supposed to be, is really... It's just not always present. You have to be a friend that, like you would be to someone else, right? Friends don't always expect something in return. They have their friend come to them and you're always, as a friend, you know, oh, cry on my shoulder. You know, come on over. I'll make you something to eat. I would say if you bring that willingness as a friend to your relationship, to this job, in addition to faith, you can make it. Because I think one of the biggest pitfalls, too, is as the spouse, always expecting some kind of return...And I think for us, too, leading up to this, it's been a tremendous friendship that's helped to support us through those rough times. Now, in addition to faith really supporting our relationship as a couple, I mean, that's just been icing on the cake. It's not to say, you know, you wake up and, you know, it's, it's fairytale land every day but it's given a sense of commitment and understanding and acceptance that we never had before. But leading up to that, I would say a very strong commitment to friendship is absolutely necessary. Or neither of you will make it through. And acknowledging the value in just not saying anything at all sometimes.

**Summary of individual and couple coping-Bill and Judy.** Two coping themes emerged during my interview with Bill and Judy. Both Judy and Bill cited their faith as their primary coping strategy as individuals, and as a couple. The second theme was their reliance on each other, as a couple, to cope with trauma. Bill commented that he has become aware of his mortality where once he believed that he was “invincible.” He relies more on Judy since the shooting to cope. Judy commented that she found a “silver lining” in the shooting because it exposed Bill’s unresolved grief from the first incident, and caused them to pursue their faith and each other more ardently. Judy discussed the value of the “friendship” she and Bill share as a couple and the importance of dialogue in the coping process.

**Larry and Diane: “I just pick up the pieces and keep the rest of it together.”**

**Individual coping strategies.** Larry made it clear during the interview that his agency did not support him following the incident and Larry believes that their lack of support hindered his healing from the trauma of this shooting. Larry learned that he had to learn to cope with the long-term effects of his shooting through his own efforts with the support of his spouse:

Well, I think you just need to come to terms with something that you have to deal with. The department is not going to deal with it. As far as they’re concerned they want to move on. Friends and family for the most part they want to move on but it’s something you have to deal with with your spouse. That should be the focus of rebuilding on this...But I think what I came from this and which I’d tell anyone else, in the long run people’s lives just to move on and you’re still going to be

there if you allow yourself just to be there. You need to find your way past it and the only way you can do it is home, because that's where it's all at.

Larry has a group of old law enforcement friends who work for other agencies. Their friendship is rooted in their youth and they have stayed close over the years. Diane observed that, "...your friends have always been very supportive because most of them are cops. So they've all been real supportive. My family wise, I don't know." Larry observed that even within the law enforcement community he has only found a handful of colleagues through a career that he could count on. He commented, "Only your buddies, just a couple of guys you have through your career. You probably can count on one hand as many close friends as you've had through law enforcement now that you had then."

Diane observed that Larry coped by seeking support outside of the agency:

Yeah and then I think you started seeking support in other places. You gave up on that administration. You finally just let go of them being jerks and not identifying the great job you had done and he just kind of, at some point, I don't remember when, you just kind of let go of it and said I'll just do the best job I can do here...

It has been a decade since the shooting and Larry has not been able to sleep well since.

Diane vividly recalls how Larry tried to cope with insomnia and the stresses associated with the shooting and the lack of support from agency leadership:

Mostly what you would do is get up in the middle of the night and go sit at the computer and go through all his files so he could start building his case. That's what he did. He didn't really do anything with the shooting. It was mostly just directing yourself towards protecting yourself and building your case.

Larry also recalls nightmares interrupting his sleep, and how he would cope by utilizing his awake time to write down his thoughts and refine his arguments in support of his position:

Yeah there were things like when I had nightmares when I think about it and just wake up have a pad and pencil next to my bed and write out what I think about those types of things...I think it screwed up my sleep since then. I still have difficulty. I always have to take something to sleep. Even after all these years.

Like other participants in this study (Dave and Pat), Larry and Diane have distanced themselves from socializing with other law enforcement officers and their families. Diane prefers to process the stresses of Larry's job within the context of the family. She noted that she does share with a small circle of friends, but even limits how much she discusses Larry's work with them:

I have a really good group of friends that I have worked with for almost 30 years. They're a lot of fun. They are real supportive. I still don't share; I mean I might incidentally say, you know, [Larry] was involved in this or that. You know...I don't talk.

Diane explained that she was part of a police wives group that was supportive years ago, but that everyone eventually went their own way, "So that's not a good place for support. Mostly just my own personal friends." Even so, she avoids talking about Larry's job outside of their family unit.

At some point, Diane had to move on with her own life and past the shooting and the trauma Larry experienced. Her comments contained elements of sentiments expressed by Judy:

I think I just, from what I can recall I just had to separate myself and move on. I had things to do. I had to work. I had the kids...I just pick up the pieces and keep the rest of it together, keep the kids together, keep the family together, go shopping for Christmas, do what has to be done. Keep everything moving and flowing like normal.

**Couple coping strategies.** While Larry faced challenges at work, Diane was the primary organizer of family life at home. She maintained a sense of normality in the days, weeks and years following the shooting. In the midst of the demands of their work and family lives, Larry and Diane continued to process Larry's struggles together. Diane observed that Larry kept her well informed, and she found that having a working knowledge of his work life and the particulars of the shooting was helpful. She was careful to point out that they do not view their relationship as having two lives, but one life that they share:

I think what he did the most was come home and talk about it because I knew how he was feeling and I knew what was going on. I think it would have been really frustrating not to know what had happened and he told me all the aspects of the case. He shares, I mean he tells me a lot, we talk about what goes on in the office even though now its kind of, civil liabilities is kind of boring. But, it's interesting. I don't know too much about police work and so, I think just him talking about it, me knowing what's happening with the case, how everything came out, what they found with all the forensic evidence and his bullets and whose bullets and all that was all good to know. He just keeps me well informed so that I'm not in the dark. It's not like this is his life and this is my life. We just

come together and talk about our lives because we both have stressful jobs in different ways. So, we just both talk about it.

Processing Larry's shooting together is a hallmark of how Diane and Larry cope. Larry values Diane's counsel and she tried to help him cope with the shooting and the difficulties he experienced with the agency leadership by helping him to assume a more adaptive view:

And, I just kept reinforcing to him that it's a job, it's not defining who you are as a person. You have to let it go and I just kept trying to support him in that way. I know this is a big part of your life and you have these friends and this career that you like, but it was stressful and frustrating for me because I leave my job. I come home and I have my life. I only work there because that's what I like to do for work.

Diane tried to help Larry keep his employment in perspective in the context of a larger life vision that included the enduring relationships of family and friends outside of the law enforcement culture.

Like all participant couples in this study, extended family did not play a significant role in supporting Larry or Diane through the crisis of an officer-involved fatal incident. It is important to note that no participant perceived an intentional lack of support from family, only that extended family cannot understand. Larry and Diane avoid talking about law enforcement issues not only with extended family, but also with their own children. Larry observed that they do not share very much with family. Diane added, "No, we don't share a lot of our issues. The kids probably know some to an extent..." Larry agreed: "We've never really drawn them into a lot of it, just intentionally you

know. I'm pleased that none of my children became police officers. I didn't, you know what I mean?"

Larry gave credit to Diane for helping him to cope by teaching him how to step away from his emotions and gain perspective:

I'll tell you, she's taught me how to take the emotion [out] of things. During this whole process, after the shooting and everything I would put things down and she'd sit down and say, look, take the emotion out, do this and that. I've learned a lot. In fact, my writing at work has improved because of her input.

Diane recognized the power of being a good listener. As Larry struggled with the shooting and his agency's treatment of him following the shooting, Diane listened and encouraged him to avail himself of professional counseling services:

You don't know what to do. I think all you can do is listen. And, like I said, and [Larry] is really good about saying how he feels and expressing himself, so I think that's all I could do. And then just support him through what he felt like he needed to do to protect himself. But as far as the shooting themselves go, I think we just talked a lot. We just talked a lot about how it felt. We just talked a lot. I would encourage him to go see the psychiatrist or psychologist or whoever they had on hand. He would come home and, like you said, it helped a little bit. It sometimes just helped to talk to someone else who knew the police department even better than me, and the processes. So I think that helped too.

Larry talked about the differences between his family of origin and Diane's family of origin, and how she has always been the stabilizing force in the family. Larry said that it is Diane's voice he seeks for reason and a reality check:

You know, I came from a very dysfunctional background. Nobody in my family was a police officer. More crooks than anything in my family. We were still in high school when we met and that's one thing I've always appreciated about her upbringing and her family is that they have always had a family. A mother and father and so what I've seen through the years, things that would never occur to me as far as keeping a family together, such as family dinners and stuff, she does it. She puts things together and makes sure the kids are always included and makes sure we do this and do that and the way I was brought up those things never occurred to me, so I was just really fortunate that she has always had that commitment to the family keeping things together because I would [inaudible] to work extra to make some extra money and she would say, no why don't we just do this with the kids. She has always been my voice of reason, you know, bring me back to reality.

Larry and Diane's marriage has survived for almost four decades and two shootings in which Larry took a life, one at the beginning of his career and the other nearing the end of his career. Larry and Diane both had thoughts about the secret of their success in marriage. Diane discussed that they, like most married couples, have their disagreements, but that they have learned from their experiences, especially the traumatic ones. From those experiences they have improved their ability to communicate. She referenced their family's stages of development from the child rearing stage to their present stage of being empty nesters:

...even though we sometimes have explosive moments of, you know, defensiveness, or had, it's gotten a lot better, we are able to recognize things



more. I think that we can say to each other, so what happened today you seem like you're in a bad mood? What's going on or do you want to talk about it? You know when we were raising kids and he was working so much you were with the kids, we didn't have time to talk with each other. I was working days and he was working nights, or I was working nights and he was working days so we didn't have to do the daycare thing and our kids are spaced quite a ways apart, so it seemed like we always had somebody that needed a lot of attention somewhere along the line and they were really busy. You know, they've done a lot in school and stuff. So now I think it all just kind of fell into place, like the empty nesters and we could support each other through it and we've been through these things. That's what makes relationships is the experiences you have together and how you get through it... It takes a lot of commitment. I don't know, I think we both have that for each other though. We love our kids, we love our family, we wouldn't want it any other way.

Larry's family is his highest priority and it was apparent throughout the interview that he values, not only the moral support, but the wise counsel of his spouse. He said, "I think with her support and everything, going through all this, it's been more than support though. It's been realistic advice..."

**Summary of individual and couple coping-Larry and Diane.** Larry relied primarily on his relationship with Diane to cope with the emotional effects of the shooting. He credited Diane for helping him to separate his thoughts and his emotions. He discovered that he could not rely on his agency, friends, or extended family. He noted that those outside of law enforcement do not understand, and that he could only confide

in trusted, long-time friends who were also in law enforcement from other agencies. Larry accessed his internal resources to make a conscious decision about his attitude toward his circumstances. He decided that, in spite of his unhappiness, he would approach his job with a positive attitude and a good work ethic. Larry coped with nightmares and waking in the middle of the night by getting up and working on his case against his agency.

Diane coped with the disruption to her life and their family life by compartmentalizing the issues confronting Larry and those of the family. She provided support to Larry through dialogue and helping to bring context and perspective to his situation while focusing on keeping the family together. Diane preferred to process the effects of the shooting within the couple relationship and shared little with friends or with the children. She encouraged Larry to seek professional counseling and supported him in that process. Diane values commitment to marriage and honors the difficult experiences she and Larry have survived together.

**Frank and Ann: "...the police had no other choice."**

**Individual coping strategies.** The primary concern for Frank is to separate work and family and to avoid bringing the negativity of the job into the home. This is how Frank copes with his job, including this officer-involved fatal incident. Support from the suspect's mother also aided Frank in coping with this officer-involved fatal incident.

Immediately following the incident, Frank remained on the job and was grateful to be busy:

I don't know. Some people say, you're kidding me, they didn't put you on administrative leave and give you three or four days off. I don't know that if that

would have been better for me. I think it was probably better that I was busy and that I was doing something even though it was a pain in the butt. I wasn't at home sitting thinking about it...I wanted all the facts to come out and make sure they had all the information that they needed because I felt like once that all came out I would be okay.

Over time, Frank chooses to cope with his work, including this officer-involved fatal incident by finding solace at home. He accomplishes this by strictly separating his role as a law enforcement officer from his role as husband and father:

I've chosen to be with my career, is not to talk about the stressful things that we go through just to try to keep home, home and have that kind of the rest of the world not intrude on our home and for better or for worse that's' how I wanted to do it and [Ann] has gone along with it. She doesn't like it sometimes and I know she wants to be supportive of me, but that's the way I want it. I don't want that world to intrude on our family...

Ultimately, the ability to come home and leave the world of law enforcement behind provides a respite from the stresses of work and allows for quality time with his family:

I think the main thing is that sense of normalcy and that's why I like what we do and I wouldn't want to do anything else. When I come home I want to know that our family is doing well and that everybody is okay and not have it impacted.

Frank received support from the perpetrator's mother that aided in his coping process.

Frank explained that the newspaper reported that the mother believed that the officers had no choice but to shoot her son. In fact, at the time of the shooting, Frank explained that the mother tried to intervene and may well have saved lives:

I think it was either later in the article or the next day, the mother comes out and basically her headline was, “the police had no other choice.” And, she described what happened in the cab of that truck. They were having a struggle. They were fighting over his bag of machine guns. He had a fully automatic AK 47 that he had in this bag when she went to meet him. So, to back up a little bit, he contacts her and says, “mom, you have to come and pick me up.” She tells her husband and says basically, “call the cops.”

Ann realized after this event that she had been naïve about the nature of Frank’s work and that even now is not aware of what he does at work. Ann said that, “Sometimes I feel a little left out.” She recognizes that there are advantage to keeping the job out of the home, but admits that it does affect their relationship, “He goes to work and I don’t know what he does, pretty much.”

**Couple coping strategies-Frank and Ann:** After this officer-involved fatal incident, Ann understood that Frank’s job is sometimes dangerous. Frank recognized that Ann worries more about his safety since the incident, especially when he is called out on raids, so they reached an agreement that he would call her as soon as the operation was completed to ease her mind.

Frank also recognized that Ann would like to hear more about his job, but he views their roles as distinct and complimentary:

Yeah. She takes care of everything here and that’s what she was doing. She takes care of everything in our home. We are partners and so I want to be able to, just like a law enforcement partner, I rely on her to do what her job is and I’m going

to do what my job is. And, that's how I think we have the best outcome and she's always done her part.

Ann commented that she experiences frustration when she senses that the job is bothering Frank and she is not in a position to help him because of the wall he has erected between work and home:

There's some advantages to that I suppose, but the flip side of that is that he really doesn't talk about it, so I don't know. So that affects our relationship from my perspective. He goes to work and I don't know what he does, pretty much.

Interestingly, Frank recognized that a consequence of not sharing his work experience is that the partnership is not entirely equal:

As far as dealing with the dangers of the job she has gotten nervous. I don't know that it's necessarily thinking that I'm going to get shot when I go to work, but I go on overseas trips, I go on different things, on different cases around the country and I think the single hardest thing for her is that I don't talk about what's going on and what I'm experiencing, what I'm doing and so I think that the difficult thing about that is that it's not an equal partnership. I try to listen to her and her problem and her concerns and be supportive of her and I don't think she feels like she gets to be an equal partner in returning that.

Frank tries to compensate for Ann's feelings of being "left out" by listening to her concerns and trying to be supportive, all the while maintaining a wall between work and family that he fervently believes is the best option for his family.

Frank was grateful for Ann's support, her initial reaction, and that he was able to focus on his job knowing that she was taking care of the family:

...so she was glad everybody was okay. I don't remember feeling diminished that she wasn't taking it seriously or anything like that. I could hear that she was stressed about [daughter] and that she needed to take her to the emergency room. And, really that is my goal to keep that part of society and that part of what we do away from her. I want her to be focusing on our family...I would have felt worse if she had fallen apart, if she started crying or said I want you to quit your job or anything like that. I don't know what I would have done. That would have been really stressful.

**Summary of individual and couple coping-Frank and Ann.** Frank's primary strategy for coping with the stress of his work, including his shooting, is to strictly separate his work life from his family life. He accomplishes this by simply not discussing his work with Ann. Frank finds solace at home. Home is his sanctuary. He is cognizant that Ann sometimes feels "left out," but he has asked her to accept his silence about work. Frank also coped with this shooting by keeping busy. He was happy that his agency did not place him on administrative leave, which is standard operating procedure for many law enforcement agencies following an officer-involved fatal incident. Frank also mentioned that support from the perpetrator's mother helped him to cope in the days following the shooting.

Before this shooting, Ann did not have a realistic understanding of the dangers that Frank encounters at work. The shooting awakened her to the dangers inherent in law enforcement, and now she feels left out sometimes. Her anxiety has increased since the shooting, so they agreed that he would call her following a special operations assignment

to alleviate her anxiety. Ann copes by adopting an attitude that there are advantages and disadvantages to not knowing the details of Frank's work.

**Dave and Pat: "Go fishing..."**

**Individual coping strategies.** While Dave does not keep his work entirely out of the home, or his marriage relationship, he did speak about the need to transition from his role at work to his role as husband and father as part of his coping strategy. Having interests outside of law enforcement is an important component of his strategy:

And I think the best way to do that is to have other interests...that aren't law enforcement...? You need to have, go to church. Have a calling in church. Something that you're responsible for that has nothing to with law enforcement. Yeah, coach your kid's soccer team. You know what I mean? Go fishing or you know what I mean? There's a myriad of things you can do that don't have anything to do with law enforcement but that you do with your spouse or your family... I do agree with [Pat] that you need to have friends that aren't in law enforcement that you do things with, you know.

Dave described how his faith guides his life and informs his perspective on his career and his family:

I have a better understanding than anybody else that I work with that's not [identifies faith] of, you know, who I am, why I'm here, where I came from. You know, what my purpose is...and I think that being in law enforcement is a good and admirable job and it needs good and admirable and honorable people to do it. You know what I mean? But it's not the most important thing...Your family is the most important thing.

Pat only becomes anxious when Dave is called out to a tactical operation such as the one that is the subject of this case. One way she copes with her anxiety is to have Dave call her as soon as the situation resolves:

I always feel, always feel relieved when it's resolved. Every SWAT callout, he has to call, it's over, bye. So I'm all, I like that reassurance that I know that they're done and nothing happened and that there's not like some period of time where something did happen and I don't know.

**Couple coping strategies-Dave and Pat.** Dave and Pat coped with this incident and law enforcement in general by restricting their access to the law enforcement culture and expanding their social life to include friends outside of law enforcement. Pat described her thoughts and feelings about creating a social life outside of the law enforcement culture:

You know, and probably this wouldn't be a popular piece of advice but I don't think you should hang out with them. I think you should have other friends that are not policemen. We do not have police friends. We have no police friends except for the [name] and that's not a friendship that evolved from work... You know, and probably this wouldn't be a popular piece of advice but I don't think you should hang out with them. I think you should have other friends that are not policemen.

Dave and Pat were not adversely affected as a couple by this incident. Pat identified the issue of law enforcement officers relying more on other officers and less on their spouses to deal with work stress as a liability for law enforcement couples:



I think that one of the downfalls, and this is from a spouse point of view, and then having friends that go through, I've watched friends go through divorces or hard times. I think the downfall of police officers sometimes is that they don't, for whatever reason, they don't rely on their spouse. They kinda tend to glob together. And then it's almost like strength in numbers and then they become, they leave their, the necessity of their spouse and replace it with necessity of the other policemen. And, and that's kind of what I always see. As they become, they aren't close with their spouse anymore. They're close with other police officers... And sometimes it's a female police officer which doesn't ever help. But, but that's just kind of what I, that's what I see and then, they kind of separate that way.

Pat went on to define what she considers key coping strategies in a successful law enforcement marriage:

I would define success in understanding the job, understanding the negative aspects of the job, placing, whether it's conscious or unconscious, placing the appropriate limitations [limiting social engagement with other law enforcement officers and families] that provides you to have a healthy home life as well as dealing with the job.

Dave added that a law enforcement officer must understand his or her roles as an officer, spouse and parent. He pointed out that when officers begin their careers that the hours, shift work and poor days off contribute to stress on the marriage:

I think that I would define success in understanding... your role when you're at work and then again when you're at home. You know... there comes a point in

your marriage where your wife doesn't, you know, it's not that she doesn't care about all the cool stuff that you did that day but it's just not the most important thing, you know what I mean? There's homework, there's science projects, you know what I mean? Stuff that she needs you and anticipates you being home and where she can depend on you to be able to fulfill your role, you know? And the hard part about law enforcement on some couples it seems like, the schedule is hard, changing, you know, shift work is hard in and of itself. Changing the schedule, you know, is hard so you're not on the, you know, on a set schedule. The days off suck when you first start... And so, and then you're not a 9 to 5 guy, you know what I mean? And all that is hard. So when you are home...you really have to make an effort to have your attention, you know, on her and on the family and on those things that are important, you know what I mean? You know, you can't be a deputy or an officer at home, you know, around the house...you can't talk to your wife like she's a suspect...and those types of things.

Pat continued that a law enforcement marriage, like all marriages, requires mutual understanding and compromise:

And the other thing, too, just listening to him, he's saying, he's coming my way with his definition of success but I think I have to come his way, too. And know that those things are out there and what he deals with isn't normal and, and accept that as well. So I think it's a two way street. I think I can't be like, do not bring that home because that's not an option. So I think, too, just from listening to what he had said, the success has to come almost in the compromise. And the, and the

well roundedness of the whole situation. You can't have it one way or another in any of it so...

Both Dave and Pat recognized the importance of a balanced approach to life and an understanding of the importance of the various roles they have in their lives and in their marriage.

Dave expressed his belief that law enforcement agencies can play a role in preparing a law enforcement couple to cope with the unique stresses that the job brings to a marriage, and help them to cope with the stresses of the job:

I think that departments can do a lot to help this. With guys that are in the academy or when they're first starting and stuff. I know [City] had a whole series of classes that the spouse went to, you know, and they explained a lot of things...that would happen and different things. And so not that that answers every question but I think that it helps, you know, take away...what do you mean you've gotta work graveyard? I thought you were on day shift or you know what I mean? You know, you're supposed to be off at 7. Why aren't you home...That kinda thing. And they addressed a lot of that kinda stuff, you know?

Dave stressed the importance of the support he receives from Pat as a key factor in his success at work and at home:

...how she treats work and stuff is such a blessing to me. It's so, makes it so easy. And you know, I see guys that I work with and stuff and their wives aren't as understanding or I don't know what it is. But it's not the same...and I think that my success at work is a direct relationship to that, you know. I've been able to do just about everything I've wanted to do and I've been successful at it and, you

know, a large part of that is, you know, [Pat] doesn't give me a bunch of guff all the time about what I'm doing.

**Summary of individual and couple coping-Dave and Pat.** Dave's primary coping strategy is found in his decision to separate his work and family roles, and to rely on his faith. Unlike Frank, Dave does discuss his work at home, but is able to achieve a balance between work and home. He accomplishes this primarily through a balanced social life, which includes his faith community. Dave and Pat both discussed the importance of leading a balanced social life, and engaging socially outside of the law enforcement culture. He also relies on the supportive relationship he enjoys with Pat. Dave discussed the importance of transitioning from his law enforcement role to his family role, and engaging his family as husband and father when he arrives home.

Pat handles the stresses of Dave's work in stride. However, there are times that she worries and she asks Dave to call her when special operations are completed to alleviate her anxiety. Pat and Dave are in agreement with the goal of achieving balance between their work and social lives.

### **The Role of Counseling in the Coping Process**

In this section I examine the role of counseling in the coping process of the informants. I begin by defining counseling in the context of this study. It is important to examine, and understand the various forms of counseling available to law enforcement officers and their spouses. Topics discussed in this section include whether or not professional counseling was mandatory, perceived competency of professional counselors by officers, the utilization of peer counseling programs, and the value of informal peer counseling. Stigma associated with counseling, and the willingness of law

enforcement officers to accept counseling as a method of coping is also discussed. A crucial aim of this study was to examine access to professional counseling services by the spouses of law enforcement officers following an officer-involved fatal incident. All of the spouse participants in the study discussed the availability of counseling services.

Professional counseling, institutionalized peer counseling, informal peer counseling and critical incident debriefings emerged as therapeutic means of coping with the effects of officer-involved fatal incidents. Professional counseling is provided by university trained, and licensed counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists.

Institutionalized peer counselors are recruited by, and provided formal training through their employing agency to support fellow officers during crisis. In agencies with peer counseling programs, it would be expected that a peer counselor would join the affected officer to provide support. I use the term “informal peer counseling” to capture times when law enforcement officers seek out peers for support whom they trust will maintain confidences. Critical incident debriefings are not, per se, intended to provide counseling, but may serve to aid in the healing process following an officer-involved fatal incident.

Some agencies in this study offered professional counseling and some did not. The same was true with formal peer-counseling programs. Some agencies mandated professional counseling following an officer-involved fatal incident, and some did not.

**Eric and Laura: “...if they don’t offer counseling for the spouse I think the whole system ends up falling apart...”**

Eric’s agency required that he see a psychiatrist immediately following his officer-involved fatal incident. Eric did not seek, or request to receive counseling and said of his initial experience:

My whole background is 20 years military. If I'm told to do something I do it.

And I, so it didn't bother me, no, I just figured it was routine and could help people who really needed it. I guess I needed it. I felt I needed it and I was being told to do it so I did.

Eric's psychiatrist was trained in treating law enforcement officers who have experienced fatal incidents. Eric described his experience with this psychiatrist, noting that he was experienced with police trauma. Eric identified certain traits of the psychologist:

It's kind of hard to talk to someone you've never seen before. For you it's easier [easier to speak to me in the interview], because we're out two years now, but when I first went to see that guy [the psychiatrist] I really didn't want to talk to him...I don't think it was so much what we talked about there. I think it was the time. If that makes any sense. I just needed some time to pass that I could just think myself and talk with my best friend [referring to Lisa]...He [psychiatrist] was calm. He was easy to talk to. I mean that's his job. He's obviously talk to some people [other clients] who have gone through some stuff. I don't think that there was anything he could have done better. I thought he was doing everything right.

Laura provided insight into the dynamic that influenced how Eric viewed and responded to counseling. She emphasized the value of mandatory counseling following a traumatic event:

I think the issue was that [Eric] has never seen a counselor before. It was very foreign to him and if he's not going to, even two years out, if he hasn't told me all of his feelings, he's not going to tell Joe Schmoie his deepest feelings about such a

traumatic event. I think what helped, in my opinion, I can be completely wrong, but I think what helped [Eric] was that it was mandatory, that he had to get back out there, outside of our yard-drive into [name of city] and see people [referring to the psychiatrist]. If he wasn't forced to go there he could have easily become a recluse in the house.

As with other officers in this study, Eric would likely have avoided counseling had it not been mandatory for him. Laura recognized that there was value in just getting Eric out of the house and back into the world, which he viewed as unsafe.

Eric had a different experience with peer counseling than did other officers in this study. His agency does not have an in-house peer-counseling program. Peer counseling was provided with peer counselors from another agency:

They brought out a couple of guys from [name of agency]. That's what I think you're talking about. I'm not sure that they call it the same thing. There was a group of us, dispatchers, everybody who was on that day and anyone who wanted to talk to them. That was a separate one from the psychiatrist I saw in [name of city]... Yeah, they were cops, but they may have a collateral duty to deal with fatalities or something like that [law enforcement officers may be trained to have collateral assignments as peer counselors when the need arises. It is not unusual for officers involved in traumatic incidents to visit with a peer counselor and a professional counselor].

For Eric, peer counseling was not a strong component of his coping with this incident. He relied primarily on Laura's support and the moral support from his own agency.

Laura's experience with counseling was similar to all the spouses of law enforcement officers in this study. She never received, or was offered counseling to help her cope with the effects of the shooting. Her role in the counseling process was to provide family support for Eric:

[Eric] went several times on his own and then I went a couple of times just to accompany him, but it wasn't something that was offered to me. They were primarily asking my viewpoint of how I thought [Eric] was doing. So that's the difference here...they just asked me a couple of questions about how I thought [Eric] was doing.

She recognized the need for Eric to receive counseling immediately, and as time went on began to recognize that the spouses and families need counseling as well. She pointed to the support role she played as well as the impact that the shooting had on her and her family:

I felt as though the spouses were not intentionally ignored, but not considered and it's very much a couple thing and I'm the one that in our home has to help put him back together and that takes a real toll on me if I'm not able to do it as effectively as I want, it can take a toll on our relationship. I think it is important to have counseling for not only the officers, but for their spouses and children if need be. I know that our boys, our oldest son still wears a memorial bracelet for [fallen officer]... There was a lot of times when I wanted to cry or scream out but I couldn't because I knew I had to be strong to put [Eric] back together and I didn't want to seem like a baby because he obviously went through so much more than I did.



Laura was insightful as she shared the lessons learned from experiencing the aftermath of her husband's officer-involved fatal incident, and she offered suggestions born out of this trial. She emphasized the need for a point of contact with the agency for spouses following an officer-involved fatal incident and the need for counseling services for families of involved officers:

I believe that every department ought to have an ombudsman to be the liaison between spouses and families and the chain of command or a contact person within the department specifically for the needs of spouses and families. In this instance, there was mandatory counseling for the officers involved and then any other officers that just felt that it brought up negative feelings for them then they were also put on leave for a short period of time and sent to counseling. But, no counseling was offered for any of the spouses.

Laura identified an important need for law enforcement agencies to provide a conduit between the agency and the spouse of a LEO involved in an officer-involved fatal incident. In this case, she advocated for an ombudsman, or referee who could receive important feedback from the spouse and identify needs of the family in dealing with the experience.

In a poignant plea to provide counseling support for spouses and families, Laura acknowledged the place for individual counseling for the officer and spouse and then focused on exactly why spouse and family support is also critical:

But, we both have very different perspectives on it and that's why you ask his questions and my questions and he needed to be able to express himself privately without having to worry what it would make me think and I needed to be able to

do the same thing. But, rightfully so, the department concentrates on its officers, but their officers are human beings. They are attached to spouses and families that are devastated by these things and if they don't offer counseling for the spouse I think the whole system ends up falling apart because I needed to be able to prop [Eric] up, but who props me up. I had to be strong for my kid, be strong for [Eric] and there are a lot of feelings that I had about his future safety, what it would be like when he went back to work...

Eric added that Laura's sentiments had been expressed by other spouses of officers who were directly and indirectly involved in the shooting. He said, "And you know that there were lots of other wives that felt the same way even if their husbands were not directly involved."

Laura added another dimension to her idea of having the agency assign an ombudsman for the spouse, and noted that, while their marriage has survived the trauma of the shooting and the loss of a fellow officer, other couples did not:

They [referring to other law enforcement couples] split up because it was too, that incident ended up being a little too much, or they could have had problems beforehand, it changes you forever, and I hate to see the marriages break up and then the kids have to deal with all of that and if there were more of a support system for spouses it would better equip them to help their law enforcement officer recover and to understand what they are going through and when they come through the other side their marriage and their relationship will still be intact. But if you put the extra stress on the deputy where his wife is crumbled and doesn't understand and he's trying to go back to work and figure out how to get through a shift and

go home safe but he's also worrying about, well my marriage falling apart at the same time...I think that it can help the department that the ombudsman, if they hear a problem or suspect a developing problem with the support system for a deputy that's been through something like this then they can jump on it quickly and say we need to give a little extra support here...

Laura's comments reflect those of other spouses and officers who, by virtue of going through the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident, recognize the need to anticipate and address issues that arise over time following the incident. It is worthy to note that no one ever thought to ask Laura how she was coping with the experience.

**Summary of the role of counseling-Eric and Laura.** Eric did not seek professional counseling, but his agency required him to attend. Eric described the initial difficulty of speaking with a stranger about personal issues, but found value in counseling. He described the psychiatrist as competent and easy to talk with. Eric found that he needed time to be with his own emotions and thoughts and placed a high value in talking with Laura, his "best friend." Eric did not find value in discussing the shooting with peer counselors assigned from another agency.

Laura was not offered counseling, and when she was asked to attend counseling with Eric it was for the sole purpose of getting her perspective on his progress. Laura believes that counseling is important for the spouse's of law enforcement officers and their families. She mentioned that no one from the agency ever asked her how she was doing. Laura expressed her belief that the agency ought to assign a liaison (ombudsman) between the agency and the family. Laura described her role as the primary caregiver for

her law enforcement spouse, and the importance of, and need for her to receive counseling support as she supports her spouse and family.

**Jon and Lisa: “...you can go talk to [psychologist name] but the stigma was, nobody wanted to...”**

Lisa provided a compelling argument for mandatory debriefings to provide opportunities for officers to process their experience following a tragic officer-involved fatal incident. She claims that officers will not attend a debriefing unless they are compelled by the agency to attend, especially if they feel emotionally vulnerable:

...we did the one debriefing and then all the rest after that were not mandatory or anything. Nobody had to talk to anybody...And I'm like everybody needs to go talk...I go, I've got some people [colleagues] bleeding and they're not gonna come in when it's not mandatory cuz then they feel weak. You know, they feel like they can't handle it...and I was thinking of [name]. She's a brand new officer. She's like, I don't wanta go in there. They'll think I can't handle it. And I'm thinking this is wrong and I'm trying to be an advocate...Nobody was listening...You can come up with all kinds of excuses, budgets, time, not enough people...Whatever, but does that really matter...You just make it...happen [a mandatory debriefing following a critical incident].

Lisa's comments reflect a belief within the law enforcement culture that officers must appear emotionally strong at all times. Lisa recognized the emotional suffering of her fellow officers and did what she could to address those needs on an individual basis.

However, she was also clearly frustrated that debriefings were not mandatory.

Jon agreed with Lisa's assessment of the need for immediate and continuing care as well as the value that professional counseling can contribute to healing following an officer-involved fatal incident:

You know, and, and the right person can elicit a lot of response. And so, and I think that could've provided some healing for people that, that felt, you know, didn't, didn't have the resolution to this incident that they'd hoped.

Lisa firmly believes that mandatory debriefings and mandatory counseling would have provided the opportunity for officers to get help without feeling stigmatized, or judged as being weak:

But that was never an opportunity that was even available and that I remember them saying, oh, you can go talk to [psychologist name] but the stigma was, nobody wanted to, I mean, that was just thrown out to everybody [that professional counseling was available, but not mandatory].

**Summary of the role of counseling-Lisa and Jon.** Lisa and Jon explained that there was one debriefing following the incident, but that the debriefing was not mandatory and that participants who did attend were reluctant to speak. Counseling was available, but not mandatory. Lisa mentioned the "stigma" attached to officers seeking counseling without it having been mandated. Other participant officers in this study, including Bill and Eric, mentioned that they would not have sought out professional counseling on their own, nor would they have accepted offers for counseling immediately following their respective incidents. Jon recognized the value of counseling with "the right person" and the healing that could have taken place.

Lisa placed emphasis on the need to have held a mandatory debriefing. She believed that a mandatory debriefing that fully explicated the incident might have provided healing for those officers who were at the scene. Lisa, instead, met with officers in the unofficial capacity of a peer counselor to aid their healing, and hers.

**Bill and Judy: “It’s a bit like a festering sore”**

Following the shooting, Bill’s agency sent him to see a psychologist to be evaluated for fitness to return to duty. He explained that a fitness for duty evaluation is standard procedure when an officer is involved in a shooting. The psychologist administered some tests. Bill said that, “...It was...virtually...like a pre-employment, fitness for duty test...There’s more therapy honestly between you and I right now than I had there.” Judy thought it was, “disgraceful” that Bill did not receive better care. Bill went on to provide additional context for his initial and only experience with counseling following his shooting:

There was a short sit down with the psychologist and he may have said, hey, what happened and how are you with it type of thing but there was no digging deeper into it. It was taking this written test, sit down with the psychologist, basically relay what happened, are you okay. And I was in and out probably in two hours, I think, so that was it. And to be fair, I can’t imagine that if he, if he would’ve offered more sessions, and there may have been more sessions offered, I doubt very seriously I would’ve taken him up on it. And he may have, in their defense, said, hey, you know, we’re here for you if you need it. So just trying to be honest, I don’t think I would’ve come back but...

Bill expressed a sentiment that echoed throughout the study in which officers were initially resistant to seek counseling to deal with the effects of their officer-involved fatal incident. After time and reflection, several of the participants offered views about what could have, or should have occurred with counseling and made suggestions to improve the emotional and psychological health for of officers, and their families. Judy offered the following thoughts on the subject:

...there should be a protocol among the command staff that there is a follow-through, even almost a tag teaming. And like [Bill] said, it's not, you know, hey, high five, buddy. It's, you know what? What happened sucked. It was a clean shoot. It was good. I support it. How are you doing? Over a lengthy period of time, with both the officer and the spouse. You know, how are you? Do you need anything? This is off the record. This is not gonna affect your husband's or your wife's job. Because I mean, I'll say it because I don't work for the department. I think that any officer would identify with the fact that there would be a stigma, if you're the officer that was in an event and everyone knows that you're seeking some type of therapy to deal with it.

Judy expanded her observations about the stigma attached to officers receiving counseling and added context:

Oh, yeah. And I think, you know, something that would help to eliminate that [stigma] so the spouse didn't feel like they were compromising, you know, the officer and the officer didn't feel like they were compromising themselves or their position or their seniority or any of those things. I, I appreciate that it's predominantly male and men deal with things very differently but there has got to

be a healthier way to address that because it's those guys, I think, that turn to alcohol and suicide and divorce that don't have a strong faithful group of buddies to consult with.

I asked Judy if she was ever offered any counseling. Her response was typical of the experience of every spouse of an officer in this study, and points to a deficit in care following an officer-involved fatal incident. Even agencies that were identified as providing excellent post incident care for their officers failed to offer assistance to the family. The following response to my question and interchange between Judy and Bill, while brief, is illuminating:

Rich: So were you offered any counseling?

[Bill answering for Judy]: No

[Judy]: I wanta laugh. Is that a joke? Are you kidding? No.

[Bill]: I don't think she was even talked to

[Judy]: No.

Judy followed with the wisdom she acquired since the shooting. She emphasized the need for regular follow-ups with affected officers over a three-year period:

At the time, it didn't really occur to me... Given a few years' retrospect and our many years with situations like that, I think that it should be a part of a department, that they have follow-up with everyone, just because of the damaging effects that lack of closure or lack of ability to deal with things brings to the home. If you're experiencing things that you don't even relate specifically to that issue. Yeah, I think that something like that probably should have happened. And honestly, I don't know that my response would've been any different from his. At



the time, it's like I'm fine. What are you... but I think that follow-up, over every six months for three years... The emotion doesn't surface for sometimes months or years after that...because it is, it is a bit like a festering sore. And it just gets worse over time, if you can't address it.

Bill followed with his perspective on the need to provide spouses not only with counseling, but education to empower spouses to deal with the effects of an officer-involved fatal incident over time, and in the process save marriages and promote healing:

I can tell you that looking back now, I would, you know, [Bill] today would certainly encourage [Judy] of 2007, no, go in and talk to them. Some things are gonna rear their heads that you need to be prepared for as a spouse to deal with. I think both of us back then would've, there would've been some resistance but I think looking back now from where we are now, man, I think Gilmartin [author and presenter on law enforcement stress] or you or somebody along those lines, post or pre [before or after a critical incident], empowering spouses on how to deal with the events when they come up, I think you're gonna save marriages, you're gonna expedite the healing process just by, you know... As it stands, you got one person involved in a situation and the other has no clue what to do...It's a big deal...But yeah, it would be nice to have some, you know, a team that just kinda gets together and agrees to, if nothing else, reach out, particularly to the spouse. The cop knows that it's that but I think often times, we leave our, our wives in the dust and they don't get anything.

Training, counseling and assistance for the spouse and families of an officer involved in a fatal incident was a theme that emerged from every interview in this research study. Bill

and Judy both admitted that they did not recognize the value of counseling immediately following the incident. It was only with the passage of time, and experiencing unanticipated emotional suffering that they were able to appreciate the need for timely counseling intervention.

**Summary of the role of counseling-Bill and Judy.** Bill was required to visit with a psychologist immediately after his shooting to determine his “fitness for duty.” Bill described taking psychological tests, but no therapy took place. Bill admitted that if he were offered counseling at the time that he would likely not have accepted it. In retrospect, Bill believes that mandatory counseling is necessary following an officer-involved fatal incident.

Judy, like Lisa, pointed to the stigma attached to officers seeking counseling on their own. She added that there is a stigma for spouses as well. Judy pointed out that spouses might not seek counseling out of concern that they would compromise their law enforcement spouse at work. Judy said that she would likely have rejected counseling if it had been offered immediately following the shooting because she believed she was handling the emotional stress well. However, she eventually came to understand that the emotional effects of trauma may take months to emerge. Judy advocated for consistent care over a 3-year period for officers and their families following an officer-involved fatal incident.

**Larry and Diane: “...they have somebody from the police psychologist’s office to come and see how you are doing...”**

Immediately after the shooting Larry’s agency had a psychologist respond to the office to check on the officers involved in the incident:

They had somebody from the psychologist's office respond that night which is standard procedure. When you're involved in a shooting they have somebody from our PPA [police association], on contract attorneys to represent your rights and then they have somebody from the police psychologist's office to come and see how you are doing and if you have any immediate needs.

Larry recalled briefly talking to the psychologist that night, but that conversation occurred as he was waiting to give his statement to investigators, and he was unsure about what he could say to the psychologist:

Yeah, and it was more how are you doing, how are you dealing with this, are you able to go home and would you want to come back and talk to us. It was real brief, just like an overview. Because when I spoke to them it was before I spoke to the investigators, although I was pretty frank with them. A lot on your mind is how much can I talk about right now [unsure how much he could disclose to a psychologist before speaking with investigators about his involvement in the shooting].

Larry did follow up with the psychologist, but then went to Kaiser to explore counseling services and options there:

And, so there was a lot of that going... And then I went back and I talked to them and I ended up also going, because at the time we had Kaiser, because I wanted to see if there was any other type of counseling, so I went to Kaiser and they had a team set up for emergencies, like critical incidents involving emergency services personnel. I didn't really care for what, he tried to have me do this where you're tapping, you know to distract... [Diane interjected 'Biofeedback stuff']... Yeah,

that kind of stuff [biofeedback] and it didn't [do it] for me. I'm too realistic. I'm a cop. You know what I mean? So I just couldn't imagine myself on a beach somewhere. I just couldn't do it so I just ended up continuing with the police psychologist there.

Larry was uncomfortable with the counseling style at Kaiser so he returned to the police psychologist. Even so, he was not entirely satisfied with his counseling experience with the police psychologist. The following quote refers to Larry's experience with the police psychologist:

I think in ways [professional counseling was helpful]. Where it was most helpful is it gave me some direction you know. But, I didn't feel fulfilled though when I'd leave. I just always felt like I would speak and say things on my mind and, okay yeah I understand and that was it. I didn't feel like I got enough concrete feedback on steps... And I felt like I was just telling him and he would just give me a few overview things. I think if we could have sat down and dissected each feeling and talk about how I felt I think that would have assisted me as opposed to just listening, okay, yeah, here's what you need to do...tell me what you were thinking. There was none of that in depth counseling [exploration of emotions and cognitive processes]. It was kind of more of an overview kind of thing. I always felt like I was being rushed. Like I had my 60 minutes and, okay. Do you know what I mean? The feeling?... I always felt like I was on a schedule and that I just really couldn't break it down to small incidents without running out of time and I don't know.

Unlike the counseling program at Kaiser, seeing a psychologist trained to treat law enforcement officers was a better fit for Larry. He commented that, “ He’s been a police psychologist I’d say [name] has been there since, for a good 25 years. And he has a lot of people that work for him, other counselors...”

The police psychologist helped Larry to address the issues he was experiencing with his leadership, which was complicating his healing process:

Yeah, he really bluntly goes; you need to get an attorney. I said, what do you mean? He goes, the only way you’re going to help yourself is you need to fight back. You need to stand up, he said. That was the first time I ever really thought about, I thought of it as him thinking yeah you’ve got a good case, I’m screwing with you, but what he really meant was that, you need to help yourself. And I didn’t really view it at that point as him telling me that but I’m glad he still gave me that advice. I kind of misinterpreted his meaning.

Larry did respond to his therapist’s invitation to fight back. He did hire an attorney and he said that he became a “bigger target” for leadership, meaning that Larry became the focus of negative attention from his employer. For instance, he was transferred to an assignment that was known as a “burial ground” for those of his rank, meaning that his opportunities for further advancement were limited. However, he developed a positive strategy to help him cope with the negative attention:

I just became a bigger target for a long time there. But you know what? I didn’t become that problem guy. What I did is, the [unit name] bureau where they put me is kind of a burial ground for [rank]...I figured if I was going to be there I’m going to make the best of it. I got involved in statewide committees and the

[agency name] then became the representative on a lot of statewide committees advising the governor and everything so I became involved in a lot of committees and found a bunch of conferences to go to. So we made the best of it... so I made something positive out of it and I really felt good about that.

Diane, as was the case with all the spouses of law enforcement officers in this study, was never offered counseling, but she did find value in the benefit of having unlimited counseling available for her husband at no cost:

Rich: And it was paid psychological counseling?

[Diane]: As much as you want to go and as often...

[Larry]...as you need it. I think the only thing that, not that the agency does it, but that' it's available to you is that you can seek out your own counseling. And, the people in the counseling office were pretty helpful.

Larry was the highest-ranking officer in this study and found himself in an unusual situation when it came to peer counseling. Peer counseling was simply not available to him because, as he noted, "there is nobody that's a peer counselor above the rank of sergeant." His situation points to the need for agencies to make it safe for any officer involved in a critical incident to talk with a peer. Peer counselors are typically selected from the rank and file (non-management staff). They are provided training on how to function in the role of a lay counselor with their peers following a critical incident: to provide support, and a compassionate presence. In Larry's case, there were no peer counselors within the management ranks with whom he could process his feelings. It would have been awkward for him to engage a peer counselor within the non-management ranks.

**Summary of the role of counseling-Larry and Diane.** Larry was provided with a professional counselor on the day of the shooting. His encounter with the counselor was brief, and the offer was extended for further counseling at Larry's discretion. Larry did follow up, but then looked for other counseling options. He eventually decided to see a psychologist experienced with law enforcement trauma. Larry believed that the counseling was helpful, but left him wanting. He complained that he was not provided with concrete steps to take in the healing process and that the sessions were too short. Larry credited the psychologist with helping him to fight the treatment by his agency. Larry explained that peer counseling was not available to him because of his rank.

Diane, like every other spouse in this study, was never offered counseling services and there were no inquiries about her support needs. Diane encouraged Larry's participation in counseling.

**Frank and Ann: "...there's no such thing as an abnormal reaction..."**

Frank's agency made professional counseling available on a volunteer basis, but he did not feel the need to be seen by a professional counselor. However, Frank was grateful for, and benefitted from informal peer counseling. Speaking of a colleague who was assigned to investigate his shooting, Frank said, "(name) was a non-shooter in a fatal encounter on the swat team before I got to (city name) so at least he had been through the peer counseling thing, so we went through it and he told me all about it."

The day following the shooting, Frank recalled a conversation with another supervisor who was familiar with the agency's peer counseling program. Frank described how the supervisor was able to empathize with Frank's post-incident reactions, and concerns. Frank expressed his feelings that since he made the decision to fire his weapon,

that he hoped he hit his target. It was important to Frank that his supervisor understood his concerns:

...the one thing I do remember, I had a conversation with [name] when he came up the next morning and he asked me how I was doing and went through all the peer stuff about abnormal reactions, there's no such thing as an abnormal reaction and all that stuff, and he asked me how I was doing, because [name] was the swat team leader when I was on the swat team, and I just told him that since I shot [at the perpetrator] that I hoped I hit the guy, and I shared that with him and he shook his head and he understood.

Not only was Frank's colleague able to understand and communicate his understanding for the emotions that Frank might experience in the aftermath of an officer-involved fatal incident, but he was able to connect with Frank's need to know that he had performed in a way that was consistent with his training and what was expected of him as a professional law enforcement officer. Frank said that he benefitted from having the opportunity to process his thoughts and feelings with a respected colleague who had also experienced a shooting, and who was also his supervisor:

Probably having somebody who had been through a shooting [who] was in a position of authority and who I looked up to and respected. ...I think that's very helpful for somebody who's been through it [to] talk about what's going to happen, about what your reactions could be and what the process is for the administrative stuff and have it come from somebody's who's been through it... that was the single most beneficial thing for me



Because of Frank's experience with the shooting and the benefits he received through the empathy, help and understanding of fellow law enforcement officers he said that, "I'm trying to pay that forward." Frank said that when he hears of another officer involved in a shooting, either within his own organization or with an agency with whom he works, he will contact that person directly, or by phone shortly after the incident to offer his assistance.

Frank received support from other law enforcement officers familiar with his shooting, and who had also experienced an officer-involved fatal incident in the past. He spoke about listening to the stories of shootings told by other officers. In one case, Frank said that hearing the other officer's story brought them closer:

It is interesting because it's a small group and when it happened I heard about I think just about everybody I knew that had been involved in one [a shooting] to whatever degree, I heard the story. It brought [name] and I closer. We had worked together a bit but he was a detective at the time and he was there and he had been involved in one previously that was a lot more hairy and so he shared that, so you hear a lot of stories and realize there's a lot of different experiences out there.

Like you said earlier, I got off easy. If it has to happen that's about as easy as it can get [compared to the stories that he heard from other officers].

Frank said that he felt fortunate after listening to stories told by other officers about their experience with officer-involved fatal incidents, especially incidents involving the use of deadly force. Frank's shooting was straight forward, and unambiguous. The facts supported that he shot and killed the perpetrator in defense of his life and the lives of other officers.

Elaborating on his agency's policy of providing professional counseling, Frank said that counseling was available, but only at a location thousands of miles away, and at the agencies convenience:

No, it's offered. That critical incident stress debrief thing [counseling], at the time, was only offered back at [name of distant location]. My recollection at the time was that they would do them as they got two or three people who were wanting to go so they didn't send just one person through, they would send a group of people through.

Ann responded to Frank's explanation that his agency only offered counseling following an officer-involved fatal incident at a distant location, and at a time convenient to the agency when she said, "That's stupid... They should come to you immediately." Ann believed that counseling should have been available locally and immediately after the shooting.

Clearly, Frank benefitted from processing his shooting with colleagues who had experienced officer-involved fatal incidents. However, Ann's response spoke to the impracticality of providing counseling services at a distant location and only when there were more than one employee/family in need of counseling. Ann expanded on her initial reaction and explained:

I thought that [Frank] should have, should is a weird word, but taken advantage of the counseling. I didn't realize counseling had to go to [name of distant location] to do, but I just can't imagine going through something like that and not talking about it, but it sounds like he's talked about it with his other people that have had the same experiences and it appears that it hasn't really seriously affected him so

maybe my shoulds are kind of crazy. But I would think that is something you want to talk about and get it out, but maybe he didn't need to.

**Summary of the role of counseling-Frank and Ann.** Professional counseling was available to Frank, but at a distant location because he works for a federal agency. Frank did not feel the need to take advantage of the professional counseling that was available to him. Frank found great value in informal peer counseling with trusted peers from his own agency. Frank also found value in discussing the shooting with officers from other agencies with whom he associates who had experienced officer-involved fatal incidents. As he pointed out, "that was the counseling." Ann was never offered counseling services, nor did anyone from Frank's organization make any inquiries about counseling needs for her, or other family members. Ann expressed her opinion that Frank might have benefitted from counseling following the shooting and thought it was absurd that the counseling would only be available at a distant location. Ann said that she could not imagine that she would not need counseling if she took another person's life, but acknowledged that Frank is a "stoic fellow."

#### **Dave and Pat**

Dave did not seek professional, or peer counseling services following his officer-involved fatal incident. He confirmed that his agency does have a peer-counseling program, but that he did not avail himself of those services. Counseling is not mandatory in his agency following a fatal incident.

**Summary of the role of counseling-Dave and Pat.** Professional counseling services were never a consideration for Dave, or for Pat. Neither expressed a felt need, or that the agency erred by not requiring counseling. Dave and Pat have a very strong

support system that includes intact extended family, friends and an active faith community. Both indicated that they relied primarily on their relationship in this instance, and did not involve friends, or family.

### **The Role of Agency Leadership in the Coping Process**

*...you need people to tell you what you did was right. Particularly people in leadership~Bill*

In this section, I present participant's descriptions of how law enforcement agency leadership influenced recovery from an officer-involved fatal incident through agency policy, practice and procedure. It is important to understand the role the employing agency has as a support to the law enforcement officer, and the officer's family. The law enforcement agency holds the power to decide if the officer acted appropriately according to agency policy. Agency leadership decides if professional counseling is mandatory, and if there is a peer-counseling program. Agency leadership determines if critical incident debriefings occur, and whether or not they are mandatory for involved personnel. Agency leadership decides if administrative leave is appropriate following an officer-involved fatal incident. Administrative leave is frequently used by law enforcement agencies to provide the officer with the time to recover from a critical incident, or to remove the officer from active duty pending the outcome of the agency's investigation of the incident.

I begin the section below by presenting an overview of the participants' experience of the role of agency leadership in the coping process. Then I present a summary of each couple's experience. A synthesis of chapter five follows this section.

**Eric and Laura: "...they were very supportive."**

Eric was given administrative leave following the shooting and the death of his partner. He did not return to work for about two months. Eric had nothing but praise and gratitude for the way he was treated following the shooting. He received daily phone calls from his agency leadership and never felt hurried to return to work:

For me it was just the support...[leader's name] called me everyday and asked me if there was anything I needed, anything at all and "how are you doing." There was no hint of "when are you coming back?" Everybody is short handed, but there was no hint of "when are you coming back"... I probably could have been gone for months. Longer than that...they were very supportive.

Laura was also impressed with the support she and Eric received from the agency, including being driven to the funeral of the fallen officer and to other events:

They didn't let us drive to any of the functions. They had us picked up by an officer and we were escorted, there were a couple of different motorcades. The Sheriff himself drove us behind the van with [fallen officer's name] body over to the coroner's office. They knew that [Eric] was dealing with enough emotion. They didn't want him trying to find his way around on top of that. So, we were escorted to pretty much everything and that I think was very helpful because then Doug and I could concentrate on just taking it all in.

According to Eric, there was nothing more his agency could have done to support him during his time off from work, "You know, I can't think of any. I felt that they supported all of us good. Anything we needed or wanted. I can't think of anything [else they could have done]."

Laura described how the agency shielded Eric and the family from intrusions by the media after all the involved officers had declined to be interviewed. In the following quote, Laura was directing her comments to Eric: “They, the media had contacted the department and I think it was Captain [name] that contacted you and they had requested an interview, but he wanted to check with you guys first.”

**Summary of the role of agency leadership in coping-Eric and Laura.** Eric and Laura felt supported by Eric’s agency following his officer-involved fatal incident. Support was manifested by daily phone calls expressing sincere support, and making sure that Eric and Laura were able to attend important events by providing escorts and drivers. The agency provided Eric with all the time he needed to recover sufficiently to return to full duty.

**Lisa and Jon: ...[A critical incident de-briefing]... would’ve been healing.”**

Lisa was adamant that the department should have had an in-depth debriefing following the incident. She cited several reasons why a debriefing would have been a good idea. A debriefing would have provided everyone involved in the incident with clarity about what occurred and what each contributed to the effort. She believed that a debriefing would have allowed for, or at least would have facilitated emotional healing after the incident ended in the death of a young girl:

Yeah, and it seems like they should’ve did a debriefing more chronologically [following the timeline of the incident from beginning to end]. Okay, so how did we get the call? Actually tell the facts as the department knew them and then said can you guys, as a group, can we fill in any blanks and I wanta hear, you know, everybody’s perspectives. Kinda like we’re talking about right now, almost the

exact same thing. And it would've took time and it would've cost money but I think that when we walked out, everybody would've had a really clear idea of what happened that night. ... That would be the opportunity for people to kind of bring up their emotions and feelings and how it's affecting them... I think knowing everything can sometimes relieve some of those things, like feeling guilt or, you know, misunderstanding and being angry at something that maybe never even really happened the way you think it did... that would've been healing and, and set the stage for people to move on in a much better place.

On an individual level, Lisa did not feel supported. She explained that, in spite of the traumatic nature of the event and the prominent role she played, leadership did not reach out to her:

I wouldn't say the department as a whole treated me bad... I was never reached out to, not even one time to talk about anything in regards to this thing... No, never, not even one time. I think it was mismanaged. I don't know. I wouldn't say they treated me bad. I don't know that they, I don't know that they, I don't know if they knew how to treat us. That's what I'm thinking. Maybe they didn't know.

Jon added that, "what's interesting about this whole thing though is she saves lives and not one of her supervisors says good job."

**Summary of the role of agency leadership in coping-Lisa and Jon.** Lisa viewed the role of the agency post-event on an individual and group level. The agency never reached out to Lisa, nor did anyone in leadership acknowledge her good work. A theme that emerged during the interview was her concern for the emotional welfare of other officers. She was adamant that a full and mandatory debriefing should have

occurred. Lisa believed that a debriefing would have precluded rumors, and would have promoted emotional healing for the involved officers.

**Bill and Judy: “...if it’s a clean shoot...let these guys heal.”**

Bill did feel supported by his agency, but certainly had ideas about how they could have better supported him. He provided the following quote that summed up what he believes is the importance of validation from leadership following an officer-involved fatal incident:

I think...there were certain benchmarks that needed to occur in order to move past this. And...being involved in something like that...you need to know...that what you did was right. And quite honestly, you need people to tell you what you did was right. Particularly people in leadership.

Bill was distressed by an investigation that took two years to complete and to vindicate his actions as the shooter. The delay caused him to doubt himself.

Judy was distressed by the delay as well and said that she was still furious because the delay in the investigation caused her husband suffer:

That was, that was more difficult for me than the shooting itself. It was a total lack of decency they showed my husband. There was, the length of time that it took, there was a sense of...absolute powerlessness that was imposed on us, that I, I don’t think we deserved. I don’t think you deserved that. So there’s this constant reminder of life kind of moving on. So there was no time to linger. It was in those immediate moments that in response to his anger and frustration, I just kept building up because there was no one to talk to. I’m not gonna vent to him and



say that's just crap that they haven't done your thing. He already knows that. He's, he's dealing with that.

Bill wanted more of a commitment on the part of leadership to actively help in the healing process:

And it would be nice to, I just think guys down the road, you know...I'd just like to see a little more commitment on the part of the leadership to make a concerted effort to make sure their people are okay with this thing and facilitate the process. That you know, if there's something wrong with the shooting, then there's something wrong with the shooting. But if it's a clean shoot, you know, let's be proactive, let's get, let these guys heal.

Bill said that the agency protected him from the media. When the family of the deceased gunman tried to contact Bill, the agency functioned as a buffer between the family and Bill, and passed along the family's expressions of support to him. Bill discussed his agency's efforts to shield him from efforts by the perpetrator's family and the media to contact him:

Yeah, which helped quite a bit. They actually wanted to get in touch with me but my department said, you know, they shielded me. There was no, I never, no media ever tried to contact me. Yeah, ...our PIO [Public Information Officer] pretty much handled everything.

Bill discussed the importance of agency leadership following and officer-involved fatal incident. He discussed the need for leadership to follow up with the involved officers, not just once, but over time. He discussed the importance of officer's actions being validated by those in leadership positions:

...you know, how the cop culture is. You don't wanta be the squeaky wheel. You don't wanta be the guy that wants all the attention, but I would like to see in the future, people in this situation, I'd like to see just a better show of support, checking in, maybe a little more leadership, checking with your people and ensuring they're okay. You're gonna ask once and they're gonna say they're fine and we know how cops are. That doesn't mean that they are fine. It just means we're cops, we're tough; we're not supposed to not be okay. We're not supposed to not be in control. We're not supposed to not be able to deal with stuff and the reality is, we're human. We think we're super human, we're not...

**Summary of the role of agency leadership in coping-Bill and Judy.** An important theme with Bill and Judy was the continuity of care for affected law enforcement officers and their families over time. Agency leadership plays a central role in providing that assistance and demonstrating interest in the officer's wellbeing, and the wellbeing of the officer's family. Bill and Judy expressed their frustration that the investigation into the shooting took two years with little regard for Bill's need for closure and for an official finding that his actions were appropriate and lawful.

**Larry and Diane: "Everything was a wall."**

Larry was very displeased with his agency's response and believed they complicated and delayed his recovery. There was no communication from leadership, or interest displayed in his wellbeing. Although Larry received the Medal of Honor for his actions, Larry not only felt unsupported, but undermined by his agency. The shooting occurred at the police sub-station parking lot. He requested a transfer when he struggled

coming back to work, and to the scene of the shooting, but the agency took months to transfer him:

And so every time I pulled in there I'd see it again so I said I need a change. And the response to me was, well I just need to see what your doctor would say, what steps you've taken to help yourself and I need to see something in writing.

Everything was a wall.

Larry's perceptions of not being supported by his agency complicated his recovery from the trauma of taking a life and seeing another officer shot. No one called to check on his welfare. They did not protect him from the media and he received press calls at home. Diane noticed Larry's distress at home and how their discussions focused more on how Larry was being treated by the agency than the shooting itself:

I think it was, there wasn't anything directly involved with the shooting, except for maybe your sleepless nights and still thinking about what if this would have happened, the what ifs. But he worked through that in time and we just talked about things. We talk a lot. I talk a lot. So we talk a lot together. I don't remember anything with the shooting itself. It was the administrative department that became a major source of stress with us and their unsupportive behaviors."

Larry began doubting his own abilities in spite of his many accomplishments throughout his career. Diane noted that he needed agency leadership support, "He needed to know that they were behind him and that they supported him and recognized what he did."

Larry added:

It became worse, because of, not necessarily the shooting, but the combination of what I was experiencing after the shooting [with his agency]...I think what was

more difficult on me is, the administrative, how I was treated immediately after the shooting. I didn't have time to adequately process what happened there when they started [unintelligible] and just really making my life difficult at work. And that was the most difficult part I think.

Larry believes that had it not been for the poor treatment from his agency he might have recovered from the shooting sooner, "I think if I had been allowed just to process the shooting and been in a supportive environment, I think I would have recovered or I would have gotten back on my feet much quicker than I had."

**Summary of the role of agency leadership in coping-Larry and Diane.** The dominant narrative in Larry's recovery from the emotional impact of the shooting was the treatment he received from his agency. Larry firmly believes that his recovery from the trauma of the shooting would have been hastened had it not been for the lack of support he received from his agency. He was particularly upset when the agency would not transfer him from the duty station where the shooting occurred. Instead, he had to endure the emotional distress of returning to the scene of the trauma day after day. Larry coped by dedicating himself to doing a good job in spite of his disappointment with his leadership.

**Frank and Ann: "...you performed in the highest traditions of the [agency name].**

Frank was very satisfied with the leadership of his agency following the incident in which he was the shooter. He noted that the investigators from his agency were experienced in officer-involved fatal incidents. He reported that he was recognized with the Shield of Bravery and that a leader in the organization reassured him that he would be fine, and that he had performed in the highest traditions of his agency. Performing to the

highest traditions of his agency meant that Frank performed at a high level consistent with his agency's expectations of excellence:

[Name] who was the [rank] from [city] who had come up, by the time he and [name] and [name], the guy from [State name], when they left I was asking them how it was looking, are we okay and he said, yeah, [Frank] you're going to be fine and you performed in the highest traditions of the [agency name].

Frank said that his agency has a policy that officers do not make statements to the press and that his agency served to maintain a wall between him and the media.

**Summary of the role of agency leadership in coping-Frank and Ann.** Frank expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the treatment he received from his agency. He also described a minimal level of emotional distress as a consequence of his officer-involve fatal incident. Frank had confidence in and respect for the people from his agency who were assigned to conduct the administrative investigation of the shooting. He felt supported and validated in his actions.

**Dave and Pat: "...they were very complimentary..."**

Dave indicated that the best thing his agency did for him was to leave him alone following the incident. He did not feel the need for help in dealing with the impact of the incident. He said that leadership complimented him and the tactical team on a job well done and that they were pleased with everyone's performance:

You know, they were very complimentary of the tactical team and all the officers that were involved and the sheriff was very happy with us and the command staff and stuff. And so everybody was very pleased...So to me, that, that verified or, you know, you know, reinforced that I had done a good job.

**Summary of the role of agency leadership in coping-Dave and Pat.** Dave was confident that his actions at the scene of the incident were appropriate and felt supported by his agency through word and deed. Dave did not want, or need any support from his agency other than their validation for a job well done.

### **Synthesis of the Coping Strategies For An Officer-Involved Fatal Incident**

The purpose of this chapter was to reveal the descriptions, and perceptions of the participant's strategies to cope with those emotional impacts. This chapter addressed three themes pertaining to coping: individual and couple coping; the role of counseling in the coping process; and the role of the agency leadership in either aiding or hindering the process of coping with an officer-involved fatal incident for the law enforcement officer and the spouse.

Coping strategies were as diverse as there were participants in this study. I constructed four themes from the data related to coping: interior life, self-care, external support, and family support. Interior life coping included mental rehearsal of the event before and after, positive mental reframe, gratitude, faith and avoidance. Self-care coping included physical exercise, compartmentalizing of work and home life, expanding social life beyond the law enforcement culture, setting of priorities (manifested by placing family and home above work and career), seeking knowledge, creating memorials and instituting rituals. External support included support of peers, support of the agency, and support through professional counseling services. Family support included the support of spouse, and the couple relationship as well as the home as a place of refuge and solace.

**Internal life**

Gratitude as a positive mental frame was a thread woven through almost all of the interviews with participants. Laura was grateful that her husband survived a shooting that took the life of another officer. She found herself listening to Eric breathe while he slept because she was grateful for his presence. While Eric grieved for his lost partner, he was also grateful that he survived and manifested that gratitude in his relationship with Laura. Eric's gratitude for his life does not allow him to argue with Laura. Since the shooting, according to Eric, no issue is worthy of argument.

Bill experienced an increase in gratitude for his faith and for his marriage to Judy. He was grateful to fellow officers who provided him comfort and empathy following the shooting. Judy was grateful that Bill was not injured and for the way he addressed his grief following the incident. She was grateful that he immersed himself in study about officer-involved killings and "suicide by cop." Judy expressed gratitude for their shared faith and the role that faith plays in strengthening them as individuals and as a couple.

Larry was grateful that he and the other officers involved in his shooting survived, and that his actions were appropriate and according to his training. He expressed gratitude for his spouse, Diane, and the support and wisdom she offered him. Diane was likewise grateful that neither Larry, nor other officers were killed in the exchange of gunfire. She expressed gratitude for her marriage to Larry and for her family. She was especially grateful that she and Larry have survived many challenges during their married life.

Frank was grateful that he and fellow officers survived and that no innocent life was taken. He expressed gratitude for the perpetrator's mother, for actions she took that

may have well saved lives and for her support after the shooting. Frank expressed gratitude for peers who provided empathy and support after the shooting and who shared their collective wisdom. Frank expressed gratitude for the sanctuary that is his home and for the support he received from his spouse, Ann. Ann was grateful that Frank was not injured during the shootout, and for their marriage.

Dave was also grateful that he and his fellow officers survived the incident and that the hostages were unharmed. He expressed gratitude for his spouse, Pat, and for her ongoing support for his work life. Pat was grateful that Dave and the other officers survived and that no hostages were injured. Months later, she was grateful that one of the hostages expressed gratitude for Dave's saving actions. Both Dave and Pat expressed gratitude for their shared faith, for their marriage and family.

Every law enforcement officer participant mentioned mental rehearsal as preparation for the incident, or as reflection after the incidents. Every law enforcement officer reflected on her or his respective officer-involved fatal incidents in the days, weeks and months afterwards. Dave was the only officer who had time to mentally rehearse every movement he would make upon entering the business to confront the perpetrator. The others rehearsed the event over and over after the fact. They all questioned some aspect of their actions, and every participant officer concluded that they acted properly and that, given the same set of circumstances they would take the same actions again.

### **Self Care**

Eric constructed a memorial to his partner, and fallen officer in his front yard to honor the memory of the fallen officer. Eric showed me the memorial (See figure 4.3).



The memorial consists of a tree with a concrete slab at the base with the fallen officer's name, his End of Watch (EOW) date and a set of handcuffs. This is where Eric goes to reflect about the day of the shooting and remember his fallen friend. At the time of the interview, he continued to wear the same uniform and boots that he wore on the day of the shooting. He explained that they serve as a reminder to exercise officer safety at all times. Laura also created a memorial to honor the fallen officer and his widow (See figure 4.4). Laura created twin memorials, one she kept for herself and the other she delivered to the fallen officer's widow to honor her and her husband's memory. The memorial consists of a figurine of a widow holding an American flag, and a photo of the fallen officer. Laura also instituted rituals that helped her relieve her anxiety about the safety of her husband, and that reflected her gratitude that his life was spared. She placed "totems" around the home for good luck, and never allowed Eric to leave for work without kissing him and telling him that she loved him. She also inscribed her name and those of their children on his ballistic vest over the heart.

Figure 5.1



Figure 5.2



Lisa exercised, rode horses, sought additional training and has been teaching law enforcement officers and hostage negotiators all across the United States and Canada as

her self-care. With the exception of the training other officers, she has always maintained her self-care activities. She is described by Jon as “purpose driven” in everything she does. Lisa commented that she still experiences emotion during certain parts of her training presentation, but that she experiences much more satisfaction knowing that she is sharing her knowledge with other professionals, and that many of her students experience a measure of healing from their own emotional wounds through her training.

Bill wears a wristband to memorialize the officer who died in his first officer-involved fatal incident. The band is a constant reminder of the sacrifice the officer made and is Bill’s way of honoring that sacrifice. He read books by well-known authors in the field of military and law enforcement combat. He attended training seminars by experts in the field of emotional health for law enforcement officers, all of whom are cited in this study. The knowledge he gained helped him to understand his own emotional response. Bill’s shooting incident solidified the priority of his marriage, family and his faith in his life scheme. Judy pursued her faith and her relationship with Bill as self-care. During the interview she expressed gratitude that the incident caused her, and Bill, to “pursue their faith and each other.” She found the silver lining in an otherwise emotionally painful, and life-disrupting event.

Larry was initially traumatized by the fact that he shot a female who looked like a, “soccer mom” and the perception that he may have killed an innocent passer-by during the exchange of gunfire. When he finally had all the facts, he was satisfied that he had acted appropriately. Larry’s emotional healing was hindered by the treatment he received from his agency following the shooting. Through counseling he found the motivation to actively defend himself against his own agency. He spent a great deal of time researching

and preparing his case. His active participation in his own defense provided him with a sense of self-efficacy. Larry also established new priorities and renewed long-held work commitments. First, Larry recognized that family relationships were his first priority. That was not always the case over the years as Larry threw himself into his career. Diane commented that Larry's career often interfered with home life. Following the shooting, Larry concluded that he would continue to be true to his own values and strive for excellence in his work life while placing his marriage and his family as his first priority. Diane was the primary support for Larry, but she eventually had to care for her own well-being by disengaging from Larry's work issues. She was able to successfully compartmentalize Larry's issues and continue to attend to family and work demands.

Frank and Dave described the least degree of emotional distress, as did their spouses. Frank demonstrates self-care through compartmentalizing his work and his home life. Of all the participants, Frank was most emphatic about protecting his family from the unpleasant aspects of his job, while creating a safe haven for himself at home and a refuge from the stresses of the work environment. Refusing to discuss work at home provides Frank with peace of mind that sensitive work information will not find its way into the community through an innocent slip of the tongue by a family member.

Dave and Pat have consciously expanded their social life beyond the law enforcement culture to include involvement in church and other activities not associated with law enforcement. They described a full social and family life that rarely includes other law enforcement friends. Dave and Pat give priority to their marriage and family life above their respective work lives.

## **External Support**

External support was provided through association with peers, through the law enforcement officer's agency and through professional counseling. In this respect, Eric relied on external support primarily from his employing agency. Eric described agency support that included daily calls from his leadership offering whatever supports that Eric and Laura could identify. The agency even provided drivers in the days following the shooting to transport them to his partner's funeral. The agency also provided professional counseling services to Eric. Laura benefitted from the agency support for Eric, and she was grateful that the agency fully supported him. She was not, however, offered individual, or family counseling support. Laura expressed strong convictions that the spouse of an officer involved in a fatal incident, as the primary source of support for that officer, could benefit from counseling. She articulated her ideas about establishing an "ombudsman" as a link between the family and the agency to assess support needs.

Lisa addressed her external support needs through one-on-one conversations with her peers. Lisa described her need to reach out to other officers and attend to their emotional wounds and to gather information about the event that would help her understand what happened and how it happened. Lisa did not feel particularly supported by her agency, and described how a mandatory, timely and methodical debriefing would have served to educate all participants and to allow for emotional healing. Lisa's agency did make peer and professional counseling available, but did not mandate it, even for the most affected by the event. Lisa described how the "stigma" of voluntarily seeking professional counseling deterred officers from doing so. Jon did not express a need for

any form of external support following the incident, having been shielded from the most disturbing moments of the incident.

Bill sought external support from his peers. Bill described the powerful positive effect of processing his emotions with trusted, and more experienced peers who had been involved in fatal incidents. Bill's reliance on his peers was not in the context of a formal peer-counseling program, but through informal associations he had formed before the shooting. Bill was mixed in his assessment of support he received from his agency. On one hand, Bill was grateful for the moral support he received from agency leadership, but was disappointed that his agency was ineffective in causing the criminal investigation to produce timely results. Bill was forced to wait two years for a final determination from the investigation agency (district attorney's office). Bill described the need he had for closure and an official finding that his actions were appropriate and lawful. Bill's experience with professional counseling was less than satisfactory. He described his visit with a psychologist as a "fit for duty" evaluation. He described completing psychological assessment instruments to determine his psychological readiness to return to the job. Bill could not recall if he was offered further counseling services, but expressed doubt that he would have accepted an offer for therapy at that time. In retrospect, Bill endorsed counseling for officers and their families following an officer-involved fatal incident and for continuing care over time. Judy was not offered professional counseling service, and also commented that she may not have taken advantage of those services, if offered, immediately following the incident. Like Bill, Judy enthusiastically endorsed timely counseling interventions following a traumatic event, and for continuing support from the agency over time. They both commented that they would have been inclined to report

that they were “fine” following the shooting, but over time learned of the damaging emotional effects of trauma, necessitating counseling support.

Larry did not seek external support from his peers. In fact, given his rank, he had few peers and was not eligible to receive peer counseling for that very reason. Peer counselors are recruited from the rank and file, and do not include management staff. However, Larry did take advantage of professional counseling and credited that counseling with providing the motivation and support to challenge the behavior of his agency. Larry described the counselor as trained and highly experienced in treating law enforcement officers who had experienced traumatic incidents. He expressed his confidence in the competence of this therapist. Larry expressed a belief that he may have healed emotionally sooner had he received support of his agency. Larry described his disillusionment with his agency following the shooting. Diane did not receive an offer of counseling support, nor was she ever contacted by anyone from the agency. She did not rely on any form of external support to help her cope with a spouse who was emotionally traumatized.

Frank sought support from his peers to cope with his shooting incident. Frank expressed gratitude and appreciation for those of his peers who supported him through processing his experience with him. He described his most helpful conversations with those who had experienced officer-involved fatal incidents, including taking the life of another. Frank said that he never felt the need to access professional counseling services, but also described those services as only being available at a distant location. Frank expressed satisfaction with the support he received from his agency. He recalled receiving a supportive phone call from the head of his agency, and also described

supportive comments from those assigned by his agency to investigate his actions. Ann received some support from law enforcement officers, and described how that support caused her to understand how dangerous the shooting had been. Ann described how the vicarious experience of the shooting led to a more realistic perspective of the dangers inherent in law enforcement, and more particularly with Frank's job.

Dave described his satisfaction with his agency's support and described how agency leadership validated his actions and those of his peers. Dave did not seek external support from peers or through professional counseling. In fact, Dave said that the best thing his agency did after validating his actions was to leave him alone. Likewise, Pat did not seek external support, nor did she feel the need for support.

### **Family Support**

The importance of family support as a component of coping with an OIFI emerged as a theme that connected virtually all of the participants. Every law enforcement officer participant attributed primary importance to the support of their spouse in their ability to cope with the stress following an OIFI. Likewise, every participant minimized the role of extended family support. The primary reason cited for not involving extended family as part of their support network was the belief that extended family could not connect with, or understand their experience. In the next subsection it will become evident that most participants found deeper meaning in the couple relationship. The data provided strong evidence of the role and influence a spouse holds in the emotional healing and resiliency of the involved officer. The spouses voiced their recognition of the support they provided to their law enforcement partners. Spouses most frequently described their role as being good listeners, and just "being there."

Eric described Laura as his “best friend” and the one with whom he wanted to process his emotional suffering. Eric described Laura as being “fully supportive” and that she was, and continues to be, available any time he needs to talk. Laura described her supporting behaviors as being a “quiet, supportive presence” for Eric. She said that she did not “expect” Eric to talk, but wanted to be present and available to him. Laura took the position that in the early days following the shooting it was important not to try and force Eric to talk. She was patient and available.

Jon was Lisa’s “significant other” at the time of the officer-involved fatal incident. Lisa commented that her first instinct was to seek out Jon and talk to him. Lisa described an overwhelming need to process her feelings immediately after the event. Later, Lisa described her relationship with Jon as unique because they are both law enforcement officers. Lisa finds comfort in knowing that Jon simply understands her daily experiences in law enforcement because he has been there. At the time of the interview, Jon had since retired. He tries to support Lisa by being positive and supporting her travel schedule as she trains officers at agencies around the country.

Bill and Judy emphasized the importance of their married relationship and the support they find in one another. They view each other as their primary support system. After the shooting, Judy was concerned that Bill would be so distracted by the emotional upheaval caused by the event that he might not react to another life-threatening situation appropriately. She took it upon herself to make sure that he was “...rested, fed, and as happy as we can make him.” Bill explained that since the event, “...I have appreciated her, leaned on her more, depend on her more than I think I did before.” Bill described Judy’s supportive behavior this way:



So a lot of times, you know, it was just her quietly listening. You know, what are you gonna say? What are you gonna say to your husband or your spouse who just killed someone. You know, how do you deal with that? So I think how I've seen my wife process and deal with this is just being there, being an ear when I needed it, continues to be. And that's invaluable, just knowing she's there. I don't always expect a response out of her but just being there.

Judy emphasized the importance of the friendship she has with Bill.

Larry credited Diane with helping him to separate his thoughts from his emotions. Diane recognized that the best thing she could do was to just listen. Larry and Diane processed the event together, and kept the rest of their world at bay. They did not include extended family, or their own children for that matter. Larry only confided in a handful of friends who were police officers at other agencies.

Frank does not rely on Ann to support him directly with work related issues, and did not rely on her a great deal following his shooting. However, he did appreciate that she did not overreact to the event itself. Frank finds support from Ann when she helps maintain the separation he seeks between work and family.

Dave's comments about Pat's support are reminiscent of Frank. Dave did not feel the need to emotionally process the event, but is grateful for the support he receives from Pat on a daily basis.

She doesn't turn into a basket case, you know what I mean? She's not worried all the time. She's not, you know...there's no pressure from her, you know, worrying about me, you know what I mean? And so therefore, I don't worry about, you know, that part of it, you know what I mean? So I think the biggest thing that she

does to help me is to, you know, she doesn't cause stress or drama or however you wanta put it...

It was not surprising that Dave and Frank did not seek emotional support from their spouses because they described minimal emotional distress. Nonetheless, they both described the importance of consistent support from their respective spouses.

The four themes I constructed from the data: internal life, self-care, external support, and family support capture the coping strategies as described by the participants. Not all themes were equal in their application, but all were efficacious in their own right as described by individual participants. For instance, faith as internal coping was significant for Bill, Judy, Dave and Pat, but was not as significant for the other the other participants. Compartmentalizing work and home life (self-care) was a significant coping strategy for Frank and Anne, and to a lesser degree for Dave and Pat, but not for the other participants. Expanding social life beyond the law enforcement culture served Pat and Dave well, but was less of a factor in coping with stress than other participants. Creating memorials, and for fallen officers, and instituting rituals (self-care) was significant for Eric and Laura. Bill has worn a bracelet to remember a fallen officer from an officer-involved fatal incident dating back to 1997. In every case, support of the spouse of the law enforcement officer was a critical coping factor.

It is important to observe that within these four broad themes is contained the coping experience of the participants as they described them. Also noteworthy is that the coping strategies the participants described are all positive approaches to dealing with the stress of an officer-involved fatal incident. Negative coping strategies, like substance abuse, are absent from their descriptions. That is not to claim that some participants did

not suffer emotionally, only that they chose to cope in psychologically and emotionally healthy ways. Making healthy coping choices may account for the survival of their marriages.

## CHAPTER VI RESULTS: Meanings and Essences of an Officer-Involved Fatal Incident

*...there's few professions out there that see what we see, experience what we experience, and live what we live... Bill*

In chapter four I presented the lived emotional experience of the informants following an officer-involved fatal incident. Recall that fear, sadness, anger, and gratitude were the most frequently described emotions experienced by the informants. I constructed two themes from the data in chapter four. The first theme involved the relationship between the law enforcement officer and the decedent as a factor in emotional distress. I argued that the nature of the relationship between the officer and the decedent was a factor in the degree of emotional distress experienced by the officer. The second theme was the motivating influence of emotions on the law enforcement officer and the spouse. I relied on Izard (1991) to argue that emotions served to organize perceptions and thoughts, and that emotion motivated behaviors and actions.

In chapter five I presented the individual and couple strategies that the informants utilized to cope with the emotional effects of having experienced an officer-involved fatal incident. I constructed four themes that captured the coping strategies described by the informants. Those themes included the internal life of the informants, self-care, external support, and family support.

In this chapter (i.e., chapter six), I present three major sections pertaining to the meaning. The first section focuses on meaning constructed by the informants related to the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident. The second section focuses on meaning embedded in a sense of professional competence and training. The third section is a synthesis of the chapter, and includes four themes I constructed from the data

pertinent to meaning. Those themes include an increased appreciation for life, an increased appreciation for spouse and family, a deepening of faith, and the importance of training and professional competence. The sections in this chapter, and the themes I constructed from the data are vital to understand how the informants experienced post trauma growth as individuals and as married couples.

### **Meanings As Constructed by the Officers and Spouses**

In this section I present the descriptions of meaning that the informants constructed from the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident. The participants are presented by couple.

#### **Eric and Laura: “you value life a lot more.”**

Eric and Laura expressed an increased appreciation for life, for fellow officers and for each other. Eric talked about his increased mindfulness of officer safety when he said:

...it definitely gives you an appreciation for life. You're real careful. You don't take any chances, not that you don't take chances, but you're just alert because you don't want anything to happen... Yeah, you value life a lot more. You're careful because you don't want to lose the person you are with. You don't want them to lose you.

Laura described how the shooting changed her and caused her to value each and every day with Eric:

For me, I don't want to take for granted each extra day I've been given with [Eric]. Because me having each of those days cost someone his life. When we

waste that time it's, deep down, I feel like it's dishonoring what they've sacrificed.

Eric discovered a new appreciation for life, his relationship with Laura and for his work. Laura discovered a greater degree of gratitude for her relationship with Eric, the life they have together and that he survived the shooting.

**Lisa and Jon: "...the opportunity I've had to go out and help other people."**

Following the incident, Lisa went on to share the experience and the lessons learned from that experience with law enforcement officers around the United States. She continues to do so to this day. She discussed how other officers have been helped to deal with their own traumatic incidents in law enforcement:

It's because we've reached out and we've touched all these people and they come up with these questions, which sometimes they come up with things I've never even thought about. Or they talk about their own incidents. And sometimes they're in the same boat that we were. They never got a chance to really talk it through. And so we're there for them when nobody was there for us. And it's pretty... awesome to have that opportunity because I don't think very, very few people who've been in critical incidents have the opportunity I've had to go out and help other people.

Jon captured Lisa's attitude toward her suffering and has appropriated it to his life:

She says it every day. Live. Matter. Do something that matters. Life is so fragile and you have to live every minute of it. I mean, we talk about riding horses. She hates going on trail rides. She hates it. Okay, because it's not, it's not purposeful.

It's not purposeful riding. So there's a, you know, and she is the most driven person I've ever met, you know.

Lisa found meaning through helping other officers learn how to successfully deal with an officer-involved fatal incident. She has spent the last 11 years traveling the country training other officers as a direct consequence of her OIFI. Her actions are consistent with a major theme that emerged from our interview: caring for the emotional and psychological welfare of other law enforcement officers. Jon, through his relationship with Lisa, has appropriated her worldview that it is essential to live a purposeful life of consequence.

**Bill and Judy: "...it's given us a tremendous faith."**

When Bill and Judy discussed what was meaningful in their experience with an officer-involved fatal incident, they focused on their faith. Bill said that faith has helped him deal not only with the shooting incident, but also with the loss of a fellow officer:

And so I would tell you the biggest thing that came out of this is, is the fact that, you know, the faith that I have. I think we both have, our kids have. And that's been a good thing. It's certainly helped to deal with, you know, mainly the accident is tougher to me at times to deal with just because of the way it happened and, but looking at it from a faith perspective has definitely helped...it's an appreciation for how quickly life can turn on a dime. And just being, you know, part of some of these things or witnessing some of these things and recognizing that, you know, we are powerless when you get down to it. And that the gifts that we're all given, it, at least for me and I know we've talked about it, you know, you weigh your situation and you compare it against some unfortunate souls that

I've encountered, you can't help but to not be changed by just appreciating the gifts that you're given, the life that you've been given.

Speaking of all the tragic situations that she has helped her spouse through over the years, Judy expressed her compassion for those who experience trauma and loss and how those events have increased her faith:

It gives you an appreciation, I think, for life certainly. Some of the situations, whether it's young couples on their way to their honeymoon or the older couple in retirement or, you know, whoever it is that's devastated by death and, and complete devastation, they've all had a part in where we are right now and our faith that we have. So I guess, sure, it's changed me. It's made me a tremendously faithful person... It's, it's given us a tremendous faith. It's given us, we value our kids, our times with our parents. I think a lot of things that most of us, I think many people don't have but a lot of people our age don't achieve either cuz you just haven't, you're not there yet. You know, you haven't really lost anyone significant to you. You haven't really experienced any real pain or, or a trial. That's sort of been a part of us. Forever.

Bill reflected about a conversation he had with a friend about the short life span of law enforcement officers and how police officer experience more life in a shorter time span. Bill said that recognizing that has changed him:

He said, you know, cuz we were kinda joking that cops generally don't live very long, for whatever reason after retirement. Hopefully you'll be the exception. But generally speaking, you know, it seems like we don't. I don't know why but we don't have long lifespans and, and we were kinda joking around about that and he



said, you know, we don't but we're, we live and we're exposed to more just kind of raw life than... You know, if you think about it, there's few professions out there that see what we see, experience what we experience, and live what we live. And although ours comparably, statistically may be shorter than most professions, our lives may be shorter, we pack a lot of sort of raw life in there. And I think...that changes you. If you recognize it and respond accordingly, I think that changes you. At least for me... Yeah, it is and then you look back and go, man, I did a lot of stupid things and I survived. You know, I'm aware, I am aware now that I'm, I'm not bullet proof. I've had some weird physiological, you know, palpitations...I've noticed in me that I focus on the little things more now. The moments with my wife, the moments with my kids. My family, in general. I've come to a place where I've certainly appreciated them a lot more and rely on them a lot more than I ever did before.

Bill and Judy's dominant narrative was the deepening of their faith as the meaning they derived a consequence of Bill's officer-involved fatal incident. Flowing out of that faith came a deeper appreciation for life, their marriage and intimate family relationships. Bill described a deeper understanding of the nature of police work and the view of life that is afforded to law enforcement officers, and few others.

**Larry and Diane: "...to shoot a woman wasn't easy..."**

When Larry discussed what he has taken away from his officer-involved fatal incident that was meaningful to him, he discussed the difficulty of having to shoot a woman, his relationship with Diane, the value he places on family, and the reality that the responsibility for dealing with traumatic incidents falls on the individual:

I'll tell you, it's difficult to shoot a woman. No matter what anybody says, she has a gun and everything, to shoot a woman wasn't easy... I think what this has really reflected back to me is how blessed I am to have her and my family and that we've survived 35 years of police work and that the bigger picture is your family is most important, you know?... Well, I think you just need to come to terms with something that you have to deal with. The department is not going to deal with it. As far as they're concerned they want to move on. Friends and family for the most part they want to move on but it's something you have to deal with with your spouse. That should be the focus of rebuilding on this.

Diane described meaning in the context of a lifetime of married life and the commitment they have to support one another through all the good and bad times:

I think the success is knowing that it's [traumatic experiences] always there. You know it's always there. It's an experience you've gone through together and survived it, but it's always there and it could come up here and there. We still talk about it once in a while. We talk about things that evolved around it and like I said I think that part of having a relationship is getting through the good times and the bad times and all the experiences that you have and still supporting each other and having a commitment to do that.

Larry discovered that shooting a woman, deadly threat or not, was very difficult for him. The shooting helped him find deeper meaning in his relationship with Diane, especially in knowing that they had survived so many years together in the face of several traumatic work experiences. An officer-involved fatal incident is not experienced by the officer in isolation from his or her most intimate relationships. Similarly, Diane described how she

and Larry reflect on this event over a decade since it occurred. She found meaning in their commitment to each other through, "...the good times and bad times..."

**Frank and Ann: "...I'm...glad that I'm not one of those agents whose picture you see in that hall of honor."**

Frank, like most of the participants in this study, found meaning in the value of life and the love he has for his family. He observed:

After we went up and checked him and cuffed him I turned around and looked at my windshield and noticed that there was a bullet hole in my windshield and it was at basically where I would've been if I was sitting in the driver's seat. That was completely not anything that registered with me when I was shooting at him because I was looking at my front sight to see the target in the background and I was shooting a pretty small target, not for center mass for a full grown man or anything and he was a small guy too so he didn't come over that camper shell very much...So immediately there was a sense of relief; I have two step kids and my little girl was just a year old and I'm glad I get to go home tonight. So there was that relief...I guess my take away is that I'm really glad that I'm not one of those agents whose picture you see in that hall of honor there, that was killed in the line of duty and left a pretty young wife and a one year old daughter. I'm just glad that wasn't me...That and the importance of training. Those are the two biggest things.

Ann gained a new meaning with respect to the nature of Frank's work. In an earlier section she described her naiveté about the dangers associated with Frank's work. Today, she would react differently based on her new understanding. She said, "Now, if I had

gotten one of those calls my reaction would have been very different, I think. I would have dropped everything, yeah, because now I realize it was a serious thing. People were shooting at him too.”

Frank describe his existential experience with the perpetrator and the appreciation he gained that he did not join the ranks of the fallen, and that he survived to enjoy his family. His training took on new meaning for him as well. Ann’s dominant narrative was reflected in how naiveté quickly evolved into a realistic perception of the dangers inherent in her husband’s work. Frank’s work, and her role as the spouse of a law enforcement officer have new meaning.

**Dave and Pat: “[The incident]...made me realize...for the first time...that my job is dangerous.”**

Dave described how the meaning of his job changed after his officer-involved fatal incident. The incident helped him to recognize that his job was dangerous. He related that his father happened to be watching the incident from his office space across the street, when he (the dad) realized that Dave was involved:

The one thing that made me realize maybe for the first time but that, that my job is dangerous and what I do is different than what other people do is my dad was working for [company name] and their building was almost directly across the street from the [location of incident]. So this is all going down, his office is upstairs, so he had a bird’s eye view of the whole thing... He said, what’s [Dave] doing there?...Not...realizing for the first time that...his son does stuff that...could get him killed...I don’t know exactly what he thought but he made the comment that it scared him and made him nervous...And I had never thought

about that before... How what I do affects other people... You want to go, you want to be in the thick of it...and...you want the hot call. You want the action. You want to be the guy in the front...but never really thinking about what anybody else thought about that.

Pat initially took the incident in stride, having been the spouse of a law enforcement officer for years. Months later she encountered one of the female hostages who approached her and expressed her gratitude for Dave for saving her life. That experience caused Pat to reflect that she had lost the capacity to understand how traumatic such incidents are for those involved:

...it was just kind of an interesting side note because we don't ever like, I mean, even when he came home from that [incident], he told the story and I'm like, oh, good job...Undress in the garage, that was like the whole thing... but it just doesn't even dawn on me what... I mean, I never think about it. So it was interesting to see somebody that actually had participated [referring to hostage victim]. She was really scared and she thought he'd saved her life so... She didn't say the police department saved me, the sheriff department...she said tell your husband thank you for saving my life...otherwise, nothing's personal to me...it's just another callout and...

Dave and Pat emphasized the role of faith in their marriage and in Dave's perception of his job, and how this incident changed their perceptions of how others are affected by Dave's job as a law enforcement officer. Dave described how faith has enlarged his worldview, and the meaning his faith provides in his role as a law enforcement officer. Dave discovered new meaning in how the dangers of his job affect those around him.

Likewise, Pat discovered new meaning in how traumatic events, that she takes for granted, affect those involved, especially victims of trauma.

Dave and Pat both experienced paradigm shifts related to Dave's work as a law enforcement officer. Before the incident, neither had an appreciation for how the danger inherent in Dave's work affected others. Dave's shift came after his father expressed his own emotional reaction to watching Dave enter the building to confront an armed suspect. It was the first time that Dave realized that his job was dangerous, and that what he does on a daily basis is very different from the experience of most people. He also realized that the danger of his job affects members of his extended family.

Pat met a victim/hostage of the incident months after the incident. Through that encounter Pat realized that what she takes as matter of fact (her husband arriving home with someone else's blood on his uniform) is anything but mundane to those who played a different role in the incident. Pat gained a new appreciation for how Dave's work affects other people, and was moved by the terror this victim/hostage experienced and the gratitude she expressed for Dave's saving actions.

### **Meaning Embedded in a Sense of Professional Competence and Training**

*...I hoped I did everything right, because if I shot when I wasn't suppose to shoot, or didn't shoot soon enough and all those things that run through your mind- Frank*

In this section I present the descriptions of the meaning that each law enforcement informant constructed based on a sense of professional competence and training.

Professional competence is central to understand the importance that law enforcement officers place on the ability to perform well during critical incidents that involve making life and death decisions. Each law enforcement officer is presented in same order as in

the previous sub-section, but without the spouses. A synthesis of chapter six follows this sub-section.

**Eric: “So he probably saved a whole bunch of lives that day.”**

Eric was devastated by the loss of his partner, but was confident that his actions were professional and appropriate. His shooting lasted a total of three seconds, and all he had time to do was to take cover in order to return fire. By that time, it was all over. The perpetrator and his partner were both dead. He was interviewed following the shooting, and in spite of his right to refuse to answer questions, he did not hesitate:

The internal [internal affairs investigation] for me was right after it happened. The sergeant, the internal investigator asked me what happened. I told him everything that happened. It really didn't bother me. Yeah, it really didn't bother me other than having to tell the story over again. I mean I didn't have anything to hide and that's what it was.

Eric commented that his training never addressed the situation like he encountered. The perpetrator was armed with an AK-47, and surprised Eric and his partner with a sudden barrage of automatic gunfire. Eric said of his academy training, “Well, I would say that the whole Academy, nothing, zero had covered this sort of training. Yeah, there just wasn't any training now that I think back on it.” Laura, however, recalled that training did play a pivotal, and life-saving role in the shooting:

You may not realize it but I think that it's overshadowed by the event that took place, but from what [Eric] told me they used their training that almost becomes like breathing for them. They split up and [Eric] and [fallen officer] went one direction around the casino and [officer's name] went the other just to, they were

looking for the suspect vehicle; yes they were looking for a white work truck. But by splitting up like that and using their training to come in from different angles. If they hadn't done that and [officer's name] hadn't come up behind the suspect, it would have been a whole different story.

Eric agreed with Laura as he reflected about the incident and discussed the lives that were probably saved by using fundamental officer safety protocols:

And you're right, that's a good point that you brought up. The training does come into play like that. We took two separate ones [officers approached from two different directions]. So he probably saved a whole bunch of lives that day because apparently there was a bunch of ammunition on the passenger's seat so whatever he was deciding to do that day, he was going to do it.

Initially, Eric did not recognize the role that his training played in the shooting. It was not until the topic was broached during the interview that he had given it any thought. After Laura demonstrated the role training played in resolving the incident, Eric realized that training meant saved lives: his life and those whose lives may have been lost had the shooter defeated law enforcement.

**Jon and Lisa: "...if I hadn't've gone to all that training and done all those things, maybe I'd be second guessing myself..."**

Lisa and Jon expressed mixed feelings about professional competence demonstrated during their officer-involved fatal incident. Lisa was far more engaged in the process of this event by virtue of her assignment as a hostage negotiator. Lisa was meticulous about receiving continuous training in hostage negotiations, even when she had to spend her own money for training. She did not feel, however, that other members



of the team were as current in their professional competence because they had not received training for three to four years. When it came time to testify in court, Lisa was pleased that she was able to articulate a high level of training and experience:

What was so nice is I had spent a lot of my own personal money going to school and people slagged me for it. They were like you're gonna make it so everybody has to pay to go to school. And I kept going when I had to keep sitting up there, showing all my training records and experience and then [name of other negotiator], of course, was squared away. We were the only two negotiators. We looked like diamonds. So thank God, it was me that negotiated and not anybody on the, anybody else on the team cuz they were... I mean, [name of officer] was right, some of them hadn't been to school in three, four years. The training was, you know, not even close to what it should be. But I was squared away... In my case, it was a huge payoff. And if I hadn't've gone to all that training and done all those things, maybe I'd be second guessing myself, even if it was the exact same scenario. Like god, maybe I would've learned this or learned that or did this better.

Jon reflected the profound disappointment that law enforcement was unable to save the child victim, the inevitability of the outcome, and the letdown that followed:

Yeah. You know, going back to the previous question just real quick, you feel let down... That little girl was dead. Okay. She was gonna die no matter what cuz that's what her mother preordained. As soon as, as soon as [officer's name] said [agency name], that girl was dead. That girl was going to die... I'm blameless. And that's the way I look at it. I didn't participate in killing that girl.

A major theme of the interview with Lisa was the emphasis she placed on training. In spite of her sadness that the child victim had been murdered, Lisa took comfort in knowing that she was well-trained and that she had taken responsibility for her own training and competence. She did not have to question her own competence with respect to the outcome. Jon was disappointed that law enforcement was unable to save the child, and maintained that no amount of training, or competence on the part of law enforcement could have produced another outcome. He attributed the responsibility for the outcome to the parent who murdered the child.

**Bill: “I really feel good about the way I dealt with it...”**

After the shooting, Bill was emotionally distraught that he had killed a man whose gun was empty. But, he knew at the time, and later reflection confirmed in his mind, that he had acted according to his training and in a professionally competent manner:

I think my training kicked in. I was, honestly I was very comfortable. It was almost kind of unnerving, looking back now at how comfortable I was. I recall everything with clarity... I was certainly focused on him but I know I had kind of a presence of mind to know who was on my right, who was on my left.

Communicating with people during the situation, even up to and after the shot.

You know, directing people what to do after he went down. I really feel good about the way I dealt with it... You know, I'm good with it. I'm good with the shooting... You know, and I really am genuinely proud of the way I handled it...

I know it was a textbook, textbook shot. It's just... Seeing him writhe in pain like that, watching him. Blood was everywhere. And I'm standing right over him.

And still gets me to this day...the business part of it was fine. It was the personal aspect of it. That's presented a struggle. I was at peace with everything. I understand, I understood that what I did I had to do...I wasn't happy about it. I was upset with the guy. I've obviously forgiven him.

Bill described how meaningful professional competence was for him in the taking of another's life. Bill was profoundly saddened when he learned that the perpetrator's gun was empty. Knowing that his actions were appropriate and consistent with his training meant that Bill could find a sense of peace.

**Larry: "I felt...confident in my actions."**

Larry described the fear he experienced when he first encountered the scene of the shooting. He saw woman holding a gun, and initially did not know if she was a perpetrator or task force officer. When he saw her shoot one of his officers he shot and killed her. He later learned that the woman also shot and killed her lover. When Larry first became aware of the dead lover, he momentarily thought he had killed a passerby:

It's just I didn't want to see anything happen to him. In ways you think well maybe if I would have shot her before she had a chance to shoot him. All those things go through your mind...I had never seen him before and my first instinct was, "Oh my God, I killed somebody walking through the park."

After Larry had the opportunity to sort through the shooting, he knew that he had acted professionally and consistent with his training, "I think initially I felt pretty, I was up, I felt, not excited, but I felt really confident and really great about the fact that we were all successful and that we all lived...I felt...confident in my actions."

A prominent theme during my interview with Larry was his initial confusion about what he perceived when he first arrived at the scene, shooting a woman and believing, even for a short time, that he may have killed an innocent passerby. Larry found peace in knowing that he followed his training, and that his actions and judgments were appropriate. It is likely he saved another officer's life.

**Frank: "...and I remember thinking to myself, 'oh, shit I got to shoot.' And, I did."**

Frank recalled and described the experience of engaging a perpetrator in a deadly encounter:

The sound, all the shots were all one continuous loud noise. I don't remember continuous shots. The sound of my shots, I remember counting, I don't know if you do that, just boom, boom, boom, boom. I thought I may have done five but I thought it was four. That's what it turned out to be. And just that kind of time-it was like, I saw him, saw him point the gun and I remember thinking to myself, "oh, shit I got to shoot." And, I did.

Like several of the law enforcement officers interviewed in this study, Frank was concerned about his professional performance in this highly stressful event:

Two things I remember that night, as time went later that afternoon and into the evening that I remember quite clearly, one is that I hoped I did everything right, because if I shot when I wasn't suppose to shoot, or didn't shoot soon enough and all those things that run through your mind. And, later it came to me that I hoped I hit the target. If I missed with four shots I was going to be very disappointed in myself. Because that's what we do. That training should take over...

Later, Frank told a peer that since he had to shoot he hoped that he hit his target. Someone who had never experienced a shooting might not understand a disclosure of that sort:

...and I shared that with him and he shook his head and he understood and so when the autopsy was done we had an agent from [city name] attend the autopsy and he said, yeah, we pulled your 9mm out of his brain, his skull and to me in a weird way it was kind of a relief because that was the last thing, if I had missed him I would have been very disappointed if hadn't done what I needed to do there...He's [the perpetrator] the one who initiated it and his intentions were clear....I think to some extent it gives you a certain level of confidence. You were faced a deadly situation and you performed and did what you were supposed to do. That, along with a couple of other cases that came along right around that time period was a crucial point in my career going from a wet behind the ears new guy to a more seasoned agent.

Frank described what almost all law enforcement officers wonder about until they are tested: Will I be able to take a human life if circumstances demand that of me? Frank shared his own reflections:

I don't know. I guess beforehand you are, the word that comes to mind is theoretical. How would I feel if I had to take another human's life? And you always wonder about that. And, if I had to do it, and I was born Catholic- school and the whole thing, all the way through and so, sanctity of life is a big deal and I guess Rich, for me compared to what that guy made me do, I don't even think

twice about it. If it's him or me, or him or [officer's name] it's going to be us every single time.

Following an officer-involved fatal incident, two parallel investigations proceed: a criminal and an administrative investigation. Typically, the administrative investigators will wait until criminal investigators complete interviews of involved officers.

Information gleaned from criminal investigations is available to administrative staff. It is not unusual for law enforcement officers to cooperate with interviews; however, officers may exercise their First Amendment right to remain silent. Frank commented about the investigative process, and in the process offered an assessment of his professional competence:

There's definitely a pucker factor there [A pucker factor refers to anxiety]. And, I thought for a second, that maybe I should invoke [his right to remain silent] and say that I didn't want to talk about it, but I said I don't think I didn't anything wrong, I don't have anything to hide and I want to clear this up as fast as I can, so I gave them a statement that night.

Clearly, professional competence had great meaning for Frank. Training meant the difference between performing in a competent manner and malfeasance. First, Frank wanted a sure knowledge that he acted appropriately in the decision to shoot the perpetrator. Next, he wanted to know that he fired his weapon accurately, hitting the intended target, and not an innocent bystander. He would eventually conclude that the shooting was necessary, that he was accurate, and that he was able to perform well given the gravest of decisions-taking a human life.

**Dave: “The only thing I was nervous...about was failing.”**

Dave was a member of the SWAT team and had time to reflect on his training before making entry into a building to rescue hostages being held at gunpoint. He rehearsed in his mind exactly what he would do and how he would do it as he prepared for entry. He was the second man in line to breach the door. Dave’s primary concern was doing his job well, and performing according to his training and the expectations he had for himself:

And so...I’m getting my mind ready and I’m going over...almost step by step, how I’m gonna enter, what I’m gonna do...so that I...get the job done and you just play the scenarios over in your mind and...you’re just thinking, constantly reassessing based on where he is in the room, what he’s doing... So I remember worrying about getting through the door. Getting out of that fatal funnel...out of that...choke point...so that everybody else could get in with me... The only thing I was nervous about or concerned about was failing. Not, not doing, not performing to the level that, that I expected of myself and that the rest of the guys expected and depended on for me to do my job...

After the shooting, the most important factor for Dave was to know that he and his team had performed well, consistent with their training, and that only the perpetrator was killed. No hostages or law-enforcement officers were injured or killed in the incident:

I think, you know, I don’t remember having a lot of feelings afterwards, other than I was glad it was over with. I was glad that he was dead, and that nobody else was hurt, you know, and I was glad that I didn’t shoot him. You know, but, you know, I was proud of the guys, you know, our team. I was proud of how we

handled it and stuff and, you know, and so, you know, I felt good for the most part. I felt good. Yeah, he died but, you know... Yeah. You know, that's not my problem, you know what I mean? He created this issue, not me.

Dave reflected on his performance following the incident and questioned whether he hesitated too long to fire his weapon. His reflection was based on his training and self-assessment of his professional competency:

Sometimes I think should I have shot him sooner. What was I waiting for...? And then I've thought, well, I don't think that I was waiting. I think that things kinda happened all at the same time. I think that it's possible that...as I entered, he was already turning...and had already decided to shoot himself...it happened so fast... So I think that he was already in the process of shooting himself as I turned the corner...In the process, I mean turning away from where we were coming from, putting the gun to his head...And then walking away...

Dave finally concluded that he performed consistent with his training and expressed that he gained confidence because of his performance and the performance of his teammates and leaders:

The benefit from it was that I learned a little bit about myself. In a good way...I built confidence in myself, in my abilities, in my training...In my partners and my leaders...that was important or pleasing to me...I knew I had the confidence and the ability and the mindset to do the job [in the future]...to get it done, do what I needed to do.

Performing well, and according to his training was important to Dave. His survival, the survival of his team members and those of the hostages were foremost in his mind. Dave



had considerable time to rehearse his actions in anticipation of entering the building and confronting the perpetrator. He had time to consider his training and draw upon his experience before that confrontation. Dave knew what he was going to do, and was prepared to use deadly force. Nonetheless, in the moment of the encounter, Dave had to make a final decision. As he and the armed perpetrator faced each other, they simultaneously made life and death decisions. Dave decided to use deadly force, but the perpetrator acted a split second earlier and committed suicide.

Following the incident it was important to Dave to know that he did perform well and that he retained the confidence of his peers and leaders. It was important to him to know that he could perform according to expectations, and in a way that engendered confidence in him. It was also important to Dave to reinforce his own sense of self-efficacy.

### **Synthesis of the Meaning Derived From an Officer-Involved Fatal Incident**

The purpose of this chapter was to reveal the meanings participants' attributed to the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident. The first sub-section focused on an overview of participants' descriptions of meaning. The second sub-section focused on the meaning that the officers attributed to a sense of professional competence and training post event. The third, and final section of chapter six is a synthesis of the most significant ideas across the first two sub-sections.

In this third sub-section, I constructed four major themes from the data related to the meaning that the participants made of their respective experiences with an officer-involved fatal incident. Those themes include an increased appreciation for life, an increased appreciation for spouse and family, a deepening of faith, and the importance of

training and professional competence. I present each theme in that order. The themes I present in this final section relate to Frankl's (1984) ideas of the primary sources from which we appropriate meaning in our lives: love relationships, work, and suffering. Frankl held that, ultimately, individuals have the capacity, even the responsibility to decide their attitudes toward their circumstances. I argue that the participants' descriptions of meaning are consistent with, and reflect Frankl's view.

### **Appreciation For Life**

Eric described an increase in his appreciation for life after watching his partner die, and almost losing his own life. Laura said that she values each and every day that she has with Eric, knowing that he could have been killed in the shooting. Both Lisa and Jon expressed an appreciation for the fragility of life and the value in living purposefully, and making life matter. Bill commented that he learned that he was not invincible, or "bullet proof" as he put it. Frank described how grateful he was to have survived the shootout with the perpetrator, and that he did not join those whose photographs are displayed on his agency's wall of honor. Dave described how he understood, for the first time, that his job was dangerous, and expressed his relief that neither he, nor his colleagues were injured or killed.

### **Appreciation For Spouse and Family**

Eric expressed appreciation for his relationship with Laura, and his family. Laura described her appreciation for her relationship with Eric and how she values every day that she has with him, knowing how quickly a life can be taken. Bill and Judy described how they found new meaning in their married relationship. Larry and Diane described an increase in appreciation for their marriage and the importance of family in the healing

process following an officer-involved fatal incident. Frank described his appreciation for his spouse, his children, and his role as a husband and father. Dave expressed gratitude for the support he receives from Pat in performing his work as a law enforcement officer.

### **Deepening of Faith**

Bill and Judy described the central place that faith holds in their lives. They described how the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident deepened their faith, and how that faith drew them closer as a married couple. Likewise, Dave and Pat described how their religious faith informs their view of the world, and their place in it. Pat described how engagement in a faith community expands their social experience, and gives context to their lives. Dave and Pat credit their faith with their ability to be resilient in the face of tragedy. Frank's moral compass was informed by this Catholic upbringing and caused him to ponder if he could take a human life. He discovered that he could take a human life if he was protecting his life, or the life of another without compromising his spiritual beliefs.

### **Training and Professional Competence**

Every law enforcement officer, with one exception, emphasized that it was important to know that their actions were consistent with their training, and with policy. The one exception was Eric. Eric's entire experience with the actual shooting lasted for 3 seconds. During that 3-second interval, Eric perceived a deadly threat and instinctively took cover. By the time he was in a position to respond to the threat, the threat was over. During the interview it was his spouse, Laura, who described how training probably saved Eric and other innocent lives. It was during that interview that Eric recognized for the first time that training played a saving role in the incident. Every law enforcement

officer mentioned the peace of mind they were able to have because they knew that they acted consistent with their training and in accordance with agency policy.

Lisa expressed gratitude for her training, some of which she pursued on her own and at her own expense. She described that her testimony at the subsequent murder trial gained credibility because of her extensive training as a hostage negotiator. Jon expressed confidence in his, and Lisa's, professional competence. He was able to know that he was "blameless" in the child's death.

Bill described how his training took over as he confronted a deadly threat. He commented that he felt very confident about his actions throughout the incident because of his training. Bill had no doubt about his professional competence, and was appreciative of his training. He described feeling at peace because he was confident that his actions were consistent with the training he had received.

Larry also commented that he was confident in his abilities and that he acted according to his training. Larry was initially confused about the perpetrator because of her non-threatening appearance, but responded to his training and shot her when he did perceive her as a deadly threat. Larry was horrified when he initially thought that he had killed a passerby (the perpetrator's lover), only to learn later that the perpetrator shot her lover. When all the facts were known, Larry had no doubt about his professional competence.

Professional competence was very important to Frank. He relied on his training to the point that he counted the rounds as he fired his weapon, and was able to be mindful of unintended targets in the background. That level of concentration is only possible through consistent training. Frank described how it was important to him that he hit his target. He

wanted to know that his marksmanship matched the countless hours of training, and that he did not hit an innocent bystander.

The meanings derived from an officer-involved fatal incident as constructed by the informants do reflect Frankl's (1984) proposition that meaning in life is found in our love relationships, our work and our suffering. Each of these levels of meaning are discoverable in the informants' descriptions. The meanings described by the informants are crucial to understand the process of recovery and healing from an officer-involved fatal incident.

## CHAPTER VII: Discussion

In this chapter, I present six major sections pertaining to the discussion of the results presented in chapters four (lived emotional experience), chapter five (coping), and chapter six (meaning). The first section focuses on the summary of the major findings. The second section focuses on the implications of those findings for the field of counseling. The third section focuses on theoretical implications. The fourth section focuses on the limitations of the study. The fifth section focuses on future direction for research based on the study. The final section includes my closing remarks.

### **Summary of the Major Findings**

This study captured the perceptions and descriptions of six law enforcement officers and their spouses (N=12) of the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident. I constructed three major themes from the data: the lived emotional experience (chapter four); the experience of coping with an officer-involved fatal incident (chapter five); and the meaning informants derived from having experienced an officer-involved fatal incident (chapter six). I present a brief overview of each chapter in the following three subsections.

#### **Lived Emotional Experience**

Chapter four addressed the lived emotional experience of an officer-involved fatal incident. Interviews with the informants elicited perceptions and descriptions of how informants experienced emotions, as well as how emotions affected the couple relationship.

The findings from this study pertaining to emotion demonstrate that (a) the context of the relationship between the officer and the decedent was a factor in the degree

of emotional distress experienced by the officer, and (b) that emotions serve to organize perceptions and thoughts, and that emotion motivates behaviors and actions.

### **Coping**

Chapter five addressed coping, and included individual and couple coping strategies as well as how counseling and agency support influenced the process of coping. While coping strategies were diverse, the findings from this study demonstrate that four general themes reflect how the informants coped with an OIFI: internal life, self-care, external support, and family support. Self-care coping included physical exercise, compartmentalizing of work and home life, expanding social life beyond the law enforcement culture, setting of priorities (manifested by placing family and home above work and career), seeking knowledge, creating memorials and instituting rituals. External support included support of peers, support of the agency, and support through professional counseling services. Family support included the support of spouse, and the couple relationship as well as the home as a place of refuge and solace.

### **Meaning**

The chapter on meaning (e.g., chapter six) included individual sources of meaning, how meaning informed the couple relationship, and how meaning was informed by professional competence and training. The findings from this study illustrate how the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident changed the perceptions of the informants on several levels. Law enforcement officers were able to describe how perceptions of life, survival, faith, family and relationship to spouse were altered. Likewise, spouses were able to describe how perceptions of life, their spouse's occupation, the general public, faith, family, marriage, and support were changed through the experience. The findings

from this study supported the construction of four major themes that capture the informants' descriptions of meanings derived from the experience of an OIFI, and include, (a) increased appreciation for life, (b) an increased appreciation for spouse and family, (c) a deepening of faith, and (d) the importance of training and professional competence.

### **Implications For the Field of Counseling Theory and Practice**

This research study was a qualitative inquiry pertaining to a narrowly defined, and extreme form of stress encountered by law enforcement officers: an officer-involved fatal incident (OIFI). This study sought to answer the question: How do law enforcement officers and their spouses perceive and describe the experience of an OIFI? I found the answers to this question within the three themes I identified above: the emotional experience, coping with the experience of an OIFI, and the meaning derived from the experience of an OIFI.

My goals were to (a) refine what is already known about law enforcement stress and how it affects the officer and the spouse, (b) enhance our knowledge of how best to prepare law enforcement officers and their spouses for the emotional consequences of an officer-involved fatal incident, and (c) to expand our knowledge about how to treat them and bring about healing in a counseling environment.

It was important to conduct this research, and add to the current literature by giving voice to the law enforcement officers and their spouses. In doing so, I have addressed the paucity of qualitative studies pertaining to law enforcement stress in general, and officer-involved fatal incidents in particular. Including the voices of the spouses of law enforcement officers was a major goal of this study. In the process, this



study identified unmet support needs for the spouses, and emphasized the primary support role that spouses provide to law enforcement officers.

This study adds to the current literature by offering a fundamentally different epistemological perspective not found in quantitative studies. The truth of the lived experience is found in the voice of the one living it, along with her or his values, and biases, and those of the researcher presenting it to the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study holds particular relevance for law enforcement officers and their spouses, law enforcement leaders, and professional counselors.

The implications from this study for the field of counseling include, (a) that the context of the relationship between the LEO and a decedent (victim or perpetrator) may influence the degree to which the LEO experiences emotional distress, (b) that the vast majority of LEOs and their spouses demonstrate resilience and posttraumatic growth in the face of potentially traumatic events through positive coping strategies, (c) that support needs for spouses of LEOs following an OIFI are lacking, and (d) that professional competence is meaningful to LEOs following an OIFI.

**The context of the relationship between the LEO and decedent influences the degree to which the LEO experiences emotional distress.** The findings of this study suggest that the context of the relationship between the officer and the decedent appears to influence the degree to which the LEOs experienced emotional distress. Recall that Eric, Bill, Lisa and Larry described significant levels of emotional distress following their officer-involved fatal incidents, and that Frank and Dave described little or no emotional distress following their incidents. For example, Eric, Bill, Lisa and Larry described significant emotional distress, and all of them experienced guilt in the context of their

respective relationships with a decedent (victim or perpetrator). In the cases of Bill and Larry, the context of the relationships changed in the course of the fatal encounter, or shortly thereafter. Bill learned the day following the OIFI that the perpetrator he shot and killed had an empty gun. Larry's first impression of the woman he eventually shot and killed was that of a "soccer mom," or a member of a law enforcement task force. When Larry saw the female perpetrator shoot a fellow officer, the context of his relationship with her changed instantly, and he took the appropriate measures to protect the officer and himself. Eric felt that he failed in his responsibility to protect his partner when the perpetrator fired on them with an AK-47 assault rifle, and Lisa felt that she failed in her responsibility to rescue a 10-year-old hostage.

In every instance that an informant LEO experienced guilt in the context of their relationship with a decedent (victim or perpetrator) they reported significant emotional distress. It is not uncommon that officers involved in fatal incidents will accept responsibility for circumstances that were beyond their control. Bill commented that faced with the same set of facts again (perpetrator threatening him with a gun) that he would take the same action. He could not have known that the perpetrator had fired all his ammunition before the deadly encounter. Even so, when then facts became known that the perpetrator's gun was empty he could not escape intense feelings of guilt. As Izard (1991) noted, there is a strong relationship between one's sense of personal responsibility and the feeling of guilt. Professional counselors should explore the context of the relationship between the officer and the deceased to uncover feelings of guilt that may serve to amplify emotional distress. Counselors can then focus on the core source of emotional distress and bring about relief for the LEO client.

**Coping and Resiliency.** The findings of this study demonstrate that positive coping skills lead to resilience in the aftermath of an OIFI. It is noteworthy that all of the coping strategies described by the participants can be considered positive coping skills as opposed to negative coping skills that can lead such behaviors as substance abuse, and isolation (Follette, Plousny & Milbeck, 1994). The utilization of positive coping skills may account for the individual wellbeing and survival of the marriages in this group. In the following paragraphs I will highlight the importance of selected coping strategies, and their importance to the field of counseling in treating law enforcement officers and their spouses. Those coping strategies include, (a) expanding social life beyond the law enforcement culture, (b) agency support, (c) peer support, and (d) professional counseling. When LEOs seek the services of mental health professionals, counselors should explore these coping strategies with them. For example, if the counselor discovers that the LEOs social life is restricted to the law enforcement culture, the counselor can explore social options outside of law enforcement with the LEO as an effort to achieve a more balanced social experience. Likewise, it is important for counselors to know if the LEO client is receiving the support of peers and the employing agency in assessing the relative strength of the LEOs support network. A good example of this is, Larry. Recall that Larry felt betrayed by his agency following his OIFI, and believed that his emotional healing was hindered by the agency's lack of support. A professional counselor became an advocate for Larry, and helped him to navigate his way through administrative issues.

**Expanding social life beyond the law enforcement culture.** Law enforcement culture tends to be encapsulated, forming a wall between law enforcement officers, their

families, and the community at large, leading to an “us versus them” mentality (Gilmartin, 1986; McCafferty, McCafferty & McCafferty, 1992; Waters & Ussery, 2007; Woody, 2006). This study demonstrated the importance of law enforcement officers and their families expanding their social circles beyond the law enforcement culture. Several participants, including Dave and Pat, Larry and Diane, and Bill and Judy described the value of breaking out of the law enforcement culture and embracing the wider community. Pat was especially eloquent as she described the dangers of becoming isolated within the law enforcement culture. She described how socializing with other officers narrows the conversation to police work, and how the bonds between officers can become stronger than the bonds within the marriage (Borum & Philpot, 1993). My own experience speaks to the need to expand social horizons to gain a more balanced perspective on the community and the world. I recall a conscious decision to widen my social experience through returning to the university, and by embracing a faith community. Counselors can be mindful of their LEO client’s social experience, and extend invitations to broaden that experience to help ameliorate negative effects (us versus them) of the encapsulated nature of the law enforcement culture.

**Agency support.** Law enforcement agencies play an important role in either promoting wellness following an OIFI, or hindering emotional healing (McCafferty, McCafferty & McCafferty, 1992; Waters, 2007). This study extends the literature in this important area of coping support. Recall that Eric, Dave and Frank were completely satisfied with the support each received from their agencies. Eric’s leadership called him everyday to see how he was doing and to offer support without ever pressuring him to return to work. Dave was pleased that his agency praised his actions, and those of his

team, and then left him alone. Frank described total support from his agency. On the other hand, Larry felt betrayed by his agency, leaving him disillusioned. Larry said that he might well have recovered from the shooting sooner had it not been for poor treatment by his agency. Lisa was disappointed with her agency's response to the incident (i.e. the death of the 10 year-old child). She believed that emotional healing could have been aided had her agency leadership conducted a mandatory and thorough de-briefing, and had they required officers to be treated by a professional counselor. Bill was satisfied with his agency's response to the shooting, except for the length of time it took (two years!) for the district attorney's office to render its findings that he acted appropriately. Bill believed agency leadership could have influenced the district attorney's office to act in a timelier manner. Bill believed that his emotional suffering was extended because of that time delay. Likewise, his spouse, Judy, also experienced the stress of the investigative delay. Counselors should inquire of their LEO clients about the level of support they are receiving from the LEO's employing agency. Doing so will alert the counselor to a possible source of additional stress, or another point of support in the healing process.

**Peer support.** Peer support is so important to law enforcement officers that an organization called Cop2Cop established a hotline for law enforcement officers (<http://ubhc.rutgers.edu/cop2cop/main.htm>). Few law enforcement officers trust anyone outside of law enforcement. Like military personnel returning from combat, law enforcement officers do not believe that anyone other than a peer could possibly understand them (Kureczka, 1996; McCafferty, McCafferty & McCafferty, 1992). Other scholars (Goldstein, 2006; Levenson, 2007) have examined the value of peer counseling

programs. However, peer support is often sought outside of formal peer counseling programs. For instance, Bill sought the counsel of trusted colleagues who had experienced OIFIs in the past, and found healing in the process. Frank also sought the counsel of a trusted colleague and even remarked that those conversations constituted “counseling” for him. Lisa sought out individual officers who had been involved in the incident to offer support, and found those conversations mutually beneficial. Professional counselors may explore the availability of formal peer support with their law enforcement clients, and whether the LEO is seeking informal support from trusted colleagues. In the process of inquiry, the counselor may discover that, indeed, the LEO client is receiving peer support, or that the LEO client has become isolated from peers and the agency. In any event, this information will inform the counseling process.

**Professional counseling.** Three of the six law enforcement officer participants received at least some professional counseling support. Two of those officers (Eric and Larry) attended multiple sessions with a professional counselor. The counselors that treated Eric and Larry had extensive experience treating law enforcement officers. Bill attended one mandatory session with a professional counselor for the purpose of determining his fitness for duty. None of the spouses were offered or received professional counseling services following the OIFIs. Only two law enforcement agencies represented in this study required that the officer receive professional counseling. In one of those cases, the sole purpose of mandating counseling was to determine if the officer (Bill) was fit to return to duty, thus protecting the agency. Bill even commented in our interview that there was more therapy during the interview than

he received from his visit with the police psychologist. The results suggest that law enforcement officers avoid professional counseling because of the stigma attached.

Establishing a therapeutic alliance with a law enforcement officer requires that the counselor be, "...transparent, competent, and familiar with the police culture" (Kirschman, 2014, p.14). This is especially true of officers who have been mandated by their agencies to receive counseling before returning to work. Counselors must earn the trust of the officer before any meaningful work can be accomplished in the counseling room. Confidentiality is of the utmost concern to the law enforcement officer. Often, this means that what is said in the counseling room is not shared with anyone, especially with the employing agency without the officer's express written permission. Counselor should establish clear boundaries with the officer and the agency in this regard. Demonstrating high ethical standards, and knowledge of police culture will go far in gaining the confidence of the officer. Law enforcement officers will test counselors in these areas. Violations of trust will end the counseling relationship.

Lastly, for the officers, the results strongly suggest that not all law enforcement officers feel the need for professional counseling after on OIFI. This was clearly the case with Dave, and with Frank (Frank relied on informal peer counseling). Trauma is, indeed, in the eyes of the beholder (Kirschman, 2007; Kirschman & Kamena, 2014). The implications for the spouses are clear, and suggest the need for law enforcement agencies to consider the emotional and psychological needs of spouses of LEOs involved in an OIFI. Counselors desiring to treat law enforcement officers and their families should seek additional training and education about the unique stressors encountered in law enforcement and about law enforcement culture.

Law enforcement officers are expected to maintain self-control, tend to suppress the expression of emotion, and are wary of seeking treatment from counseling professionals (Beehr, Johnson & Nieva, 1995; Fair, 2009; Gersons, 1989; Kirschman, Kamena & Fay, 2014; Mann & Neece, 1990; Waters & Ussery, 2007; Woody, 2006). Law enforcement officers have difficulty trusting outsiders, including mental health professionals (Fair, 2009; Kirschman, Kamena & Fay, 2014; Kureczka, 1996; Wester, Arndt, Sedivy, & Arndt, 2010; Woody, 2006). Lisa, Bill and Judy described their concerns for the stigma attached to seeking counseling. Having experienced the emotional consequences over time, all enthusiastically encourage officers and their spouses to seek professional counseling. This study extends previous research because participants were able to describe how their views of professional counseling changed over time, and provide context for how that change occurred. For instance, Bill and Judy admitted that they might have initially rejected an offer of professional counseling. However, given time and experience, they both recommend that officers and spouses engage in professional counseling at an early stage in emotional recovery. Counselors treating LEOs should encourage participation of the spouse in the counseling process, and inquire about emotional needs of the spouse and other family members. This study adds to the literature by demonstrating the necessity of the availability of professional counseling services for spouses, and by extension, the family.

**Resiliency.** While some informants described having experienced greater or lessor degrees of emotional distress, none described experiencing long-lasting emotional and/or psychological damage. The resilience manifested by the informants is consistent with the findings by other scholars that the vast majority of people who experience a



potentially traumatic incident are able adjust through healthy coping skills, and even grow from the experience (Bonanno et al., 2012; Kirschman, 2014; Meichenbaum, 2012). Even so, it is important for LEOs to know that it is “okay to be okay” following an OIFI.

Kirschman (2007) commented that the Chinese symbol for the word, “crisis” is represented as danger and opportunity. She noted that when victims of crisis are asked what they gained from an experience, they report changes that include changes in themselves, changes in their relationships with others, and changes in their spirituality and their orientation to life. Among the particular changes that Kirschman identified are increased confidence in coping with the future; a combination of feeling more vulnerable for having had the experience, and feeling stronger for having survived it; deepened relationships with others; more compassion for the suffering of others; a deeper appreciation for life and the people closest to them, and a deepening of the role that spirituality and religion play in their lives.

Kirschman’s (2007) findings fit well within the four themes I constructed pertaining to meaning (e.g., appreciation for life, an increased appreciation for spouse and family, a deepening of faith, and the importance of training and professional competence), and are reflective of the comments of the participants. For instance, all participants expressed a deeper appreciation for life, and that they were changed by the experience of an OIFI. Eric, in particular, described feeling more vulnerable after his OIFI. Several officer participants expressed increased self-confidence after their OIFIs because they performed well in the face of extreme adversity. Pat described how she experienced an increase in compassion for victims of crimes. Bill and Judy described how the experience of an OIFI deepened their spirituality, and their married relationship.

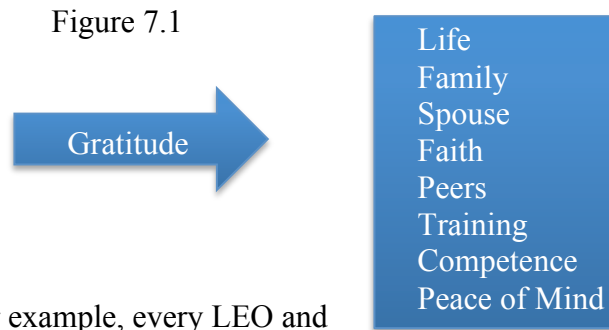
Diane and Larry described feelings of satisfaction knowing their marriage has survived multiple traumatic experiences as a consequence of Larry's work.

A focus on faith, spirituality and values is one characteristic of resilient people following a potentially traumatic event (Meichenbaum, 2012). For example, Bill, Judy, Dave and Pat described a reliance on their faith, if not a deepening of their faith, through the experience of an OIFI. They all framed their spirituality as informing their worldviews in a way that provides perspective and meaning to the trials that inevitably visit our lives. Frank described how his Catholic upbringing informed his values about life. Before his OIFI, he wondered if he could take a human life. Frank discovered that he was capable of taking a human life under certain circumstances (e.g. defending his life or the life of another). He concluded that he had not violated the precepts of his faith. Frank's posttrauma growth is reflected in his practice of seeking out other officers who experience an OIFI. Frank referred to this practice as "paying it forward."

Counselor can help LEOs and their spouses identify what is meaningful in the experience of a traumatic event. This is not to say that victims of trauma do not suffer, develop transient symptoms, and struggle with their experiences. It is only to acknowledge the innate resilience of the human nature and the healing qualities that lie within.

The findings from this study demonstrate that gratitude plays an important role in resilience and posttrauma growth. Gratitude emerged as a thread that weaved through the entire study, first as an emotion that was experienced consequent to an officer-involved fatal incident, as a function of coping, and finally as an emotion that informed meaning.

Informants expressed gratitude for life, survival, for family, for spouse, for fellow officers, for faith, for the job (training) and for peace of mind (See figure 7.1).



For example, every LEO and every spouse informant expressed an increased appreciation for life. While Eric was grief stricken that his partner was killed, he expressed profound appreciation that he survived, and that no one else was injured. His spouse, Laura, gained a deep appreciation for life, and for her life with Eric. She came to appreciate every day that she has with him, knowing how suddenly that could change. Frank was deeply grateful that bullets intended for him, and for his colleagues missed their marks, and that they all survived. Bill and Judy found deeper appreciation for their faith following his OIFI, and for each other and their relationship. Every LEO expressed appreciation for the support received from her or his spouse. Bill and Judy, and Eric and Laura discussed how their respective fatal incidents drew them closer as a couple. Every LEO expressed gratitude for the training they had received that helped them survive. It is vital for counselors to explore with the LEO and family members how gratitude informs the meaning derived from the experience of an OIFI, and how meaning promotes growth and resilience.

**Unmet Support needs of the spouse.** The findings of this study demonstrate that the emotional and psychological support needs of the spouses of LEOs are lacking. There was not one instance when the spouse of a LEO was offered counseling. One spouse,

Laura, was invited to counseling with her husband, Eric, but only to report on Eric's progress. An officer-involved fatal incident is an intimate experience involving the officer's spouse and family. It is a family affair. Law enforcement officers consistently described the importance of their relationships with spouses as their primary source of support (Follette et al., 1994). Eric, Lisa, Bill and Larry were emphatic on this point. Frank does not rely on his spouse directly for support in any given work-related experience, but does rely on her to help create a home atmosphere devoid of the work experience. Eric, Bill and Larry described how their relationships with their spouses deepened as a consequence of their respective incidents. Their spouses, Laura, Judy and Diane described positive changes in the relationships with their spouse after the incidents.

Spouses described the profound role that they play in helping their law enforcement spouses heal, and the effects an officer-involved fatal incident can have on the family. Laura explained that spouses are the first level of support for their law enforcement partners. She discussed the need for counseling support for spouses and children and proposed that agencies assign an ombudsman as a liaison to the family to address emerging emotional and psychological issues. Laura proposed that law enforcement agencies would benefit by strengthening spouses as they provide support for the officers. Lisa described the benefits of having a spouse in the law enforcement profession (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2004). Judy and Diane commented that it was important to be a good listener, and avoid trying to "fix" the problem.

Once the spouse is engaged in the counseling process, professional counselors have the opportunity to explore her or his emotional support needs. Attending to the emotional needs of the spouse may improve therapeutic outcomes for the officer, the

spouse, their relationship and the family as a whole. The spouses in this study were not only willing, but in some cases eager, to participate in the research interviews. The results of the study suggest that spouses of LEOs recognize their role as the primary support for the LEO, and would be willing to engage in the counseling process if an invitation were extended. Counselors should explore the possibility of including the spouse (and family members for that matter) with the LEO once a therapeutic alliance has been established and trust secured. Counselors can engage spouses through recognition of the important supporting roles they play, and through empathetic understanding for the stresses they encounter as the partner of a LEO.

**Professional competence.** The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that professional competence is vitally important to LEOs following an OIFI. Every LEO expressed the importance of knowing that (a) they made the right decision, (b) that their decisions were based on their training, and that their decisions were consonant with department policy and procedure, and (c) that they performed according to the expectations of other officers who relied on their decisions. It was important to them that they did not let their fellow officers down, or place them in danger through their actions.

Several of the LEO informants expressed a greater confidence in their ability to deal with future OIFIs after reflecting on their performance (the execution of their training under highly stressful circumstances). Bill, Larry, Dave and Frank all said that they were confident in their actions, and that they had greater confidence following their respective OIFIs that they would be able to respond competently to future critical incidents.

### **Theoretical Implications**

I explored the question of how law enforcement officers and spouses perceived and described traumatic events through the theoretical lens of transcendental phenomenology, existential theory, and family systems theory (Buber, 1970; Descartes, 1977; Frankl, 1984; Gurwitsch, 1966; Henggeleer, & Borduin 1990; Hoffman, 1981; Husserl, 1931, 1977; Ihde, 1977; Keen, 1975; Kockelmans, 1967; Lauer, 1967; Lowrie, 1962; May, 1983; Minuchin, 1993; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981; Moustakas, 1994; Nichols, 2008; Schmitt, 1967; Sharf, 2004; Schutz, 1967; Smith, 2003; Yalom, 1980). Transcendental phenomenology was the primary lens through which I approached descriptions and perceptions of experience in the context of subjective openness (Descartes, 1912/1988; Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). The existential lens helped provide a thematic context for interpreting the results and understanding how individual officers and their spouses processed, transitioned and emerged from the experience of an officer involved fatal incident (Sharf, 2007). Family systems theory was useful to interpret the results of the emotional consequences of an OIFI for the couples: it provided a relational context to discover how law enforcement officers and their spouses negotiated the stressful outcomes of an officer involved fatal incidents as a couple. Transcendental phenomenology, existential and family systems theories operated together to afford different lenses for examining the experience of an OIFI.

#### **Transcendental Phenomenology**

This study extends previous uses of transcendental phenomenology by applying it to the very specific experiences of law enforcement officer-involved fatal incidents.

Transcendental phenomenology informed the results of this study by providing a context to, (a) explore the subjective lived experience of the informants, (b) provide a reminder to strive to set aside my biases, assumptions and preconceptions about the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident (OIFI), and (c) apply the epistemological position that “truth” rests with the one doing the experiencing. Transcendental phenomenology facilitated my approach to the study, whereby I relied on the informants’ perceptions and descriptions of their experiences.

An important goal of the study was to make every attempt to view the experience of an OIFI through the eyes of the informants. This lens required me to attempt to set aside, or bracket, what I know of officer-involved fatal incidents, including my own past experiences (Husserl, 1931). This requirement is especially relevant to the field of counseling. Professional counselors similarly bracket preconceptions, and strive to set aside judgment to gain an appreciation of the client’s unique perceptions of experience, including meanings that clients attribute to those experiences (Conte, 2009). Setting aside biases, assumptions and preconceptions is not entirely possible, as even Husserl (1931) concluded near the end of his life. However, it is a goal to strive for in qualitative work as well as counseling. To the extent to which I was able to do this, the experience of the informants gained prominence, and my past experiences faded to the background.

Transcendental phenomenology assumes that “truth” rests with the one doing the experiencing. Throughout this study, I maintained the epistemological position that the truth of what was experienced, and how it was experienced, rested with the informants’ perceptions of the experience. Any thematic construction of the participants’ perceptions

and descriptions was my subjective experience of the participants individually and collectively.

Prior studies have primarily used quantitative research models to study stress and trauma experienced by law enforcement officers. I am not aware of any qualitative study that has extended a phenomenological framework to study the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident from the perspectives of both law enforcement officers and their spouses.

### **Existential Theory**

It was not uncommon for participants to experience emotion during the interviews as they revealed their deepest selves, and became vulnerable to re-experience unpleasant memories. More than once, officers commented on the healing nature of the interviews, and spouses commented that they appreciated the opportunity give voice to their experiences, so often ignored beyond the walls of their homes. This study extended existential theory by examining how the participants emerged and evolved through the experience of an OIFI.

Existential theory was useful to this study by providing a thematic framework that allowed me to (a) interpret the results of the study, and (b) inform my relationship with the participants. Specifically, existential theory provided a framework to interpret the results pertaining to life and death, isolation and belonging, meaning making, and the freedom of the informants to choose their attitudes toward their experiences with an OIFI.

The themes of living and dying were well represented in comments from the participants. Three of the participant officers (Bill, Frank and Larry) shot and killed an armed perpetrator in defense of their lives, or in defense of another's life. Of the seven



law enforcement officers represented in this study, five (Lisa and Jon are the exceptions) expressed their appreciation for having survived their encounters with death. Law enforcement officers often feel isolated following a traumatic event (Borum & Philpot, 1993; Follette et al.; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; McCafferty et al.; Waters & Ussery, 2007). Isolation and belonging were also well represented in my work. Recall how Eric isolated himself from the world following his shooting. The trauma of the experience did not allow him to venture outside of his home for more than a few feet without being armed for a period of time. Without exception, the participants' expressed a belief that those outside of the law enforcement community were incapable of understanding their experiences. That was true even with those who chose to expand their social circles beyond the law enforcement culture in search of balanced lives. Belonging was a need expressed by informants many times. First, belonging related to marriage and family, then to the law enforcement community and faith communities. Freedom was expressed by the choices that the participants made in response to trauma. This was especially true in the participants' choice of the attitude they would adopt toward their circumstances. Bill, Judy, Dave and Pat chose to view their circumstances through faith. All participants chose to view their circumstances through gratitude.

The tenets of existential theory guided my interactions with the informants. Rugala and Waldo (1998) captured best what I hoped to achieve in my relationship with the participants when they wrote of the moment of encounter (the interview) that represents, "...the deepest self of the therapist [researcher] meets the deepest self of the client [participant]" (p. 67). That hope was realized as participants disclosed their deepest thoughts and feelings about their experiences to me during interviews.

## Family Systems

The informants' married relationships changed as a consequence of the experience of an OIFI. Family systems theory was useful to (a) interpret how couples coped with the emotional consequences of an OIFI, (b) how changes in one spouse changed the relationship, and (c) how resiliency was influenced through couple interaction in response to an OIFI. Family systems theory informed how the couples in this study influenced each other as they coped with a potentially traumatic event within the context of their marriage. Research clearly demonstrates that traumatic events impact the individual officer as well as the officer's spouse and family (Alexander & Walker, 1996; Beehr et al., 1995; Borum & Philpot, 1993; Follette et al., 1994; Gersons, 1989; Gilmartin, 1986; Kureczka, 1996; Mann & Neece, 1990; Maynard et al., 1980; McCafferty et al., 1992; Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2003; Waters & Ussery, 2007; Woody, 2006). In most instances in this study, the spouse mirrored the level of emotional distress experienced by the officer (Gottman, 1999, 2012; Johnson, 2002, 2008). For example, Eric, Bill, Larry and Lisa expressed high levels of emotional distress following their respective fatal incidents, as did their spouses. Frank and Dave did not report a high level of emotional distress, nor did their spouses.

Changes in couple relationships were manifested in various ways. Eric and Laura grew closer, but both became fearful. They began instituting rituals and superstitious behaviors that reflected their love for each other, and their desire to avoid future calamities. Bill and Judy grew closer in their relationship as they pursued their faith in the wake of his OIFI. Larry changed his priorities and focused his attention on marriage and family relationships. Frank and Ann's relationship changed in an interesting way. Frank

continued to adhere to his commitment to keep the unpleasantness of his work life away from his home following his OIFI, but Ann became aware that her understanding of Frank's job was naïve because of the OIFI. Her perspective on his job changed, and she became more anxious about Frank's safety. Family systems theory posits that when one person in a relationship changes, it changes the relationship. This dynamic held true for the informants in this study.

In all cases, the officers expressed gratitude for the support provided by their spouses. Spouses acknowledged the pivotal role they play in support of their law enforcement husbands, and how family life was affected post event. The support of the spouse, and the interdependent nature of their relationships promoted resiliency. The lack of counseling support for the spouses and families of law enforcement officers in the aftermath of an OIFI was a glaring deficit that was revealed through this study. This study extends the use of family systems theory by exploring how couples interact, and influence each other in the wake of an OIFI on three levels: emotion, coping, and meaning making.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The most notable limitation of this study are the voices that are not heard. I only included participants whose marriages survived the emotional toll of an officer-involved fatal incident. This was not intentional. With rare exception, the participants described colleagues whose marriages did not survive the incident that was the topic of the interview, or whose marriages fell victim to an unrelated critical incident. Laura described the situation of the officer who saved Eric by shooting the perpetrator. That officer's marriage did not survive. She rightly conjectured that other factors may have

contributed to the demise of the marriage, but wondered if the event was not the tipping point. I opened this dissertation with a vignette from my own experience that resonated with her speculation. Lisa described an officer whose marriage was a victim of the emotional toll extracted from the OIFI. He eventually retired. Lisa said he was overcome with feelings of guilt. Larry described an officer who shot and killed a perpetrator who shot another officer. He said the officer who killed the perpetrator began drinking heavily, eventually displayed bizarre behavior at work, and finally quit police work. We could learn much from these officers and their former spouses.

This study is lacking in diversity. This was not intentional. Only one female law enforcement officer was represented in the study. All participants were Caucasian, although one participant was Hispanic.

A rather invisible limitation to the study was what was not said because the interviews were done with couples, and not individually. It cannot be known what information may have been withheld because the partner was present. I never sensed that was the case, but I will always wonder. On the other hand, on at least two occasions spouses said that they were hearing information from their law enforcement spouse for the first time.

Another limitation was the boundaries that I placed around the study. I did not include other officers involved in the incidents, their spouses, family members of the officers, dispatchers, EMT personnel, or family members of the deceased. Nor did I obtain the perspectives of agency leaders. This was intentional. Each could have provided valuable insight, but including others would have been beyond the scope of this inquiry.

### **Future Direction for Research**

The limitations described in the previous section highlight the need for research that involves participants whose marriages did not survive the experience of an officer-involved fatal incident, or any law enforcement critical incident. It was instructive, and inspiring to hear the stories of participants' resiliency and success in overcoming the potential corrosive influence of trauma. However, we can learn much from hearing the voices of those who have experienced failed relationships, and other negative outcomes. The literature is not lacking in identifying the negative potentials of law enforcement stress, including divorce, promiscuity, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and suicide. The voices of those who experience these consequences are absent in this study. This research will be challenging. It is clear that law enforcement officers are distrustful of outsiders. Gaining access to former spouses will be difficult, and joint interviews probably impossible, but it is worth the effort.

Perhaps the most glaring deficiency exposed in my research was the lack of support provided to spouses. Not one spouse was offered counseling support by the law enforcement agency. Laura pointed out that the spouse is the primary support for the officer. The officers made it clear that they sought support primarily from their spouses. More research is needed to evaluate support needs for spouses and families of law enforcement officers. Participants in my study pointed to the need for orientation classes for the spouses and families of new officers, and support needs over time following an OIFI. Laura believes that the employing agency could assign a person from that agency as a point of contact for the spouse to help identify issues, and provide support in a timely manner. Judy discovered that officers and families need support over time as the effects

of stress and grief manifest in unanticipated ways. Law enforcement agencies invest a great deal of time and money to recruit and train qualified law enforcement officers. It makes little to sense to attend only to the support needs of the officers when her or his family is falling apart. Research in this area will help inform law enforcement leaders about policies, practices and procedures necessary to meet support needs of spouses and families.

The role of spirituality is often glossed over, or simply ignored in the literature. Indeed, Beehr et al. (1995) commented that religiosity, "...is a very nontraditional variable in occupational coping research" (p. 6). The authors were able to establish a correlation between the use of religion by the officer and the spouse with more general coping techniques that included problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. The authors also concluded that while religion was a coping technique reported by some officers, religiosity was not likely to be harmful, or helpful in coping with police stress. The data in my study seems to suggest another finding. For 33% of the participants in my study, spirituality functioned as a primary source of coping. The officers (Bill and Dave) shared their spiritual beliefs with their spouses. Bill and Dave were clear that their religious beliefs informed their worldview, and played a major role their ability to successfully cope with the stresses of an OIFI. More research is indicated to address this "non-traditional" topic, and the value spirituality holds for some. Understanding the role of spirituality in the lives of clients could aid counselors with the process of helping clients access internal, and external support resources.

The under-utilization of peer-counseling programs by officers as a resource for coping surprised me. I was not surprised that law enforcement officers gravitated to

trusted, more experienced peers to process the experience of an OIFI (informal peer counseling). However, going into this research, and knowing that peer-counseling programs are common in law enforcement agencies, I expected to hear more about those programs from the officers. Law enforcement leaders would benefit from more research about the demonstrated effectiveness of peer-counseling programs. There is a cost involved in training officers to become peer counselors. Additional research might inform leaders about how to assess the effectiveness of existing peer-counseling programs, and how to enhance effectiveness.

Finally, the role of gratitude across all themes in my study was somewhat of a revelation. Gratitude was experienced as an emotion. It was experienced as a coping strategy, and then gratitude informed meaning. The power of gratitude to influence emotional healing and promote posttrauma growth was inspiring. The research on gratitude and its relationship to posttraumatic growth has increased over the past decade, but more research is indicated because of its power to aid in the healing process. It is especially important for law enforcement officers to understand the power of gratitude in a work environment that produces high levels of negativity and stress.

This study has provided a foundation for further research into the topics outlined above. The results have informed the current body of knowledge pertaining to law enforcement stress, including the lived emotional experience of an OIFI, the coping strategies that proved effective for the participants, and the meaning that the event held for the participants. The voices of law enforcement officers and their spouses were heard. Future research will only improve our understanding of what it is to experience an OIFI from the perspectives of both officer and spouse, and will enhance our knowledge of how

best to support them in the process of emotional healing. In that process, marriages and families will be strengthened. Communities will benefit as law enforcement officers are able to continue to perform their duties and families remain intact.

### **Closing Remarks**

I have been changed through my participation in this study. I was always proud of my law enforcement career, but those feelings of pride were awakened once again. I was inspired by every interview. With one exception, I was invited into the participants' homes. I left every interview with a renewed sense of pride for the law enforcement profession, and confidence in those who continue to serve today. I was especially touched by the response from the spouses. Laura expressed her enthusiasm for the interview:

I think it's nice to have the opportunity to do this because I don't know of anytime or anywhere that they would have stopped to think about the spouses...I was so excited when [Eric] told me about this [interview]...because I felt as though the spouses were not intentionally ignored, but not considered and it's very much a couple thing and I'm the one that in our home has to help put him back together and that takes a real toll on me if I'm not able to do it as effectively as I want, it can take a toll on our relationship.

Eric had his own perspective about the value of the research interview for Laura:

That's the first thing when I read the email, I said this is perfect, this is an opportunity, not just me to be able help out but for [Laura] to be able to help out, to tell her side, tell it from her viewpoint, to tell what was on her heart and her mind and how she felt about it was important to me. I'm glad that you're here... And we haven't opened up to anybody else.



Bill said that, “There’s more therapy honestly between you and I right now than I had there [with the police psychologist].

I am indebted to the law enforcement officers and their spouses who agreed to meet with me and discuss painful memories of an officer-involved fatal incident. Every interview elicited emotions related to the event being discussed, yet every participant remained open to the interview process. I am also grateful to the members of the law enforcement community who expressed a desire to participate in the study, but could not because they lived beyond my reach. I am grateful too for those who have engaged in previous research about law enforcement stress and continue to expand our knowledge about what it is to be a law enforcement officer, and improve our means to help alleviate the burden carried by our most courageous citizens, including those who love and stand with them. I only hope that I have done justice to their stories.

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## APPENDIX A

**Expanded Definition of Officer-Involved Fatal Incident**

The following definitions are taken from a 2005 agreement between law enforcement agencies in El Dorado County, California to establish a protocol to investigate officer-involved critical incidents and are helpful for the purposes of this study to clarify the definition of an officer-involved fatal incident:

“Incidents occurring in El Dorado County involving two or more people, in which a police agency employee is involved as an Actor, Victim, or custodial officer, where a “Critical Injury”...occurs. Such “Incidents” include, but are not limited to the following:”

(Provided in Summary Format)

Intentional and accidental shootings...

Intentional and accidental use of any other dangerous or deadly weapon.

Assaults upon police officers...who are on duty or are acting for a law enforcement purpose.

Attempts by police employees to make arrests or to otherwise gain physical control for a law enforcement purpose.

Physical altercations, mutual combat, and domestic violence in which the police employee is acting in a private citizen capacity.

Any fatal injury in police custody...

Any fatal injury to a person who is a passenger of a police officer...

Vehicle collisions involving a fatality...including police pursuits.

## APPENDIX B

**Letter to Participants**

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your interest in my research study of law enforcement officers and their spouses who have experienced an officer involved fatal incident. As a retired law enforcement officer and researcher, I value the unique contribution that you can make to my study and I look forward to the possibility of your participation in it. The purpose of this letter is to reiterate some of the things we have previously discussed and to secure your signature on the participation-release form that you will find attached.

The research model I am using is a qualitative one through which I am seeking the voices of law enforcement officers and their spouses to provide descriptions and perceptions of your experience. In this way I hope to provide answers to my research questions: How do law enforcement officers and their spouses perceive and describe the stress of an officer involved fatal event?

Through your participation as a participant, along with others participating in the study, I hope to capture the essences and meanings of what it is like for a law enforcement officer to experience an officer involved fatal incident; what it was like for a spouse to vicariously experience the same event and how couples experience the event together.

You will be asked to recall specific episodes, situations, or events that you experienced in going through an officer involved fatal incident. I am seeking vivid,

accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you: your thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

I value your participation and thank you for the commitment of time, energy and effort. It is my sincere hope that other law enforcement officers, their spouses and families will benefit by what is learned through this study. If you have any further questions before signing the release form or if there is a problem with the date and time of our meeting, I can be reached at.....

Sincerely,

Rich McGuffin

## APPENDIX C

**Participant Release Agreement**

I agree to participate in a research study of “How Law Enforcement Officers and Their Spouses Perceive and Describe the Experience of an Officer Involved Fatal Incident.” I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a Ph.D. degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication. I understand that a brief synopsis of each participant, including myself, will be used and will include the following information: first name, marital status, number of children, occupation, details of the officer-involved fatal incident you describe and any other pertinent information that will help the reader to distinguish and recall each participant. I grant permission for the above personal information to be used. I agree to meet at (location): \_\_\_\_\_ on (date)\_\_\_\_\_ at (time)\_\_\_\_\_ for an initial interview of 1-3 hours. If necessary, I will be available at a mutually agreed upon place and time for a follow up interview not to exceed one hour, unless otherwise agreed upon by mutual consent. I also grant permission to audio record each interview.

\_\_\_\_\_

Research Participant/Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher/ Date



## APPENDIX D

**Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Law Enforcement Officer**

Note: Bold are questions provided to each participant, and italicized questions are possible prompts.

Tell me about the officer-involved fatal incident you experienced? What happened?

(Narrative)

How did you first learn about the event? Dispatched, on view, citizen report?

What did you see/encounter when you first arrived?

What happened next...and then?

What was your role initially and how did that change as the event evolve?

How did the event stabilize?

Tell me about the person who died?

The following questions are determined by the relationship of the decedent to the officer:

If fellow officer-How well did you know the officer?

How has his/her loss affected you?

How have you coped with the loss of this person?

Contact with decedent's family?

Counseling? Peer or professional?

If civilian victim-Did you know the victim? If not, how has this person's death affected you?

If criminal suspect-Did you know the suspect? How has the suspect's death affected you?

What scenes and people stand out for you?

What were the most critical moments for you during this event?

Whose actions were most significant in your view?

What individuals or groups of individuals stand out for you?

What bodily changes or states did you experience throughout the event?

Did you experience events in “slow motion” at any time? When?

Did you become physically ill?

Did you go from calm action? What was that like?

What thoughts stood out for you while you were engaged at the scene?

How did training and experience influence your thinking?

What thoughts about what you saw, smelled, felt...stood out?

What thoughts stood out about your personal safety, or the safety of others?

What were your thoughts about the actions, or inactions of others?

What feelings stood out for you during and immediately following the event?

Fear?

Helplessness?

Horror?

What was your experience of the event like days, weeks and months following the event?

How did your drinking habits change?

How was your mood affected by the experience?

As you have had time to reflect about this experience, what new feelings have you experienced that differ in any way from those initial feelings about the experience.

Do you, or have you experienced recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event?

Do you, or have you experienced recurrent, distressing dreams of the incident?

Do you, or have you had feelings that the event was recurring?

Do you, or have you experienced distress at triggers, or cues that remind you of the incident?

Have you noticed physiological reactivity to triggers, or cues that remind you of the incident?

How did your agency treat you following the incident?

Where you provided with a peer counselor?

Where you placed on administrative leave following the incident, and if so, for how long.

Did the agency take your badge and weapon? If so, how was that done and how did that affect you?

Did your agency protect you from media contact?

What there a criminal/internal affairs investigation?

How did those investigations affect you?

What did your agency do that was most helpful to you in dealing with this event?

What could your agency have done better in supporting you following this event?

What counseling, if any, did you receive following the incident?

Were you ordered to receive counseling or did you seek counseling on your own?

What was your counseling experience like for you?

If helpful, what was it about counseling that was helpful?

If not, how could counseling have been more helpful?

Was the counselor familiar with law enforcement culture? If so, how did you know and was that knowledge beneficial to you in the counseling process?

What could your counselor have done, or not done to better help you in dealing with the aftermath of this event?

As you have reflected on this experience what have you taken away that is meaningful for you and your life?

What did this experience mean for you personally?

Sense of mortality?

Enhanced appreciation for life?

Disappointment or disillusionment on any level?

What did this experience mean for you and your most important relationships?

What did this experience mean for you professionally?

How did you inform your spouse of the incident?

What was your spouse's initial response, or reaction?

Was it helpful?

How did this experience affect you personally and professionally?

What changes to you attribute directly to this experience?

How did media coverage of the event affect you?

How has this experience affected your relationship with your spouse and children (if any)?

Did this experience cause distance, conflict, closeness, empathy?

If you have spiritual beliefs, how have those beliefs influenced how you have experienced and responded to this experience?

Have you shared everything that is significant for you about this experience?

## APPENDIX E

**Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Law Enforcement Officer Spouse.**

Note: Bold are questions provided to each participant, and italicized questions are possible prompts.

How did you learn about your spouse's involvement in an officer-involved fatal incident?

From spouse, agency, media, friend, chaplain?

Were you alone when you received the information?

What were your initial feelings when you heard the news?

What was your gut reaction?

What were your first impressions?

What were your first thoughts about what you heard?

Were your first thoughts about needing more information?

About what you needed to do?

What someone else needed to do?

About how your spouse was dealing with the experience?

About your children?

What were your initial feelings upon hearing the news?

Fear, relief, sadness, helplessness.....?

How did you deal with your thoughts and feelings around this event?

What was it like for you, personally?

What was it like for you in your roles as spouse and parent (if children)?

How did you engage your support system (family and friends).

What was it like when your spouse returned home for the first time following the event?

Did you discuss the event?

Did you share your feelings with your spouse?

Were you anxious about how the event affected your spouse?

What changes have you noticed in your spouse's behavior, mood, or habits since this experience?

Mood, sleep, ability to experience joy, distance, closeness, engagement, disengagement?

How has the experience of your spouse being involved in an officer-involved fatal incident affected, or changed you?

How has sleep changed, or not for you?

Have you experienced distressing dreams about the incident?

How have your drinking habits changed, if at all?

How has your view of your spouse's occupation changed?

What is it like for you, the spouse of a law enforcement officer, to experience an event like this vicariously?

## APPENDIX F

**Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Still Together Law Enforcement Couple**

Note: Bold are questions provided to each participant, and italicized questions are possible prompts. I will distinguish questions asked of both and those directed to a particular spouse.

Both: I have interviewed each of you to get your descriptions and perceptions of what it was like to experience an officer-involved fatal incident from your unique perspectives. Now, I would like to get your descriptions and perceptions of what this experience has been like as a couple in a committed relationship. What has it been like as a couple to experience an officer-involved fatal incident?

In what ways has this experience affected your relationship?

What has changed since this experience?

For the better?

For worse?

Spouse: What have you seen your spouse do to deal with the effects of this event personally?

Spouse: How do you feel about what you have seen your spouse do?

Spouse: How have your spouse's actions, or behavior affected your relationship?

Spouse: What could your spouse do now that would be helpful to you in dealing with this experience?

LEO: What have you seen your spouse do to deal with this experience personally?

LEO: What has your spouse done that has been particularly helpful to you in dealing with this experience?

LEO: What could your spouse do now that would help you deal more effectively with this experience?

Both: How have family, friends and colleagues assisted you in successfully dealing with this experience?

Both: (If counseling): What has been your experience with counseling around this event? If helpful, how?

If not, how could counseling have been more effective?

Both: (If applicable): How have your spiritual beliefs influenced how you handled or are handling this event in your relationship?

Both: If you feel you have been successful in handling this event together, how do you define success?

Both: Is there anything else that is significant about what it is like for a law enforcement couple to experience an officer-involved fatal incident?