Understanding police officers' experiences of post-shooting interviews: factors influencing account-giving

Understanding police officers' experiences of post-shooting interviews: Factors influencing account-giving

Louise E. Porter[1,3]

&

Martine Powell[2]

[1] Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University, QLD, Australia

[2] Centre for Investigative Interviewing, Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University, QLD, Australia

[3]Corresponding author

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the assistance provided by the Queensland Police Service. The authors would like to thank the officers who contributed their time and experiences to enable this research. The authors also acknowledge the research assistance of Sarah Deck in conducting the interviews with officers. The views expressed in this material are those of the authors and are not those of the Queensland Police Service. Responsibility for any errors of omission or commission remains with the authors. The Queensland Police Service expressly disclaims any liability for any damage resulting from the use of the material contained in this publication and will not be responsible for any loss, howsoever arising, from use of or reliance on this material.

Funding statement

The project received funding from the Griffith Criminology Institute

Keywords: Officer-Involved Shooting, Interviewing, Memory, Procedural Justice, Informational Justice, Police, Trauma, Fairness.

Understanding police officers' experiences of post-shooting interviews: Factors influencing account-giving

Abstract

Purpose. This study aimed to understand the factors that are perceived to influence the completeness and accuracy of officers' accounts of an officer-involved shooting (OIS).

Design/methodology/approach. We conducted research interviews with 13 Australian police officers who had been involved in a shooting and subsequently undergone an investigative interview by their agency's internal investigators. We integrated their experiences of, and perspectives on, these investigative interviews using inductive thematic analysis.

Findings. Officers' accounts of a shooting relied not just on their memory but their engagement and ability to provide their account. This was influenced by their psychological state, but also the interview process. Interview timing was relevant. However, it was not necessarily the length of time to wait, but the treatment experienced during that time that had the most impact, not only on officers' satisfaction with the process but also on the quality of information provided. Officers felt they performed best when supported, and demonstrations of procedural and informational justice were key.

Originality. While prior research has recognized OISs as traumatic events with long-term impacts on officer wellbeing, far less is known about the immediate aftermath of a shooting with respect to the needs of the officer and how this might impact the interview process. By drawing on the insights of officers with direct experience, this study adds to the evidence for best practice interviewing of officers after a shooting.

Practical implications. Knowledge of the factors that affect officers' ability to provide accounts of stressful events can contribute to policies that recognize individual-level needs and ensure fair treatment of subject officers.

Introduction

Officer-involved shootings (OISs) have a major social impact, not only on those directly involved and their families, but also on communities, with the potential to undermine police legitimacy and trust and create social unrest. These 'critical incidents' must be thoroughly and fairly investigated, and interviews with the involved officers to elicit accurate recall of the event are integral in this process. However, after experiencing such highly stressful situations, providing accurate, consistent, and complete information can be challenging for officers. Officers' accounts of a shooting are likely to depend on a range of factors. Experimental research suggests the timing of the interview likely plays a role in officers' ability to recall the event (Grady, Butler and Loftus, 2016; Porter, Ready and Alpert, 2018; Schnell *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, officers' prior experience, and the role the officer played in the incident may affect what they are able to recall (Hope *et al.*, 2016), as will the subject and method of questioning (Powell, Garry and Brewer, 2009). Research on traumatized witnesses and victims further suggests that the treatment received during an interview could affect their performance and compound the trauma of the event (Langballe and Schultz, 2017). The range and impacts of these factors are, however, poorly understood in the context of police internal investigative interviews, due to the lack of applied research to capture or measure officers' experiences, particularly outside simulation or laboratory settings.

The present study aimed to shed light on the factors that influence officers' accounts, through integrating the experiences of police officers who had been involved in a shooting and subsequently undergone an investigative interview by their agency's internal investigators. Our study used qualitative methodology to elicit the perspectives of these officers on that interview process. We then used thematic analysis to identify commonalities among these experiences. The findings reflect factors that are perceived to influence the

accuracy and completeness of officers' accounts of a critical incident and recommendations for optimising the interview process.

Literature review

Police officers have the power to use lethal force in the course of their duties, but incidents such as an OIS must be investigated to ensure police accountability. Hogan describes these investigations as 'criminal investigations into a potential homicide' (p.55), but OIS investigations seek to explore not only the possibility of criminal charges against the officer in question, but also potential disciplinary action regarding 'whether an officer's use of force was aligned with department policies' (Grieco and Robbins, 2019, p.42). While specific procedures after an OIS may differ across police agencies, investigators are assigned to gather evidence and establish the facts, including from multiple points of view, such as interviewing those present. The appropriateness of an officer's use-of-force is typically assessed from the perspective of a 'reasonable officer' on the scene (for example, Graham v Connor (1989) in the US). Therefore, interviews with the involved officers form a crucial part of the investigation, particularly to establish the subject officers' decision-making based on their perception at the time of the shooting.

An OIS is arguably a traumatic event for the subject officer. Many authors have documented that officers experience stress-related perceptual distortions in shootings. For example, Miller (2016) provided a review of research on the stresses in OISs and concludes that 'most officers who have been involved in a deadly force shooting episode have described one or more alterations in perception, thinking, and behavior that occurred during the event' (p.116). Most commonly, distortions affect auditory, visual, and time perception (Klinger, 2002; Miller, 2016). In addition, the long-term impacts of this trauma on officers, including

experiences of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder have been well documented (see Miller, 2016; Loo, 1986; Parent and Verdun-Jones, 2000).

Less attention has been given to the immediate aftermath of the shooting with respect to the needs of the officer and how this might impact the interview process. Hogan (2020) suggested that 'one of the most difficult areas of officer-involved shooting investigations is the interview of the officers involved' (p.54). A study by Loo (1986), comprising surveys and interviews of police officers involved in a shooting, suggested that most stress reactions were experienced within three days of the shooting. More recently, Klinger's (2002) study of 113 officers described frequent reports of recurrent thoughts and feelings of anxiety and fatigue in the first 24 hours after their involvement in a shooting. Similarly, Miller (2016) suggested that officers experience an 'adrenaline dump' as a 'surge of anxiety which may last for several hours' after a shooting (p117). The stress of the shooting may disrupt logical thinking and impair the officer's memory (Miller, 2016; Reiser and Geiger, 1984).

Interviewing practice for officer-involved shootings

The timing of officer interviews after a shooting, and how this relates to recall of a traumatic event, has received increasing attention. Some have suggested interviewing after at least a day or two to allow the effects of stress and trauma to subside and memories to be consolidated and more accurately recalled after sleep (Grossman and Siddle, 2001; Lewinski, Dysterheft, Priem, and Pettitt, 2016). However, memory experts have argued that interviewing sooner rather than later is better to avoid memory decay and contamination (Grady, Butler and Loftus, 2016), with experimental studies supporting this latter perspective, finding no evidence that delay improves recall accuracy (Porter, Ready and Alpert, 2018; Schnell *et al.,* 2021). Importantly, however, Hogan (2020) noted that objections to early

interviews often come from police unions and not officers themselves; officers' perspectives have not been sought systematically beyond a broad organisational policy standpoint.

Outside of the timing of interviews, the literature says little regarding optimising officer interviews after a shooting. Several authors have documented relevant internal investigation processes (e.g., Grieco and Robbins, 2019; Hewes, 2016; Hogan, 2020; Hammonds *et al.,* 2016), including the need to separate involved officers, and the difference between criminal and disciplinary interviews. However, they do not comment on the content of the interview, treatment of the subject officer, or officers' perspectives on the experience. Miller (2016) did not detail the interview process for officers but discussed general protocols and the role of supervisors, peers, and psychological support for officers after a shooting. The author suggested that departmental handling of an OIS can compound the trauma of the incident. Reiser and Geiger (1984) proposed that this can be minimized by keeping interviews short and interviewers avoiding an adversarial attitude. More recently, Geiselman, Wilson and Artwohl (2017) advocated for interviewers to adopt a fact-finding approach from the perspective of conducting a witness interview, rather than conducting officer interviews like a suspect interrogation. They suggested that cognitive interview techniques, which are standard practice for interviewing witnesses and victims, could similarly maximise officers' recall in post-shooting interviews.

Smith and Milne (2018) recommended that guidance for critical incident interviews 'should take particular account of the impact and management of trauma in respect of victims, witnesses *and responders from the emergency services* [emphasis added]' (Smith and Milne, 2018, p.275). Further, they recognised that the trauma experienced by first responders is 'sometimes forgotten' (p.274). However, they do not mention whether or how their proposed witness interview strategy relates to *subject* officers in an OIS (who are the responders in such critical incidents). Subject officers are in a unique position regarding their

role and expectations placed on them. This includes 'the need of police officers to pretend that they can handle anything and that feelings are not important' (Reiser and Geiger, 1984, p.317) and a belief that police officers would have better recall of violent events than non-police due to their training (Hogan, 2020). Further, Geiselman *et al.* (2017) proposed that subject officers in a shooting are simultaneously victims and potential suspects, as well as employees whose jobs may be at stake. On this basis they advocate for ensuring investigations are neutral and objective.

While not specifically in the context of traumatic events, literature on police complaints investigations provides some support for the value of objective and fair treatment in officer interviews. For example, Miller (2010) writes about the need for Internal Affairs investigators to be open-minded rather than use manipulative techniques to gain a confession, which may be stressful and coercive for the interviewee and result in conflict. De Angelis and Kupchik (2007) explored, through surveys of 373 police officers in one US police department, officers' satisfaction with the complaints investigation process. Using quantitative scale measures and structural equation modelling, they found that beliefs in the procedural fairness of the investigation were strongly and directly linked to overall satisfaction with the process. Importantly, perceived quality of treatment by investigators was positively related to beliefs in procedural fairness (and had a strong indirect effect on satisfaction). Quality of treatment was measured by ratings that investigators treated them politely and with respect, asked fair questions, and explained the complaint process. De Angelis and Kupchik (2007) concluded that procedural justice and perceptions of legitimacy are more influential in shaping officers' satisfaction with complaints investigations than are the investigation outcomes.

The extent to which treatment by interviewers may impact directly on officers' engagement in an internal investigative interview is, however, lesser known. The above

review shows promise of the importance of procedural justice in internal investigations, through demonstrations of the components of neutrality and trustworthy motives, respectful treatment, and inviting participation. However, considerations of fairness in relation to OISs and shooting investigations typically focus on police treatment of the community (see for example Hewes, 2016) rather than subject officers. Indeed, procedural justice scholarship more broadly has consistently demonstrated the benefits of procedurally just treatment of citizens by police, but this also extends to treatment of police by their organizations (Donner, et al, 2015). Outcomes of procedural justice include increased perceptions of trust and legitimacy, as well as compliance and co-operation. Importantly, while procedural justice in the context of police-citizen interactions is largely described as comprising the four components listed above, procedural justice in the context of organizational treatment of officers has been noted to include not only fair decision-making and respectful treatment, but also open and timely communication, or informational justice (Quinton, Myhill, Bradford, Fildes and Porter, 2015). Quinton et al. (2015), concluded that organizational justice 'was associated with officers "going the extra mile" without personal gain, following work rules…feeling empowered, and supporting ethical policing' (p.2).

Interviewing practice for traumatised witnesses and victims

In contrast to the sparse literature on interviewing police officers after a traumatic event, interviewing traumatised witnesses and victims has received much greater attention. Drawing on this literature may, therefore, begin to inform considerations for interviewing similarly traumatised officers. While officers may have additional considerations due to the nature of their role (as noted above), this literature can highlight some of the potential issues involved in recounting traumatic events.

The cognitive interview is well established as good practice when interviewing victims and witnesses. In the UK, best practice guidelines include building rapport, establishing ground rules, and encouraging a free narrative account through open-ended prompts (Ministry of Justice, 2022; Smith and Milne, 2018). Further, a recent body of work on interviewing of traumatised victims from Norwegian scholars has shown the importance of treatment by the investigators to both interviewee performance and satisfaction. These studies explored the police interviewing of traumatized youth who survived the 2011 Utøya terror attack in Norway – a shooting spree that claimed 69 lives.

Langballe and Schultz (2017) explored, through interviews and questionnaires with 320 victims of the Utøya attack, experiences of the investigative interview. Positive interview experiences were linked to victims' perceptions that they performed well in the interviews and were able to contribute meaningfully to the investigation. This included their ability to provide a detailed and coherent narrative. Empathy and good listening were associated with being able to 'give police the information they wanted' (Langballe and Schultz, 2017, p.70) but with a sense of control. In contrast, interviewers perceived to be insensitive and demanding were associated with stressful experiences and feelings of underperformance.

Jakobsen (2021) explored the concept of interviewer empathy further through observing four recorded police interviews with victims of the Utøya attack and interviewing the detectives who conducted them. The author concluded that empathy was a difficult concept to define and operationalize but that demonstrating understanding and interest might be appropriate ways for police to show empathy. Indeed, many of the opportunities for empathy presented by the victims in those police interviews suggested they were experiencing guilt and looking for understanding or reassurance regarding their actions. However, Jakobsen, Langballe and Schultz (2017) showed that, while detectives acknowledged the trauma of the event and wanted to be supportive of interviewees, they

perceived that providing such support may conflict with their role as objective information gatherers, finding this challenging to varying degrees.

Present study

While OISs are generally recognised as a traumatic event, there is little research on how this might impact the interview process for the officer, and how to enhance officers' accounts. The present study explores officers' perspectives regarding factors that affect subject officers' recall of a shooting. Specifically, research interviews were conducted with Australian police officers who had experienced a shooting and subsequent police investigative interview, to understand their experience of the interview process. By drawing on the insights of officers with direct experience, this study adds to the evidence for best practice interviewing of officers after a shooting.

Method

Sample

Thirteen officers from the Queensland Police Service (QPS) in Australia participated in this study. All but one of the participating officers was male; they ranged in age from 28 to 55 years old (mean 39 yrs old, S.D. = 8 yrs) and had served with QPS between 5 and 31.5yrs (mean 13 yrs service, S.D. = 8 yrs). Potential participating officers were initially identified by QPS based on having been in an OIS as either a primary officer (shooter) or secondary officer (present at the shooting but not the shooter), in the previous 5 years, and where the investigation was closed. The shootings that the interviewed officers experienced all involved an individual being shot by police. As such, these officers had all undergone an interview as part of the QPS internal investigation into the shooting. Under the approved ethics protocol, officers were not asked any details of the incident itself, but from the details volunteered by officers during their interviews it could be discerned that six of the shootings were fatal, five

non-fatal, while two did not specifically mention the outcome. Only one interviewed officer identified as a secondary officer (non-shooter present at the shooting).

Data collection

The study was approved by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 2018/911), and by the Queensland Police Service (QPS) Research Committee. Officers identified as potential participants were contacted by QPS with an informed consent package and invited to contact the first named author to participate in the study. Written consent was obtained before scheduling an interview with an independent interviewer. Participation was voluntary and officers were provided with contact details for support services.

Interviews were conducted online over Zoom/Teams and lasted between 36 minutes and 1.5 hours. Interviews began with a verbal briefing including a plain language statement of the purpose of the interview and selection process. Interview questions then focused on the officers' critical incident interview experience. The officers were not asked to recount the shooting event itself. Questions began with an open-ended request for the officer to 'Tell [the research interviewer] all about the interview in as much detail as you can, as long as you are comfortable'. Officers were then asked what they think determines how well an interview will go with respect to a subject officer's engagement and accuracy. The interviewer then asked the officers to consider the following topics and whether there was an issue or if they had any recommendations: interview timing, number of times officers are interviewed about an incident, fairness of the process, and support provided to officers when interviewed. Finally, the officers had the opportunity for any further comment on a) what affects officers' accuracy and engagement in an interview, b) recommendations for the interview process, and c) general comments on the topics discussed. All interviews were recorded and subsequently

transcribed and anonymised. Each interviewee was assigned a participant number ranging from P1 to P13.

Data analysis

The data were subjected to inductive thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were analysed in NVivo for common themes and variation in experiences. This involved coding for semantic and latent themes. The process was guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Familiarisation with the data commenced with the first author listening to the recordings of all the interviews and making notes. The first author then read through the transcripts and conducted a line-by-line analysis to identify key codes and concepts. Statements that represented similar concepts were categorized together to form themes of underlying meaning. Text associated with these themes were then re-read and refined into subthemes. The second author read through all of the transcripts independently and noted key themes. The authors then met to discuss and interpret the identified themes, including any different perspectives on the data, to ensure agreement over the thematic coding. There was a high rate of consensus between the authors with similar themes identified by both researchers. There were many topics discussed by the interviewees and not all are reported here. This paper focuses on the themes that emerged most strongly from the data to inform the research question and aspects that most define those themes. Select quotes have been reproduced verbatim to illustrate these themes and themes were further interpreted within the context of the literature. While the officers' specific experiences varied, there was a high level of consistency across the identified themes, both in terms of the thematic content and their perceived importance for the topics in question. This demonstrates that, despite the relatively small number of interviews conducted, the data reached a saturation point regarding the topics and opinions discussed.

Results

The responses of the officers suggest an account of a critical incident relies not only on the officer's memory but also the officer's engagement and ability to provide their account during an interview. Officers were invested in the topic and openly discussed their experiences, perceptions, and ideas for improving the process. The officers' provided insights into their psychological state post-event and during police interviews, but the process of providing an account was the dominant focus of the comments made. This covered the timing of the interview, which was particularly associated with officers' ability to recall or articulate information, and perceptions of the treatment received by the officers, which was primarily associated with officers' engagement in the interview.

Psychological state

The officers described a range of aspects relevant to their psychological state after the incident. This included comments on memory and cognition, and physical and emotional state. The themes provide important context for the subsequent themes relevant to the interview process.

Memory

The officers' evaluations of their memory varied. Some spoke confidently of their memory, specifically stating that they had a very 'clear' (P6) or 'vivid' (P1) and enduring memory of the incident, that was 'cemented' (P3) or 'singed into your brain' (P4). In contrast, several officers mentioned memory difficulties, such as memory gaps for their own or the subject's actions (P1, P2, P3, P5, P11), inconsistencies between the recollections of different officers at the scene (P1, P2), or discrepancies between memory and independent information

(P1, P5). For example, P1 commented on discrepancies between memory and body-worn camera footage,

> I thought I'd given a really good account, and then I realised how much I had blanked out or literally had missed when I had the opportunity to see the video (P1).

Six of the 13 officers described experiencing at least one perceptual distortion, including time dilation (four officers) where time during the incident appeared to slow down, tunnel vision (three officers), and auditory exclusion (one officer).

Physical and emotional state

Officers described their physical and emotional experiences after the incident and prior to their interview. Seven officers mentioned the effects of the 'adrenaline dump', experiencing a 'crash' after the 'spike' in adrenaline during the incident. Seven officers spoke of tiredness, fatigue, or exhaustion, while officers also mentioned the trauma and feeling shock or numb as well as emotionality/emotional upset, and grief.

Six officers revealed feeling anxious, nervous or worried prior to the interview, particularly regarding uncertainty of the interview process (P2, P5, P7). Officers also recounted 'second-guessing' their actions or memory, despite initial feelings of confidence. One officer noted how the interview process can compound the stress experienced,

> [the interview] can be very traumatic… even though you know you've done nothing wrong they've got to ask all these questions. They've got to account for every possible angle. That can put pressure on you. Because now you're thinking 'God, am I going to be in strife?' (P4).

Isolation compounded these negative feelings. Officers understood the need to separate involved officers prior to being interviewed to avoid the possibility, or perception, of contamination or collusion. However, several officers mentioned feeling isolated while waiting for their interview. Isolation was felt negatively, including reflecting judgment on the person's actions in the shooting. As P7 recounted,

> I felt quite isolated sitting … by myself… I sort of felt like I'd done something wrong and I was just stuck in the naughty corner until they'd figured out what they wanted to do with me.

Difficulties thinking

Six officers mentioned difficulties thinking directly after the incident, describing that the mind 'is not working' (P1 and P3), 'blanks out'(P1) or is 'spun out'(P9), or 'not in the right headframe' (P11). Thoughts were said to be 'a jumble' (P9), 'flying in my head from all directions' (P7) and in 'fragments like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces floating around' (P8). This was described as affected by adrenaline, shock/trauma, and tiredness/fatigue. These factors, along with the dynamic nature and short time frames of incidents, also contributed to six officers describing at least some portion of the incident as a 'blur' (P1, P5, P6, P7, P8 and P13).

Articulation problems

Experiences of trauma (P4), emotion (P8), and fatigue (P3, P10) were noted by some officers to impact the ability to articulate and communicate thoughts in an interview. As P9 noted, 'it's articulating it that can be a bit of an issue. Articulating the facts, trying to get your words out. 'cause you're spinning a million miles an hour' (P9). P8 further explained how emotions about the incident and anxiety over the interview might increase cognitive load with a detrimental effect on articulating information from memory, since 'you might not be able to

concentrate properly … all these extra things that you've got to worry about sort of override your ability to extract that information'.

Timing

Opinions were divided regarding the timing of interviews. Nine officers suggested benefits of interviews being conducted quickly after incidents occurred. For some, this was based on their own positive experience of being interviewed 'soon' (in their view) after the incident, while others reflected a preference for a shorter time to interview than they experienced. In contrast, eight officers discussed the benefits of waiting some time after the incident before participating in an interview (some discussed both viewpoints).

Sooner rather than later: Fresh recall and less anxiety

The benefits of a shorter time to interview were communicated as facilitating more accurate recall and preventing anxiety build-up. Five officers thought conducting interviews soon after incidents would elicit better recall, noting the information would be 'fresh' (P9, P2, P12) and therefore more accurate. Some expanded on this to note how time might decrease accuracy of recall. P8 noted that memory would have decayed over time; 'If they waited some time to interview me, I would have lost a lot of information', while P2 noted that memory can become distorted with time and continued rehearsing or retelling of the incident,

> If I had been interviewed the next day, there would have been other outside influences that could, I guess, change the structure of what you believe and what you think… the more time that it takes, then your memory can be swayed to believe other things or what you would prefer to believe.

Comments of P5 reflected this sentiment, questioning the source of changes in memory experienced over time

> As the days go on, it all slowly comes back to you, but then again, I don't know if that's because I'm able to talk to my partner now and … whether the information [my partner] is giving me is affecting my own memory'.

This highlights that time can undermine one's confidence in memories due to difficulties in attributing the source of new memories and unconscious memory distortions.

Some officers described wanting to get the interview 'done with' or 'out of the way' (P1, P2, P12), particularly as it creates anxiety (P11). P3 expanded on the idea of interviews as anxiety-provoking,

> The sooner after the incident [the interview] is done, the better reflection you'll get, the more accurate and the more relaxed a person will be…You haven't had time to build up anxiety about it and play over, not only the event, but also the interview; 'What are they going to ask me? What if I don't remember? What's going to happen?'.

Other officers explained the negative effects of a delayed interview from a welfare perspective, where an officer is not allowed to leave or talk to others, have access to a shower or change of clothes, and may have already worked a long shift and so be particularly fatigued (e.g. P1, P6, P12).

Time to calm down and 'make sense of it'

Eight officers advocated waiting for a period after an incident before interviewing subject officers. Those who viewed a delay positively were those who either did not

personally experience a delay (but thought one might have been beneficial) or those who were allowed to go home while waiting for their interview. Like the above arguments against delaying the interview, arguments in favour of a delay were based on perceived improvements to recall accuracy as well as their emotional state.

P13 reflected that more time after the incident would likely have provided a better interview, due to improved recall and emotional state, 'I had a lot more thorough recollection the following day rather than a few hours later [in my interview]'. A similar sentiment was expressed by P10, but specifically noting that the improvements afforded by more time would have been in how to articulate aspects of decision-making and use of correct terminology rather than remembering more details of what happened. Similarly, some officers saw benefit in a delayed interview assisting with remembering the sequence of events (P13) or being able to communicate memories in a sequential way (P9).

Officers who reflected that their memory improved with time, particularly after sleep/several days, spoke of 'things falling into place' (P7), being 'able to put more pieces of the puzzle together' (P13), having 'a chance to make sense of it' (P6; also P13 and P5) and time to 'get your thoughts straight…everything is a bit of a jumble' (P9). P5 further spoke of how some parts 'became a bit clearer probably the next two to three days', but explaining that this was about 'making sense' of what must have happened, including through reviewing other information that informed this process.

A delay was viewed positively particularly by those who were not held on police premises. Those officers described being able to go home before the interview as providing 'time to calm down…and come back fresh' (P4). As explained by P7, being able to go home and sleep 'gave me a little bit of time to process the emotional side of it a little bit more…I think if I had been interviewed straight away afterwards, I still would have been in a state of

shock'. Similarly, P5 recounted 'that sort of 12-hour break is probably not bad. I would have been too tired and too much adrenalin if I had been interviewed [earlier]'.

Follow-up interviews

Six officers reported that they gave all information at the time of their interview and recalled nothing additional later to require a follow up interview. Four officers felt that officers should have an opportunity for a follow up interview should further details be remembered, with two suggesting that a preliminary interview should be conducted two to three hours after the incident, with a follow up interview once the officer has had time to 'reboot' (P9). In contrast, one officer stated 'I don't see any benefit to being interviewed any more than once. You get the information fresh and raw prior to any outside influences' (P2).

Treatment

While the above section focused on the interview process, the perceptions of treatment during the process highlighted strong themes in the interviewee's responses. The willingness to engage in an interview was mentioned by some officers as the most important factor in determining a successful interview. The two predominant themes reflected the provision of information and procedural justice.

Provision of information

Officers raised issues relating to the provision of information during the investigation process. Nine of the 13 officers said that they did not understand (or have explained to them) parts of the investigation process. Several officers recounted a period of waiting and not knowing what was happening, often in isolation or with minimal contact with others.

Six officers mentioned the importance of being provided information about the outcome of the incident and/or feedback on their actions. This information was thought important because it relates to the nature of the investigation and the officer's understanding of the possible consequences. Most commonly, comments related to provision of feedback on whether the officer had 'done the right thing', with P3 suggesting this would be important for a person's engagement during the interview. One officer stated 'you just want someone to say to you, "it's okay, you did what you had to do"' (P1). Comments also highlighted the importance of information regarding whether the subject of the shooting had survived (P1 and P12) as well as the welfare of their partner/others who had been involved in the incident (P7 and P8).

A lack of information was described as 'confusing', 'frustrating', 'difficult', 'upsetting', and anxiety-provoking.

> Sitting there and not knowing and not getting given a lot [of information] is really [difficult] – because we [as police officers] normally are given everything…you start to feel like you're getting ostracised in a sense (P1).

High levels of uncertainty were associated with defensiveness. One officer suggested that knowledge before the interview would affect how open an officer might be in his/her account of the event,

> Whether they give the information that 'we're happy with everything but we've got to run through this with you. …You go, 'oh, thank goodness… well, I'll tell you what happened, exactly'(P3).

In contrast, six officers mentioned receiving information about the process, either from their lawyer, support person, or the interviewer. Officers who received explanations of, and/or

understood, the process and goals of the investigation reported feeling relaxed and comfortable to openly engage.

Procedural justice

Procedural justice relates to the fairness of the decision-making process, typically comprising four components: conveying trustworthy motives, neutrality, treating people with dignity and respect, and providing voice. All four components were evident in the context of the treatment received from the interviewers, particularly trustworthy motives.

Trustworthy motives. Eleven of the 13 officers discussed either their experience or the perceived importance of interviewers having trustworthy motives. Nine officers noted a negative reputation of internal investigators as untrustworthy, for example for 'trying to stitch you up' (P6 and P7), 'burn you' (P1) or 'smash you' (P8), being 'out to get you' (P3), 'only out to criticise' (P5) and that 'if they can get you, they will' (P7). Preconceptions of the interviewers was noted specifically by one officer to have resulted in being initially defensive in interview,

> I think I probably went in a little bit guarded, in all honesty … that they were going to be picking at parts of my story and trying to look for something that I'd done wrong (P7).

However, those officers all recounted that, in their experience, interviewers were not trying to 'trick' them, and that they understood the interviewers were just trying to establish 'the facts' about 'what happened'. Six officers commented favourably on the level of empathy and understanding conveyed by the interviewers as well as being non-judgmental. Officers described that this made them feel 'supported' and more 'comfortable' and 'relaxed'.

Several officers noted that a non-judgmental approach that does not treat officers as a suspect or 'villain' positively affects how an officer will engage in the interview,

> It changes the interview from essentially being treated like a suspect where … you feel like you have to be careful … to literally just trying to be as accurate as you possibly can and explain what happened (P7).

In contrast, two officers said they felt the interviewers were 'trying to trip me up' (P1); '[the interviewer] kept trying to push to try and make me slip up… just kept picking' (P12). Feeling like interviewers were 'second guessing' and 'trying to draw answers' out of officers was said to impact the officer's confidence in the interview, 'you start to question your own [recollection] – what happened and could I have done something differently – and your confidence takes a hit' (P1).

Neutrality. Three officers noted the importance of unbiased equal treatment of police officers compared with community members. All three felt they had been treated impartially and highlighted that police officers need to be investigated to the same standard as community members without perception of preferential treatment. For example, noting that interviewers 'need to be seen to be unbiased. Which they were' (P9) was seen as important for accountability and community expectations.

In contrast, five officers felt they had been treated more harshly than others. One officer felt more harshly treated than other colleagues from the same incident. Four officers noted they were treated more harshly than members of the public would be, predominantly because of differences in interview procedure where they noted, for example, 'some of those practices we would never get away with doing with an offender or a victim' (P6). P12 further inferred that differential treatment represented a different attitude towards subject officers

compared to members of the public, ‘as a police officer you are guilty until proven innocent, whereas every other [person] is innocent until proven guilty’ (P12).

Respectful treatment. Respectful treatment was discussed by seven of the 13 officers. Three officers specifically stated their interviewers were ‘polite’ or ‘respectful’, while a further four officers described the interviewers’ demeanour as ‘friendly’ or having ‘good rapport’. This made the officers feel ‘relaxed’ and ‘at ease’. In contrast, a prior negative interaction with an investigator had affected one officer’s preconception of the interviewers. Another officer recounted negative treatment by the interviewing officer and suggested interviewers ‘should be more approachable...They should be more respectful’ (P12).

A further officer observed that interviewers could improve the ‘human side’ of the interview, ‘you sort of feel like you’re just getting looked at through a magnifying glass, but they’re not worried about how you feel or you as a person’ (P1). Officers spoke about the importance of ensuring they are treated as human beings, ‘just treat us like a human. Treat us like a fellow police officer’ (P12), or ‘making people feel more humanised’ (P1). This included treating officers with compassion, showing empathy and being cognisant of the subject officer’s emotional state. Empathy and supportive treatment were described as breaking down subject officers’ inhibitions and encouraging complete and accurate information in an interview. As P7 stated

> The interviewers themselves seemed empathetic, which really made me feel supported in telling my story…took that pressure off of feeling like I might have to be careful about what I say or how I articulate something. I was just able to freely talk about it without having to worry about that. Because of that, I feel like the information was a lot more accurate.

Voice. Seven officers commented on the opportunity they had in the interview to voice their account of the incident. Most comments indicated a positive experience of being able to 'freely explain what had happened' (P7); to give their 'version' (P2 and P13) or tell their 'story' (P3 and P7) and be 'able to express that honestly' (P3). The success in eliciting a good free recall was attributed to the questioning format (initial open question asking what happened) as well as the way the interviewers conducted themselves.

Several officers said they did not feel 'pressured' to answer questions or answer quickly, with interviewers being described as 'patient' (P8) and giving officers 'time to reflect' (P7 and P9) and 'time to just speak' (P4). This was said to help with recall, for example,

> There was really no pressure to hurry up and answer the question. Everything was dictated by my own time…which really, really helped, I think, with the clarity and the ability to recall everything (P7).

In contrast, two officers recounted negative experiences of not feeling listened to, for example,

> [the interviewer] kept stopping me and telling me 'oh no, no, you need to do this and this'. I said 'no mate, that's not what happened. This is putting words in my mouth' (P12).

This led the officer to highlight the importance of interviewers giving officers the opportunity to have their voice heard. Being listened to and understood was associated with feeling 'relaxed' (P13) during the interview, as well as feeling 'satisfied' and 'relieved' (P7), 'confident and happy' (P3) after the interview.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify and understand, from police officers' perspectives, factors that may influence the accuracy and completeness of officers' accounts of a shooting. The process of giving an account relies on the officer's memory for that incident but also the officer's engagement and ability to provide their account. While this is influenced by their psychological state during and post-incident, this can also be impacted by the interview process. Interview timing was a relevant factor. However, it was clear that the treatment officers receive (or perceive) from interviewers had a large impact on both the officers' satisfaction with the interview and the quality of information provided. Officers felt they performed best in terms of both ability and engagement when they were supported, and demonstrations of procedural and informational justice were key to this. Procedural justice includes components of neutrality, trustworthy motives, voice, and respectful treatment. Informational justice concerns fairness in the sharing of information. Generally, reduced discomfort and reduced cognitive load likely leads to improved quality of the interview.

In line with previous research on OISs, our findings suggested an officer's memory for the shooting can be affected by perceptual distortions as well as disorganised or unclear thinking post-incident (Miller, 2016). This was described as affected by adrenaline, shock, and fatigue. This psychological state needs to be considered regarding expectations on officers' memory for details of the event; officers may not have encoded certain details and so will not be able to recall everything and there may be discrepancies between accounts from those present. This has previously been noted, for example by Klinger (2002). However, these distortions and physical and emotional reactions also need to be considered in relation to the process for retrieving memories. Officers reported continuing to feel the physical and emotional effects for some time past the event, which has implications for their ability to construct and articulate coherent accounts, as well as understand processes and questions

required of them. It is important to reduce the cognitive load placed on officers during the interview process, to optimise recall and cognitive functioning.

Cognitive load can be reduced through attention to the conditions under which an officer is interviewed. As noted earlier, there is a debate around the timing of the interview for optimising officers' recall, but officers' perspectives have not been systematically explored. In the present study, there was generally a consensus on giving the officer some period of time after the event before an interview, at least for adrenaline to settle. However, opinions about the optimal length of time between incident and interview varied, as did the interpretation of a 'long' or 'short' wait time. Interestingly, it was not necessarily the length of time between the incident and interview that was an issue for these officers but the treatment during that time and whether this reduced or increased discomfort and anxiety.

Among our interviewees, and in line with memory experts (see Grady *et al.*, 2016), advocates for a short time between incident and interview noted advantages of greater memory accuracy (less forgetting and less distortion of memories). However, they also spoke of being able to avoid a waiting period of uncertainty and isolation that would compound anxiety and fatigue. Conversely, those interviewees who advocated more time before the interview tended to be those who had not experienced being held for any length of time on police premises, and who found the delay provided time for physical and emotional effects of the incident to dissipate.

In line with suggestions by Grossman and Siddle (2011) of 'critical incident amnesia', some officers reported that details of the incident returned to them after a period of time. However, for some of these, it is hard to untangle the effects of time from the effects of additional information provided, such as talking to their partner or reviewing other evidence, and whether that 'triggers' these memories (e.g. through the process of context reinstatement) or provides context for an officer to reconstruct meaning. For some though, the passage of

time was said to improve memory, with additional details or additional clarity emerging in the days following an incident. However, many of the improvements with time that officers reported were related to articulation rather than recall *per se*; for example, organising thoughts and providing a chronological account. Thus, in the context of OIS post-event interviews, time may affect cognition more than memory.

In addition to feeling the physical effects of adrenaline and fatigue/tiredness, our findings point to emotional discomfort that may be experienced by officers, for example through feelings of anxiety, frustration, uncertainty, grief, or feelings of guilt. Many of these concerns align with the findings of Klinger (2002). Officers in our study noted the importance of recognition of 'the human side' of interviews and treatment that reduces anxiety and feelings of alienation.

In line with findings of studies of interviews with traumatised victims (Langballe and Schultz, 2021), our findings suggest that a sense of agency (control) and value was important to officers in their investigative interviews, and that this increases their willingness to engage. Like in internal investigations of complaints (De Angelis and Kuptchik, 2007), and in line with prior literature on procedural and organizational justice (Donner et al., 2015), the comments of our interviewees suggest that fair treatment of officers, through demonstration (by interviewers) of procedural justice and informational justice, appears to increase perceptions of value and agency, which in turn promotes trust. Thus, officers treated in a procedurally just way, and who are kept informed throughout the process, are more likely to experience lower anxiety and, therefore, lower their inhibitions and engage more openly in an interview.

Elements of procedural justice, particularly, helped officers feel the interview was a collaborative process towards a shared goal of fact finding, rather than an adversarial relationship. This was thought to more likely motivate an officer's effort for full and open

disclosure, while a lack of procedural justice in the interview was thought to produce unmotivated, guarded responses, undermined by lack of trust, agency, and good will. This is in line with procedural justice research more broadly (Donner, et al., 2015) and supports Geiselman *et al.*'s (2017) proposition that post-shooting officer interviews should be fact-finding and not adversarial. The findings further show why practices such as rapport building and open questioning can promote this; such practices display neutrality, trustworthy motives and respect, and provide opportunities for voice, all of which are core to perceptions of fairness.

Demonstrations of fairness are perhaps particularly important for subject officers as they occupy a unique role in the investigation with a degree of uncertainty over this and its consequences for the outcome of the investigation. As Geiselman *et al.* (2017) point out, officers are simultaneously victims and suspects, as well as employees who might lose their job. Like in Klinger's (2002) study of US police shooters, and Jakobsen's (2021) study of Norwegian victims, some of our interviewees recalled experiencing uncertainty over their own actions – second guessing appropriateness or deliberating whether other courses of action were possible. They also acknowledged the interview to be anxiety-provoking and, echoing the victims in Jakobsen's (2021) study, sought empathy from interviewers in demonstrating understanding of their actions and acknowledgement of their trauma. Displays of empathy as well as neutrality and trustworthy motives were, therefore, particularly important for setting the tone of the interview, reducing anxiety, and encouraging openness. However, similar to the views of investigators in Jakobsen et al.'s (2017) study of victim interviews, the context of officer interviews may likely constrain appropriate interviewer behaviour. Until the outcome of an investigation is known, interviewer displays of understanding of officer trauma, non-judgmental behaviour, and truth-seeking are likely to be more appropriate ways of demonstrating empathy in officer interviews; providing specific

reassurances regarding officers' actions (i.e., that the officer 'did the right thing') may undermine the objectivity of their role.

Practical implications

Knowledge of factors that affect officers' accounts of stressful events can contribute to policies that recognise individual-level needs and ensure fair treatment of subject officers. To reduce cognitive load, agency policies should consider the timing of an interview regarding individual officer conditions of fatigue, adrenaline and trauma. While it is important to increase the chance of fresh uncontaminated recall by interviewing soon after the incident, allowing time to address the immediate welfare needs of officers and for adrenaline effects to subside would also assist with reducing discomfort and displaying empathy. Such timeframes may need individualised consideration, however given that some of the benefit of delaying an interview seemed to lie in officers better articulating their narrative, other options for reducing cognitive load may be to consider aids to articulation. This could include allowing written statements or drawings, as well as enhancing the preparation of officers through regular training in articulating decisions and actions – for example, through simulation training and practice debriefs. Additionally, the opportunity for a later follow-up interview or addendum statement would allow for any additional details recalled over time to be captured by the investigation. For example, officers could either provide their free-recall narrative again, or volunteer specific differences in recall they have identified over time. However, this should come with an understanding that there may be discrepancies between accounts over time due to the way memory works (Geiselman *et al.,* 2017) as well as possible contamination of memory from intervening experiences. Thus, the initial recollection should be preserved and any additions or changes clearly recorded as such.

Fair treatment of subject officers can be conveyed through attention to informational and procedural justice. Informational justice can be displayed by ensuring information about processes and decisions is provided to subject officers throughout the process in a timely way, from after the incident occurs through to the conclusion of an investigation (Miller, 2010). Interviewers should also be sensitive to the demonstration of procedural justice principles when interacting with subject officer interviewees. Procedural justice can be communicated by interviewers through, for example: a non-judgmental demeanour and application of a standardised process (neutrality); use of 'ground rules' to explain the purpose of the interview and demonstrate trustworthy motives; open-ended questioning designed to elicit free recall (voice); and respectful interactions and questioning that shows consideration for the officer. These principles are in line with best practice guidance on witness interviewing. This supports the view that witness interviewing practice may be helpfully extended to subject officers, as well as Geiselman *et al.*'s (2017) more specific suggestion that the cognitive interview would be useful in this context.

Limitations

While this study has offered the experiences and insights of officers who have undergone an internal investigative interview after a shooting, there are limitations to acknowledge. First, the study relies on retrospective recollections of the officers. While this provides the officers' perspectives, these are subjective and could also be affected by recall bias. As such, officers' perspectives might differ from research evidence obtained through other methods, such as experimental research, or perspectives gathered closer to the events in question.

The small sample size and single jurisdiction are also limitations. Police shootings are relatively rare events in Australia, limiting the sampling pool, and are likely a sensitive topic

for those who have been involved. However, the similarities among the comments suggest a point of saturation was reached on the main factors this study highlights, even though some experiences differed across individuals. Further, the generalisability of these findings shows promise given the alignment of these experiences and viewpoints to issues noted in prior studies based on varied samples (police and victims) and different jurisdictions (for example, the US, UK, and Norway), both in terms of officer experiences of shootings and the interview experiences of traumatized victims/witnesses.

In addition, while the sample included OISs with varied outcomes – both fatal and non-fatal – and some variation in the role of the officer – primary and secondary – the small numbers of cases and exploratory nature of the study limited our focus to analysis of the full sample rather than comparing subsamples based on these or other attributes of events of individuals. Future research could explore such comparisons. Hope *et al.* (2016) demonstrated that officer role in an OIS (shooter vs observer) in experimental scenarios impacted the amount of stress experienced and recall accuracy. It is, therefore, possible that officer role might impact the experience of the post-event interview, particularly regarding the stress and uncertainty experienced regarding the interview process. In relation to event outcome, however, our findings showed that officers did not always know the outcome of the incident at the time of their interview; the outcome may be less likely to impact officers' experiences of the interview under such circumstances.

Conclusion

OISs are, typically, traumatic events. Interview processes for subject officers need to take that trauma into account. Subject officers occupy a unique role that adds anxiety and stress to the interview – it is common for officers to second guess their actions and look for reassurance, particularly where there is uncertainty over a process that could result in loss of their job or criminal charges. Supporting officers to provide accurate and complete accounts

of the event is crucial and can come through a variety of ways to reduce discomfort and cognitive load. Procedural and informational justice are key concepts that should underpin any interview strategy. Demonstrating neutrality, trustworthy motives, and respect, and providing opportunity for voice, as well as keeping the officer informed regarding processes and decisions, all encourage a collaborative interview where officers can do their best and feel satisfied with the process. Improving the process for eliciting officers' accounts will not only enhance the quality of information to assist the investigation but also support officer wellbeing.

References

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2021) One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), pp.328-352, DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

De Angelis, J. and Kupchik, A. (2007). Citizen oversight, procedural justice, and officer perceptions of the complaint investigation process. *Policing: An International Journal, 30*(4), pp.651-671.

Donner, C., Maskaly, J., Fridell, L. and Jennings, W.G. (2015). Policing and procedural justice: A state-of-the-art review. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management, 38*(1), pp.153 – 172.

Geiselman, R.E., Wilson, J.F. and Artwohl, A. (2017). Conducting the investigative interview. In D.L. Ross and G.M. Vilke (Eds), *Guidelines for Investigating Officer-Involved Shootings, Arrest-Related Deaths, and Deaths in Custody* (pp. 285-304). New York: Routledge**.**

Grieco, J., and Robbins, T. (2019). *Officer-involved shooting situations, responses, and data: an analysis of information from major city police agencies*. Washington, DC: National Police Foundation.

Grossman, D., and Siddle, B. K. (2001). Critical incident amnesia: The physiological basis and the implications of memory loss during extreme survival stress situations. *The Firearms Instructor, 31*.

Hammonds, A.L., Kaiser Moy, K., Suhr, R.R. and Vanderwall, C. (2016). *At arm's length: Improving criminal investigations of police shootings*. Stanford Criminal Justice Centre.

Hewes, K. (2016). Procedural justice and officer-involved-shootings. *International Journal of Therapeutic Jurisprudence, 1*, pp.373-404.

Hogan, T. P. (2020). Officer-involved shooting investigations demystified: slashing through the gordian knot. *Drexel Law Review, 13*(1), pp.1-86.

Hope, L., Blocksidge, D., Gabbert, F., Sauer, J. D., Lewinski, W.,Mirashi, A., and Atuk, E. (2016). Memory and the operational witness: Police officer recall of firearms encounters as a function of active response role. *Law and Human Behavior*, *40*, pp.23–35. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000159

Jakobsen, K. K., (2021) Empathy in investigative interviews of victims: How to understand it, how to measure it, and how to do it? *Police Practice and Research, 22*(2), pp.1155-1170, DOI: 10.1080/15614263.2019.1668789.

Jakobsen, K. K., Langballe, Å., and Schultz, J.-H. (2016). Trauma-exposed young victims: Possibilities and constraints for providing trauma support within the investigative interview. *Psychology, Crime and Law, 23*(5), pp.1–18.

Klinger, D.A. (2002). *Police Responses to Officer-Involved Shootings.* Final report to the National Institute of Justice. Washington, DC: National institute of Justice.

Langballe, Å., and Schultz, J.-H. (2016). I couldn't tell such things to others: Trauma-exposed youth and the investigative interview. *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal, 18*(1), pp.62–74.

Lewinski, W. J., Dysterheft, J. L., Priem, M. M., and Pettitt, R. W. (2016). Police officers' actual vs. recalled path of travel in response to a threatening traffic stop scenario. *Police Practice and Research*, *17*, pp.51–67. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2014.959950

Loo, R. (1986). Post-shooting stress reactions among police officers. *Journal of Human Stress*, *12*(1), pp.27–31.

Miller, L. (2016) Shots fired: Stresses and strategies in officer-involved shootings. In Burke, R.J. (Ed.). (2016). *Stress in Policing: Sources, consequences and interventions* (1st ed., pp.115-133). Routledge.

Miller, S. (2010). What makes a good internal affairs investigation? *Criminal Justice Ethics*, *29*(1), pp.29–40.

Ministry of Justice (2022). *Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings: Guidance on Interviewing Victims and Witnesses, and Guidance on Using Special Measures*. London: Ministry of Justice. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6492e26c103ca6001303a331/achieving-best-evidence-criminal-proceedings-2023.pdf

Parent, R.B. and Verdun-Jones, S. (2000). When police kill: The aftermath. *The Police Journal, 73*, pp.241-255.

Porter, L.E., Ready, J. and Alpert, G.P. (2018). Officer involved shootings: The effect of delay and repeated questioning on officers' recall of stressful events. *Journal of Experimental Criminology, 15*(1), pp.1–28.DOI: 10.1007/s11292-018-9348-0.

Powell, M., Garry, M and Brewer, N. (2009). Eyewitness testimony. In Freckleton, I. and Selby, H. (Eds.), *Expert Evidence*. North Ryde, N.S.W.: Law Book Co.

Quinton, P., Myhill, A., Bradford, B., Fildes, A., & Porter, G. (2015). *Fair Cop 2: Organisational Justice, Behaviour and Ethical Policing*. Ryton-on-Dunsmore: College of Policing.

Reiser, M. and Geiger, S.P. (1984). Police officer as victim. *Professional psychology: Research and practice, 15*(3), pp.315-323.

Schnell C., Spencer, M.D., Mancik A., Porter, L.E., Ready, J., and Alpert, G.P. (2021). Expanding research on investigations of officer-involved shootings: An experimental

evaluation of question timing on police officers' memory recall. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *49*(7), pp.1031-1049. doi:10.1177/00938548211035824

Smith, K., and Milne, B. (2018). Witness interview strategy for critical incidents (WISCI). *Journal of Forensic Practice, 20*(4), pp.268-278.