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Trauma in the South African polce force: Personality and coping as risk factors for developing post-traumatic stress disorder

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1. Abstract

The South African service (SAPS) has a reputation for being resilient despite the amounts of trauma they are exposed to. Research has shown that this occupation is one of the most stressful. However, research surrounding the SAPS suggests that police work is one of society's most stressful occupations. The way in which individuals respond to such traumatisations is dependent on numerous factors, two being personality and coping. In so far, this study investigated three main areas around police reservists – a unit within the SAPS - in order to understand their responses to trauma: whether personality factors were related to post-traumatic stress symptomatology (PTSS) in the police reservist population; whether coping moderated the relationship between personality factors and PTSS; whether a personality factors predict coping style. A quantitative analysis was conducted among a sample of 36 reservists in the Gauteng area of South Africa. This study found that the relationship between Neuroticism and PTSS is mediated by coping, specifically Emotion-Focused and Dysfunctional Coping styles. A relationship between Conscientiousness and PTSS showed to be prevalent, however this is not due to the mediation affect of coping. Furthermore, Neuroticism and Extraversion showed to predict coping style. Specifically, Neuroticism showed to affect EFC and DC and Extraversion showed to affect EFC. The descriptive statistics showed that this sample of police reservists is suffering from PTSD. Implications of these findings are discussed and directions for future research are explored.

Key words: South African Police Service; police reservists; trauma; post-traumatic stress; personality; coping.