Situation-Specific Stressors and Training for Police

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I. Situation Specific Training

In the mid-1960's Norman Kagan and his colleagues at Michigan State University developed a system called Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) to train counselors in effective helping skills. This system included a series of filmed vignettes of basic emotions commonly encountered in counseling. Steve Danish had been a graduate student in this group; in 1968 at Southern Illinois University he and I presented IPR "hostility" film vignettes to a training class for basic police recruits (all of whom had prior police experience).

The filmed vignettes consisted of seven subjective camera scenes of graduated hostility in which the actor on the screen spoke directly to the viewer, as if the viewer were in the room with him. The mildest hostility level was excessive denial of anger and negative feelings. The intensity increased to the highest level, in which the actor yelled, swore, shook, and accused. The verbal content was non-specific, so that any viewer could interpret the statements as personally applicable.

Graduate students in counseling and other training groups reacted less strongly than did the police (Danish and Brodsky, 1970). The police trainees showed a special vulnerability to these standardized and provocative stressors. Some became infuriated. All were highly emotionally responsive. We saw a need to desensitize police to the effects of such situations.

The next step consisted of checking our observations with a large number of police and police training experts. There was a consensual validation that training should help police deal with specific interpersonal problems presented in law enforcement.

Armed with enthusiatic support from the film production studios at Southern Illinois University, the interest and collaboration of the Illinois State Police, and the generous funding from the Illinois law Enforcement Commission, we began the training project with a series of biweekly planning sessions attended by senior police officers and the project staff. Later we had advisory meetings with experienced police training. Our purposes were to consider difficult situations frequently faced by Illinois state troopers and to plan these situations in film vignettes and for training purposes. We asked, what were the difficult situations? What were the job-related stressors that trigger inappropriate reactions or difficult adaptations?

The project team found 58 situations prototypical in painfulness or awkwardness. A number were not feasible for filming and others sufficiently overlapped in content and we concluded with 30 planned vignettes.

Our interest was in psychologically related issues. We were not concerned about techniques, shift schedules or equipment failures, but we were concerned about the interpersonal stressors and pressures experienced by the state troopers.

If the series of films exclusively showed trying and difficult situations, it was felt that the trainees would be continually on guard, and the goals were to evoke typical responses in training. Thus situations were included which were innocuous, although potentially threatening. In one such scene an officer approaches a motorcycle gang which looks ominous; the gang actually is casual, and jokes with the officer. In a college demonstration scene, the youths speaking to the officer are pleasant, and seek to converse rather than to challenge.

Subjective camera techniques were used throughout, in which the actors or actresses spoke directly to the camera. For the purposes of training each police officer was instructed to look directly at the screen and pretend that the person on the film was speaking to him, personally, alone, individually. This subjective camera technique was used to maximize the sense of involvement.

The film vignettes may be divided according to the stressors' content. Four situations dealt with supervisor-supervisee interactions. In three of them, the supervisor was wishy washy, inappropriately angry, and failed to listen to a suggestion. In the fourth supervision scene the actor was a trooper challenging the newly promoted supervisor's authority.

The next category of films consisted of non-enforcement, public interactions. In one scene a tavern drinking partner reacts with surprise to learn that the viewer is an officer and he speaks of his negative feelings about police. In a cafe scene the officer overhears three truck drivers discussing him and other police in pejorative ways.

The third set of scenes concerned officer discretion in traffic ticketing of different citizens. The specific scenes included: a) a friendly truck driver who explains that a ticket will cause him to lose his job; b) a bearded, t-shirted young man who is polite, apologetic and embarrassed; c) a former high school friend of the officer who reminds him of their prior reckless adventures together; d) an older woman who criticizes the officer for ticketing her instead of pursuing more serious enforcement functions; e) a woman with political influence.

The fourth set of scenes dealt with emotionally aroused or distraught women: a) a woman is hysterical and crying, following an auto accident injury to her child; b) a desperate and angry woman is taken into the police car, and she tears off her blouse to accuse the officer of rape; c) a seductive woman suggests that "...I'm not a criminal and we don't have to play cops and robbers. We can play something else."

Two scenes focused on racial incidents. One concerned a mixed racial couple in which the white woman accuses the officer of stopping the car because of racism. In another situation the police officer stops to investigate a disabled car that has three "jive talking" young black men responding with ridicule and exasperation.

There are a variety of other scenes, including a college student at a demonstration demeaning the masculinity of the officer and suggesting the officer's wife is promiscuous with his "pig buddies," a drunk, a man who refuses to open his car on the side of the road in a rain storm, an aggressive cross examination in a courtroom, a family quarrel, two homosexuals, an elderly couple with a loquacious wife, a disdainful VIP, a suicide attempt, and an interfering bystander.

These scenes give a sense of direct relevance to stressors in police experience. In training with both new and experienced officers the content validity of the scenes was strongly affirmed. Officers repeatedly said, "Yes, that's what happens," or "Let me tell you about the time I was on the road and......"

THE TRAINING

The film vignettes called for identification of specific stressors and production of scenes that would realistically depict the stressors. The utilization of the film vignettes took place initially at the Illinois State Police Training Academy. Several operating principles were followed.

The university project staff began with the major training roles. However, from the beginning the staffing of training sessions was arranged so that the academy staff could soon assume full training responsibility. In the first class to complete the training, the academy staff assisted the university trainers. In the next one, co-training was used. Then the university staff became assistants, and then they became observers and consultants. After that time, the academy staff directed the training independently.

It was assumed that the film vignettes themselves were only helpful in the context of active trainee participation and involvement. Trainees met in groups of eight to ten. The training following individual film scenes ranged from 20 minutes to an hour in length. Sometimes a filmed scene would be stopped in progress and discussion would precede the complete showing. Techniques used in training included role-playing, responding directly to the character on the screen as if he or she were in the room, writing responses one would make, group discussion of personal reactions and feelings, varied behavior rehearsals, and examining possible responses in similar, but somewhat different, police situations.

A satiation effect was observed, in which very high emotionality peaked and then diminished to weariness with prolonged use of the film training. Thus no more than two hours of continuous film-based training was employed each day, interspersed between regular academy classes.

All levels of trainees participated, from basic recruits undergoing initial police education to troopers, corporals and sergeants who has been police for up to twenty years. The particular order of the film segements as modified to fit the different groups.

An interesting reciprocal need-perception phenomenon appeared among the experienced troopers. The senior officers emphasized how relevant and meaningful this would have been for them when they entered the force, and how good it is for returning junior troopers. The troopers and lower ranking officers pointed out that the senior officers were lacking these situation-specific skills. And all of them indicated that the training should be brought to fellow troopers located on station around the state. Inexperienced troopers, troopers who repeatedly got into trouble, and those seen as lacking common sense were especially noted as in need of training. In the case of senior officers, they saw the film training as a way of opening up for discussion the interpersonal difficulties some problem troopers were having. In addition to the attribution of needs of others, there was an affirmation of clear personal benefit.

ASSESSMENT

The perceived validity of the situational training was investigated by daily administering a six item questionnaire to 32 Illinois State troopers and 15 Sergeants in in-service training. Table 1 shows this ten-point scale, with standard deviations hovering close to 1.00 of all groups and items. Items 2 and 5 were highly endorsed, indicating that these experienced officers saw the training as meaningful for police work, and that the films were important, accurate and worthwhile.

TABLE I

Mean Rating of Film Training

Item	Troopers (N = 32)	Sergeants (N = 16)
1. Meaningful to you personally	7.9	8.6
2. Meaningful for public work	8.0	9.8
3. Applicability of the training	8.2	9.2
4. General worth of the training today	8.2	8.6
5. Importance, accuracy and worth of the films themselves		
6. Training techniques used by instructors	8.6	9.0

The scene relevance was also studied by administering a fifteen item "Opinion Questionnaire" to the officers prior to the beginning of all of the academy training, immediately following the completion of the academy training, and some nine weeks later than they were on trooper duty. These fifteen items included items related to homosexuality, racial incidents, and content reflecting the training scenes. The items are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Stressor Opinion Items

	At-Ease Pretaining Scores	
	X	SD
1. Very hostile reaction to you	4.6	1.3
2. "Apple-polishing from a citizen as a result of your action.	4.8	1.3
3. Sexual come-on from opposite sex citizen.	5.1	1.2
4. Sexual come-on from same sex citizen.	4.2	1.9
5. Citizen threatening you.	4.9	1.4
6. Family crisis in which you have to intervene.	5.3	1.7
7. Handling a group that is "disturbing the peace."	4.5	1.5
8. Racial confrontation.	4.1	1.7
9. Hippie confrontation.	4.7	1.7
10. Citizens questioning your authority	*	*
11. Unjust supervisory criticism.	5.3	1.3
12. Drunk driver.	5.6	1.4
13. Citizen crying uncontrollably.	5.8	1.5
14. Citizen who "knows someone important."	5.8	1.5
15. General problems, crises, or emergencies		

Two ratings on an eight scale of the Opinion Questionnaire were elicited. The questionnaire asked how well trained the officers felt to handle each situation, (Preparation score) and how much or how little at ease he was in each situation (At-Ease score). High scores indicated positive evaluations of training preparation and degree of ease.

Table 2 indicates that the greatest ease was felt in handling the drunk driver (X= 5.6) and the citizen who "knows somebody important" (5.8). The lease comfort and ease were reported in racial confrontations (4.1) and homosexual "come-ons" (4.2). All of these situations were rated as being of medium discomfort, in the sense that they fell in the middle score range of 4 - 5.

The Law Scale and Attitudes Toward Police Human-Relations Training Scale were brief before-after measures on the cadets. The Law Scale is a 22 - item, Likert type scale developed as part of the Minnesota Survey of Opinion (Rundquist and Sletto, 1936). There were no significant changes on this scale with the before scores mean of 80.7 (SD =7.7) and after scores mean of 79.7 (SD = 6.7). The Attitude Toward Police Human Relations Training Scale was especially constructed.[b] Very high scores were obtained before and after training, with the scores significantly dropping from 13.7 to 12.3, of the maximum 15 points possible on the scale.

An entering cadet class was evaluated prior to the beginning of training, after training, and after they had nine weeks experience as state troopers on duty. The Opinion Questionnaire was given all three times, with the full class of 42 taking the questionnaire while at the academy, and 32 troopers responding to the follow-up mail survey. Preparation and At-Ease scores were obtained.

The At-Ease mean scores were 72.0 before training (SD = 14.7) and 81.4 after training (SD = 12.8), and 72.8 in the follow-up (SD = 8.4). The same inverted V pattern occurred for the Preparation Scores. The cadets began prior to training with a mean of 72.6 (SD = 15.8), rose to 85.8 after training (SD = 13.4), and fell to 74.8 in the follow-up (SD = 10.1). Only the before-after differences in all comparisons were significant.

An effort was made to select a control group, consisting of the prior cadet class. However, the instruments were administered at somewhat different points in time, and the demographic composition of the class was different. In both the after-training scores and the follow-up, the control group had higher Preparation and At-Ease scores, and higher standard deviations, hovering close to 20 around all means.

The overall assessment information may be considered as preliminary. It did appear that the trainees generally felt good about the training experience as it related to situational stressors. At least for the time they were in the academy they developed increased feelings of mastery and ease in dealing with the kinds of situations in which they were trained, a finding which was anticipated.

CONCLUSIONS

The present project grew out of training experience with state troopers. The targets of the training were those classes of situations which presented some conflict or difficulty to the officers. It was believed that there are re-occuring types of persons, attitudes and interpersonal situations that

functionally place stress on the officers. First these persons, attitudes, and situations were identified through a series of meetings and discussions. Next some of these stressing situations were filmed using a subjective camera technique. Third, they were tried out in a training context, and fit readily into a state police training curriculum. Fourth, an assessment of training effectiveness yielded mixed results, including an affirmation by trainees of the general worth of the training procedures.

This project was developed for state police use, and thus many of the situations were vehicle-stop and highway-related in content. Furthermore, an operating assumption was that the preferred way to reduce effects of stress was through academy training. Other limitations existed as well, and there is no unequivocal evidence that troopers after training survived and coped any better than untrained troopers.

Nevertheless the project is meaningful to the examination of police stressors. The subjective camera approach and the apparent content validation both serve (modestly, we must note) to expand the alternative ways of potentially reducing police strain and providing surrogate experiences to on-line duty stressors.

II. DIFFERENTIAL VULNERABILITY OF POLICE TO STRESS:

LAW ENFORCEMENT STRENS AND TRAUMAS

Individual police officers often become aware that their own experience of policing is different than many other police officers. In spite of the strong mutuality and reciprocal support police officers give to each other, the range of reactions, personalities, and preceptions of difficulties among police officers probably is as great as any other occupational group and is as wide as among the citizenry as a whole. This heterogeneity among police officers needs to be considered in any discussion of the causes and nature of stressors and strains among police officers. Investigation into this question should include background characteristics and occupational socialization patterns of those police who respond with high strain and trauma to police work as opposed to those who thrive on the challenges and ongoing activities. Another aspect of such a full discussion should deal with the particular characteristics that police perceive of their work and experiences that differentially either sensi-
'tize them to or successfully armor them against the slings and arrows of outrageous citizenry and enforcement fortunes.

Our preliminary investigation was into such successful and unsuccessful police experiences that lead to differential vulnerability to police related stressors. The study of strens and traumas has already been conducted among college volunteers (Finkel, 1974). A trauma is typically defined as a negative incident, significant in the experience of the life of the person, which has after effects in the person's life. Psychology itself is oriented toward such negative experiences. The development of this set of papers focusing on police stressors rather than police success, rewards, and positive feelings reflects the inclination of behavioral scientists to be sooth-sayers of psychopatho-logical doom.

Out of the community mental health and community psychiatry movement has come the emphasis on the positive experience in individuals' lives. The notion of stren is seen as directly opposite to that of trauma, and it comes from the

word strength (Hollister, 1967; Finkel, 1974). We define stren as a positive experience in an individual's life which is major in impact and which has a continuing affirmative effect in the life of the individual. Our frame of reference is that traumas and strens are significantly related to the differential experiencing of police stressors situations. An individual who experiences severe or many traumas is highly sensitized and vulnerable to the impact of police stressors. A police officer who experiences a number of strens will have his or her personal functioning and ability to withstand stressors improved. What then is the nature of traumas and strens among police officers?

A Law Enforcement Stren and Trauma questionnaire was adapted from the stren and trauma booklet reported by Finkel (1974). After stren and trauma were defined in the instructions, the subjects were asked to describe "In detail the various strens and traumas you can recall that are related in any way to your career in law enforcement." It was emphasized that because the inquiry was highly personal, no names were requested on the questionnaire. And that they had the right to decline participation.

The subjects were 58 police officers in attendance at the University of Alabama Law Enforcement Academy in Tuscaloosa. The officers were enrolled in a required 240 hour basic police training class. All of the officers were from West Alabama, a region heavily represented with rural communitites. All subjects were currently employed in law enforcement. The range of law enforcement experience of the subjects was two months to nine years, with a model employment time of six months.

The law enforcement strens reported are shown in Table 3. Nine of the subjects accepted the option of not responding. It may be seen that 37% of the responding officers indicated a stren in entry or achievement into the police occupation. The largest proportion describing positive interpersonal experience wrote of helping citizens in need of assistance or having other rewarding interactions. A small number had intrapsychic experiences, including religious insights and awareness.

Table 3

Law Enforcement Strens

Achievements: (37%)

    A. Occupational Entry or Acquisition (N = 14; 29%)

        Becoming a police officer (N = 4)
        Training or academy success (N = 7)
        Other (N = 3)

    B. Occupational Action (N = 4; 8%)

        Successful encounters with violent mental patients (N = 2)
        Handling self well on first arrest
        Arresting without force a man with a reputation as a cop fighter

Interpersonal: (51%)

A. Helping Others (N = 13; 27%)

   Strong feelings of really helping other (N = 5)
   Locating runaway girl
   Saving lives of two fellow officers
   Helping a citizen even after being told by supervisor it was not
       my job
   Helping injured in auto accident (N = 2)
   Experience with a cerebral palsy victim
   Helping those who are helpless or can't help themselves (N = 2)

B. Interpersonal - other (N = 12; 25%)

   Family or marital experiences (N = 3)
   Influence of other officer (N = 3)
   Meeting the public
   Generosity of strangers
   Overhearing man using the word 'pig' and hating him for it...then
       learning that man raises and sells pigs and also cows
   Experiences in S.E. Asia
   Feeling superior to 'bad' policemen
   Becoming a better person and feeling more a part of the community

Intrapsychic: (N = 6; 12%)

   Religious experience (N = 2)
   Feeling of dedication to duty
   Beliefs strengthened (Because of being threatened for an action I
       knew was right)
   Handling self well in a medical emergency
   A dream

Reported no strens: (N = 9)

   The law enforcement traumas are presented in Table 4. Some officers re-
ported more than one trauma, and 19 officers reported no law enforcement traumas
or declined participation, a proportion considerably higher than those reporting
no strens. A total of 44 trauma responses were obtained. As in the strens
analysis, percents were calculated only among those responding.

Table 4

Law Enforcement Traumas

Situational: (34%)

A. Deaths and Fear (N = 11; 25%)

   Seeing dead or mutilated bodies, especially children (N = 6)
   Feeling that a little girl burned to death due to my failure to
       respond quickly

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Dealing with the family of victim of a drunken driver
Being assulted, with resultant fear (N = 2)
Dealing with mentally ill people

B. Role entry and discomfort (N = 4; 9%)

Having to arrest the son of a close friend
Giving my first ticket
Difficulty with academy classes
Being rejected by police department(s)   (N = 2)

Citizen Incidents and Attitudes: (N = 9; 20%)

Public hate and persecution (N = 6)
Verbal abuse (N = 2) -- e.g., "Being called pig, son-of-a-bitch,
     etc. by a group of teenagers--sense of rejection and helplessness
     in the face of preconceived ideas
Mother's fear causing me to leave the police department for a year

Other police: (N = 9; 20%)

Seeing other officers being abusive, overbearing or callous (N = 6)
Poor management in the police department
Waiting two years for promotion, then being passed over

Interpersonal, Coincidental with Police Work: (N = 10; 23%)

Rejection by spouse or girl friend (N = 4)
Death of wife or friend (N = 2)
Personal alcoholism
Speech impediment
Being sent to 'Nam'

No Traumas reported: (N = 19)

Twenty five percent of the responses dealt with death or fear. A number
of officers described a deeply felt horror or shock at seeing dead persons and
mutilated bodies. Six other responses centered around the felt antagonism of
the public toward police, and the perceived public belief that most officers
were corrupt or evil. Six responses concerned the distress and difficulty felt
when other officers inappropriately harmed or harrassed defenseless citizens
or youths. Finally, a number of these police subjects wrote of difficulty
their marital problems or other personal traumas presented to their law enforce-
ment work.

CONCLUSIONS

These data represent a first investigation into strens and traumas in law
enforcement experiences. The emphasis on the strens of occupational achievement
and helping relationships may be important in understanding police vulnerability
to job stressors. Our predictions are that officers with such high positive
reactions will be less affected by ongoing police stressors. Some sort of balance
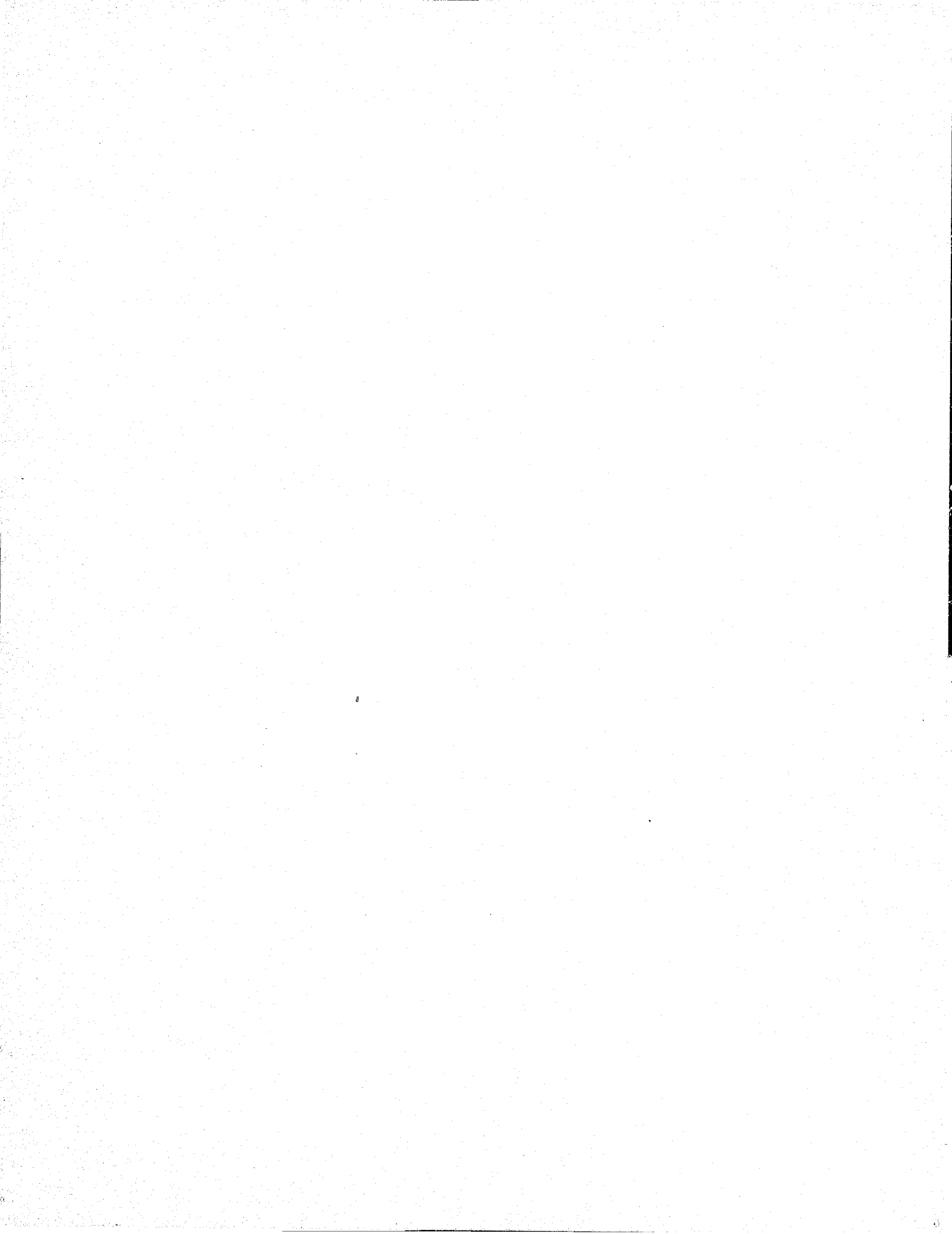between stressors and strens may occur, with enough derived satisfaction to see

the officer through the troublesome situations and feelings. Indeed as investigators look at ulcers, divorces, and depression among police officers, there may be a necessary equal attending to radiant good health and quick healing, happy marriages and joyous elation.

The training experiences reported in the first half of this paper seemed to be associated with strengthening processes. These arose in part from the group support; however the informal comments pointed more to the sense of having coped in desirable ways and with competent mastery.

Some experiences are both traumas and strens, and some officers report no such depth of experiencing. It seems that these sources of information should be similarly explored further in the pursuit of police stress reduction knowledge.

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