special situations.

Beyond their normal duties police are often called in to special situations that require a coordinated response to a civilian disaster or violent incident, for example the Hillsborough Stadium disaster, the Brixton riots, or the 1980s miners’ strike. Below is an excerpt taken from a news report from the BBC, which gives some insight into the policing experience of such an event. Bill King was a Chief Inspector at the time of the miners’ strike.

We usually left our families on a Sunday, getting on a coach with all the other officers, returning the following Friday – there was a lot of couples who separated in police families that year. We were usually living in such places as drill halls, sometimes sleeping on the floor, living out of a kitbag.

Breakfast was usually taken at about 1 a.m., so that we could be at the pits before dawn. Days were long and tiring, usually returning to our accommodation in the afternoons, to a hot meal and then bed, only to get up again at about midnight. We were all young and fit, but this routine tired us all out so that at the end of the week we got off the coaches like old men. Duty during the day usually consisted of long periods of waiting, or travelling, or talking to the pickets, interspersed with short periods of violence or pushing and shoving with the pickets. The exception was that week at Hatfield, when there was a great deal more action and violence than normal. I remember it very well: being dog tired; long, long working days; very early starts in the morning; the bitterness and understandable abuse from the crowds. I remember the sheer torrent of stones raining down – the sky just fell on us with stones, sticks, bits of railings, bricks, ball bearings. At one point I looked up and the sky was black with missiles. I felt the weight of command and concern for my officers and personal fear at the level of violence from the crowd, mixed with the excitement of the situation. I lost a stone in weight that week and I found holes in the soles of both my shoes by the end of it.

Police are more likely than most other professions to be con- fronted with shocking or unexpected events. These one-off traumatic events may have a profound and devastating effect. It is normal to experience some stress and to be upset by devastating incidents, but if these symptoms (such as experiencing flashbacks of the incident, sleep problems, feelings of detachment and disruption to normal life) persist over a long period of time, then an officer may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Recent disasters such as bombings and train crashes, have drawn attention and raised awareness of the fact that the police and other emergency services experience such devastating incidents. Preparation for the management of such disasters, physically, operationally and psychologically, is difficult. It is increasingly acknowledged that participation in such traumatic incidents requires a great deal of support from within the police organization.

Coping with stress can be attempted at an individual or organizational level. It is well known that stress impairs social, physical and psychological functioning and can result in errors, accidents and poor judgement. It may be experienced as feeling of tension, anxiety, irritability, poor concentration or sleeplessness, and can affect relationships with family, friends and colleagues. It depresses the immune system making people more susceptible to physical ill- nesses, such as heart disease, stomach ulcers, migraines and high blood pressure, and is associated with alcohol or drug dependency, an increased rate of marital breakdown and even suicide.

Research suggests that many police officers hide their symptoms, often with the cumulative effect of declining health and impaired job performance. Informal methods of coping, such as the black humour of the canteen culture, provide only short-term alleviation for many. As policing becomes increasingly stressful, there is greater interest in the topic of stress management and counselling for traumatic incidents. Training to prepare officers and maintain officers’ ability to manage stressful encounters is vital. Providing psychological support for officers, including specially designed programmes, is crucial.

Given the role the police play in society and the potentially stressful environment in which they will be placed, a thorough selection process for new recruits is essential to the maintenance and improvement of the service. Undesirable characteristics such as racist and sexist attitudes must be identified early in the selection process, so that applicants exhibiting such characteristics are not invited to join the police service.

The screening in and screening out of applicants is done via a variety of methods such as psychometric tests, interviews, roleplay, attendance to assessment centres, fitness tests and medical tests. There is some dispute as to whether performances on these tests can predict actual future performance or success as a police officer, which is not surprising considering how difficult it would be to measure police success, or even what characteristics would describe a good police officer in the first place. This is particularly significant given the wide range of roles police officers perform.

‘Faking good’ refers to successful candidates on some tests simply faking it in order to succeed. It is for reasons such as these that some people suggest that psychometric tests are not particularly useful in screening candidates in or out. Support for such testing has also declined over the years because it is difficult to agree on exactly what qualities would make a good police officer and, where there is any agreement, these traits are often very difficult to measure.

Selection deals not only with new recruits, but also experienced officers wanting to be promoted or move into more specialist areas, such as firearms, bomb disposal, public order or CID. Again the debate arises as to what the essential personal attributes required for success in these different roles might be and how they should be measured.

So what are suitable characteristics for police officers? Psychological research suggests traits such as good interpersonal skills, common sense, assertiveness, a good sense of humour, honesty, problem-solving and sensitivity – but these traits are difficult to quantify and predict. Many people suggest that there is a certain ‘type’ of person or personality that become police officers because particular types of people are attracted to this occupation. The training can also shape the recruits’ behaviour.

a police personality?

Researching the possible existence of the ‘police personality’ is important both in terms of who would be best suited to particular duties and who can cope with particular stressors. There is no conclusive evidence as to the origins of the police personality, but research evidence does suggest that such a ‘personality’ does exist and that the police do differ from other occupational groups. Traits such as authoritarianism, dogmatism, conservatism and cynicism appear to be present in policing samples, but whether applicants join the service with such a personality or whether it is the police training that shapes officers’ behaviour is difficult to determine. The evidence available suggests that it stems more from police training rather than the attitude of people when entering the police service. Several studies have demonstrated that authoritarianism, for example, develops as officers gained experience on the beat.

The reasons why people choose to join the police service and their initial motivations is an area that is under-researched. The reasons why some officers remain and thrive in the service for a full career while others drop out are not well understood at this time.

The demographic composition of the police service in many countries has changed considerably over the last thirty years, reflecting the change in composition of the population and wider changes in society. The police service, like many other organizations, is now actively involved with issues of equality and diversity. This requires that career opportunities and promotion are open to everyone within society regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, religious beliefs or disability. In this way the skills, knowledge and experience of the organization can be vastly improved and a better service offered to all.

Historically, women have not always been permitted to become involved in policing. In Britain women were first involved with policing activities during the First World War, largely in the role of volunteer work, and mainly involved in moral guidance and crime prevention patrols near munitions factories. By the Second World War women were involved in a wider range of duties, revolving around clerical and supportive duties and general housekeeping activities. After the Second World War women were employed to carry out what could be classed as ‘caring’ duties requiring sensitivity and good interpersonal skills, such as dealing with lost children and domestic violence. In 1975 the Sex Discrimination Act passed into law and women were entitled to full employment rights. By 2003, there were 25,390 female officers working in England and Wales. Women are now employed in every aspect of policing, including firearms, public order and CID, and the country now has several female chief constables (i.e. chiefs of police).

Police services in several countries have also been attempting to actively recruit citizens from ethnic minority groups: the aim being to provide a police service that is representative of the community it serves. However, targets may be particularly difficult to reach not only in terms of attracting new recruits to the force, but in maintaining them, as research shows that large numbers of the ethnic minority recruits leave within two years of joining. This may be in part due to perceptions of ‘institutional racism’, a label given to the police following racist disruptions in Britain. However, Lord Scarman’s Report of 1981 (following the Brixton Riots) and the Macpherson Report (following the murder of Stephen Lawrence, 1993) both acknowledge not only the problems of racism and racially motivated crime throughout Britain, but also the concept of institutional racism within the police service itself.

In his report Lord Scarman responded to the suggestion that ‘Britain is an institutionally racist society’:

If, by [institutionally racist] it is meant that it [Britain] is a society which knowingly, as a matter of policy, discriminates against black people, I reject the allegation. If, however, the suggestion being made is that practices may be adopted by public bodies as well as private individuals which are unwittingly discriminatory against black people, then this is an allegation which deserves serious consideration, and, where proved, swift remedy.

Some recent developments show evidence of commitment to provide equality and diversity to all prospective applicants including gay and lesbian citizens. In England and Wales the Gay Police Association was set up in 1990. Recently it has been working towards introducing a sexual orientation scheme, in order to monitor the sexual orientation of all its staff. Clearly not all staff may wish to divulge such personal information, but it does offer staff members the choice to do so if they wish. The Gay Police Association aims to support gay staff and to educate the police service and central government on issues connected with sexual orientation and policing. This includes policy development, the investigation of homophobic hate crime, victim care, and community liaison. It is estimated that there are over 5.8 million members of the public throughout England and Wales who are lesbian or gay. Having officers of diverse sexual orientation may improve the service provided to the community, especially for those who may feel marginalized or victimized because of their sexuality.