

AN ECO-ETHOLOGICAL EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS OF POLICE COMPLEX PTSD

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The purpose of this article is to present a snapshot of an application of what I have called the Eco-Ethological Existential Analysis. I will offer a case example of an officer suffering from Police and Public Safety Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PPS-CPTSD).

In over a decade of my life in policing and psychology I have observed scores of police and public safety officers forego treatment for traumatic loss, even in the face of multiple and intense experiences of traumatic events. Why this is so glaring may be in part answered by the loss hidden in trauma – what Dr. K. Doka coined disenfranchised loss.^{1,2} Disenfranchised loss is when a patient, who experiences many losses, does not understand that there are *losses unacknowledged/hidden from his/her conscious awareness*.

When losses are not accepted/sanctioned, openly acknowledged, socially supported, easily recognized, or publicly mourned, they become “disenfranchised grief.”^{1,2,7,8} Accumulation of disenfranchised losses often turns into complicated grief and trauma. I equate that phenomenon in police and public safety populations with Frankl’s existential vacuum.

The toxic result of the existential vacuum un-confronted in police officers is replete with depression, aggression, and addiction suffused with the fuel of experiences in the Tragic Triad of witnessing death, involvement in extreme pain, and experiencing rescuer’s guilt.^{3,4,5,6} Whilst the accumulation of loss is brewing, it is possible to deter what is developing toward a non-pathological human “cry for meaning” and change of attitude – that can change that loss into meaning in a human response to it. This struggle for health is what logotherapists have as a task in helping the officer-patient find meaning where it seems absent. The vacuum may be viewed as something that either can be shrunk by genuine meaning or enlarged by the ecological niche of defenses against traumatic loss and the ethological aggression and sexual addictions consequent to so many traumatized officers.

Often times the officer’s genuine expressions are ignored or minimized. Responding in a human way – expressing fear, sorrow, and pain – may be labeled with a stigma and followed by many repercussions.

The question we are left with is what to do when one is truly surrounded in a context (ecology) of violence, bearing witness to the depths of inhumanity one person can inflict on another. I have found Frankl’s life is



testimony, and I have made *Man's Search for Meaning* one of the core interventions with officers who feel no one can understand the war zones they have experienced. It often spurs interest in the therapy Frankl developed and the ability to synchronize human time, stuck in traumatic loss, with the transcendental space as an anchor to a meaningful world.

Although life, in its resplendent meaning, defies reduction, paradoxically it often *defies* that very reduction – Frankl offers clinicians a way to reverse that trend by replacing reduction with meaning. Taking heed of Frankl's perspective can serve as a corrective to the officer-patient's maladaptation to the events in the past – a self-imprisonment that keeps the officer-patient stuck in self-destructive patterns. Encounter is the ongoing process that changes the monologue of loss into the dialogue that leads to correction and redemption.

I approach losses in trauma as unique attempts at adaptation. Through the therapist's intervention, the individual officer-patient may achieve adaptations that are healthier. Helping the patient reach a level of healthier adaptation takes time, effort, and an attitude that demands repeated attention to what is ethological, ecological, and both unconscious and conscious.

Real and fantasized aspects of what the trauma means in each officer-patient's individual response includes building a psychological context. Clarifying that truth is therapeutic. It is also patriotic: No veteran of the military, police, medical corps, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians deserves to suffer the hell of loss unrequited.

Case Example: Don't Trouble Your Own House

Detective Sergeant B

Detective Sergeant B is a single, female, college graduate with a hyper-focused style of personality. Det. Sgt. B has been fair, yet tough minded, in her no-nonsense approach to investigations. She denies being bothered by politics, yet she describes in detail what she says is, "Internal, Peyton Place, Puzzle-Palace Politics." She remains enamored with an ideal performance that barely suffices covering over perfectionism in her standards. Recently, she has been feeling burnout after a series of traumas experienced vicariously with officers who were involved in off-duty incidents, ranging from minor violations to serious crimes. Unidentified traumatic loss emerged in a sting operation she supervised in which an officer was indicted for a serious corruption charge of drug dealing. She encountered a cold wall of indifference by former professional colleagues after this sting went down. Being called a "rat" and given the "cold shoulder" exacerbated her isolation. She grew to believe, "one can never know who is watching," and this disturbed her sense of whom to trust (no doubt including me).

A deep feeling of desperation to connect with me was countered by fear and distrust, at being vulnerable, misunderstood, and hated because she was an Internal Affairs Investigator. Her anger was betrayed by a plastic smile, that was disingenuous and plastered on. Considering the objective

reality of her position, her apparent paranoia and borderline tendencies were viewed as non-pathological. Stigma and fear of being labeled “crazy” blocks many officers from seeking needed therapy and support.

Eco-Ethological Existential Analysis

My approach was to acknowledge to Det. Sgt. B that I was interested in understanding her – not ever to betray her trust – tolerating her hostility. I silently took the attitude of therapist, maintaining my optimism and taking a persistent stance that she can learn to trust again through my consistent non-judgmental attitude. I stayed firm on a confrontation of why she needed my approval, working through to her core maladaptive belief in perfectionism (which produced her damnation of her own actions and others in her unit). Behind this perfectionism was an attempt to squelch real and disenfranchised human emotions related to traumatic loss. That loss was associated with her unmet demands for her own ideal performance as a ranking supervisor-investigator.

One objective was to help Det. Sgt. B realize that her position is not “being a rat” but rather one of critical importance. Her performance was ethical, not overly zealous, and with the internalized goal of being fair, which she had successfully achieved.

The loss of other uniform friends, because she joined Internal Affairs, is a very hard loss for her to accept. I do not suggest she change her detail; rather I get her to explore her attitude toward it. I relate to her fervor as supervisor and investigator – getting her to mobilize her tendency to hyper-focus into a resilient attitude toward the jibes sent her way.

A Brief Intervention

DR: It seems like this case really bothered you a lot. What comes to mind now?

Det. Sgt. B: Well I feel like he took an oath and betrayed it completely. He's no better than a perp. Then I just cannot believe he tried to hurt himself, that's the way of a cop turned bad, *as simple as that*. I don't really care. Not one iota. I'm not guilty, not one ounce! Not even a kernel of truth, he can accuse me of that, but he is the rat. He caused his own downfall.

[I respond to her guilt by clarifying her truth, that the officer did act criminally, and acknowledging her position, while getting her to own up to and express guilt so as to simultaneously disabuse herself of it.]

DR: It is interesting that you say you really don't care, not even one iota. Its seems like you very understandably feel incensed that he betrayed his oath. He put you in a position you hate to be in. Then he accuses you of being the rat. That's grating on you, huh? I can imagine it's painful.

Det. Sgt. B: It was not. I felt good that he got what he deserved.

[Her denial is strong. Passively accepting guilt is almost an invitation to clarify her guilt and help her to express it.]

DR: Yet you needed to prove, with evidence to me, and perhaps yourself, that he deserved what he got. If you felt he was so deserving, why repeat what he said unless it bothered you?

[I repeat the dynamic and cognitive intervention to get her to focus on her denial.]

Det. Sgt. B: Do you think I overdid it? Do you think I was over-zealous?

DR: You tell me. Did you overdo it in being overly zealous by discarding the fact he may have been totally innocent?

[This is risky, considering our relationship is somewhat ambivalent. I, however, test her ability to see the point that she did try to disconfirm his guilt which was blatant and which included collaboration with drug dealers.]

Det. Sgt. B: I know many times officers are unjustly accused by drug dealers and civilians with a gripe, a vendetta by others, for whatever reason. I am never over-zealous.

DR: So, if I got it right from your history, you personally have been involved in thwarting those who would tarnish a good officer's name?

Det. Sgt. B: Yeah. You don't know how many times, and no one seems to sing my tune.

DR: Ahh, so why do you react so harshly on yourself for doing your job? Clearly you know you are not overly zealous. Yet, you remain so unsure and so harsh on yourself. I am turning my large ear right in your direction to listen. I am listening intently, if you care to share with me what comes to your mind. (She smiles begrudgingly.)

[We go over the actual case and other associations emerge where she witnessed disregard of colleagues, civilians, and others.]

Eco-Ethological Existential Analysis

It appears that Det. Sgt. B suffered from a great deal of pain in her position of investigator, often not realizing that *her assignment is meaningful in finding officers who are in fact innocent of charges that are directed by vengeful criminal elements*. Det. Sgt. B has achieved getting many innocent officers exonerated and free of false accusations. This is inestimable in reducing harm to her peers. However, this achievement is also disenfranchised when we begin our work; yet it is redeemable.

The point here is that, in the eco-ethological approach to loss in trauma, the disenfranchised courage and resilience is made conscious and redeemed. One of the positive outcomes of our work was Det. Sgt. B's choice to present to her superiors the suggestion that exacting equal prosecution of those individuals who have targeted public servants with false allegations is a stance she can present internally with more credibility than if she choose to leave and be part of a different Command. Her keen debating and polemical views are thus repositioned from sour grapes to humble raisins: choice morsels that are shaped by her existential struggles with justice, not in the abstract, but in the complex crucible of field experience.

A significant result that emerged from our work was her choice to pursue her previously disowned dream to be an attorney. In the course of our work she recognized the only obstacle to becoming a law school candidate was her own minimization of her considerable ability as an investigator.

Eliciting the Trauma

The trauma of witnessing the arrested officer crying and in anguish was elicited in the following abridged piece.

[While her memories emerged, her expression turned ashen and sullen, tears started to well in her eyes as she fought letting them out. My tears were less noticeable.]

DR: It seems like you are holding back what you are really wanting to let out. (Silent and waiting till she is ready to express what is on her mind.)

Det. Sgt. B: I felt terrible that I had to lock him up. He was young and I felt this was serious. He was going to do time. My other cases were minor in comparison – DWI first offence, or other minor offenses – the officer usually had a loss of days, mandatory counseling, referred to early intervention unit, or alcohol detoxification through the counseling unit.

Det. Sgt. B: I supervised this sting operation. I mean, I shouldn't be feeling sad – he is a perp, right? I mean, you were a cop too, you know the deal. Of course you probably think I am a rat too?

[I do not respond to enlisting me for confirmation, but rather I normalize her feelings of distress.]

DR: Why shouldn't you feel as you feel, including sadness?

Det. Sgt. B: (Teary eyed and crying) I can't think of him that way because he is a rogue cop, a degenerate, he went to the other side, including drugs. I mean the way he looked at me...

DR: Does that make him a totally evil person, although his actions – we can agree – were evil by supporting the drug dealers who are involved in hurting brother and sister officers?

Det. Sgt. B: I can't think of him that way because then I can botch the investigation. It's weakness Doc, you have a notorious reputation to put almost any member of the service on the couch.

DR: Is that so that you can't feel the way *you really do*? Tell me again.

Det. Sgt. B: Oh, I really hate you.

DR: I'll take that risk – it seems he made a bad mistake that will cost him his career, his freedom for a while – and yet he still is a fellow human being. You feel sorrow. Is that a crime?

Det. Sgt. B: I guess not. But it's hard to keep on thinking of him as a human being even though he acted that way. It's easy for you, like I said, you put everyone on the couch.

[I do not negate her statement because it has some truth in it. I use it to bring some humor into our dialogue and to encourage her to think of me in human terms in our relationship. I then reassess her thoughts.]

DR: It seems like the difference is that, while I find some peoples' behaviors patently absurd at times, to downright obnoxious, I work hard at not damning anyone as a whole person. Why? Because I will invariably lose the fact of my own humanity the moment I start to consume myself in the hateful actions I witness and encounter at times.

Det. Sgt. B: You're a shrink. It's easy for you with all that training.

DR: Not easy at all. It seems like life as a cop and sergeant for me involved losses, some I can never replace. The challenge with my losses, although different, parallels yours. The challenge is our personal attitude, choice, and responsibility toward the tragedy our lives traverse. My choice is different from your exact choice, but they have similar components. I have a choice of my attitudes, responsibility, what to take on, and what to let go.

[While I do not disclose the specific losses in my personal life, I equally let her know I, too, had to work hard at dealing with my experiences of trauma and loss, and I am no different as a fully human and alive person than she is. It is a choice I make that works in helping Det. Sgt. B put her situation and her existential freedom in perspective. It helps her in her own existential choices and responsibility where meaning is left to be cultivated and redeemed in her attitudinal changes toward loss – re-franchised for the hard work ahead in challenging experiences left to unfurl.]

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