

**Death Work:
Police, Trauma, and the
Psychology of Survival**

Vincent E. Henry

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Lyrics to “Kaatskill Serenade” by David Bromberg. Published by Sweet Jelly Roll Music.
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*For Lydia, my best secret weapon,
who was there
with a push or a pull every step of the way
and taught me to believe in myself.*

*For my late father, Lieutenant James P. Henry,
and my brother-in-law, Sergeant Tom Callahan
—we three share a shield, and more—
and my partner, Detective Mike Dziuk,
who each taught me what it means to be a good cop.*

*And for the collaborators,
who taught me about heroism, sacrifice, and honor.*

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Foreword

Robert Jay Lifton

Truly innovative work causes one to ask: why didn't someone think of that before? The response has to do both with the illumination the work provides and its stark appropriateness—its necessity—for the world we live in. With Vincent Henry's *Death Work*, that appropriateness and necessity became painfully evident with the attacks of 9/11. From that moment, Henry's work took on an eerie practicality, as he movingly describes in the last chapter of this book.

Death Work is about the police officer (or in the more affectionate intra-departmental usage, “cop”) as survivor—as one for whom death is a presence in everyday work. The special value of Henry's study derives from his interview method. Rather than make abstract assumptions or simply summarize others' findings, Henry went out and talked to his fellow cops—not simply as a friendly insider (though he was surely that) but as a trained psychological interviewer who could find order and meaning in the riveting words of those he talked to.

Henry's work sustains an exquisite balance between the highly specific and the universal. Nothing could be more specific, more concrete, than the death-haunted experiences of police officers—whether taking the form of disturbing corpses, fallen partners, or their own near demise. But the significance of his findings extends to all who work in what historian Michael Lesy has called the “forbidden zone” or “zone of death”—a zone that envelops not only police officers but firefighters and rescue workers of all kinds, military personnel, doctors and health workers (especially in hospices), undertakers, prison staff on “death row,” and those working in meatpacking or “slaughterhouse” industries.

Ultimately—and most important—Henry is exploring nothing less than the larger struggle with dying and killing. One can view the police officers he interviewed as “point men”—a kind of advance guard—in that struggle. Their encounters with especially grotesque forms of death challenge anyone's claim to mastery of this insoluble human dilemma.

Yet Henry's research, as much as any I have come upon, demonstrates impressive forms of survivor resilience and illumination. With support of various kinds, men and women can not only weather that extreme trauma but become "better cops." Henry is scrupulous when invoking my own work in some of these areas and has extended and transformed that work by means of his original findings and observations.

This is especially true of his exploration of the rookie's *rite de passage* in becoming a police officer, his need to in some way confront death and make use of a form of selective professional numbing. Henry vividly conveys the inner division that enables the police officer to suppress his emotions in the service of demanding professional tasks. The various elements that enable him to do that—mentorship from experienced professionals, gradual routinization, gallows humor—reminded me of parallel experiences I'd had many years ago as a medical student and young doctor confronted with a corpse to dissect and the task of assisting surgeons who were cutting up live human beings. In this process one evolves one's professional identity and initiates a lifelong struggle to balance numbing and feeling, to both limit intrusive emotions and hold onto one's humanity. We are both moved and enlightened by Henry's depiction of his own experience of this struggle in connection with his herculean actions following 9/11.

Indeed, with 9/11 this overall study took on a terrible immediacy. Meant originally as a probing of psychological reactions of police officers under ordinary conditions—that is, ordinary conditions of a "forbidden zone"—it was suddenly converted by 9/11 into a psychological and ethical baseline for the work of all service professions in that disaster. The psychology of the survivor was painfully at issue for victims and potential victims, and for all who offered help of any kind.

When Henry reflected on his own survivor psychology and his capacity to make constructive use of it in his personal and professional plunge into the disaster, he was calling forth all he had learned from his fellow cops over the course of his study. One wishes that Americans in general, and especially our leaders, were able to experience similar survivor wisdom in relation to 9/11.

This book should become a classic, for its contribution to the most humane form of police work and to all work in the "forbidden zone," and for what it tells us more broadly about the hard-earned psychological possibilities of survivors.

Acknowledgments

One of the subtle themes that emerges in this book, and one that I hope to take up in subsequent research, is the tremendously important role mentors play in a cop's personal and professional development. Certainly the same can be said of the importance of mentors in a scholar's academic development. In line with the formative-symbolic paradigm that is the theoretical underpinning of this study, we can see that in conveying their own hard-earned life experiences and in guiding us toward a more complete understanding of ourselves and the world around us, mentors provide the important images that shape our sense of self and ultimately our understanding of the world. Because they influence our lives so profoundly, and because they so generously permit us to share in their experience, a special sense of connection exists between mentors and protégés. This section represents my opportunity to acknowledge and say thanks to those who mentored me professionally and academically throughout the course of my dual careers.

No project as involved and complex as this could be undertaken without the guidance and assistance of a great many people, all of whom are, in one way or another, my mentors. It is not possible to list the names and describe the contributions made by every individual who participated in this project in one way or another—the identities of the collaborators who so generously shared their time and their experiences to make this book possible, for example, must remain confidential. The collaborators know who they are, and hopefully they know how much I admire and respect them and how much I appreciate the opportunity to bear witness to their struggles. If this research has an impact, it will be more to their credit than mine.

Certain people's contributions deserve special mention, and among them are Police Commissioner William J. Bratton and Deputy Commissioner Mike Farrell, who encouraged this project from the beginning and did a great deal to support

my research. Importantly, they recognized the difficult psychological struggles cops have around death and were committed to helping them. Inspector Joe Lovelock made a tremendous impact on my understanding of police history, management, and culture over the seven years I was privileged to work with him, and he spent many hours listening to my ruminations and offering insights as I struggled with this project. He also kept pushing me to complete the project during those too-frequent periods when my formative process seemed to crawl to a halt. Director James O’Keefe and Chief Demosthenes Long of the Police Academy were also instrumental in helping to keep me on track to bring this project to fruition.

A great many cops—too many to mention—also share in the credit for this book. They include the great cops who taught me the Job when I was a rookie, my partners throughout the years, and the many cops who served as a sounding board for the issues that are the subject of this research. The insights they shared helped me to refine my thoughts and to appreciate the many situational variables that shape cops’ experience of police work and especially of death events. I must also thank those who read portions of the dissertation and offered cogent comments that contributed to its objectivity and validity.

On the academic side, I must also thank Professors James Levine and Dorothy Bracey of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who offered important suggestions and encouraged me to pursue these explorations. Their time, effort, patience, generosity, and thoughtfulness mean a great deal to me, and their contribution was considerable.

Any student is truly fortunate if at least once in his academic career he encounters a teacher who exposes him to a set of ideas and principles that affect him deeply and change the way he looks at the world. The student is doubly fortunate when that teacher takes him under his wing to further guide the development of his thought and his understanding. I was that fortunate when I was exposed to Robert Jay Lifton, his formative-symbolic paradigm, and especially his ideas about the psychology of survival. Although some of the nebulous ideas and many of the elementary observations that ultimately led to this research had been with me for some time, it was when I took a course with Dr. Lifton—a course entitled “Victims, Survivors, and Perpetrators: The Lessons of Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and Vietnam”—that they really began to coalesce in a meaningful way. The formative-symbolic paradigm and the psychology of survival provided the necessary framework for me to understand some of my own police experiences and feelings around death and to understand some of the attitudes and behaviors I had observed in other cops. Being the kind of teacher he is, Dr. Lifton encouraged me to further develop these ideas, suggesting they could make an important contribution to the understanding of police as well as to the psychology of survival.

With the support, motivation, guidance, and direction Dr. Lifton continually provided over the years, and with a great deal of additional observation and research, my indistinct concepts took on greater sophistication and meaning and ultimately became the basis for this research. Notwithstanding the demands of his own tremendously busy schedule and his own academic explorations, Dr. Lifton always found the time to discuss issues of theory and method, to share his knowl-

edge and insight, and to continually encourage my development as a scholar. He did so with great kindness, great patience, and a great deal of tolerance for a student whose own busy professional life often presented obstacles to the timely completion of research objectives.

One of the things Dr. Lifton taught me about is the nature of the relationship between a mentor and student. He often speaks of his relationship with his own mentor, Erik Erikson, and of the important ways Erikson shaped his thought and his theoretical perspective, and one of the things Dr. Lifton impressed upon me is the responsibilities the mentor and the protégé have toward each other. It is the responsibility of the mentor to provide intellectual guidance, support, and structure and to honestly impart his wisdom and knowledge so that the student grows and develops as a scholar in his own right. It is the protégé's responsibility, though, to challenge the bounds of the mentor's paradigm and his body of work, and in doing so to expand upon it.

A great many others deserve special mention for their contributions. Professor Albert R. Roberts of Rutgers University has been a tremendous friend, supporter, and mentor through the years, and I have valued the opportunity to work with him on other projects as much as I value his ongoing scholarly and practical advice. An outstanding and very insightful scholar, he recognized the potential value this research might hold for clinicians, for police, and for those interested in understanding a rarely glimpsed but important area of police psychology. He championed the research, bringing it to the attention of Joan Bossert at Oxford University Press. Working with Joan Bossert and her enthusiastic and committed staff, especially my editor Maura Roessner and production editor Stacey Hamilton, has truly been a pleasure. I was made to feel very much a part of the editing and production processes, and Joan, Maura, and Stacey were exceptionally tolerant of delays as I fiddled with the manuscript.

Lucy Silva of the Center on Violence and Human Survival was always affable and obliging as she juggled schedules to maintain the lines of communication with Robert Jay Lifton. Valuable insights provided by John Kleinig, Barbara Price, and Debbie Baskin helped prepare me to undertake this project, and others who helped mold my intellectual and professional development include Pat Weller, Harvey Kushner, Pat Ryan, Aaron H. Rosenthal, Arch Harrison, and Keith Bryett. I owe a special thanks to David Bromberg, a sensitive and caring man who generously gave permission to quote his song "Kaatskill Serenade." Over the years I've also benefited greatly from the kindness and generosity of Elaine Niederhoffer and Victor Niederhoffer. For their gestures of support and interest during a very difficult time I will be eternally grateful.

My spouse and life partner Lydia Staiano did so much more than just put up with me over the years this research took shape: as in every other area of my life, she provided the unremitting love, support, and encouragement that facilitated my intellectual growth. She watched this research take shape from the very beginning, unselfishly putting aside her own needs for the sake of the project, and in more ways than I can relate she nurtured its development as much as she nurtures my evolving sense of self. Lydia is the kindest, gentlest, and wisest person I've ever known, and she believed in this project almost as much as she believes in

me. Her love sustains me and defines me, and without her this book would never have happened.

Finally, I have to thank Police Officer James Whittington, who was murdered in the line of duty on October 30, 1982. We only met once, and too briefly, but a part of me was buried with him and I am the better for it. His sacrifice and that of his family became a large part of my own survivor mission. Thanks, Panama.

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Introduction

The Death and Policing Nexus

This book is about the psychological struggles and transformations urban police officers experience as the result of their routine work-related exposures to the deaths of others, as well as from more profound and personally consequential encounters with their own mortality. Psychological struggles and transformations around encounters with death are significant concerns in all human psychology, but they are particularly salient in the context of contemporary urban policing. Urban police officers can have frequent encounters with the deaths of others, and their death confrontations can take place across a broad range of circumstances and situations. Additionally, some police officers experience death encounters of an entirely different and infinitely more consequential kind: they face mortal combat situations that pose an objectively credible threat to their survival, they participate in the taking of a human life in the line of duty, or they witness the line-of-duty death of a fellow officer but manage to remain alive.

Every human encounter with the death of another person is to some extent a painful reminder of one's own mortality, and every death encounter entails some degree of psychological trauma that results in subtle or profound psychological transformation. Police death encounters, though, differ from more "ordinary" human encounters with death because police work is permeated with an overarching perception of danger—to a far greater extent than in other occupations, contemporary urban police officers perceive in their work the realistic and continual potential for meeting their own demise in the course of their professional duties. In conjunction with the frequency of their death encounters, the wide range of circumstances and situations in which the death encounters can occur, and a variety of other factors intrinsic to police work, this perceived potential for a highly personalized death encounter sets the police officer's experience of death events apart from "ordinary" death experiences, and it sets the experience apart from exposures in

other death-work occupations as well. Exposure to death is a highly relevant and influential, if infrequently recognized, variable in police psychology.

This book is based on research that draws its underlying theoretical assumptions and principles primarily from Robert Jay Lifton's psychoformative paradigm and the "psychology of survival" perspective the paradigm subsumes. This paradigm is organized around psychological principles of death and the continuity of life, and it stresses the importance of images in man's vitalizing quest for ongoing symbolization.¹ The psychology of survival deals with the lasting intra-psychic impact or imprint of an encounter with death (either the death of another person or a confrontation with one's own mortality), and with the universal psychological tendencies that inevitably result from that encounter. A survivor is one who has come in close contact with death in some bodily or psychic fashion and has remained alive (Lifton, 1967a, p. 479). This fundamental framework is supplemented and complemented by insights and data drawn from a fairly broad body of empirical and qualitative research on the psychology and sociology of death encounters and on the psychology and sociology of police officers. A fairly eclectic mix of theory, research, and data was employed in this research study in order to adapt the psychology of survival and locate it within a conceptual framework reflecting the practical realities of contemporary urban policing. The specific interview and field observation techniques used to collect the data and the theoretical assumptions used to analyze them are described in greater depth in subsequent chapters. Both the method of data collection and the analytical framework generally conform to the method Lifton used in his studies of death-related psychic trauma and the adaptive processes that accompany death encounters.

To explore the contemporary urban police officer's exposures to death and the kind of psychological transformations that result from them, we will examine the psychological and social processes that shape the way officers experience and make meaning of their world, including its death encounters. We will explore the psychological sequelae of police death encounters, distinguishing the effect of relatively routine job-related death encounters with the deaths of others from the more profound and personally consequential transformations that result from actually surviving or witnessing firsthand a life-or-death mortal combat situation. More specifically, we will examine how four different task environments or types of assignment in policing—those of the rookie police officer, patrol sergeant, homicide detective, and crime scene technician—determine the conditions of death exposure and shape officers' individual and collective responses to them. We will also examine how these fairly routine exposures to the deaths of others differ from the extraordinary experiences of a fifth group: those who survived mortal combat, witnessed the death of a fellow officer, or violently took a life in the performance of duty. We will see how these routine and extraordinary death encounters have a powerful impact not only on the officers who personally experience them, but also on the police culture as a whole.

This book utilizes a "shared themes" approach to illuminate how different types of exposures in different task environments shape officers and their subculture. Because so many individual and situational variables can be present or absent in a given death encounter, and because each of these variables can have

different levels of meaning to different officers, every officer experiences a death encounter somewhat differently. Rather than focusing entirely upon a single individual's unique and subjective reaction to particular death events—an approach typically used in case study research—the shared themes approach looks for commonalities in the experience of numerous similarly situated individuals who have gone through comparable or analogous events. The shared themes approach, which is often used in psychohistorical research, allows us to delve into a particular task environment and the kinds of death exposures it typically presents and to observe and analyze the common themes of experience among officers operating in that environment. Although it is firmly rooted in subjective experience, the shared themes approach imparts an important element of objectivity to the research.

Psychology has long recognized that virtually all human encounters with death are potent reminders of our own mortality that entail important psychological consequences. Whether death encounters involve casual exposures to the deaths of others or are more extreme and more personally meaningful encounters involving the realistic potential for one's own extinction, they are emotionally difficult events from which some degree of emotional or psychological trauma is almost certain to accrue. Moreover, the individual's subjective experience of the death encounter may be magnified or diminished by the presence or absence of myriad individual, social, cultural, and contextual factors and variables. Given the multiplicity of forms, situations, causes, and circumstances of death that may occur in a cosmopolitan urban environment, and in light of the fact that urban police officers attend virtually every death scene occurring outside a medical facility, police encounters with death can be conceptualized as occurring along a continuum of psychological significance. This continuum of significance ranges from brief and relatively impersonal encounters with the deaths of strangers through the most profound encounters that involve the realistic prospect of the officer's own demise. By dint of their overlapping and at times conflicting social roles as social service providers, first responders to violent crimes and medical emergencies, law enforcers, and criminal investigators, urban police officers encounter death in virtually all its myriad forms. Each of these roles and situations entails a specific array of prescribed tasks and duties that further influence the type and quality of exposure. The seasoned patrol officer who responds to a death scene at which an elderly person died in his sleep from natural causes, for example, is likely to have a very different subjective experience of the event and will perform entirely different tasks than a novice officer who responds to his first fatal traffic accident or a veteran detective who is called to investigate a particularly gory multiple homicide in which one or more victims is a child.

To explore this continuum of death-related experience and its psychological impact on officers, I carried out field observations and conducted structured interviews with New York City Police Department officers in the four nominal categories or task environments mentioned above. For the most part, officers in these four task environments attend the deaths of strangers, and so their death encounters are somewhat routine and fairly impersonal. I also interviewed a number of