

Facing Wreckage: A Phenomenological Study on Traffic Investigators' Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Road traffic accidents remain a significant public safety concern, placing traffic investigators at the forefront of accident response and investigation. This study explored the lived experiences of traffic investigators in the aftermath of road traffic incidents, using a qualitative phenomenological approach grounded in the work of Max van Manen. The participants were six (6) active-duty police officers assigned as traffic investigators in selected municipal police stations in Bukidnon Province, Philippines, each with at least four years of investigative experience. Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide and analyzed using Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological method. The findings revealed five essential themes: embodied strain and heightened vigilance; navigating chaotic and unpredictable accident spaces; temporal tension between urgency and prolonged attention; balancing professional duty and human compassion; and interpreting evidence through material objects. These themes indicate that traffic investigators experience their work as physically demanding, emotionally challenging, and cognitively complex, requiring vigilance, adaptability, and professional discipline. Despite these challenges, investigators find meaning through duty and public service. The study highlights the need for institutional support, enhanced training, and stress management to sustain investigator well-being and effectiveness in road safety and accident response. It is recommended that law enforcement agencies strengthen training and support systems to better equip traffic investigators in managing both operational demands and psychological stress.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traffic investigation plays a vital role in maintaining public safety and ensuring accountability following road crash incidents. Traffic investigators are responsible for documenting, analyzing, and interpreting crash scenes, placing them at the forefront of traumatic, highly stressful situations (Syahputra et al., 2024). Their responsibilities include examining accident sites, collecting evidence, interviewing witnesses, and coordinating with various stakeholders to determine the causes and circumstances of road crashes. Because these incidents often involve severe injuries or fatalities, investigators must perform their duties with technical competence while maintaining emotional composure and professional judgment under pressure (Lemaire & Wallace, 2020). Although their work is often conducted behind the scenes, traffic investigators

carry a substantial emotional and psychological burden associated with vehicular tragedies.

Globally, studies have highlighted the demanding nature of investigative work among law enforcement personnel, particularly those exposed to traumatic events and high-stress environments. Traffic investigators frequently encounter chaotic accident scenes, distressed victims, grieving families, and time-sensitive investigative responsibilities. These circumstances require them to balance investigative accuracy with urgent response demands while managing emotional stress and operational pressure (Violanti et al., 2022; Stogner et al., 2023; Dautovich et al., 2023). Continuous exposure to such situations can affect investigators' mental well-being, potentially leading to fatigue, emotional strain, and occupational stress. Despite these challenges, traffic

investigators remain essential in ensuring the accurate documentation of accidents and supporting the administration of justice.

In the Philippines, road traffic accidents continue to pose a significant public safety concern. Rapid urbanization, increasing vehicle ownership, limited road infrastructure, and unsafe driving behaviors contribute to the growing number of road crash incidents across the country (Sigua et al., 2023; Villa-Buena, 2024). According to Santos (2022), thousands of traffic-related injuries and fatalities are reported annually, many of which require detailed investigation by police traffic units. These cases often involve complex circumstances, including multiple vehicles, hazardous road conditions, and environmental factors. As a result, traffic investigators must navigate demanding operational environments while ensuring thorough, objective investigations (Tus, 2023; Malang et al., 2023).

Within Region X, particularly in Bukidnon Province, traffic investigators face additional challenges due to geographic conditions, limited logistical resources, and the increasing frequency of road crash incidents. Rural and semi-urban areas often present unique risks, including hazardous road conditions, limited emergency response infrastructure, and longer response times, which complicate accident investigations (Sigua et al., 2023; Villa-Buena, 2024). These conditions expose investigators to complex cases involving severe injuries, fatalities, and environmental hazards. As a result, traffic investigators must operate in demanding environments that require adaptability, technical competence, and situational awareness.

Despite the crucial role of traffic investigators, they often work under challenging conditions characterized by understaffing, limited training opportunities, and inadequate psychological support (Ramos et al., 2022; Tus, 2023). Continuous exposure to traumatic events such as fatal crashes and severely injured victims' places significant emotional and psychological strain on investigators. Studies have shown that prolonged exposure to such stressors may lead to burnout, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms among law enforcement personnel (Garcia & Javier, 2024; Medina et al., 2023). These occupational pressures may also affect the quality of investigative work and the overall well-being of officers responsible for traffic crash investigations.

Although numerous studies have examined occupational stress among police officers, most research focuses on general policing duties such as criminal investigations, anti-drug operations, and patrol activities. Recent literature indicates that

research on police stress remains concentrated on broad law enforcement roles rather than specialized functions (Drew, 2024; Gavin et al., 2025). Limited scholarly attention has been given to traffic investigators, despite evidence that they are frequently exposed to traumatic incidents, high workload, and psychological strain (Ramos-Galarza et al., 2025; Yadav et al., 2023). Furthermore, existing studies highlight that the lived experiences of traffic investigators remain underexplored, particularly in localized contexts such as developing regions or specific jurisdictions (Behboudi et al., 2024). This gap underscores the need for research examining how traffic investigators interpret and manage the emotional, psychological, and operational demands of their work, especially in the Philippine context.

In response to this gap, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of traffic investigators in handling road crash incidents. Specifically, it seeks to understand the psychological, emotional, and operational challenges investigators face and the coping mechanisms they use while performing their duties. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study provides an in-depth understanding of how traffic investigators interpret their experiences and manage the demands associated with accident investigations.

This study is significant because it contributes to a deeper understanding of the realities traffic investigators face in their professional roles. The findings may provide valuable insights for law enforcement agencies, particularly the Philippine National Police (PNP), in developing training programs, stress management initiatives, and institutional support systems that enhance investigators' well-being and performance. Moreover, the study may assist policymakers and local government units in strengthening road safety programs and improving coordination among agencies involved in traffic management and accident investigation. Finally, this research may serve as a reference for future scholars interested in examining occupational stress, trauma exposure, and resilience among law enforcement personnel in high-risk professional environments.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach using an interpretive phenomenological design. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence and meaning of individuals lived experiences as perceived from their own perspectives (Van Manen, 2014). Specifically, the study adopted interpretive phenomenology, as outlined by Max van Manen,

which emphasizes the interpretation and description of how individuals experience and make sense of events in their everyday contexts. This approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to explore the lived experiences of traffic investigators who respond to road crash incidents and to understand how they interpret the emotional, psychological, and professional challenges associated with their duties. Through this method, the study provides an in-depth examination of how investigators understand their roles, process traumatic accident scenes, and manage the demands of accident investigation. By focusing on participants' narratives and interpretations, the phenomenological approach highlights the human dimension of traffic investigation, offering deeper insight into the realities of law enforcement work that are often overlooked in procedural or technical descriptions of accident investigations.

This setting of this study was at the selected municipal police stations across the Province of Bukidnon, Philippines. Bukidnon is a landlocked province in Northern Mindanao, characterized by mountainous terrain, extensive agricultural lands, and a network of national highways and local roads connecting its municipalities and major cities. Many of these roads pass through steep, zigzagging, and elevated areas, posing significant risks to motorists and complicating traffic accident investigations. Traffic investigators assigned to municipal police stations in the province are frequently responsible for responding to road crash incidents occurring in these diverse and challenging road environments.

Despite a reported decrease in overall traffic accidents from 2015 to 2019, several local government units (LGUs) in Bukidnon, including Valencia City, remain identified as high-risk areas for road crashes (Province of Bukidnon, 2025). Between 2020 and 2025, the province experienced numerous serious traffic incidents involving motorcycle collisions, pedestrian accidents, vehicular crashes, and environmental hazards such as floods and landslides (Tribune, 2024; GMA Network, 2024, 2025; Mindanews, 2020; DSWD, 2024). These recurring incidents indicate that traffic-related risks persist despite ongoing safety measures and enforcement efforts.

The selection of this setting was intentional, as traffic investigators at municipal police stations across Bukidnon regularly respond to road crash incidents in complex geographic and environmental conditions. These circumstances provide a relevant context for exploring the lived experiences of traffic investigators

as they navigate the operational, emotional, and investigative challenges of road traffic incidents.

The participants in this study were six (6) traffic investigators selected from various municipal police stations in the Province of Bukidnon, Philippines. One (1) traffic investigator was selected from each participating municipal police station to ensure fair representation and capture diverse experiences from across the province. Selecting a small number of participants is consistent with phenomenological research, which aims to provide in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify and recruit individuals with direct experience in traffic accident investigations. This sampling method enabled the researcher to select participants who could provide rich, relevant information about the phenomenon under investigation.

To qualify for participation in the study, the participants met the following inclusion criteria: (1) they were active-duty police officers, (2) currently assigned as traffic investigators, (3) had at least four years of experience in traffic investigation, and (4) were willing to participate voluntarily in the study.

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. This instrument was developed based on a review of related literature on stress, coping, and the lived experiences of traffic investigators. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow participants to describe their experiences in depth while giving the researcher the flexibility to probe further into significant responses. This approach is particularly appropriate for phenomenological studies, as it helps capture participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences.

The interview guide consisted of three main parts. The first part included introductory questions related to the participant's background, such as years of service and current assignment as a traffic investigator. The second part focused on the participants' experiences in responding to road crash incidents, including the challenges and stressful situations they encounter in their daily duties. The third part explored the participants' coping mechanisms, emotional experiences, and suggestions for improving organizational support for traffic investigators. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to express their perspectives and experiences in their own words.

To ensure the instrument's validity and appropriateness, the interview guide was reviewed by

experts in research and criminal justice. Their feedback was used to improve the clarity, sequencing, and relevance of the interview questions.

Ethical Considerations:

Before conducting the study, the researcher obtained the necessary permits and approvals from relevant authorities and institutional bodies. These included the Technical Review of the Research Proposal, the Proposal Review Assessment, approval from the Ethics Review Committee for the research protocol, and the evaluation of the Informed Consent Form. These approvals ensured that the study complied with established ethical standards in conducting research involving human participants.

Prior to participation, each respondent was provided with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as participants. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they had the right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Participants were assured that all information gathered during the interviews would be used solely for academic and research purposes. The researcher emphasized that participants' identities would remain confidential and that their responses would be treated with strict confidentiality.

To protect participants' anonymity, coded identifiers were used instead of real names in the documentation and analysis of data. All sensitive information obtained during the study was handled with utmost confidentiality, and appropriate measures were implemented to safeguard the privacy and anonymity of the participants throughout the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of traffic investigators in responding to road traffic incidents. Using the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach of Max van Manen (1990), the interview transcripts were analyzed with holistic, selective, and detailed reading strategies to uncover the significant meanings embedded in the participants' experiences. The analysis generated several themes that describe how traffic investigators confront accident scenes, manage their emotional and professional responsibilities, and sustain their commitment to public service despite the challenges of their work. Each theme is presented with supporting verbatim statements from participants and is discussed in relation to the existing literature and the study's theoretical framework.

Embodied Strain and Heightened Vigilance in Traffic Investigation

Grounded in van Manen's (1990) lifeworld perspective, this theme captures how traffic investigators experience their bodies as sites of physical exhaustion, tension, and physiological activation while responding to traffic wreckage. Their narratives reveal that the body does not merely function as a tool for investigation but becomes an active medium of experience, manifesting stress through fatigue, heightened alertness, muscle tension, and continuous vigilance in demanding environments, which are commonly reported among law enforcement personnel exposed to critical incidents (Violanti et al., 2022; Stogner et al., 2023). These embodied responses reflect the immediate pressures of accident scenes, where investigators must remain attentive, responsive, and in control despite physically and emotionally taxing conditions (Ramos-Galarza et al., 2025). At the same time, the body becomes a space of regulation and resilience, as investigators consciously manage their reactions through discipline, composure, and professional control, highlighting the tension between bodily vulnerability and sustained vigilance in high-risk occupations (Dautovich et al., 2023; Aligato & Maglangit, 2024).

As cited by Participant 1, the experience of traffic investigation involves enduring fatigue and stress while maintaining a strong sense of dedication and control through a "mind-over-body" mindset. Participant 2 similarly emphasized that heightened alertness and tension are consistently present, particularly when arriving at accident scenes and gathering evidence to avoid overlooking critical details. Participant 3 also noted physical stress and tension, especially in serious accidents, while Participant 4 highlighted that such incidents require constant alertness and contribute to increased stress levels. In addition, Participant 5 described feeling both alert and tense in chaotic, injury-related situations, whereas Participant 6 noted specific bodily reactions, such as a racing heartbeat and muscle tension, triggered by urgency and pressure. These insights show that traffic investigators consistently experience their roles through heightened physical and emotional states, where vigilance and strain are inseparable from their investigative responsibilities. The following responses support these:

"Being a traffic investigator is not an easy job; fatigue and stress are normal, but with a mind-over-body mindset and dedication to public service, I keep moving forward." (P1)

"My stress and tension are always high, especially when I arrive at the scene... I feel alert, especially

when gathering evidence, in case something is overlooked.” (P2)

“I often feel physical stress and tension, especially in a serious accident.” (P3)

“When incidents are serious, they require alertness and often create stress.” (P4)

“During traffic investigations, I often feel alert and sometimes tense, especially when the scene is chaotic or involves serious injuries.” (P5)

“I notice physical signs, such as a racing heartbeat or tense muscles, due to stress and urgency.” (P6)

The participants' responses indicate that traffic investigators experience their roles as physically and psychologically demanding, with stress and vigilance constant components of their daily duties. The narratives reveal that fatigue, tension, and heightened alertness are not occasional reactions but recurring conditions that accompany the process of accident investigation. Participants consistently described how their bodies respond to the demands of the situation, particularly in high-risk and emotionally intense scenarios involving serious injuries or chaotic environments. These experiences suggest that investigation requires continuous monitoring of both the environment and one's own physical and emotional state to ensure critical details are not missed. The findings highlight that vigilance is sustained by both cognitive focus and bodily awareness, reinforcing the idea that effective investigation relies on integrating mental and physical engagement.

From a phenomenological perspective, this theme reflects the lived body (corporeality) of traffic investigators, where the body becomes the primary site through which experience is felt, interpreted, and managed (van Manen, 1990). The participants' accounts suggest that physical responses such as tension, fatigue, and heightened alertness are integral to their professional roles, consistent with studies showing that law enforcement personnel experience stress as both physiological and occupational demands (Violanti et al., 2022; Stogner et al., 2023). This demonstrates that their experiences are embodied, as investigators continuously regulate their physical and emotional states to maintain composure and effectiveness in high-pressure environments (Dautovich et al., 2023). At the same time, the tension between bodily strain and professional control highlights how vulnerability is managed through discipline and resilience, reinforcing the role of embodied awareness in sustaining vigilance and performance (Aligato & Maglangit, 2024).

The results are supported by recent studies indicating that law enforcement officers frequently experience significant physical and psychological strain due to the demanding nature of their work. Marlatte et al. (2025) found that police officers exhibit heightened physiological responses, such as increased heart rate and stress levels, when exposed to critical incidents, emphasizing the embodied nature of stress in policing. Similarly, Balynska et al. (2024) reported that continuous exposure to high-risk and unpredictable situations contributes to chronic fatigue, tension, and psychological strain among police personnel. Furthermore, Violanti et al. (2021) highlighted that sustained vigilance and operational demands in law enforcement are closely associated with both physical exhaustion and mental stress. These studies support the participants' experiences, demonstrating that embodied strain and heightened vigilance are fundamental aspects of police work, particularly in high-pressure roles such as traffic investigation.

Navigating Chaotic and Unpredictable Accident Spaces

Anchored in Max van Manen's spatial lifeworld, this theme reflects how traffic investigators experience accident scenes as dynamic, crowded, and often disordered environments that demand immediate control and situational awareness. The presence of bystanders, injured victims, damaged vehicles, and environmental factors such as heat, traffic congestion, or weather transforms the scene into a complex, sometimes overwhelming space. These spatial conditions shape how investigators perceive safety, urgency, and their ability to carry out their tasks effectively. Moreover, the accident scene is not merely a physical location but a lived space that influences cognition, focus, and professional action. Investigators must constantly adapt to fluctuating environmental factors while establishing order within chaos. Their experiences reveal that space can either facilitate or hinder investigative processes, requiring them to actively manage and reconstruct the environment to ensure safety, clarity, and accurate evidence gathering.

As cited by Participant 1, accident scenes are often immediately crowded with bystanders, requiring investigators to establish control through proper traffic management and scene security. Participant 2 similarly emphasized the need for quick spatial assessment upon arrival, including securing the area and regulating traffic flow to prevent further incidents. Participant 3 highlighted how environmental conditions such as crowd density, heat, and unsafe surroundings can disrupt focus and

complicate investigative tasks. Participant 4 also noted that accident scenes typically involve injured individuals, visible vehicle damage, and multiple people in the area, which contributes to the complexity of the space. In addition, Participant 5 emphasized that variations in spatial conditions, whether crowded, chaotic, or isolated, directly influence how investigative work is carried out. At the same time, Participant 6 noted that environmental factors, such as traffic conditions and weather, significantly affect both safety and efficiency at the scene. These insights demonstrate that traffic investigators must constantly adapt to changing spatial conditions while maintaining control and focus.

The following responses support these:

“Upon our arrival at the scene of the incident, a large number of bystanders have already gathered... and proper traffic control is necessary to secure the area and prevent further incidents.” (P1)

“When I arrived at the accident scene, I conducted a quick assessment of the area... secure the area and control traffic if necessary.” (P2)

“Upon arrival at the scene, the area is crowded, with many bystanders watching and taking videos and photos... when the area is crowded, hot, or unsafe, it becomes more difficult to focus on the investigation.” (P3)

“Mostly when we arrived at the scene of the incident, we saw the injured person, visible damage to the vehicle involved, and a number of persons surrounding the scene.” (P4)

“Whether it’s crowded, chaotic, or isolated greatly affects how I conduct my work.” (P5)

“The scene environment, like traffic conditions or weather, influences how we manage the situation and perform our tasks.” (P6)

Participants' responses indicate that accident scenes are experienced as complex, constantly changing environments that significantly influence investigative performance. The narratives reveal that crowd presence, environmental conditions, and physical layout of the scene can either support or hinder the investigators' ability to focus, maintain safety, and carry out procedures effectively. Participants consistently described the need to quickly assess and control the space, suggesting that managing the physical environment is a critical component of their role. These experiences highlight that accident investigation is not conducted in a neutral setting but rather in dynamic, often disruptive

spaces that require immediate organization and control. The findings suggest that investigators must continuously adjust their actions in response to spatial challenges to ensure both safety and investigative accuracy.

From a phenomenological perspective, this theme reflects the lived space (spatiality) of traffic investigators, where the environment is experienced not simply as a physical location but as a meaningful and influential dimension of their work. The participants' accounts show that accident scenes are perceived as overwhelming or manageable depending on how space is structured, controlled, and navigated. This indicates that space directly shapes perception, attention, and decision-making, influencing how investigators engage with their tasks. Furthermore, the need to transform chaotic environments into controlled investigative spaces demonstrates how investigators actively reconstruct their surroundings to create order and meaning. This interaction between the investigator and the environment highlights that spatial experience is dynamic, relational, and integral to the lived reality of accident investigation.

These results are supported by recent studies indicating that emergency and accident scenes are inherently dynamic and complex environments that require rapid spatial assessment and control. Behboudi et al. (2024) emphasized that accident environments involve multiple interacting factors, including crowd behavior, road conditions, and environmental hazards, which influence response effectiveness. Similarly, Stenshol et al. (2024) found that police officers operating in unpredictable field conditions must continuously adapt to spatial changes to maintain situational awareness and operational efficiency. In addition, Sigua et al. (2023) highlighted that effective traffic accident management depends on investigators' ability to organize and control the scene to ensure safety and accurate evidence collection. These studies support participants' experiences, demonstrating that navigating chaotic, unpredictable spaces is a fundamental aspect of traffic investigation.

Temporal Tension: Between Urgency and Prolonged Attention

Anchored in Max van Manen's temporal lifeworld, this theme reflects how traffic investigators experience time as fluid, distorted, and situationally dependent during traffic wreckage investigations. Their accounts reveal a constant tension between urgency and careful deliberation, where time may feel accelerated by pressure to respond quickly, clear the scene, and submit reports, yet slows or even suspends when attention to detail is required for accurate evidence gathering and documentation. This duality

highlights that time is not experienced objectively but as a lived and subjective phenomenon, shaped by situational demands, emotional intensity, and professional responsibility. Investigators must continuously negotiate between acting swiftly and working meticulously, balancing external pressures with the internal need for precision. Such experiences illustrate how temporality becomes a critical dimension of their work, influencing decision-making, focus, and the overall quality of the investigative process.

As Participant 1 noted, time during the traffic investigation feels like it passes rapidly, yet cannot be rushed due to the need for accuracy and completeness in documentation. Participant 2 similarly emphasized the constant pressure of deadlines, particularly in submitting reports to higher offices, which creates a persistent sense of urgency. Participant 3 highlighted the dual experience of time: it feels fast when clearing the road and assisting victims, but slows down when gathering evidence and interviewing witnesses. Participant 4 also noted the pressure of limited time to complete reports, reinforcing the urgency associated with investigative duties. In addition, Participant 5 described how time can feel prolonged during careful documentation, as attention to detail becomes essential. At the same time, Participant 6 emphasized that certain investigative tasks require intense focus, making time feel suspended. These insights demonstrate that traffic investigators experience time as both accelerated and slowed depending on the demands of the situation, requiring them to continuously adjust their pace and attention. The following responses support these:

“During a traffic investigation, I often don’t notice how fast time passes. However, I cannot rush my work... I need to make sure that all data and details are accurate and complete.” (P1)

“My experience during investigations is always feeling rushed... there is time pressure to submit reports to the higher office.” (P2)

“Sometimes I feel very fast when there is pressure to clear the road and help the victims, and at other times I feel very low when gathering evidence and interviewing witnesses.” (P3)

“Feel pressure since there was only a short time to send a report to our higher office after the incident.” (P4)

“During an investigation, time often feels prolonged because every detail matters... even though it can feel like time slows down, this careful approach ensures an accurate and complete report.” (P5)

“I sometimes feel rushed during investigations... at the same time, certain tasks... make time feel suspended because I need to concentrate fully.” (P6)

The participants' responses indicate that traffic investigators experience time as a dynamic, situational phenomenon shaped by both external pressures and internal demands for precision. The narratives reveal a tension between the urgency to respond quickly and the need for careful, thorough investigations. Participants described how time can feel accelerated during emergency response and report submission, yet slows down or becomes suspended when attention to detail is required. These experiences suggest that investigators must constantly regulate their pace of work, balancing efficiency with accuracy to ensure that critical information is not overlooked. The findings highlight that temporal pressure is an inherent part of accident investigation, influencing both performance and decision-making processes.

From a phenomenological perspective, this theme reflects the lived time (temporality) of traffic investigators, in which time is experienced subjectively rather than as a fixed, objective measure. The participants' accounts demonstrate that their perception of time is shaped by the intensity of the situation, the complexity of tasks, and the responsibility they carry. Moments of urgency compress time, creating pressure for immediate action, while moments requiring deep concentration expand or suspend time, allowing for detailed observation and reflection. This dual experience illustrates that temporality in traffic investigation is fluid and continuously negotiated, influencing how investigators engage with their tasks and make decisions. The interplay between urgency and prolonged attention highlights how investigators navigate time as both a constraint and a resource in their professional practice.

The outcomes are supported by recent studies indicating that time pressure significantly affects decision-making and performance in law enforcement and emergency response contexts. Marlatte et al. (2025) found that police officers frequently operate under time constraints that influence cognitive processing and increase stress levels during critical incidents. Similarly, Renner et al. (2025) emphasized that effective performance in high-risk police operations requires balancing rapid response with sustained attention to detail. In addition, Klein (2021) highlighted that professionals in emergencies rely on experience-based decision-making to manage time pressure while maintaining accuracy. These studies

support the participants' experiences, demonstrating that temporal tension between urgency and prolonged attention is a fundamental aspect of investigative work in high-pressure environments.

Balancing Professional Duty and Human Compassion in Relational Encounters

Anchored in Max van Manen's relational lifeworld, this theme explores how traffic investigators experience their work through meaningful interactions with victims, families, witnesses, colleagues, and bystanders. These relationships are not merely functional for gathering information but are deeply human encounters that evoke empathy, compassion, and emotional awareness. Investigators become witnesses not only to the incident itself but also to the suffering, grief, and emotional responses of those involved, which significantly shape their lived experience. At the same time, these interactions require a careful balance between emotional engagement and professional detachment. Investigators must remain objective and focused while responding with sensitivity and care, ensuring that their decisions and actions are both legally sound and ethically humane. This dual responsibility highlights how relationality becomes central to their role, transforming traffic investigation into a practice that is both technical and profoundly interpersonal.

As noted by Participant 1, traffic investigators often experience sympathy and care for victims, particularly in serious incidents where emotional responses are difficult to suppress. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of relational interaction in the investigative process, noting that victims, witnesses, and responders serve as primary sources of information for understanding the incident. Participant 3 similarly highlighted the need to balance professionalism with compassion when dealing with injured victims and grieving families. Participant 4 also noted that interactions with victims, witnesses, and responders are essential to determining responsibility, reflecting the investigative reliance on human accounts. In addition, Participant 5 described how engaging with individuals affected by accidents reveals the human impact of incidents. At the same time, Participant 6 emphasized that witnessing emotional reactions among victims and bystanders fosters empathy and careful case handling. These insights demonstrate that traffic investigators' roles are deeply shaped by interpersonal encounters that require both emotional awareness and professional control. The following responses support these:

"Sometimes, while investigating incidents, especially serious ones, I feel sympathy for the victim or show care and consideration." (P1)

"The victims are the ones who narrate the incidents... the witness is also necessary... and lastly, the responders who helped the victims..." (P2)

"We deal with injured victims and grieving families, so we must balance professionalism with compassion." (P3)

"In my investigation, I obtained information only from the victim, the witness, and the responders... so I can determine who is responsible." (P4)

"Interacting with victims, witnesses, and responders adds a human dimension... I see firsthand the impact of the accident on people's lives." (P5)

"My interactions with injured victims and concerned bystanders also shape my perspective... seeing their emotions makes me more empathetic and careful in handling the case." (P6)

Participants' responses indicate that traffic investigators experience their work as both a professional obligation and a deeply human engagement. The narratives reveal that interactions with victims, families, and witnesses are not limited to information gathering but also involve emotional exposure to suffering, grief, and distress. Participants consistently described how these encounters influence their perspectives, requiring them to remain empathetic while maintaining objectivity in their investigative duties. These experiences suggest that investigators must carefully regulate their emotional responses to ensure that compassion does not compromise accuracy and fairness. The findings highlight that relational encounters are integral to accident investigation, shaping both the investigators' emotional experiences and their professional conduct.

From a phenomenological perspective, this theme reflects the lived relation (relationality) of traffic investigators, where meaning is constructed through interactions with others within the investigative context. The participants' accounts demonstrate that their experiences are shaped by their connections with victims, witnesses, and responders, revealing that their work is inherently social and relational. These encounters create a space where empathy and professional responsibility coexist, requiring investigators to navigate the tension between emotional involvement and detachment. This balance illustrates how relational experiences influence perception, judgment, and decision-making, as investigators must remain sensitive to human suffering while upholding legal and procedural standards. The interplay between compassion and professionalism highlights the complexity of their

role, where relational understanding becomes essential in managing both emotional and investigative demands.

The decisions are supported by recent studies indicating that law enforcement work involves significant emotional and relational demands. Penco (2024) found that police officers frequently engage in emotionally charged interactions that require balancing empathy with professional boundaries. Similarly, Randall (2025) reported that repeated exposure to victims' trauma and emotional distress necessitates adaptive coping strategies to maintain psychological well-being and professional effectiveness. In addition, Todak and James (2021) emphasized that police officers perform emotional labor in managing interactions with the public, particularly in crises, where compassion and control must be carefully balanced. These studies support the participants' experiences, demonstrating that relational encounters are a central and challenging aspect of policing, requiring both emotional sensitivity and professional discipline.

Interpreting Evidence: Meaning-Making Through Material Objectives

Anchored in the material lifeworld of Max van Manen, this theme illustrates how traffic investigators engage with physical objects and material elements such as wrecked vehicles, skid marks, photographs, and investigative tools as central to their lived experience. These objects are not merely passive elements in the environment; rather, they serve as critical sources of meaning, guiding investigators in reconstructing events and determining accountability. The physical remnants of accidents become silent narrators that require careful observation, interpretation, and documentation. Furthermore, materiality shapes both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the investigators' work. The presence of damaged vehicles and tangible evidence reinforces the gravity of the incident, while tools like cameras and sketches support precision and objectivity. Through these interactions, investigators transform fragmented physical traces into coherent narratives of truth, highlighting that their experience is deeply intertwined with the material world, where objects both inform professional judgment and embody the reality scene.

As cited by Participant 1, traffic investigators emphasize the importance of ensuring that all data and details are accurate and complete, highlighting their reliance on material evidence for proper documentation. Participant 2 similarly noted the necessity of photographing the scene, demonstrating how tools are used to capture and preserve physical

evidence. Participant 3 noted that environmental factors such as heat, crowding, and unsafe surroundings can affect focus, underscoring how material and environmental factors influence engagement with evidence. Participant 4 described observing injured individuals and visible vehicle damage, which serve as immediate physical indicators of the incident. In addition, Participant 5 emphasized the process of marking and documenting evidence such as skid marks and vehicle positions. At the same time, Participant 6 highlighted the use of sketches, photographs, and collected statements to reconstruct the incident. These insights show that traffic investigators actively engage with material elements to interpret and understand accident events. The following responses support these:

"I need to make sure that all data and details of the incidents are accurate and complete." (P1)

"If necessary, then conduct a photograph of the scene of the traffic incident." (P2)

"When the area is crowded, hot, or unsafe, it becomes more difficult to focus on the investigation." (P3) (reflecting how environmental/material conditions affect engagement)

"We saw the injured person, visible damage to the vehicle involved..." (P4)

"I assess the situation, mark and document evidence such as skid marks and vehicle positions, take photographs..." (P5)

"I gather evidence, draw a sketch of the area, take pictures, and collect statements to properly reconstruct the incident." (P6)

The participants' responses indicate that traffic investigators engage with accident scenes actively, using material objects to guide their understanding of the events. The narratives reveal that physical evidence, such as vehicle damage, skid marks, and environmental conditions, is not merely observed but carefully interpreted to reconstruct the sequence of incidents. Participants consistently described the use of investigative tools, including photographs and sketches, as essential for transforming fragmented physical traces into structured, reliable information. These experiences suggest that meaning in traffic investigation is constructed through systematic interaction with material elements, where accuracy and attention to detail are critical. The findings highlight that investigators rely heavily on tangible evidence to support objective decision-making and ensure the integrity of their reports.

From a phenomenological perspective, this theme reflects how investigators engage with the material world as part of their lived experience, where objects are not passive but meaningful elements that shape understanding and action. The participants' accounts demonstrate that material objects, such as damaged vehicles, road markings, and investigative tools, serve as carriers of meaning, enabling investigators to interpret events and establish accountability. This interaction illustrates that knowledge in traffic investigation is constructed through direct engagement with the physical environment, where perception, interpretation, and action are interconnected. Furthermore, the presence of material evidence reinforces the reality and seriousness of the incident, influencing both cognitive focus and emotional awareness. This highlights how investigators' experiences are grounded in the material dimension of their work, where objects mediate understanding and guide professional judgment.

The outcomes are supported by recent studies indicating that interpreting physical evidence is central to effective accident investigation and law enforcement practice. Behboudi et al. (2024) emphasized that analyzing physical traces such as road conditions, vehicle damage, and environmental factors is essential for accurately determining accident causation. Similarly, Stenshol et al. (2024) highlighted that police officers rely on material evidence and situational cues to make informed decisions in complex field environments. In addition, Saferstein (2021) noted that forensic and investigative practices depend heavily on the accurate collection, documentation, and interpretation of physical evidence to ensure reliable conclusions. These studies support the participants' experiences, demonstrating that meaning-making through material objects is a fundamental aspect of traffic investigation.

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