
The Importance and Essentiality of Counselling for Police Officers: A Systematic Review

Deepak Sharma

Allied Health Sciences, Psychology

Corresponding author: dr.deepaksharma.psy@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to review previous articles that related to coping strategies utilized by police officers when encountering their job stress. In this paper, it is argued that the counselling could provide rich insights into the understanding of employee and employer relations within the police and the stress and wellbeing of officers. Police officers often experienced stress when executing their job. Stress and trauma experienced by police officers in the line of duty can have negative impacts on officers' health and wellbeing. Psychological support and counselling is imperative to help officers maintain psychological well-being and to perform their duties more efficiently.

The author concluded that police departments should consider requiring mandatory and periodic counselling for all officers, a procedural tactic that camouflages counselling need while concurrently treating the source of officer stress. The suggestions for future study research of importance and essentiality of counselling in policing also discussed.

Keywords: Police officers. Counselling. Stress, Wellbeing, Psychological support, police health promotion

What is Policing?

It is widely acknowledged the world over that policing is one of the most stressful profession. Police officers were reported possess high level of job stress as compared to other professional (Russell 2014; Yun *et al.* 2013). Over the past decade, policing has been widely discussed as a stressful occupation as compared to other professions in the literature (Campbell and Nobel 2009; Vuorensyrja and Malkia Vuorensyrjä and Mälkiä, 2011). By its nature, it has been identified as one of the most demanding and stressful occupations worldwide because of the officers' exposure to a variety of acute and chronic stressful events at work (Lieberman *et al.* 2002; Magnavita and Garbarino, 2013; Paton *et al.* 2009). Consequently, police officers are at greater risk of physical and mental ill-health, e.g.

impaired psychosocial wellbeing and physical ill-health (Garbarino, Cuomo, Chiorri, and Magnavita Garbarino *et al.* 2013; Lucas, Weidner, and Janisse Lucas *et al.* 2012), self-harm and poor functioning (Volanti *et al.* 2016).

Stress and Police

Stress plays a part in the lives of everyone. Some stress may be called as eustress is not only inevitable, it can be good. For example, the physical stress of "working out" improves your cardiovascular system, and feeling pressure that causes you to study harder for an exam can improve your score. Police stress, however, refers to the *negative* pressures or Distress related to police work. According to Gail Goolkasian and others, research shows that they are affected by their daily exposure to human indecency and pain; that dealing with a suspicious and

sometimes hostile public takes its toll on them; and that the shift changes, the long periods of boredom, and the ever-present danger that are part of police work do cause serious job stress. Police officers experience frequent and on-going stressors in their work. These stressors range from cumulative stress (constant risk on the job, the need for adherence to often restricting and conflicting regulations, public perceptions that may be inaccurate) to critical incidents such as violent crimes, shootings and mass disasters. While these stressors are inherent and accepted by officers, they need not necessarily lead to burnout or other psychological problems including substance abuse, marital problems, anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Many studies have shown that the job of policing is an extremely stressful one (Colwell, 1988; Heiman, 1975; Kroes, Margolis & Hurrell, 1974; Niederhoffer & Niederhoffer, 1978; Selye, 1978; Somodevilla, 1978 & Violanti, 1992).

Police stress arises from several features of police work. Alterations in body rhythms from monthly shift rotation, for example, reduce productivity. The change from a day to a swing, or graveyard, shift not only requires biological adjustment but also complicates officers' personal lives. Role conflicts between the job—serving the public, enforcing the law, and upholding ethical standards—and personal responsibilities as spouse, parent, and friend act as stressors.

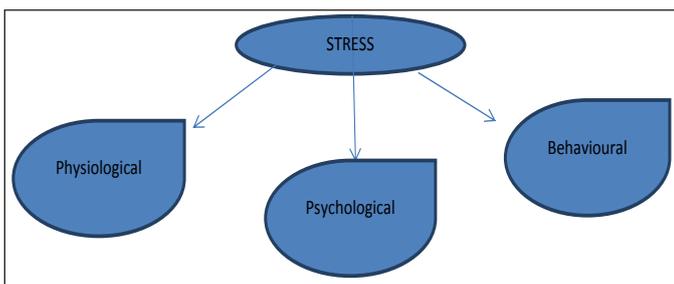


Fig. 1

Stress contributes not only to the physical disorders previously mentioned, but also to emotional problems. Some research suggests that police officers commit suicide at a higher rate than other groups. Most investigators report unusually high rates of divorce among police. These stress experiences impair their health and result in high rates of mental illness.

Stress related illnesses are of particular concern and are reflected in tragically high suicide rates, divorce, alcoholism, decreased job satisfaction and burnout (Curran, Finlay & McGarry, 1988; Labovitz & Hagedorn).

Possible Sources of Psychological Stress

- ❖ **Within the organization characteristics:** lack of supervision, lack of positive reward, restrictive policies, excessive paperwork, poor equipment.
- ❖ **Criminal Justice practices:** Unfavourable court decisions, recidivism, court delays and continuances, adversarial nature of the justice system.
- ❖ **Public practices:** distorted press accounts of police work, allegations of brutality and racism, adverse local government decisions such as funding.
- ❖ **Police work itself:** role conflict (e.g. apprehension of criminals while needing to maintain their rights), irregular work schedule, danger inherent in the profession, inability to resolve and close many problems in the community, witnessing human suffering, seriousness of the consequences of one's actions, critical incidents such as shootings or mass disasters, cumulative nature of stress.

Challenges

Police work is challenging in multiple ways. Police officers are often mandated to respond to and resolve violent situations (e.g., violent criminals, terrorist attacks, and domestic violence). It can be inferred that police officers, as frontline professionals, adopt a dual role: that of the "crime fighter" and that of the "social service worker" (Manzella & Papazoglou, 2014). Previous research has clearly demonstrated the link between line of duty stress and deleterious effects on health outcomes through officer self-report and physiological stress. Research has indicated that by the time police officers put on their uniform and begin general patrol, their stress-related cardiovascular reactivity is already elevated (Anderson, Litzenberger & Plecas, 2002).

Police officers are expected to perform well and make the right decisions under extreme stress. Police

organizations, the government, and the public in general, expect police officers not only to be healthy, but also to maintain high performance levels in the line of duty. However, police officers are human beings and they have their own personal and family lives to consider. At the end of their shift, they return back home and undertake the role of the parent, spouse, sibling, friend, and so on. When individuals manage multiple roles they may experience role strain, or the difficulty in meeting given role demands due to allocation of energy, skills, and resources into multiple roles (Goode, 1960). The policies and procedures of the police organization (Swanson & Territo, 1983) and autocratic management (Cooper, Davidson, & Robinson, 1982) have been known to cause discontent and dissatisfaction among police personnel along with frequent transfer, suspension / suppression, delayed promotions, non-grant of leave on time and departmental inquires (Mathur, 1995). The success of a law enforcement organisation depends upon a good understanding of the stressors operating within the organisation and managing their impact on performance and wellbeing (Kuo, 2014). Generally, there are two accepted sources of stress in policing namely job content (operational stressors) and job context (organisational stressors) (Houdmont *et al.* 2012; McCreary and Thompson, 2006; Shane, 2010). Operational stressors for policing, such as exposure to violence and death, pressure to perform efficiently, making critical decisions and life-threatening situations (McCraty and Atkinson, 2012; Violanti and Aron, 1993; Waters and Ussery 2007), have been linked to psychosomatic symptoms and psychological distress (Burke and Mikkelsen, 2005; Dowler and Arai, 2008; Setti and Argentero, 2013; Violanti *et al.* 2006). In addition, organisational stressors, such as shift work, overtime demands, feelings of being always on the job, problems with co-workers, inadequate training, weekend duty, poor relationships with supervisors and colleagues and a lack of administrative support (Ellison, 2004; McCreary *et al.* McCreary and Thompson, 2006; Shane, 2010; Violanti *et al.* Violanti and Aron 1993), have been associated with depression and anxiety (Nelson and Smith, 2016), suicide (Spence and Millott Spence and Millot, 2016), burnout (Burke and Mikkelsen, 2005), marital or family problems (Alexander and Walker

1996), poor performance (LeBlanc, Regher, Jelley, and Barath LeBlanc *et al.* 2008), emotional exhaustion, cynicism, absenteeism, early retirement, alcoholism and post-traumatic stress disorder (Brough, 2004; Dowler *et al.* Dowler and Arai, 2008; Martinussen, Richardsen, and Burke Martinussen *et al.* 2007; Setti *et al.* Setti and Argentero 2013; Toch 2002; Volanti *et al.* 2006).

Counselling- A finest Coping strategy

According to the American Counseling Association "Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education and career goals." Our world is increasingly becoming more interconnected. This globalization highlights the need for highly trained mental health professionals to address trauma, addiction, depression, academic and career concerns in clinics, hospitals, schools, and universities. Counselling takes place when a counsellor sees a client in a private and confidential setting to explore a difficulty the client is having, distress they may be experiencing or perhaps their dissatisfaction with life, or loss of a sense of direction and purpose.

Inability to cope with job stress sufficiently would lead to emotional disturbances, mental disorders, unhealthy body and social isolation. Coping strategies is derived from cognitive, biological and social development. Coping strategies according to Sipon *et al.* (2014), functions as survival skills in encountering various challenges in life as well. In brief explanation, coping strategies is significant element in life functioning and individual development (Grant *et al.* 2003). Coping is viewed as stabilizing factor that may help individuals maintain psychological adaptation during stress period (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Moose & Billings, 1982). Very recently, Freedy and Hobfall (1994), pointed out that the persistence of stress and burnout across the time suggests the need for effective intervention programmes (see also Wade, Cooley & Sivicki, 1986). Examples of ways of coping in policing are cognitive coping, behavioral coping and external source of coping such as social support. Coping strategies refers to different strategy utilized when encountering particular stressful conditions. According to Masten (2006), coping

strategies requires wider context by taking into account the context of physiology, emotion, external behavior, attention, interpersonal and social environment. According to Holodynskidan Friedlmeier (2006), coping strategies is a social interaction and physical context in real life situations. Therefore, social and physical sections should be considered when discussing about coping strategies. There are endeavors to reduce, eliminate or modify stress among police personnel using psychological techniques based on the western model.

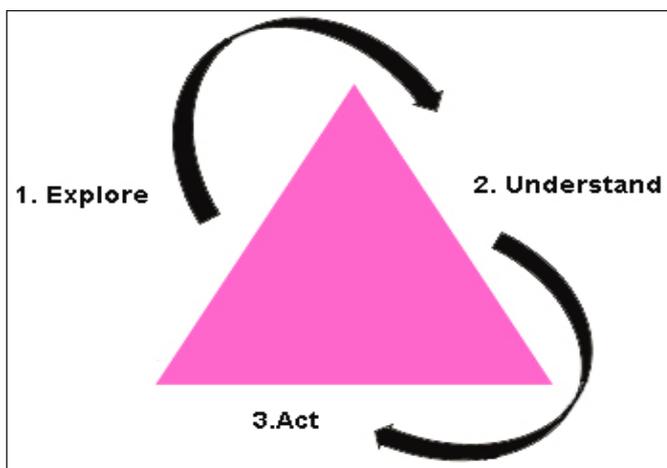


Fig. 2

Methodology

The library search was carried out on library databases and several journals such as Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategy and Management, Stress Medicine, Psychological Bulletin by using the key words “police” and “stress” and “coping”. Accordingly, the search was restricted to coping with stress as general. The articles findings filtered articles accordingly; the search included a variety of settings in policing. In term of the design, chapters of the book, theses student, review article and empirical studies were included in this review. All studies published in English were selected in this review. The previous articles covered year from 1988 to 2019, resulted 250 journal articles, but only 100 research articles were selected since they fulfilled the criteria required related to importance and essentiality of counselling as coping strategy.

Benefits of Counselling

There are many research discussed regarding the issue of coping strategies in policing while encountering with job stress. Many people have a significant degree of emotional distress, which may include anxiety, depression, anger or burnout. Work stress in particular has adverse effects on the person and organisation, including poor health, absence from work and attendant costs to the organisation (Cooper, Sloan, & William, 1988; Wainwright & Calnan, 2002). Work stress has a wide range of pressures experienced by workers that include work overload, lack of control over tasks, poor working environment, difficulties in relationships with colleagues and managers and in turn family, differences in career development and career achievement, and the dilemmas in balancing between the home-work interface (Carroll, 1996; Cooper, Sloan & William, 1988; Wainwright & Calnan, 2002). Policing is a highly specialized type of work unlike many other professions. Although it is not specifically easy to measure and conceptualise problem coping (Heppner, 2008), police work in particular can be very stressful (Moad, 2011) for various reasons, including the fact that police officers have irregular and long working schedules. Besides, front line police officers often tackle traumatising incidents in their day-to-day activities. In the developing world, there is the additional stress associated with poor working conditions long periods of separation from immediate family members due to far-flung postings, and the exigencies of duties (Moad, 2011; Wango, 2015). Police officers with stress-related symptoms and depression require help, and in good time. Counselling psychology, through an interdisciplinary approach, can provide a range of problem-focused social support services to assist officers in situational difficulty.

There have been various incidents of utmost significance that reflect the need for psychological intervention in the police service. The general objectives of counselling are to help police officers grow in self-confidence, understanding, self-control and ability to work effectively.

Ways to Help

- ❖ Limit on-duty work hours to no more than 12 hours per day.
- ❖ Make work rotations from high stress to lower stress functions.
- ❖ Make work rotations from the scene to routine assignments, as practicable.
- ❖ Use counselling assistance programs available through your agency.
- ❖ Take frequent, brief breaks from the scene as practicable.
- ❖ Talk about your emotions to process what you have seen and done.
- ❖ Stay in touch with your family and friends.
- ❖ Participate in memorials, rituals, and use of symbols as a way to express feelings.
- ❖ Use physical exercise to help work through the stress.
- ❖ Take care of your body through rest, relaxation, massage etc.
- ❖ Pair up with a responder so that you may monitor one another's stress.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study are an encouraging indication to pursue this line of research. Keeping in view the Indian ethos, the psychologist need to explore the scope of indigenous techniques to (a) alleviate the wear and tear of body and mind, (b) enhance the well-being of person. Both these aspects are important, whether we take management view, or the remedial measures. Our results showed that police officers could improve their ability to cope with negative emotions of their job, such as depression, anxiety, and stress through seeking counselling help. Therefore, to reduce psychological problems, it is recommended to implement counselling programs for police officers at regular interval of time.

Study reveals that heavy work load, long hours duty schedule, less break hours affect police officer's mental stress which brings health related disorder like back pain, headache, anxiety depression and isolation with suicidal tendency. Counselling Understand the root cause of what's getting in the way of a happy life.

Mental Health evaluations: This is a key component of a law enforcement wellness plan. Currently, mental health assessments are only made when a problem surfaces either from the officer or the officer's supervisor. I believe that regular mental health evaluations are appropriate and necessary based on the regular stress levels encountered by law enforcement personnel and are essential to the well-being of police personnel. It is not only the effects of critical incidents that affect officers, but also the daily situations and stressors, which have an effect on mental well-being.

Recommendations

To deal with the psychological problems of police officers due to their high job stress it is highly recommended to organized counselling workshops, counselling sessions in regular intervals of time. However set up of counselling centres within the offices should be carried out so that in any need to deal with the stress anyone can reach out for the psychological support and counselling for their betterment. Counselling centres should be well equipped as per the standards. Trained professionals should be hired for the services. Family therapy and group therapy can be incorporate in the counselling sessions.

If a competent wellness program is presented and maintained from the time a police recruit graduates from the academy and throughout his/or her career, the likelihood that physical and mental wellbeing can be maintained. I believe that a standardization of policy and procedure relating to police officers' wellness should be implemented. Agencies must implement mandatory involvement of officers in physical and psychological maintenance and evaluation programs.

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