6.12 Occupational stress in police and prison staff

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Definitions and theoretical framework

Stress researchers generally agree that the term *stressor* refers to the environmental stimulus or demand (antecedent) that causes stress. *Strain* refers to the individual's physical and/or psychological response to the stressor (consequences of stress). The term *stress* usually defines the overall process and implies a relationship between stressors, strain and coping, rather than any specific component of the process itself (O'Driscoll and Brough 2003). Current conceptualizations of occupational stress are influenced by the work of Richard Lazarus and colleagues, who defined stress as a *transactional* process between the individual and his/her environment (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). The transactional stress theory emphasizes that it is the individual's *perceptions* (or appraisals) of a situation that define the core process of a strain reaction. Thus, 'stress arises when the demands of a particular encounter are appraised by the individual as about to tax or exceed the resources available, thereby threatening well-being' (Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll 2001, p. 12). The transactional perspective focuses upon a dynamic interplay between an individual's perceptions, resources, wellbeing and the stressful demand.

The Job-Demands-Control (JDC) model (Karasek 1979), a well-regarded theory of occupational stress, posits that while both *job demands* and *job control* independently predict occupational stress, their effects are heightened when considered in combination, or through an interaction between demands and control (Mansell and Brough 2005). An important revision of the JDC model acknowledges the beneficial effects of perceived *job support* in relieving occupational stress, and thus identifies a third construct, the Job-Demands-Control-Support (JDCS) model (Johnson and Hall 1988). The enhanced JDCS model proposes that occupational stress occurs most often for work characterized by *high job demands*, *low job control*, and *low support* (see van der

Doef and Maes 1999 for a review). Specific elements of job demands, control and support commonly associated with occupational stress for police and prison workers are discussed below.

Antecedents of occupational stress

Antecedents of occupational stress can be classified into eight broad categories:

1. *Work relationships*: interactions with people at work
2. *The job itself*: nature of the work performed
3. *Overload*: workload and time pressures
4. *Control*: lack of control over work processes and timing
5. *Job security*: uncertainty about the future of one's job
6. *Resources and communication*: inadequate or malfunctioning technological and other resources; ineffective communication processes in the workplace
7. *Work-life balance*: interference or conflict between the job and both family and personal life
8. *Pay and benefits*: perceived or objective inadequacy of remuneration and other important tangible benefits (Johnson *et al.* 2005).

Both police and prison work commonly include all these antecedents of occupational stress, and are commonly identified as being 'high-stress' occupations. The type of work demands that contribute to high levels of strain in police and prison workers, and affect their health and functioning, include encountering major incidents involving death, violence, personal attacks and harassment, typically over years of exposure. These 'operational stressors' are formally recognized by the police and prison services, and are anticipated and prepared for as much as is possible via training, and managed afterwards through the provision of debriefing, support and counselling programmes (see below for details).

As well as traumatic operational stressors, the impact of frequently occurring minor *job stressors* or hassles also contributes to the experience of occupational stress for police and prison workers (and other workers within high-stress occupations). Thus job stressors such as interpersonal conflict with colleagues and supervisors; inadequate pay, training or career advancement; missing or faulty equipment; and bureaucracy, paperwork and red tape have all been associated with stress outcomes. Brough (2004), for example, demonstrated that items such as excessive paperwork and inadequate job

recognition predicted psychological strain in New Zealand police, fire and ambulance officers to almost the same extent as traumatic operational stressors. Similarly, the Correctional Officer Job Demands measure, which assesses common occupational stressors such as lack of decision making, understaffing, formal complaints and management support, was associated with adverse psychological health and low job satisfaction for Australian correctional officers (Brough and Williams 2007). Liberman *et al.* (2002) also demonstrated the associations between occupational stressors and psychological strain in US police officers and concluded: 'Routine occupational stress exposure appears to be a significant risk factor for psychological distress among police officers, and a surprisingly strong predictor of post-traumatic stress symptoms' (p. 421). For a review of why research and practice are still having a limited effect on the reduction of 'chronic sources of organizationally induced stress' for police and prison workers see also Stinchcomb (2004, p. 259).

Finally, the experience of occupational stress can be exacerbated by organizational systems that are overly bureaucratic, punitive of staff and strictly managed, and during restructuring or organizational change. Police and prison services recognize the influence of occupational culture to varying extents, and have made attempts to 'soften' the culture by increasing the diversity of staff, expanding training and promotion programmes, and flattening the hierarchical structure by reducing some levels of management. Nevertheless, both police and prison work are still conducted within distinctive organizational cultures that directly influence both the antecedents and consequences of occupational stress (for a review see Chan 2007).

Consequences of occupational stress

The psychological impact of acute stressors (traumatic events) is well documented; so too are the prevention and intervention techniques employed to reduce adverse outcomes associated with acute stressors. The consequences of chronic occupational stress (daily hassles) in police and prison officers are also well established and span four categories of individual outcomes: physiological, psychological, social and behavioural. These outcomes are briefly discussed here.

Individual outcomes associated with acute stress

Vicarious or actual exposure to traumatic events at work is associated with ill health and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology, such as

intrusive recollections of the event (Brown, Fielding and Grover 1999). Although pre-existing vulnerabilities do influence the development of PTSD, certain aspects of the organizational culture (e.g. the requirement to suppress emotional reactivity), and the manner in which the event is handled by the organization, may also contribute to its aetiology (Amaranto *et al.* 2003). Provisions are made by most police and prison services to support officers who experience traumatic events (e.g. debriefing and employee assistance programmes) to a greater extent than the support services provided for staff experiencing strain as a result of chronic stress (daily hassles).

Individual outcomes associated with chronic stress

Physiological processes enable the human body to cope with, and recover from, short periods of intense stressor exposure (e.g. exposure to critical incidents). Exposure to long-term *chronic* stressors, however, may prevent sufficient recovery time, and instead encourage the manifestation of psychological strain. The associations between psychological strain and physiological health outcomes, such as coronary heart disease, have been demonstrated (e.g. Bosma *et al.* 1998). Mortality data indicate that police officers experience elevated rates of mortality from malignant neoplasms, digestive diseases and arteriosclerotic heart disease (Violanti, Vena and Petralia 1998). Behavioural responses to acute traumas, chronic stress and cultural variables investigated within law enforcement populations include alcohol abuse, aggression and suicide ideation (Violanti 2004). On average, both police and prison officers experience higher rates of suicide compared to the general population. Associations between these findings and characteristics of police and prison work have been identified, such as access to firearms, social isolation and reliance on maladaptive coping strategies (Stack and Tsoudis 1997; Violanti, Vena and Marshall 1996).

Both cognitive and emotional chronic stress reactions have been extensively investigated within law enforcement occupations, including job satisfaction (Lambert, Hogan and Barton 2002) and psychological strain (Brough 2002). Due to the high level of 'emotion work' required, both police and prison officers are constantly exposed to risk factors associated with burnout, such as emotional suppression, cynicism and suspicion towards others (Amaranto *et al.* 2003). Theoretical discussions consider psychological burnout to be a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson and Leiter 1996) that is associated with an imbalance between demands and resources (Demerouti *et al.* 2001) and

emotional incongruence (Zapf 2002; see also O'Driscoll, Brough and Kalliath (2009) for a more detailed discussion).

Research within police and prison occupations has linked psychological burn-out with worker characteristics (e.g. gender), aspects of the job role (e.g. inmate contact), lack of support and role conflict (Whitehead and Lindquist 1986), organizational stress and job dissatisfaction (Manzoni and Manuel 2006), lack of reciprocity between effort expended and rewards attained (Euwema, Kop and Bakker 2004) and increased job hassles (Kohan and Mazmanian 2003). Psychological burnout has also been associated with favourable attitudes towards the use of violence in conflict situations (Burke and Mikkelsen 2005). The consequences of strain do not affect the individual in isolation but also extend to the families of police and prison workers, colleagues and the organization itself (see, for example, Hogan *et al.* 2006; Roberts and Levenson 2001).

Moderators of occupational stress

A number of variables moderate the occupational stress process and this explains why different individuals perceive the same stressor differently, and why the same individual can experience a stressor in different ways at different points in time. Common moderators of occupational stress include perceived levels of support and job control, gender, age and personality characteristics such as neuroticism. Research examining occupational stress perceived by male and female police officers has an extensive history and has resulted in practices that aim to better equalize the work environment for all officers. Berg *et al.* (2005), for example, demonstrated that female Norwegian police officers experienced fewer traumatic incidents on average at work compared to their male colleagues, but still reported the highest ratings on all aspects of occupational stress. Brough and Frame (2004) demonstrated that the experience of sexual harassment by female New Zealand police officers influenced perceptions of job satisfaction and turnover intentions, but that adequate levels of supervisor support improved these outcomes. Brown (2007) provided a comprehensive review of gender issues in policing, and suggested that British police services remain replete in masculine characteristics.

An issue of growing concern in contemporary society is the health, performance and retention of the increasing number of ageing workers. Gershon, Lin and Li (2002), for example, demonstrated that police officers aged 50 years or older are at increased risk of occupational stress compared to their younger colleagues. The associations between age, gender and occupational stress can

be offset to some degree by the provision of adequate workplace support and the use of adaptive coping behaviours. These findings have particular importance for the training of supervisors and managers. The occupational stress literature repeatedly demonstrates that providing adequate levels of support, especially supervisor support, together with the use of adaptive coping behaviours, can significantly reduce occupational stress (see, for example, Anshel, Roberston and Caputi 2000; Brough and Frame 2004; Stephens and Long 2000). The provision of workplaces that actively aim to reduce occupational stress, either directly via the reduction of known stressors or indirectly via the effective management of stress symptoms, is also typically identified as an employer's obligation under occupational health and safety legislation.

Interventions for managing occupational stress

Two useful systems for categorizing occupational stress interventions are those developed by Murphy (1988) and DeFrank and Cooper (1987). Murphy's tripartite model describes *primary prevention* (elimination of stressors from the work environment to prevent stress), *secondary prevention* (detecting stress and providing stress management skills), and *tertiary prevention* (rehabilitation of stressed workers). DeFrank and Cooper's classification system focuses on the target of the interventions, and comprises interventions directed at *individuals* (equipping individuals with skills to manage stress, e.g. relaxation), the *individual/organizational interface* (interactions between individuals and their workplace, e.g. decision-making authority) and *organizations* (the organizational context, e.g. job design). Police and prison services most commonly use individual-level secondary and tertiary interventions – usually peer-support officers or trained professionals – to manage stress within the service, although failing to modify the stressful work environment tends to be ineffective at producing long-term outcomes (Bond 2004). Two of the most common stress management strategies are Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) and Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs).

Critical Incident stress management

CISM (e.g. Mitchell 1983) usually involves providing short-term support services to either prepare staff who are at risk of exposure to traumatic events, minimize the impact of the trauma, or promote recovery after exposure to a critical incident (Fix 2001). Critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) is a

component of CISM based on the premise that retelling the event will reduce stress and the likelihood of PTSD (Bledsoe 2003). The actual value of critical incident debriefing is difficult to demonstrate empirically. In a comparison with two control groups, Carlier, Voerman and Gersons (2000) demonstrated that individual critical incident debriefing produced *no* significant differences for PTSD symptomatology within their sample of Dutch police officers. Researchers such as Matthews (1998) and Hobbs *et al.* (1996) have also demonstrated that critical incident stress debriefing alone produced no significant health improvements or actually *increased* stress-related symptoms for individuals experiencing PTSD. It is important to note that the value of critical incident stress debriefing is currently being debated, with more positive results, for example, being identified for *group* debriefing sessions rather than individual debriefing sessions (e.g. Leonard and Alison 1999). For a review of critical incident stress debriefing in law enforcement, see Malcolm *et al.* (2005).

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs)

EAPs are provided by most law enforcement agencies to manage occupational stress symptoms. Typically, these programmes provide referral services; offer brief counselling for a variety of personal, family and work-related issues; and are based on the premise that the provision of such services will promote organizational productivity. A pertinent criticism of these interventions is their tendency to adopt an individualistic approach and thus ignore organizational stressors (Kirk and Brown 2003). These programmes are often met with some resistance by employees in law enforcement occupations, commonly expressed as scepticism of the level of confidentiality and the actual value of these EAPs (e.g. Waters and Ussery 2007). Furthermore, there remains a pervasive stigma that officers should naturally be able to deal with stress and handle the pressure of the job. Failure to do so is therefore often regarded as an indication of personal unsuitability for the job. Research with both police and prison workers has, for example, described the social stigma associated with admissions of failing to cope with stress and the difficulties experienced by officers attempting to integrate back into the workforce after experiencing stress (Brough, Biggs and Pickering 2007).

Conclusion

Working in the police or prison services is typically a rewarding but demanding role. The dual demands of regular exposure to operational (often

traumatic) stressors, and a highly regulated bureaucratic organizational system, define police and prison work as 'high-stress' occupations. Individual susceptibility to occupational stress experiences can be heightened by both organizational and individual factors, such as culture, support, gender and age. Similarly, improving individual levels of 'stress resilience' can also be approached from both an individual and an organizational level, with the most effective results emerging from a joint approach. Thus, organizational efforts to prevent or manage occupational stress necessitate effective training, education, resources and supports. Individual efforts entail stress recognition, active coping strategies and help-seeking. The nature of police and prison work ensures that occupational stress is a permanent job risk; designing and implementing practices to reduce this risk most effectively should be the focus of both service managers and researchers.

FURTHER READING

For a comprehensive review of occupational stress research including issues such as leadership, harassment, workplace safety, work-family conflict, ageing workers and organizational interventions, see J. Barling, K. Kelloway and M. Frone (eds.) (2005) *Handbook of Work Stress* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage). For a review of the main occupational stress issues still pertinent to police workers such as minority groups, culture, operational stressors and organizational stressors, see J. Brown and E. Campbell (1994) *Stress and Policing: Sources and Strategies* (New York: Wiley). Finally, for a more recent overview of occupational stress research within policing, prison work and similar service professions, which includes discussions of stress theories, measurement issues and occupational interventions, see M. Dollard, A. Winefield and H. Winefield (eds.) (2003) *Occupational Stress in the Service Professions* (London: Taylor & Francis).

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