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Author

Brough, Paula, Barbour, Jennifer

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POLICE STRESS RESEARCH: MOVING BEYOND SURVEYS AND COUNSELLING



**Paula Brough & Jennifer Barbour,
Griffith University, Brisbane
Contact: p.brough@griffith.edu.au**

ABSTRACT

Stress is one of those topics that we are all experts in, regardless of our actual job or rank. We have all experienced stress in our work or personal lives and we are a good judge of how stress affects us personally. When managed appropriately stress has a *positive* impact on performance: just think about the extra learning achieved immediately before an exam, or the burst of adrenalin that carries you through a major incident. Stress becomes harmful to health and performance when the stress experience is *prolonged* and it is this psychosocial relationship between work stress and health that has maintained our interest over the last 15 years. In this article, we briefly review four recent developments in the work stress and health relationships, explore some of the police gender differences in stress experiences, and conclude by reviewing the more innovative stress management practices currently being adopted by some police services.

The research of work stress and its impact on health has a long and broad history. Previous 'explanations' of the stress condition include terms such as hysteria, passions, vapours, nerves, worry, mental strain, and tension. Until the appearance of the 'shell-shocked' soldiers of the First World War, stress was also largely perceived as a female experience; an affliction of the 'gentle sex'. Personally admitting to experiencing stress is still commonly regarded as a weakness and an inability to do the job. Although this stigma associated with stress is slowly declining, it is still the principal reason for why many workers seek professional assistance for work stress health symptoms through their own GPs, rather than approach an employer-sponsored scheme.

STRESS CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

What is stress? We broadly define stress as the *individual's perception that what is being required of them exceeds their*

ability to deal with it effectively. Stress occurs due to a significant imbalance between performance requirements (i.e., job demands) and ability. In most cases of work stress, this imbalance is a chronic, ongoing situation with minimal chance of resolution or assistance (such as a chronic heavy workload or long work hours). Stress has both a physical impact (such as difficulties with relaxing and sleeping, fatigue, migraines, stomach and heart problems) and a psychological impact (such as feeling constantly 'on edge' or nervous, being irritable with colleagues, or perceiving core work such as assisting the public as a nuisance). For more detail see, for example, Brough and Biggs (in press). Decades of measuring stress in police officers has informed us of the most commonly perceived stressors; each of these stressors can be linked to officer demotivation, dissatisfaction, poor health, and turnover. Table 1 lists eight of these common police stressors, as rated by officers across Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Of course, there are other police stressors too, but it is pertinent that these same core items routinely receive the highest ratings. It is also pertinent to note that these 'organisational stressors' can have as much, or even a greater impact on an officer's level of psychological health and job satisfaction compared to their exposure to critical incidents (operational stressors; Brough, 2004, 2005). Now that such stressors have been repeatedly identified, the focus should turn to the *actions* police services are actually taking to reduce these stressors.

Table 1: Commonly identified police stressors

Hoax calls	Red tape
Missing meals	Police service bureaucracy
Dealing with the public	Working with incompetent colleagues
Paperwork	Working with inadequate equipment

Adapted from Brough (2004)

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN WORK STRESS RESEARCH

While police stress research has a long history and officers often feel they are being continuously assessed by yet another survey, we thought it would be useful here to highlight four recent developments in stress research. Each of these four developments is assisting organisations, including some police services, to be more proactive and specific in the training being offered to their employees. We feel strongly that the effective management of work stress needs to go beyond survey measurement and individually focused counselling. The focus should instead be placed on workplace design and training which is effective in removing some of these widely recognised stressors.

1. JOB DEMANDS AND RESOURCES

One pertinent 'stress model' that has proven to be useful when examining work stress and more specifically, usefully identifies how we can design work to be less stressful, is the *Job Demands Resources* (JDR) model, developed by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2001). A basic overview of this model, illustrating the common job demands and resources experienced by the police and similar services, is depicted in Figure 1. It is important to note that the high levels of job demands *per se* are not

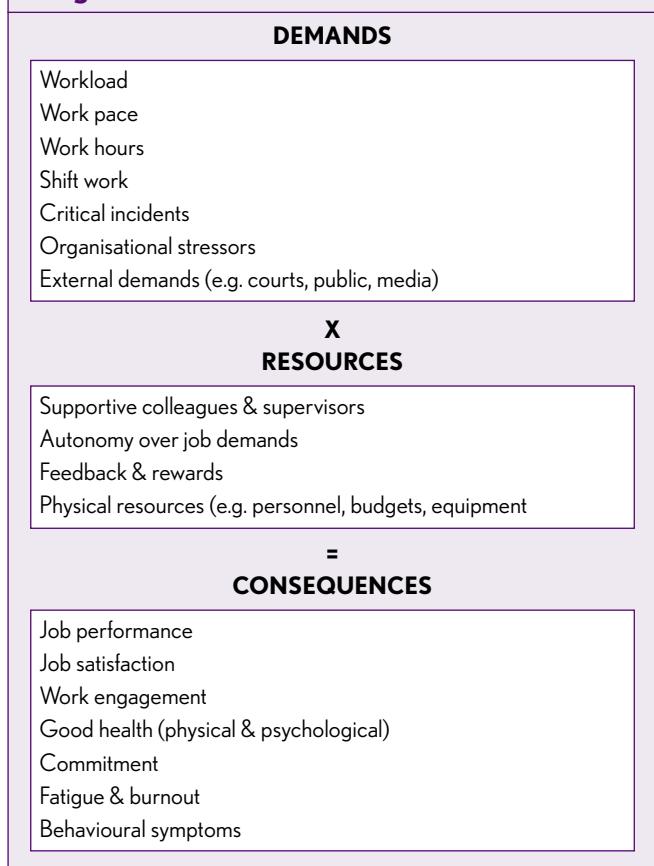
necessarily indicative of poor health and performance outcomes. A heavy workload combined with adequate resources (support, rewards, etc) can actually lead to positive outcomes. Stress occurs when high demands and inadequate resources are *both* experienced, especially over long periods. In these 'high stress' situations, fatigue, disengagement and dissatisfaction are commonly experienced, along with increased unhealthy behaviours (e.g., increased alcohol and smoking, lack of exercise) and physiological symptoms of stress.

2. SUPERVISOR'S IMPACT

The role of supportive supervisors in shaping work experiences, including stress experiences, is a key feature. It is surprising how much stress (i.e., work demands) can be tolerated if individuals feel recognised and supported for their efforts by their organisations. Some of the more proactive police services have now begun to offer practical management training focusing specifically on supervisor impact for this very reason. The work we are currently conducting with *Queensland Police Service* for example, assesses the specific impact that supervisors at all levels of the organisation have on their direct workers. By presenting data to each supervisor which says 'Look, this is your specific leadership style, and this is the engagement, performance and stress levels of your staff' supervisors more clearly understand that their own work attitudes have good and bad consequences for their staff. Through this process, managers can more clearly understand how their own work attitudes and behaviours are linked to the attitudes and behaviours of their staff. The training we conduct as part of our '*Healthy Workplaces*' research project involves supervisors identifying their own leadership styles and then receiving one-on-one coaching to improve their people management skills. Assessments made before and after this training can empirically demonstrate changes in the health and performance of staff.

One interesting aside here, is the increase in unsupportive and/or malicious behaviours, which are being reported by workers within both public and private industries. While bullying of employees by supervisors has a recognised history in workplaces (i.e., *downwards bullying*) and has been an especially relevant issue for some female police officers (e.g., Brough, 2002; Brough & Frame, 2004), a newer development which is also pertinent for female workers is *horizontal* bullying (malicious behaviours by co-workers to co-workers at an equivalent rank) and *upwards* bullying (bullying of a supervisor by their subordinates). Recent reports from the military services for example, show a growing trend for some female supervisors to be bullied by their male subordinates. This has been described as a backlash against female promotions, especially within male-dominated organisations (e.g., Brough, O'Driscoll, Kalliath,

Figure 1: The Job Demands-Resources Model



Cooper, & Poelmans, 2009). Though we currently have no data regarding the rates of such bullying within Australian police services, it is interesting to note that our own data indicates that female officers are significantly more satisfied than male officers with their likelihood of promotion, particularly in the Senior Constable and Sergeant ranks.

3. WORK ENGAGEMENT

Another recent pertinent development in stress research is the emergence of work engagement as a construct of interest. Engagement is defined as the level of motivation and commitment displayed by a worker, and is increasingly being used as an overall 'barometer' or indicator of employee stress and satisfaction. Formally, work engagement is measured by three components: *absorption*, *vigour*, and *dedication*:

1. **Absorption** is defined as being concentrated and happily involved in one's work.
2. **Vigour** is characterised by feeling energetic while working (i.e., not fatigued).

3. **Dedication** is characterised by a worker's feelings of enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge, resulting from their work.

Thus, the ultimate engaged employee is someone who is absorbed by their work (i.e., is not clock-watching), enjoys their job (dedication), and feels energised by their work (vigour). Engagement is typically broken down into three levels: *actively disengaged*, *not engaged*, and *actively engaged*. We would all be able to identify co-workers who fit into each of these categories.

1. **Actively engaged** workers are loyal and committed to the organisation. These are the positive workers who perform the job well, enjoy the job, go 'above and beyond' the expectations of their job description, and are overall 'good citizens' at work. Unfortunately, in most workplaces only about 15% of workers fall in to this 'actively engaged' category. We have recently found, for example, that the ranks of Inspector and Constable contain the largest proportions of actively engaged officers. In comparison, the ranks of Senior Constable and Sergeant have the lowest proportion of actively engaged officers.

2. Workers who are **not engaged** are productive, but are not overly motivated by their work and/or are not wholly psychologically connected to their organisation. The main difference between this group and the actively

engaged is that while performing their jobs competently, they are unlikely to go 'above and beyond' the remit of their job descriptions. With appropriate motivation and leadership, these workers can move into the 'actively engaged' category. However, persistent perceptions of unfair treatment by the organisation may result in these workers falling into the 'actively disengaged' category. Unfortunately, the majority of workers including most police officers, fall into this middle category: typically 60-70% of workers. Somewhat surprisingly, we recently found that police constables had more 'not engaged' officers in comparison with all other police ranks.

3. **Actively disengaged** workers are undesirable employees. These workers are blatantly dissatisfied and cynical, often because of persistent frustrations with bureaucracy, lack of recognition or lack of rewards. The main danger of this group is that they are usually very vocal about their discontent, which can affect the morale and satisfaction of those they work with on a daily basis. These workers are also very undesirable in management positions, particularly where they are supervising new employees. In most organisations, around 15% of workers are actively disengaged. In our recent assessments for example, we found that more Sergeants were actively disengaged compared to officers in other ranks.

In tests of gender differences in engagement levels between police officers, we found that

overall female officers are *more engaged* in their work than male officers are. However when examining these differences specifically by rank, this gender difference is reduced. Specifically, a significant difference occurs for the rank of Senior Constable only; female Senior Constables are significantly more engaged compared to their equivalent male colleagues. Drilling down further, female Senior Constables are significantly more *absorbed* in their work than male officers are. Why exactly this is the case however, and the impact this higher level of absorption has on health outcomes, are both issues that we are currently researching.

4. RESILIENCE

Finally, resilience is also a relatively new term being applied within work stress research. Developing 'stress-resilient' workers is very topical and 'resilience training' has already been incorporated into some police recruit training programs. Resilience has a long history, and in previous incarnations has been labelled as *hardiness* and *stress-resistant*. Resilient workers are those who not only manage



stressful situations effectively and emerge relatively unscathed, but also exhibit positive learning and growth from the situation. This may sound contradictory, but such resilience is often experienced by emergency services and humanitarian aid workers, for example, who may feel a sense of purpose and self-validation occurring from their post-disaster assistance (e.g., Shakespeare-Finch, Gow, & Smith, 2005). Resilience in response to critical incidents is developed within work groups or organisations that have a climate of peer support, appreciation of a varied repertoire of individual coping strategies, openness, and clear communications between the ranks. Police services obviously wish to encourage resilience in their employees, and especially within the teams of specific response officers. A project we are currently conducting, again with Queensland Police Service (QPS), is trialling a police-specific resilience training program and comparing the officer's health and performance with staff in control groups who do not receive this training. If proven effective in the long-term, then the QPS will be able to provide its own evidence-based officer resilience in-house program.

CONCLUSION

Policing is widely recognised as a high-risk of stress occupation and the studying of the impact of police work on officer's health and performance has a substantial history. While significant advancements have been made in the provisions offered by most police services, it remains important to move forward in the effective reduction and management of workplace stress. This means for example, rethinking stress research which is based simply on the measurement of stress (i.e., stress/counselling surveys) and is not linked to a program to actually do something concrete with the findings. Some of the new developments in stress research (four of which we described in this paper) are assisting police services to offer tailored, evidence-based programs which can significantly improve the work environment for officers. Stress associated with police work will never be totally eliminated, but the impact of a number of police workplace stressors can certainly be reduced.

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR PAULA BROUH

Associate Professor Paula Brough is an organizational psychologist in the School of Psychology, Griffith University, Australia, and Director of the *Social and Organisational Psychology Research Unit*. Paula's research encompasses the evaluation and enhancement of occupational psychological health, with specific interests in occupational stress, coping and work-life balance. Specifically, Paula's research focuses on two main categories: (1) reducing experiences of occupational stress within the high-stress industries and, (2) enhancing individual health and organizational performance. Paula has produced over 50 publications describing her research primarily with the police, emergency services and corrections industries. This work was recently condensed into a book published by Edward Elgar: *Workplace Psychological Health* (2009). Paula is a member of journal editorial boards, serves as an academic reviewer and regularly presents her work to both academic and industry audiences.

JENNIFER BARBOUR

Jennifer Barbour is a PhD candidate in the organisational psychology program at the School of Psychology, Griffith University. Jennifer's thesis explores the role of police officer's workgroup environment on their well-being, turnover intentions and job performance. Jennifer has presented some of her initial findings at national and international conferences; winning an award for Best Student Paper at the 2009 Australian Psychological Society Organisational Psychology Conference. Jennifer is currently writing up these results for submission to both psychology and policing journals.