

Job Stress and the Police Officer:
Identifying Stress Reduction Techniques

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SUMMARY

Police work has been identified as one of a number of high stress occupations. Because of the importance of stressor identification and understanding, prior to the articulation and development of stress reduction techniques, this paper focuses upon the former. Based upon the author's experience as a police officer, over 30 alleged/implicit sources of psychological stress are identified, discussed, and organized into the following six categories: Intra-organizational practices and characteristics, inter-organizational practices and characteristics, criminal justice system practices and characteristics, public practices and characteristics, police work itself, and police officer him/herself. Collectively, the stressors appear to support the conclusion that law enforcement is a high stress occupation.

BACKGROUND

Police work has been identified as one of a number of high stress occupations. Current research has implicated psychological stress as an important causal agent in such health problems as coronary heart disease, gastro-intestinal malfunction, dermatological problems, severe nervous conditions, neurosis, and a number of other physical and mental disorders. Additionally, it can be speculated that health problems are not the only consequences of psychological stress; the alleged high rates of divorce and marital discord among law enforcement personnel may be attributable, at least in part, to occupational stress. Furthermore, certain forms of police malpractice, under certain conditions, may also have their origins in psychological stress. These, and perhaps other yet to be identified consequences, suggest the need to identify stressors in police work, and once identified and understood, to develop stress reduction techniques.

Prior to the identification and development of stress reduction techniques, it is important to attempt to identify the stressors themselves. In a research effort conducted in the Cincinnati Police Department, this task was addressed and a number of stressors were identified.¹ However, it is believed that the identification and understanding of stressors in police work is of such importance that additional perspectives and observations seem fully warranted. This paper will focus upon the task of stressors identification rather than stress reduction techniques. It will be seen that although the material which follows

1. Kroes, William H., Margolis, Bruce., and Hurrell, Joseph J. Job stress in policemen. Journal of Police Science and Administration, 1974, 2 (2) 145-155.

was developed independently of the aforementioned research in Cincinnati, substantial overlap exists. However, important differences also evidence themselves.

It is anticipated that some alleged stressors can fundamentally be eliminated with appropriate techniques such as changes in organizational practices and employee counseling. However, it is also expected that many stressors cannot be eliminated and, at best, techniques developed can only serve to help the individual cope with the condition/stressor. Furthermore, there is possibly a class of stressors which can neither be eliminated nor coped with, but must be accepted as a natural condition of employment as a police officer. In these cases, the form of adjustment the individual takes is far more important than the technique itself. Finally, the articulation of stress reduction techniques should include not only post-employment methods (e.g., changes in organizational practices and counseling) but pre-employment techniques also (i.e., selection methods).

This paper, as previously indicated, will focus upon stressor identification. The author has attempted to provide symposium participants with a classification of various stressors. The limitations of this classification should be made perfectly clear. Stressors identified are not based upon data nor research, they are basically reflections of the author's personal observations and feelings while performing the functions of a patrol officer in a metropolitan law enforcement agency for approximately two years. These observations are distorted to some extent by virtue of the author's unique association with the San Jose Police Department which is a temporary one. In this regard, the implications of a "20-year career" in law enforcement are absent. Furthermore, the author's age which is approximately 10 years in excess of the average age of police officers performing the patrol function may have some important implications.

FRAMEWORK

Over 30 alleged/IMPLIED sources of psychological stress are organized below into the following six categories:

- I. Intra-Organizational Practices and Characteristics
- II. Inter-Organizational Practices and Characteristics
- III. Criminal Justice System Practices and Characteristics
- IV. Public Practices and Characteristics
- V. Police Work Itself
- VI. Police Officer Himself/Herself

Neither the order of presentation of the six categories nor the stressors identified within each category imply any order of importance or veracity. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the stressors identified are largely speculative in nature, unsupported by data or research. Finally, the 30 sources of psychological stress are not intended to represent a comprehensive description of all stressors in police work.

SOURCES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS

I. Intra-Organizational Practices and Characteristics

Intra-organizational practices and characteristics refer to features within an organization which may provoke and encourage the development and

growth of psychological stress among police personnel, particularly patrol officers. In this category, particularly, it is important to distinguish bitching and griping which may be considered in some way healthy in a morale sense from serious sources of frustration, and in the larger context, stress. Further, it should be realized that police officers occasionally behave as children for they misunderstand as frequently as they are misunderstood. In spite of these reservations, the following conditions seem to represent legitimate sources of psychological stress:

1 - Poor Supervision - Supervision, particularly sergeants, play a key role in the world of work of a police officer. Styles of supervision vary tremendously, some providing a haven for the nurturance of psychological stress, while others tend to prohibit its manifestation or at least provide a vehicle available to the police officer for coping with stress. The supervisor who always "goes by the book," is never available on a complicated or delicate street situation, is overly demanding, tends not to back-up a subordinate when conditions justify such support, or who fails to attend to subordinate's personal needs represents a supervisor who can substantially contribute to the psychological stress of his subordinates. The importance of the supervisor in the life of the patrol officer cannot be underestimated.

2 - Absence or Lack of Career Development Opportunities - The vast majority of police officers start and end their careers as patrolmen. Opportunities for promotion to higher rank are limited and the promotional process itself ordinarily lacks fairness and objectivity; this fact alone generates substantial frustration. Typically, specialized assignments within the patrolman rank are also limited and highly competitive. For these and other reasons, police officers frequently assume corollary careers in other professions.

3 - Inadequate Reward/Reinforcement System - Although this stressor relates in part to the condition described above, it stands largely by itself. Recognition and compensation for work well done is extremely limited in law enforcement. One can count on being "recognized" for poor performance but good performance somehow stands as the norm or expected behavior. Most of the behavioral monitoring systems are negative in nature and as such generates stress. The existence of "internal affairs" units without a positive organizational counterpart, for example, supports the allegation and condition.

4 - Offensive Policy - Police organizations abound with policies which their memberships find offensive, threatening, and unreasonable. Two particularly compelling and contemporary issues concern use of force and minority recruitment. Frequently these and other policies provoke much psychological stress. They can further initiate a "don't give a damn" attitude which eventually the individual himself finds conflict with. Although one can postulate divergent explanations which support conclusions that some policies are offensive, they nevertheless are perceived as offensive by police officers, and as such are stressful.

5 - Excessive Paper Work - At first glance, this intra-organizational characteristic may appear childish and absurd. Yet, the volume of paper which police officers push is incredible. Equally, if not more important, is the fact that all too often the need, purpose, and value of this paper work is called into serious question by the police officer himself. Personal experience strongly suggests the legitimacy of these questions. To the scientist, this situation is analogous to the numerous research reports gathering dust while sitting on their shelves.

6 - Poor Equipment - When the quality of one's work and one's physical well-being is part dependent upon one's equipment, the quality of that equipment and its maintenance takes on significance. Adequacy of physical facilities and the juxtaposition of related facilities also becomes important. In this regard the quality and maintenance of vehicles, hard communications equipment, and safety materials can become, at the very least, sources of frustration if inadequate.

II. Inter-Organizational Practices and Characteristics

Inter-organizational practices and characteristics refer to features between or among police agencies which may lead themselves, to some extent, to the manifestation of stress. Two of these sources are briefly described below:

7 - Absence or Lack of Career Development Opportunities - Unlike many other professions, law enforcement, in most cases, limits its growth of personnel to development within a particular organization or agency. The primary exception to this condition is at the very top of the organization; the police chief. Police chiefs and other high-ranking police officials have substantial opportunity for mobility within the profession and, in fact, evidence such mobility. However, for the vast majority of police personnel, career development and growth opportunity within the profession is extremely limited. When connected with the limited opportunities within the agency itself, as previously described in item 2 above, this source of stress comes to take on significant proportions. It is conceivable that the opportunity for growth and development evidences itself more frequently in changes in careers or insertions into other related professions (e.g., probation, fire service, law) than within the law enforcement profession itself. Attempts to open-up the degree of mobility have met with much resistance and little success (i.e., lateral entry).

8 - Jurisdictional Isolationism - Law enforcement agencies tend to operate in a vacuum and within a particular jurisdiction. Boundary lines are jealously guarded and therefore restrict the degree of cooperation among police agencies. Although mutual aid agreements exist with great frequency and occasionally are put into effect under emergency/crisis conditions, the experience frequently creates worsened relationships between or among the "participating" agencies. This stressor is perhaps more evident among ranking police personnel and investigative staff than among uniformed patrolmen in that the job responsibilities of the former personnel more frequently involve contacts and associations with staff from other police agencies than is the case with uniformed patrolmen.

III. Criminal Justice System Practices and Characteristics

Criminal justice system practices and characteristics refer to conditions which ordinarily exist among agencies within the criminal justice system itself (e.g., adult and juvenile probation, parole, sheriff and police agencies, corrections facilities, municipal and superior courts, and public defenders and prosecuting offices). In summary, the system is by no stretch of the imagination a system but a conglomerate of fragmented agencies which have a mission in common. Examples of more specific stressors include the following:

9 - Ineffectiveness of Corrections Sub-System - For whatever the reason may be, corrections facilities at whatever governmental level have failed to rehabilitate offenders and to a large extent no longer serve the warehousing role they

once did. As a consequence, police officers continually find themselves confronting the same individuals and frequently for the same or similar offenses. Accordingly, the activities of police officers, as seen by police officers, are frequently viewed as "paper exercises" which generate volume upon volume of reports which only infrequently anybody pays attention to. A sense of meaninglessness comparable to pounding away at a pile of rock therefore develops. Additionally, the feeling that "if they don't care, why the hell should I" also follows.

10 - Unfavorable Court Decisions - Whether justified or not, certain court decisions, particularly Supreme Court decisions, have been judged by police personnel to be antagonistic to part of the law enforcement mission; namely, the suppression of crime. Taken within the context of other circumstances, this stressor is perceived as one more condition which works against and prohibits the effective discharge of the police responsibility.

11 - Misunderstood Judicial Procedure - Because the adversary system of justice is misunderstood and/or unendorsed by a large percentage of police officers, much of judicial procedure is seen as inefficient at best and frequently downright belittling. The individual, for example, who has been the subject of cross-examination and the techniques employed by defense or prosecuting attorneys to discredit testimony, although procedurally and philosophically appropriate, cannot help but feel personally threatened and belittled by the entire process. Anxiety runs high prior to and during testimony. Furthermore, the role played by police officers in this context is frequent and continuing throughout their careers.

12 - Inefficient Courtroom Management - Delays and continuances in the judicial process are typical. Furthermore, scheduling with rare exception, excludes consideration of the police officer's on and off-duty time. Although allowances are made in terms of occasional re-scheduling and compensation for overtime, the scheduling of judicial proceedings usually interferes with the officer's personal life. This is particularly evident with work shifts other than days which can severely disrupt one's sleeping and other personal activities. To police officers, it seems that only they in the courtroom drama are exposed to this inconvenience and disruption for all the others (e.g., judges, attorneys, defendants, witnesses, experts, clerks, recorders, bailiffs) ordinarily work days and are thus not exposed to such turbulent work/personal life conditions.

13 - Preoccupation with Street Crime - This stressor is perhaps one which evidences itself among a relatively small proportion of police officers but is nevertheless a compelling issue. Law enforcement basically deals with street crime, that is so-called violent crime which is codified in penal code and which is typically perpetrated by poor, ignorant, physically and mentally disabled people. Certainly one would agree that there are all kinds of "criminal" actions which are not within the province or emphasis of law enforcement. Typically included would be much of "white collar" crime and "wrongs" which are considered civil in nature. The simple action of one or more people "messing over" one or more other people ranges from such circumstances as the Watergate incident to the slum landlord. To some officers then, there is a constant hassling of and emphasis upon perpetrators of street crime. Perpetrators of other forms of disorder, if not defined as a crime, go largely if not entirely ignored by law enforcement agency personnel. Summarily, it can appear then that law enforcement takes one small bite out of the total disorder picture.

IV. Public Practices and Characteristics

Public practices and characteristics refer to sources of stress outside of law enforcement and the criminal justice system which impact police officers. Included are the following:

14 - Distorted Press Accounts of Police Incidents - The need for timeliness with regard to the reporting of news is of paramount importance to the newspaper industry. Accordingly, deadlines have to be met on a scheduled and continuing basis. Frequently then, the accounting of a police incident in the local newspaper is distorted by way of incompleteness and/or language intended to stimulate the reader. Distortions are often offensive in nature to the police profession itself and are therefore perceived by police officers as derogatory to their image in the community, something which is in fact valued by police officers.

15 - Unfavorable Minority Attitudes - Attitudes about the police expressed by various minority elements of a community are frequently unfavorable, at best. Typical, are allegations of brutality and racism. To most officers, such allegations are perceived as unfair at the very least. Frequently, these attitudes contradict officer's personal impressions of themselves which are based upon their own personal experiences on the street relating to minority members of the community. Once again, the image and reputation of the profession is threatened, as it so often is in other contexts; and, image/reputation is of considerable importance to most police officers.

16 - Unfavorable Majority Attitudes - Majority members of a community also frequently articulate attitudes which police officers find offensive. Slow response time to an assignment or call is but one example. Another example includes the traffic stop situation where citizens call into question the legitimacy of the citation and such police activity. A third example is the citizen who expounds upon the value and importance of law enforcement yet really fails to support important police related ballot propositions when put to the voters.

17 - Derogatory Remarks By Neighbors and Others - This stressor is similar to those already described in this category but evidence themselves in the police officer's own neighborhood and usually while off-duty. It is of significance in that it obviously infringes upon the officer's personal life while away from work and accounts, in part, for the tendency of police officers to isolate and insulate themselves from non-police people.

18 - Adverse Local Government Decisions - Frequently, local government decisions are made independently of law enforcement inputs yet impact law enforcement operations. At best, such decisions are misunderstood by law enforcement personnel, at worst they are taken as a slap in the face. On those occasions when input is allowed (e.g., budget), the decision reached is frequently perceived as unfavorable. Issues of contemporary importance include such areas as: minority recruitment and selection, use of force policy, disciplinary hearings and budget, particularly in regards to increased manpower and safety equipment.

19 - Ineffectiveness of Referral Agencies - Theoretically, the extent to which referral agencies can be put to use by police officers is tremendous. The volume of police work which is non-criminal or borderline criminal in nature is great and police-citizen contacts are such that assistance of some

sort beyond police intervention is frequently evident and compelling. Either there is a lack of referral agencies in a particular jurisdiction or those that do exist are perceived as ineffective. Certainly those who work for referral agencies feel the same frustrations. This stressor does however contribute to the police officer's overwhelming sense of uselessness and inability to contribute significantly to helping those who do in fact need help.

V. Police Work Itself

Police work itself represents a category of stressors which are not tied to the police agency within which one works, nor the system of criminal justice, nor the public, but to basic aspects of the law enforcement job. Included are the following:

20 - Role Conflict - In a recently published book by Sterling,² the subject of role conflict in police work was researched. Five different intra-role conflict situations were studied. "Stopping the rise in crime" was perhaps the most significant conflict situation of those studied and therefore will be used to exemplify a class of stressors based upon role conflict in police work. "Stopping the rise in crime" basically involves the conflict between maximizing efficiency in enforcing the law on the one hand versus the guaranteeing of constitutional rights and civil liberties, on the other hand. This intra-role conflict situation is considered a potential if not really source of stress. Additionally, a great variety of inter-role conflicts in law enforcement (e.g., occupational vs. marital role) may have significant stressor consequences.

21 - Adverse Work Scheduling - Shift work characterizes law enforcement work scheduling. It is considered a significant stressor in that it has substantial adverse effects upon one's family life and possibly health. Changing shifts every month, three months, or whatever is disruptive to one's personal and occupational styles. Adjustments become a demanding way of life. For example, the change from day shift to swings or midnights requires numerous personal and occupational modifications. Additionally, related issues previously addressed such as hold-overs, court time, and late/untimely assignments create a working environment which disallows both short and long term planning regarding one's personal life.

22 - Fear and Danger - Whether policemen express it or not, law enforcement contains dangerous elements which provoke fear; fear of serious injury, fear of disability, fear of death. Although the frequency with which such incidents is lower than in other dangerous professions, the unexpectedness of such incidents creates a hazardous environment within which to work. Additionally, the techniques employed to enhance officer safety are frequently such as to mitigate against if not outright antagonize the development of good public and community relations, the latter ordinarily encouraged by police and city administrative personnel.

23 - Sense of Uselessness - Occasionally alluded to briefly in previous issues, much of police work generates a sense of uselessness and meaningless-

² Sterling, James W. Changes in role concepts of police officers. Gaithersburg: International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1972

ness. Frustrations are profound for those police officers who seriously endorse the value of "helping people," a value which frequently is one of the first to go with exposure and experience. The inability to effectively function and successfully deal with people's problems confronts the police officer daily. The forms of adjustment are numerous ranging from learning to be satisfied with the few and rare successes to clear and apparent apathy; from conclusions of "that's the nature of the job" to rationalizations about why the job can't be performed more effectively; from continued, dedicated job involvement to the development of interests in other professions and/or activities.

24 - Absence of Closure - To a large extent, much of police work is fragmented in the sense that opportunities for follow-up on a case are limited and feedback from other police personnel (e.g., detectives) on cases police officers were originally involved in is minimal. In some sense then, it is almost like working on a production-line making but one contribution to the total product or service.

25 - People Pain - The street is full of people suffering and agonized, both physically and mentally. Brutality, pain and death is normal, usual and eventually almost routine. No matter how police officer may come to adjust to this condition and fact of life, it must take its toll. Once again, the form of adjustment varies but it is expected that some are more conducive to the manifestation and encouragement of stress than others.

26 - The Startle - Law enforcement has often been characterized as containing much boredom. Depending upon the type of city, shift, beat, time of year, and other conditions, periods of boredom do exist. Yet, at most any time a quick response to a particular condition is required and such a response is jolting to one's physical and mental state. Most anything can happen most any-time and the unexpectedness of events is very much part of the job. These "ups" and "downs" on a variable schedule would appear on their face to be stressful.

27 - Consequences of Actions - Police work is serious business. It is demanding both physically and mentally. Things done well or by-the-book pose no problem for the officer evidencing that behavior. However, in many situations, and frequently in those appearing to be benign or routine, consequences can be severe for a mistake even if accidental and unintended. Citizen complaints, disciplinary actions, civil litigation occur with apparent frequency, sometimes to the point of creating timid behavior among police officers. Sometimes a fear almost always a concern, the police officer continually must be aware of his actions, their appropriateness, and possible adverse consequences.

28 - Twenty Plus Years - It is anticipated that the effects of many of the stressors described are cumulative in nature. Therefore, it is inappropriate to view any one of the stressors as a unique condition unconnected to other stressors and without long-term continuity. Certainly, it has been the author's personal experience that the ability to cope with stressors in a short-term context is both different and easier than would be expected in a long-term career sense. The consequences of this condition therefore appear to justify inclusion as a unique stressor.

IV. Police Officer Himself/Herself

Stressors evident among unique police officers constitute another category of stressor which adds to those already described in the proceeding five categories. Additionally, they are of significance in that they have implications for the selection of police personnel whereas stress reduction techniques appropriate to other categories are basically post-selection or non-selection methods (e.g., changes in police organizational practices and counseling/therapy services). The following five unique police officers are discussed:

29 - The Incompetent - The incompetent police officer who has been unable to benefit from training and/or early experience is one who is subjected to severe stress far beyond the stress already described. Although many leave the business and self-select themselves out, other stay in the profession and attempt in various ways to cope with their own incompetence.

30 - The Fear-Ridden - The police officer who is in the constant fear of his/her own physical well-being (i.e., the "wimp") is also subject to additional stress. Not always one and the same with the incompetent, the police officer who lacks courage becomes the object of great ridicule from his peers, which is ordinarily one of the very few sources of support and positive recognition for police officers and the work they perform. Once again, not always do they leave the business and enter new careers.

31 - The Non-Conformist - The law enforcement profession demands conformity from its members and allows little deviation from established norms. Pressures to conform are incredibly severe and few can tolerate such pressures once subjected to it. Law enforcement is more than a job, it is entry into a family and violation of family expectations will result in ridicule and exclusion, if not disowning of the off-spring (e.g., Serpico).

32 - The Ethnic Minority Officer - The minority police officer is a very special breed of police officer. Not only is he/she exposed to the stressors already described but the additional stresses of rejection and skepticism by members of his own ethnic background. Further, he or she is ordinarily not fully accepted into the police family, which is a great source of support, camaraderie and occupational identity.

33 - The Female Officer - The female police officer is also subject to additional and unique stressors. These include: her own feelings of competence; how she is perceived; how her peers, particularly males, view her competence; and unfavorable reactions by some citizens. Of course, reluctant acceptance within the police culture constitutes another possible source of stress.

Summarily, 33 sources of psychological stress which manifests themselves within the context of law enforcement have been briefly described. Obviously, on their fair, they vary in importance and consequence. However, each plays its role, no matter how small, in the total law enforcement milieu. Whether each represents a true source of psychological stress or is merely an example of tolerable and necessary frustration no different than that found in other occupations is open to debate. Hopefully, this symposium will, among other things, address itself to this very issue.

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