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EVIDENCE-BASED POLICING: new perspectives

PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS AS PREDICTORS OF BURNOUT AMONG POLICE OFFICERS WITH DIFFERENT YEARS OF EXPERIENCE



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1. Background & Aim

Policing is recognized as one of the most stressful and high-risk occupations, and, in the line of duty, police officers are repeatedly exposed to operational stressors in the form of unpredictable and potentially dangerous or traumatic situations (Balmer, Pooley & Cohen, 2014; Yung et al., 2015). Over the past years, chronic occupational stress became a concern among researchers and clinicians, especially when it leads to burnout (Maslach, 2011, 2015; Weber & Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2014) has recently developed the Health Places campaign, alerting that 14% of European workers referred stress, depression and anxiety as more frequent psychosocial risks related with professional tasks. Literature revealed a significant association between burnout and psychopathological indicators (Rossler et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014), suggesting a general decrease in psychological wellbeing caused by work tasks (Weber & Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). Kelty and Gordon (2015) referred that it is estimated that close to one-fifth of emergency management, law-enforcement and criminal justice personnel will develop, or are at a high risk of developing, occupational stress, with damages for individuals and organization services. Recently, longitudinal and cohort studies increased, since they allow to follow individuals and to better assess the impact of context variables on their behavior (McQueen et al., 2015).

This study aims to identify and compare burnout and psychopathological symptoms among 3 groups of police officers from Portuguese National Police (PSP - Polícia de Segurança Pública): students, working at their first year and working with more experience years. The study also aims to know the relationship between burnout and psychopathological symptoms, checking if psychopathological symptoms are burnout predictors.

2. Methods

Participants: The sample consisted of 100 students at police school, 230 police officers during their 1st year of work, and 230 police officers with more experience (between 4 and 12 years of professional experience, M= 7.61 and SD=1.866), all working in Lisbon district. They were aged between 20 and 36 years (M=27.88 SD=3.899), 92% were male, 41% single (59% married), and 5% have high graduation (95% have 11 or 12 years of school, the minimum degree to be accepted at this police force).

Instruments: They fulfilled Portuguese versions of Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1997; Marques Pinto & Picado, 2011) and SCL90-R (Derogatis, 1977; Batista, 1993), to evaluate burnout using emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and professional achievement dimensions, and to evaluate psychopathological symptoms, namely somatization, obsessions, interpersonal sensibility, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobias, paranoid traits, psychotic traits and various symptoms.

Procedure: Data were collected during regular and official psychological assessment of each group, done by Psychology Unit of PSP. For research purposes, data were analyzed anonymously. **Data analysis**: IBM-SPSS-21 was used to perform descriptive, correlation (*R Pearson*) and Stepwise regression analysis.

3. Results

Results revealed low burnout levels and low presence of psychopathological symptoms (Table 1). Emotional exhaustion presents a mean of 0.88 (using a 0-6 point scale) depersonalization mean was 0.68 and professional achievement mean was 4.73. All psychopathological symptoms' dimensions presented low intensity, being less than 1, using a 0-4 point scale. Differences between the 3 groups were found only for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and professional achievement, with students presenting low values of emotional exhaustion when compared with 1st year and experience group, and 1st year group presenting more depersonalization when compared with students (lower values) and experience group. Professional achievement distinguished all groups, with students presenting higher values and experience group presenting the lowest ones. Regarding psychopathological symptoms, only somatization differentiates groups, with experience group presenting higher values and students lower ones.

Depersonalization presents a weak negative correlation with age (r=-,144), while somatization presents a weak positive correlation with age (r=,095) being higher among male police officers than among females (p=,000). Somatizations and depression were higher among female than among male (respectively p=,046 and p=,022). Moderate positive significant correlations were found between emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and psychopathological symptoms (r between ,231 and ,541), and weak negative correlations were found between professional achievement and psychopathological symptoms (r between -,172 and -,339).

Regression analysis (Table 2) revealed that psychopathological symptoms explain 33% of emotional exhaustion, 15% of depersonalization and 11% of professional achievement, with no differences between groups. Depression and interpersonal sensibility seems to be important predictors.

4. Conclusions

Despite the presence of low burnout level and low psychopathological symptoms, experience group seems to present low psychological wellbeing compared with students and 1st year group, suggesting that stress increases with more professional years, and that psychopathological symptoms are related with emotional exhaustion. Regular assessment of these professionals is needed, following the same individuals during different years, which allow to prevent occupational stress and to define stress management strategies directed especially to police officers' specific tasks (Anshel & Brinthaupt, 2014; Grubb et al., 2015; Sundaram & Kumaran, 2012).

Table 1. Mean comparison between groups												
MBI (0-6 scale)	Students	officers1st year	officers	All sample	F Oneway		Bonferroni					
BSI (0-4 scale)	(N=100) a	(N=230) b	(N=230) c	(N=560)	Anova	р	р					
Emotional exhaustion	0,59	0,89	1,00	0,88	8,642	,000	a-b,007 a-c,000					
Depersonalization	0,46	0,81	0,65	0,68	8,876	,000	<u>b-a</u> ,000 b-c ,047					
Professional achievement	5,05	4,78	4,55	4,73	11,107	,000	a-b ,040 a-c ,000					
Somatization	0,30	0,33	0,42	0,36	6,592	,001	c-a ,009 c-b ,007					
Obsessions	0,65	0,63	0,63	0,63	,137	,872	_					
Interpersonal sensibility	0,36	0,28	0,29	0,30	2,247	,107	_					
Depression	0,27	0,28	0,28	0,27	,066	,936	_					
Anxiety	0,23	0,22	0,24	0,23	,659	,518	_					
Hostility	0,27	0,27	0,32	0,29	1,558	,211	_					
Phobias	0,06	0,08	0,08	0,07	,273	,761	-					
Paranoid traits	0,56	0,47	0,45	0,48	2,027	,133	-					
Psychotic traits	0,11	0,11	0,09	0,10	,658	,518	-					
Various symptoms	0,51	0,51	0,58	0,54	1,808	,165	-					
Symptoms' severity	0,32	0,31	0,33	0,32	,332	,718	-					
Disease degree	1,21	1,20	1,20	1,21	,058	,944	-					
Symptoms' variety (0-90)	23,52	22,81	24,69	23,71	,647	,524	-					
Symptoms' total (0-360)	29,07	28,09	29,82	28,98	,332	,718	-					

Dependent variable	Predictors	R ²	R ² change	β	t	р	F (p)
Emotional exhaustion	Depression	,256	,256	,230	3,192	,001	
	Somatization	,288	,032	,191	3,790	,000	
	Obsessions	,302	,014	,165	2,956	,003	44,238
	Interpersonal sensibility	,308	,007	-,219	-3,437	,001	(,000)
	Paranoid traits	,320	,011	,169	2,901	,004	
	Hostility	,325	,005	,103	2,060	,040	
Depersonalization	Psychotic traits	,114	,114	,247	4,123	,000	
	Paranoid traits	,134	,021	,221	3,620	,000	24,657
	Hostility	,141	,007	,138	2,620	,009	(,000)
	Interpersonal sensibility	,151	,010	-,177	-2,530	,012	1
Professional achievement	Depression	,102	,102	-,184	-2,821	,005	35,235
	Interpersonal sensibility	,112	,011	-,170	-2,598	,010	(,000)

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