

STRESS PERCEPTION AND SENSATION SEEKING IN PORTUGUESE POLICE OFFICERS INVOLVED IN PEACE KEEPING MISSIONS IN EAST TIMOR

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1. Introduction

Policing is a stressful activity. Police officers must deal with aggressive people, delinquents, and danger, or with victims and citizens asking for help. Often, with lack of resources and under stressful conditions. In international peacekeeping missions, stressful situations are even more frequent, increased also by hostile reactions of the inhabitants of the country, who sometimes refuse the presence of foreign police forces. These missions are established in scenarios of crisis brought on by war due to inter-state economic interests that appear masked as religious, ethnic and nationalistic differences. Resulting in crisis scenarios, where there is an increase in disorder and uncertainty within a system (Correia, 2004), materializing in breach of the ceasefire agreement, absence of law, risks of armed conflict, massive atrocities on the civilian population, collapse of civil infrastructure, local governments, non-cooperative and undefined areas of action (Waddington, 1999; Wilkinson & Rinaldo, 1995). Despite those situations, some police officers don't feel stress and show higher sensation seeking, suggesting that personality traits protect from stress.

Key words: Stress, Sensation seeking, Police officers, Peace keeping missions, Personality traits.

2. Aims

To identify levels of stress perception and sensation seeking personality traits in a sample of United Nations Police Officers (Portuguese) involved in a peace keeping mission in East-Timor, a former Portuguese colony.

3. Methods

• **Participants:** Data was collected on 70 male police officers from the Portuguese National Republican Guard, after returning from a peace keeping mission in East Timor. The sample was 100% male; aged between 22 – 52 years (M=31.3 SD= 5.6), 63 % married, 33% single and 4% divorced; 60% returned from their first mission, 61% lived a stressful or dangerous event during the mission, especially related with violence and death. Main reason founding the decision to go on a mission was having a better salary, being valorized in the career and having new experiences.

• **Instruments:** Individual and professional characterization questionnaire; Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al, 1983) and Sensation Seeking Scale V (Zuckerman, 1994) Portuguese Versions.

• **Procedure:** Data was collected on the Portuguese National Republican Guard Anti-riot Unit, during July 2008, using self-completion questionnaire, anonymous and confidential, after formal authorization and 2 months after returning from East-Timor.

• **Data analysis:** SPSS-15 was used to do descriptive and correlational analysis (R Pearson).

4. Results

• The results reveal low stress experiences during mission, and the presence of moderate levels of sensation-seeking, with variations in values among dimensions (Table 1). Compared with other studies, our research revealed the higher levels on all the considered dimensions, specially on thrill and adventure seeking and experience seeking. Boredom susceptibility has low values, and those values in boredom dimension are typical for police officers, since they often must policy no challenging areas, however they have to be always alert of danger.

• No significant correlations were identified between stress and sensation seeking (R Person between -0.100 and 0.175), despite literature and other portuguese studies founded negative correlations (Mendes, 2005; Oliveira, 2008). One possible justification is the fact that our sample is a higher trained unit, prepared to adequately deal with stressful events.

Table 1. Means for stress and sensation seeking in different studies

Studies	Mean (SD)	Mendes (2005)	Oliveira (2008)	Goma-i-Freixanet et al. (2002)	Glicksohn & Bozna (2000)
Dimensions (scale)					
Stress (0-56)	11,73 (5,826)	-	-	-	-
Thrill and adventure seeking (0-10)	7,46 (2,083)	6,97	6,48	7,25	6,71
Experience seeking (0-10)	4,89 (1,982)	4,08	4,65	4,80	4,55
Disinhibition (0-10)	3,96 (1,740)	3,52	3,85	4,45	3,86
Boredom susceptibility (0-10)	1,74 (1,270)	2,15	2,28	2,85	2,12
Sensation Seeking (0-40)	18,04 (5,106)	16,72	17,26	19,35	-

5. Conclusions

Literature demonstrates that personality traits can protect from stress. However our sample does not present significant correlations between stress and sensation seeking, showing even lower levels of stress. Sensation seeking is typical of some activities, including policing, and our results are consistent with other studies, with police officers having sensation seeking personality traits. The knowledge of personality traits can be useful to select the most adequate individuals to deal with stressful situations.

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