Psychology essays - forensic psychology

Forensic Psychology: Critically discuss research studies that have investigated the psychological factors associated with police stress.

There is a natural assumption in the public consciousness that being a police officer is a stressful occupation. It is thought that the effects of dealing with the kinds of people and situations that police officer's are regularly required to must be stressful. This perception is not just confined to lay-people: psychiatrists and occupational physicians find that police officers are in the top three occupations that are reported to the Occupational Disease Intelligence Network (ODIN). Similarly, studies such as Schmitdke, Fricke & Lester (1999) have found a higher rate of suicide amongst police officers than other similar members of a German population. In a recent review of 26 different professions in the UK, Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor & Millet (2005) found that police officers were amongst the top 6 professions for high levels of stress and low levels of job satisfaction.

Like any area of psychological research, individual differences are going to be important in how a person reacts to a situation. There has been some research carried out into the different individual factors that affect police stress in a number of different police forces around the world. Many of the researched populations have not, however, involved the police, but the factors that have been examined are common amongst occupational groups. Amongst these, Clarke & Cooper (2000) include Type A behaviour, negative affectivity, the locus of control, coping styles and psychological hardiness. Negative affectivity, for example, is a tendency in an individual to show generally negative emotions and reactions across a range of situations. The

research has frequently found a link between stress and negative affectivity. Similarly there is a large amount of research into Type A personalities. Type A personalities are often impatient, strive for achievement and are very competitive. This factor has been shown to be important in connection with stress. Davidson & Veno (1980) report that 75% of a sample of police officers showed that they had Type A personalities – not a surprise considering some of the job requirements.

The idea of psychological hardiness has also been shown to be important in stress reaction – this has been defined by Lambert & Lambert (1999) as involving the factors of control, commitment and challenge. Control refers to the extent to which a person believes that they have an influence over the things that happen to them, commitment envisages an involvement with events that are happening, and challenge infers an approach to life that incorporates and expects change as a matter of course. Hills & Norvell (1991) examine psychological hardiness in a sample of 234 highway patrol officers. The findings showed that hardiness as well as neuroticism (almost the same as negative affectivity) moderated the relationship between measures of stress and its physiological and psychological consequences.

Much of the older research into stress in the police has concentrated on the negative impact of police work. It has tended to assume that bad experiences at work will tend to result in stress, which in turn results in an absence of well-being. This may not be correct, as research has shown that bad experiences do not tend to have a negative effect on well-being (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Hart, Wearing, & Headey (1995) wanted to examine, then, how personality, coping and work experiences affected well-being. 527

Australian police officers completed a Perceived Quality of Life questionnaire that incorporated a number of different measures including the Satisfaction With Life scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) and the General Well-Being Questionnaire (Cox & Gott, 1990). This research made a number of findings based on these data. For their first finding they compared the psychological well-being of police officers to other professions, in this case school teachers, tertiary students and community norms. It was found that police officers showed similar levels of psychological well-being to these other groups. This lead the authors of the this study to conclude that police officers have normal levels of psychological well-being. This finding can be questioned though, as Johnson et al. (2005) found that teachers also tend to have high levels of stress and low levels of job satisfaction. Hart et al. (1995) are not making valid comparisons. That caveat aside, the authors did look more specifically at what factors were associated with higher levels of stress. Here they confirmed what has already been a consistent finding in the research that it is organisational variables that contribute more to levels of stress than operational variables. In other words police officers in this sample, as in previous research, found their police departments a greater source of stress than dealing with criminals and the extreme situations they came into contact with during their job. As well as these aspects, this research also examined personality variables, police work experiences and coping strategies to see how they affected well-being but no particularly strong findings were reported other than some moderate correlations.

Findings about the importance of organisational variables over operational variables have also been found in a sample of police officers from the UK.

Collins & Gibbs (2003) administered a postal questionnaire to 1, 206 members of a county police force who were constables and sergeants. This questionnaire attempted to assess the complete loop of the stress-strain cycle by obtaining measures of perceived occupational stress and perceived life stress. Further to this measures were taken of personality factors, moderators in the form of social support and the individual's shift pattern to look for a correlation there as well. In addition to these the General Health Questionnaire was administered. Collins & Gibbs (2003) report previous evidence of two studies in the UK that found that levels of mental ill-health amongst police officers was between 17 and 22% (Brown & Campbell, 1990, Alexander, Walker, Innes & Irving, 1993). In this study, however, mental ill-health had risen to 42% of the sample suggesting that levels of stress, and/or its effects, had risen in the 10 years between the studies. In examining the cause of the stress, this study confirmed the result found in Hart et al. (1995) in finding that it was organisational stressors that had a greater effect than operational stressors. The measurement of other factors such as personality, social support and shift work did not provide any particularly significant results. For example little association was found between shift work and stress levels, contrary to previous research which has found it to be associated with higher levels of stress (Brown & Campbell, 1990). A clear disadvantage of this study in being able to generalise to other police officers was that it was carried out in a relatively small non-metropolitan police force. Different balances of operational issues and organisational demands may be present. The authors counter this criticism citing a study into Manchester Metropolitan police force which found a similar concentration on the organisational issues (Crowe & Stradling, 1993).

Much of the older research on stress in the police suffered from methodological flaws, such as using incorrect measures and failing to compare police officers with other occupational groups (Hart et al., 1995). Brough (2004) researched police officers as well as fire and ambulance officers to compare the levels of stress and the response. It was found that levels of psychological trauma and organisational stressors were relatively similar across the services, while again, the importance of organisational stressors over operational stressors was repeated.

Looking now more closely at stress, and what kinds of stress police officers have to deal with, it is useful to outline a model of stress to inform the discussion. Mitchell & Bray (1990) explain that stress reactions can be categorised into three main different forms: cumulative, delayed and acute. Cumulative stress builds up over a period of time from a number of incidents, while both delayed and acute stress may have their primary cause in one particular incident, often called a ' critical incident'. Police officers are often exposed to a number of critical incidents so the study of their effects on officers is of importance.

The effects of this stress have been found to be considerable in many studies. One particularly strong type of reaction to stress is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which may be caused by experiencing an event involving the threat of death or an actual death. This is clearly something that a police officer is more likely to experience in their career with regularity than in most other professions. Ursano & McCarroll (1990), for example, found that the handling of dead bodies and parts of bodies was a significant psychological stressor that caused psychological trauma. Stephens & Miller

(1998) investigated the rates of PTSD amongst a sample of 527 New Zealand police officers. They found that the rate of PTSD was similar to that experienced by members of a different population that had experienced a traumatic event of a similar nature. The majority of individuals in both groups recovered successfully from the experience. An important finding of this study was that a relationship was found between the number of traumatic events witnessed and subsequent diagnoses of PTSD. Research in the UK has augmented these findings, Green (2004) reports evidence from Robinson, Sigman & Wilson (1997) that found the prevalence of PTSD amongst suburban police officers of 13%, this compares to the prevalence amongst the general population of 2-3%. Green (2004) examined whether PTSD was any more severe amongst members of the police force, once established, than it was in the overall population. The study found that there were no significant differences between the two groups. A criticism of this study was that the number of participants was limited, with only 31 police officers and 72 civilians taking part. Still, the strong effects of trauma are replicated in other research: Carlier, Lamberts & Gersons (1997) found in a sample of 262 traumatised police officers that, 3 months after a trauma they showed introversion, emotional exhaustion. In addition, at 12 months post trauma they continued to have difficulty expressing their emotions, suffered job satisfaction and lack of social support – amongst other symptoms.

How police officers process traumatic events, then, seems to be very important psychological factor in the stress it causes. Karlsson & Christianson (2003) examined the phenomenology of traumatic experiences in a sample of 162 Swedish police officers. The research found that all the

police officers who took part were able to remember a traumatic incident from while they had been on duty. The memory of that traumatic event tended to come from the officer's early career and usually involved all of the senses – many aspects of which could be remembered in considerable detail. The fact that it was early events that most readily came to mind suggested that these had the greatest impact on a police officer. Karlsson & Christianson (2003) also cite earlier work by Stradling, Crowe & Tuohy (1993) in the UK that found that during the socialisation process into the police force, there was a change of role so that the individual had a more professional attitude to their work. This was often associated with a more cynical approach and self-perception. Karlsson & Christianson (2003) make the point that the alternative explanation is that police officers simply become more adept at dealing with the stressful situations with which they have to deal.

From this survey of some of the research into the factors associated with police stress it can be seen that there are many aspects to consider. Individual differences have an important role to play in reactions to stressful events. In comparing sources of stress, much of the research has found the surprising result that organisational rather than operational factors are more important. It is possible that organisational factors become more important as operational factors diminish. The research into the phenomenology and coping mechanisms shows that police officers perhaps learn how to cope better with stressful events. Despite this, it is clear that witnessing a number of traumatic events is likely to lead to PTSD. A large proportion of the research looks at averages over reasonably large populations which masks

the fine-grain details that are better explored by Karlsson & Christianson's (2003) study. A hint at gaps in the current research is provided by Johnson et al. (2005) which found that police officers at lower levels suffered higher levels of stress than those in more senior positions. These authors suggest that this might be the result of higher levels of emotional labour – a concept that has not yet been carefully examined in this occupational population.