How Do Police Officers Cope with Stress? A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Earlier research on managing strain among police officers in South Africa is inadequate. Most studies conducted have centered on the predictors of stress and few have examined their coping mechanisms. The current study aimed to investigate the coping mechanisms used by law enforcement officers in dealing with stress. The study was conducted in one Province of South Africa. A qualitative approach using phenomenological research design was used to explore the mechanisms police officers used in handling stressful situations. The target population was police officers; purposive convenient sampling was used to select 12 police officers. The one-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. The data was gathered until saturation was reached; it was analyzed using the thematic analytical approach. The findings revealed support systems, religion, participation in sports, and substance abuse as strategies used by police officers to deal with stressful situations. The main limitation of the study is the geographical area, it focused on one out of five districts. However, the study findings have important implications for psychological intervention within the police service. The findings suggest the establishment of counseling services in each police station by the South African Police Service to avoid distributing therapists at the cluster level.

Introduction

The work of police officers worldwide is incredibly challenging and necessary for providing security and preventing crime in the public. Being a law enforcement officer appears to be an extremely demanding and difficult occupation because of the qualities of modern-day societies such as the rise in physical violence with guns in metropolitan areas, as well as insufficient human and material resources (Purba and Demou 2019). Furthermore, police officers have to work in an emergency facing a lot of hindrances including political pressure, exertion, and working late. Such stressors cause a noteworthy job strain on police officers (John-Akinola, Ojayi, and Oluwasanu 2020).

Recent studies found that work stress and anxiety have risen among law enforcement officers and it results in inadequate psychological wellness, non-adaptive coping techniques, and self-destructive behaviors (Castro et al. 2019; Costa et al. 2019). While several studies have attempted to map law enforcement officers' distress and the causes thereof. Nevertheless, the subject has brought more interest in studies designed, such as Violanti et al. (2018) and Wasserman et al. (2019), who continuously determine law enforcement officers' distress sources and their adverse effects on law enforcement officers' work efficiency and health and wellness. Just lately, another study by Ermasova et al. (2020) was conducted on law enforcement officers' distress as well as emotional wellness. According to Clements, Sharples, and Kinman (2020), the critical nature of their work exposes them to a high level of work stress and anxiety regardless of the position they hold, resulting in psychological strain, fatigue, and poor performance.

In the last few years, there has been a surge in occupational stress research in the police. Most cops pass on due to distress related to work than through lawbreakers. Some developed countries have taken the adverse effect of strain on police officials seriously and taken steps to tackle police

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stress (Singh 2017). The ability to identify signs and symptoms of stress would enable them to know when to seek help. This will ensure that their productivity at work, as well as in their personal lives, is not impaired. Furthermore, Singh stated that police officers should learn to be up to date on the stressors in their lives and the methods to deal with them. Similarly, supervisors should be able to identify the stress affecting their subordinates and be able to deal with it effectively (Lee et al. 2020).

Singo (2019) found violent behavior associated with financial difficulties and the absence of companion support to be stressors among police officers. Similarly, working overtime and the authoritarianism of supervisors were found by Violanti et al. (2016), Roberts (2019), and Lee et al. (2020) as contributing to work stress. Violanti et al. (2018) also demonstrated that institutional factors impact seriously police officers' well-being because of their frequent occurrence. According to Nie and colleagues (2019), support from colleagues was perceived by Chinese clinicians as more important than peer and family members' support in relieving work stress and anxiety. The authors further indicated that the absence of support from co-workers combined with stress and anxiety brought on by the absence of rest might have adverse effects on their lives.

Although Bachman (2018) reported underreporting of suicidal deaths, the pace of self-destruction among South African cops remains top of the world (Luvhengo 2017). Stress in the work environment is not a completely adverse experience; sometimes, it can improve the inspiration to ensure job completion. Nevertheless, it can likewise be hazardous if people come to be burdened resulting in incapacity to move on with their entire lives (Glanz and Schwartz, 2008). Thus, of considerable significance is the necessity (obligation) for early recognition of stressors and the application of psychological therapies and other techniques to avoid incapacitating health problems as it is evident that police officers are in danger of psychological health and wellness (Clements et al. 2020; Gill et al. 2018).

The study on job-related stress demonstrates that ways of dealing with challenging times and assistance from other people have a protective outcome on distress and a defensive function on psychological well-being (Foley and Massey 2019). "Coping strategies are perceptual, behavioral or mental responses used to manage traumatic life situations which are primarily active, adaptive or maladaptive where active and adaptive coping styles have an optimistic role" (Zeidner and Saklofske 1996). Maladaptive coping methods adversely influence the distress and psychological well-being connection. Research has demonstrated the association between job-related distress and patterns of surviving and that the coping techniques or patterns of surviving are employed based on the context. Furthermore, diverse causes of job stress need distinct mechanisms for coping.

Psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and reduced perceptions of organizational stress were found to be associated with social support (Hansson et al. 2017). Social support is defined "as the provision of assistance or comfort to other people to help them deal with different problems" (APA Dictionary of Psychology). It is related to numerous positive bodily and wellness results. Another study on stress revealed that police officers of lower rank, namely, constables and sergeants dispatched in stressful areas scored higher in stress than police officers stationed in no-stress areas (Rao et al. 2008). On the contrary, an Indian study demonstrated that police officers in middle and upper-level positions reported higher levels of stress than constables and warrant officers (Singh and Kar 2015).

The first author, a social worker and master's student in Public Health, while conducting her work activities observed that several police officers were diagnosed with depression. With this in mind coupled with evidence, most studies carried out among police officers have concentrated on the predictors of stress and few have studied their coping mechanisms. The current study explored the coping mechanism used by Limpopo province police officers to deal with stress. To the best of our understanding, no research on coping mechanisms among law enforcement officers has been undertaken in the area where the current study was conducted.

Methods

Study Setting and Design

South Africa comprises nine regions with Limpopo being one of them. The province forms global boundaries with three countries, namely, Botswana towards the northeast and west, Mozambique towards the east, and Zimbabwe towards the north and upper east. This province connects the country and the rest of the continent. This research study was performed in one cluster, which is a group of five to six police stations under the control of one station commander, called cluster commander. The selected cluster has six police stations.

The study adopted a phenomenological method to investigate the strategies used by law enforcement officers in dealing with stressful situations and suicidal ideation. This study used a descriptive analysis style because it is flexible and also promotes a comprehensive explanation of the perceived factors. Phenomenology focus on providing a valuable explanation of the person's experiences as delineated by those that experience them (Bachmann 2018). In this specific case, the investigators were concerned with comprehending the meaning of the experiences of police officers as they dealt with stressors while performing their functions.

The investigator made all attempts of detecting and keeping in suspension beliefs and opinions that she already had in mind about the experiences of the police officers at the institutions of study.

Population

The target population was police officers at one of the clusters in the selected province. Six police stations were selected through non-probability purposive sampling (Gray et al. 2017). These police stations were identified considering a balance of the geographical areas, which resulted in the inclusion of both rural and semi-urban police stations in the study. Participants were selected purposively, two per police station. Inclusion criteria were police officers working in Limpopo province with 10 years and more work experience, were aged 18 years and older, occupied the lower ranks, and were willing to participate. The lower rank was chosen since this is the group most frequently committing suicide in the law enforcement unit. The station commander of each participating police station was communicated for particulars of police officers occupying the lower ranks. Afterward, police officers occupying lower ranks were communicated with by the interviewer who offered them information about the study and sought agreement for participating in the current study. Those officers who showed interest in the study were briefed about the project, comprising the time, date, and venue where interviews would be conducted as well as the interview questions to be asked. Furthermore, they were informed that participation is entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without repercussions to their employment. Subsequently, twelve law enforcement officers were interviewed, which is an acceptable sample size for studies exploring lived experiences of human beings. It ought to be noteworthy that the sample size of twelve was determined by the saturation of data.

Ethical Issues

The Ethics committee members at the University gave ethical approval for this study, Project number: SHS/17/PH/15/0809. Authorization for conducting the research was attained at the National and Provincial Departments of the South African Police Services and station commanders of the six police stations. Preceding the interview, all employed participants were conversant with the study purpose and were explained that involvement is of their own will. The duration of the interviews, approximately 45–60 min, was communicated to them. Police officers were requested to give their permission before being interviewed, and it was clarified that their contribution was voluntary, that is, they could choose not to take part. Informed consent was requested from participants before they were interviewed. Also, it was explained that anything discussed during the interviews would be handled in secret and transcriptions would be anonymous. They had been instructed that they should withdraw from being part for the duration of the interview with no consequence. The authorization was also acquired from participants to audiotape the one-on-one interviews. The participants have been certain that the recordings would be destroyed later.

Data Collection

The first author, a social worker who is confident in speaking the local languages, visited six police stations after receiving permission from the National and Provincial Departments of the South African Police Services. Each police station commander received a personal visit from the researcher to detail the study's purpose. After authorization was given by station commanders of the participating police stations, the first author requested the register book of each police station and copied the names of all junior police officers in the lower ranks. The first author printed each name on a piece of paper and requested one police officer per police station to pick four pieces of paper, and persons whose names were written on those papers were approached in person and invited to be part of the research project. The study purpose was then given to these persons, and a verbal agreement was sought from the participants before participating in the one-on-one conversations. The setting for the meeting was cautiously chosen to guarantee participating members went ahead and talk and participating members were furnished with places and schedules where the discussions would take place. The first author spent time with participants to establish a rapport before starting the individual interviews at the agreed time and place. It should be noted that the researcher was not related to the participants. All 24 participants who were invited agreed to participate, but only 12 were interviewed because of "data saturation, referring to the point at which the data collection process fails to yield new information pertinent to the study." The main question asked during the interviews was "How do you deal with stressful situations?" Probing questions sought clarity and explanations as participants responded to the central question. Participants were informed that a voice recorder would be used to capture their responses and ensure accuracy and notes would be taken during the interviews. Participants were assured that the information obtained would remain anonymous since no names would be mentioned during the interviews. The researcher used the language preferred by the participants for the interviews which were conducted in a private room. The interviews lasted 45–60 min and were conducted over 1 month.

Data Analysis

Transcription of the audio-recorded interviews was done by the researcher who conducted them. The interviews were later changed from the local language to the instructional language which is English by a linguistic professional confident in the two languages. Back-translation of the transcriptions into the local language was done to safeguard correctness. The first author, who conducted the interviews, read and checked the two versions of the interviews (English and local language). The seven steps of data analysis by Tesch were used to analyze the data (Creswell 2018). Below is the outline of the steps followed in analyzing the data.

The first step involved reading the transcriptions several times to get a feeling of the entire content. Feelings, beliefs, and any opinions that resulted from the researcher owing to her experience of interacting directly with the police officers were put aside. This made the investigation of the coping mechanism experienced by police officers themselves easier (Beck 2019). In step 2, the researcher chose one interview document to read, create meanings from the statements, and record ideas that came to mind in the margins. In the third step, the first author made a list of similar themes and categorized them into the most important, insignificant, or distinctive topics after the data has been analyzed. This was followed by step 4 where the researcher abbreviated topics into codes, "wrote them next to each segment," and reread the codes to make sure there were no new codes that appeared. In step 5, the most illustrative phrasing for the recognized subjects was transformed into groupings by the researcher while arranging the connected points and showing their interrelationship. The next step is 6, which is where the ultimate choice regarding the acronym for every classification was made and was organized in order. In step 7, which is the final step, all organized data fit into one group was placed together, and a preliminary analysis was done. All transcripts were checked and compared to the audio by the second author who is an expert in qualitative research. Five themes and two subthemes emerged from the data. An independent coder verified the results, and to avoid losing any information, the grammar was not changed. The first author returned to participating members for member check before putting the emerged themes in the context of the current publications as a way of comparing and contrasting the current study findings. It should be noted that no feedback was provided by the participants on the findings, and no-repeat interviews were conducted.

Trustworthiness

Alase (2017: 17) defines trustworthiness "as the degree of confidence in data, interpretation and the methodology used to confirm the quality of a study." The first author spent more time with police officers to establish rapport and create trusting relationships during the interviews to ensure credibility. Dependability was ensured by "The data was coded and re-coded several times, comparing the themes and categories with a co-coder to ensure dependability," while authenticity was enhanced by word-for-word excerpts. The authors described the methodology and results and provided direct quotes of study participants in the form of excerpts from a selection of interviews to ensure transferability or how far the results can be generalized to other contexts. The researcher kept records locked in a cupboard for any researcher to use as an audit trail when needed. Authenticity was enhanced by verbatim extracts. Through the process of creating themes, the first author met with her supervisor who evaluated and questioned the analysis to safeguard the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data analysis process.

Results

Participants' Socio-Demographic Information

A whole of twelve police officers (eight men and four women) participated in this research**.** Ten members had been between the ages of 50 and 59 years and two individuals had been less than 50 years. Most members had been married; only one member used to be single, two lost their partners, and two had their marriages ended. A matric certification is held by all officers, and a diploma is held by four; all members have labored for a length of 10 years and more. Eleven members were Christians.

The Coping Mechanism Used by Law Enforcement Officers to Handle Stress

Research has displayed that law enforcement officers utilize coping mechanisms to cope with stress, some of which increase stress rather than alleviate it, such as alcohol and drug misuse, and nonconformity. The use of these solutions could change the police officer into a law violator, thus increasing personal stress. The law enforcement officers were asked to share their experiences in coping with the daily stressors. The following mechanisms of attending counseling services, social support, substance abuse, exercises, and religion arose during the interviews.

Theme 1: Counseling Services

The participants have been requested about the help they get hold of in their workplace, as a way of dealing with work-related distress, household issues, and other issues they stumble upon in their life. Most of the members indicated

that they receive employer assistance in the form of the aid of the skill of psychotherapy and intercessions.

The counseling is done by Employee Health Practitioners (EHPs) placed in the cluster offices. Some members cited that they use this counseling carrier while others stated that they understand this service; however, they have in no way used it.

> I have my book in which I have number phones of EHPs who counsel me when I have problems or when something is wrong, or I need to talk to someone. Yes! When I am not feeling well (P 07).
> There are social workers, psychologists, and pastors, it is just that people fear embarrassment to consult as they do not want to be labeled. No one can come out and say I am HIV/AIDS because they fear being stigmatized. Even though the social workers, psychologists, and pastors are there to support us (P 02).
> There are social services for counseling the police officers, especially when you deal with a traumatic crime scene……I attended a traumatic scene, even today I still remember what happened because I did not attend counseling (P 06).

Another participant mentioned that they receive emotional support and that there is a designated office that is responsible for assisting them in coping with stress.

> There is a spiritual office when you have problems, they call them, and you get assisted (P 09).

Theme 2: Perceived Societal Support

Social assistance is the most necessary psychosocial shielding resource, the emotionally enjoyable social bonds limit the outcomes brought about by stress and its damaging results on health. Support from the family and support from colleagues are sub-themes for perceived societal support and are presented below.

Sub-Theme 2.1 Support from the Family

The contributors in this study said family circle and coworkers assist as they go through challenging times. They further stated that the assistance is based on stress reduction and coping; for example, if a household participant passes on, the spouse, children, and relatives assist.

> Since my partner passed on, I am by myself. I decided to take my nephew so he can assist with household chores. It also assists because I have someone to talk to and it relieves my stress. (P 07)
> I have a good support from my wife, especially since we are both working, and I remember when I was transferred to work away from home and my wife also

applied for a transfer and we stayed together; we also came back to work near our home the same year (P 12)

Sub-theme 2.2 Support from Colleagues

> The person who supports me is also my colleague. The one who had just phoned me now. He helps me a lot because even if I phone him when I am at home he comes to my home. Most people do not want me, they say I am disabled. When my wife passed away it was difficult, but I got support from my family members and my colleague (P 07).
> I have a good relationship with colleagues, we work here as a team, and we advise each other on what we can do to reduce crime, even when one of us feels down we support one another, and life continues (P 11).

Theme 3: Substance Use

Some participants mentioned that police officers use alcohol, cigarettes, and substances to deal with daily stress. The excerpts below attest to this.

> When I am stressed, I drink excessively to become drunk and forget about the stressors even though I still experience stress when I become sobber (P 10)
> There are police officers who drink alcohol a lot, and some even use or smoke tobacco. They are even afraid to talk about their problems. Whereas some use drugs to cope with their problems (P 04)

Theme 4: Participation in Sports and Physical Exercise

Some participants indicated that they engage in sports and physical activity to cope with household and work-related pressure.

> In our workplace, we are encouraged to engage in sports on Wednesdays, I play soccer every Wednesday and it helps to cope with the daily stress and relieve all the distressing emotions we face at work and with our families as you will be engaging in sports with others. (P 01).
> Exercise is very much important; I am not merely saying that we should go to the gym but jogging once a day. I also go to the gym, and I play chess, I have competed at the SA Open, with other police officers from various countries such as police officers from Australia and Kenya and so on, and we won, even though we play with experienced people. We play once a year when competing with other countries. Last year I was playing in Cape Town and this year we are going to

Northern Cape. I will be representing SAPS for my Province. (P 05).

Some members additionally stated that they have something wonderful to participate in such as making vegetable gardens and spending time with their families.

I sow at home in my backyard and plant vegetables for me and my family and also sell to the community to supplement my salary (P 11).

When I am off, I make it a point that I have quality time with my family (P 08)

Theme 5: Religious Belief

There have been members who indicated that faith features defense against distress. Police officers reported that praying and putting trust in God is a mechanism they use to manage stressful situations. The following excerpts attest to this.

Ahhhh religion helps a lot hey because many of the problems I encounter in life and find it hard to deal with the problem by myself I put my trust to HIM. At work, we also have services on Thursdays (P 12).

When you are a churchgoer, you can see that going to church helps in a variety of ways, you live life with Ubuntu and develop the love for other people. You also become aware that life does not end here, we will face judgment afterlife (P 05).

When I am not at work I go to church and assist, at times I attend all-night prayers and crusade, which keeps me going (P 03).

Another participant who believed in African traditional religion had this to say:

When I have problems I go to the traditional healer, I know I will get traditional herbs that will help, and if I have to perform libation, I also do that to relieve all the stress and bad luck I encounter on daily basis (P 01).

Discussion

A total of twelve law enforcement officers took part in the study; the information was gathered via an in-depth one-on-one interview with a semi-structured interview schedule. There have been probing that took place throughout the interview, which could mean that they turn to God for help during a stressful situation.

When asked about the mechanism they use to cope with stress, most police officers mentioned counseling services available at the workplace. They further indicated that counseling services are provided by the Employee Health Practitioners (EHPs) stationed at each cluster. The use of counseling services by police officers in the current study is following Muthomi (2014) who demonstrated that employee counseling increases employee performance and family relations by solving personal problems. Furthermore, the author revealed that participants displayed constructive results after the psychotherapists counseled them.

The demographic data shows that some participants in the current study do not have spouses, and this could mean that they may not have someone close to support them, be it emotional, financial, or physical. These findings agree with Qazi et al. (2019) who found social isolation and poor interpersonal relationships respectively to be noteworthy positive predictors of mental health difficulties. Although some participants in the present study do not have partners, they demonstrated that their family members and colleagues played a crucial role in supporting them during challenging times. Parkes et al. (2019) attest that those participants in their study identified the support of colleagues as their most valued asset to cope with their stressors.

Furthermore, Kellerman and Kraus (2018) found that stressful life events and depression can be mitigated by social support. Similar to previous research (Kellerman and Kraus 2018), Akotia et al. (2019) found anxiety disorders and depression to be related to a lack of support. In addition, the authors indicated the importance of family members' and coworkers' support. The interpersonal relationship between friends and the next of kin and the individual experiencing distress is the most essential protective factor that decreases everyday distress and the despair an individual is presently going through (Foley and Massey 2019; Horn et al. 2016). This contradicts the current findings, as participants reported receiving more support from colleagues than from family members. Foley and Massey further stated that peer and social support function as a powerful protective factor in the prevention of mental health problems and could play a significant role in influencing them to seek help. Clements et al. (2020) cited that contact with aid offering facilities by phone was deemed not suitable for certain problems. On the contrary, the current study provided the physical presence of EHP services in various clusters to assist police officers in dealing with stress.

Substance use, alcohol intake, and smoking were reported by lower-rank Limpopo police officers as techniques for coping with stressful situations. The use of substances like drugs and alcohol to relieve stress can lead to more stress and unintended harm like an increased risk of developing substance use disorder. The findings are in line with the study that demonstrated law enforcement officers use substances as a way of coping with tension that comes from a range of elements in the household and work environment (Pastwa-Wojciechowska and Piotrowski 2016). It should be noted that substance use, perceived by users to relieve stress, could also increase their stress level on the one hand. This may have a psychological impact on police officers if not addressed appropriately.

The participants also mentioned engaging in physical exercises as a method of dealing with tension. Participants engaged in physical activities by playing soccer and planting vegetable crops. Although they considered cultivation as an exercise that assisted them in relieving their stress, it also enhanced their financial status by selling what they produced. The findings of police engaging in sports and other physical exercises as a method of dealing the day-to-day life pressure are in line with Galanis et al. (2019) who found decreased physical exercise to be associated with increased work stress. Similarly, another study found that square breathing calms the nervous system and alleviates feelings of anxiety when getting overwhelmed, which was not the case in this study (Canadian Center on Substance Use, and addiction and the Mental Health Commissioner of Canada 2020).

Religiosity and spirituality are known coping techniques for stressful crises. Research has demonstrated that people who are more religious or spiritual are considered to be healthier both physically and emotionally and use their spirituality to cope with life. Therefore, it is not surprising that participants in this study mentioned that prayers and getting to a place of worship helped them to deal with everyday stress. The result relates to what was revealed by Lawrence et al. (2016) who found religion to be a protecting element versus stressors. The authors further stated that it depends upon the culture-specific ramifications of association with a specific religious belief. Similarly, Estrada et al. (2019) demonstrated the consequence of spiritual teachings in the enhancement of emotional well-being through the reduction of stress, alcoholism, and depression.

Limitations of the Study

Since the research was carried out among law enforcement officers employed at one cluster in Limpopo province coupled with the small sample, it implies that one cannot make a general statement about the findings to the whole population of police officers. The other limitation of the study is its subjective nature.

Conclusion

The study produced several catalysts. The stress catalysts mentioned were both adaptive and non-adaptive strategies. Some of the non-adaptive strategies like substance use can add to the advancement of suicidal thoughts and self-destructive behaviors. Therefore, it should be properly dealt with. Interestingly, participants also mentioned counseling services, partaking in sports, physical exercises, and spiritual support which are considered favorable coping techniques. Social assistance from family members and co-workers was seen to act as a safety element for law enforcement officers.

It appears that stress and anxiety are bothersome for both law enforcement officer wellness as well as police officer efficiency. Therefore, some actions should be taken to deal with this issue.

Grounded on the current study results, it is commended the way some officers manage their stress and we encourage them to continue with their exercises. To enhance their coping mechanism, it is suggested that health promo programs concentrating on techniques for dealing with stress ought to be developed to decrease incidences of persistent stress. Since some police officers utilize substances to handle stressful situations, it is suggested that instructional treatments that would certainly enhance the understanding of law enforcement officers on the health and wellness effects of drug abuse ought to be executed. This could be achieved through collaboration between the South African Police Services and Health and Welfare, and referrals should be made for those abusing substances to the relevant organizations for help before they could become addicts.

This study demonstrated how law enforcement officers cope with stress. Other possible avenues for law enforcement coping strategies include resilience training, which was found to be the most effective method to assist personnel who have been injured (Horn et al. 2016); stress management workshops among police officers and their family members, as well as psychotherapists in each police station. Future studies should assess the coping strategies quantitatively, conduct a secondary survey to evaluate the more often-used strategies, and triangulate the qualitative and quantitative data to guide the development of an adaptive coping strategy program. Increasing staffing to avoid overtime work is one policy recommendation for dealing with stress on police officers.

Declarations

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