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Occupational Stress among Nigerian Police Officers: An Examination of the Coping Strategies and the Consequences

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Abstract

The study was conducted to examine the stress associated with policing in Nigeria, the strategies for coping with stress and the outcomes. A total number of 300 police officers randomly selected participated in the survey. The participants responded to Work Stress Inventory (WSI). They also responded to self-report scale on the use of alcohol, smoking, religiosity and seeking for professional help to cope with stress. Multiple Regression analysis was run to test four hypothesis. Results indicated that Police officers who experienced stress took to alcohol drinking, tobacco smoking, and religiosity to cope with stress. Moreover, the result showed that Police officers would not seek for professional help to cope with their stress. The study discussed the possible effects of these coping strategies on the wellbeing, and performance of police officers and also offered recommendations.

Key words: Stress, alcohol, smoking, religiosity,

Introduction

Occupational stress can be regarded as stressors that have to do with working in a particular occupation. This stressor could be related to the nature of the job, and

generally specific to that type of job. For example, a flight attendant might normally encounter stress associated with travels at great heights on airplanes for many hours, and a police officer might experience stress associated with running after a criminal in a high-speed car. These stressors would not normally occur in other occupations; rather, it is fundamentally a result of work circumstances and arises as a function of tasks that the employee encounters. Policemen and women as professional law enforcement officers are subjected to a number of stress inducing activities in Nigeria. This is particularly so because of the nature of their job. They are often looked up to for the security of lives and property of others. In their line of duties, they are frequently exposed to violence from criminals, often engage in rescue operations of civilians from armed robbers and other gun men, they deal directly with the hardest criminals and the worst of the society, sometimes they watched their colleagues killed or maimed in the course of their legitimate duties. They are the ones to stand in the turbulent election process to ensure order, they are on the streets to monitor traffic and ensure law and order among so many others. Besides, they are also susceptible to losing their jobs/careers easily for committing the slightest blunder, this is how risky it is to be a police officer in Nigeria. In spite of the enormous risk the Nigerian police officers bear to do their jobs, an average policeman is not appreciated in the Nigerian society; he is often criticized and maligned by the members of the public. (Finn & Tomz, 1996). He is perceived as an outclassed member who joined the force out of frustration at securing a better job. To be a policeman is therefore very tough in the Nigeria context. As for a family life, that should provide emotional support for police officers, studies show that most police officers frequent redeployment makes it difficult to have a stable marriage (Ansen & Colon, 1995).

In the literature on occupational stress among police officers, four different classification of stressors can be identified, this consist of organizational stressors, operational stressors, external stressors, and personal stressors (Dempsey & Forst, 2013). Organizational stress was implicated as a stressor that is induced or caused by the workplace. Organizational stressors, may be experienced as a result of organizational policy of the police e.g. redeployment of a police officer across interstates, shift change, nature of drillings, lack of support to officers, especially when in need, etc. (Shane, 2010; Violanti & Aron, 1994). Operational stressor was defined as a stressor that is generated or caused by the activities of tracking or arresting criminals. Operational stressors is considered to be the most serious stressor, an example is experiencing a tragedy by an officer in the course of his or her duty (Violanti & Aron, 1994). Personal stressors are stress that is caused by the person himself or herself. (e.g., personal debt due to low payment at work). External stressors are caused by others outside the work and the person, (an example is the failure at school of the police officer's kids who could not get adequate attention from the officer because of his job) It is generally agreed that, occupational stressors, regardless of their type, have a

negative effect on employees psychological wellbeing (Gerber, Hartmann, Brand, Holsboer-Trachsler, & Puhse).

Objectives

The objectives of this study include:

- (a) to explore the various types of stressor experienced by the Nigerian police officers.
- (b) to examine their reactions to stress
- (c) to explore the different ways police officers try to cope with stress
- (d) to assess the outcome of such efforts.

Literature Review

Stressors have been an issue of concern in the vocational life of officers in and around the world, (Myers, 1992; Brown and Campbell, 1994). These stressors have been implicated in a variety of work outcomes such as high rate of employee turnover, absenteeism, lowered morale, low productivity, personal physical and psychological distress, addictions and family problems (Maynard and Maynard, 1982; Alexander and Walker, 1996; Finn and Tomz, 1996). Also, Anderson, (1996) noted that the entire system of law enforcement in the United States manifests antecedents of stress. Officers usually come into the service with enthusiasm, to make their own contribution to change the world through crime prevention and eradication, however when the reality of the enormity of task of the job dawn on them in the course of their duty, many officers get emotionally and psychologically overwhelmed and become disillusioned and their morale plummets (Kroes, 1988; Kurke and Scrivner, 1995; Anderson, 1998). Police officers do not only become stressed in the course of their duties, they are also often subjected to undue and harsh criticisms from the same people they work very hard to protect, (Finn and Tomz, 1996).

The experience of supervision of police officers is usually rigorous, tough and sometimes punitive, (Violanti and Aron, 1993). Moreover, the police officer's file is often filled with queries, and this furthers lowers their morale, thereby increasing their stress level

As officers become increasingly distress and become sad; it can consequently affect the physical, social and vocational aspects of their life (Wood, 1982; Violanti et al., 1986). Olf, (1999) also opined that Stress tends to reduce the immune systems of officers. They sometimes refuse to accept social and emotional support and therefore report poor health more often (Perrier and Toner, 1984; Reiser and Geiger, 1984). This results into heavier workload (and stress) for available officers on duty who have to cover for the absentee officer. Many officers turn to alcohol, over-the-counter sleep

aids, and other addictive behaviours in order to try to numb their distress (Dietrich and Smith, 1986; Wolford, 1993; Alexander and Walker, 1994). This, along with the unspoken rule against discussing feelings, contributes to officer's psychological distress and often exacerbates poor family relations (Gersons, 1989; Alexander and Walker, 1994; Alexander and Walker, 1996). Spouses and children of officers often live separate due to frequent redeployments, this affect their children's moral development and even their academic and social life. Police officers are prone to sexually transmitted diseases as a result of this, but more importantly divorce is rampant among officers which usually, causes yet another stressor in the officer's life (Ansen & Colon, 1995).

Coping Strategy: Alcohol and Tobacco Use

Research shows that one of the ways police officers cope with stress is by engaging in alcohol consumption (Brady & Pharm, 1999; Keyes, Hatzenbuehler, & Hasin, 2011; Siegrist & Rodel, (2006) also suggested the likely habitual use of tobacco by police officers. According to Smith, Devine, Leggat, & Ishitake, (2005). Many officers often get together to drink after the day's work as a way of coping with their stress. At such forum they reflect over the day's activities Thus, the officers revisit the same stressful work issues (e.g. exposure to violence at work, exposure to people in pain or distress, etc.) that they were hoping the alcohol would take away (Leino, Eskelinen, Summala, & Virtanen, 2011). This is typically the case with smoking as well. Many officers smoke as a way of coping with their stress. Smoking as a coping strategy is also a common practice for the general population as well (Khurshid & Ansari, 2012). A change in an officer's work schedule has also been shown to increase an officer's smoking rate (Smith et al., 2005) in addition to other physiological health issues. Overall, the review of existing literature shows that work-related stressors indeed have a significant impact on officers' health, both physiologically and psychologically.

Religiosity as a Means of Coping with Stress

That Nigerians are a very religious people is to state the obvious. There are two major religions- Christianity and Islam. It is common to see many police officers engage in religious practices such as prayers, confession of scriptures, fellowshiping etc., to cope with stress. Beehr, Johnson & Nieva, (1995) observes that the potential soothing effects of relaxations technique and biofeedback are more likely to be used as treatments by third party professionals than using the religion, but it appears that such techniques are complete alien to many people around the world especially Nigerians. in spite of the secularity nature of Nigerian society, religion is a widely accepted means of solving a variety of human problems including stress, this view finds support in the study conducted by Idehen & Ojewunmi (2010) who argued that religion beliefs play a role in the way people strive to prevent illness and stay healthy; the study also

revealed a correlation between religiosity and indicators of preventive health behaviour, therefore, in spite of the fact that religiosity appears to be a non-traditional variable in occupational coping research, the religiosity of the Nigerian people and the recommendation of Nelson & Sutton (1990) about the need to investigate religiosity in coping process, justifies its inclusion in this study.

No doubt, there is a substantial volume of study on occupational stress and coping among law enforcement officers in literature, however, what appears to be lacking are studies on stress and coping in highly volatile societies, yet with less sophisticated, technologically assisted policing, the present enquiry is conducted against this background, thereby filling this important gap in literature.

Method

Demographics

This sections seeks for responses from participants on age, rank, years of service, gender, marital status, educational qualification.

The Work Stress Inventory

David Barone (1982) developed the Work Stress Inventory (WRI) in order to measure the frequency and intensity of organizational stressors and stressors related to job risk in emergency service personnel. The questions were presented in a four-point Likert type format with each question having two required responses: the rating of the frequency ranging from 1 = never to 4 = very frequently and the rating of the intensity ranging from 1 = not stressful to 4 = extremely stressful. Scales demonstrated alpha reliabilities of .93 and test- retest reliabilities of .84

A Self- Report on Coping

This sections required from the participants to indicate what they usually do to cope with stress. The participants were to indicate on 4 Likert scale whether they take alcohol when stressed. The possible responses are: “not at all”, “sometimes”, “often”, and “very often”. This was also the way other variable were worded, i.e. Smoking and religious practice. The data obtained were represented on an interval scale of measure

Procedure

300 police officers were randomly selected into the sample from Lagos State Police Command. After permission has been obtained from the appropriate authority, the officers were briefed that the purpose of the research was to understand stress among policemen and how they cope, hoping that the study would suggest better ways to handle their stress to help enhance their psychological wellbeing. They were assured on confidentiality, that none of their answers could be linked to their names as they would not need to write their names on the questionnaires. The questionnaires was

given to them by hand and they were told that the researcher would return one week after for its collection

Data Analysis

The data obtained were subjected to descriptive statistics for demography while Multiple Regression analysis was used to test the four stated hypothesis.

Hypothesis

The formulated null hypothesis below guided the study.

- Ho_i: Police officers who are distressed would not take to alcohol to cope with stress
- Ho_{II}: Police officers who are distressed would not take to smoking to cope with their stress
- Ho_{III}: Police officers who are distressed would not resolve to religiosity to cope with stress
- iv. Police officers who are distressed would not seek for professional help to reduce their stress

Result

Demography

A total no of 245 police officer returned the questionnaires for the survey. 189 of them which represents 77.1% were males while 56 which represents 29.1% of the sample were female officers. 199 (80.4%) were married while the remaining 37 (15.6%) were single. On Rank, 23 (9.3%) were Constables, 65(27.0%) were Corbrals, 76 (31.5) were Sergeants, 47 (19.5%) were Inspectors. On age, 27 (11.2%) were between 21 and 30, 132 (54.5%) were between 31-40. 74 (30.6%) were between 41-50 years of age. While 8 (3.3%) were 51 and above. On year of service, 21 of the participants which represents 8.8% have worked for between 1- 3years. 84(35.0%) of the participants have worked between 4-7 years.

Table 1: The Result of the multiple Regression predicting alcohol drinking as a coping strategy among Nigerian Police officers

Variable	B	SE	β
Organisational Stressor	1.07	0.13	- 0.41
Operational Stressor	1.27	0.16	0.13
External Stressor	1.35	0.13	0.20
Personal Stressor	1.11	0.13	- 0.69

*P= .002** p<.005

R =0.17 AR² = 0.70 F=0 .73

Using the enter method, the model was significant: $F = (8, 238) = 73.07$ $p < .0005$. The Adjusted R square value indicates that the model accounts for 70% of Variance in the self-report score on alcohol drinking. ($R^2 = .70$) Table 1 gives information for the predictors variables entered into the model. All the variables entered into the model were significant predictors of alcohol drinking to cope with stress.

The Ho hypothesis is thus rejected. The result suggests that police officers who experience stress to take to alcohol as a coping strategy.

Table 2: The Result of the multiple Regression predicting smoking as a coping strategy for stress among Nigerian Police officers

Variable	B	S E	β
Organisational Stressor	0.13	0.65	0.37
Operational Stressor	1.17	0.08	0.16
External Stressor	- 1.40	0.65	-0.15
Personal Stressor	0.72	0.13	0.75

*P= .002** $p < .005$

R= 0.27 $R^2 = 0.73$ F= 33.07

Using the enter method, the model was significant: $F = (8, 238) = 33.07$ $p < .0005$. The model accounts for 73% of Variance. (Adjusted $R^2 = .73$). Of all the variables entered into the model. All the variables entered into the model were significant except “” External Stressors” that was not a significant predictor variable of alcohol drinking to cope with stress.

The study hereby sets aside the null hypothesis, and adopts the alternative hypothesis that the police officers would take to alcohol to cope with stress.

Table 3: The Result of the multiple Regression predicting religiosity as coping strategy against stress among Nigerian Police officers

Variable	B	S E	β
Organisational Stressor	0.33	0.65	0.37
Operational Stressor	0.17	0.08	-0.16
External Stressor	1.40	0.65	-0.15
Personal Stressor	0.72	0.13	0.75

*P= .002** $p < .005$

R= .30 $AR^2 = .67$ F= 23.09

Using the enter method, the model was significant: $F(8, 238) = 23.09$ $p < .0005$. The Adjusted R square value reveals that the model accounts for 67% of Variance in the self-report score on religiosity. The table indicates that all the variables entered into the model were significant predictors of religiosity as a coping method for stress.

The study hereby sets aside the null hypothesis, and adopts the alternative hypothesis that the police officers would take to religiosity cope with stress.

Table 4: The Result of the multiple Regression predicting the seeking for professional help as coping strategy among Nigerian Police officers

Variable	B	S E	β
Organisational Stressor	0.43	0.67	0.48
Operational Stressor	-0.14	0.80	-0.13
External Stressor	-1.67	0.66	-0.19
Personal Stressor	-0.08	0.13	-0.75

* $P = .002$ ** $p > .005$

R = .324

$R^2 = .105$

F = 2.18

Using the enter method, the model was not significant: $F(8, 238) = 2.18$ $p < .0005$. The Adjusted R square value reveals that the model accounts for 10% of Variance in the self-report score on seeking for professional help. Table revealed that all the variables entered into the model were not significant predictor for seeking for professional help to cope with stress. Therefore, the null hypothesis is upheld, that police officers would not seek for professional help to cope with stress.

Discussion

The result of the first hypothesis shows that police officers who experienced stress take to alcohol in order to cope with stress, this finding aligns with existing findings in literature that police officers drink alcohol as a way of coping with job induced stressor. It particularly agrees with the submission of Dietrich and Smith, (1986) who stated that many officers turn to alcohol in order to try to numb their distress. It does appear that the habit of drinking alcohol to overcome stress is a global phenomenon that has claimed several casualties in death through accidents and cardiovascular disorder. Records show that millions have become incapacitated and died as result of alcohol use an abuse. .

Also, the result of the second hypothesis reveals that police officers smoke to cope with stress, there is also substantial findings in literature that the result agrees

with, this is quite worrisome considering the dangerous effect of such a habit. It is on record that, millions of people died due to illness arising from smoking. It is estimated that direct costs to industry of alcohol and drug abuse are close to \$80 billion per year in North America. (Brady & Pharm 1999).

In the same vein, the third hypothesis shows that people resolve to religiosity to cope with stress, while this strategy may lead to some kind of relief, there is evidence in literature to prove that religion is usually used as a defensive approach to cope with stress.

Finally, the study reveals through the test of hypothesis 4 that police officers in Nigeria seldom seek for professional assistance from relevant health professionals. One possible reason for this is because of non-availability of adequate provision for such services or its nonexistence in most cases.

The present study clearly shows that Nigerian police officers are only coping with stress using Defensive coping which is explained in literature to involve activities aimed at helping a person avoid or ignore the problem that bring stress to an individual, such as drinking, smoking and religiosity. This approach is also described as “emotion-focused” coping, which implies that efforts are directed at managing the negative emotions rather than the problem. The other approach which is largely considered appropriate is the problem-focused coping, which is directed at managing the problem itself, or associated with the problem. This approach consists of seeking for professional assistance. In which case the person who experiences stress can be assisted to overcome through counselling and other professional practices.

Conclusion

There is a dire need for creating an enabling work environment for police officers in Nigeria and strengthening of medical centres in police stations and barracks with appropriate manpower to encourage and assist police officers get professional assistance to deal with their stress. This is important because a reliance on defensive coping strategies such as alcohol drinking, smoking and other addictive behaviours ultimately lead to blocking of feelings. This may get to point where they are scared to feel anything, because of the fear of becoming overwhelmed (Miller, 1995). This may consequently impair the quality of their judgment and decisions on scene as well as compound the stress. The increasing reports of police harassments of public members by police officers, numerous cases of extra-judicial killings, extortions and other vices from police officers may be consequences of poor judgments occasioned by the use of alcohol and other addictive behaviours of the police officers.

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