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The role of stress in assessing life satisfaction and self-efficacy among prison officers

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Abstract:

Stress is a major public health concern. It can be observed in all aspects of life, in everyday family life and work life. The focus of this article is work-related stress. Work stress can be observed in any work environment and in all professions. As a complex condition it affects different people in different ways. The study presented in this article was done on a sample of 59 prison officers who volunteered to participate. Among those 59 participants 34 were males and 25 were females aged between 25 to 52. Each participant received a survey to collect general information about the person and included three questionnaires: The Questionnaire of Stress in the Prison Service (KSSW), Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES), and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). The questionnaire took approximately 45 minutes. Results turned out to be rather surprising. Findings showed that job stress of prison officers is not significantly correlated with the amount of time they spend among prisoners. The results also showed that being married or having a partner is not a protective factor against job stress for that sample. Results also showed that negative significant correlation between job stress and life satisfaction and job stress and self-efficacy were only found for particular subscales of KSSW not for the overall levels of stress. Further analysis of the results suggests that the very core of prison officers' job is the most stressful factor. This is an interesting finding that may be a basis for further research for specific stressors and coping strategies that may help the officers.

Key words: Stress, Distress, Job stress, Prison officer, Life satisfaction, Self-efficacy

Introduction

Stress is a complex condition which influences how the body functions. Small amounts of stress can help us in achieving goals, finishing tasks, and keep us motivated. As such stress can be perceived as desirable and good for us. However, it also has a different impact. Large amounts of stress or prolonged exposure to it can lead to serious physical and mental health issues.

Generally speaking, stress is caused by stressors. Stressor is a threat that an organism can perceive or experience that leads to a response (stress response). Those threats can come from both external and internal environments.

For the purpose of this study the focus was on work stress. Several definitions of stress exist in the literature however, for this study Lazarus's Transactional Model of Stress was chosen. This model suggests that stress is "a particular kind of relationship between person and the environment" [1,2]. Uniqueness of this relationship is that the demands of the environment exceed or tax one's ability to cope with them and endanger their well-being. This model introduced the term "transaction" that suggests that this relationship is not just one-way. In fact, the environment influences the person in the same way as the person influences the environment and as such this transaction is more than just the sum of its parts [3].

Lazarus's model also explains that stress is a matter of individual and subjective perspective. Transactional nature of stress also implies that it is a process and that means it is in a constant state of change. Change suggests that there are multiple factors that influence the situation,

here those factors are primary and secondary appraisal. The first one, as the name suggests, is responsible for the first assessment of the stressful situation. It is when the person decides whether such a situation poses a threat or not. If the situation is not threatening it does not activate a stress response and can lead to positive or neutral emotions such as happiness, joy, or relief. On the other hand, when the situation is perceived as dangerous one of three types of primary appraisal is activated. Harm or loss appraisal where something harmful has already happened, threat appraisal when there is a possibility of it happening or challenge appraisal when the person assesses their ability to cope with it. Lazarus also added a fourth type of appraisal, which is benefit appraisal that searches for a benefit in a demanding or stressful situation [4].

Secondary appraisal is when the person starts analyzing what can be done in a situation and assesses possible coping mechanisms. According to Lazarus [5] coping is a process that is “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts a person makes to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person”. Terelak [3] suggests that coping can take two forms. The first one is an active form which is more effective, it is an active engagement in behaviors and actions that work against the stress. This coping style helps achieving or at least coming close to achieving previously set goals despite the fact that stress is present. The other form of coping is a defensive one. Defensive form of coping is much less effective as it promotes avoiding behavior that in turn leads to abandoning goals that were previously set. What is important to mention is that secondary appraisal is just as important as primary appraisal [6].

Literature on stress is very extensive therefore many different definitions of stress can be found and as follows different classifications or categorizations. One of the possible criteria by which it can be categorized is the duration and severity of stress. Here short- and long-term stress can be distinguished. The short-term stress, as the name suggests, is a type of stress that is caused by a sudden danger and lasts for a short amount of time. In some situations it can be of service as it activates the fight-or-flight response by releasing the stress-hormone. When the threat is gone the body cools down and systems get back to normal functioning [7].

Long-term stress on the other hand can be much more harmful. Long-term means that stress is present for a long time even when the threat is no longer present. This malfunction of the short-term response can have really serious repercussions on one's health. It is caused by the prolonged state of arousal that disrupts the normal functioning of body systems leading to digestive problems or circulation problems [7].

Selye [8] distinguished “bad” and “good” stress. This theory identifies three types of stress eustress, neustress and distress. Eustress is the kind of “on the spot” reaction, similar to short-term stress, that can function as a booster in achieving goals and is responsible for a boost of adrenaline that creates a drive or energy to help people through difficult situations. Distress is the “bad” stress. It is chronic, long-term, stress that can be dangerous and harmful. Lazarus [5] defines distress as a “response to emotional pressure suffered for a prolonged period over which an individual perceives he or she has no control. It involves an endocrine system response in which occurs a release of corticosteroids.” High levels of cortisol in the blood can lead to serious cardiology problems and it causes the domino effect by deregulating body systems one by one.

Another way to categorise stress is by the circumstances in which it appears. Situations like being on time, getting children to school can be categorized as everyday stresses. Everyday stresses are usually not very severe and can be dealt with and are forgotten by the end of the day. What is more severe and harmful are traumas that usually carry heavy consequences both psychological and physiological. They are caused by big events like catastrophes, natural disasters, assaults, etc.

Among those circumstances is work, hence we have job stress. Job stress is any stress response caused by job related stressors [9]. This type of stress has become one of the most influential ones. American adults report that job stress is the major source of distress in their lives (American Institute of Stress [10]).

Job stress is a tricky and problematic phenomenon to study. The list of job related stressors is probably endless and each stressor can be perceived differently by every person. Therefore, establishing which job is the least stressful and which is the most stressful is not possible. However, studies show that there are measurable variables that can make the job more stressful, those are the job requirements [10]. Furnham distinguishes five such requirements: 1) unstructured tasks to perform, 2) constant supervision of materials or mechanisms, 3) difficult or unpleasant environment, 4) exchange of information with co-workers, and 5) decision making. Meanwhile, studies showed that over the last few decades job stress has increased dramatically (American Institute of Stress).

Life satisfaction

The APA Dictionary of Psychology [11] defines life satisfaction as “the extent to which a person finds life rich, meaningful, full or of high quality”. Life satisfaction is a very individual opinion. It is the subjective comparison between the idea of an appropriate standard of work and the one’s actual circumstances [12]. Deiner et al. also suggests that life satisfaction is more than the sum of its parts and that different people assign different values to the same factors that contribute to life satisfaction. That makes it very difficult to measure and provide reliable results as to what factors contribute the most or the least to the perception of life satisfaction.

Piotrowski [13] found some variables that can help study these phenomena. He found that age influenced life satisfaction, e.g. as age increased women felt less satisfied whilst men felt more satisfied with their lives. He also distinguished marriage as a factor that boosts life satisfaction compared to individuals that are divorced, widowed or single. Education seems to be low-correlated with life satisfaction.

Self-efficacy

In the Dictionary of Psychology [11] self-efficacy is defined as “an individual’s subjective perception of his or her capacity to perform in a given setting or to attain desired results, proposed by Albert Bandura as a primary determinant of emotional and motivational states and behavior change”. Self-efficacy is related to Lazarus’s model of stress. It is a personal belief of the ability of handling difficult situations that determines the meaning of such situations. High levels of perception of self-efficacy contribute to higher likelihood of assessing such situation as challenging rather than threatening and allow for applying more effective coping mechanisms [14,15]

Working in prisons

Professor Gary Cooper examined 104 professions and reported that prison officer’s was the most stressful of them all [16]. Social organization of a prison is a unique and very complex net of interpersonal relationships between officers as well as prisoners [17]. This complexity is due to the fact that both groups have different duties or obligations but they also have goals. It happens that prisoners’ goals are in opposition to officers’ obligations and that can create conflicts.

Working in a prison carries many stressors that are not present in any other type of employment. Poklek [17] distinguishes several important stressors, these are 1) paramilitary structure of the organization that implies military-like hierarchy and obedience, each officer receives military rank and their duties are described in the Penal Code and in Prison Service, they also wear uniforms that are compatible with their ranks and they carry weapons, they

work in public service hence they need to obey military rules even outside their job; 2) working in isolation, being cut off from the outside world during their shifts, officers are not allowed to carry phones or use the Internet on the prison site, especially officers from security department. Departments like administration that need contact with institutions or people outside the prison have some access but only by using the land line; 3) two antagonistic groups that have to co-exist in a limited space, usually the prisoners' population is much bigger than the officers' population.

Pomiankiewicz [16] also mentions that the contact with prisoners itself is an important stressor in prison officer's work. Prisoners can be aggressive both verbally and physically towards the officers. They also use different means of manipulation to try to get control over the officer in any way, those behaviors are even more dangerous and difficult to handle as prisons are often overpopulated. Pomiankiewicz also points out the fact that overpopulation leads to a distinctive and unpleasant smell that is almost constant (too many people, poor hygiene, etc.).

Those conditions mentioned above are just unique stressors for working in prisons, but are not limited to only those. Working in a prison carries also all "typical" job stressors that can be found in other professions as well, like long working hours, difficult or unpleasant job environment, too much paper work [9].

Method

Participants

The participants were 59 prison officers from a Detention Ward in Cracow Prison who volunteered to partake in the study (there are over 300 staff members in the prison). The sample was composed of 25 females and 34 males and 58 of them were officers of different ranks, only 1 person taking part in the study was a civilian worker. Participants came from all 6 departments (penitentiary, security, quartermaster, records and employment, finances, healthcare). The age of the participants varied from 25 to 52 years of age with an average of 34 and the average work experience was 93 months (7 years, 9 months).

Procedure

The first step was a distribution of sets of questionnaires among the volunteers. A total of 90 sets were distributed but only 59 were fully completed and returned. Participants were able to take the questionnaires home and had about three weeks to return completed sheets, however the set itself took approximately 45 minutes to fill in. The set comprised of four parts. No identifying information was collected and all parts were anonymous. Participants did not receive any money or other rewards for partaking.

Measures

The first part of the set was a questionnaire that collected all the important variables and other important information (sex, age, marital status, work experience, department, etc.). A brief description of all the measures is presented below.

Job stress

Job stress was measured by using The Questionnaire of Stress of Prison Service (KSSW, Kwestionariusz Stresu Służby Więziennej) [18]. The questionnaire is originally in Polish and therefore it was administered in Polish. It consists of 80 items to which five possible answers have been assigned, 1 stood for "never" and 5 for "very often". Those items fall into five categories, workload, work dissatisfaction, management style, contacts with the prisoners and work atmosphere. Scales were based on Principal Components Analysis (PCA) that allows for relevance of the tool to be estimated.

Life Satisfaction

The SWLS scale (Satisfaction with Life Scale, Diner) in polish adaptation [19] was administered to measure life satisfaction. Participants had to answer five statements regarding life satisfaction on a scale from 1 “I completely disagree” to 7 “I completely agree”.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy was tested using the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) [19]. The scale consists of 10 statements that have assigned four numbers representing the degree to which they agree with the statement (1 stands for “no” and 4 for “yes”).

Results

All 59 questionnaires were analyzed and no data was missing. Simple summation was used to compute general results of all questionnaires as well as separate mean scores were computed for each scale of KSSW.

The study in total analyzed seven hypotheses, however the focus is on the most important findings. Results showed that there is no significant difference in stress levels between officers who have everyday contact with prisoners ($M=239.08$, $SD=38.95$) and those who have that contact only few days a week ($M=231.65$, $SD=42.93$), $t(55)=.639$, $p=.525$.

However, it is important to mention that both groups reported high level scores.

Other important results were found after conducting the Spearman correlation to find the connection between stress levels and work experience as a prison officer. Analysis showed that work experience is significantly positively correlated with overall levels of stress, $N=59$, $r=.275$, $p=.035$. Further analysis showed that this significant correlation is present for the KSSW scale called “Contacts with prisoners”, $N=59$, $r=.280$, $p=.032$, and the correlation with the rest of the scales was not significant but had strong positive tendencies.

Results also showed that marriage does not seem to be a protecting factor as there was no significant difference in overall levels of stress between officer who were married ($N=39$, $M=239.62$, $SD=39.77$) and those who were not ($N=19$, $M=225.79$, $SD=33.01$), $t(56)=1.31$, $p=.196$.

One-way ANOVA was used to analyze another hypothesis that states officers from different departments experience different levels of stress. Results of ANOVA were highly significant and showed that there is a difference in overall stress levels between departments at the $p<0.5$ level [$F(5,51)=3.33$, $p=.011$]. Officers working in the health department reported the highest scores ($M=267.5$) and officers from the quartermaster department reported the lowest levels of stress ($M=214.5$).

To measure the correlation between stress levels and life satisfaction the Spearman test was used. A negative correlation found between overall stress levels and life satisfaction was not significant, $N=59$, $r=-.15$, $p=.258$. The only significant score found for this analysis was for the scale “Work atmosphere”, $N=59$, $r=-.265$, $p=.043$. For the rest of the scales the findings were not significant for this sample, however all of these were negative.

Last but not least a Spearman correlation was conducted to determine the relationship between the levels of self-efficacy and levels of stress. The hypothesis stated that higher levels of self-efficacy indicate lower levels of stress. Results of this analysis showed that even though there was a negative correlation between these two factors it was mostly insignificant. The only significant, negative correlation was found for the scale “Contacts with prisoners”, $r=.313$, $p=.016$, $N=59$. For the rest of the scales as well as the overall level of stress the correlation was not significant, however strong tendencies were found.

Discussion

Job stress has become a current problem [3,20-23]. As the world changes and develops the job requirements and environments also change. All the changes, new duties and obligations carry potential stressors for those who perform those jobs. A prison officer's job is important socially and very demanding [16]. Factors like long, irregular hours, aggression and manipulation from inmates, overpopulation, isolated environment, the huge amount of responsibilities for both themselves and the prisoners can create a stressful environment [3,16].

Results suggest that the contact with prisoners itself is stressful, not the amount of it. However, it is interesting and it may provide more information if this type of comparison was done between officers who have everyday contact with prisoners and those who meet them only once a week or less.

The research literature often suggests that marriage is a protective factor against stress [8,13,16]. However, results from this study showed that there was no statistically significant difference in stress level between married and unmarried officers. Further analysis of the reasons why it is so could be beneficial, as to find what actions to take in order to decrease those levels. One reason for the lack of statistical significance of the variable being married might be the fact that married officers are not allowed to share work information with their partners. Single officers do not have this problem therefore they reported lower levels of stress. Therefore, the question to explore is whether having a 'confidant' for officers to discuss work issues regularly in confidence can be a protective agent.

Similar finding is reported across different departments [18]. What also may contribute to high levels of stress reported by employees working in the health department is the fact that job of a doctor or a nurse is at risk of high amounts of stress itself. Similar to doctors and nurses working in hospitals those who work in prisons face similar responsibilities, dilemmas and situations.

In term of stress levels and self-efficacy and life satisfaction, the results turned out to be insignificant. This was a rather surprising finding [18,19]. For both variables negative correlations were found that may suggest that we may expect that high levels of stress contribute to lower levels of life satisfaction and self-efficacy. The reason why those results only showed strong tendencies but not significant differences may be that the sample was too small, there were some variables missing, or presence of confounding factors. Therefore, a follow up study would be beneficial.

In interpreting the results it is important to take into the account the reality of Polish prisons [13,16]. The prisons are very often understaffed and overpopulated at the same time. Understaffing often leads to increased responsibilities (long hours, physical and mental exhaustion) for each officer, increasing the risk of confusion and making a mistake adding to stress levels. Overpopulation and understaffing can adversely affect inmates' behaviour due to heightened stress level thus exacerbating anxiety and stress levels. A vicious circle may be observed in which officers reported that working shifts disrupts family life and reduces performance at work due to fatigue, which in turn creates even more frustration and stress, sloppiness and even disobedience [24].

Conclusion

Job stress is a complex issue that appears to become more and more common across different professions. Prison officers are a specific population that is exposed to unique stressors that are not present in other professions (working with inmates, working in isolation). Results suggest that even though job stress experienced by officers seems to negatively affect life satisfaction and self-efficacy its influence is not significant. However, tendencies found in

those correlations are strong enough to be a good base for future follow up or replicative studies in order to overcome some problematic issues in the prison service.

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