

PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

Utilising counselling services by law enforcement: An exploratory case study

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This study explored police officers' dispositions to utilise counselling services. Informants were 20 officers of the Lesotho Mounted Police Services (females = 42.5 %; constables = 57.5 %, age range 21 to 50+). The officers completed the Workplace Counselling Service Utilisation survey on their perceptions of the relevance and accessibility of counselling services by their workstation. Descriptive analysis results indicate the officers to perceive the value of workplace counselling for chronic health conditions and general well-being as well as for mental health support. The officers perceived their workplace counselling services inaccessible due to lack of privacy, as well as risks for stigmatisation for languishing health and poorer career prospects. Workplace counselling for law enforcement would be serviceable with infrastructure for privacy and confidentiality.

Keywords: burnout, counselling services, Lesotho police, perceptions, stress

Introduction

Globally, police officers are exposed to more work-related stress, which would lead to their risk for cardiovascular diseases exceeding that of the general population (Magnavita et al., 2018). However, there is evidence to suggest that police officers use less counselling services than the general population (Mushwana et al., 2019), which would harm their health in the long-term. Yet, among police services, there appears to be a trend towards the use of mental health counselling services (Faulkner, 2018). Specifically, police mental health and psychotherapeutic help-seeking suggest an evolving police culture more accepting of mental health services and away from beliefs rooted in “stigma, shame and rejection, low mental health literacy, lack of knowledge and treatment-related doubts, fear of negative social consequences, limited resources, time, and expenses” (Kantor et al., 2017, p.53). At workplaces, concerns about breach of confidentiality and the potential negative career impact would impact utilisation of counselling services (Fox et al., 2012). We sought to explore engagement by the Lesotho police service members of their workplace counselling unit for well-being.

Lesotho: Its law enforcement socio-ecology

Lesotho is a small mountainous kingdom in Southern Africa, comprising 30 355² kilometres in size (Leduka, 2012). It is surrounded by the Republic of South Africa (RSA) and comprises around 2.3 million people (Maliehe, 2014). Most Lesotho's citizens work in various sectors of the South African economy such as farms, textile, mining, and professional jobs. The Lesotho informal sector provides work for the majority of the Basotho.

The Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS) is managed by the Commissioner of Police and has a counselling unit to provide psychosocial support to officers

needing relief from work-related stress and trauma. The unit also provides counselling support to officers with mood disorders and with work-family conflict role issues that would impact work performance. This includes the management of chronic health conditions {PLEASE CONFIRM AS CORRECT} (Olowu, 2015). The counselling unit is managed by a senior officer with basic counselling training. It is unclear as to the perceptions of the in-house counselling services by the police officers that would influence their use of the services for themselves or the public they serve. Conceivably, their cultural understanding would influence their utilisation of counselling services for mental health issues.

Attitudes and intention to seek counselling

People may utilise formal mental health counselling services less, preferring informal counselling within their family or their social network (Duff et al., 2013; Ebersöhn, 2019; Seleme, 2017; Sharaievska, 2013). This would be true mostly in developing country settings like Lesotho with strong familial social networks and access to complementary or alternative counselling services provided by traditional healers (Iyeke et al., 2018). Traditional healers typically are the first point of call by indigenous community people prior to accessing modern medicine treatments (Iyeke et al., 2018; Labys et al., 2016). Thus, a treatment gap is apparent in the use of modern therapies by indigenous populations (Wolff, 2014).

In the Lesotho cultural context, people expect counselling in everyday settings from their communal flock or the *khokanyana-phiri*. This also provides social capital in help-seeking behaviour (Ebersöhn, 2019), discouraging self-stigma (McCann et al., 2016), and empathetic consideration to a person in need (Frey & Goldstone, 2018). Yet, workplace-based counselling in the form of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) is increasingly

utilised across industry sectors (Dookran, 2014). This is indeed the case with the Lesotho police service counselling unit. Yet, the uptake of modern counselling services would be low in most African countries (McCann et al., 2016; Raji, 2019). Influences of use of workplace counselling by LMPS officers remain a matter for research, and findings would inform the design and implementation of workplace counselling by law enforcement across the African continent.

Goal of the study

Perceptions of a human service influence its utilisation (Chiboola, 2020; Goss & Adebawale, 2014; Mpofu et al., 2015). If LMPS perceived workplace counselling to be inconsistent with their core beliefs about help seeking and provision, they would be less likely to utilise such a service or perhaps be very selective in their use of a workplace counselling unit. We sought to explore utilisation of workplace mental health counselling services by the LMP and the conditions under which utilisation was likely. Our specific research question that guided the study was: How does police officers' perceptions influence their disposition towards utilization of counselling services?

Method

Participants and setting

Participants were 40 of 296 officers (14%) stationed in Maseru, Lesotho. Table 1 presents a summary of the participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Demographics	Frequency <i>N</i>	Frequency %
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	23	57.5
Female	17	42.5
Total	40	100
<i>Age</i>		
21 – 30	15	37.5
31 – 40	15	37.5
41 – 50	9	22.5
50+	1	2.5
Total	40	100
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married	24	60
Not married	12	30
Widowed	4	10
Total	40	100
<i>Rank</i>		
Trooper	20	50
Sergeant	10	25
Inspector	10	25
Total	40	100
<i>Education level</i>		
C.O.SC	22	55
Diploma	6	15
Degree	8	20
Special certificate	4	10
Total	40	100

Note. Frequency *N* = Frequency Number. Frequency % = Frequencies in percentages.

Instrument

The participants completed a Workplace Counselling Service Utilisation Survey (Seema, 2010) which included questions on participants' demographic characteristics. It also included questions regarding the perceptions of use of workplace wellness counselling. Specifically, counselling services that police officers use; work related factors influencing police officers to seek counselling services; and barriers police officers face in seeking counselling services. As a measure of the consistency or reliability of reporting, we administered the survey to a subsample of the participants twice and observed a concordance of agreement of 85%, indicating high reliability.

Procedure and data analysis

The University of Botswana Office of Research and Development approved the study {PLEASE PROVIDE THE ETHICAL CLEARANCE NUMBER IF AVAILABLE}. The Maseru Central police command granted permission for the study. The participants individually consented to take part in the study and were informed that the information they provided was for research purposes only. We used dummy codes for the data capture to protect the participants' identities. Given the small sample and exploratory nature of this study, we analysed the data descriptively.

Results and discussion

In this section, we present and discuss results simultaneously as they emerged from the analysis of data for the current study.

Counselling services that police officers use

Table 2 and Table 3 present the major work and life domains for which the LMP would use workplace counselling services.

As apparent from Table 2, the LMP perceived workplace counselling pertinent to HIV/AIDS management and general counselling. HIV and AIDS counselling would be a priority in this high pandemic region, as would general counselling. Roz and Raval (2017) support this observation and note that police are prone to mental health problems and require general counselling services. The officers also utilised the workplace counselling unit for family, child, and couple's therapy (see also Tuerk et al., 2012; Tuttle, 2019). When families take part in the counselling services it might serve as an advocacy tool to encourage the utilisation of the services beyond the members-only approach. Bano (2011) reports that lack of time for family and related stresses among police personnel can lead to police officers seeking workplace counselling services.

Table 3 identifies three priority counselling needs for the LMPS: daily police work, nature of work, and nature of workplace. Stress from daily police work is a major driving factor for use of workplace counselling services (Leino et al., 2011; McCormick, 2017). This would be from the fact that the nature of work performed by the police is mostly crisis intervention, which is associated with psychological distress (Leino et al., 2011). The psychological distress may be from role ambiguity as to how far the police officers should engage communities without breaching

Table 2. Perceptions by the LMP of Life situation issues for counselling ($N = 20$)

Counselling services provided by LMPS	Frequency	Frequency %	Ranking
Family counselling	6	15	3
HIV and AIDS counselling	22	55	1
Child counselling	7	17.5	2
Couple counselling	7	17.5	2
General counselling	22	55	1
Not sure	4	10	4
Other services	0	0	5

Note. Participants could nominate several of the areas and the percentages are for endorsement per item

Table 3. LMP perceptions of Work issues for counselling ($N = 20$).

Factors influencing counselling services	Frequency n	Frequency %	Ranking
Daily police work causes stress and trauma	30	75	2
Stress at work	28	70	3
Stress due to being the front desk police officer	15	37.5	4
Nature of work	33	82.5	1
Workplace	33	82.5	1
Other	0	0	0

Note. Participants could nominate several of the areas and the percentages are for endorsement per item

police code of conduct (Perrott & Kelloway, 2011). Compassion fatigue is a type of traumatisation prevalent among police officers as they respond to citizens' traumatising experiences (Papazoglou, 2017).

Regular transfers may be one of the factors causing stress. However, this will mainly be if officers are transferred to less resourced areas (Bano, 2011). Although we did not analyse by age due to small sample size, "stress is significantly more pronounced among those police personnel who are younger, more educated, posted in urban areas and have less work experience" (Joseph & Nagrajamurthy, 2014, p. 39).

Influencing on workplace counselling help seeking by the LMP

Table 4 presents the data summaries on influences on use of workplace counselling services by the LMP.

As apparent from Table 4, breach of confidentiality was a major concern to dissuade officers from taking part in activities deemed to compromise it. In this particular work setting, the same space that is used for counselling services is also used as an operational office accommodating three other officers. Confidentiality of the meeting space is pivotal to counselling services (Dey & Kumar, 2020). Lack of confidentiality seems to be associated with less help seeking behaviour of the police officers.

Perceptions of lacking in resilience to face challenges in life was a critical aspect influencing workplace

counselling help seeking among the officers. Law enforcement officers are generally expected to show mental strength (van der Meulen et al., 2018). Lack of resilience in times of adversity is generally not perceived as aptness for police work. Counselling is perceived predisposed to capacitate police officers to face challenges and develop resilience skills through education and training (Cregan et al., 2020).

Fear to be judged negatively at work due to personal problems underpinned lack of help seeking from the counselling services. It equally appeared to promote negative stereotypes linked to weakened social identity (see also Trinkner et al., 2019). Fear to be judged negatively would be counter-productive to utilisation of workplace counselling services for the well-being of police officers.

Implications for practice

Occupational stress is an inevitable part of police work in general as policing is considered one of the most stressful occupations (Bano, 2011). Police service members contend with daily work (Maguen et al., 2009) and for which they require specialised services (Quraishi & Benton, 2014). Mental health resilience training should be a part of workplace counselling services (van der Meulen et al., 2018). Furthermore, education about counselling services would enhance workplace counselling service utilisation by police service members. Fear of confidentiality breaches

Table 4. Influences of workplace help seeking by LMPS members

Challenges	Frequency n	Frequency %	Ranking
Fear to be judge negatively at work due to my problems.	12	30	4
Perceptions of lacking in resilience to face challenges in life.	13	32.5	3
Career fears of supervisors denting promotion	13	32.5	2
Lack of work-hardiness among the junior officers.	13	32.5	2
Confidentiality concerns.	16	40	1
Perceptions of lack of decisional resolve	9	22.5	5

Note. Frequency n = Frequencies in Numbers. Frequency % = Frequencies in percentages. Ranking = Ordering the Frequency Percentages by superiority

from lack of counselling space was a major concern for the police officers. Police officers value confidentiality as part of their training.

Limitations

The results of this study cannot not be generalised to the Lesotho national police service due to the small sample of police officers surveyed. We also did not analyse the data by sex, age, and seniority due to the small sample size. Moreover, we relied on self-report data, rather than on that of the officers providing the counselling services. Future studies should survey a representative sample of officers who are users and providers of the counselling services for more definitive findings.

Conclusion

LMPS officers perceive workplace counselling services important for their work-life situation support needs. They identify usefulness of workplace counselling for HIV and general counselling. The officers perceive workplace counselling relevant to mental health needs. However, they are also reticent to use the services due to a lack of privacy and confidentiality and concerns that they might be stigmatised by peers and supervisors as pathological and unfit for service.

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