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Stress and Stress Management in Policing
A cross-sectional analysis of the literature in the field

Mikael Nygren and Staffan Karp

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to map the literature on stress in police organizations and stress management for police officers. Results show that much of the stress management research has focused on the individual, despite that stress research over the past 25 years has shown that organisational stressors have major negative effects on individuals. Future research would benefit from a wider focus. Including several or all the levels described in this article will make it possible to develop new knowledge about stress-generating factors within police organizations, as well as new and more effective methods and techniques for stress management.

Mikael Nygren

PhD student

Department of Education

Umeå University, Sweden

e-mail: Mikael.nygren@ledarskapscentrum.se

Staffan Karp

Associate professor at Department of Education

Umeå University, Sweden

e-mail: staffan.karp@pedag.umu.se

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Introduction

Work-related stress is a problem in many occupations in today's society (Ainsworth, 2002) and police officers are no exception in this respect. According to Andersson, Swenson & Clay (1995) there are few professional groups that encounter such a broad spectrum of stressors as police officers. Christianson & Granhag (2004) found that, compared to other occupations, there is an elevated risk for police officers to be exposed to stressful and traumatic situations. Anderson, Litzenberger & Plecas (2002) argue that policing is one of the most stressful occupations in western society. In a report on threats against employees within the police organisation (RPS, 1999), the Swedish National Police Board concluded that stress knowledge, stress management, crisis theory, mental preparation, debriefing and the consequences and handling of burnout syndrome are essential areas of knowledge for police officers. Research has also shown that practicing police officers believe that stress management is one of the most important things to teach students at police academies (Ellonen, Nurmi, Raivola, Vålitalo & Vålitalo, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to map the available literature on stress in police organizations and stress management for police officers. Research on work-related stress has identified stressors at all levels within organisations (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Stressors exist at the individual level, group level, leadership level and organisational level. We have studied how stress and stress management at these levels are dealt with in the literature, and we have also analyzed the content of the documents included in the study and the methods described for each level.

Method

In our search for relevant literature, we used internet search engines and research databases (PsychInfo). Searches were conducted in May 2005 based on the keywords *police and/or crisis resolution skills, mental training, mental preparation, stress management*.

The literature thus found was then categorized according to type of document, the content of the document and the methods described at the individual, group, leadership or organisational level.

The different types of document were grouped as follows:

1. General literature

Documents in this category are accounts by individuals who, in first hand written statements, tell about and reflect on specific events or matters, or on their whole lives (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). One example of such a document is a police officer's own story of stress and stress management.

2. Research literature

Documents in this category are articles published in scientific journals, dissertations, unpublished manuscripts based on scientific research and research-based literature often used at universities.

3. Official documents

Documents in this category include official reports, published government studies, minutes from the Swedish parliament, curricula and other official publications.

The documents were also categorized according to whether they deal with stress and stress management at the individual, group, leadership or organisational level. Documents pertaining to more than one of these levels were classified at each level dealt with. We also included a survey of the methods and techniques described for each level.

Results

Using the above search criteria we identified a total of 62 documents, the majority of which belong to the research category (see Table I).

Table I. Categorization based on type of document.

	Count
General literature	4
Research literature	
Dissertation	2
Books	14
Scientific journals	22
Meta analysis	6
Unpublished manuscripts	3
Official documents	11
Total	62

Our analysis of the content with regard to each organisational level showed that the majority of the documents (41) discussed stress and stress management at the individual level while 21 were focused on stress at the group level, 7 on the leadership level and 16 on the organizational level (see Table II). While there are examples of literature describing and discussing two or more of these levels, the dominating pattern is that only one level is dealt with.

Table II. Categorization based on content at an individual, group, leadership and organisational level.

Types of documents	Levels			
	Individual	Group	Leadership	Organisational
General literature	3	1	0	4
Research				
Dissertations	0	0	1	1
Books	6	8	5	7
Scientific journals	18	3	0	3
Meta-analyses	7	3	0	0
Unpublished manuscripts	2	2	0	0
Official documents	5	4	1	1
Total count	41	21	7	16

Our analysis of the documents with regard to methods and techniques described as being useful in stress management showed a wide range of such methods and techniques at all levels (see Tables III, IV, V, VI). However, since the majority of the documents deal with stress management at the individual level, the largest number of techniques and methods were found in that category.

Table III. Methods and techniques for stress management at the individual level

<i>Individual level</i>	
<i>Bio feedback</i>	<i>Progressive muscular relaxation</i>
<i>Breathing techniques</i>	<i>Knowledge about stress and stress reactions</i>
<i>Cognitive methods</i>	<i>Meditation</i>
<i>Cognitive repetition/visualization</i>	<i>Mental preparation</i>
<i>Concentration</i>	<i>Physical exercise</i>
<i>Constructive inner conversations</i>	<i>SIT – Stress Inoculation Training</i>
<i>Drills</i>	<i>Sleep</i>
<i>Eating habits</i>	<i>Thought suppression</i>
<i>Fear management</i>	<i>Triggers</i>
<i>Mood management</i>	

Table IV. Methods and techniques for stress management at the group level

<i>Group level</i>	
<i>After action review</i>	<i>Evaluation of an event</i>
<i>Crisis management</i>	<i>Peer support</i>
<i>Debriefing</i>	<i>Social support</i>
<i>Defusing</i>	<i>Teambuilding</i>
<i>Effective groups</i>	

Table V. Methods and techniques for stress management at the leadership level

<i>Leadership level</i>	
<i>Education / Knowledge</i>	<i>Role overload</i>
<i>Leading in a crisis</i>	<i>Vague roles</i>
<i>New leadership</i>	<i>Uncertain roles</i>
<i>Role conflicts</i>	

Table VI. Methods and techniques for stress management at the organisational level

<i>Organisational level</i>	
<i>Communication</i>	<i>Systems for caring</i>
<i>Personnel division</i>	<i>Tertiary prevention</i>
<i>Responsibility of the police academies</i>	<i>Training</i>
<i>Secondary prevention</i>	<i>Primary prevention</i>

Discussion

The results show that the majority of the literature included in our study of stress and stress management in police organizations presents an individual perspective. This is interesting, considering that much of the research conducted in the past 25 years has shown that organisational stressors are the most common cause of stress in police officers at the workplace (Anderson et al. 1995; Anshel, 2000; Brown & Campbell, 1994; Copes, 2005; Ellison, 2004; Geerinck & Stark, 2003; Kates, 2001; Kurke & Scrivner, 1995; Liberman, Best, Metzler, Fagan, Marmar & Weiss, 2002; Nygren, 2006; Scanff & Taugis, 2002 & Stephens och Long, 1998). This is not unique to police organizations. For instance, Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter (2001) find it paradoxical that burnout interventions tend to be focused

primarily on individual-centred solutions, given that research has found that situational and organisational factors play a bigger role in burnout than individual ones. Brustad & Ritter-Taylor (1997) found that research on stress and stress management has mainly been focused on the individual and on individual methods and techniques instead of taking the social context into consideration. Maslach & Goldberg (1998) explain the focus on the individual level with notions of individual causality and responsibility, and the assumption that it is easier and cheaper to change people than organisations.

In view of the above, and our own findings, we argue that future research into stress and stress management and the development of methods and techniques in police organisations will benefit from a larger and wider focus than mainly the individual level. With a research perspective that includes several or all of the levels described, it will be possible to generate new knowledge about the causes of stress within police organizations, as well as new and more effective methods and techniques for stress management.

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