



Gender difference in occupational stress: A study of the South Korean National Police Agency

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Available online 23 October 2015

Abstract

Using survey data from 512 sworn police officers in the Korean National Police Agency, this study explores the impact of five job characteristics, organizational environment, and external environment on stress experienced by male and female police officers in South Korea. Data analyses show that female officers experience statistically significant elevated degrees of somatization and anxiety. The level of organizational bureaucracy has statistically significant impact on both male and female officer's somatization and anxiety, and male officer's depression. In addition, the level of community relationships has statistically significant impact on somatization, anxiety, and depression for male officers, but only on anxiety and depression for female officers. The effects of task identity and autonomy on different measures of work-related stresses differ between the two gender groups. Findings of the current study support previous police stress literature in general. Implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Keywords: Police occupational stress; Gender difference; South Korea; Stress symptom; Job characteristics; Bureaucracy

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1. Introduction

Studies have shown that law enforcement officers' performance may be negatively impacted when officers encounter prolonged strain (Anderson et al., 2002; Anshel, 2000; Goodman, 1990). Sapolsky (2004, p. 12) explains that it is with extended strain that a person gets to the third stage in the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), which Selye (1956, p. 31) named “exhaustion,” where stress-related medical problems arise. The GAS, which is called the stress-response currently, consists of three developmental stages: first, an initial warning stage where a stressor is detected; second, an elevated struggling phase wherein the human body attempts to go back to homeostasis immediately by adapting to or resisting against a stressor; and the final stage, a chronic phase in which energy sources are used up and the human body cannot go back to homeostasis but instead develops stress-related diseases: exhaustion (Sapolsky, 2004; Selye, 1956). Although differences in the levels of, sources of, and the ways to cope with stress between male and female police officers are conjectured by a substantial number of scholars and practitioners, there is insufficient empirical evidence to support this conjecture specifically focusing on gender differences in stress (Barnett et al., 1987; Brown and Campbell, 1990; Burke and Mikkelsen, 2005; He et al., 2002; Martin and Jurik, 2006).

The issue of the effect of stress on female law enforcement officers should have additional attention since the percentage of female officers in many law enforcement agencies has continuously increased. Hence, sound and competent law enforcement agencies would benefit from a further integrated force (Roberg et al., 2015). For instance, Block and Anderson (1974) reached conclusions that while there was no difference between male and female officers in performing patrol work, female officers seemed to defuse potentially violent situations and made fewer arrests. Sherman (1975) also discovered similar findings that while female police officers were as effective as their male counterparts in performing patrol work, they were less aggressive and made fewer arrests. Research revealed that female police officers were more receptive and understanding of citizens' expectations and dealt with calls for service, particularly domestic disturbances, better than their male counterparts (Mallicoat and Ireland, 2014; Rabe-Hemp, 2009; Sherman, 1975). In addition, Sichel et al. (1978) found that female police officers were evaluated by citizens to be more capable, polite, and agreeable; moreover, citizens who made contact with female police officers were more likely to show a higher esteem for the police department. However, contemporary studies present different aspects of the female police officer. For example, Feder (1997) and Robinson (2000) observed that female and male officers make quite similar arrest decisions in the course of encounters with suspects; Paoline and Terrill (2004) discovered minor difference in the application of coercion by officers across gender. Additionally, Hoffman and Hickey (2005) noticed that female officers employed physical force without weapons for arrests at roughly an identical rate as their male counterparts. Although significant advances have been made for female officers over the past five decades, such as the passing of the *Civil Rights Bill of 1964* and the *Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978)*, research still shows mixed findings whether the opportunities for access to employment and promotion within law enforcement are equally guaranteed for females (Mallicoat and Ireland, 2014).

Since the establishment of the modern organization, Korean police have experienced insufferable hardships in their official capacity as law enforcement. This is especially problematic with political neutrality due to the annexation of the Korean Peninsula by Japan from 1910 to 1945, the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, and political corruptions primarily by pseudo-democratic military regimes until 1992 (Moon and Morash, 2009). When pro-

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