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Hazardous alcohol use among South Korean police officers: Examining predictions from general strain theory

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Abstract

Agnew's (1985, 1992) general strain theory (GST) had earned a wide array of empirical support in research on crime and delinquency. Yet, there has been limited attempt to apply GST's framework to unique samples such as police officers. The present study explores the generalizability of GST to hazardous alcohol use using a sample of 570 South Korean male police officers. OLS, binary logistic, and ordinal logistic regression analyses produced evidence that partially supports the key propositions of GST. These findings are explained in the context of South Korean drinking culture. Research implications for future researchers are also discussed.

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Police officers' excessive alcohol consumption can have negative impacts on both the individual officers and the police organization. Research shows that alcohol consumption is, in general, more pervasive among police officers than employees of other occupational domains (Richmond et al., 1998; Swatt et al., 2007). In order to develop effective prevention and treatment programs, it is important to understand the dynamics underlying the etiology of

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hazardous alcohol use among officers. Research thus far indicates that police stress could be linked to a list of psychological, physical, and behavioral maladaptive outcomes, including hazardous alcohol use (He et al., 2002; Kohan and O'Connor, 2002; Lindsay et al., 2008; Morash and Haarr, 1995; Violanti and Aron, 1994). Nevertheless, very few of these studies have been guided by a well-founded theoretical framework that can help explain underlying dynamics regarding the etiology of hazardous alcohol use among some officers.

Agnew's (1985, 1992) general strain theory (GST), one prominent criminological theory, can serve as a useful explanatory framework that may contribute to understanding excessive alcohol use stemming from stress among police officers. Although originally developed to explain the phenomena of crime and delinquency, Agnew (1992) posits that GST is a general theory that can be applied to other forms of maladaptive behaviors adopted by individuals in an attempt to cope with felt strain.¹ A large body of research has tested the efficacy of GST in the context of crime and delinquency, resulting in evidence supportive of GST's tenets (Agnew et al., 2002; Capowich et al., 2001; Johnson and Morris, 2008; Paternoster and Mazerolle, 1994). Yet, there has been limited attempt to apply GST's framework to unique samples such as police officers. To our knowledge, there exists only one study wherein GST has been applied to examining hazardous alcohol use among police officers, which was conducted using a sample of Baltimore police officers in the U.S. (Swatt et al., 2007). No comparable studies have been conducted outside the U.S. This is an unfortunate oversight because if GST is to be considered truly a general theory, it should be brought to bear on maladaptive coping behaviors across national or cultural boundaries as well as across study populations.

In the current study, we test the generalizability of GST against South Korean police officers' hazardous alcohol use. Cultural norms and behavioral modalities regarding alcohol use in East Asian countries, in particular in South Korea, are markedly different from those found in the US or other western countries. If the current study revealed evidence in support of GST, therefore, it would further bolster the veracity of the key propositions of GST.

1. Police stress and alcohol consumption

Compared to other occupations in modern civil society, the police occupation appears to hold a greater potential for dangerous and stressful experiences. Although policing is not currently the most dangerous occupation, it is probably one of the only occupations, other than the military, in which the workforce routinely confronts hostile individuals, who are often intent on harming them (Carter, 2001). As Skolnick (1966) observed decades ago, the idea of danger permeates in police organizations and the psyche of police officers. Research shows that work experiences associated with danger, such as violent confrontations with suspects, having to shoot at other individuals, getting injured, or witnessing fellow officers' deaths are significant stressors among officers (Jaramillo et al., 2005; Manzoni and Eisner, 2006; Violanti and Aron, 1994).

While stressors related to danger stem from routine day to day operations of the police force, some stressors originate from the nature of the police organization itself. The bureaucratic and paramilitary nature of the police organization necessarily entails impersonal rules, strict chains of command, and other rigid characteristics inherent in bureaucratic organizations (Gershon et al., 2009; Morash et al., 2008). Line officers' inputs are rarely sought in important

¹The concept of strain in GST is essentially the same as stress, and Agnew (1992) uses the two terms interchangeably. Similarly, strain and stress are used synonymously in the present study.

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