THE MAIN SOURCES OF STRESS AND SPECIFIC COPING STRATEGIES FOR POLICE MANAGERS

Constanța POPESCU[1] ORCID :

Loredana-Mihaela RÎNJEA[2] ORCID:

Abstract*: The research addresses the problem of professional stress, the purpose being to know the specificity of the stress generated by the occupation of a management position in the Romanian Police and the peculiarities that can lead to the occurrence of some dysfunctionalities in the managerial act. The participants in the study are managers, men, who work in a police unit and who have staff in their subordination working in the street field. The paper is a qualitative approach, the instrument used being a questionnaire with open questions, with the help of which the main sources of stress and their management strategies specific to the police environment were identified, as a stage of diagnosis in the construction and implementation of prevention programs aimed at reducing the negative consequences associated with organizational stress and increasing the efficiency of managerial work.*

1. Introduction:

Professional stress represents a key point of interest to research conducted within the field of occupational health. Many studies have been carried out in connection to the professional stress that police officers are undergoing, most of which reaching the conclusion that the police officer's job "*is one of the most rik-prone professions, surpassing the stress felt by those involved in the domain of air traffic*" (Selye, H, 1978, cited by Pinzari, A., Bordian, V., 2013).

By using statistical data as our starting point which claim that "*nearly 80% of managers have experienced professional stress*" (Bolliger, L. Et al., 2022), it has been deemed useful to embark on the task of studying the managers of the Romanian Police Force in terms of the specificity of stress manifestations which arise once one has been assigned to a management position. Being a manager in a key institution within the domain of Public Safety and Order means carrying out

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one's activity under physical and mental overload conditions, while following the restictions and rigours of the system (the organizational and operational requirements).

The managers' workload is implicitly associated with sources of stress from the very beginning of his / her appointment, when the first expectations are laid out regardin his / her attitude and behaviour, which he / she must adjust to the new status; these are supplemented by new sources of stress amplified by the specificity of the activity that he / she must undertake: the management of unforseen tasks, the management of negative situations, the coordination of field activities, the support provided to his / her employees in solving complex cases etc.

In this context, it is mandatory to bear in mind that the Romanian Police is a specialized state institution, part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which, by fully complying to the legal framework, enforces its attributions regarding the safe-keeping and protection of personal rights and of public and personal property, the prevention and uncovering of criminal activity, the compliance with public order and peace.

2. A Review of the Literature

The multitude of specialized papers and analyses on the topic of stress, in general and on professional stress, in particular, would determine us to consider this as the basis and as the starting point to those definitions that are mutually and unanimously accepted by everyone when it comes to such notions.

If we define stress as *"the process through which the demands of the environment surpass the body's capacity to adapt, and therefore psychological changes occur"* (Cohen et al., 1997 cited by Cazacu C., Rosca, I.S., 2021), we notice the constitutive elements which generate the occurrence of this process: the sources of stress, the analysis of its potential effects, the reaction to stress and its effects. Basically, stress arises when the demands of external factors exceed the individual capacity of coping.

In an attempt to understand and operate with what we call stress, a few concepts have been designed to explain it: the first one views stress as an *independent variable*, and its core idea is that stress *"represents the potentially harmful external stimulus"* (Zlate, M., 2007). Those who embrace this view have looked for the identification and categorization of stressful agents; the second view is that of stress being the body's reaction to a potentially harmful event; the third paradigm is the one that monitors the interaction between the stimulus and the reaction, with stress being the moderating variable; the most recent approach is the transactional one in which stress occurs when, after a close cognitive assessment of the stressors, the subject evaluates the event that disrupts his / her balance as one that exceeds his / her potential to manage it, thus endangering his / her pysical or mental health, an assessment which should be followed by the necessity to solve the situation he / she is confronted with.

The stress transactional paradigm brings about the idea of coping, which is defined as the *"cognitive and behavior efforts that are constantly changing in order to manage the internal and/or external requirements assessed by the individual as exceeding his / her personal resources"* (Lazarus, R.S., Folkman, S., cited by Bondac, G.T. et al., 2017). The essence of this paradigm represents the understanding of the fact that these stressors do not carry the capacity to generate tension and stress by themselves, the latter actually being the result of the assessment of the considerations that these factors are perceived as threatening elements. If the individual perceives

himself/herself as the possessor of the right coping tools, then the threat posed by these stimuli is significantly decreased or even eliminated.

Given the stance that the two authors take, the coping strategies have been grouped into two sub-parts: *problem-focused strategies* (the subject approaches the problems and their triggering factors directly, these being considered adaptive strategies which produce long-term effects) and *emotion-focused strategies* (the subject puts in a lot of effort in order to manage the emotions that resulted from the action of stressful factors, he/she minimises the importance of problems, denies their existance or simply ignores them, hoping that the situation will eventually go away or solve on its own with time). Although the strategies mentioned in the first category are clearly more effective, the ones that focus on emotions aid the individual to reduce the negative impact of the stressor and to not be overwhelmed by each situation. A combination of the two strategies could be found within the mobilizing support that includes both emotion-focused strategies and problem-solving strategies (the individual reduces, at cognitive level, the emotional intensity of the stress-generating factor and then, once the tension has been diminished, he/she could directly interfere onto the causes that have led to the disturbance of the body's homeostasy).

When it comes down to the organizational stress factors, classifications include both extrinsic sources: *bad working environment, ambiguity regarding promotion, job uncertainty, high risk of accidents, unsettlement regarding payment, position ambiguity, job conflicts, individual behaviour constrictions etc.*, and intrinsic sources: *time pressure, work overload, high/low difficulty tasks, increased/diminished liability, high/low participation in decision-making processes* (Dolan, S. and Arsenault, A., 1980 cited by Racu, C., 2022).

Another classification of the stress sources associated with the workplace could be found in the paper called '*Work Protocols for Stress and Negative Emotions Reduction at the Workplace' : role ambiguity, workplace relationships, work tools and equipment, career promotion, workplace safety, lack of autonomy at the workplace, work-home interference, workload, perks and compensations, lack of support from various leaders or managers, the fundamental nature of work etc.* (Coetzee, 2010 cited by Turc, M., et al., 2019).

The effects of stress, according to specialised research, can also be grouped into certain categories: *physical symptoms* (ex. vision impairing, sleep disorders, dizziness etc.), *emotional symptoms* (ex. cognitive blockages, cognitive disorders etc.), *behaviour symptoms* (ex. : sabotaging some tasks, psycho-social isolation, passive-agressive behavior etc.).

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Scope of Research:

This paper has considered, as its starting point, a practical necessity which results from the very nature of the job carried out within the Romanian Police Force, namely the necessity to know the specificity of professional stress associated with management possitions, the purpose being that of diagnosing the key stress factors, of physical, emotional and behaviour consequences associated with the coping strategies used in properly managing them, as an initiating stage in our specialized endeavour of constructing an organizational intervention programme which ensures the proper management of professional stress.

3.2.Subjects Group:

The subjects group consisted of 54 respondents, all men and police officers that had management positions (33 appointed, 19 empowered, 2 elected). All subjects are part of the Romanian Specialized Police Force, whose goal is to safeguard the safety of each citizen by providing good quality police service.

All those taking part in the study were aged between 28 and 52 (the average age being 41,08), with an average work experience of 18 years within the police force and an average experience in the current management position between 3 months and 16 years. The work tasks that the subjects followed are all part of the operational directive, which expose the personnel to psycho-social risks, while their duty, assignments and missions take place in demanding and stressful psychological conditions.

3.3.The Reasearch Methodology:

The tools used to collect data consisted of a questionnaire with open-end questions, in accordance with the specialized requirements, through which we have pursued the identification of the sources that generate stress at the level of professional middle-management positions within the Romanian Police Force. The questionnaire has kept to the dimensions of the classical ranking made by Cooper and Marshall in 1976, the causes of stress being grouped into six categories: the intrinsic factors pertaining to the work which is being carried out, factors pertaining to the role within the organization and the relationships at the workplace, stressors regarding career progress, factors which relate to the structure and organization environment, as well as those pertaining to the work-family dichotomy.

The questions we find inside the reasearch instruments are also connected to the exploration of those subjects that police officers who find themselves in management positions within the internal institutional hierarchy associate with professional stress.

We have also added questions that were designed to test the knowledge regarding the main (perceived) effects of professional stress, as well as the identification of those strategies that help manage this kind of stress. Moreover, we wanted to monitor the perception of respondents regarding the measures they need to undertake for an effective management of professional stress, given that the most useful programmes regarding stress management are built around an efficient diagnosis of the stress factors that interfere with professional activities.

When talking about the identification data of those who answered the questionnaire, we only requested information that pertains to statistical analyses: the age of the respondents, their work experience (within the institution, either as managers or within their current leading position), their line of work and the position they currently occupy.

The questionnaire, as well as data collection, analysis and interpretation were carried out in April, this year.

4. Results and Further Discussions>

The analysis of the answers provided by the subjects regarding the task pertaining to the simple association of *"professional stress"* with the first three words that come to mind, through the use of content analysis, has identified three types of themes that reoccur: stress effects, stress-generating causes and stress manifestations.

By analysisng the frequency of individual answers regarding various words associated with our topic, the subjects mentioned the following: *pressure, workload, deadlines, understaffing, responsibilities.*

The most frequent answers regarding the *stress-generating causes* gravitated around notions like: workload, pressure (of deadlines, of gaining results that match the institutions' goals, of interacting with other state institutions etc.), personnel deficit, task accomplishment responsibilities and coordination of direct subordinates.

Although with a lower frequency, we could also identify causes like: the emergency and unpredictable nature of the activities carried out, the risk of work accidents, the necessity to accept more tasks at the same time, the intensity and quick pace of adopting a decission given the operative circumstances, the difficulties that arise from the characteristics of the hierarchic structures.

Within the second category, namely that of *stress manifestations*, a few features with a higher frequency have been added: anxiousness, irritability, annoyance and, with a much lower frequency, frustration, "strong emotions" and physical discomfort.

The effects of stress identified by the subjects mostly included exhaustion and tiredness, and, with a lower frequency, conflicts and sickness.

The stressful agents (stressors) exibited by the managers of the Romanian Police Force are perceived differently, due mostly to the possition within the hierarchy, and are influenced by a series of individual parameters (control place, behaviour patterns that characterize the individual, personality structure, management style etc.), as well as the particularities of the environment within which they carry out their activities. In the following paragraphs, we shall analyse the stress-generating elements that interfere with management activities within the Romanian Police Force, which represents an integral part of the Defence, Public Order and National Safety Systems.

1. Intrinsic stress factors pertaining to particular activities:

When it comes to this category, the stress-inducing factor that has been identified to a large extent within more than half the subjects' answers (33 managers) is *the workload*, which is deemed to be very high and which also causes overburden at the workplace. Moreover, *the pressure of deadlines, the speed* with which it is necessary to solve a case with the existing short-staff at any given moment are also some of the factors that rank high as stress-generating elements.

Some other aspects which are particularly interesting and typical for the police environment, but at the same time can impact the work of police managers are: the unpredictable, diverse and complex nature of the interventional activities, the provision of quick solutions to various activities, the short term required to solve various activities / the inadequacy of deadlines to the volume of data which requires analysis, the overlapping of various tasks, the multitude of demands from higher ranking officers, the short time imposed for the analysis of various situations and the

pressure resulting from the necessity to adopt quick, clear, correct decission and fast decission making.

Of all the physical agnets mentioned by police managers in the questionnaires, there are a few that stand out in terms of frequency, namely temperature and noise. Apart from these, we should also mention: the inadequate spaces necessary to carry out professional activities, kuminosity, pollution levels and air quality.

Given the operative situation at police structures level and the fact that, if we want these structures to ensure public order, it is necessary to allow the permanent presence of the entities in charge, the frequency with which the managers exceed their usual working hours is *daily / almost daily.* Some of the most frequent consequences of the overextension of work hours are represented by: fatigue (both physical and mental) and the absence / diminishing of the hours spent with the family and the manifestation of extraprofessional activities, given the fact that the coordination activities are usually extended outside normal working hours and leisure time.

2. *Factors related to the role within the organization*

By analysing the answers provided by the respondents, we haven't been able to identify the existance of ambiguities or conflicts regarding the role of managers within the organization and the work process, which allows us to conclude that the managing staff possesses the knowledge related to its own responsibilities, the limits of its competence / authority in relation to the the position they occupy and the expectations regarding the roles at hand are not incompatible with the managers' personalities, and the roles associated with their status are not incompatible.

The effects of this potential stress source have been diminished in the case of managers that have taken part in this study due to the fact that the vast majority of these persons have had role models whom they have learned the specific requirements of such position from. Learning one's role refers to the gaining of those abilities that allow one to exercise his/her duties, on the one hand, and on the other, to the adjustment and reorientation of the necessary attributes in order to exert one's authority effectively. We haven't identified any discrepancies between the expectations and the realities regarding the job requirements, the demands of the latter, the duties and the responsibilities which are in perfect correlation with the capacities and the availably of the managers that took part in our study.

The adaptation to the status of manager and the assimilation of the specific roles are much easier in those cases where managers possess some sort of experience within the *"reference domain"*, where they are prepared from a professional perspective, where they manifest management skills (coordination, motivation, planification), mediation abilities, active listening attributes, knowledge within the field of management and, nevertheless, where they are aware of the group they lead and of the problems that its members are facing.

However, the factor deemed as "*responsibility towards people*" is appreciated as being another potential source of stress and is connected to the role of the manager within the organizational context. What is mentioned is the fact that stress is influenced by professional experience or by the knowledge possessed by the subordinates and, nonetheless, by the their professional motivation (in the last few years, there has been a significant personnel fluctuation, where experienced police officers have retired and left the system and have been replaced by young men, thus creating a gap in the transfer of information between generations). At the same time, the manager status brings

about numerous expectations from employees and subordinates regarding the manifested behaviour (*ex.: protecting the personnel, creating a safe working environment, taking responisbility for actions carried out by subordinates etc.*).

3. *Factors related to working relationships:*

The questions addressed within this questionnaire concerning working relationships had, as a starting point, the idea that human beings need to be accepted and valued, in the sense that he/she offers special attention in relation to its peers, subordinates and superiors, and this attention plays a key role in the proper functioning of the organization.

When discussing the items used to measure peer relationships and interactions, managers have characterised this aspect in a positive light (respect, collaboration, support, seriousness, professionalism, communication), which allows us to conclude that this does not represent a source of stress for professional managers.

If we take the idea of stress as being influenced by the organizational support that managers perceive as a starting point, we could include, within our questionnaire, items that have highlighted this aspect and the analysis of the answers provided leads to the existence of the organizational support concernig management decissions, both from the managing director as well as from those in higher positions within the hierarchy. The positive interactions with higher-ranking police officers as well as with subordinates reveal the idea of organizational bilateral support which constitutes an important source of balance for the organization as well as for those who carry out activities within it.

4. *Stressors regarding career progress:*

The analysis of specialized studies has revealed that, within this category, the stressful factors that could manifest upon the managers are: the lack of career development opportunities and work insecurity. According to the answers provided by the managers that took part in our survey, we could conclude that, at the moment and within the institution, there are numerous professional development opportunities, hence this aspect does not represent a stress-generating factor.

The respondents assess that the factors which represent motivational incentives for executive police officers that desire a step up in their career in order to ocupy a management position are: the accumulated experience, the desire for professional evolution, internal motivational factors, the possession of management skills, the possibility for a whole new vision to be put into place, the confidence in his/her own abilities in order to positively impact the group and create a good working environment.

When talking about job insecurity generated by the appointment to a new position, the perceived consequences can be grouped into these categories: individual consequences and organizational consequences, the ambiguity of roles, insecurity/uncertainty, lack of predictibility regarding professional development, subordinates' resilience to change, etc.

5. *Stress factors that relate to the organizational structure and climate:*

Studies in the domain of professional stress indicate that the freedom of decision-making and control are stress-causing factors. The lack of perceived control, in the case of our respondents, manifested at the level of lack of control over the workload, over the experience level of the subordinates that have to solve complex tasks, over the level of organizational engagement requested by the occupied position (manifested as the number of events that require the active presence of the manager), over the increased dynamics between staff members etc.

6. Stress factors that result from the conflict between work and family lives:

Out of the three forms of the work-family conflict mentioned in previous studies refering to professional stress, the conflict related to time management and stress management occurs most frequently (*"the permanent nature of work tasks affects the time spent with the family", "holding a management position means a permanent connection with the operative situation, which inevitably leads to a diminished attention offered to family life"*).

The necessity to manage rapidly, correctly and effectively those professional situations at subunit level, even outside working hours, interfere with the tasks of life partner and parent. Moreover, the stress-generating situations occur as the necessity to offer extra time to work tasks in order to effectively solve work-related problems, which interfere with family duties.

Another topic up for analysis within this study was the grasping of **professional stress effects** and has included the following categories: effects within the professional workfield / organizational consequences, physiological and psychological effects felt at the level of interpersonal relationships.

The effects within the professional workfield / organizational consequences mentioned by the respondents are: professional errors, modification of decision-making capabilities, diminishing of professional performance, diminishing of professional satisfaction and motivation, the analysis of opportunities regarding professional conversion.

The effects felt at the level of interpersonal relations: the presence of communication blockages, lack of trust in the partners taking part in the interaction, a decrease in the social interactions with friends, tense relationships with high conflict risks, "exageration regarding careful time management".

The physiological and psychological consequences perceived by the subjects: cephalalgia, sleep disorders, fatiguability, gastrointestinal disorders, cardiac disorders, nicotine consumption increase, continuous state of alert / awareness ("overthinking"), mental fatigue, decreasing ability to focus one's attention, decreasing levels of tollerance, irritability, anxiousness, anger, isolation, sadness, apathy, decreasing confidence in one's forces.

Out of all the coping strategies employed in order to deal with professional stress, we have identified strategies that pertain to the coping strategies focused on emotion, but also to the coping strategies that focus on problem solving:
- *Instrumental actions:* efforts targeted at the analysis of problematic situations and the planning of actions that lead to a solution, together with the acceptance of personal limitations;
- *The search for social and instrumental support:* actively seeking the necessary information / support to mitigate the effects of problematic situations;

- *Acceptance:* a strategy through which the subject accepts the reality of the existing problematic situation and therefore proceeds to finding a solution;
- *Reinterpretation / Readmission of the problematic situation*: extraction of conclusions after having solved the problem and using the experience as a starting point for the solution to other more complex professional situations that may arise later on;
- *Aviodance / procrastination regarding the problematic situation*: detatching oneself from the problematic situation and immersing oneself in other activities, like spending time with friends, socializing etc.

The proposals regarding the measures which the respondents deem necessary for better stress management concern both the modification of stress sources (ex.: deadline pressure) as well as the coping strategies (ex.: searching for information, grasping the problem, looking for pro and against arguments etc.).

5. Conclusion:

The results of our research point to the fact that the expression "professional stress" is mostly associated, in the collective mind, with a series of negative words: pressure, workload, deadlines, personnel deficit, responsibility, all of these being sources and manifestations of stress. The main stress-generating agents which act upon managers are the ones that pertain to the intrinsic aspects of working within The Romanian Police Force, as well as those concerning the responsibilities towards other people. Moreover, an important source of stress was also the conflict between work and family life, in the sense that the time dedicated to work interferes with the one dedicated to the family. The main effects perceived by the subjects are manifested within the areas of both physiological and psychological symptoms. These efects are also felt within the relationship and organizational domains.

The coping strategies that managers apply are traced within the action-behaviour sphere, focused more on problem solving and less on the attempt to tune the emotional response to a stressful situation.

Given the exploratory and quality-focused nature of this research, it is difficult to extrapolate these results to each and every middle management representatives within the Romanian Police Force. Nevertheless, the results observed could guide us in discovering some useful tools that are adapted to the specificity of the police force which could identify, through the use of quantitative surveys, the most frequently occuring sources of stress, the main consequences associated with professional stress as well as the most efficient coping strategies associated with its management. After the diagnosing stage, there are prevention programmes that can be designed and implemented in relation to the reduction of the negative consequences associated with professional stress.

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