

A MODEL FOR POLICE OFFICER BURNOUT*

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ABSTRACT: This article presents an empirically derived model of police officer burnout based on 199 male police officers. A brief review of research on police officer stress is also provided.

INTRODUCTION

The term burnout appears to be one of the catch words of the 80s. This phenomenon is a combination of psychological, behavioral and physical symptoms that recently has been investigated by many researchers [Cherniss, 1980; Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980; Freudenberger, 1975; Maslach, 1976]. Many occupational groups have used the burnout syndrome to account for their anxieties, tensions, and difficulties functioning in their chosen professions and in complex organizations. The increasing rates of job turnover, high absenteeism, alcoholism, suicide, marital dysfunction, and depression in various occupations, have stimulated interest in the concept known as burnout.

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Dr. Goodman has conducted extensive observations of police officers on the job through the Ride-A-Long program in which non-police personnel may accompany police officers on a particular shift of duty. In addition, he has consulted with numerous police chiefs regarding the various high-risk factors for those police officers who may be experiencing burnout and stress. In addition, intervention strategies in order to alleviate these feelings were discussed with these officials.

Burnout is the attitude that "a job is a job is a job." Or else it is after however many months or years of stagnation, frustration, and apathy, no job at all [Edelwich and Brodsky, 1980, p. 14].

One such occupation that has been looked at by many researchers is the police officer. In December of 1980, the American Broadcasting Company presented a news program written by Paul Altmeyer entitled "The Shattered Badge." The following, stated by one police officer, summarizes many of the feelings and attitudes of some burned out officers.

This job builds human bombs and if, and if, and if the police administration can't do something to vent these bombs . . . then some people gonna reach a height where they're gonna commit suicide, they're gonna have mental breakdowns. They have no place to vent and they just build it up inside them, because the image of the police officer is supposed to be above anything else: Strong, don't cry, be brave, he's a human being, and the department builds human bombs. And sooner or later, it's gonna blow up and it's gonna blow up right in their faces.

According to Spielberg [1981], each new officer who terminates employment due to misconduct, incompetence or being burned out, costs the police agency thousands of dollars. In addition to the cost of up to 20 weeks of academy training for each new recruit, most police agencies pay the salaries of trainees while they are enrolled at the police academy, even though they are not providing any direct service to the community.

Objective

The specific objectives of this study were to determine the relationship between certain biographic, demographic, and situational variables as they relate to burnout among police officers and to develop a model of burnout. In addition, the second objective of this study was to make recommendations to police departments of certain situations that are beneficial or detrimental in relation to police officer burnout.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Included in this section will be the important researchers and studies that directly relate to the model of burnout developed by this author. The general reviews of the literature on burnout and police burnout are covered elsewhere [Goodman, 1983].

The importance of considering the effects of stress and anxiety on the performance of police officers has been suggested by several researchers [Cruse & Rubin, 1973; Kroes, Margolis & Hurrell, 1974; Rei-

ser, 1974, 1976; Spielberg, 1979; Symonds, 1970]. Stress, as it relates to police officers can be divided into two categories. According to Symonds [1970], there is stress which is due to the nature of police work and stress which is the result of the nature of the police organization.

Saunders [1977] has suggested that the relationship between candidate's anxiety and his or her performance as a police officer may be very complex. Saunders suggests that anxiety acts as a moderator variable in police selection research in improving the predictive validity of other variables, but anxiety measures cannot stand alone as predictors of successful police performance.

According to Kenneth McCreedy [1974, p.42], some very critical skills that a police officer must demonstrate are affected deleteriously when the officer experiences feelings of burnout and stress. They include the ability to assemble pieces of information and form a logical conclusion, the ability to make decisions quickly and accurately, the ability to interact favorably with members of the community and the ability to observe, retain, and recall detailed information.

Some studies have addressed bureaucratic characteristics that influence the officer's burned out feelings. Problems with the criminal justice system are ever present for the officer [Haynes, 1978; Reiser, 1974; Symonds, 1970; Welch, et al., 1982]. Police, who risk their lives on the streets, view courts and prosecutors as making light of their efforts [Gross, 1980, p.42]. To many officers, the attitude of the courts seems to be that the victim has fewer rights than the criminal.

Other studies have looked at background factors as they relate to the successful performance as police officers. There are many conflicting theories as to the benefit of higher education [Cascio and Real, 1976; Frost, 1955; Kayode, 1973; Levy, 1967; Niederhoffer, 1967; Sparling, 1975].

The patrolman's marital status has been studied by many researchers with much conflicting opinion as to whether divorced, never married, or married has any effect on success as a police officer [Cohen and Chaiken, 1972; Cross & Hammond, 1951; Levy, 1967].

Another background variable that has been looked at by some researchers has been the role of previous military experience in predicting success as a police officer [Azen, Montgomery, Snibbe, Fabricatore, and Earle, 1974; Cohen and Chaiken, 1972; Cross and Hammond, 1951; Levy, 1967; Spielberg, 1979]. Here again, there are conflicting opinions as to the benefits of having been in the military.

Ordinal position within the rearing family has been another variable studied by researchers with conflicting results [Connors, 1963; Levy, 1973; Palmer, 1966].

Reiser [1974], a renowned psychologist with the Los Angeles Police Department, reviews many of the organizational stressors on policemen and women. Policemen tend to be very competitive with each other. The

failure of a promotion at an anticipated time may result in feelings of alienation from the group, depression and low self-esteem. This loss of group identification may seriously alter the police officer's functioning ability on the street.

In criticizing the past research, one major fault in the use of background information is that the procedures and methodology have not been systematic and orderly. The men who collected the information were not highly skilled in the techniques of information gathering. Flynn & Peterson [1972, p.569] believe that inconsistency in information gathering has been the rule rather than the exception which usually results in unreliable information.

A significant drawback in many studies is the lack of attention given to job performance measures by the investigators since most researchers have relied upon the ratings of supervisors. Another weakness of some of the studies has been the utilization of police academy performance rather than field performance. The more important measure is actual field or on-the-job performance. Few studies have used a predictive validation design in which predictor scores are related to performance measures. In addition, the use of many variables with too few subjects increases the likelihood that mere chance relationships will emerge as significant.

Upon reviewing the vast amount of literature regarding burnout, police burnout and stress as well as police selection studies, it becomes apparent that there is no single consensus as to the variables that relate to police officer burnout.

Given the above, it seems necessary to develop a relationship between certain variables and burnout in police officers. The following section describes such hypothesized relationships.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

1. A linear multiple regression equation can be developed to discriminate between those officers who indicate that they are burned out and those who do not, based on early history before coming to work in the police department.
2. A linear multiple regression equation can be developed to discriminate between those officers who indicate that they are burned out and those who do not, based on certain events occurring during their work in the police department.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects who participated in this study were 199 male police officers from the Carlsbad, Chula Vista, Coronado, National City and Oceanside Police Departments in San Diego County, California. They were employed during the beginning of 1983.

Procedure

All subjects were asked to review and complete a package of materials containing:

1. Cover letter describing the research study as an investigation into police officers' attitudes regarding the police profession. The cover letter provided the police officer with this author's assurances that the officer's responses would be completely confidential.

2. Police Officer History Questionnaire [Goodman, 1983].

This was used to obtain demographic, biographic and situational information from the subjects. This questionnaire was developed by this author based on reviewing the studies that have already been conducted on police officers. The questionnaire contains many important facts about the police officer's life both before he was on the force and during his career as an officer.

3. The Staff Burnout Scale for Police and Security Officers (SBS-PS) [Jones 1980]

The Staff Burnout for Police and Security Officers is self-administered. Instructions for examinees are printed on the top of the inventory. The SBS-PS can be completed in 5-15 minutes. This burnout scale contains 30-items: 20 items that assess the burnout syndrome and 10 items that form a Lie scale to detect tendencies to "fake good" in self-reporting. The scale was presented to the subjects in this research study as a survey of how various people in the police profession view their job. A frequency distribution of the scores on this scale appears in Figure 1.

The scores for all burnout responses are then summed using a numerical value for each answer to yield a burnout score which can range from 20, no burnout, to 140, severe burnout. Jones [1980] has found a reliability coefficient of .76 for the SBS-PS burnout items. Jones [1981] obtained a split-half reliability of .86.

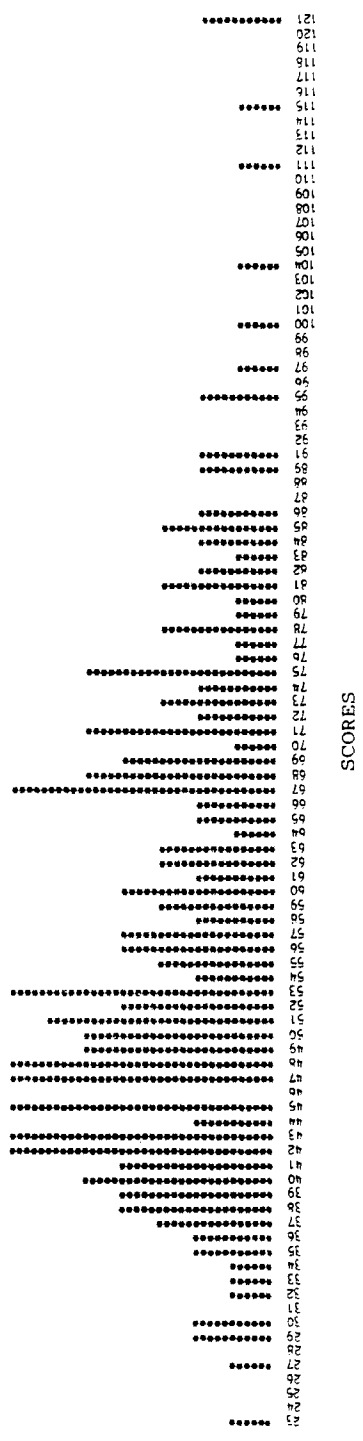
4. Self-Evaluation Questionnaire [State-Trait Anxiety Inventory-Form X-2 [Spielberger, Gorsuch, and Lushene, 1970].

The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory is comprised of separate self-report scales for measuring two distinct anxiety concepts: State anxiety (A-State, Form X-1) and Trait anxiety (A-Trait, Form X-2). In this

Figure 1
Frequency Distribution of Scores on Staff Burnout Scale for
Police and Security Officers

Mean = 58.60

Standard Deviation = 18.51



study, only A-Trait, Form X-2 was used. Trait Anxiety (A-Trait) refers to relatively stable individual differences in anxiety proneness.

Upon completing the questionnaires, the officers were asked to return the envelopes containing the research materials to a designated location in the police department.

RESULTS

Results of Data Prior to Beginning Police Career

The first hypothesis in this chapter stated that a linear multiple regression equation could be developed based on pre-career data that the police officer provided. A multiple regression analysis with stepwise inclusion was used to identify those predictor variables, based on this data, which best describes a police officer who is most likely to experience burnout after becoming a police officer. The optimal regression solution resulted in the identification of two pre-career variables. The results are presented in Table 1. The first predictor variable selected for inclusion was Trait Anxiety. The second and last predictor variable selected for inclusion in the regression equation was the average number of sick days per year that the officer took before coming to work on the police force. The inclusion of this predictor variable indicated that the regression equation accounted for a total of approximately 43 percent of the variance. The regression equation can be written as follows:

$$Y' = 9.48 + 1.43 (\text{Trait Anxiety score}) + .89 (\text{average number of sick days}),$$

where Y' is equal to the predicted burnout score.

Results of Data During Police Career

The second hypothesis in this section stated that a linear multiple regression equation could be developed to discriminate between those officers who indicate that they are burned out and those who do not based on events occurring during their career in the police department.

A multiple regression analysis with stepwise inclusion was used to identify those predictor variables, based on events occurring during a police officer's career that best describes a police officer who is most likely to experience burnout.

The optimal regression solution resulted in the identification of six variables. The results are presented in Table 2. The first predictor variable selected for inclusion in the equation was the average number of sick days each year that the officer took from work. The next most sig-

Table 1
Predictor Variables in Multiple Regression Analysis With Stepwise Inclusion (Pre-Career Variables)

Step	Variable	Multiple R	R Square	R Square Change	Coefficient	Standard Coefficient (Beta)	Standard Error	t*
1	Trait Anxiety	.6231	.3883	.3883	1.4269	.6286	.1229	11.610*
2	Average Number Sick Days	.6527	.4260	.0377	.8873	.1942	.2473	3.5878*

Constant 9.4768
 $*t(\infty) = 1.960, p < .05.$

Table 2
Predictor Variables in Multiple Regression Analysis With Stepwise Inclusion (During Career Variables)

Step	Variable	Multiple R	R Square	R Square Change	Coefficient	Standard Coefficient (Beta)	Standard Error	t*
1	Average Number Sick Days	.3282	.1077	.1077	1.7303	.1598	0.3884	4.455*
2	Lost Work Due to Family Problems	.4257	.18122	.0735	14.6935	.2339	3.8835	3.784*
3	Many Social Outlets	.4655	.2167	.0355	-6.8860	-.1845	2.3163	2.973*
4	Bad Court Decision	.4914	.2415	.0248	6.0008	.1303	2.8891	2.077*
5	Number of Days Hospitalized	.5109	.2610	.0195	0.3662	.1523	0.1504	2.441*
6	Been Wounded	.5293	.2802	.0192	7.0459	.1402	3.1183	2.260*

Constant 49.1114

* $t(\infty) = 1.960, p < .05.$

nificant predictor variable was whether the police officer lost work due to family problems. The third variable selected was whether the police officer has many social outlets, and the fourth variable selected was if the police officer had a bad court decision. The fifth variable selected was the average number of days hospitalized during their career. The last variable selected for inclusion in the regression equation was if the officer had ever been wounded. All of these variables together account for a total of approximately 28 percent of the variance.

As a result of the stepwise multiple regression on the data during the officer's career, the following equation can be elicited. This equation is comprised of six predictor variables related to police officer burnout. The coefficients represent the relative contribution of each variable in predicting burnout and Y' represents the predicted burnout score. In the formula, a "1" stands for yes and a "0" stands for no.

$$\begin{aligned} Y' = & 49.1114 + 1.73 (\text{number of sick days per year}) \\ & + 14.69 (\text{either "1" or "0" if they lost work due to family} \\ & \quad \text{problems}) \\ & - 6.89 (\text{either "1" or "0" if they have many social} \\ & \quad \text{outlets}) \\ & + 6 (\text{either "1" or "0" if they had a bad court decision}) \\ & + .37 (\text{number of days hospitalized during career}) \\ & + 7.05 (\text{either "1" or "0" if they had been wounded}). \end{aligned}$$

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data indicated that a model for police officer burnout could be developed based on factors occurring prior to the officer's entry on the force. In addition, a model for police officer burnout could be developed that considered events occurring to an officer while on the police force.

The multiple regression equation that was developed for pre-career data included both the trait anxiety scores as well as the average number of sick days the officers had per year. The finding that trait anxiety is significant as it relates to burnout is consistent with previous literature. According to Lazarus [1966] and Spielberger [1966, 1972], stress is determined in part by the officer's disposition and his ability to determine if a situation is hazardous or threatening. It can be argued that due to the high correlation of .62 between burnout and trait anxiety obtained in this research [Goodman, 1983], a police officer might have an impaired ability to function under stressful situations. The theory behind this as stated in the review of the literature suggests that burnout is a slow process resulting from many stressful experiences that af-

fect the officer detrimentally. Since the theory behind the trait anxiety scale is that the score reflects a life long pattern or personality style, then it is apparent that with the relationship between these two variables determined by this study, that one's personality style is quite significant if police are to consider factors that contribute to the ever increasing number of burned out officers. When anxiety is high the officer's arousal level is also high. If these factors are too high, then the officer's ability to perform the tasks necessary to be competent as a police officer are deleteriously affected. This deficiency can result in the officer not being able to assess situations carefully and thus endanger himself or others.

The other variable in this equation is the average number of sick days per year. From a behavioral standpoint, it has long been recognized that psychological factors play a major part in the development and treatment of specific organic illnesses. If prior to joining the police force, the officer lacked the knowledge of adequate coping skills for the stressors that all people must face in our society, then it is clear that he may be more prone to stress-related disorders after joining the force and experience more absenteeism. [Kroes, Margolis, Hurrell, 1974; Richard and Fell, 1975, p.11].

The other important objective in this research study related to developing a model for police officer burnout that was based on events occurring during the officer's career on the police force. Six variables proved to be significant in the development of this model.

The first variable was the average number of sick days per year that the officer had reported. As stated during the discussion of the pre-career variables, the average number of sick days per year may reflect an officer's ability or inability to cope with stress. The resultant inability relates to many organic illnesses that psychological factors play a major part in their development and cure.

Another important point regarding events surrounding absenteeism from work relates to the fact that many officers who are unable to cope with stresses of police work often avoid the situation by calling in sick. The officer may have had a particularly upsetting or frustrating tour of duty and call in sick until he is able to deal with his feelings of stress. An officer may have had a traumatic experience occur to him, that according to Haynes [1978], may not necessarily be life threatening, but damaging enough so that his main concern becomes the avoidance of work. Officers may fear that if they have a minor injury on the job, that the next time they might be more severely injured or killed. This fear is ever present.

Officers who find it impossible to relieve the stress encountered during their work, often develop illnesses which are psychosomatic. Schlossbert [1974, p.165-172] cites several incidents in which specific pain was

experienced by an officer despite the fact that no organic basis for the pain could be established. Schlossberg states that "all illnesses are not psychosomatic, but when a man catches fourteen colds a year. . . , you suspect he may have emotional conflicts."

The next variable selected was whether the officer lost work due to family problems. Kroes, Margolis, and Hurrell [1974] discuss in their article that police officers are not different from other people in taking home the pressures of their job. Police officers may come home physically and mentally exhausted and in no mood for problems in their family. These officers have no more resources in order to deal with the needs of family members or friends. In addition to the tension which the officers bring home, they often deal with their families in detached ways. Many policemen's wives accuse their husbands of being insensitive and rough as a result of their work which may be a consequence of constant contact with many difficult situations [Schlossberg, 1974, p.110].

The next variable that was selected was whether the officer had many social outlets. It was found from the results of this study that fewer social outlets were associated with higher burnout. Ayala Pines [1981, p.122] states that one of the most effective ways of coping with burnout is the efficient and creative use of a social support system. Pines also reports that social support can protect people in crisis from a wide variety of pathological states including among others, depression, alcoholism and social breakdown. In a stressful job such as that of a police officer, emotional support is an important function of an effective support system. It is important that the support system provide unconditional support during a support session in order to allow the officer to express his feelings and needs.

The fourth variable selected relates to whether the police officer had a bad court decision. A majority of the police officers in this study stated that they have had a bad court decision. Both Haynes [1978] and Welch, et al. [1982] state that problems with the criminal justice system are ever present for police officers. The officers may feel that the arrest process is useless since many criminals are released as a result of the present system of justice. This feeling of uselessness may result in cynical feelings that produce burned out officers. If the officer is not reinforced for arresting a suspect due to court technicalities that result in the suspect's release, then it may be likely that the officer may not arrest suspects in the future. If the difficulties continue with the criminal justice system, then it is likely that police officers will continue to have feelings of dissatisfaction. It is imperative that police departments consider the effect that a bad court decision has on a police officer in terms of his feelings of self-esteem and job satisfaction.

The fifth variable selected was the number of days hospitalized during the officer's career. The rationale for the inclusion of this variable into the equation is similar to the concepts presented in the section of this discussion relating to sick days and absenteeism. Hospitalizations can be caused by many different factors. Naturally, an organic disease process can be one factor. Additionally, the continual presence of stressful situations can assist in the development of stress-related illness. If the illness is severe enough, hospitalization may be deemed necessary. The other consideration is that the officer may have a series of hospitalizations resulting from accidents on the job. These events help in contributing to his burned out feelings.

The sixth and final variable in the multiple regression equation is whether the officer had ever been wounded. Ellison and Genz [1978, p.3] state that acute, situational stressors that come on suddenly contribute to burnout. Monahan and Farmer [1980] discuss the fact that danger in the line of work contributes to police officers experiencing stress on the job. Haynes [1978, p.37] states that each police officer must face the daily possibility of being injured, maimed, or killed. The effect of being wounded in the line of duty is an obvious concern to officers and increases their potential for burnout. It is one thing to prepare for methods of intervening in situations when one is in the academy, or knowing what to do when one is under attack, but when one's life is on the line in terms of being shot or wounded, then attitudes toward one's job are subsequently affected.

In summation, two models of police officer burnout have been developed. One is based on pre-career data and the second one was developed based on data from events during the officer's career. These results are important because police departments and psychologists working with police officers can utilize this information on the factors that contribute to police officer burnout in order to improve the mental health of the officers and ultimately affecting the cost effectiveness of policing. The results of this study can best be understood by the following statement by Territo [1977, p.226] when he states that "policing in America is big business. Total annual expenditures on police service range into the billions of dollars, the large majority of which is consumed by personnel costs. Daily, police agencies are being held more and more accountable for justifying expenditures." Due to the large amounts of money allocated to police departments for their much needed services, then it is of the utmost importance that the officers who are employed be mentally and physically fit. If they are not, ways of assisting them with their feelings and attitudes should be addressed. For further discussion of recommendations for psychologists and police departments, consult Goodman, 1983.

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