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Stress in police officers' work and their styles of coping with difficult situations

Abstract: Police work places a special kind of psychophysical strain on officers. The threat of loss of health or life and other cherished values becomes real. Difficult situations occurring on duty cause the feeling of being overloaded, the necessity of great involvement, they are also a source of emotional tensions, deprivation of various needs, especially the sense of security, social acceptance, sometimes resulting in a conflict of values. Long-term stress can be a source of permanent fatigue, and in consequence lead to a decrease in the quality of performance and professional burnout, and in the long run professional maladaptation and quitting the police force. Hence the need for continuous monitoring of this issue. This article is based on the author's empirical research and is devoted to determining the relationship between police officers' perceived stress and their ways of coping with difficult situations. A significant relationship between these variables was found. It turns out that officers show high resistance to stress and when faced with difficult situations, they usually use avoidance style or focus on solving the problems.
Key words: work in the police, difficult situations, occupational stress in police officers, coping with stress

Introduction to the research

Police work requires certain psycho-physical aptitudes and the necessary professional and ethical qualifications. Police officers are a professional group comprising people whose knowledge and skills are used to ensure the safety of

citizens. The police profession is a profession of high public trust and the police service is a kind of social mission. The special nature of police service is reflected in the oath taken by officers, which states that they serve the nation, protect the legal order and the safety of citizens, even at the risk of their lives, and the ethical dimension of the duty performed (cf. the Police Act of 6 April 1990). This is because police officers act in the public interest – under the law and within the law. Their main task is to protect the life and health of people and property from unlawful attacks that violate these goods; to ensure public safety and order, including ensuring order in public places, means of public transport and in road traffic. Moreover, they are responsible for prevention of crimes and misdemeanors, counteracting criminogenic phenomena and cooperation in this respect with state and local authorities and social organizations, as well as detection of crimes and misdemeanors and prosecution of their perpetrators (cf. Dziedzic 2007; Klonowska 2018).

Their daily duty is about the functional adequacy between the work situation including the circumstances in which the police officers perform their duties and tasks, and their personal resources including primarily: knowledge, skills, sense of efficacy, sense of responsibility, resistance to stress, which promotes effective professional functioning. Difficult situations arise when there is destabilization between the tasks and needs of an individual and the conditions and means of achieving them. This imbalance applies to a normal situation, which means that the natural development of activity is disrupted and the probability of performing at a normal level is minimized, which decreases the chances of achieving previously specified goals. T. Tomaszewski (1976) explains that "we are dealing with a difficult situation when the internal equilibrium of an ordinary situation is disturbed, making the course of basic activity and task realization impossible" (p. 124). M. Tyszkowa (1972), in turn, points out that difficult situations are "a system of external stimuli that cause disruptions of activities or threats to the needs of an individual, his/her aspirations and cherished values, thus causing characteristic changes in behavior" (p. 14).

Following the deliberations of T. Tomaszewski (1975), difficult situations in which the demands of the environment exceed the possibilities of effective functioning of a police officer may include: situations of deprivation, overload, obstruction, threats and conflict situations.

Situations of deprivation usually occur when there is an inability to meet basic needs. As it turns out, the inability to complete individual tasks and goals can cause a decline in given person's mental performance or physical condition, resulting in a decrease in the level of performance, emotional agitation. Chronic deprivation associated with the loss of cherished values can lead to depressive states and an aversion to life. In the case of police officers, deprivation may refer to the lack of opportunities for professional development, obtaining promotion to a higher position, inadequacy of gratifications in relation to the requirements and

accompanying threats, lack of recognition by superiors or in the society despite devotion and achievements on duty. Deprivation may also result from poor relationships with supervisors, lack of supervisor approval to change duty station, or referral for in-service training. The situations of overload will occur when a police officer is given a task at the limit of his/her mental aptitude, physical aptitude, or nervous endurance. Shift work and an activity that requires numerous interventions to maintain public order leads to exhaustion, discouragement or fatigue. If it is impossible to cope with difficult activities, a general decline in performance may be noticed. The more pressure is exerted on the officer, the more his/her nervous tension will build up, resulting in a lower quality of task performance. Persistent overload can lead to nervous disorders (cf. Tomaszewski 1976, p. 33). Difficult situations in the work of a police officer include also activities related to notifying the family about the death of a relative, especially if it happened in shocking circumstances, and these unpleasant situations leave a mark on their psyche.

Situations of impediment in police service occur when officers are unable to perform the task assigned to them for reasons beyond their control, when they encounter subjective deficiencies or obstacles arising from sensory limitations inadequate to the specified requirements (cf. Terelak 2001, p. 80). Both deficits and obstacles impair performance, decrease orientation, or interfere with normal functioning in the work environment and impede executive and decision-making activities.

Situations of threat occur when there is a likelihood of losing some value cherished by the police officer such as health, life, well-being or social standing. It is often the threat of an active assault on an officer by violators, the accompanying verbal aggression, the disregard shown and the lack of respect from citizens. All signals indicating imminent danger are treated as threats. This threat causes fear and anxiety when it is an anticipation of harm to health or life, or is a cause of fear when the danger threatens the personality, such as loss of social prestige, undermining of competence, etc. An important feature in such a situation is motivation; unfortunately, it is often accompanied by anxiety, which has a destabilizing impact on the effectiveness of thinking or acting.

Conflict situations occur when a police officer finds himself/herself in the grip of opposing forces and when, of two plans of action, he/she must choose only one and his/her choice makes it impossible to achieve the other objective. Examples include social and moral pressure as well as physical forces. Any conflict may be accompanied by emotional tension that increases as an individual hesitates what choice to make. Such conflicts are called motivational ones (cf. Tomaszewski 1976, pp. 34–35). Conflicts in an officer's work environment may arise from individual characteristics, style of command preferred by their superior, poor work organization, lack of opportunity for rest and mental and physical regeneration, unfair evaluation of work results and assignment of tasks to

be performed (favoring some and depreciating the work of others), lack of social support and a bad atmosphere in the work environment.

In the professional work of a police officer, each of the situations characterized above, resulting from the performance of tasks typical for ensuring the safety of citizens and public order, may occur to a different extent. Difficult situation may be the result of objective difficulties, e.g. difficult task to be performed, or subjective ones resulting from limited capabilities of a given police officer, e.g. fatigue, little experience, lack of training, etc.

Thus, a difficult situation in the professional functioning of a police officer is characterized by three features: a) there is a disruption of the proper course and structure of goal-oriented activities; b) some threat to a given value arises; c) negative emotions and emotional tensions are generated (cf. Ratajczak…). The situation perceived as such is a source of stress in which "certain external circumstances or situations place sudden and unusual demands on the organism" (Lazarus 1966, p. 28). Occupational stress is therefore an inherent part of police work. According to J. Strelau (2006), stress is "a state characterized by negative emotions of high intensity (such as fear, anxiety, anger, hostility or other states defined as mental discomfort), accompanied by physiological and biochemical changes clearly exceeding the level characteristic of resting arousal level" (p. 152). The author treats stress as a result of interaction between demands and human capabilities, which are both real and perceived.

Lazarus' theory stating that stress is only present when an individual, after evaluating stimuli in the context of his/her individual resources, can conclude that there is a threat, is widely known in the psychology of stress. The stress response is therefore individualized and depends on the individual's perception of the situation he/she found himself/herself in. This is because each person differs in terms of sensitivities and resilience. Thus, stress in this view is a process consisting of the following elements: a) the appearance of an external or internal factor that causes stress, b) the evaluation of this factor by given individual and the determination of the extent to which it poses a threat due to its harmful effect, or the recognition that it is neutral or even a positive stimulus to action; c) the stress response; d) the struggle with the stress if it turns out to be harmful for the individual. It should be emphasized that the process of struggling with stress is dynamic in nature, conditioned by both external and internal factors of the individual, and it may result in success or failure. This is why it is so important to choose a specific strategy to solve a problem or regulate emotions (cf. Grzegorzewska 2006, pp. 19–20).

There are different stress coping strategies and styles of action. The point is to reduce the gap between the demands of the environment and the abilities of the person, which gives rise to unpleasant situations that cause negative emotions. In order to minimize this gap, different action strategies are activated, appropriate to the changing situation (cf. Wrześniewski 2004). As Irena Heszen (2014) notes,

"Coping understood in this way is complex and dynamic, sometimes takes long and changes with time, with the development of the stressful situation being an important factor determining the course of these changes" (p. 61).

Coping strategies consist in the cognitive and behavioral efforts that an individual makes in a given stressful situation. Their selection depends on the specifics of the particular stressful situation, as well as on personality traits such as coping style, self-esteem and other individual characteristics, e.g. age, gender, intelligence level (Wrześniewski 2000).

R.S. Lazarus (1980) pointed out the following ways of coping with stress, which have a dual function, that is, a solution to the problem and also as a factor in regulating the emotions experienced by a person under stress: a) information seeking – reviewing one's own stressful situation in order to gain knowledge to make a rational decision to deal with it, or to reevaluate the damage or threat; b) direct action – all activities of an individual except cognitive ones, which may concern changes within the individual as well as the environment; c) refraining from action – due to the demands it is often more beneficial than any activity; d) intrapsychic processes – including all cognitive processes, the aim of which is to regulate emotions, e.g. denial, projection, rationalization (cf. Terelak 1997, p. 19).

In subsequent analyses. C.S. Carver, M.F. Scheier and J.K. Weintraub (1989) presented an alternative approach to the empirical concept of coping with stress by R.S. Lazarus and S. Folkman. Based on theoretical assumptions, the following types of stress-coping strategies were distinguished: a) instrumental involving active coping by removing or avoiding the source of stress, planning and thinking about how to deal with stress, inhibiting competitive activity, stopping activity and waiting for the right opportunity to act appropriately, or seeking support in the form of: advice, information, help; or lack of active coping; b) emotion-focused strategies involving seeking emotional social support, sympathy, understanding, making positive reevaluations, or accepting that the stressor is real and lack of active coping with the situation, denying that the stressor is actually present, or trying to act as if it is not real; c) other mixed strategies including turning to religion, focusing on emotions and relieving them, decreasing effort to overcome the stressor or even giving up on the goal, decreasing mental engagement if one cannot withdraw behaviorally (cf. Heszen, 2014, p. 72).

As it turns out, coping strategy clearly has a situational context, while style is "an individual's enduring, personality disposition to deal with stressful situations in a particular way. This disposition does not depend on the type of stressful situation because it is an attribute of the subject" (Wrzesiński 1996, p.46). This means that it is a typical way for an individual to behave in various stressful situations in order to remove or reduce the state of stress. However, it should be noted that this behavior is not fixed in nature, but is a flexible action that takes into account the situational context and effective coping with the problems that arise (cf. Strelau et al. 2005). S. Miller (1987) identified two basic coping styles.