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Stress among Italian Male and Female Patrol Police Officers:

A quali-quantitative survey

Several studies on police work have underlined the sources of stress and its consequences as well as the coping strategies used. As already reported for other professions, stressors include interpersonal conflicts (hostility in relationships with superiors and colleagues, inadequate support of supervisors) (Shane, 2013) and an unacceptable workload (shift work, excessive overtime, heavy workload, poor working conditions, constant interactions with the public) (Mazzola, Schonfeld & Spector, 2011). The relationship with the public, which implies exposure to traumatic events (Gachter, Savage & Torgler, 2009) and to violence and suffering (Collins & Gibbs, 2003), is another stressor that characterizes the work of police officers. These stressors necessarily affect physical and psychological health (Luca, Weidner & Janisse, 2012), and this population reports a variety of disorders related to work fatigue (e.g. sleeping disorders, circulatory system diseases, digestive diseases; see Amendola, Weisburd, Hamilton et al, 2011; Thayyil, Jayakrishnan, Raja & Cherumanalil, 2012; Waggoner, 2012). As far as psychological problems are concerned, symptoms of anxiety and depression ascribable to chronic stress have been identified (Morash, Kwak & Haarr, 2006) and could pose serious problems to mental health (Arial, Gonik, Wild & Danuser, 2010). The coping strategies used may be adaptive (the aim of such strategies is to obtain social and family support, by sharing the experience with others) or maladaptive (ignoring the problem, using self-destructive methods in order to reduce stress, such as cigarette or alcohol abuse or avoiding friends and family)

(Mazzola, Schonfeld & Spector, 2011). Various studies have shown that the use of an inappropriate coping strategy contributes to increasing stress or making it chronic; it also reduces motivation and is at the base of the decision to quit the job (He, Zhao & Ren, 2005).

Various studies have underlined that gender is a key factor in predicting the perception of stress and the coping strategy used (Brown & Campbell, 1990). In all companies and organizations, studies that have included women have found certain variables to be gender sensitive (Acquadro Maran, 2010): one such variable is the perception of distress (Matheson & Foster, 2013), which is related to biological and social vulnerability and results, for instance, in a greater tendency to depression (see Eagly & Wood, 2013). Social vulnerability refers to the influence of the role and expectations (concerning the role and gender) of the organizational players (colleagues, users, society) on behavior. Role and expectations often do not coincide: a person in a certain role is required to adopt a goal- and task-oriented attitude (e.g. enforcing compliance with the highway code), whereas women might be expected to adopt a supportive relationship-oriented approach, seeking to understand and accommodate other people's needs (e.g. not giving a parking ticket to a driver who has double-parked in front of a pharmacy because the offence was committed in an emergency). As described by Eagly, Beall and Sternberg (2005) the perceived incongruity between gender and role leads to two forms of prejudice: a) perceiving women less favorably than men as occupants of roles considered typically suited to men (as in the case of the police force); b) evaluating authoritative/managerial behavior (control and

leadership) less favorably when it is enacted by a woman. This incongruity generates distress that affects women more negatively than men (Turk, Davas, Tanik & Montgomery, 2013).

Some authors have reported that the stress experienced by female and male police officers originates from different sources (He, Zhao & Archbold, 2002; Gachter, Savage & Torgler, 2009), for example, women might find it difficult to wear a uniform that is particularly heavy and not really designed for the female body (Morash & Haarr, 2006). As shown by data gathered in previous studies (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006; Bowler et al, 2010), the officer's rank and role in the police organization also influences the way stress is perceived: females in low-ranking roles, who are faced with violent situations and exposed to human suffering, are the most fragile category and at the highest risk of distress.

There are also significant differences in the consequences of stress and the coping strategies used. Role and rank being equal, female officers report significantly higher levels of physical complaints (somatization and general health problems) (Gachter, Savage & Torgler, 2009) and psychological stress (Acquadro Maran & Varetto, 2012). Moreover, men use problem-focused strategies while women prefer emotion-focused strategies (Barnett et al,1987; Stone & Neale, 1984). It is interesting to note that officers who feel that they have the support of their colleagues consider their job to be less stressful (He, Zhao & Archbold, 2002). This is particularly important for women, since problems in the workplace are frequently associated with colleagues' attitudes of rejection (Morash, Kwak &

Haarr, 2006). In a longitudinal study of female and male police officers (White & Marino, 1983), in which all possible stressors were taken into consideration, organizational characteristics emerged as the main source of stress. This finding has been confirmed by further research. Garbarino, Cuomo, Chiorri and Magnavita (2013), for instance, investigated conditions of distress in people with symptoms of depression, anxiety and burnout: their results showed that organizational stressors (little autonomy in making decisions, poor relationships with colleagues and superiors, few opportunities for reward, etc.) are associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. Suresh, Anantharaman, Angusamy and Ganesan (2013) found the main stressors to be related to never being off duty, lack of time to spend with family, political pressures from outside the police department, inadequate salary/facilities (organizational stressors), but not for instance exposure to injured people (operational stressors). Relationships with colleagues and superiors, inadequate support of supervisors, work shifts, bureaucracy and so on therefore appear to be greater sources of stress than dealing with the public and being faced with potentially traumatic situations (e.g. domestic violence). It is interesting to note that, while some research has shown that dealing with pain and violence is one of the main stressors for female officers, other studies have pointed out that stressors are mainly of an organizational nature.

As underlined by Mazzola, Schonfeld and Spector (2011), one of the limits of the studies thus far conducted could lie in the methodology used: the majority are quantitative. Such studies take it for granted that the researcher already knows

which stressors to measure, the data are easily analyzed with questionnaires and scales. At the same time, there is the risk of overlooking the participants' real sources of stress: this problem could be overcome by conducting a qualitative study in order to bring out those elements not revealed by quantitative research. Quali-quantitative research uses a mixed methods approach. which provides a better understanding of a research problem or issue than either qualitative or quantitative research alone (Tashakory & Teddie, 2010): while open responses allow researchers to understand a problem and capture the points of view of respondents without pre-determining their answers (Patton, 2002), qualitative and quantitative methods can explore related aspects of the same question. This approach is widely used in social science research (Creswell, 2013), including studies to investigate stress at work (see e.g. Suresh, Matthews & Coyne, 2013).

The aim of this research was to carry out a quali-quantitative study to analyze unease and perceived stress in a population of male and female police officers in a large city in northern Italy, and investigate the consequences of these and the coping strategies adopted. Other Italian studies have recently investigated work-related stress in this population in relation to operational and organizational stressors (Garbarino, Magnavita, Chiorri, et al., 2012; Setti & Argentero, 2012) and, more generally, absenteeism (Magnavita & Garbarino, 2013) and personality traits (Garbarino, Chiorri, & Magnavita, 2013). Thus this is, to the best of our knowledge, the first quali-quantitative study in Italy to consider the gender variable within a single police force. The working context we chose to investigate was that of the Municipal Police, which is characterized by strong links with the

local community. This police force celebrated 220 years of activity in 2011 and is present throughout Italy, with an average of 10.4 police officers for every 10,000 inhabitants. The first female officers joined the force at the end of the Seventies, and women now account for 25.7% of the workforce. We chose to study the patrol police officers category, responsible for law enforcement, intervening in cases of assault and violence, conducting investigations, ensuring safety, managing relations with the public, information and crime-prevention projects.

As suggested in the literature, we focused our attention on organizational stressors (relationships with colleagues, with superiors, difficulties with bureaucracy, etc.) and operational stressors (e.g. relations with the public). Thus, we conducted a descriptive survey to measure both the source of stress (qualitative and quantitative data) and the level of stress (quantitative data) experienced by patrol police officers, the consequences of that stress and the coping strategies adopted. Qualitative data were analyzed as text corpus and in relation to quantitative data. Quantitative data were analyzed to report means and regression models and to determine the interactions of the variables, namely gender.

Method

Participants

The participants were 485 Patrol Police Officers, 255 men and 230 women. The mean age of the men was 45.47 years (range 21-65). The majority were married (58.5%), 15.5% were single, 11% were cohabiting, 8.1% were divorced, 5.5% were engaged, 0.5% were widowed. 66.2% of the men had

children: 43.2% had one child, 47% had two, the rest had three or more. The majority had a high-school diploma (75.5%), 14.4% held a degree. The mean age of the women was 42.55 years (range 21-59). The majority were married (53.4%), 17.4% were single, 10.5% were cohabiting, l 6.9% were engaged, 11.3% were divorced, 0.4% were widowed. 62.2% of the women had children: 46% had one child, 39.3% had two, 14.7% had three or more. The majority had a high-school diploma (74.6%), 20.8% held a degree.

Materials

The self-administered questionnaire was composed of different parts: the first part contained the introduction and the purpose of the research, the instructions for filling out the questionnaire, the anonymity and privacy statements. The second part contained two questions and a request to provide a written answer. The questions regarded organizational stressors (problems in relationships with colleagues and superiors, problems deriving from the organizational context) and operational stressors (e.g. problems deriving from relations with the public, problems associated with urban coexistence). The third part investigated distress in various life situations (Distress Thermometer), anxiety (State Trait Anxiety Inventory), and coping strategies (Brief Cope). The last page contained socio-personal data (gender, age, marital status, household composition, address).

The Distress Thermometer is a tool developed by Roth et al. (1998), and was originally created to measure stress in cancer patients. It has recently been used to measure distress in association with anxiety in other populations, e.g. in

workers after a traumatic incident (see Mehnert, Nanninga, Fauth & Schäfer, 2012). It is a rapid screening instrument; each person rates their level of distress during the previous week on a visual analogue scale that ranges from 0 to 10 (0 = not distressed; 10 = extremely distressed) (Gil, Grassi, Travado, Tomamichel & Gonzalez, 2005). The sources of distress considered regarded practical problems (5 items, e.g. 'child care'), family problems (3 items, e.g. 'dealing with partner'), emotional problems (6 items, e.g. 'sadness'), spiritual/religious concerns (1 item), and physical problems (21 items, e.g. 'nose dry/congested'). As indicated by the National Cancer Institute (NCI), most studies use a cut-off score of 4 or 5. In this study the internal consistency was Cronbach's alpha = .86.

Anxiety was measured using the Italian version of the STAI Y1 and Y2 scales (Pedrabissi & Santinello, 1989; the original scale was developed by Spielberger, 1983). The Y1 form measures state anxiety, the person's current anxiety about an event, namely the temporary interruption in the emotional continuum characterized by a subjective feeling of tension and associated with the arousal of the autonomic nervous system. The Y2 form measures trait anxiety, or anxiety level as a personal characteristic, i.e. how an individual usually feels across typical situations experienced by everyone on a daily basis. Each of the two scales comprises 20 items rated on a 4-point scale. Total scores can range between 20 and 80, and 40 is the threshold value that is considered predictive of anxiety symptoms. A rating scale defines the level of severity: from 40 to 50 mild, 50 to 60 moderate, > 60 severe. In this study the construct validity was respectively Cronbach's alpha = .85 and .84.

Coping strategies were measured using the Italian version of the Brief Cope (Italian version Conti, 1999; the original scale was by Carver, 1997). This is a 28-item questionnaire with scores ranging from 1 (I would not normally do this) to 4 (I would usually do this) that identifies the different coping strategies: self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance use, emotional support, instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion, self-blame. In this study Cronbach's alpha was = .80.

As suggested by Matteucci and Tomasetto (2002), content analysis methodology was used to process the answers. Content analysis methodology is defined as "the systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those categories using statistical methods" (Riff, Lacy & Fico, 2014, p. 3). We created two text corpora (one for organizational stressors and one for operational stressors) with the answers provided by men and women, using gender as an illustrative variable. This procedure allowed us to underline the descriptors used by both genders and those specific to each gender. Alceste 4.6 software was used to process the responses. This software allows researchers to analyze the distribution of words as well as the associations of the reduced forms of the words (the root of the word) (Matteucci & Tomasetto, 2002). The software uses symbols to indicate the type of root. If the word is followed by the symbol <, this indicates that only the root of the word is recognized. The symbol + indicates the identification of the termination and of different forms with the same root. An example of the first type is depend<, which indicates the words dependent, dependency, dependence;

an example of the second type is bod+, which indicates the words body, bodies. It also highlights hapaxes (unique words, i.e. those that appear only once in the text). It produces a descending hierarchical classification of the text corpus (Reinert, 1993) in order to divide the elements being analyzed (elementary context units - ECU) into classes with similar lexicon. The use of specific words appears to convey the conceptual context of the topic of which they are part along with the situation in which they are pronounced. Therefore, if a specific word is used frequently, it means that a particular relevance is attributed to the underlying topic. Conversely, the fact that a specific word is under-used could mean that it is not relevant to that topic or even that the speaker is not *predisposed* towards that word. The descending hierarchical analysis applied by the software is a classification procedure that has some similarities with the cluster analysis normally used with numerical data. It allows the sentences that make up the whole corpus to be divided into smaller and more internally homogeneous classes. In a second phase, the software performs the χ^2 test on the association between words and classes to identify the specific vocabulary for each cluster, which consists of those words that occur more frequently in it than in the rest of the corpus (Matteucci & Tommasetto, 2002). The resulting data were examined by three independent and autonomous subjects, as suggested by Annese and Mininni (2002). This phase was followed by a discussion of the meaning attributed to the data in order to reach an agreement on the results. Consistency was guaranteed by reproducibility (or intercoder reliability).

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS version 20.

Procedure

First of all, we obtained the permission of the Chief of the Municipal Police force. We presented the project to a delegation of the Municipal Police and obtained their consent, and then presented it to all of the 23 territorial headquarters. During the presentation a copy of the questionnaire was given to all the officers and additional copies were left for those who were absent (because they were on vacation, working another shift or due to illness). A sealed box with a slot (similar to a ballot box) was left for the questionnaires to be posted in. The title of the study and the scheduled collection date (15 working days from the distribution of the questionnaires) were indicated on the box. The questionnaires were collected on the deadline date and a new box was left with a new deadline after a further seven working days. This gave anyone who had been absent, due to illness or because they were on vacation, the opportunity to participate in the study. Officers were asked to fill out all parts of the questionnaire and to contact two of the authors of the present work (whose contact details were printed on the box, next to the title of the study) if they had any questions, difficulties with filling out the questionnaire, or required any further information on how their data would be processed and treated (e.g. in compliance with the privacy statement). This methodology has already been used in previous research projects and guarantees privacy and anonymity (Acquadro Maran, Varetto & Zedda, 2014). Approximately 1000 questionnaires were delivered and 501 were filled out. Of these, 16 could not be used because they contained no indication of gender. The number of valid questionnaires was thus 485 (48.02%).

Results

Answers to the questions

74.7% of male and female patrol police officers answered the questions about organizational stressors. There were 2742 occurrences, 1080 distinct forms, with a mean frequency of 3 per form; there were 773 hapaxes. Of the 621 ECU classified, 357 were used (57.5%). On the basis of the co-occurrences of forms and units of context, the statements making up the corpus were divided by means of a descending hierarchical classification into four classes (or lexical worlds, as defined by Reinert, 1993). The result is represented in the dendrogram of stable classes (Fig. 1) showing the classification procedure used and in which it is possible to see which classes are closer and therefore more similar. For each class the first five words presented in reduced form were identified. These words characterize each class and are presented in order of Chi-squared results (Table 1), with the indication of the gender illustrative variable.

- Figure 1 here –
- Table 1 here -

The descending hierarchical classification (Fig. 1) showed classes I and III to be more homogeneous between them and dissimilar to class II. Class III represents male officers' stressors, class II identifies female officers' stressors, while class I refers to the most common stressors for both genders. For each class and word some explanatory sentences are reported.

Classes I and III concern the perception of differences in earnings and in the evaluation of expertise when dealing with the public. In class I in particular,

words characterizing both men and women revealed the difficulties of working with other colleagues who spend time doing other things instead of on their job

"*the hardest moments are when I realize that my colleagues haven't done what they should have done, or that they have done it but in a superficial and incomplete way and I have to spend my time fixing their errors*" (male)

"I see my job as a duty, a mission, but it's not like that for everyone" (female)

"colleagues who act harshly, who consider the facts and not the reasons, make me feel bad: I think you need to be a bit flexible" (male)

Similarly in class III, men described how they have to pay attention to relationships when they are working with colleagues:

"*I suffer from a high level of anxiety… I'm anxious when I have to work with unmanageable colleagues, I have to pay more attention than usual, I'm afraid they could cause trouble*"

"It's not easy working with colleagues who have only been in the police for a few years, they have little experience in this field and don't recognize signs of danger"

"I'm always a bit anxious about how shifts are organized… I don't like being on patrol duty with certain colleagues"

"I don't like the way some of them behave, acting as if they're out to save the world rather than to serve the public"

In class II, cooperation and being professional are the main aspects; the lack of these elements produces critical situations. Female officers clearly defined

the factors which can determine a worsening of the group climate: they indicated professional relationships as a key element

"*Some people are always criticizing, but not directly, this creates a climate of distrust, there's no cooperation: if everything you do is wrong, you might just as well not do it*"

"some of my colleagues court me, they pay me compliments, but I don't like that at all"

"lots of men complain they have problems at home, with their wife, their family… what do they think, that I don't? It's as if my personal problems are obvious, because I'm a woman, while theirs are more important"

"I can't stand it when there's sometimes disagreement over the level of detail required to deal with the issues at hand. Some people find it easier to "simplify", they somehow lack the knowledge about how to proceed".

75% of officers answered the questions regarding operational stressors. The analysis of their answers revealed 3101 occurrences, 1208 distinct forms, with a mean frequency of 3 per form; there were 853 hapaxes. Of the 621 ECU classified, 357 were used (57.49%). On the basis of co-occurrences of forms and units of context, statements making up the corpus were divided, by means of descending hierarchical classification, into four classes. The result is illustrated in the dendrogram in Fig. 2. As for the previous set of questions, the first five words presented in reduced form were identified for each class. Those words characterize each class and are presented in order of Chi-squared results (Table 2), with the indication of the illustrative variable

- Figure 2 here –
- Table 2 here -

The dendrogram of stable classes presented in Fig. 2 shows that classes I and II were more homogeneous between them and dissimilar to classes III and IV, which were homogeneous between them. Officers shared some stressors with the mixed groups of men and women, but the description of these and how they affect the quality of professional life differed.

In class I, men and women described the stressors that derive from the behavior and reactions of the public as a consequence of the need to obey rules

"I feel hurt when I perceive aggressiveness and delegitimization of our work by the public" (female)

"Always having to justify my actions even though I'm doing my duty, users are rude" (male)

"making people understand that we operate in everyone's interests, not just to fill the coffers of the council!" (female)

"members of the public don't understand that the officer's intervention is necessary to ensure that rules are obeyed to everyone's advantage" (male)

These stressors were particularly critical for women who perceived their job as being underestimated and receiving little respect (Class II)

"*members of the public don't respect the work we do*"

"It's hard not to answer rudely to users who keep on asking the same things even when you have explained how a service works"

"the hardest part of my job is relations with the public"

"Overcoming the initial prejudice that many people have against the police and the lack of respect for female police officers"

Classes III and IV refer to the attempt to provide an appropriate response to the public's needs, the need to apply sanctions, the appropriateness of which is often not shared by the public. The need to find solutions to the public's problems is a source of stress for women (class III)

"*I feel helpless in the face of serious social problems for which we don't have effective means of intervention"*

"People who really do need help don't find solutions or get adequate responses, although they appreciate the officers' good will… I feel uncomfortable with that"

"Objections raised by users who receive heavy fines"

The lack of appropriate laws emerged as a stressor for men (class IV)

"*I feel uncomfortable when I have to enforce a law that is not suited to the context*"

"Coping with circumstances in which the laws intended to resolve the issues at hand are too weak to satisfy the user's expectations"

"Feeling of unease about having to enforce rules I don't think are fair, lack of justice"

"Explaining things I don't think are fair, imposing fines"

Distress Thermometer

As shown in Table 3, men did not exceed the NCI's proposed cut-off score, while women did. There were also significant differences in the means of

single problems; as regards practical problems, women reported stressors associated with dealing with children and working more than men, while low salary was more of a concern for men. Family problems characterized both genders, with minimal differences in dealing with partners (more complicated for men). The results of the ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences between groups (F (1,375) = 4.44, MSE = 30.35, p = .036). Women obtained higher scores on measures of emotional (anxiety, worry) and physical problems (appearance, constipation, fatigue, feeling bloated, memory/concentration, nausea) (see Table 4).

STAI Y 1 and Y2 forms

Results regarding state and trait anxiety revealed that both men and women reached the cut-off scores for moderate anxiety. While in state anxiety (Y1 form) men and women reported similar scores, men's trait anxiety scores were higher than those of women (56.62 and 54.69 respectively). The results of the ANOVA did not show any statistically significant differences between groups in either version (Table 3).

Brief Cope

Active Coping, Planning and Acceptance were the strategies used most across genders (Table 3). Emotional Support, Venting and Religion were used more by female officers than by their male counterparts.

An additional correlation matrix examined the relationship between Distress Thermometer, STAI Y-1 and Y-2 scores and coping strategies for male and female officers. In men, scores relating to the physical problems 'feeling

bloated and 'sexual' were both negatively correlated with 'behavioral disengagement' coping strategies (r = -.36, p = .000 and r = -.34, p = .000, respectively). The 'behavioral disengagement' strategy was also negatively correlated with the 'active coping' strategy (r = -.31, p = .000). The 'active coping' strategy was correlated with the 'planning' strategy (r = .50, p = .000), the 'instrumental support' strategy was correlated with 'emotional support' (r = .55, p = .000). 'Emotional restructuring' was correlated with both 'humor' (r = .36, p = .000) and 'planning' strategy (r = .36, p = .000). The 'expression' strategy was correlated with both 'acceptance' (r = .31, p = .000) and 'self-blame' strategy (r = .36, p = .000). 'Diverting attention' was also correlated with 'denial' (r = .30, p = .000). Moreover, STAI Y1 was correlated with the Y2 form (r = .86, p = .000).

The results for female officers revealed that the physical problem 'nausea' was negatively correlated with the 'diverting attention' strategy (r = -.32, p = .000), while both the emotional problem 'worry' and the physical problem 'fatigue' were negatively correlated with the 'self-blame' strategy (r = -.33, p = .000 and r = -.31, p = .000, respectively). Of the coping strategies, 'emotional restructuring' was correlated with 'humor' (r = .42, p = .000), 'acceptance' (r = .34, p = .000) and 'planning' (r = .40, p = .000). The 'emotional support' strategy was correlated with both 'venting' (r = .41, p = .000) and 'instrumental support' (r = .56, p = 000). The 'self-distraction' strategy was correlated with 'self-blame' (r = .35, p = .000). As observed in men, STAI Y1 was correlated with the Y2 form (r = .84, p = .000).

Discussion

Answers to the open questions of the questionnaire revealed above all the difficulties experienced by female patrol police officers owing to the incongruity between gender and workplace role expectations, as already described by Eagly, Bell and Sternberg (2005). This incongruity emerged from the description of both organizational and operational stressors. Lack of expertise, superficiality and inflexibility of the rules were cited by men and women as sources of organizational stressors (table 1, class I). However, whereas the professional aspects of relations with colleagues were more of a concern for men (serving or not serving the public, for instance; class III), women highlighted both professional and personal aspects (e.g. undermining of confidence due to criticism, gallantry and over-familiarity; class II). As regards operational stressors (table 2), women and men both complained about the delegitimization of their work by users (class I). Here too there were some differences. Women perceive prejudice against them as lack of respect for their work (e.g. continuous requests for confirmation of information that has already been received; class II). Added to this is the difficulty of handling emotions linked to the inadequacy or absence of responses for which they feel responsible (class III): women appeared to be self-conscious and feel helpless because of their inability to respond appropriately to the requests of the public. Men direct their reaction to this delegitimization and difficulties managing problems and meeting users' expectations towards the outside: they complain of the inefficiency of the social system, lack of rules and adequate legislation (class IV).

Thus these findings reveal that some stressors are common to both genders and others specifically characterize the fatigue related to this job. One expected organizational stressor reported by both genders was the low salary for a potentially high-risk job (Suresh et al, 2013), while we found it very interesting that the difficulty of working with colleagues was due to the lack of cooperation and confidence in their emotional and relational competence. Women perceived the lack of cooperation and professional recognition for their job as a critical element more than men, as already reported by Morash, Kwak and Haarr (2006). Moreover, for women the difficulties appear to be mainly associated with perceived problems related to respect for their role and inclusion within the organization (Berg, Hem, Lau, Häseth, & Ekeberg, 2005). This finding invalidates the feeling that women have of not being given adequate support by the organization as a whole and by their male colleagues in particular (He, Zhao & Archbold, 2002). Women thus appear more fragile because they are exposed to prejudices about gender and workplace role expectations, the absence of an internal social network within the organization, non-recognition of professional skills that would enable them to be evaluated on a par with their colleagues.

The different perception of organizational and operational stressors is reflected in the quantity of stressors reported and the coping strategies used. Male patrol police officers activate a wide range of adaptive coping strategies (active coping, planning, instrumental support, positive reframing, humor), indicating good ability to reduce the risk of general psychological distress (e.g. see Elliot & Guy, 1993), and which can therefore be regarded as a protective factor against

organizational and operational distress. Maladaptive strategies are mainly associated with avoiding problems (denial, that can also be expressed by asking for more government intervention) and self-blame.

The coping strategies used by female patrol police officers – as already reported by Barnett et al. (1987) - indicate the search for emotional and instrumental support and, as for men, problem-solving abilities are related to good comprehension and a positive critical interpretation of problems. Once again, this denotes the development of a protective coping mechanism to counteract psychological distress (Ménard & Arter, 2013). Unlike men, maladaptive coping strategies are expressed though the body (data proved by the correlation between 'attention diverting' and problems related to fatigue and worry). Therefore women amplify emotional exposure (as described in the answers to the questions) and physical vulnerability (data derived from the scores on emotional and physical problems in the Distress Thermometer) (see Gachter et al, 2009).

Both men and women are self-critical and their evaluation of the professional and contextual circumstances in which they operate is filtered by pessimism and self-blame, with higher levels of somatization in women: as reported in previous studies (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006; Bowler et al., 2010), female Patrol Police Officers are at the highest risk of psychological distress.

As suggested by Morash and Haarr (2006), stress management programs should consider the officers' organizational and operational stressors as identified by research. This study also revealed the fundamental importance of considering training as gender sensitive and not gender-neutral. As underlined by Ellison

(2004), the work of patrol officers is characterized by stressful situations, where it is impossible to intervene. But it is possible to intervene in the ability of these subjects to cope with stressors, through stress management programs tailored to suit the specific needs of male and female officers. The aim of this study was also to furnish data that can be used by the organization's management to increase and improve the training courses available for patrol police officers. The results were welcomed by management: patrol police officers can now choose to attend courses on physical efficiency (e.g. safety techniques, total body conditioning) and well-being (e.g. autogenic training, yoga), all of which are provided free of charge. Despite the fact that these training courses are all held outside working hours, more men and women enrolled than expected and several editions of the same course were therefore held during the year.

The data that emerged from this study may be useful for all police forces that want to consider the gender variable in their training courses. For instance, both male and female officers could benefit from programs focused on the enhancement of self-efficacy, while courses dealing with emotional aspects would be useful for female officers (e.g. psychological debriefing, trauma-focused cognitive–behavioral therapy; see Dyregrov, 1989; Bisson, Ehlers, Matthews, Pilling, Richards, & Turner, 2007). Supporting male and female patrol police officers and enhancing their ability to tackle stress efficaciously could also mean improving the standard of service available to the public.

Limits

Some socio-personal variables that could have enriched the comprehension of our work were not considered. We refer in particular to the experience variable (the length of time in the specific police force) and the age variable. This data could explain the effect of disillusionment with work and the ability to effectively intervene on the context. After careful consideration, we decided to focus our attention in this first study on the gender variable in the role of patrol police officer. Having chosen to concentrate on this aspect, we were able to conduct our investigation within this police force and protect the anonymity of respondents. With open questions there is a risk of participants not wanting to give answers because they are afraid that their identity might be exposed when data about gender, age and years of service are cross-checked, despite being given repeated assurance of anonymity. This is definitely one limit of questionnaires with open questions, which take longer to answer and require more active participation. Not surprisingly, fewer than half of the people who received a copy of the questionnaire actually answered it. Further research considering these limits and these variables might lead to a better understanding of the gender-related stressors perceived by patrol police officers.

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