

INTERINDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN STRESS PERCEPTION AND MANAGEMENT WITHIN THE POLICE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

This research deals with the identification of the strategies to manage professional stress specific to those employees that carry out their activities within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and whose main roles are, among others, to maintain order and public safety. Moreover, the main goal of this study is to identify the relationships which exist between the coping strategies and the locus of control as an essential feature of personality which differentiates between individuals. In order to reach the scope of the research, we used two questionnaires with closed questions which were completed by a number of 53 police officers.

Keywords: *Coping strategies; police officers; locus of control; interindividual differences.*

JEL Classification: *M12, M54*

INTRODUCTION

In accordance to the legislation in force, the police officer is a public servant with a special status, who exerts his / her duties within the structures subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and who, while carrying out his / her work duties within the limits of the legislation, supports the needs of the citizens and the community that he / she is a part of and of the public institutions. The profession of police officer generates a series of obligations, responsibilities and duties which lead to risk-taking measures that result not only from carrying a weapon and ammunition during missions but also from the specificity of the work duties. Therefore, professional stress which is specific to the personnel that activates within the Romanian Police Force results both from the particularities of the work (work conditions, work environment, constrictions etc.) and also from the interactions with citizens during which the officer aims to solve, as quickly as possible, any of their demands. The way in which police officers ensure a balance between the demands of the job / the external demands and the capacity to manage them is crucial to the well-being of the individuals as part of the Police Force and to an optimal intervention in solving the cases.

I. REVIEW OF SPECIALIZED PAPERS

The job of a police officer is considered to be "*one of the most stressful activities in the world*" (Campbell & Nobel, 2009 cited by Gomes & Afonso, 2016, p. 48).

Starting from this idea and given the context we have previously mentioned, as a result of the involvement in solving the required cases (for example, traffic accidents, missing persons, domestic violence, sexual assaults on minors, suicide attempts etc.) and of the action of organizational stress factors, the personnel that carries out its activity under intense mental demand develops / applies coping strategies in managing professional stress. We may add to this, given the particularity of the cases where they are required to intervene, the pressure coming from their status which means that the police officers are requested to endanger their own life in order to save others.

The concept of *coping* is defined as „*the cognitive and behavioural efforts needed to manage external and internal demands which are deemed as stressing or surpassing the individual resources*” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) cited by Civilotti et al., 2021, p. 2). The way in which police officers manage to deal with occupational stress, the choice of an adaptive / problem-oriented coping strategy (Anderson et al., 2022; Sh Sabirova & Umurkulova, 2016) or one which is based on emotional management associated with the problem in order to diminish emotional tension (Bond & Bunce, 2000), is different from one individual to another and depends on the particularities of the personality structure.

Starting from the general idea of the interindividual differences between the employees that carry out their duties within the structures of the Romanian Police Force, we tried to identify the connection which is established between the locus of control (as one aspect of the personality structure) and the adaptive and non-adaptive coping strategies which the police officers employ when dealing with stress factors (Singo & Shilubane, 2022; Dehghani Ashkezari, et al., 2024).

The locus of control is a concept that was introduced by J.B. Rotter in 1966 within the theory of learning and it operates through the belief that an individual explains his / her success / failure through causes that are either under or outside his / her control. Based on this, there were two forms of control that were identified: internal control and external control. The conviction regarding control refers to “*the belief that an individual has about the existing connection between his or her behaviour and/or the personal traits (features, skills etc.) and the positive or negative feedback he or she receives (to pass or fail an exam, to make friends or not at a party, to win the lottery or not etc.)*” (Sintion & Rizea, 2012, p. 13-14). Therefore, based on this aspect, we identify the persons that are convinced they have the ability to influence events that they are involved in, that personal success is due to hard work, to personal efforts at to the skills they possess (locus of internal control) and those that have the belief that the events they undergo cannot be influenced because they are caused by fate, by chance or by luck etc. (locus of external control).

„Internal / External control refers to the degree in which people expect that an outcome or result of their behaviour is conditioned by their own behaviour or the personal features / the degree in which people expect the outcome or result of their behaviour to be a sign of hazard, chance or fate, to be under the control of stronger individuals or simply unforeseeable”. (Rotter, J.B., 1966 cited by Nowicki et al., 2021, p. 1).

Basically, by analysing the concept of locus of control we notice that, in essence, we are talking about internal attributions, as well as external attributions respectively, that individuals provide. If referring to this concept when applying it to the police environment, we estimate that any subject’s level of internal control depending on the solving of cases to the highest standards imposed by the profession will determine the subject to appreciate that things can be improved to the degree in which they study and internalise the legislation, the rules and the specific procedures. Nevertheless, when dealing with the same professional context, if the subject estimates that the causes of the failure are due to a lack of support from colleagues or higher ranking officers, to the particularities of the case in which he was involved or to the unfavourable context, the police officers will passively wait for another opportunity to change things. Assuming both the failure and success of a mission when it is considered to be the result of their efforts and skills is typical for police officers who possess a locus of internal control (Sparrow, 2015). When dealing with the locus of external control, the police officer will consider the success or failure of a mission as being a direct consequence of a high level of case complexity, of the influence of colateral factors, of breaches in the legislation etc.

When talking about the locus of control and after studying the specialized papers and works, we notice that “*the persons with locus of external control are more susceptible to the appearance of the negative effects of stress, while those with locus of internal control are more protected*” (Bădescu & Dobre, L., 2013, p.78). The cause of this is the existence of some coping strategies which the individuals employ in stressful life or professional contexts.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Research

The scope of this research is to analyse the coping strategies employed by police officers in dealing with professional stress depending on individual particularities. We analysed the connections between the variable called “*locus of control*” and the emotional/problem-centred coping strategies employed by police officers when dealing with stressful situations or psycho-social risk contexts they are faced with. In other words, our objective was to analyse of the link between the police officers’ personal beliefs regarding their achievements (locus of external/internal control) and the coping strategies (adaptive/emotion-centred) which are used in stressful situations.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: *We estimated that there is a connection between the emotion-centred coping strategies employed by police officers in stressful situations and the locus of external control (the belief that personal achievements are due to fate / chance).*

Hypothesis 2: *We assumed that there is a connection between the locus of internal control (the belief that personal achievements are due to personal work efforts) and the problem-centred coping strategies that police officers employ when dealing with stressful situations.*

Variables

1. Locus of control:
 - *internal*;
 - *external*.
2. Stress adaptive strategies:
 - *emotion-centred*;
 - *problem-centred*.

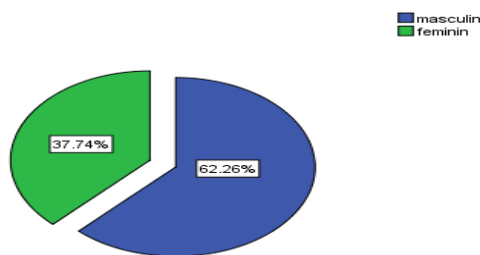
Group of subjects

The group of subjects consisted of 53 respondents, police officers by profession, who carry out their activities within a unit that is subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs; out of these, 62,26% were male and 37,74 were female.

The distribution of the participants varied depending on their age and it shows us that around 40% of the subjects fell within the age group of 22-35 years old, 39,6% of them fell within the age group of 36-45 years old, 1,3% were part of the age group of 46-55 years old and just one participant was older than 55 and one was younger than 21.

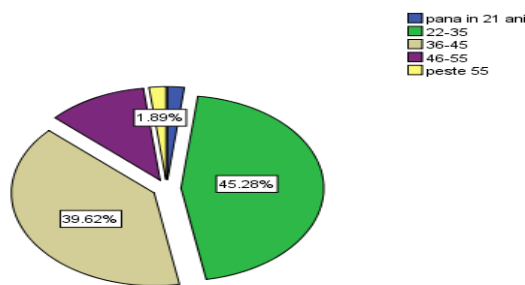
From the social status point of view, 52,8% of the group members were married while 35,8% were not married, 5,7% were remarried and 5,7% were divorced.

Figure 1. Distribution of respondents based on “gender”



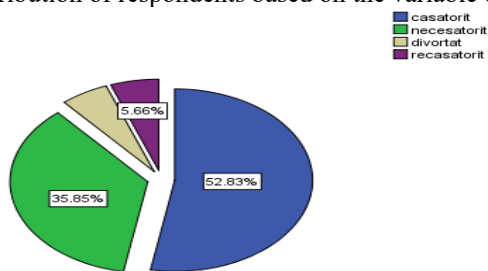
Source: Own assessment

Figure 2. Distribution of respondents based on the variable of “age”



Source: Own assessment

Figure 3. Distribution of respondents based on the variable of “social status”



Source: Own assessment

Instruments employed

In order to carry out this study, we used two instruments:

1. *The stress-identifying strategies questionnaire*

The instrument is made up of 48 items divided into 8 levels with the help of which we can identify the types of adaptive and non-adaptive coping strategies: caution, instrumental actions, negotiation, running away from reality, minimising, self-blaming, searching for meaning, mobilising support.

Each of the 8 strategies consisted of a number of 4 to 9 items; the respondents were asked to mark each of the 48 statements with the help of a 5-steps scale (“never”, “rarely”, “sometimes”, “often”, “always”) while taking into consideration their own reaction when confronted with difficult situations.

2. *Rotter’s “Locus of Control” Questionnaire*

The questionnaire consisted in a number of 29 items provided with two options to answer (a and b, respectively). Subjects were requested to choose the option they consider to be true for them. Among these items, 23 were considered to be very significant, while others were deemed to be “control” items. After applying the questionnaire, a few psychological profiles came up:

- *Externalists* – within this category, we find those subjects that obtain high scores on the E dimension; these are the ones that project the causality of the phenomena to their exterior, outside personal control (ex.: fate, chance, hazard etc.). Within the work group, these people are believed to be easily influenced, with a low level of confidence in their own capacities, without showing initiative and with weak organizational abilities. Adherence to the norms of the group is low, which means they are more susceptible to breaking the rules because they are not internalized; they manifest low tolerance to uncertain, ambiguous situations.
- *Internalists* – these are the subjects that register high scores within the I dimension and who project the cause of all events on their own person while ignoring the role played by chance, of unforeseen life situations, while believing he is the ruler of his own destiny. Within the work group, they can turn out to be domineering, authoritarian, inflexible when analysing the point of view that oppose their own beliefs while presenting a type of behaviour that exacerbates their self-confidence.
- *Subjects with average scores in both dimensions* – within this category we find people who can be characterised through emotional balance, responsibility, flexibility, tolerance to frustration and who, within their own professional group, have the ability to solve their work tasks as part of a group, show a good adaptability to the specific demands of their profession and they manifest objectivity in analysing the causes for various life events.

Applying the questionnaires, collecting, analysing and interpreting the data took place throughout the year 2024.

The research instrument which tried to identify the stress strategies was calculated the Alpha Crombach coefficient and which had the value of .78.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Descriptive analysis

In table no. 1 we show the results of the primary analysis of the data by using the answers provided by the 53 subjects that took part in this study.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Total number of respondents	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Caution	53	20,98	2,85
Instrumental Actions	53	25,69	3,93
Negotiation	53	10,75	2,40
Running from responsibility	53	16,16	3,64
Minimising	53	27,35	4,15
Self-blaming	53	15,46	3,55
Searching for meaning	53	15,38	3,23
Mobilising support	53	20,67	4,23

Source: Own assessment

The data analysis of the results following the application of the research instrument which seeks to identify the coping strategies used by police officers when having to deal with stressful situations pinpoint the highest scores on minimising (M=27,35) and instrumental actions (M=25,69). We notice that the police officers

frequently appeal to coping strategies regarding an active pursuit to solve problems, with subjects being confronted with various situations directly and focusing on the triggering factors while dealing with these problems; at the same time, they also resort to minimising/reducing the negative emotional impact the stress factors have, thus decreasing the internal tension generated by the problematic situation.

The average high scores also pertain to two other strategies: caution (M=20,98) and mobilizing support (M=20,67). These results come as an addendum to the ones described above and help to better explain the fact that, when confronted with problematic situations, the police officers appeal to both emotion-centred coping strategies as well as to the problem-oriented ones; when being confronted with a problematic issue, the police officers carry out activities that are directed at stabilising and applying the required action plans, together with the manifestation of caution with the purpose of adapting the emotional response to the tense situation.

It is not necessarily surprising that negotiation, as a problem-oriented coping mechanism and understood as a generator of compromises and as means of expressing negative emotions towards other people in order to reduce the tensions spurred by problematic situations, is a strategy that is less employed by police officers in stressful situations (M=10,75).

On the other hand, the least employed emotional coping strategies are the search for meaning (M=15,38) and self-blaming (M=15,46) and this aspect enables us to conclude that, when being confronted with daily professional stressful challenges, the police officers do not put any effort into searching and finding a meaning or they try to take the blame upon themselves, while focusing either on emotional adaptive coping strategies combined with the instrumental ones or, given the specificity of the workload, on searching for the required additional information in order to find the solution to the cause and on seeking the support of those that experienced and successfully overcame such problematic situations; all of these appear as a result of having overcome the flow of emotions that appeared initially and while managing various tense moments.

By using the t test for independent groups, we could identify the presence of some differences regarding the coping strategies between the representatives of the two genders only by reporting them to the level called “instrumental actions” (t=2,07, p<0,05); In other words, the male police officers employ more actions in order to solve problems they are confronted with compared to the female officers that activate within the same domain. The result is in tune with the collective mentality, which means that, although the representatives of the two genders are subject to the same schooling stages and professional evolution, the gender characteristics become predominant when being confronted with potentially stressful situations.

The age of the respondents is a factor that, when analysing the data, significantly influenced the use of stress coping strategies. Thus, the subjects that are part of the 36-45 years-old age group employ, on a significantly more frequent basis, the coping strategy called “negotiation” compared to those that fall within the 22-35 years-old age group.

What is probable is that expressing negative emotions and making compromises in order to diminish the emotional tensions associated with specific situations becomes a temporary coping strategy for the people who have gained enough professional experience and can easily anticipate the negative consequences of an improper management of the professional issues which they need to deal with during intensely stressful situations.

Testing the hypotheses

1. We estimated that there is a connection between the emotion-centred coping strategies employed by police officers in stressful situations and the locus of external control (the belief that personal achievements are due to fate / chance).

Table 2. Correlations between the emotion-centred coping strategies and the locus of external control

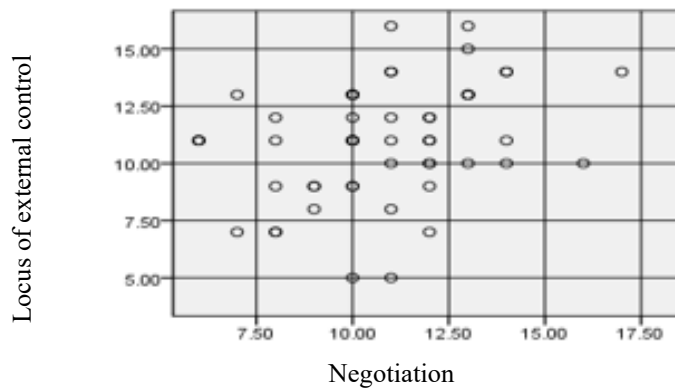
		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1.	Running away from reality	-				
2.	Minimising	.75				
3.	Self-blaming	.372**	-.040			
4.	Searching for meaning	.417**	.008	.933**		
5.	Locus of EXTERNAL control	.136	.120	.095	.116	-
** correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (2-tailed)						

Source: Own assessment

The analysis of the correlation indexes above allows us to conclude that our hypothesis is not validated, in the sense that we did not register a statistically significant connection between running away from reality, minimising, self-blaming, searching for meaning (as emotion-centred coping strategies) and the beliefs of the respondents that personal achievements are the result of fate, chance or accident.

Although it did not represent the scope of our hypothesis, we analysed the connection that could take place between the locus of external control and the problem-centred / adaptive coping strategies. Thus, we registered a positive correlation of average strength that is statistically relevant between negotiation and the locus of external control ($r=.314, p=.022$), which can be interpreted in the sense of the existence of a directly proportional connection between the respondents' belief that personal achievements are the result of the influence of external factors and negotiation as an adaptive coping strategy. Basically, the respondents whose characteristic is "external control" manifest the tendency to appeal to the "negotiation" coping strategy in order to find solutions to problematic situations (within the questionnaire we used, this strategy is regarded as a way of finding the person responsible for the problematic situation and of manifesting the negative emotions in front of this person, ex.: *rage*).

Figure 4. Correlation between the "locus of external control" and "negotiation"



Source: Own assessment

We also analysed here the connection between "mobilising support" as a stress management strategy which includes both an active search for solutions as well as support from others and the variable "locus of external control" and we did not identify a statistically significant relationship (the significance threshold is higher than 0,05).

2. We assumed the existence of a connection between the locus of internal control (the belief that personal achievements are due to the efforts and hard work put in) and the problem-centred coping strategies that police officers employ when confronted with stressful situations.

Table 3. Correlations between the problem-centred coping strategies and the locus of internal control

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Caution	-			
2. Instrumental actions	.625			
3. Negotiation	.190	.179		
4. Locus of INTERNAL control	.156	.104	-.290*	-

** correlation is significant at the 0,05 level (2-tailed)

Source: Own assessment

The data analysis contained in the table above may lead us to the idea of a partial validation of the working hypothesis in the sense that we identify a negative, weak correlation when compared to the absolute dimension of the negotiation coefficient and the locus of internal control.

This tendency on behalf of police officers (who consider that their achievements are due solely to their personal effort) of using, with a low frequency, the "negotiation" strategy is in accordance with the results obtained within the first hypothesis.

We analysed some potential connections between problem-centred coping strategies and the internal dimension of control, without registering and statistically significant correlations. Moreover, we did not notice any correlations between internal control and mobilising support as a way to manage stress

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The results we obtained during this research, which sought the identification of stress management strategies from the personnel that carries out its activity within a unit of the Romanian Police Force, lead us to the idea that, when confronted with stressful agents, the police officers appeal to an adaptive-type of coping, centred

on solving the problem, while applying some strategies of minimising the emotional tension generated by the need to solve the events they take part in. Self-blaming and searching for meaning are the least employed strategies, which is in tune with the requirements of the environment in which they carry out their professional duties when police officers direct their attention to the identification of the problems which they are faced with, while establishing the stages they have to go through and are preoccupied less with the coping strategies that could interfere at a certain moment in efficiently solving the case. Males adopt more “instrumental actions” in solving the issues rather than females and the strategy of “negotiation” (understood in the same way as presented in this research) is rather more often than not typical to the police officers that have gained at least some average work experience in the police domain and are more inclined to make compromises and to express negative emotions in order to diminish emotional tensions associated with stressful situations.

The analysis of the results did not allow a validation of the hypotheses under scrutiny and therefore we did not register statistically significant relationships between the emotion-centred coping methods and the locus of external control (the respondents’ beliefs that the results they have are due to hazard, chance or luck etc.) and neither between the problem-centred coping strategies and the locus of internal control (the belief according to which there is a direct proportion between achievements and the amount of work and effort put in).

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