

# **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS OF POLICE OFFICERS**

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## **Abstract**

*Police officers frequently experience stress at a higher rate than other careers. The length of time that a police officer remains on patrol, the frequency of traumatic and stressful events increases. This study analyzed the relationship between emotional intelligence and the organizational stress of police officers. Officers with higher emotional intelligence on the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso-Emotional-Intelligence-Test (MSCEIT), reported lower organizational stress than those with lower emotional intelligence.*

## **Police Officers Stress**

Law enforcement officers are exposed to continuous traumatic and stressful events throughout their law enforcement careers (Toch, 2002; Wirth et al., 2011). Law enforcement stress consists of operational and organizational stress, both of which are present throughout a law enforcement officer's career (Brown & Campbell, 1994; Burke, 1993; Maran et. al., 2015; Snitchcomb, 2004; Toch, 2002; McCready & Thompson, 2006). Ongoing operational stress can consist of rape investigations, assaults on officers, abuse, child pornography, line of duty shootings, and death of co-workers (Brown & Campbell, 1994; Kirschman, 1997; Burke, 1993; Maran et. al., 2015). Police officers' stress is not solely the result of stressful or traumatic events. Organizational stress such as continued shift work, bureaucracy, inadequate department support, and negative responses from the public can add to police officers' stress (Chopka et al, 2013; McCreary & Thompson, 2013). Organizational stress experienced by police officers can result in impaired psychological well-being in addition to the negative psychological effects of operational stress (Maran et al., 2015).

Organizational stress is different than operational stress. Organizational stress is a continuous weight on the person with no periods of relief. Many operational stressors are traumatic events that happen for a short period of time. Organizational stresses are more prevalent and continuous than operational stresses and more likely to contribute to negative psychological well-being (Brown & Campbell, 1990; Tuckey, Winwood, & Dollard, 2012). Organizational stress may consist of shift work, paperwork, promotional processes, lack of communication, distrust of management and lack of recognition (Snitchcomb, 2004; Toch, 2002; McCready & Thompson, 2006). Threats of litigation and negative criminal justice outcomes, such as a criminal receiving a lesser sentence, are commonplace and further contribute to an officer's stress. Lack of employer support for the psychological care of officers experiencing organizational stress contributes to law enforcement officers leaving police work (Tuckey, Winwood, & Dollard, 2012).

The U.S. Department of Labor has stated that police officers have one of the highest rates of injury and illness among all professions. Identifying tools or techniques to help reduce stress in police officers could reduce the negative psychological impact of long-term exposure to organizational stress. Longer exposure to continued stress requires the officer to continuously monitor and practice coping skills to preserve psychological well-being. Officers with higher emotional intelligence may be able to better

cope with the impact of continued stress and traumatic events. Officers engaging in avoidance or passive coping increases the risk of developing PTSD or other negative psychological outcomes.

### **Emotional Intelligence Theoretical Framework**

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to the ability of a person to recognize, understand, and manage their own and others' emotions in order to inform the person's thoughts and actions (Bar-on, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Ability emotional intelligence theory is the theory that emotional intelligence can be measured in a cognitive manner, bridging the gap between emotions and reason (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Branick et al., 2009). That is to say that an individual's ability to utilize emotional intelligence can be measured. Mayer and Salovey (1997) describe emotional intelligence as four related but different abilities. These abilities are known as the four branches of emotional intelligence.

The first ability, Perceiving Emotions, is ability to perceive emotions in facial expressions and tone of voice is the starting point for more advanced understanding of emotions. This ability also measures an individual's ability to perceive the emotions in oneself.

Secondly, Using Emotions, allows an individual to prioritize what is most important. Emotions are information. An individual must be able to perceive emotions and use those emotions to inform their decisions.

Understanding emotional mood changes allows the receiver to facilitate appropriate responses to the sender. Failing to understand why certain feelings are present can result in the inability to find an acceptable and appropriate response to the feelings.

Lastly, Managing Emotions is the ability to control how an individual receives emotional signals within themselves and others. The ability to manage emotions in oneself and others increases the comfort level of dealing with emotional situations. The ability to prolong or detach from an emotional state may help to achieve an individual's emotional management goals (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2000).

### **Emotional Intelligence and Stress**

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been shown to be connected to outcomes relevant to police work such as stress, trauma, coping and psychological resilience to traumatic and stress events. These are the areas in which police work and emotional intelligence intersect. Individuals with a higher emotional intelligence are better equipped to deal with a traumatic event or stressful situation (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler & Mayer, 1999; Mikolajczak & Luminet, 2008). Emotional intelligence is linked to effective coping, building and utilizing support, and disclosing trauma (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler & Mayer, 1999; Webster, 2014). Increased emotional intelligence suggests the likelihood of increased self-control and self-awareness (Goleman, 1995; Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 1999). Emotional intelligence is associated with the ability to reduce the adverse effects that organizational stress has on an individual (e.g., Bar-on, 2001). Examining the influence of emotional intelligence on perceived acute or chronic stress revealed that those with higher emotional intelligence were in a position to better handle day-to-day stress (Singh & Sharma, 2012). Singh and Sharma's (2012) results showed individuals with higher emotional intelligence had fewer acute and chronic stress levels compared to those with lower emotional intelligence.

## **The Current Study**

There are no research studies that analyze levels of emotional intelligence as they relate to prolonged exposure to stress experienced by police officers. Continued exposure to organizational stress, operational stress and traumatic events experienced by police officers has not been studied. This study determined if there is a relationship between emotional intelligence and organizational stress. If there is a relationship between emotional intelligence and organizational stress, this study will determine if years on a police force moderates that relationship. The longer an officer serves, the longer periods of stress they experience.

## **Methods**

This research analyzed if there is a relationship between EI and organizational stress for police officers. Participants in this study completed a data questionnaire, the Organizational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-Org) (McCready & Thompson, 2006) and one emotional intelligence test, the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, Version 2.0 (MSCEIT) (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002b). The independent variable was the level of emotional intelligence determined by the MSCEIT (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002b) scores. Police officers' organizational stress, determined by the PSQ-org scores, were the dependent variables. A multiple moderated regression was conducted to determine if there is a relationship between organizational stress and the emotional intelligence of police officers, and if so, how this relationship is affected by an officer's number of years in police work?

## **Participants and Procedures**

Participants ( $n = 169$ ) were from medium to large police departments from the Northeast, United States. Each department employed more than 10 full-time police officers. Participants were full-time certified police officers with powers to arrest within their state. The officers had to be active duty for a minimum of one year prior to participating. Certified officers were categorized into four categories: patrol, sergeants, detectives and administrators. Administrators were considered those with the rank of Lieutenant or higher.

## **Measures**

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire. Demographic information collected from participants included age, number of years on the force, position, and level of education. Additional information about the participants' military experience, prior EI training, and the specific stressors of investigating child abuse and loss of co-workers were collected. For this study, years on the force (YOF) was the variable used in the hierarchical linear regression. The longer an officer serves, the longer exposure to continued organizational stress.

**Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, Version 2.0 (MSCEIT)** (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2002b). An ability-based measure of emotional intelligence was used for this study. The ability model of testing made it possible to measure the degree that emotional intelligence had on an officer's response to emotional situations (Salovey, Bracket & Mayer, 2004). Other emotional intelligence measures were self-reported and did not measure ability. The MSCEIT (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002b) (pronounced ("Mess-Keet")), measured the emotional intelligence skills of the participants. The MSCEIT (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002b) is a 141 - item ability-based test that

measures: (a) Perceiving Emotions, (b) Using Emotions to Facilitate Thought, (c) Understanding Emotions, and (d) Managing Emotions.

**Organizational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-Org)** (McCready & Thompson, 2006) are short, 20 question measures of operational and organizational stress associated with policing. The answers were recorded on a 1-7 Likert scale. One being “No stress at all” and 7 “A lot of stress”. The PSQ (McCready & Thompson, 2006) was developed to measure the most common stress police officers experience throughout their careers (McCready & Thompson, 2004). The PSQ (McCready and Thompson, 2006) was different from other stress tests that measure stress after one individual incident.

## Results

The current study used a Hierarchical Linear Regression with the data collected from the MSCEIT (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2002) and the PSQ-org, (McCready & Thompson, 2006). The hierarchical linear regression determined if there is a relationship between emotional intelligence and organizational stress.

The total emotional intelligence scores are categorized into five skill levels. Total EI scores <70 are classified as “Improve”; scores between 70-89 suggest “Consider Improving”; scores between 90-109 are considered “competent”; scores between 110-129 are considered “skilled”; and scores >130 are considered “expert”. The average total emotional intelligence score for this group was 93.40 (SD = 14.30), suggesting that on average participants fell in the “competent” range of emotional intelligence. The majority of participants scored in the “consider improving” (31.80%) and “competent” (52.80%) levels.

**Table 1:** Demographics of Measures

Measure	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Total EI	58	124	93.40	14.307
Org-Stress	22	126	60.97	21.479

**Table 2:** Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis of Organizational Stress

		B	T	P
Step 1				
	YOF	-0.06	-0.76	0.45
Step 2				
	YOF	-0.07	-0.94	0.35
	Tot EI	-0.16	-2.08	0.04*
<i>Note.</i> $R^2 = 0.003$ for Step 1; $R^2 = 0.03$ for Step 2.				
* $p < 0.05$				

**Organizational stress and emotional intelligence.** A hierarchical linear regression was calculated to predict organizational stress based on emotional intelligence after statistically accounting for YOF. Years on the force was entered as the first variable in the regression. The total EI score as determined by the MSCEIT was the second variable entered. Examination of the variable coefficients shows that YOF was not a significant predictor of organizational stress ( $\beta = -0.07$ ;  $t = -0.94$ ,  $p = 0.35$ ), but total emotional intelligence was ( $\beta = -0.16$ ;  $t = -2.08$ ;  $p = 0.04$ ). This means that increases in emotional

intelligence predict decreases in organizational stress. There is no relationship between years of police work and organizational stress (see Tables 1 and 2).

## **Discussion**

Police stress can be categorized into two categories; operational or organizational. Operational stress is defined as the stress officer's experience while performing their day-to-day duties. Operational stress can consist of rape investigations, assaults, abuse, child pornography, line of duty shootings, and death of co-workers (Brown & Campbell, 1994; Kirschman, 1997; Burke, 1993; Maran et. al., 2015). Operational stress can have a negative psychological impact in officers, but the stress is due to sudden exposure to traumatic and critical incidents.

Organizational stress is continuous. Organizational stress is more prevalent in police officers than operational stress (Tuckey, Winwood, & Dollard, 2012). Organizational stress is a continuous weight on the person with no periods of relief. Some aspects of operational stress are always present. Numerous operational events include aspects of organizational stress. For example, when an officer is involved in a use-of-force incident, the officer may be confronted with aspects of organizational stress such as the threat of litigation or negative public opinion after the event concludes. It is for these reasons this study focused on officers' continued exposure to organizational stress in lieu of operational stress.

This study showed that an increase in emotional intelligence predicts lower levels of organizational stress. Previous research indicates that those with higher emotional intelligence are better able to handle organizational stress. Increasing an officer's emotional intelligence can assist officers in managing emotions generated by organizational stress. Management of emotions can help reduce the negative psychological effects of exposure. Even minor protections from the negative psychological effects of prolonged exposure to stress and trauma should be considered by police agencies. The research is clear that individuals who score higher on emotional intelligence tests are more psychologically resilient to negative life events (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler & Mayer, 1999). Incorporating emotional intelligence training in concert with other stress reducing programs can improve the lives of officers in our communities.

Tuckey, Winwood & Dollard (2012) found that lack of psychological support from police superiors contributes to officers leaving police work. Police administrations must consider emotional intelligence training for their officers to help support officers' psychological welfare. Programs that teach police officers how to increase their emotional intelligence could be introduced during the police academy or during in-service training for certified officers. New police officers are required to attend a police academy to become certified law enforcement officers. While police academies differ slightly from state to state, the purpose of the academy is to educate new officers in areas of the law and how to handle numerous types of calls they may be exposed to in the field. How to recognize and manage prolonged exposure to organizational stress is not addressed. Providing new officers with emotional intelligence training to manage the negative emotions officers may experience would address the need to safeguard officers' psychological well-being at the beginning of an officer's career.

The benefits of police officers with increased emotional intelligence have been clearly defined. Emotional intelligence programs should be incorporated into police departments' annual training and evaluations. Most states require officers to receive a specified number of hours of in-service training. In-service training could be the platform to increase officers' emotional intelligence. During the hiring process, police candidates are required to pass psychological and physical exams, but emotional intelligence is not measured. Incorporating emotional intelligence during the hiring process and

intermittently during on officer's career, police officers can develop the skills necessary to finish their careers with reduced psychological damage.

### **Strengths**

The participants in this study came from a variety of locations throughout the Northeast. Officers share numerous stress experiences however specific stressors may fluctuate depending on the agency. Using numerous agencies increased the possibility that the participants would have experienced a wider variety of reported stressors. Years of force experienced by the participants was diverse with a minimum of 1 YOF to a maximum of 45 YOF (M = 13.18; SD = 8.86). This gave a wide spectrum of years on the force to be included in the regression.

Using the MSCEIT (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002b) as the measure of emotional intelligence provided the ability level of participants. It is important to measure their ability to utilize emotions during a variety of situations compared with their perception of how they utilized their emotions during these situations.

The Organizational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-org) and Operational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-op) (McCready & Thompson, 2006) were used as the measure of stress because they are specific to police officers and the stress they experience. Stress experienced by police officers is unique (Toch, 2002) and the measure of stress had to be specific to police stress.

### **Limitations**

This study did not analyze an officer's stress based on specific levels of the officer's emotional intelligence. It was correlated that officers with higher emotional intelligence experience lower levels of organizational stress, but the level of emotional intelligence needed to reduce organizational stress was not explored. Perhaps if more participants scored higher in EI, the comparison between EI and stress would be more profound.

This study focused specifically on organizational stress. Police officers are exposed to stress from numerous sources. Emotional intelligence has been shown to assist in coping with several types of stress, but this study did not explore operational stress, traumatic events or emotional intelligence's relationship with posttraumatic stress.

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