

Could Self-Esteem Moderate the Relationship between Occupational Stress and Depressive Symptoms among Police Officers?

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Abstract

This study examined the moderating role of self-esteem on the relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms among police officers. A total number of one hundred and seventy three (173) police officers participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 28 to 59 years with mean age of 40.77 and standard deviation of 7.44. Their academic qualification includes secondary school and university graduates. Operational police stress questionnaire, Beck depression inventory and self-esteem questionnaire were used for data collection. While moderated regression analysis was adapted for data analysis. Occupational stress predicted depressive symptoms at $\beta = .46$, $t = 7.09$, $p < .01$. Thus, first hypothesis was confirmed. Self-esteem significantly and negatively predicted depressive symptoms at $\beta = -.43$, $t = -4.57$, $p < .01$, hence, the second hypothesis was confirmed. Furthermore, the third hypothesis was confirmed; indicating that self-esteem moderated the relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms at $\beta = -.33$, $t = -3.68$, $p < .01$. Based on the findings, the researcher recommended among others that there is need for a periodical evaluation of police officers in respect to occupational stress, depressive symptoms, as well as their level of self-esteem; so as to be proactive in preventing further development of clinical psychopathology.

Keywords: occupational stress, depressive symptoms, self-esteem

Introduction

Occupational stress is one of the factors that lead to negative emotions towards one's job. It reduces work out-put, commitment to one's job, job satisfaction, and could as well, trigger depressive symptom. This study focused on police personnel, as it is observed to be one of the psychologically demanding jobs, with lots of traumatic events associated with crime fighting. However, no occupation goes without some amount of stress; as such, work-related stress has triggered scientific quest for the understanding of the possible causes, how to proffer solution, or identifying possible psychological factors that could reduce the impact occupational stress on mental wellbeing of employees; in this case, police officers. According

to Violanti (2019), Policing is associated with psychological stressors, such as dealing with human misery, child molesters, and spontaneous decisions that have to do with life or death, societal burden and responsibility. Police job requires constant and sudden duty calls which could alter the sleep cycle of police officers, leading to reduction in the ability to concentrate in their occupational responsibilities, and could have a hazardous implications on the safety of life and properties of the citizenry.

According to Violanti et al. (2017), failure to get enough rest by an individual could worsen one's fatigue, and could lead to an increased tendency of being involved in an accident. It could as well result to impairment in an officer's posture, manual dexterity and possibly, could lead to sleeping while on duty; which could have detrimental implications. Occupational stressors among police officers may present with symptoms such as fatigue, difficulties in concentrating with their official duties, irritability, anger, impulsive behavior, and depressive symptoms (Kula, 2017). Moreover, Studies have shown that occupational stressors among police officers is associated with reduced work performance, and an increase in their physical and mental health illnesses (mood disorders and or psychotic conditions) (Bye et al., 2019). The amount of stress associated with the policing could be overwhelming to some police officers, and could trigger some level pathological responses such as substance use disorder, passive aggression, death anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Chan and Anderson (2020) opined that occupational stress could as well lead to oppression stress injuries, and could also result to depressive symptoms.

The rate of depressive symptoms as well as depression among police officers is significantly high, as well as a global phenomenal that needed attention. For instance, in Sri Lanka, Wickranasingh et al. (2016) observed the prevalence of depression among police officers as between 10.6% to 14.6%. Tsehay et al. (2021) observed the rate of depressive symptoms among police officers in Ethiopia as 28.9%. Furthermore, they examined the rate, based on the severity of the depressive symptoms, and reported the rate of mild depressive symptoms among Ethiopia police as 19.7%, moderate as 7.3%, and reported moderate-severe as 1.6%. Nigeria is not exempted from depressive symptoms and its associate, suicidality among police officers. Lebimoyo and Adegbite (2023) rated suicidality among

Nigerian police as 14%. In their study, they further observed that this high rate of suicidality among police officers in Nigeria is associated with depression.

One of the mood disorders observed among police officers is depression; which according to Beck (1972), is caused by negative cognitive triad. Such cognitive triad could be as a result of an individual's negative view of self, the world, as well as the future. By implication, an individual who is depressed, sees the world around them through some form of organized depressive mindset which negatively alters their view of self, their environment, as well as what the future holds. Hence, a police officer might have negative perception about his/her competency in performing the task expected of him/her in fighting crime, such could create a negative self-schema. Thus, leading to the development of depressogenic model of perceiving self as inadequate, which could stimulate the feel of worthless, and could result to depressive symptom or, clinical depression.

An individual's cognition (mental schema), influences how the person feels when faced with certain life situation. However, a person that developed negative cognitive triad must not certainly experience depression. Rather, some stressful life events; like, occupational stressors could serve as trigger for the activation of the acquired negative schema; stimulating depressive emotions. According to Onuoha et al. (2021), Once the negative schema is activated, a number of illogical thoughts or cognitive bias seem to dominate the persons thought, hence, depressive symptoms.

However, the confidence of a police officer in implementing the skills, acquired during training can bring about an increase in self-esteem. Thus, could reduce depressive symptoms associated with occupational stress, compare to an officer that lacks understanding, or that perceived self as unskillful in crime fighting. According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem is an overall evaluation of a persons' thought about self and it involves an individual cultivating the idea of respect for self, and considering himself worthy. Thus, one's self-esteem is associated with the individual's attitude towards him or herself. Hence, is in association with one's belief as regards to their skills, capacity, sociability, as well as their ability to utilize these qualities for future positive outcomes.

Self-esteem involves ones' evaluation of self, and is customarily maintained by self, with regards to one's thought about self. It is an expression of one's sense of approval, as well as an indicant, that shows the level at which a person sees his/herself as having the ability, significant skills, and as a worthy individual (Coopersmith, 1967). It also involves self-approval or disapproval which is based on perceived self-efficacy. Smith-Lovin (1995) opinionated that self-esteem is the reflexive emotions which can be developed with time, through social processes that involves self-invention, and is subject to social control. Stavropoulos et al. (2015) opined that a high level of self-esteem, gives an individual the capability of accepting his/her happy times, properly manage unpleasant events, cope adequately in challenges of life, as well as maximize their strengths. Thus, is among the factors that could positively alter one's expression of pathological mental schemata when faced with negative life situations.

Looking at the significant prevalence of depressive symptoms among police officers, as well as the observed association between occupational stress and depressive symptoms among police officers, there is need to search for possible psychological factor that could moderate such detrimental relationship. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has not been any study that investigated the moderating role of self-esteem on such relationship in this part of the world, and among police officers. Hence, the need for this study which investigated the moderating role of self-esteem on the relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms among police officers.

Theoretically, this work rested on cognitive theory of Beck et al. (1979). This theory implies that people that develops depression, first develop negative self-schema. This their negative schema forms a depressogenic model of defining life situations, even job expectations and environment as stressful; leading to depressive emotions. However, enhancement of one's self-esteem which requires an alteration of the negative mental-schema about self to a more functional and adaptive sense of self, would modify such depressogenic model of negative definition of life expectation as stressor. Thus, inhibiting depressive symptoms.

There are some empirical evidence on the relationships between the study variables. Such as, Van der Werff et al. (2013), Lasisi (2013) and Van der Meulen et al. (2018) that examined

the relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms. Their observations indicated an association between occupational stress and depressive symptom. Moreover, Lee (2013), Moritz and Roberts (2020), Pikoulas et al. (2022), and Gu et al. (2024) investigated the association between self-esteem and depressive symptoms and found that self-esteem plays a protective role in the development of depressive symptoms.

Hypothesis

1. There would be a positive and statistically significant relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms among police officers.
2. There would be a negative and statistically significant relationship between self-esteem and depressive symptoms among police officers.
3. Self-esteem would moderate the relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms among police officers.

Participants

One hundred and seventy three (173) police officers participated in this study from five different police stations in Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria. Their ages ranged from 28 to 59 years, with mean age of 40.77 and standard deviation of 7.44. Their academic qualification includes secondary school and university graduates.

Instruments

Three instruments were adapted in this study for data collection; which include: 20 items operational police stress questionnaire, developed by McCreary and Thompson (2013), 21 items Beck Depression inventory, developed by Beck et al. (1996), and 10 items Self-esteem questionnaires, developed by Rosenberg (1965). All the instruments used in the study were valid and reliable.

Ethical Consideration

1. No form of deception was used for data collection in this study.
2. Consent for participation was solicited by the researcher and was giving by the participants.

3. In other to ensure the confidentiality agreement clause, their stations were not reported in this study as well as some personal demographic information.

Procedure

An approval letter was sorted for by the researcher, and was granted by the Head of Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. Hence, a letter of introduction was given to the researcher for this study. With the introduction letter, the researcher went to various police stations in Onitsha to obtain approval for this research. After explaining the nature and purpose of the study to the head of the stations DPOs', as well as the confidentiality of the personal information of the participants, the researcher was granted permission to conduct the study, and was given dates and time for data collection by DPOs' in the five different police stations that were selected for this study, using convenient sampling method. With the help of the police men assigned to assist the researcher for data collection, 205 copies of the research questionnaires were administered to the police officers that agreed to be part of this study. Of the 205 administered copies of the questionnaires, 182 copies were returned, while 173 were properly filled and were coded for data analysis.

Design and Statistics

This study utilized a correlational research design and moderated regression statistics was adopted as the appropriate statistical tool for the data analysis using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS version 21).

Result
Table 1: Zero order correlation matrix for occupational stress, depressive symptoms and self-esteem among police officers.

Variables	N	M	1	2	3
1. Occupational Stress	173	54.2	.950		
2. Depressive Symptoms	173	37.3	.456*	0.95	
3. Self-Esteem	173	52.2	-.347*	-.357*	0.95

Table one indicated that a statistical significant negative relationship was found among occupational stress and depressive symptoms with self-esteem at $r = -.347$ and $-.357$, $p < .05$. However, a positive statistical significant relationship existed between occupational stress and depressive symptoms at $r = .46$, $p < .05$. Thus indicating that as a positive relationship was found between occupational stress and depressive symptoms, a negative relationship was observed between occupational stress and self-esteem, and between depressive symptoms and self-esteem. Therefore, self-esteem was observed to have negative influence on occupational stress and depressive symptoms whereas occupational stress negatively influenced depressive symptoms among police officers.

Table 2: Moderated regression table for self-esteem on occupational stress and depressive symptoms.

The result in table two showed that occupational stress significantly and positively predicted depressive symptoms. Thus, the first hypothesis was confirmed at $\beta = .46$, $t=7.09$, $p < .01$. By implication, a unit of increase in occupational stress among police officers, will directly lead to .46 units of depressive symptoms. It was further observed that self-esteem significantly and negatively predicted depressive symptoms at $\beta= -.43$, $t= -4.57$, $p < .01$. Thus, the second hypothesis was confirm; implying that a unit increase in self-esteem of a police

Variable	R ²	Df1(df2)	F	β	SE	T	LLCI	ULCI
Model1	.19	2(171)	37.06					
O*S								
Occup Stress				.46	.12	7.09	.02	1.64
Self- esteem				-.43	.11	-4.57	-.05	-1.53
A*B				-.33	.03	-3.68	-.21	-2.23

officer will directly lead to .43 decrease in depressive symptoms among police officers. Furthermore, the third hypothesis of the study was as well confirmed at $\beta =.33$, $t= - 3.68$, $p < .01$. Thus, self-esteem was observed to moderate the relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms.

Discussion

This study that examined the moderating role of self-esteem on the relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms has a significant outcome. The findings of the study indicated that a positive and statistically significant relationship existed between occupational stress and depressive symptoms. Thus, indicating that an increase in occupational stress will directly result to an increase in depressive symptoms observed among police officers. This finding is in consonance with the findings of Van der Werff et al.

(2013). They investigated neuroimaging resilience to stress. Their observation indicated that working in a highly stressful occupational environment is associated with many risks for poor psychological wellbeing of employees. The finding of the first hypothesis in this present study, validated that of Van der Werff et al. (2013) as a positive association was observed between occupational stress and depressive symptoms.

Van der Meulen et al. (2018) in a study titled predictive value of psychological resilience for mental health disturbances: A three-wave prospective study among police officers. Their investigation found occupational stressors as a predictive factor in mental health disturbances among police officers.

The second hypothesis of the study was confirmed which indicated that there is a negative relationship between self-esteem and depressive symptoms. By implication, as self-esteem increases, depressive symptoms decreases. Whereas, as depressive symptoms increases, self-esteem among police officers decreases. This finding is in line with the observation of Pikoulas et al. (2022) that investigated the role of self-esteem on burnout and depression symptoms among police officers: A path analysis approach and found that self-esteem plays a protective role on inhibiting depressive symptoms among police officers. By implication, a police officer with high self-esteem, will likely experience very little or no depressive symptom.

Furthermore, Gu et al. (2024) examined the effect of self-esteem on depressive symptoms among adolescents: the mediating roles of hope and anxiety. Their finding among many others, indicated that self-esteem has a negative and significant relationship with depressive symptoms. Thus, implied that as self-esteem increases, depressive symptoms decreases.

The third hypothesis of the study was accepted which indicated that self-esteem moderated the relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms. The finding implied that high self-esteem inhibits police personnel from depressive symptoms even while facing stressful times. This finding is in line with that of Yang et al. (2016) that conducted a study titled effects of job stress on self-esteem, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. Their finding indicated that Job stress has a significantly negative effect on job satisfaction, and

self-esteem. However, with an increased self-esteem, the reverse would be the case, hence, a positive change in the observed job stress and satisfaction would be observed.

Also, Pikoulas et al. (2022) investigated the role of self-esteem on burnout and depression symptoms among police officers: A path analysis approach. They found that self-esteem plays a protective role in inhibiting depressive symptoms among police officers. Meaning that the higher an officers self-esteem, the lower the tendency of developing depression.

Furthermore, Gu et al. (2024) investigated the effect of self-esteem on depressive symptoms among adolescents: the mediating roles of hope and anxiety. Their observation showed that self-esteem has a negative and significant relationship with depressive symptoms. Thus, implied that as self-esteem increases, depressive symptoms decreases.

Implications of the Study

Theoretically, the findings in this study validated the theoretical framework of this study. Thus, could be used for further elaboration of the cognitive theory of Beck et al.

The findings of this study also implied that police personnel with high occupational stress have high tendency of developing depressive symptoms. By implication, when dealing with depressive symptoms among police officer, there is need to access their level of occupational stress.

Furthermore, therapist managing police officers on depressive symptoms associated with occupational stress, should focus on the enhancement of their self-esteem.

Limitations of the Study

Since the study utilized a correlational design, the study design lacks the potency of stating cause-effect implications. Hence, cannot make a causal inference as regards to the study variables. Furthermore, since this present study depend on self-report mode of data collection, participant could have responded in a way that will make them look more socially acceptable; hence, influencing the result outcome. Nonetheless, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information as well as nondisclosure of their stations in this study. Thus, would increase their level of transparent response to the questionnaire.

Recommendations

The recommendation in this study was made in line with the study findings in this study.

1. From the findings of this study, the researcher recommended that police officers should be tested in other to ascertain their level of self-esteem prior to recruitment.
2. Also, there is need for a periodical evaluation of police officers in respect to occupational stress, depressive symptoms as well as their level of self-esteem. So as to be proactive in preventing further development of clinical pathology.
3. Therapist and counsellors working with police officers should develop a tailored intervention that can boost the self-esteem of police officers, so as to be proactive in managing depressive symptoms associated with occupational stress among police officers.

Conclusion

This study was triggered by the increase in criminality and killings, directed towards the security agencies in our society. Thus, stimulated the interest of the researcher into this study to check if there will be a relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptom among police officers. Also, to access if self-esteem as a personality factor could moderate such relationship. However, it was observed that there is a positive relationship between occupational stress and depressive symptoms. So to say, occupational stress is a direct indicant of depressive symptoms among police officers. It was further observed that with high self-esteem, the impact of occupational stress, leading to depressive symptoms can be inhibited.

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