

Emergency teams in their voice (PSP & GNR) factors of risk and resilience

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Abstract

Giving direct voice to the participants in this study, results of research conducted with elements of emergency teams in the North of Portugal - Public Security Police (PSP) and National Republican Guard (GNR) are presented. Using the focus group methodology, stress factors were identified in the face of emerging situations and / or cumulative exposure to potentially traumatic events, thus giving visibility to protective factors. The results correspond to a partial analysis of the data collected in this investigation, with longitudinal methodological objectives.

Keywords: Perceived risk, acceptable risk, protective factors.

Resumo

Equipas de emergência nas suas vozes (PSP & GNR) fatores de risco e resiliência. Dando voz directa aos participantes neste estudo, apresentam-se resultados de investigação conduzida com elementos de equipas de emergência, no Norte de Portugal - Polícia de Segurança Pública (PSP) e Guarda Nacional Republicana (GNR). Com recurso à metodologia de *focus group*, identificaram-se factores de stresse face a situações emergentes e/ou exposição cumulativa a eventos potencialmente traumáticos, e, assim, dando visibilidade a factores de proteção. Os resultados correspondem a uma análise parcial dos dados recolhidos nesta investigação, com objetivos metodologicamente longitudinais.

Palavras-chave: Risco percebido, risco aceitável, fatores de proteção.

* An initial version of this work was presented at the event: "(Dis)Memory of disaster? Culture and natural hazards, catastrophe and resilience. Madeira, a case study" (DMDM), 18 and 19 October 2013, Funchal, CECC (Communication and Culture Studies Center of the Portuguese Catholic University), CIERL (Research Center for Regional and Local Studies at the University of Madeira). What is presented now corresponds to a part of a more comprehensive study, framed in a postdoctoral scholarship, by the author, financed by FCT, within CES (Center for Social Studies, University of Coimbra) as the host institution. At the author's invitation and still at an early stage of the work, data collection was partially discussed and followed up with two colleagues; a sociologist and a psychologist, from University of Minho, Portugal. A questionnaire to quantitative data collection, was also built, tested, and electronically implemented.

Introduction

Honoring Professor Doctor Luciano Lourenço, we give voice to those who demand a look at themselves, as rescue team elements, to their social function, and to the right of recognition of their risky profession.

The impact of emerging and cumulative exposure to events that are potentially traumatic by emergency teams responders, and other risk professions, has, now, great relevance to the research conducted by the scientific community, namely in psycho, psych and social sciences (e.g. Lazarus, 1999; Pinto *et al.*, 2012; Brooks *et al.*, 2016; Mao *et al.*, 2018; Guthier *et al.*, 2020; Soravia *et al.*, 2020).

The concept of emergency is used here in the sense of a complex phenomenon, or process, which emerges from a series of simple stressing moments or actions where the risk associated with danger for quality of life, for health and for life itself is imminent. The various stressors, potentially traumatic, can be categorized according to the impact on the victim, control, predictability, duration of exposure and protective factors.

The concept of adversity is used to designate situations that can threaten the physical or psychological health of human beings (Gunnar, 2000). At the extreme of these situations we can find traumatic events. The current definition of a traumatic event places the focus not only on the nature of the event, but also on the victim's response to it. The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2002).

Exposure to traumatic events affects personal functioning, family functioning, the ability to form and maintain friendly relationships, the definition of one's own level of self-esteem, confidence in the own trial and beliefs (Resick *et al.*, 2012), also change the feeling of security and self-sufficiency and efficiency, and the susceptibility of connection work with others, putting people in the hands of "fate", which not only affect health, employment performance, interpersonal relationships, and in the limit the ability to confront with death (Valentine, 2003). Long-term exposure, involves hopelessness and sense of security changes (McFarlane and Girolamo, 1996). So, concepts of trauma and memory emerge as key dimensions to understand socio-psychological disorder resulting from exposure to stressors in rescue teams.

But, there is also, another factor very important, the organizational one. A duty of work, providing relief to victims emergency professionals teams are continually exposed to adversity as secondary victims. Furthermore, as a result of their duties, often they experience situations that threaten them directly, and can even put your own life in danger. And, cumulative exposure to adversity can have derogatory consequences in psychological balance as has been noted in several studies (Royle, *et al.*, 2009).

Perceived support, namely organizational environment one, to face dangers and understanding risks and to decide about them, is a key dimension within protective factors (Diego Gonçalves, 2015). Is a kind of capital that is mental and emotionally implicitly triggered and thus visible in behaviors related with trust and perceived risk.

Protective factors are constituted by individual, situational, contextual and event characteristics that facilitate and contribute for individuals to be able to adequately manage potentially traumatic life events and the surrounding phenomena. These protective factors can be maintained before, during and after the trauma aiming to promote and facilitate the adjusted and effective adaptation during and after the event and also to avoid adverse situations - thus configuring resilience characteristics -, protecting from the consequences of exposure and stress and avoiding the development of traumatic disorders, or reducing the symptoms (however, even if some of these protective factors may be identified, it does not mean that the individuals who present them do not develop disturbances in the sequence of contingent events).

The concept of resilience we use refers to the ability of the individual or group to deal with problems, overcome obstacles – to cope with - or even resist the pressure of adverse situations, such as shock, stress, without entering into a psychological disorder (Diego Gonçalves 2012). Resilience, in itself, is a protective factor too, but, also related with some uncertainty always present in any process performed by human behavior, and in such related with contingency situations.

Social and family support is a multi-sectorial factor given the role played at different times. This plays an important role in monitoring and post-trauma reactions, in such a way that people exposed to traumatic situations are at high risk of developing post-traumatic stress disease (PTSD) when organizational support is low (McNally *et al.*, 2003). Personnel of rescue teams may be at risk of PTSD symptoms due to exposure to trauma and other work stressors (Soravia, *et al.*, 2020).

And: what about role institution's support?

A protective factor related to exposure to trauma is the preparation provided by belonging organization to deal with certain situations, constituting a resilience variable for this purpose (North *et al.*, 1991; cit. McNally *et al.*, 2003). Thus, the training that people carry out before, during and after events is essential for the processing of information and for the development of more effective coping strategies, as it reduces uncertainty, increases perceived control and allows triggering and preparing appropriate automatic responses for manage the situation (Shalev, 1996).

The need for organizations and managers to reduce or manage uncertainty has never been greater (Beck & Holzner, 2007). But the capacity of organizations and management to manage such uncertainty seems to be lagging behind and managers and organizations seem unprepared to deal with this situation (Hutter & Power, 2005).

The organizational factors are constant and unavoidable, since they may be the main predictors of stress; they are part of the operational context and participate in conduct monitoring, preventing or causing stress, and we reiterate, they are not dissociated from the trust on belonging organization, and on organizational support perceived by the agents. But it is also necessary to quote that in special circumstances, agents feel embarrassed or feel the opportunity to use an agency and act in a different way from the planned and routine – the role of improvisation (Lundberg & Rankin, 2014; Denver *et al.*, 2007).

The performance performed can, under normal or special circumstances, lead to stress, which has consequences for health and for personal and organizational performance, extending to the family. The perceived existence of stress encourages the adoption of strategies to deal with that phenomenon, which summon or benefit from the existing social, family and organizational supports. The behavior of agents who, through their agency, use existing support to resolve stress management reproduces or transforms institutionalized forms of the relationship between agents and the organization in the realization of the functional content of the position and in the ways of being police agents.

Methodology

As Mitchell (1999) observed “[...] *each researcher may feel free to create their own models and scales, specific and of limited design, as long as they do not find an existing model that adjust to your goals*”. This is undoubtedly a matter of creativity that, in this case, combines deductive models with the heuristic capacity of induction.

Within the above mentioned scope, we give to the agents of Public Security Police (PSP) and National Republican Guard (GNR) a voice! We let them speak for themselves! Expose their truth! Using the Portuguese neologism *estória*, we pay tribute to their “story” in their own words! And yet, thus, keeping us in the field of research and scientific dissemination, alerting and suggesting that we look at what they want to convey to us.

Data collection

The focus group technique for data collection was applied to at least 1 peri-urban and one urban team (a variable in itself) from each of the organizations under analysis (GNR; PSP). Each focus-group gathered between, 6 to 8 elements, contemplating the variables

for selection of the participating members: age and seniority in the career; rank and type of operation; gender. Main Dimensions of the focus group script: *previous individual characteristics* (family, history of life; contingencies); *features of the events* (they face to); *role of institutions in risky behavior* (perceived organizational support).

Data analysis and results

Reciprocal interactions between perceived risk and trust, acceptable risk and loss calculation process and memory of events, are highlighted in some data arising from focus group analysis within elements of emergency and rescue teams, which activities expose them continuously to factors potentially triggering stress, even, trauma, in a dynamic interaction on factors of risk, vulnerability - considered an intrinsic risk factor, of an individual exposed to a threat, expresses his predisposition to risk (Diego Gonçalves, 2012) - and resilience, perceived by individuals, but contextually framed, in order to propose preventive and coping strategies.

Previous individual characteristics

The contextual personal characteristics of individuals and their support resources are evident in the implications of stress and in the performance of the policy agents.

“(…) an element who has lost a child and who has dealt with a police situation also of the death of a child (…) in fact this vulnerability has been reflected a lot in the performance of his work (…)

he managed to deal with the situation, *but the suffering was notorious and a connection between the professional part and the personal part was evident* (…)

although the countenance, sadness, the outburst itself (with colleagues, peers)” (Man, Commissioner, PSP).

“Stress risk factors are normally bidirectional, that is, they are always linked to the personal part, if there are often stress factors in the professional part, that is to say in our day-to-day activity, it is often because we are not able to disconnect, they are related to the personal part, I believe that many of the stressful situations of my colleagues may be related in some way to family problems (…)

but the professional part often negatively influences the family environment or often by excessive hours, due to the very activity that causes stress, puts a great pressure on the authority officer and often it is not possible to disconnect in the work / home division, resulting in family stress too” (Man, Cabo, GNR).

Features of the events

Continued exposure to stressful events can drive to loss of sensitivity, which will be a kind of a psychological defense, but it doesn't mean less sense of stress.

“in a project that I implemented in the Sé neighbourhood, where the police elements, always worked, a problematic neighbourhood, drug trafficking, a lot of stress, an element after eight months asked to leave, the *family identified him as much more aggressive, much less sensitive*, and he asked to leave, and I agreed to his request, *because in fact it was affecting him in his professional and personal life, that systematic exposure to violence and pressure affects you in your performance* (...) there are also risk factors in our job, in my opinion, exposure to violence is one of them, but there are also other factors that also *tend to make us less sensitive*, namely those who deal with deaths, for example the people who work next to the metro line, or on the train, constantly see people slaughtered, so I think that these are also factors that are losing sensitivity ...” (Man, Commissioner, PSP).

“(...) in a situation that I had here a few years ago with my team at the time, there was a flagrant crime in which the individuals were doing a robbery and it was necessary to go after them, there was an exchange of shots and one of them ended up dying it moves a person, to know that in that night *someone who still was young died, regardless of being a criminal or not, always moves with a person*” (Man, Detachment GNR intervention).

“Situations that mark us(?) I remember when I was at the territorial post I went to accompany an attachment, there was a family that had children, they were being evicted from the house. These situations are very striking, also in accidents when they are young people or children; they mark a lot, especially when they die” (Woman, Traffic, GNR).

Features of the events and previous individual characteristics

“*It takes a personality and an ability to withstand the pressure*, the pressure is too much (...) we have to show results of apprehension, for example, and we, in this work, have to be prepared to be bestial and beasts” (Man, *Cabo*, GNR).

“I think it is almost common for anyone to have situations that put children in, it affects emotions more, it really weakens (...) the elderly too (...) I think that *there are situations that each one of us who thinks about our own life*, when situations are so limit” (Man, Criminal Investigation, PSP).

“I remember perfectly an accident; they were young, the oldest was the driver who was eighteen years old, the remaining sixteen and seventeen years old, the four died in the accident... and our team elements who went there, all of them with family, *and I began to imagine - I am at home waiting for my children to arrive and I am faced with a situation like this...*” (Man, Subcommittee, PSP).

“(...) we have elements that in the course of their mission have road accidents and end up being paraplegic, we have elements that in the course of their functions have very serious injuries, they are attacked, very striking, very traumatic situations and then they have an aggravating effect that is: are situations that negatively influences the agent and the organisation” (Man, Commissioner, PSP).

The role of institutions in risk behavior and perceived organizational support

A sense of low perceived organizational support is evidenced.

“How am I going to deal with the children of others, *if nobody cares about mine(?)* It was a situation that I lived, related with children, and I never overcame well, it was something that was marked, I still feel it today” (Woman, Chief, PSP).

“(...) I think it is effectively a failure in organizational support, to which the chief (L) is referring, is that in fact, a female police officer who has to do nights, days, every shift and who is faced with: “Who am I going to leave my children with to go to work at night? Do I take them with me to the police station? Don't I take it? Who do I ask? *Without close family members, it causes some stress because of lack of organizational support.*” (Woman, Subcommittee, PSP).

“I can say that I have already lost years of life, because have already complained about me, a gypsy, in court, I caught an individual without a driving license, he ran away, I managed to catch him, I did the news report the father himself identified and he went to the court to say things that didn't happen, it was to say that I went to his house a few days ago to bribe his own father, he complained about me, I was listened to by the PJ for a year, a year and so on I'm called to the PJ, I didn't know what for and to take a lawyer, it was proven that he had lied, *and the support I had inside the institution was zero, zero*” (Cabo, GNR).

“(...) we may be collecting evidence for a year and we reach a point when we are going to do house searches and we don't apprehend anything (drugs or weapons...) – so we stop being *bestial to be beast* - but *we have to be psychologically prepared to deal with it*, the results are everything, people analyse us by the results, the process can be very well elaborated in

terms of evidence and then in the seizure it doesn't give anything the result is weak, even if in the sentence the individual can get a heavy effective prison sentence, that doesn't count anymore because there is no visibility for us, within the organization!" (*Cabo*, GNR).

"(...) a colleague of mine who entered the course, he was 19/20 years old, we found out that he committed suicide, on the day that we were celebrating his birthday, because he didn't succeed, it's my opinion, *committed suicide for failing to live up to the expectations that the institution wanted of him, demanded of him...*" (...) *we, our peers, were never able to identify that that boy was in stress, he even showed signs of it - crying*, we were able to help him (...) crying, saying that he couldn't, that he did not know the minimum to pass the course, asking questions and not knowing how to answer, outburst to commanders and peers..." (Commissioner, PSP).

"*We have elements to commit suicide at the beginning of their careers as at the end of their careers, we have elements to commit suicide after tragic events, professional events, as we have elements who end up committing suicide through situations that were never detected, namely conflict at the family level*, that is, I cannot identify a pattern here, saying that that fringe, that age is more propitious or that there is a tendency already detected for a situation of suicide, there is a situation that is worrying, which is the elements who are relocated from their family environment, which is a concern that the institution has had (...) the support has given to elements that have situations at the service level, traumatic ones, and we had a good example, recent or several recent ones, such as situations of the use of the firearm, situations of serious accidents, whatever it may be, from the point of view of physical aggressions, the social context has a repercussion on their all or a large part of the whole, that is, a traumatic situation is felt... if a police element that is assaulted in a very particular way (...) so when we see an element that is assaulted that goes to court, in which for another reason that we are not here to discuss, but that, in general, *if the police professionals feel that a decision did not protect their interests, it has a very negative impact* (...) it has happened many times, but in communication social, or the police as an entity or as individual element is forgive me for the expression, tried and condemned, is always judged in the public square" (Commissioner, PSP).

"They have a pre-determined profile about who they expect to see inside the institution, if afterwards, if what is the result of psych technical tests and interviews with psychologists, it actually results in a mentally balanced person for the practice of the profession, sometimes yes, other times not, other times a person who is very balanced at the beginning can also become unbalanced within the profession itself, in view of events, previous vulnerabilities, etc." (Man, Police Station Commander, PSP).

“The two supports are important (organizational and family), if we have family problems that are reflected in the work, professional and managerial support is important, and vice versa, if the work doesn't go well because we don't have the support of the managers it's important to get home and have the support of the family to comfort us psychologically and prepare better for the next day” (Man, *Cabo*, GNR).

Desecrating the Superman Myth

“We need organizational support: for example I am in the criminal investigation, if I were to ask for psychological support now, maybe it was seen in my boss as being fragile, maybe for the service, if you are in need of a psychologist, it's because you don't are you well and how are you not well?” (Man, Criminal Investigation, GNR).

Trust within organization peers and between teams

There is a negative correlation between damage and loss and the perceived risk, the greater the trust in the organization, in the pairs, in the interactions between competing teams for the same events.

“If there is no good mutual assistance, institutional and personal trust, and then I would move on to another field more at the level of the terrain and the personal relationships that are often established, but here at a more institutional level it is essential that there be interconnection and cooperation and institutional respect, at the field level, naturally, if there is no trust if there is prejudice it will harm and may affect in some way the exercise not only of our role but also of them because the distrust is mutual has negative repercussions on the service” (Man, Criminal Investigation, GNR).

Trust mediates relationships and work performance

“Trust it is fundamental, is a good personal relationship, in addition to the good institutional relationship that always has to be, I believe that a good personal relationship is fundamental, because on the ground, and when there are situations on the ground, if people do not understand each other each other is very complicated and very potent in very unpleasant situations” (Man, Commissioner, PSP).

Perceived and acceptable Risk

Cunningham (1967) was the first author to suggest the measure of perceived risk by proposing a model with two components: uncertainty and the consequences involved in the decision. In turn, Stone and Winter (1987) instead of modelling the perceived risk based on the probability and value of loss, defined it directly as “*a subjective expectation of loss*”. In this way, the more certain the individual is of loss, the greater the risk perceived by him.

The greater the confidence that the events do not present risks to take, the lower the risk perceived as such.

From this argument, apparently, the perceived risk will be an antecedent of trust, just as trust will have an impact on the perceived risk and therefore on the decision taken (not excluding the possibility that the decision may also depend on other factors that contribute to it). Thus, it is important to know how the perceived risk and the confidence in a model of reciprocal causal relationship are related. Trust and social and organizational capital are preventive to stress factors, or even traumatic ones.

The importance of the oath in the defense of the citizen and in the calculation of the perceived and acceptable risk

The greater the assignment given to the mission, the duty, associated with the exercise of the profession, the greater the attribution given to the acceptable risk, in a calculation between damages and losses

The acceptable risk depends on a calculation between damages / losses and obligations, gains, rewards, especially in the recognition of peers within the organization, but, also, in the personal gratification of the *accomplished duty*.

“(…) it is in our oath, to give our life if necessary, in defense of whoever it is …” (Commander, PSP).

“(…) I think that when we act in certain contexts, none of us remember that there is a life of ours to preserve – it is our duty” (Man, Criminal Investigation, PSP).

“(…) A very concrete case: a police officer used the firearm, the person who was shot was killed, reconciling the personal interest and the interest of the institution, this element was supported at the level of the psychology office, it was transferred from command, was placed in a non-operational service, there was a concern to accompany him and to put him in rear functions, that is, to avoid exposure and contact after this

traumatic event, because it was a limit situation that resulted in the death of a citizen” (Man, Commissioner, PSP).

The evaluation of situations that were evaluated as safe before the event, and that proved to be threatening, may lead to situations of fear, more trauma symptoms and more depressive reactions when compared to previous evaluations of the events as threatening at the start (Cascardi, et al., 1996; Sheppele & Bart, 1983; Resick, 2012).

Thus, when someone is attacked in situations and contexts that they previously assessed as safe, the shock is greater at the moment of exposure and after the traumatic event, considering what happened as inconceivable, unlike what happens when situations of violence are expected. However, the fact that they can be expected does not guarantee that there can be no shock and trauma.

Conclusion

Security forces agents are undoubtedly carrying out a risky profession (s)!

Observant statements are a request for implicit reminder that manifests their vulnerability asking for reduction measures and developing coping strategies. Could the unconscious strategy of dissociation (distancing) from events work as a strategy of forgetfulness? No. It is therefore important to identify resources as a survivor and not as a victim - a work on memories and, thus, promoting resilience is necessary. Successful protagonist happens when the victimization cycle is broken.

Controlling the symptoms of depression in the affected agents is fundamental not only in medical terms, but also because it will help people to restructure their lives. Although it is a reaction to loss, depression incapacitates individuals and groups from functioning on a daily basis. Policy agents represent a profoundly at-risk group. In addition to being in danger of life, many lose their peers or even kill citizens, which, in general, will mark them deeply and even definitively. The intervention must exist, even if it is not the best, it must always be some, even if it is only possible.

And, for sure, the implementation of preventive measures must not be neglected! So, not only have measures for consequences of the impacting features they face. So that people can learn and better deal with potential stressful situations, it is suggested planning and executing stressfully and potentially traumatic simulations, which allow training, acquisition or improvement of skills of the agents and other people potentially involved.

Even so, this type of training is probably not a significant protective factor in itself, but combined with others it can be an important protection and resilience variable.

Risks and crises are among the biggest challenges that organizations have to face and manage. How can we contribute to change in organizations in order to be more resilient in the face of risks and crises?

There is an urgent need to think about interventions aimed at the group level (and not only an individual one), taking advantage of the fact that shared experiences can be a resilient risk protective factor.

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