Research Article

PATHOLOGICAL STRESS AND ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES AMONG ANTI-TERRORIST POLICE OFFICERS IN BURKINA FASO

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on the anti-terrorist missions assigned to officers of the Multipurpose Intervention Unit of the National Police (UIP-PN) of Ouagadougou. Its aim is to highlight the stress factors and elucidate the coping strategy used by the anti-terrorist police of Ouagadougou. The methodological approach of the study is based on a single case sample. It is therefore based on a qualitative approach requiring a semi-directive interview as data collection technique. The psychodynamic approach to work serves as a theoretical model for analysing the findings. These findings reveal less than stellar working conditions and a management style that is less productive and therefore less fulfilling. The related clinical dashboard reveals a kind of fear, anguish, anxiety and pressure linked to the subject's inactivity. This suffering due to inactivity, once the mission is over, is a hyperactivity from which the subject cannot escape. Clearly, the ineffectiveness of health care, mainly for physical injuries, communication and organisational deficit and the resulting distress, testify the relevance of the objective set by this study. Thus, the adaptive strategies developed to counteract pathological stress revolve around cultural and religious beliefs, the individual strategy of defending voluntary blinkers, recognition, the feeling of accountability due to satisfactory health care for war wounded and the strategy of communicational distortion.

Keywords: Ouagadougou, adaptive strategies, occupational stress, UIP-PN.

INTRODUCTION

The security context marked by terrorist attacks on all sides in Burkina Faso requires a real mobilisation of the Defence and Security Forces (FDS) in general and the specialised anti-terrorist unit of the National Police (PN) in particular. Indeed, onJanuary 15, 2016, the "country of honest people" suffered its first attacks in the heart of its capital city, Ouagadougou. Claimed by the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Aqmi) (*l'express, 2016*), this attack caused the death of 29 people. From that date onwards, there has been an upsurge in terrorist violence across almost the entire country. In order to deal with this unprecedented situation, armed forces agents are constantly deployed in the field, constantly confronting terrorists with the firepower of their weapons at the cost of their lives.However, human losses and injuries have been recorded among these defence and security agents. As of May 31, 2020, the Observatory for Democracy and Human Rights (ODDH) reckoned 436 Burkinabè soldiers killed and 310 wounded. It is in this hostile context for the SDF that we took a close look at the Multipurpose Intervention Unit of the National Police (UIPPN). Created in 2013, this specialised unit, present on the frontline in accordance with its prerogatives, including intelligence, protection and restoration of order, is experiencing real difficulties. In addition to the material and physical difficulties, the psychological aspects of these difficulties are completely obscured. This situation augurs well for the practice of management that is directive and therefore autocratic. And yet, the trend of human relations (Mayo, 1933; Maslow, 1943) already suggested that it was not so much the improvement of objective working conditions but the attention to human relations that allowed for increased productivity.

Obviously, this postulate was widely presented in the management sciences as a solid empirical basis of reference. Unfortunately, the assumptions of the classical school (Taylor, 1947; Fayol, 1966; Weber, 1922) embodied in rationalist thinking advocating the maximisation of profit to the detriment of the human dimension and unquestioning obedience to the ruling class still remain fundamental benchmarks nowadays. This rationalist position still contributes to the hardness of the task, to the dehumanisation of work, making man an automaton in the pay of productivity. Current management practices being subject to perpetual questioning due to the complexity of expectations integrating the well-being of the worker, they channel our reflection on a certain number of important issues. These include the prevention and management of occupational stress. Dealing with such a phenomenon helps to preserve the integrating, emancipating and fulfilling function of work. However, this reality imposes, beforehand, a real apprehension of the agents of stress or stressors and lets us see the general question that serves as a guideline for conducting our work. So, what are the main predictors or determinants of occupational stress?

The variables responsible for occupational stress are multifactorial. For Kavosi *et al.,* (2018) these variables are seven in number and correspond to high workload, role conflict, role ambiguity, work-family conflict, high weekly rate, job dissatisfaction; women are more exposed to occupational stress. Based on a systematic review of literature on police officers, Galanis *et al.,* (2021) identify five potential reasons ranging from demographic characteristics, through work and lifestyle characteristics, to different personality traits and poor coping strategy. Thus, these causes of stress can be understood under a different model integrating socio-demographic characteristics, personality traits, characteristics related to the work itself, characteristics related to the external

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work environment and ineffective coping strategies. Socio-demographic characteristics refer to individual aspects generally related to age, gender, marital and professional status and seniority within the police institution. According to Berg *et al.,* (2005), increasing age among police officers is associated with stress and those working in districts with more than 50,000 inhabitants are more stressed (Berg *et al.,* op.cit.). For Selokar *et al.,* (2011) married police officers are more stressed than single and divorced ones. In relation to police ranks, contradictory results were observed, since two studies found that a lower rank increased stress (Luceno-Moreno *et al.,* 2016; Brown & Campbell, 1990) and three others stated that a higher rank increased stress (Berg *et al.,* op.cit.; Masilamani *et al.,* 2013; Tsai *et al.,* 2018). Furthermore, a significant number of years of experience increases (Deschamps *et al.,* 2003) or reduces (White *et al.,* 1985) stress. Personality traits refer to characteristics that describe an individual's relatively stable way of being or how they typically react to situations they face. Several personality traits such as neuroticism, psychoticism, introversion and reduced resilience have been associated with stress (Griffin & Sun, 2017; Kaur *et al.,* 2013; Garbarino& al., 2013). For Friedman (2019) neuroticism involves anxiety, worry, mood disorders and negative feelings. Psychoticism involves inappropriate emotional expression (Eysenck, 1993) while resilience refers to positive personality traits, e.g. situational control and work engagement (Miller, 2008). Work-related characteristics per se refer to the content and profile of the job. They take into account the conditions and organisation of the work, the physical condition of the worker and psychosocial factors.

Poor working conditions increase occupational stress (Duxbury &Halinski, 2017). These results also hold true for high work hours (Selokar *et al.,* op.cit.), shift work (Ma *et al.,* 2015; Gerber *et al.,* 2010; Zukauskas *et al.,* 2009), low job satisfaction (Gershon *et al.,* 2009; Lu & Wang, 2015; Brown & Cooper, 1996) and injuries at work(West *et al.,* 2017). Other work stressors include work-family conflict (Griffin & Sun, 2017; Lambert *et al.,* 2017; He *et al.,* 2002), deteriorating work environment (Tsai *et al.,* 2018; Zhao & Archbold, 2002; Chen & al, 2006), patrol assignment (Griffin & Sun, op.cit.), burnout (White *et al.,* op.cit.), bureaucracy and perceived mismatch between pay and workload (Masilamani *et al.,* op.cit.).

Gershon *et al.,* (op.cit.), Collins & Gibbs (2003), Gershon *et al.,* (2002), Zukauskas *et al.,* (op.cit.) showed that operational and organisational factors in work increase stress. In particular, exposure to critical incidents (e.g. violence, crowd control, treatment of rape victims, use of force, negative public opinion and hoaxes) increases stress (Gershon *et al.,* 2009; Gershon *et al.,* op.cit.; Zukauskas *et al.,* op.cit.).In addition, the demands of work encroaching on private life, lack of support from senior officers, dealing with an intoxicated person, being the subject of complaints investigation, being exposed to a risk of hepatitis or AIDS, lack of control over work and urgent demands preventing planned work, are risk factors for stress (Collins & Gibbs, op.cit.). Finally, poor cooperation, discrimination at work and lack of organisational fairness are operational and organisational work factors that increase stress (Gershon *et al.,* op. cit.). The characteristics related to the environment outside of work, in particular lifestyle, correspond to aspects of non-work that, somehow, impact the life of the worker in his or her work environment and vice versa. Thus, reduced physical exercise (Seok *et al.,* 2015; Deschamps *et al.,* op.cit.; White *et al.,* op.cit.), lack of leisure time (Deschamps

et al., op.cit.; White *et al.,* op.cit.) and smoking (Seok *et al.,* op.cit.) have been considered as stress factors. Coping strategies are the ability or mechanisms employed by the worker to deal with the effects of a stressful situation. These strategies may be good or bad, effective or ineffective, hence their impact on pathological stress in the organisational environment. Given the extent of the terrorist threat in Burkina Faso, our work aims to identify the psychological impact of such a phenomenon on the working lives of defence and security agents. The countless consequences in terms of deaths and injuries mentioned earlier have led us to focus our study on occupational stress, particularly pathological stress. In contrast to acute stress, which is intended to be limited in time, pathological stress is intended to be chronic with repeated exposure to the critical event. This study is justified insofar as UIP-NP officers are subject to a high rate of stress due to the perilous nature of their mission in a potentially risky context. This raises the thorny issue of the performance and health of anti-terrorist agents in a climate of increasing security demands. This reality leads us to reflect on the predictors of pathological stress among a number of IPU-NP officers. It underpins the fact that current management practices within this unit in some places obscure the prevention, the management and care of experienced stress. In order to address this shortcoming, we ask the following specific question: What are the factors of pathological stress among the Multipurpose Intervention Unit police officers in the fight against terrorism in Burkina Faso? Such a concern raises the so-called specific objectives of:

- Identify pathological stressors,
- Describe the manifestations of stress at work,
- Identify the defensive strategies developed to overcome psychological distress.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this research is based on: sampling, materials used, analysis of collected data and results.

Sampling

On the basis of a pre-survey consisting of group debriefings for the various teams of IPU-NP officers returning from anti-terrorist operation theatres, we selected the single subject of our study. This pre-survey, which was intended to be comprehensive, focused on the experiences of the concerned officers during anti-terrorist operations. It reveals a risk of precarity among victims of work-related accidents due to the absence of comprehensive support and psychological assistance, complaints linked to a difficult work context and almost inoperative management. These include inadequate health and food care and inadequate material equipment in the theatre of anti-terrorist operations. In the end, the selection of our subject as an exemplary case, took into account the free and informed consent and the experience of terrorist attacks (explosion of an Improvised Explosive Device (IED), ambush or intervention resulting in loss of human life on IPU-NP officers' side).The time criterion includes consideration of events from the beginning of the terrorist invasion to the interview date, specifically from 2015 to 2021.

Survey materials

Our study being centred on the quest for meaning, we are obliged to use a semi-structured clinical method of interview.

This requires the creation of a dynamic exchange situation allowing the subject to express themselves on the precise aspects submitted to them in order to reveal the background of their psycho-cognitive and affective state. In other words, based on open-ended questions, we encourage the subject to make free sequences of questions, while at the same time directing them to specific themes that will allow us to deeply probe their experience of pathological stress. This clinical interview is conducted in two phases. The first phase, through a group debriefing, takes place during the pre-investigation aiming at collecting information relating to the professional experience of anti-terrorist officers. The second phase, consisting of an individual debriefing, focuses mainly on the collection of data, being the subject of this study.

Data treatment techniques: thematic content analysis

The verbatim produced during our interview should not be interpreted in any way that would distort certain aspects of the speech. This is justified by the fact that the corpus obtained could be tainted by subjectivity, strong emotion, disarray or risks of personality disturbance. In doing so, we resort to the so-called thematic content analysis. While favouring the objectivation of the discourse content, this technique makes it possible to extract the essential and explicit elements emerging from the verbal statements in order to untie and reveal the content of the expression in relation to the reality of the subject's experience. Thus, it is practised on the basis of the following 3 units of analysis:

- The unit of the context constituted by the paragraph;
- The unit of content corresponding to the sentence or paragraph;
- The unit of information relating to the word or phrase conveying a specific idea in each sentence.

In this way, we reached instructive insights into the pathological stress and defensive strategies adopted by the anti-terrorist officer under study.

RESULTS

The clinical analysis of the data points to explanatory factors for psychological suffering involving anxiety, distress and inactivity. This experienced inactivity is the result of a hyperactivity that the subject hints at, during the survey, through a feeling of regret due to their non-participation in anti-terrorist intervention missions. In relation to this assertion, our work raises concerns about the managerial aspect of management and the organisation of work. More specifically, there is a kind of inhibition of decision-making autonomy, leading to stress arising from the autocratic management style of the supervisor towards their subordinates, and the poor organisation of work. As a reminder, decision-making autonomy refers to the freedom given to the worker to use their imagination in the organisation of work. Similarly, communication distortion as a management practice focused on the denial of suffering at work contributes to the subject's stress. Indeed, the extrinsic or environmental factors, which are sources of stress for the subject studied, are established around a sort of unpreparedness linked to the lack of prior operational information on the reality of the operations field, even before the deployment of the intervention team. Likewise, the fusion of different heterogeneous units (CRS, BAC, UIP-PN) which do not observe similar tactics in terms of operating mode,

undermines the cohesion within the intervention team. In addition to these aspects, there are coordination difficulties in the effective conduct of operations by the intermediate commanders. Furthermore, the totally insufficient duration of training does not facilitate the upgrading of the joint team various bodies skills in order to make it more operational in the new security context.

In response to these psychological sufferings, since they do not experience passively this situation of distress, the anti-terrorist officer develops defensive strategies. These strategies are based on inhibiting the pain of loss caused by their personal history of frequent deaths of loved ones. In addition, the subject uses both religious and cultural beliefs. This syncretism with a strong magic-mystic flavour provides a kind of unrealistic optimism. This mechanism, since it helps to develop and maintain a sense of control and mastery of events and security, could be described as positive. It gives the feeling or illusion of control over the situation, which helps to mitigate the effects of stress. It stimulates motivation, perseverance, maintains hope and reinforces the belief in one's personal capacity. It acts as a protective lever against the perception of danger and the resulting stress. However, it could increase vulnerability by exposing the person who indulges in it to a potential accident because it seems illusive. At this level the subject could dive into pessimism which, unlike unrealistic optimism, implies the absence of control, a feeling of powerlessness and therefore of harmful and non-productive passivity.

The subject also uses the individual strategy of defending voluntary blinders, which they justify by the mission order and the duty to protect the population affected by the phenomenon of terrorist terror. During their interventions in the theatre of anti-terrorist operations, therefore, the legal compliance conferred by the law on terrorism and the supervisor's order justify their investment in any action. They thus establish a normopathic defence which is a type of limited functioning to the fight against the fear of exclusion and precariousness. Thus, in order to continue working without asking themselves certain questions likely to destabilise their psychological balance, the subject prevent themselves from thinking about their participation in the misfortune of others.

The anti-terrorism officer interviewed similarly adopts emotion-focused coping. This type of coping, as an internal action based either on the emotional, physiological, cognitive or behavioural dimension, is a strategy for managing the emotions induced by the aggressive situation. This strategy for managing occupational stress is also observed outside of work, particularly with regard to one's family. In this respect, they claim that the family environment is experienced in a harmonious way and without autocratic management (no distinction of head of the family, mother and children) but in a fraternal way (like brothers and sisters). Despite the autocratic aspects of management, the subject's individual defence strategies are strengthened to some extent by the recognition of their skills by their supervisor and colleagues. Similarly, they feel indebted to and grateful for the medical care they received following a fatal accident in which they lost six colleagues. It should be noted, however, that the collective defence strategy face to stress is undermined by poor preparation, insufficient training time and poor operational coordination of the joint intervention team. Consequently, there is a lack of cohesion and solidarity within the unit during anti-terrorist interventions, with each officer referring to their own branch of origin. This

leads to a lack of genuine commitment to action and a disruption of trust in the support needed in case of danger. In addition, there would remain doubts and uncertainty about the other's ability to provide support or assistance in difficult situations.

DISCUSSION

After analysing the clinical data from the interview, we will now proceed to the discussion by comparing our results with those of previous research. In a study conducted by Bikienga (2017), it was found that the lack of decision-making autonomy is a source of stress among Burkinabè police staff. Likewise, Payre (2014) notes that dysfunctions in the organisation of work, communication and working conditions generate stress among subordinate workers. For Codo (2013), the techno-bureaucratic management mode characterised by, among others, omnipresent written regulations, difficult communication between grades, concentration of power, relatively little autonomy for lower grades, very limited right of expression is a source of stress. With regard to the psychological aspect, Payre (op.cit.) emphasises that a management style that does not take into account the well-being of workers is a source of stress. According to Rolland (2002), the individual may have personal dispositions that expose them to occupational stress. Also, the DSM-5 states that the lack of adequate care experienced in childhood exposes the future adult to stress. As for Bikienga (2017), emotional management can be a source of stress in the police work environment. In addition to this factor, the author notes that certain work-related requirements such as working conditions are potentially a source of stress. According to Cyr (2014), however, the danger associated with the mission is a source of stress in the performance of the task. As for adaptive strategies to stress, Bruchon-Schweitzer (2006) argues that seniority in a profession allows to overcome occupational stress. For this author, the problem-focused coping that emanates from seniority is an effective defensive strategy against occupational stress, unlike the emotion-focused coping. Monier (2014) considers the indicators of emotional management, in particular addiction (dependence on extreme situations), faith (linked to intrinsic motivation, it refers to the belief in the validity of one's mission), mithridatism (training to experience extreme situations), humour, social recognition, human resources management through the detection of emotional competences during the recruitment tests and through continuous training as defensive arrangements face tooccupational stress. In his work on French soldiers called to particularly morally compromising missions, Retsin (2018) observes a kind of moral disengagement on their part. This defensive arrangement, according to Bandura (1980), allows them not only to invest themselves in the professional domain in response to professional ethics, but also and above all, to conduct any kind of mission, no matter how harmful it may be to civilian population and to human rights. Indeed, acting under legal protection and to ensure the security of population, this defensive strategy, like that of the voluntary blinkers, allows missions to be conducted effectively without immediate psychological trauma. However, the future life of these men needs to be monitored because post-traumatic pathologies could manifest themselves. Eventually, the practical contribution of this research focuses on the recommendations formulated to improve the living, working and performance conditions of the anti-terrorist officers of the Burkina Faso national police. For the self-fulfilment of officers involved in the fight against terrorism and for the accomplishment of their missions, the following recommendations are made:

- Create a space of freedom consisting insubordinate agents' involvement in the organisation of work;
- Restructure pre-deployment training to take account the security context;
- Strengthen the officers' logistical capacities of protection and combat;
- Work to motivate officers through well-being, financial rewards, investment in work, recognition by the hierarchy and the population;
- Make a psychological service available to support officers and their families in case of need or necessity;
- Ensure a recruitment process that includes psychological tests on personality profile given the particularity of UIP PN officers.

CONCLUSION

At the end of our work on pathological stress and adaptive defence strategies, we identified incongruence in the organisation of work and stressful working conditions. Occupational stress manifest through fear, anxiety, and suffering from idleness due to the subject's hyperactivity. Face to this psychological imbalance, individual, personal and environmental defensive measures were developed. These include the individual defence strategy of voluntary blinkers, recognition, health monitoring of war wounded and the strategy of communicative distortion, the form of work organisation which, like working conditions, weakens self-fulfilment. Thus, the objective of this research work consisting in understanding pathological stress and the related defensive arrangements is fully elucidated.

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