

Operational and Organisational Stress Specific to the Agencies within the Romanian Police Force

Loredana-Mihaela RÎNJEA¹
Constanța POPESCU²

DOI: 10.24818/mer/2025.03-05

ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the problem of professional stress and the regulation of emotion systems of the police officers that carry out their activity within the domain of Public Order and National Safety, at the level of one police unit. A number of 95 respondents took part in this research, both police agents and officers, more than half of them being at the beginning of their professional career. In order to carry out this research, three important work tools with closed questions were applied, and they identified the differences concerning operational and organisational stress among police agents and officers, as well as the influence of professional experience in coping with it; we also monitored the connection between the components of the emotion regulation system and the professional stress.

KEYWORDS: *police officer, emotional regulation, operational stress, organisational stress.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *D23, M54*

1. INTRODUCTION

The activity that is specific to the units within the Romanian Police Force represents a stressful endeavour and the staff which activates within these structures is required to have developed to a large extent the capacity to cope with both physical and mental demands. Thus, in order to carry out professional tasks and duties, the capacity to fulfill various missions, to adapt to stress-generating situations and to manage them effectively represents one of the core criteria to analyse and assess the activity of police officers who act, among other things, in order to maintain public order and safety in accordance with the competences established through the rules in force.

In order to solve the cases in which they are required to intervene, the personnel that activate within the operative structures of the Romanian Police Force are crucial to have the capacity to regulate and tune their emotions, thoughts and actions so that they don't act with "impulsiveness or inadequate response (...), to escalate rather than defuse the tense situations" (Stanley & Larsen, 2021; Makin & Mauricio, 2011; Kop & Martin, 2001 quoted in Carvalho et al., 2024).

In this study, we aim to analyse the situation which is established between the mechanisms of emotion regulation and stress (both operational and organisational), bearing as study subjects the police officers and agents with executive roles; we monitored the difference between the two professional categories regarding stress levels, as well as the differences based on the level of professional experience. Moreover, we aimed to identify the relationship which is

¹ "Valahia" University of Târgoviște, Romania, loredanarinjea@yahoo.com, corresponding author

² "Valahia" University of Târgoviște, Romania, tantapop@yahoo.com

established between the mechanisms of emotion regulation and stress (with its two manifestations, operational and organisational).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the study carried out by Oliver et al. (2022), within the police field, the stress factors are divided into two categories: “operational (ex.: individual work during night shifts, involvement in traumatising events, the risk of being injured)” and “organisational (ex: task overburden, ambiguity of one’s role, peer relationships)”. Based on these manifesting stress factors, we therefore can identify operational stress and organisational stress, respectively.

Operational stress originates in the particularities of the work being carried out: the risk of being assaulted, the involvement in activities which are risky both to the physical integrity of the individual, of the team members, and to the citizens who need to be protected, whose physical integrity and other legitimate interests need to be safeguarded; police officers also need to interrogate the persons that were subject to sexual abuse, to inform the legal representatives on the death of a member of the family, to investigate murders, to immobilise and neutralise the persons who, by means of their actions and behaviour, threaten the life and physical integrity of other individuals, etc.

Given all these challenges, “many police officers are confronted, during various missions, with the risk of being injured, with the fear of not returning to their families safe and some of them even have to cope with the death of teammates, which may lead to changes in the mental and physical well-being of the survivors”. (Sunday, 2024).

Organisational stress within the police environment is described as “the result of organisational policies and practices, of organisational structures and of management practices” (Rodrigues, 2016). Organisational stress factors which are typical to police work are (without being restricted to these) connected to: bureaucracy, wearing police gear, working in shifts, taking on administrative activities, the work overload, the ambiguity of roles, the responsibilities towards others, etc.

Taking into account what has been mentioned above and given that police officers are the first ones to arrive “at the scene”, when talking about dangerous / risky situations, “their capacity to manage stress is vital, not only to their own mental well-being, but also to the safety of the general population, as a whole” (Lester et al., 1984 quoted by Patterson et al., 2012).

When dealing with stress factors, the access to and the use of emotion regulation strategies which aim to decrease negative emotions associated with professional contexts is essential to the proper performance of the police officers’ activity under optimal conditions.

The emotion regulation is „a psychological and behavioural process of identification, monitoring, assessment and regulation of emotional responses to various events and circumstances (both internal and external)” (Aldao, 2013; Gross, 2001 quoted by Sephton et al., 2024).

The strategies of emotion regulation can be functional and they provide support to the police officers in adapting to the contexts in which they find themselves or can be dysfunctional and non-adaptive, thus exacerbating the negative emotions which appear in certain professional contexts. When talking about the staff whose main responsibility is law enforcement, it is

especially important to adapt the strategies of emotion regulation to the professional context in which they find themselves. Therefore, applying the strategies of highly functioning emotion regulation will be reflected in the psychoemotional state of the employees, on the one hand, and in the professional success, on the other hand (ex.: successfully composing disagreements whenever they are called in to intervene).

The law enforcement agents are the first to arrive at the scene where there's an ongoing incident that requires their intervention, and the cases they need to solve require the enforcement of some strategies of emotion regulation in accordance with the seriousness of the event. The professional context in which they might find themselves requires „hiding, inhibiting or suppressing their feelings and behaviors” (Kshtriya et al., 2022), as well as the cognitive reassessment / modification / recalibration or reinterpretation of the situation at hand. Adjusting behaviour responses based on the participants in the interaction and on the particularities of the case that needs to be solved requires implication and voluntary control of emotional responses, which can be very demanding for the representatives of the police force.

3. THE METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

3.1 The Aims of the Research

In this paper, we tried to analyse the differences that we recorded among police officers when it comes to professional stress (both operational and organisational). Moreover, we tried to underline the possible differences between the representatives of the two professional bodies based on the experience they had accumulated within the structures of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Last but not least, our goal was to record and interpret, as objectively as possible, the connections that exist between the mechanisms for emotion regulation and the stress levels resulting from the specific status of the police officer on the one hand, and resulting from the particularities of the institution in which they carry out their activity, on the other hand.

3.2 Hypothesis

H1: We assumed the existence of some significant differences regarding stress levels (both operational and organisational stress) between police agents and officers.

H2: We estimated the existence of some significant differences regarding stress levels (both organisational and operational stress) based on the respondents' professional experience.

H3: We assumed the existence of some significant differences between the strategies for emotion regulation and stress levels (operational and organisational stress).

3.3 The Group of Subjects

The total number of police officers taking part in this research was 95 respondents, each of them carrying out his / her activity within the structures of the Romanian Police Force. When it comes to gender distribution, the structure shows that 21,1% of the participants were women and 78,9% were men, respectively. Regarding the age groups, more than half of the subjects (56,4%) were aged between 21 and 29; 16% of the subjects fell within the age category of 30-39 years old and 13,8% within the group of 40-49 years old; at the extremities, when looking at the age groups of 18-20 years old, we saw 11,7% of the respondents falling under this category and only 2,1% above 50 years of age.

When compared to the structures they belong to, the subjects were mostly police officers (85,3%), graduates of the specialised academies or employed by an external source, having

passed a specific admittance exam. The level of studies the respondents possessed is high for 45,3% of them, while 31,6% are graduates of post-highschool studies which ensure a preliminary training for the staff within the Ministry of Internal Affairs; the rest of the respondents are graduates of at least a highschool-level institution, with 8,4% of them having finalised a post-university form of education.

From a „professional experience” perspective, 60% of the subjects were at the beginning of their career (less than 1 year / 1-5 years of experience in the workfield), while the rest were rather evenly distributed when talking about this metric (6-10 years, 11-20 years, 21-30 years of work experience).

When talking about their marital status, 67,4% of these respondents were „not married”, 18,9% were „married”, 10,5% were part of a „consensual union” and only 3 respondents were divorced.

3.4 Instruments Used

The instrument selected for this study were three questionnaires taken from specialised works in this field as follows:

- Operational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-Op) (McCreary & Thompson, 2013) is a research tool made up of 21 items, where the subjects are asked to analyse each of the aspects that are specific to police work with the help of a 5-stage-scale (1 - „to the very least extent”, 2 - „to a lesser extent”, 3 - „to a medium extent”, 4 - „to a greater extent”, 5 - „to the greatest extent”).
- Organisational Police Stress Questionnaire (PSQ-Org) (McCreary & Thompson, 2013) is a research tool made up of 20 items, where the subjects are asked to analyse some of the aspects of police duty with the help of a 5-stage-scale (1 - „to the very least extent”, 2 - „to a lesser extent”, 3 - „to a medium extent”, 4 - „to a greater extent”, 5 - „to the greatest extent”).
- Regulation of Emotion Systems Survey (C.R.E) (Constantinescu, 2021) is a questionnaire which is validated at the Romanian population level, made up of 37 statements which the subjects had the task of analysing and then answering (based on the way they think, feel or behave) through the use of a 5-stage-scale (1 - „never”, 2 - „rarely”, 3 - „sometimes”, 4 - „often”, 5 - „always”). Each dimension is made up of 4 to 8 items. The research instrument consists of the following aspects: rumination – a prolonged focus on a situation which is associated with negative emotions, a continuous analysis of the factors that had triggered it and of the associated consequences, distraction – shifting attention on another activity, reevaluation – a change in the perception of the negative experience by modifying the thoughts associated with emotional experience, suppression – the attempts of the person to hide the internal feelings regarding the negative experiences and to not externalise them through their behaviour, involvement – an increase in the emotional expressiveness used to diminish the effects of the emotional experience, relaxation / impulse control – keeping under control the physiological component of the emotional experience.

Applying the questionnaires, collecting the data, analysing and interpreting the data took place between March and April 2025.

The research instruments were calculated as the Alpha Cronbach coefficients, and these are presented in Table No. 1 and Table No. 2, respectively:

Table 1. Alpha Cronbach Coefficient

Scale	Alpha Cronbach
Op.S.Q	.93
O.S.Q	.94
C.R.E.	.93

Source: Own interpretation

Table 2. Alpha Cronbach Coefficient

Scale	Subscale	Alpha Cronbach
C.R.E.	Rumination	.82
	Distraction	.91
	Reevaluation	.93
	Suppression	.89
	Involvement	.90
	Relaxation/Impulse Control	.81
	TOTAL C.R.E.	.93

Source: Own interpretation

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

In Table No. 3 we hereby present the results of the primary analysis of the data by using the answers of the 95 subjects that took part in this research.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

	Total Number of respondents	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistics	Statistics	Statistics
Rumination	95	11,49	3,94
Distraction	95	9,31	4,01
Reevaluation	95	25,37	8,21
Suppression	95	15,83	5,57
Involvement	95	23,47	7,30
Relaxation/Impulse Control	95	5,99	2,92
Operational Stress	95	41,67	16,04
Organisational Stress	95	43,32	17,76

Source: Own interpretation

The primary analysis of the data presented in the table above regarding the questionnaire which includes the emotion regulation strategies enables us to notice that the highest scores are obtained when talking about the cognitive aspect of these strategies – reevaluation (M=25,37), followed by the behaviour aspect – involvement (M=23,47), and suppression (M=15,83), respectively.

Interpreting complex situations with which they are confronted from multiple perspectives, analysing events from different angles, as well as finding various ways of interpreting stressful events, represents endeavours of emotion regulation on behalf of police officers when approaching negative / intense situations. These strategies for coping and manifesting various emotions are completed with the behaviour component (suppression and involvement) – maintaining a professional attitude, showing self-confidence, doubled by the hiding of the emotions felt by the officer, coupled with an assertive way of solving the situation; the behaviour component is mentioned even in the ethical guidelines for police officers, in the

conduct rules which enable them to exert their professional duty while everything has to be governed, among others, by principles such as: professionalism, legality, capacity, and duty of expression.

When we talk about operational stress which results from the specificities of the job ($M=41,67$) and compare it to the organisational stress which results from the specificity of the organisation ($M=43,32$), we notice a slight difference in average numbers.

4.2 Testing the hypotheses

H1: We assumed the existence of significant differences regarding stress levels (both operational and organisational) among police officers and agents.

The statistical analysis was done with the help of the „t” test for independent groups and revealed the results that we grouped in the table below.

Table 4. Differences for Operational Stress

Operational stress			
Police agents	Value of „t” test $t = 2,53$	Threshold of significance $p = 0,13$	Average 43,38
Police officers			Average 31,93

Source: Own interpretation

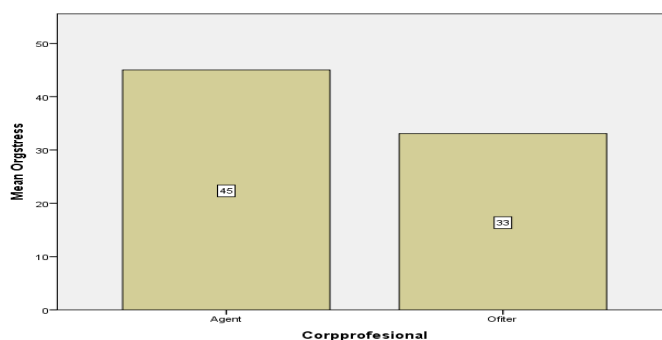


Figure 1. Difference for operational stress

Source: Own interpretation

Table 5. Difference for Organisational Stress

Organisational stress			
Police agents	Value of „t” test $t = 2,98$	Threshold of significance $p = 0,007$	Average 45,00
Police officers			Average 33,08

Source: Own interpretation

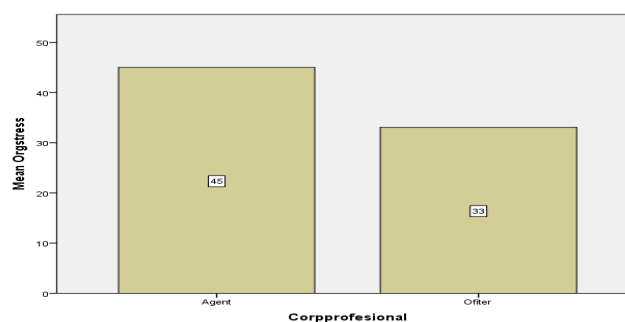


Figure 2. Difference for Organisational Stress

Source: Own interpretation

Compared to operational stress, the one that results from the specificities of police duty, the results indicate the absence of some statistically significant differences ($t=2,53$, $p>0,05$) between the representatives of the two professional bodies. On the other hand, when we talk about organisational stress, we notice the existence of some statistically significant results ($t=2,98$, $p<0,05$) among police officers and agents.

These results can be explained by the fact that, from a professional status point of view as well as taking into consideration the tasks and duties the police officers exert, nobody is above the law, and they are obliged to follow and apply the provisions of the law. Therefore, no significant differences were recorded between police officers and agents when taking into consideration the work-related stress generated by being part of mixed teams, which may have significant differences between professional training, by being aware of injuries or by participating in mission which bear a traumatic potential. The workload carried out during the weekend, on legal holidays or on other non-working days, the lack of the expected spare time to be spent with the family, the feeling of „permanently being at work” are not perceived differently by police officers and agents.

From the point of view of organisational stress, which manifests through: the relationship with colleagues and superiors, bureaucracy, extra workhours, inequality between tasks / professional inequity, internal checks, the use of police gear, etc., we noticed significant differences from a statistical point of view between the representatives of the two professional categories. Therefore, police agents tend to perceive the negative state, the physical, emotional, and mental discomfort that stems from the organisation in which they carry out their activity more strongly, when compared to police officers. One possible explanation for this result is the fact that police agents represent the interface between the beneficiaries of their activity, namely, the citizens, and the institution. The roles that police officers and agents have are rather different, even if the community does not perceive this to be true. Police agents are much more present on the streets and carry out, while wearing their uniforms, patrol and intervention activities, and thus strongly feel the need to adapt to various changes in law or to changes in the gear they wear, while police officers are more involved in tasks that require the coordination and control of police agents, bureaucratic activities and their presence on the streets in cases with a high degree of complexity.

H2: We estimated the existence of significant differences when it comes to stress (both operational and organisational) based on the professional experience of the respondents. In order to carry out a successful statistical analysis, we used the „t” test for independent groups, which revealed the results presented in the table below:

Table 6. Differences – Operational Stress

Operational stress				
Total Work Experience	Less than 1 year	Value of „t” test $t = 2,53$	Threshold of significance $p = 0,015$	Average 42,14
	11-20 years			Average 30,30
Total Work Experience	1-5 years	Value of „t” test $t = 3,23$	Threshold of significance $p = 0,003$	Average 48,81
	11-20 years			Average 30,30

Source: Own interpretation

The table above shows that data that present significant differences in experiencing stress levels compared to the variable of „work experience”. Thus, stress which is generated by professional demands outside the working hours, by mental and physical fatigue, which is a clear effect of the activities that are carried out in an environment where the risk of being hurt is permanent and the feeling of staying continuously alert which is extended even inside a familiar setting is more strongly present with the police officers that are at the beginning of their career compared to those that have an average work experience of 11-20 years within the structures of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The same type of statistical analysis was carried out in order to identify the differences regarding organisational stress based on the work experience of the respondents within the structures of the Romanian Police Force. We didn't identify any statistically significant differences with this category, which allows us to accept the „zero” hypothesis and to reject the research hypothesis. Therefore, for thresholds of significance that are higher than 0.05, we can assume that there are no significant differences within the variable of „work experience” when it comes to stress caused by hierarchical or peer relationships, by the drafting of various documents, by the volume of tasks handed out, by the style of leadership etc.

******We should mention the fact that we didn't carry out comparative analyses between the work experience of „over 30 years” and other work experience intervals just because there was only one representative that fell within the first category.

H3: We assumed the existence of a significant relationship between the strategy for emotion regulation and stress (both operational and organisational).

Table 7. Correlations between the strategies for emotional regulation and stress (both operational and organisational)

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Rumination	-							
2. Distraction	.589**	-						
3. Reevaluation	.411**	.550**	-					
4. Suppression	.656**	.600**	.369**	-				

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
5. Involvement	.210*	.262*	.449**	.040	-			
6. Relaxation/ Impulse control	.455**	.404**	.438**	.383**	.150	-		
7. Operational Stress	.579**	.301**	.244*	.408**	.132	.214*	-	.828**
8. Organisational Stress	.463**	.246*	.235*	.311**	.218*	.111	.828**	-

** correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (2-tailed)

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

Source: Own interpretation

The analysis of the correlation indices shows that we can assume as valid the working hypothesis and we can reject the „zero” hypothesis. We notice the existence of a strong, positive connection between rumination – the cognitive component of emotions and the operational stress ($r=.579$, $p<0,01$); the connection is proportional, which means that the more the police officers and agents focus on the perceived experiences, on reliving the events in which they are involved at the workplace, the more the stress stemming from the particularities of the workload is higher. If we notice the persistence of some ideas and thoughts related to the negative / difficult events in which they were involved at the workplace, then there is also a tendency for stress, which is specific to the missions that have an operational character, to manifest more strongly.

We also identify positive connections of average intensity, on the one hand, between operational stress and distraction ($r=.301$, $p<0,01$), between operational stress and suppression ($r=.408$, $p<0,01$) and on the other hand, between organisational stress and rumination ($r=.463$, $p<0,01$) and between organisational stress and suppression ($r=.311$, $p<0,01$), respectively. The existence of positive connections allows us to assert that we have direct proportional connections among variables. Therefore, the more the subject distracts himself, his thoughts, and feelings from a negative situation, the more there is the tendency for organisational stress to manifest itself more intensely. Suppression, as a behaviour component for the regulation of negative emotions, can manifest a direct connection to organisational and operational stress; thus, the greater the effort on behalf of the subject not to externalise his / her negative emotions, the more we notice a tendency that the stress generated by the activity within the police force to manifest itself more strongly.

We also see some positive connections, of a weak intensity, between the two forms of stress (operational and organisational) and the strategies of emotion regulation: operational stress and relaxation / impulse control ($r=.214$, $p<0,05$), operational stress and reevaluation ($r=.244$, $p<0,05$), organisational stress and distraction ($r=.246$, $p<0,05$), organisational stress and reevaluation ($r=.235$, $p<0,05$) and organisational stress and involvement ($r=.218$, $p<0,05$).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research started off with the study of the differences which can arise between the police officers that carry out their activity within the domain of National Safety and Order, accomplishing missions and activities with an operational character, based on the affiliation to the professional bodies of police agents and police officers, respectively, as well as on the professional work experience within the structures of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The results do not indicate any significant differences between the representatives of the two professional categories when talking about operational stress; there were, however, differences regarding the stress levels associated with the activities taking place inside the police institution which stem from its particularities among police agents and officers, in the sense that the graduates of a post-highschool educational institution strongly feel the pressure of the necessity to permanently demonstrate their professional ability, coupled with the pressure coming from their relationship with their superior, their peers, the control structures, etc., compared to police officers (graduates of higher educational institutions).

When considering the influence of the variable “total work experience” / professional experience, the results may indicate differences in perception of both operational and organisational stress between police officers at the beginning of their professional career (with a work experience ranging from less than 1 year or with a professional experience between 1 and 5 years) and those that may be thought of having an average work experience (between 11 and 20 years), which means that the former feel the pressure of the specificities of the system rather more intensely, together with the limitations of the police status.

Between the strategies of emotion regulation and professional stress caused by the two components, operational stress and organisational stress, we identified certain statistically relevant connections; rumination, the repetitive focusing of thoughts and emotions towards the events that produced negative emotions, is correlated with the feeling of organisational and operational stress in a more intense manner. Suppression as a means of masking the internal emotions from the outside world, emotions that are usually generated by negative experiences, is directly related to the experience of stress which is specific to the job and to the stress resulting from the work within the Police Force. Distraction, as a strategy to shift the focus on other activities which are not connected to those that have generated negative emotions, is also directly connected to the „stress” variable.

This study is thought to be just the beginning of a series of research endeavours aimed at the two components of stress (organisational and operational), which is characteristic of the work carried out by police officers. During the subsequent research, in order to emphasise the specificity of the stress which is generated by working within the Public Order and National Safety domain, we could build research instruments that are extremely well-tuned to the Romanian police environment and we could use more complex research designs which are able to analyse the joint influence of two or more variable on stress and we could also reach more complex comparative analyses among police officers that carry out their activity within the operational structures and those who activate within the support structures of the Romanian Police Force.

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