JOURNAL OF ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR, VOL. 16, 27–28 (1995)

Commentary Police work, occupational stress and individual coping

JOSEPH J. HURRELL JR.
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

The article by Beehr and his colleagues raises interesting issues regarding coping strategies utilized by police officers and their spouses. Many readers, myself included, will agree with the authors that such research is 'long overdue'. Indeed, the problem of occupational stress among police officers, and the need for examining stress reduction techniques, was noted by researchers nearly 20 years ago (see Kroes, 1976). This article clearly provides an impetus for a renewed research interest in occupational stress coping strategies in arguably high stress occupations such as policing. Moreover, the article 'breaks new ground' by systematically considering the effects of both employee and spouse coping and by broadening the focus of interest in occupational stress coping to include largely overlooked stress coping strategies.

However, as someone who has been involved in the area of occupational stress from both a research and public health perspective, I believe there is a need for concern about the 'unspoken' implications of this article. Sadly, studies of the efficacy of individual stress coping strategies fit nicely into a still widespread organizational philosophy that views occupational stress as an employee problem and not an organizational problem. That is, if only employees (in this case police officers) possessed and utilized effective coping strategies, then stress would not be a problem. While not overtly endorsing this philosophy, the authors intimate (in their discussion of rugged individualism) that assessments of coping strategies might be efficaciously incorporated into personnel selection procedures and that individual stress coping training might be beneficial. Along with others, I would argue that selecting employees on the basis of their ability to cope with organizational stressors or training them to better tolerate poorly designed organizations is a less desirable strategy than one that attempts to make the organization inherently less stressful. Indeed, altering the job or aspects of the organization as a means of reducing employee stress, represents a preferred approach because the focus is on changing the source of the problem (stressors), not the symptoms of stress (see Murphy, 1984). Examples of such interventions which have shown considerable promise include reducing excessive workload, increasing control over aspects of work, increasing worker participation in decision-making, and instituting flexible work schedules (see Invancevich, Matteson, Freedman and Phillips (1990) and Murphy (1988) for reviews).

The results of the current study indicate that both the police officer respondents and their spouses reported that they utilized problem-focused coping behaviors more frequently than the other three types of coping behaviors studied (emotion-focused, religious, and rugged individualism). However, emotion-focused coping behaviors and not problem-focused behaviors were found to be more consistently associated with strain reduction. This is clearly not an uncommon finding. Some studies (e.g. Howard, Rechnitzer and Cunningham, 1975) suggest that problem-focused coping may actually increase strain. Such seemingly unexpected findings have led many to conclude that the effectiveness of problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping for reducing

CCC 0894–3796/95/010027–02

(buffering) the effects of stressors on strain is a function of the controllability of the stressor, coping of any type being relatively ineffective in situations beyond the individual's control (see Hurrell, 1989). I would argue that the kinds of stressors faced by police officers (as well as most workers) are, by and large, beyond individual control. The stressors mentioned in the vignette posed to the officer subjects, for example, included both shift work and departmental politics which are, for most workers, beyond the boundaries of individual control. Thus, from a pragmatic standpoint, effective stress management interventions need to incorporate primary prevention strategies at the organizational level aimed at reducing or eliminating stressors at work. Ideally, occupational stress interventions should be comprehensive addressing the organizational environment, the individual, and the individual–organizational interface.

While the authors provide an interesting discussion of some of the methodological and conceptual issues that impact upon stress coping research, I believe that a few additional 'cautionary' comments are in order. Simply stated, coping is a complex transactional process that is not easily studied. It is simplistic to assume that certain patterns of coping response will invariably be adaptive. As noted above, any particular strategy can alleviate strain in one situation and be ineffective or even maladaptive in another. The question for coping researchers, acknowledged in this article, becomes one of coping measurement specificity. Should one develop and utilize coping measures targeted to categories of jobs? specific jobs? categories of stressors? or specific stressors? Adding to the researchers dilemma, coping behaviors seem to be a function of not only situational factors but personality and behavioral dispositions as well. These include such factors as hardiness, self-esteem, locus of control and Type A personality (Steptoe, 1991). Finally, as Folkman and Lazarus (1980) have noted, coping behaviors are modified by experience. Thus, workers may cope with the same situation with different behaviors or strategies at different times. All of the above factors make coping research exceedingly difficult to both conduct and interpret. I find it easy to agree with Beehr and colleagues that '... there are many unanswered questions about coping'.

References

Folkman, S. and Lazarus, R. S. (1980). 'An analysis of coping in a middle-aged community sample', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, **21**, 219–239.

Howard, J. H., Rechnitzer, R. A. and Cunningham, D. A. (1975). Coping with job tension—effective and ineffective methods, *Public Personnel Management*, **4**, 317–326.

Hurrell, Jr., J. J. (1989). 'An overview of organizational stress and health'. In: Murphy, L. R. and Schoenborn, T. F. (Eds) *Stress Management in Work Settings*, Praeger Press, New York, pp. 31–45.

Ivancevich, J. M., Matteon, M. T., Freedman, S. M. and Phillips, J. S. (1990). 'Worksite stress management interventions', *American Psychologist*, **45**, 252.

Kroes, W. H. (1976). *Societies Victim—the Policeman: An Analysis of Job Stress in Policing*, Charles Thomas, Springfield.

Murphy, L. R. (1988). 'Workplace interventions for stress reduction and prevention'. In: Cooper, C. L. and Payne, R. (Eds) *Causes, Coping and Consequences of Stress at Work*, Wiley, Chichester, pp. 301–339.

Murphy, L. R. (1984). 'Occupational stress management: A review and appraisal', *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, **57**, 1–15.

Steptoe, A. (1991). 'Psychological coping, individual differences and physiological stress responses'. In: Cooper, C. L. and Payne, R. (Eds) *Personality and Stress: Individual Differences in the Stress Process*, Wiley, Chichester.