Psychological Inflexibility and Wellbeing Among Police Officers: The Mediating Role of Burnout

Mahsa Mojallal, M.A; Randal Quevillon, Ph.D; Mason L. Hatwan, B.A.
University of South Dakota

Introduction

- Policing is a highly stressful occupation, which exposes officers to a variety of organizational and operational stressors (Bishop et al., 2018; Burk, 2016; Violanti et al., 2011).
- This repeated and unpredictable exposure to critical incidence and chronic stress, as well as the societal expectations for optimal performance, can increase the risk of burnout (Chu, 2015; Houdmont, 2017) and adversely impact officers' mental well-being (Avdija, 2014; Schonfeld et al., 2016; van der Meer et al., 2017).
- Failure to address these issues has grave negative consequences in personal, organizational, and societal, such as inappropriate use of force (Menard & Arter, 2013; Queiros et al, 2013), apathy and lack of concern for clients (Maslach, 1976), elevated aggression (Rajaratnam et al., 2011), poor problem-solving (Arslan, 2010), and impaired decision-making (Violanti et al., 2014).
- Psychological flexibility (PF) can affect well-being thorough its effects on burnout.
- PF is defined as the ability to adapt to a variety of different situational demands when doing so is useful for living a meaningful life (Hayes et al., 2006).
- Psychological inflexibility occurs when people attempt to avoid unwanted private events at the expense of their values, which can paradoxically increase distress in the long run by using personal resources for experiential avoidance and interfering with engagement in value-directed behaviors (Kashdan et al., 2006; Lloyd et al., 2013).

Current Study

- This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of burnout in the association between psychological inflexibility and well-being among police officers, after controlling for age and the years of service.
- We hypothesized that burnout mediates the association between psychological inflexibility and well-being, with psychological inflexibility being positively associated with burnout, which is in turn, negatively associated with well-being.

Method

Participants

- Participants were 190 officers (84% male; 94% White) aged 21–64 (73% in 38–54 age group), recruited from eight police departments in the Midwest, West Coast, and East Coast of the U.S., who completed an online cross-sectional survey. Data collected between May 2019 and January 2020. Officers above age 21 who were active members of law enforcement were eligible to participate.

Measures included

- ***The World Health Organization – Five Wellbeing Index (WHO-5; 1998)*** is a 5-item self-report scale developed, which asks subjects to respond to questions about their positive feelings within the past two weeks on a 6-point scale. The scale yields a total score, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of well-being. This scale has shown high internal consistency (Lee et al., 2017) and good construct validity (Topp et al., 2015). In the current study, this scale showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$).
- ***The Burnout Measure – Short Form (BMS; Malach-Pines, 2005)*** is a 10-item self-report measure, which assesses the level of an individual's physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion on a 7-point response. The scale provides a single total score, with a score of four or above shows burnout. BMS has shown good convergent validity, internal consistency (among police officers), and acceptable test-retest reliability (Malach-Pines, 2005). BMS showed good internal consistency in this study ($\alpha = .89$).
- ***The Everyday Psychological Inflexibility Checklist (EPIC; Thompson et al., 2019)*** is a 7-item self-report scale that assesses psychological inflexibility using a 7-point response option. Of the seven items, four are indicative of avoidance, and three are indicative of behavioral rigidity. Higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological inflexibility. EPIC acceptable internal consistency for avoidance (Thompson et al., 2019). In the current study, the total score showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .73$).

Method continued

Procedure

- We contacted chief officers in different police departments and invited them to participate in the study. After receiving their approval, the departments received the link to the online study survey and emailed that to their officers. All participants provided informed consent and responses were anonymous. All procedures were approved by the university Institutional Review Board. All questionnaires were completed online.

Statistical Analysis

- Descriptive statistics were used to provide basic information about the frequencies and central tendencies. Bivariate correlations were calculated for all variables using Stata 13 (StataCorp, 2013). A path-analytic mediation was conducted in Mplus 8.4 (Muthen & Muthen, 2019) using the maximum likelihood estimator. The significance of the indirect effects was determined by bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals using 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Mackinnon, 2006). Psychological inflexibility entered as the predictor. Burnout entered as the mediator, and well-being entered as the criterion variable. Age and years of service entered as covariates.

Results

- Descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.
- A path model was tested using the maximum likelihood estimator. The model was estimated on 178 observations. The hypothesized model was a good fit to data (X^2 (178, 1) = 0.588, p = .443; RMSEA = 0.000 (90% CI [0.000, 0.180]; CFI = 1.000; SRMR = 0.013 (see Fig. 1).
- Results indicated that psychological inflexibility was significantly and positively associated with burnout, and burnout was significantly and negatively associated with well-being.
- Bootstrapped 95% CIs (10,000 samples) indicated burnout mediate the association of psychological inflexibility and well-being. No changes were made to the model. Findings supported the hypothesis, and the model showed good global and local fit. Unstandardized direct effects and standardized indirect effect are reported in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.
- Results indicated Age is not significantly associated with burnout (ß = 0.258, *SE* = 0.156, p = .098) or wellbeing (ß = –0.147, *SE* = 0.114, p = .197). However, years of service was significantly associated with both burnout (ß = –0.036, *SE* = 0.018, p = .048) and wellbeing (ß = 0.026, *SE* = 0.012, p = .033).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Psychological Inflexibility, Burnout, and Wellbeing*

Variable	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis	Range
Psychological Inflexibility	181	3.80	0.79	–0.12	3.08	1.88–5.57
Burnout	162	3.13	0.95	0.43	3.23	1.4–6.3
Wellbeing	187	3.00	0.92	–0.83	2.93	4–4.6

Table 2. *Pearson Correlations Between Psychological Inflexibility, Burnout, and Wellbeing*

Variable	1	2	3
1. Psychological Inflexibility	–		
2. Burnout	.163*	–	
3. Wellbeing	–.145	–.627***	–

Note. N Range = 160–186
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Results continued

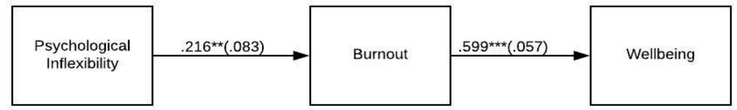

Figure 1. N = 178. Path analytic model predict wellbeing from psychological inflexibility with mediating effect of burnout. Coefficients are standardized. Standard errors are in parentheses.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 3. *Unstandardized Coefficients and Standard Errors of Direct Effects*

Variable/ Path	Unstandardized Coefficient	Std. Error
Psychological Flexibility → Burnout	**0.26***	.102
Burnout → Wellbeing	**–0.58*****	.056
Burnout R^2	**0.30*****	.044
Wellbeing R^2	**0.40*****	.068

Table 4. *Unstandardized Coefficients and Standard Errors of Indirect Effects*

Variable/Path	Unstandardized Coefficient	Std. Error	95% CI
Psychological Inflexibility → Burnout → Wellbeing	**–0.13**	.053	[–0.282, –0.036]

Discussion

- The current study investigated the mediating role of burnout in the association between psychological inflexibility and well-being among police officers.
- Our findings supported the hypothesis.
- Police officers experience high levels of job-related stress and negative emotions. Having an unaccepting and avoidant approach can lead to increased distress in long-term, which can increase the risk of burnout, and indirectly impact officers' well-being.
- Finding also indicated that higher years of service is associated with less burnout and higher wellbeing. It is possible that more experienced officers learn to deal with job stressors in a more efficient way.
- In conclusion, it seems that psychological flexibility is one of the important associates of well-being in high-stress professions, such as policing.

Limitations and Future Studies

- This study has a cross-sectional nature; so the results of this study while considering the characteristics and limitations of cross-sectional design. This is especially important as avoidant strategies may reduce distress in short-term and increase distress in the long-run. Future studies can investigate the role of time by using a longitudinal design.
- The measure we used to assess psychological flexibility consisted of avoidance and behavioral rigidity. Future studies can address this gap by including other elements of hexaflex in their study.
- Data for this study collected before recent social events. It is expected that these events significantly affect officers' well-being and burnout.