Biggs, David M (2016) Resilience in police emergency services 999 call operators. In: BPS DOP Annual Conference, 6 - 8 January 2016, Nottingham, UK.

Authors & Affiliation

David Biggs. University of Gloucestershire

Title.

Resilience in police emergency services 999 call operators

Content.

Abstract

The current study investigated resilience in emergency service 999 call operators. A longitudinal study was adopted with interviews carried out with 22 and then a year later 15 call operators in a centralised emergency management centre. Calls handled by the operators could range from minor crimes to dealing with victims of rape or murder. An inductive thematic analysis approach was taken to analyse the data which summarised 85 codes generated into three themes consisting of: building resilience in the job, organisational dysfunctions and job demands. Call operators spoke freely on how they developed resilience on dealing with emergency calls. The longitudinal design helped this investigation. Call operators developed a hard shell and relied heavily on teamwork and training to build up their resilience.

Introduction

Police work is stressful and individuals working for the emergency services have to build up resilience in this type of work (Kingshott, Bailey & Wolfe, 2004). The police are the last port of call for a variety of issues ranging from criminal damage to terrorism. Indeed, when the other emergency services cannot assist often it is left to the police to deal with the situation (Boots, Biggs & Elcock, 2014). Reflecting on the job demands and personal risk as a police officer threats can be quite considerable ranging from organisational constraints through to death (Boots, et al, 2014). While emergency call handlers may not necessarily witness first hand crime and violence, they are often in the position of hearing it, seeing

it on CCTV or receiving reports of incidents. An example of a call is an extract from a 16 minute phone call as follows:

> I heard another bang, he's letting off guns. He's banging down the front door. Please help me. My son could be dead. He's coming through the door. Oh God, I've got about one minute before I die. Please... (Adams, 2005, p.2)

During this incident, the operator repeatedly asked, "can you tell me your address" (Adams, 2005, p.2) as the telephone system did not readily give this information. The call operator could only do as much as they could while at the same time they could hear shots and the final disparaging words of the murderer who after shooting their son, shot his wife dead (Adams, 2005).

This example, although not a day to day occurrence, does illustrate that individuals within the police services experience tragic events that go beyond normal encounters (Violanti & Paton, 1999; Ravalier & Biggs, 2009). How individuals deal with these stressful events and build up resilience is essential to understand in order to help those within the emergency services.

Research Design

At time one, 22 call operators were interviewed along with two managers and a trainer. The manager and trainer were not in direct contact with the public so were excluded from the analysis although they provided a useful context for the study. At time two, 15 call operators were interviewed approximately a year after the first study. Security clearance had been arranged by the Director of the emergency management centre facilitated by the previous work experience of the researcher. Ethical considerations were also made given the sensitivity of the subject for both the researchers and the participants. Pseudonyms have been used below to protect the identity of the participants. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the scripts as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

NVivo 10 was used to categorise the data. A total of 85 codes were generated by going through the transcripts of the call operators and these were coded 247 times in the data. Three clear themes arose as shown in table 1. The most common 36 codes are listed in table 1 as these were shared with most of the call operators. The 49 less common codes were only the view of one or two of the call takers and consisted of fairly unique insights ranging from age helping with stress, through to eating chocolate to de-stress.

Table 1: The most common 36 codes given, with number of participants (N=37) and number of mentions divided by theme

Building resilience in the job	Organisational dysfunctions	Job demands
teamwork, 13, 23	not a call centre, 7, 13	difficult call, 7, 9
Mary Gober training, 8, 11	bad management, 9, 13	job description, 5, 6
distance themselves from the incident, 6, 9	system problems, 9, 13	calm the caller down, 5, 5
training effecting performance, 5, 7	short staff is the pressure, 5, 7	adrenalin rush dealing with crime, 2, 3
Good to help someone, 5, 6	take stress home, 6, 6	correct info is crucial, 2, 3
management are good, 5, 5	leave work at work due to security reasons, 5, 5	handle call not so well feel bad, 2, 3

need intelligence to perform well, 4, 5	lack of staff, 3, 3	public can be rude, 3, 3
develop a hard shell to cope, 2, 3	security compromised, 1, 3	dead body didn't affect me at the time but then couldn't sleep, 2, 2
development centres encouraging teamwork, 3, 3	feedback bad, 2, 2	stressful dealing with a lot of different issues, 2, 2
ways of dealing with stress, 3, 3	government at fault for problems, 2, 2	suicide difficult to sleep after, 2, 2
work allows time with the kids, 2, 3	impersonal environment at times, 1, 2	variety makes it interesting, 2, 2
use distancing for emotional resilience, 2, 2	insulted as took sick leave, 2, 2	workload, 2, 2

Discussion

The study was successful in illuminating a very difficult area of investigation involving emergency call operators and their work. The calls were varied ranging from car vandalism and burglary through to less common murders and suicide. The amount of demand that could be on a call operator was enormous as reported in the following extracts:

> This guy just rang up and said "oh hello, I've had the gas on in my house for four hours, what would happen if I light a cigarette?" you don't want to be doing that. (Maz)

> If someone phones up and says they are committing suicide and says I've cut my wrists, what do you say? (John)

> One [call] I had was a very young girl, she was only about 5 and it was simply the fact that she needed help and it was difficult trying to help because she couldn't give me any information ... I was just concerned with trying to help that little girl. (Alex)

The inductive thematic analysis clearly reflected the research questions and revealed three important themes. By far the most popular theme was building resilience in the job. Teamwork was the most important way in which the participants built up their resilience as shown in the following extracts:

> We all do the same. We are all working in the same office, so we want a happy environment, its not them and us, some people do, officers, dispatchers and call takers all work together we all want to achieve the same thing (Charlie)

> We work closely together, it helps if the shift get on, we work for 6 days together, it makes it a nicer place to be. If you get on with the people it makes the job better. It makes a pleasant environment (Frank)

Teamwork aided the call operators as if they had received a difficult call, their colleagues would understand if they needed assistance. It helped build the resilience up for the individual as they could count on their colleagues. Indeed, staff shortages and management failing to predict busy times were seen as a real problem in dealing with the job coded under the organisational dysfunctions theme.

Training was also seen as a way of building up resilience with two codes relating directly to its effectiveness in dealing with the job. Call operators felt that their training was essential and often wanted more as in the following extract:

> People need more training, they deserve more training, regular group training for 2 weeks when all sorts of questions about phone calls can be answered, and training is needed in how to handle types of calls, whether nasty or emergencies (Jo)

A difference did seem to emerge between the time one and time two study with specific Mary Gober training being implemented over the period of the study. This aided the call operators use their language carefully in order to resolve many situations successfully.

Other resilience building strategies were more individual ranging from using intelligence through to developing a hard shell, as seen here:

> Researcher: So you develop a harder shell?
> Participant: Yes you have to, it is the job, we are all human and if you didn't you couldn't cope with some incidents, you have to be immune to it, especially if you have children at home.

Interestingly, counselling although available wasn't used by many of the participants on a day to day basis. Teamwork, training, individual factors such as developing a harder shell or desensitising yourself from the role all seemed to aid call operators develop resilience in the job.

References

Adams, F. (2005) The family no one could save. *The Guardian newspaper*, 7th June 2005, p2-3.

Boots, K.L., Biggs, D.M., and Elcock. J. (2014) Reflecting on the job demands and personal risk as a police officer *BPS DOP Conference*, Brighton, UK

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:77-101.

Kingshott, B.F., Bailey, K. and Wolfe, S.E. (2004). "Police Culture, Ethics and Entitlement Theory", Criminal Justice Studies, 17(2), pp. 187-202

Ravalier, J., and Biggs, D.M. (2009) Tough man culture and stress in the emergency services. *BPS DOP Conference*, Blackpool, UK

Violanti, J.M. and Paton, D. (1999), Police Trauma: Psychological Aftermath of Civilian Combat, Springfield, Il: Charles C Thomas Publisher

Woody, R.H. (2005). The Police Culture: Research Implications for Psychological Services, *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 36(5), pp. 525-529