The influence of occupational strain on organizational commitment among police: A general strain theory approach

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Using a General Strain Theory (GST) framework, this study examines the role of various strains on officers' organizational commitment to their agencies. In addition, the mediating effect of negative affect is investigated.

Methods: A total of 180 law enforcement personnel from multiple agencies in the Northern Kentucky area were surveyed.

Results: Two strains, the failure to achieve positively valued goals and the removal positively valued stimuli, significantly predicted greater negative affect. Negative affect did not serve as a mediating variable between strain and officers' commitment to the department. The failure to achieve positively valued goals, the removal of positive stimuli, and the two measures of presentation of noxious stimuli all significantly and directly influenced an officer's commitment to the agency after controlling for negative affect.

Conclusions: GST is a viable theoretical framework in which to study organizational commitment among police officers as various strains have been shown to result in officers being less committed to their police agencies. Consequently, policies that attempt to alleviate those strains or stressors commonly faced by officers can increase the dedication and possibly the job performance of America's law enforcement officials.

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Introduction

Police face special challenges due to the specific nature of their work. Officers continually confront issues not often faced by persons in other occupations. Police officers often work irregular hours, are subjected to continual shift changes, are criticized by the public, must respond to traumatic scenes, experience dangerous working conditions, and must cope with the prospect that each day they put on their uniform may be their last. These unique occupational strains associated with police work have been shown to influence job satisfaction, work-family conflict, marital discontent, stress experienced by the officer, alcohol use, and turnover (Jurik & Winn, 1987; Swatt, Gibson, & Piquero, 2007). However, the influence of these strains on organizational commitment among police officers has not been thoroughly investigated.

Organizational commitment is especially critical for effective police work (Beck & Wilson, 1997). Every department has a mission to protect and serve the citizens of their community. If the individual officers of an agency are not committed to that mission, then the ability of the department to successfully achieve that goal is substantially hindered. This not only has serious ramifications for the general public, but also the individual officer. Although scholars have recognized the importance of understanding the factors that contribute to organizational commitment among correctional officers (Hogan, Lambert, Jenkins, & Wambold, 2006; Lambert, 2004; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, & Clarke, 2005), little research has been conducted on police officers (Martelli, Waters, & Martelli, 1989; Morris, Shinn, & DuMont, 1999; Van Maanen, 1975).

This exploratory study hopes to fill this gap in the research by examining the antecedents of organizational commitment among law enforcement officials. More specifically, using Agnew's (1992, 2006) General Strain Theory (GST) as a theoretical framework, the impact of the unique occupational strains of police work on an officer's commitment to their agency is investigated. Applying GST to organizational commitment among officers provides a context in which to determine what strains are likely to lead to a lack of organizational commitment. In this day of budget cuts, it is imperative to focus limited resources on those factors that have the largest influence. As officers often are faced with a multitude of stressors, GST provides a manner in which to categorize these stressors and determine which are most detrimental to organizational commitment. Thus, if organizational commitment is most affected by the exposure to negative events, then more resources could be allocated to reducing or assisting officers in coping with these situations. However, if organizational commitment is most influenced by new officers having unrealistic expectations of the job, then greater efforts in recruiting and in the academy could be made to ensure the officers' expectations are congruent with the reality of the job.

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Before discussing the design of this study and the results, two primary areas will be reviewed and discussed. First, the dependent variable for this study, organizational commitment, is defined and a review of the literature is presented. Second, an overview of Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) is provided.

Organizational commitment

Since the 1970s, the extent to which employees are committed to their organization has been the subject of much research (Alutto, 1969; Beck & Wilson, 1997; Hogan et al., 2006; Hrebiniack & Alutto, 1972; Jex & Bliese, 1999; Martelli et al., 1989; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1999; Van Maanen, 1975). Although conceptualized in a variety of ways (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), organizational commitment can be defined as:

the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization. Conceptually, it can be characterized by at least three factors: a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization. (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982, p. 27)

Identifying the factors that contribute to high levels of organizational commitment is an important endeavor as a lack of organizational commitment has been found to be related to a variety of negative work outcomes. Specifically, low levels of commitment to the organization have been associated with higher rates of turnover, absenteeism, tardiness, and stress as well as lower job satisfaction (Camp, 1994; Hogan et al., 2006; Martelli et al., 1989; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1999; Stohr, Self, & Lovrich, 1992; Wilson, 1991). Thus, employees' commitment to the organization is of crucial importance to the success of any organization.

In particular, fostering and maintaining organizational commitment has serious implications for police work. Although not heavily researched, lack of organizational commitment among officers has been linked to a variety of undesirable outcomes, such as cynicism (Niederhoffer, 1967), turnover intentions (James & Hendry, 1991; Koslowsky, 1991), increased stress (Martelli et al., 1989), and alienation (Hunt & McCadden, 1985). Even more unsettling, officers lacking dedication to the agency are more likely to make unethical decisions. For example, Haarr (1997) linked organizational commitment with various forms of police deviance. In particular, officers who were less committed were more likely to engage in work manipulation and avoidance (e.g., not responding to calls or doing so in an untimely manner, not checking in with dispatch, throwing away minor evidence or weapons, arresting minor offenders in order to keep them from having to actively patrol), accepting informal rewards (e.g., free food, discounts), and engaging in deviance against the department (e.g., corruption, absenteeism, unnecessary use of force, on-duty sexual misconduct). Consequently, understanding the factors that influence organizational commitment among police officers is an especially worthwhile endeavor.

Vast amounts of research have been conducted to determine the antecedents of organizational commitment. In a comprehensive meta-analysis, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) found that older, female, less educated individuals who have long tenure with the organization tend to display higher levels of organizational commitment. Furthermore, a variety of job-related characteristics were also related to dedication to the organization. Individuals who had autonomy at work, felt challenged, had adequate leadership with clear structure, and experienced little role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload possessed a strong commitment to the organization. Although many factors appeared to be significantly related to organizational commitment, it is important to note that organizational- or job-level characteristics had a much stronger impact on one's dedication to the organization than personal factors. Consequently, it is the environment at work—having clear expectations, robust leadership, non-conflicting roles—that lead an individual to become more committed to the agency more so than the characteristics a person imported into the occupation (Marsden, Kalleberg, & Cook, 1993).

The findings of Mathieu and Zajac's (1990) meta-analysis have been confirmed with more recent research. For example, in a study of U.S. Army combat soldiers, Jex and Bliese (1999) showed that work overload was negatively related to organizational commitment. Similarly, Grau, Salanova, and Peiro (2001) found role conflict to contribute to a lack of dedication to the organization. Furthermore, Marsden et al. (1993) discovered a variety of factors to be related to organizational commitment. In particular, those who felt they had autonomy, had a position of authority, and perceived quality workplace relationships expressed more dedication to their occupation. Additionally, in each of these studies, individual characteristics such as age, gender, race, and education were generally not found to be significantly predictive of organizational commitment. Thus, the more recent literature continues to confirm that job-related characteristics, rather than personal characteristics, are likely to influence one's dedication to his or her job.

Related to the criminal justice arena, Lambert and colleagues have extensively examined this topic amongst correctional officers. Surveying Midwestern correctional officers, Hogan et al. (2006) found that being in a supervisory role corresponded to a stronger commitment to the agency, while role ambiguity, role conflict, and work-family conflict resulted in lower organizational commitment of the officers. On the other hand, individual characteristics, such as age, race, and education, were nonsignificant predictors. Using the same sample, Lambert (2004) discovered that job satisfaction and being in a supervisory role increased one's commitment to the organization, while having a negative relationship with a supervisor and job stress resulted in lower commitment. These results confirmed an earlier study of private prison correctional officers that showed organizational commitment was lower among those who perceived more role conflict and role ambiguity (Lambert et al., 2005). Furthermore, each of these studies verified the importance of work-related characteristics over personal characteristics in predicting one's dedication to the job.

Although much research has been conducted on the antecedents of organizational commitment, few studies have specifically examined organizational commitment among police officers. This is a glaring omission in the literature as police work presents special challenges and issues often absent in other occupations. Due to a variety of factors, such as shift work, overtime, and dangerous conditions, police work is undeniably a stressful occupation which may influence officers' commitment to their agencies.

In one of the first studies on police officer organizational commitment, Van Maanen (1975) found that organizational commitment significantly decreased the longer the officer worked for the agency; however, the overall level of commitment still was relatively high when compared to other occupations including managers, public utility, hospital, and bank employees. Additionally, having a positive sergeant evaluation was related to increased commitment. Although this study was one of the first to examine organizational commitment among officers, it lacks in the number of predictors examined. In fact, only time on the job, academy performance, and sergeant evaluations were used to predict organizational commitment.

In a 1989 study using the Police Stress Survey, Martelli et al. found that overall stress on the job and administrative/organizational stress results in lower organizational commitment to the police agency. However, physical and psychological stresses were not significantly related to organizational commitment. Consequently, it is not the dangerousness or the physical and emotional toll of the job that results in officers being less committed to their departments. Instead,