

Coping Strategies, After Death Misconceptions and Paranormal Phenomenon amongst Police Officers of Ernakulam, Kerala handling Deceased: A cross sectional study

Anu Achamma Varghese¹, Farhana Mutharintavida², Fathima Ubaida³, Fathima Sherin⁴, Rashmi P⁵, Adarsh Kumar⁶

Author Affiliation: ^{1,2}Undergraduate Student, B.Sc Psychology, ⁵Assistant Professor, Dept of Psychology, MES College, Marampally Road, Marampally P O, North Vazhakulam, Ernakulam, Aluva, Kerala-683107, India. ³Student Counsellor, Jama-ath Residential Public School, Kerala, ⁴Student, Santhwana Institute of Counselling, Kerala, ⁶Professor, Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi 110029, India.

Corresponding Author: Adarsh Kumar, Professor, Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Faculty I/C Forensic Anthropology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi 110029, India.

E-mail: dradarshk@yahoo.com

Abstract

Police officers help to maintain peace and security in any nation and checks whether people abide by law of the country and instrumental in bringing justice all over the world. But they go through thick and thin during their career. The aim of the present study is to find out the coping strategy, misconceptions of after-death and paranormal phenomena amongst police officers who handle dead bodies. Participants consisted of Police officers within the age group of 25–60 years. Total of 32 samples were collected from different police stations across Ernakulam District in state of Kerala. Method used was Interview and the data was qualitatively analyzed. The study explored that certain police officers had belief in paranormal phenomenon and misconceptions about after death, other reported that belief in rebirth was based on their religious background. Coping strategies varied in each police officer.

Keywords: Police officers; Paranormal phenomenon; Coping strategies; Misconceptions; After death.

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Introduction

Police officers help in bringing peace and security to the state by preventing and detecting crimes, ensuring law enforcement, protecting and assisting the public and maintaining the public order^{1,2}. Unlike other professions police does not work on a predetermined work schedule rather is more focused on emergencies and crisis that occur each day³. In a single day they will have to work in totally different contexts, ie, the pattern of their work differs with the daily cases they encounter. Behind the ironed crisp uniforms and fighting the bad guys, which is usually portrayed in the movies and other media, these officers deal with a lot of stressful and emotionally draining situations. One such is handling body remains and death scenes. These

tasks are often laden with emotional significance and are usually followed with unpleasant sights, smell, sound, and touch sensations that stick along with them for hours or even days. The gruesome accidents and deaths leave an undeniable impression on the officers. These experiences can make the officers dealing periodically with it to adapt new coping strategies. It is important that the officer's mental state is fit and healthy as much as the physical body. But most of the time the training and techniques are given to enhance physical health rather than the mental health. Along the years there has been a considerable amount of change in bringing attention to the mental health of people working in these areas.

Death scenes and handling dead bodies come with a lot of physical and emotional stress. Officers

who work with these often experience the brutal reality of death and loss of the closed ones during the initial phase of their career, but later form an emotional resistance. They get to see and work on dead bodies of different forms. There may be a body of a person died just few hours ago sleeping on the bed and sometimes it is of a person buried in soil and decayed for a long time. There might be even a body that is scattered all around the place from a train accident or similar dismembered one which involves collecting all the pieces and careful assembling. It is crucial they are utmost careful and concentrated in the work they handle as any tiny error could destroy evidences. This also means they cannot let any trace of emotional weakness. Depending on the death scene and the details of the body, the officers can have different traumas or difficulties in working with them. It also depends on the mental capacity of officers handling them. The environment around with which they work also play a significant role in determining how much affected they will. An officer working in a stressful police station or coming from a distorted family can find it more depressing than officers from a pleasant work place or family. There are many factors that affect their mental health. Their experience associated with death and after death will be unique when compared to lay person. Different culture and religions offer to pay various contributions after death. One of the most common beliefs is that after a death the physical body remains in the earth while a soul from the body is taken to the heaven or hell depending on the deeds of the person in his or her life time.

After-death is a subject that remains mystery for us as one can never be sure about the events that follows the death of a person. There has not been a clear indication of the after-death events except the knowledge of the decaying of the physical body. Many people like atheists don't believe in the existence of a soul or the concept of heaven and hell. Since the after-death involves so much mystery there are many speculations regarding it. One such is the presence of ghosts. In folklore, the ghost is described as the soul or spirit of a dead person appearing alive. Its description varies from an invisible presence to translucent to lifelike forms. Although the experiences and stories of ghosts date to ancient times, the overwhelming consensus of science is that ghosts do not exist. Despite centuries of investigation there has been no evidence regarding presence of ghosts or particularly haunted locations or people. People engage in different practices like Ouija board where it is believed that one could talk to spirit of a

deceased person. Souls are called as burdened souls because most of the spirits wandering are believed to have died suffering some tragedy or injustice and is wandering to fulfill their revenge or gain justice so that they can finally rest in peace. Since police officers deal with crimes and such deaths, it is rumored to have the police officers suffer from such after-death misconceptions. Medias and movies can be seen often portraying constables or officers that have to work with dead bodies and guard them for a long time appearing as frightened or paranoid. It also shows about them experiencing paranormal phenomena. Paranormal events are purported phenomena described in popular culture, folk and other nonscientific bodies of knowledge, whose existence within these contexts is described as beyond normal experience or scientific explanation. Many groups and organizations, popularly in western countries, have established to record paranormal activities in haunted house. They have a heavy unit of microphones, cameras and other recording and taping devices installed to monitor such events.

Kerala Police officers undergo basic training at Kerala Police Academy, which includes crime scene analysis and basic forensic studies and lot more. Earlier studies have showed that police officers who were involved in handling dead bodies didn't show significant psychological distress or psychiatric morbidity.⁴ Also, reported that low level of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was due to police officers resilience and managerial and organizational factors.⁵

Police officers had traumatic experiences early in their careers and remained in their memories as visual, tactile and olfactory sensations. The same study reported that talking about the event with their colleagues helped them to overcome the stress.⁶ North C.S et al. (2005), suggested that firefighters had low rates of PTSD related to handling the case of Oklahoma city bombing.⁷ It was reported that PTSD can be due to reduced job satisfaction, functional impairment or work load.⁸ Whereas, another study suggested that Police officers, those encountered death related stressors had higher levels of PTSD.⁹ Studies showed that when an individual is exposed to paranormal activities, the tendency of that individual to believe in paranormal phenomenon increases.¹⁰ Another study found that there was no significant gender difference in PTSD symptoms among police officers.¹¹ Study by Sharps M.J et al. (2010) suggested that paranormal beliefs were due to depression, dissociation and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

among eyewitnesses.¹² Study among Scottish police officers investigated the coping strategies. It found that in addition to healthy methods like exercise, they increase use of alcohol, smoking and eating to relieve stress.¹³ Another study suggested that among police officers the resilience built in training program improved their family relationships, enhanced work performance and more effective communication.¹⁴

Need and Significance

Mental health is crucial for all professionals and particularly police officers attending deceased and handling dead bodies should be taken care beyond the physical fitness. Their mental health should be addressed as important as any aspect of the case. Research has indicated a high stress level for officers attending such cases. This is a study to investigate the stress and coping strategies of officers dealing with cadavers and dead bodies in Kerala and to see if they have certain misconceptions regarding after death and paranormal events. This study helps in educating and exploring areas that help in enhancing their mental health and to create awareness among people of the real hardships and misconceptions they face.

Objective

The aim of the study was to investigate the coping strategies, paranormal phenomenon and misconceptions about after-death among police officers who handle dead bodies.

Methodology

The subjects of the study were police officers from⁹ different police stations in Ernakulam District. The police stations were selected randomly. The sample size was 32, which consisted of Sub Inspector (SI)- 9, Assistant Sub Inspector(ASI)-8, Senior Civil Police Officer (SCPO)-11 and Civil Police Officer (CPO)-4. Interview method was used with a self-prepared questionnaire. It was an open-end interview and verbatim recording was done. The purpose was to investigate the mental health of police officers who were involved in handling dead bodies.

The permission for data collection was taken from the Sub Inspector of Police from respective police stations. Thereafter, the interview was conducted with each police officer who was part of handling the dead bodies. After the data collection, the samples were classified into 3 parts based on their designation, years of experience and number

of dead bodies handled. They were then subdivided into other groups.

Result and Discussion

The study was done among the Kerala Police officers in Ernakulam District. In the interview method, they were asked whether they accept what was depicted in movies (such as stress, fear while handling dead bodies), witnessed any sort of shadows or apparition, belief in soul wandering and rebirth, and whether they had stress, discomfort or fear after handling dead bodies. These participants were divided into three different parameters and categories as below.

(A) PART- 1

When the participants were grouped on the basis of designations such as SI, ASI, SCPO and CPO; it was found that among these groups, stress/ discomfort was least experienced by CPO(25%) followed by ASI (63%), SI (78%) and SCPO (82%). Stress is higher in all the 3 groups which can be due to direct contact with the dead bodies. It was reported by all the 4 groups that they had never witnessed a shadow. In the case of Belief in soul wandering, ASIs have no such belief, whereas, SCPO (9%), SI(11%) and CPO (25%) had belief. The CPOs have this belief may be due to fact of having full responsibility of the dead body and are supposed to guard the dead body until it is released to the family.

When asked about their belief in Rebirth, ASI had the least belief in rebirth with 13%, followed by SI (22%), CPO(25%) and SCPO (27%). It is seen that only 9% of the entire population has belief in rebirth. This might be due to their bringing up, religious background rather than their work environment.

Fear was found only among SIs (33%), this might be because they're doing the inquest. It was not found among all the other 3 groups (ASI, SCPO and CPO).

Among SIs, the coping strategies used were; Engaged in other activities (44%), Not Applicable (22%), Shares experience with Others (11%) and Alcohol consumption (11%). In the case of ASIs, Not applicable (38%), Engage in other activities (25%), Part of duty (25%) and shares experience with others (13%). Whereas among SCPOs, Shares experience with others (25%), Engage in other activities(25%), Part of duty (25%), Smoking (8%) Prayer (8%) and N/A (8%). CPOs; Not applicable (50%), Prayer (25%) and Alcohol (25%).

(B) PART- 2

In the second grouping, the participants were grouped into 6 categories based on years of experience-I (5 to 9 years), II (10 to 14 years), III (15 to 19 years), IV (20 to 24 years), V (25 to 29 years) and VI (30 to 34 years). Stress was found to be highest among group I (100%) and least among group VI (50%). Reason might be, as experience increases, the ability to cope up with the stress also increases.

It is clear from all the groups that, none had witnessed shadow after handling cadavers. (0%)

Belief in soul wandering was found as 0% in group I, group III and group VI. Whereas it was 33%, 8% and 14% in group II, IV and V respectively. Lower groups highly accustomed, whereas higher groups after handling more dead bodies had feeling of haunting. In certain groups, such belief system was not seen.

In the case of belief in rebirth, least was found among group III(0%) and highest in group VI (50%). This might be, as age increases, spirituality increases. The same finding can be seen in part 3 grouping of belief in rebirth.

Fear, was found lowest among groups-II, III and IV. It was highest in group VI (50%) and 14% and 25% in group V and I respectively. Strategies among group I was found as; Engage in other activities (50%), Prayer (25%) and N/A (25%). In group II, Engaged in other activities (33%), Alcohol (33%) and N/A (33%). Among group III, Shares experience with others (25%), Engage in other activities (25%), Part of duty (25%) and N/A (25%). Group IV, Shares experience with others (38%), N/A(30%), Part of duty (15%), Smoking (8%) and Prayer (8%). In group V, Engage in other activities (38%), part of duty (38%), shares experience with others (13%), N/A (13%).

(C) PART- 3

The participants were categorized into 3 groups on the basis of number of dead bodies handled. Group A- 99 and below. Group B- Between 100 and 999. Group C- 1000 and above.

Stress, was found to be lesser in Group C (67%) followed by Group A(71%) and Group B (88%). Here, it is evident that all the 3 groups experience stress and there is only a small variation between the groups. Witnessing shadows, as earlier, is not found among all the 3 categories. Belief in soul-wandering, is found only in group A with 10%, experience is lower compared to other groups. The reason for no belief in soul wandering among

Group B and C, can be as they have handled more dead bodies, they must have been desensitized. Whereas belief in Rebirth, the highest percentage is for group C(33%), then group B(25%) and A (19%). As mentioned earlier, the ones who had handled more dead bodies, might have more years of experience, thereby more belief in Rebirth.

Fear is found to be highest in group B (13%) followed by group A (10%) and C (0%). Group A and B have comparably equal percentage of fear. Handling the most number of dead bodies must have helped the group C members to overcome fear.

Strategies in group A; N/A (27%), Engage in other activities (23%), Shares experience with others, (18%), Part of duty (14%), Alcohol and smoking (9%) and Prayer (9%).

Among group B, Engage in other activities (38%), N/A (25%), Part of duty (25%) and alcohol (13%). In group C, Share experience with others (33%), Part of duty (33%) and N/A (33%)

Certain participants(28%), when asked about rebirth, did mention that they had belief in rebirth which was based on their religious beliefs. In the rational thought, some had told they had no belief in rebirth, but while sharing their experiences it was evident that their belief system has influence on them. It was found that, the belief on rebirth increases with age as spirituality increases. This indirectly indicates that their coping strategy was prayer. While 31% of the population did mention about the discomfort occur due to smell from the decayed dead bodies.

The police officers are obliged to work 24/7, which included law and order maintenance and crime investigation and are supposed to work in different atmospheres. Thereby, it makes their work more hectic. Though it was not asked directly, 28% mentioned about their work stress. They might have to handle dead bodies with AIDS, which increases the probability of having stress.

When all the strategies of the population was considered, it was seen that, Shares experience with others (15%), Engaged in other duties (26%), Part of duty (18%), Alcohol or smoking (8%), Prayer (5%) and N/A (26%). The participants who reported that they have no particular strategy might not be aware of the method they use to overcome or might not be able to verbalize it. Engaging in other activities has helped the police officers to enhance their mental wellbeing. As alcohol consumption during the duty time is against the law and order, such strategy was not mentioned by most of them.

Majority of the sample was emotionally affected and had memory impact after handling dead bodies especially, Children's cases (53%) and Run-over bodies (19%). Others did mention about decayed bodies and accident cases. Most number of cases reported by the police officers occurred during the initial stages of their career.

During the open end discussion, they shared several experiences, which included;

One case was reported as a young adult was found in a lodge room, at Ernakulam, when the police went for inspection, and couldn't find the body at first. They got broken beer bottle and poison from the scene. Later, they saw a decayed body lying under the bed. After the investigation, they found that the guy, attempted suicide with the beer bottle (cut throat injury) and had consumed poison.

Another case was such that, the police officers found an elderly lady dead in a well. During inquest they found evidence for a strangulation death. But Postmortem reported that it was a completely drowning incident. The police officer was quite stressed as he couldn't find the actual reason behind the incident.

Yet another case which dates back 20 years, 2 young females along with their parents reported to the police station that both were in love with each other and wanted to marry. The parents requested the police to help them in separating them. As the police officers had no prior experience in handling such cases, they did not take it seriously which emotionally affected the girls. Both of them stated that they will commit suicide if they pressurize them to get separated. Next day they were found dead in a pit nearby.

There were instances where the police officers were helpless and felt guilty. This shows how stressful their work is. Though, it is shown in movies that police officers has stress while handling dead bodies, it is true in the initial days. The fear they experience during the initial stages would have been overcome by repeated exposure in this field due to desensitization.

Limitations

As the data was qualitatively interpreted, there was much confusion regarding how to interpret the data even though inter-reliability was verified. Difficulty was faced during confirmatory analysis. As this is an exploratory study, further analytical comparison groups were not included.

Conclusion

The lower cadre is found to have higher rate of stress, thus effective stress management training should be given. Certain police officers reported that they use no particular strategy, and others reported they get engaged in other activities, but it is seen ineffective. Therefore, effective training must be implemented. Study proved that police officers had no paranormal phenomenon, but a small percentage had concepts of after death, which was based mainly on religious background. They all had different coping strategies to handle the stress/discomfort and fear.

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