

Work Stress and Death Anxiety among Police Officers: Moderating Role of Coping StrategiesMaheen Bibi^a, Ansa Qurat Ul Ain^a, Muhammad Bilal^{b*}^a Department of Psychology, Air University Islamabad, Pakistan.^b Department of Psychology International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan**Abstract**

The current research investigated the influence of occupational stress on death anxiety in police officers of Islamabad, with an emphasis on the moderate role of coping strategies. In addition, the relationship between demographic factors and study variables was studied. 180 police officers, between the age groups of 21 and 60 years, were selected through convenience sampling from Police Station (PS) Aabpara, SP/City Office, PS Kohsar, and PS Margalla. Data were obtained through the Workplace Stress Scale, Death Anxiety Scale, and Coping Scale. Findings showed a significant positive correlation between work stress and death anxiety, with linear regression analysis affirming work stress as a significant predictor variable for death anxiety. Moreover, coping styles were found to act as moderators of this relationship, indicating that good coping can buffer occupational stress's psychological effects. Demographic analysis did not yield any differences in stress or anxiety levels between nuclear and joint families' officers; however, married officers showed significantly greater work stress and death anxiety. The results support the need to implement specific interventions to alleviate occupational stress and augment coping skills to ensure police personnel's mental well-being.

Keywords: Coping Strategies, Death Anxiety, Mental Health, Work Stress, Police officers

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1. Introduction

Occupational stress is a well-documented phenomenon across professional domains; however, it is particularly pronounced in high-risk occupations such as policing. Police officers routinely encounter violent confrontations, traumatic incidents, life-threatening situations, and sustained organizational pressures. These demands, coupled with challenges in balancing professional responsibilities and personal life, substantially contribute to psychological and physiological strain (Alkudhayr & Aljabr, 2024). Although extensive research has examined the mental health consequences of police work, including burnout, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), relatively limited attention has been directed toward existential outcomes of occupational stress specifically, **death anxiety**.

Death anxiety refers to fear, distress, or apprehension arising from awareness of mortality (Pifer et al., 2019). While death anxiety is a universal human concern, it is particularly salient for police officers whose occupational roles involve frequent and direct exposure to death, dying, and the possibility of personal harm (Curtis et al., 2023). Recurrent encounters with fatal accidents, crime scenes, terrorism, and violence may normalize mortality at a surface level while simultaneously intensifying latent existential fears. Despite its relevance, death anxiety remains an understudied construct within policing research, especially in non-Western and high-conflict contexts.

Police work stress arises not only from operational hazards but also from chronic organizational stressors such as excessive workloads, extended and irregular working hours, limited administrative support, rigid hierarchical structures, and constrained decision-making autonomy (Schultz, 2021). These stressors often interact to heighten officers' psychological vulnerability by reinforcing perceptions of uncertainty, lack of control, and existential threat. According to Royce (2023), work stress occurs when occupational demands exceed an individual's coping capacity, particularly in environments characterized by insufficient resources and ineffective organizational structures. Empirical evidence indicates that prolonged exposure to both operational and organizational stressors contributes to adverse psychological outcomes, including burnout, reduced job satisfaction, absenteeism, and mental health disorders (Lee & Wu, 2024; Perez-Floriano & Gonzalez, 2019).

Individual differences in stress responses have been observed across roles, ranks, and experience levels within police organizations. Officers in frontline or outdoor patrol roles, who are more frequently exposed to unpredictable and dangerous environments, tend to utilize a broader range of coping strategies compared to administrative or indoor officers, who are more likely to rely on avoidance-based coping (Maran et al., 2018). Additionally, length of service has been associated with lower perceived stress, potentially reflecting increased resilience and the development of effective coping skills over time (Maran et al., 2015). However, such coping patterns may vary substantially across cultural and organizational contexts.

Coping strategies play a central role in determining how occupational stress affects psychological outcomes. Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage demands perceived as exceeding one's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Adaptive coping strategies such as problem-solving, seeking social support, positive reappraisal, and mindfulness have been shown to buffer the negative effects of stress and promote psychological resilience. In contrast, maladaptive strategies, including avoidance, denial, and substance use, are associated with increased psychological distress and impaired functioning (Watts et al., 2020). In policing, coping strategies have been identified as key mechanisms linking stress exposure to mental health

outcomes, with structured organizational support playing a critical role in fostering adaptive coping (Chen & Wu, 2022).

The relationship between occupational stress and death anxiety can be understood through **Terror Management Theory (TMT)**, which posits that awareness of mortality generates existential anxiety that individuals manage through cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and symbolic forms of immortality (Becker, 1973; Greenberg et al., 1986). When these existential defenses are accessible and reinforced through professional identity, religious beliefs, family bonds, or social recognition, death anxiety is mitigated. Conversely, when such defenses are weakened or suppressed, psychological distress intensifies. Empirical evidence supports this framework, demonstrating that higher self-esteem and effective coping are associated with reduced death anxiety (Dumont & Provost, 1999). Complementary, Karasek's Demand-Control-Support (DCS) model emphasizes the role of job demands, perceived control, and social support in shaping occupational stress outcomes, offering a useful lens for understanding stress processes in hierarchical institutions such as police organizations.

In Pakistan, the psychological burden of policing is further intensified by sociopolitical instability, terrorism, religious extremism, and chronic resource limitations. Police officers operate under persistent threat while simultaneously navigating organizational inefficiencies, inadequate infrastructure, limited compensation, and insufficient mental health support (Noman et al., 2016). Between 2003 and 2019, more than 7,000 security personnel were killed, underscoring the extreme occupational risks faced by law enforcement officers in the country (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2019). Cultural narratives emphasizing martyrdom, honor, and sacrifice particularly within security professions may function as symbolic defenses against mortality but may also discourage emotional expression and help-seeking, thereby exacerbating unresolved death anxiety.

Despite growing global attention to police mental health, empirical research examining death anxiety within law enforcement remains scarce, particularly in culturally conservative societies where psychological vulnerability is stigmatized. Existing studies have largely focused on demographic correlates of death anxiety, such as age, gender, religiosity, and personality traits, while overlooking the moderating role of coping strategies in the relationship between occupational stress and death anxiety. This gap is especially evident in the Pakistani context, where police officers are exposed to acute and chronic stressors alongside sociocultural constraints on psychological disclosure.

Accordingly, the present study aims to examine the association between work-related stress and death anxiety among police officers in Islamabad. Specifically, it investigates whether coping strategies moderate the relationship between occupational stress and death anxiety. In addition, the study explores whether these relationships differ across key demographic characteristics, including age, rank, marital status, family system, and years of service. By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to the limited empirical literature on existential distress in policing and to inform culturally sensitive mental health interventions within high-risk law enforcement contexts.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between work-related stress and death anxiety among police personnel in Islamabad, with coping strategies investigated as a moderating variable.

2.2 Sample

A convenience sampling technique was used to select participants. The final sample consisted of 180 male police officers aged between 21 and 60 years, drawn from various police units in Islamabad, including PS Aabpara, PS Kohsar, PS Margalla, ICT Police, and the SP City Office. Following approval from the Senior Superintendent of Police (SP) City Operations, a total of 215 questionnaires were distributed across these units. Of these, 180 questionnaires were complete and suitable for analysis, yielding a high response rate. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

2.3 Instruments

Data were collected using a set of standardized and validated instruments:

2.3.1: Demographic Information Sheet: A structured demographic sheet was used to obtain information regarding participants' age, rank, marital status, family system, and years of service.

2.3.2: Work Stress Scale (WSS); Work-related stress was developed by American Institute of Stress. It has 8-items rated on 5 point Likert scale demonstrating strong internal consistency in $\alpha > .80$.

2.3.3: Death Anxiety Scale: Death anxiety was assessed using the 15-Item Death Anxiety Scale developed by Conte, Weiner, and Plutchik, which has shown good reliability ($\alpha = .839-.831$).

2.3.4: Coping Scale: Coping strategies were measured using a 13-item Coping Scale adapted from Holahan and Moos (1987) and Hamby et al. (2015). The scale has demonstrated high internal consistency across studies ($\alpha = .88-.91$).

3. Results

In the current study research data of 180 police individuals of capital city Islamabad were analyzed. Different statistical methods (Multiple linear regression, moderation, independent t-test and Anova) were applied. The results of that analyzes are given below:

Table 1:
Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants (N=180)

Variables	N	%
Marital Status		
Married	138	76.7
Divorced	6	3.3
Unmarried	36	20.0
Education		
Graduate	31	17.2
Undergraduate	56	31.1
Intermediate	92	51.1
Other	1	0.6
Family System		
Nuclear	94	52.2
Joint	86	47.8
Rank		
ASI	12	6.7
Constable	137	76.1
Head Constable	24	13.3
Sub Inspector	7	3.9
Posting		
ICT Police	49	27.2
Margalla	47	26.1
PS.Aabpara	44	24.4
PS.Kohsar	30	16.7
SP/City Police	10	5.5

Note: n = number of participants, % = percentage

Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants. Out of 180 participants, most of the police officers were married (76.7%). Most of the police officers (51.1%) were undergraduates. 52.2% of them were from the nuclear family system. Most of the participants (76.1%) were Constables, followed by (41.7%) who had their posting in Margalla.

Table 2
Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Death Anxiety from Workplace Stress and Coping Strategies among Police Officers (N = 180)

Variable	B	LL	UL	SE	B
Constant	-0.138	-2.306	2.030	1.098	
Work Stress	.59***	.475	.714	.06	.719
Coping	-0.041	.054	.048	.048	-.063
R ²	.45				

Note: **p<.01

Table 3
Death Anxiety Predicted by Work Stress Moderation by Coping (N=180).

Variable	B	SE	p
Constant	-13.76	3.10	.000
Coping	0.55	.13	.001
Work Stress	1.33	.16	.000
Work Stress × Coping	-.03	.01	.000
Low	18.000	.0720	.000
Average	28.000	.0617	.000
High	36.000	.0934	.007
R ²	.52		
F	63.669		

Note; p<.001

Table 2 shows the impact of work stress on death anxiety in police officers. R² value (.45) shows that the predictor variable (work stress) explained 45% of variance in the outcome variable (death anxiety) with $F(1, 178) = 151.1, p<.001$. Further, the findings revealed that the work stress predicted death anxiety in police officers. Furthermore, the results accepted the null hypothesis that indicated that higher levels of work stress predict higher levels of death anxiety. However, coping strategies did not significantly predict death anxiety, suggesting they had little influence as a moderating factor in this model.

Table 3 summarizes the moderation analysis to examine whether coping moderates the impact of work stress on death anxiety in police officers. The results indicated a significant moderating effect of coping $F(3, 176) = 63.66, p<.001$ on the impact of work stress on death anxiety. R² value (.52) shows that the impact of work stress on death anxiety is moderated by coping by 52% of variance

Table 4
Mean, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analysis of Variance in Work Stress Across Service Years(N=180).

Measure	Service Years		F(3, 176)	η^2
	M, SD	M, SD		
Work Stress	1-10 Years (18.23, 6.86)	11-20 Years* (21.58, 5.07)	9.95**	0.14
		21-30 Years* (22.67, 3.98)		
		30-40 Years* (24.88, 3.09)		
	11-20 Years (21.58, 5.07)	21-30 Years (22.67, 3.98)		
		30-40 Years (24.88, 3.09)		
	21-30 Years (22.67, 3.98)	30-40 Years (24.88, 3.09)		

Note. *p<0.05

Table 4 shows the mean, standard deviation, F-value, and post-hoc comparison for work stress across different service years. The results indicated a significant mean difference across service year groups on work stress with $F(3, 176) = 9.95, p < .001$. The value of η^2 was 0.14, which indicated a small to moderate effect size.

Further, the post-hoc comparisons indicated significant mean differences between specific groups. The comparison between the 1-10 years group (M = 18.23, SD = 6.86) and the 11-20 years group (M = 21.58, SD = 5.07) was significant. Additionally, significant differences were found between the 1-10 years group and the 21-30 years group (M = 22.67, SD = 3.98), and the 1-10 years group and the 30-40 years group (M = 24.88, SD = 3.09). Similarly, the comparison between the 11-20 years group and the 21-30 years group, as well as the 11-20 years group and the 30-40 years group, showed significant differences. However, no significant difference was observed between the 21-30 years group and the 30-40 years group. Overall, the results suggest that employees with longer service years tend to experience higher levels of work stress compared to those with fewer services.

4. Discussion

This research examined the work stress-death anxiety association among police officers, focusing on the moderating function of coping mechanisms. Relationships between demographic variables and psychological constructs were also investigated. The results present strong evidence that excessive work stress can strongly predict high death anxiety among police officers, whereas good coping mechanisms can reduce this association. These findings make significant contributions to knowledge about occupational stress and mental health in law enforcement environments.

The results indicated a significant, positive statistically strong correlation between work stress and death anxiety, showing that the more perceived stress one has, the higher the anxiety about death. Regression analysis supported the relationship with work stress as a significant predictor of death anxiety, explaining 45% of the variance. These results are consistent with prior literature, which in turn consistently connects high levels of occupational stress among police officers to negative psychological effects, such as depressive symptoms and anxiety (Violanti et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2019). Police officers are constantly exposed to life-threatening situations, trauma exposure, and high job requirements, all of which led to chronic stress development and increased existential anxiety (Chen & Wu, 2022; Prati & Pietrantonio, 2010).

One of the main contributions of this research paper is that it also seeks to explore coping strategies as a moderating factor. Coping was found

to substantially moderate the effects of work stress on death anxiety. Both the linear and quadratic effects of coping levels indicated that the negative influence of work stress on death anxiety had less impact in the officers who had higher levels of coping, implying that coping attenuated the impact of work stress that was reflected in death anxiety. Previous studies also show that coping strategies are a protective factor in potentially dangerous professions like a policeman (Li & Miller, 2017; Batista et al., 2022). It is found that problem-oriented coping, emotional control, and social support reduce stress levels and enhance mental health outcomes (Maran et al., 2018; Duru et al., 2023). The current research contributes to the evidence supporting the need to introduce structured coping training as part of police wellness programs, which may result in decreasing anxiety and increasing resilience.

Demographic factors were also influential in determining work stress levels. Married police officers were particularly more likely to report significantly higher work stress compared with those who were unmarried (M = 21.72 vs. M = 17.80, $p < .001$). This lends credibility to the claim that balancing the workload in occupational roles with the burden of being responsible for the family can escalate psychological stress (Ogunbamila & Fajemirokun, 2016). The conflict between balancing high-risk professional jobs with domestic stability might increase stress levels among married officers.

Surprisingly, family system type—nuclear or joint—did not significantly vary with work stress, nor with death anxiety. This is at odds with some earlier research indicating that family structure may affect psychological health. Nonetheless, the findings here suggest that family support dynamics could be more complex, encompassing variables like interpersonal relationship quality, emotional support, and joint responsibility, which are not necessarily tied to family structure (Queirós et al., 2020). It is possible that other mediating factors, like social support networks or organizational climate, had more influence on officers' psychological experience in this research.

Age and years on the job were other factors found to be significantly related to work stress. Officers in the older age category scored greater stress levels (M = 22.97) than those in early adulthood (M = 19.68, $p < .001$). Likewise, longer service periods (21–30 years and 30–40 years) correlated with greater stress levels. These findings are consistent with studies showing that senior officers' high levels of stress are caused by increased administrative workload, chronic cumulative exposure to occupational trauma, and poor physical health (Chen et al., 2009; Violanti et al., 2017). Conversely, younger officers may have acute pressures related to role adaptation and job performance, but they are often less long-lasting than the ongoing responsibilities faced by senior

personnel. Overall, the current study's findings demonstrate the significant impact that professional stress has on police officers' death fear, for which coping mechanisms are a crucial moderator. Age, years of service, and marital status also affect these psychological effects.

Limitations and Recommendations

Despite offering valuable insights, the present research has certain limitations that should be considered. Its cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw conclusions about causality; instead, longitudinal or experimental research is advised to determine the direction of the relationships among coping methods, death anxiety, and work stress. The results may not apply to other high-stress professions like paramedics or firefighters because the sample consisted solely of police officers. Additionally, Self-report assessments might have introduced bias; physiological or behavioral measures could be used in future studies to increase validity. Lastly, important moderators like organizational and personality are absent, and their inclusion in further research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of stress and anxiety in law enforcement.

The findings of this study have important implications for police organizations and policymakers, particularly in high-risk and resource-constrained contexts such as Pakistan. The demonstrated moderating role of coping strategies in the relationship between occupational stress and death anxiety highlights the critical need to move beyond reactive approaches to police mental health and toward proactive, skills-based interventions. Police departments should prioritize the integration of structured training programs focused on stress management, emotional regulation, adaptive coping, and problem-solving skills as part of both initial training and ongoing professional development. Such programs can enhance psychological resilience and reduce vulnerability to stress-related and existential distress.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that occupational stress is a significant predictor of death anxiety among police officers, with coping strategies playing a critical mediating role in mitigating its impact. Findings also indicate that demographic factors such as age, marital status, and years of service influence officers' stress levels, highlighting the combined effect of individual and organizational contexts on psychological outcomes. The results extend theoretical understanding within the frameworks of Terror Management Theory and the Demand-Control-Support model, showing how adaptive coping can buffer existential distress in high-risk professions. Practically, the study underscores the importance of structured coping skills training, accessible mental health services, and organizational reforms that foster supportive work environments and stress-sensitive leadership.

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