Project SPORE
Research Design Protocol

Introduction

Some occupations are unique with respect to which members risk exposure to traumatic events. Paton & Violanti (1996) describe these as 'critical occupations', a term coined to encapsulate the critical role played by such individuals in protecting communities, as well as the fact that "in the course of acting in this capacity, these professionals can encounter traumatic events which may, under certain circumstances, exert critical impact on their psychological well-being" (Paton and Violanti, 1996; p vii). Added to this, it is also recognized that therapeutic intervention with offenders can be one of the most demanding tasks in the entire area of mental health (Scott, 1989).

The SPORE proposal highlights key elements of the probation officer role in Europe that qualifies the work as a “Critical Occupation”. Daily work with complicated cases (e.g. unmotivated, violent and/or dangerous clients), high levels of community expectations, and increased workloads due to the growing popularity of alternative sanctions are examples of such features. Concern was also raised in the proposal that there is limited opportunity to address the well-being and resilience needs of probation staff.

The pioneering work of Paton, Violanti et.al. (2008) has resulted in the development of theoretical model (The Stress Shield Model (SSM)), that is comprised a number of features recognized to be important in the development, maintenance and enhancement of resilience in critical occupations. The strong theoretical basis of the model means it is ideal for application to probation staff across Europe whose work places them firmly in a critical occupation context.

What follows is a summary of Paton et. al.’s SSM paper. The purpose is to provide a common understanding for the SPORE project team of the rationale behind the proposed research design. Following the summary (which is actually quite long), there is a description of the methods for data collection and the proposed analyses. At this early stage of the project, all proposals are open to discussion and agreement.
In the critical occupations literature, resilience is defined as the capacity of organisations and individuals to draw on their resources and competencies (individual, collective and institutional), to cope with, adapt to and develop from the demands, challenges and changes encountered during and after a critical incident. Importantly, these resources and competencies can all be developed through selection, training and organisational development programmes. This definition was originally focused on emergency service type roles (e.g. police, disaster recovery workers and so on), where demand tends to be acute i.e. related to specific incidents. However, it is recognized that some roles, and perhaps especially those in criminal justice, can involve more daily, or chronic exposure to high psychological demand, hence the application of the definition to these contexts.

The influence of the organisation is arguably the greatest because it defines the context in which staff experience and interpret critical incidents (and their consequences), and the place where future capabilities are nurtured or restricted. The authors argue that a comprehensive understanding of resilience must integrate organisational, team and individual perspectives in order to be useful.

Key concepts associated with resilience are job satisfaction, organisational climate and empowerment.

**Job Satisfaction**

People who find meaning in their work, and who feel competent to do it, report higher levels of job satisfaction; meaning and competence are two integral components of resilience. Job satisfaction can be measured, and as such is an important indicator of individual resilience, as well as future capacity to adapt to unpredictable and challenging events.

**Organisational climate**

The term “organisational climate” describes staff perceptions of how their organisation functions, and these perceptions influence both their well-being and performance in their job. Organisational climate has been found to be the best predictor of job satisfaction, and therefore, by inference, represents a significant influence on an individuals ability to make sense of critical incidents/demands. A positive climate would be a key source of an individual’s ability to impose and sustain a sense of meaning and manageability over a critical incident.
Empowerment

Empowerment is also linked to levels of satisfaction, in individuals and in teams. It is associated with motivation to act in conditions of uncertainty. The theory is, if people have sufficient resources (psychological, social, and physical), and the capacity to use them, they will be able to confront effectively the challenges presented by events and the environment. Whether there is potential to use resources depends on the relationship between the organisation and the individual, and on organisational climate. Empowerment is about removing organisational practices that foster powerlessness and encouraging practices that develop individuals’ resourcefulness.

An empowered workforce would be characterised by four main components; meaningfulness, competence, choice and impact.

Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness (or meaning), describes the degree of congruence between an individual’s values, attitudes and behaviours and the tasks to be performed. Lack of meaning would lead to lowered job satisfaction and therefore lowered resilience. Empowered individuals feel a sense of personal significance, purpose and commitment to their involvement with work activities. These are increased by experiencing “uplifts”, such as receiving recognition and being given responsibility, and restrained by “hassles”, such as red tape, that shift the emphasis from meaningful role to meeting administrative expectations.

Competence

Competence is about an individual’s belief in his or her ability to perform their operational role successfully. Importantly, there is a direct relationship between competence and the level of effort and persistence individuals invest in facing challenging events. Consequently, competence makes an important contribution to the capacity to adapt to the unexpected.

Choice

Choice reflects the extent to which individuals perceive their behaviour as self-determined. A sense of choice is perceived when staff feel they are actively involved in defining how they perform their role, rather than just being passive recipients. It is particularly important for dealing with emergent, contingent emergency demands and for creative crisis decision making. An ability to exercise choice also facilitates learning from training and operational experiences and, in an empowering climate, facilitates others to do likewise and pass it on.

Impact

Impact describes the degree to which someone perceives they can influence important organisational outcomes. Where choice concerns control over one’s work behaviours, impact concerns the notion of personal control over organisational outcomes.
Event assessments

Experts in the critical occupations field refer to two types of event assessment that workers make in the face and aftermath of a critical incident that affect the development of resilience.

Task Assessment

The first, task assessments, are localised within a particular task and time period. Each time an event happens the experience is assessed and feedback provided (by self, peers, superiors). The person then develops, maintains and changes their operational schema (or mental map) used to plan for, interpret and respond to future critical incidents. These assessments are made using the four components described above (meaning, competence, choice and impact).

Global Assessments

The second type, global assessments, are about the capacity to generalise expectancies and learning across tasks and over time, and describe the capacity to fill in the gaps when faced with new and/or unfamiliar situations. This is particularly important when working in a profession where one cannot predict the sort of events that might have to be confronted and must thus draw on current and previous experience to deal with future risk. It is important to recognise that these assessments occur in the context of the organisational climate and though might primarily happen around critical incidents, will also be influenced by the way the organisation is perceived to respond and manage on a daily basis.

Empowerment Schema and Resilience

There are three main components of empowerment schema that influence the development of resilience; attributions, envisioning and evaluation.

Attributions

Empowerment is greater when individuals attribute causes for failure to external, transient and specific factors. Successful outcomes under normal (non-critical) circumstances can lead to the development of what is called the “helper” stereotype. This fuels expectations that the individual can always be resourceful, in control and able to put things right. The suddenness, scale and complexity of critical incidents make it inevitable that at some point, failure and not performing to the expected level will have to be dealt with. The problem with the helper stereotype is that the individual internalises the failure rather than attributing a given problem to environmental complexity. Similarly, organisational hassles such as reporting practices that supersede concern for well-being or that project blame onto individuals increase the likelihood that an individual will perceive problems as emanating from internal sources. In contrast, feedback processes that differentiate personal and environmental influences on outcomes contribute to the development of schemas that sustain adaptive capacity.

It is pertinent that, in a survey of support needs of staff in DHS Discrete Units, one significant factor was time to re-orientate following a critical incident, rather than the immediate undertaking of paperwork as required by the post-incident procedures.
**Envisioning**

This refers to how people anticipate future events or outcomes. Individuals who anticipate positive rather than negative outcomes experience stronger task and global assessments and thus empowerment. Positive expectations regarding performance and well-being are enhanced in organisations where there is a learning culture that interprets problems as catalysts for learning and future development, rather than as failure.

**Evaluation**

This refers to the standards by which one assesses success or failure. Individuals who adopt realistic standards (rather than absolutist ones) experience greater empowerment and are more likely to adapt effectively to highly threatening circumstances.

Empowerment represents the mechanism that illustrates how an individual’s experience of organisational culture is translated, via the above schema components, into resilience and future adaptive capacity. However, there are some important precursors to empowerment to consider, including social structural variables (access to resources and information, organisational trust, peer cohesion, and supervisory support), and personal characteristics.

**Access to resources**

Having physical, social and information resources allows individuals to take initiative (choice), and enhances their sense of control (impact) and self-efficacy (competence) over environmental challenges. Information is crucial for providing a sense of purpose and meaning, but on its own is not enough. The social context in which information is received is an equally important determinant of empowerment – a key aspect of which is trust.

**Trust**

Trust plays a crucial role in empowering people, particularly when they have to deal with uncertain future events and rely on organisational sources to provide the information, training and so on required to prepare themselves for these uncertainties. People operating in trusting, reciprocal relationships are left feeling empowered and are more likely to experience meaning in their work. Trust is a significant predictor of a person’s ability to cope with complex, high-risk events, particularly when relying on others to provide information or assistance.

People are more willing to work co-operatively in high risk situations when they believe that those they are working with or for are competent, dependable and likely to act with integrity. Organisations that value openness and trust create opportunities for learning and thus contribute to the development of adaptive capacity.

**Peer Cohesion**

The relationships between co-workers predict the meaning that staff find in their work, and colleagues are invariably cited as the primary source of support [by prison staff]. Cohesive teams share knowledge and skills, which is an essential pre-requisite of a learning culture and thus individual and organisational resilience.
Line-manager support

Managers play a central role in developing and sustaining empowering environments, because it is generally through them that the organisational culture is translated into day-to-day values and procedures. Quality supervisor-subordinate relationships not only enhance general feelings of competence, they also encourage the creation of similar value structures between staff.

Personality

Although organisational decisions can provide the conditions necessary to enable staff, this doesn’t automatically imply that officers will be able to utilise those opportunities. It is necessary to have an empowering environment and staff with the dispositional characteristics to be empowered. There has been less research into personality variables but one factor that has attracted attention is that of conscientiousness. Conscientious individuals experience a stronger sense of meaning and competence in their work (especially during times of change), they demonstrate greater levels of perseverance, and are more committed to contributing to the collective effort.

A second characteristic that has a long history as a predictor of resilience is that of hardiness. Hardiness comprises a number of facets including control, challenge and commitment which represent indicators of an individuals potential to utilise environmental opportunities to learn from an empowering environment. It has an advantage over conscientiousness in that hardiness is open to change through team and organisational intervention.

HMPS research has also identified a number of personality variables associated with resilience and vulnerability, relating to emotional style and interpersonal skills.

Bringing it all together

The Stress Shield Model of Resilience (Fig. 1) brings together all the factors discussed to provide organisations in the critical occupations field with a model that can be used to guide the development and maintenance of resilience. It has been developed by integrating and building on theoretically robust and empirically tested work, and describes resilience as resulting from an interaction between the person, team and organisation. The most important benefit though is its utility in informing the design of practical programs to develop resilience in staff. All the model components (with the exception of conscientiousness) are amenable to change through organisational intervention and change strategies. Guidelines for changing hardiness, peer support, supervisory support, organisational hassles and uplifts, trust and empowerment are available in the literature, and work is already underway in the Directorate of High Security to implement interventions derived from this model that has both theoretical rigour and practical utility.
Fig 1. The Stress Shield Model of Resilience
Solid lines indicate positive influences on adaptive capacity and growth. Dashes indicate pathways with negative influences on empowerment.
The proposed design is a cross-sectional, mixed methods design, intended to address the key aims of the project (summarized from p.6 of the Technical Annex):

1. Recognize the factors influencing probation staff resilience
2. Catalogue different, and identify promising, approaches to develop and sustain resilience
3. Provide MS probation administration with information about supportive activities and possibilities to sustain and develop staff resilience in EU jurisdictions
4. Recommend areas for further developments to promote staff resilience in EU member states

Research methodology

Quantitative methodology and analyses

In order to test the model, data will be collected from probation staff across the four nations. A number of established and validated psychometric assessments will be presented (see the list below), which when combined, test all aspects of the SSM. The full questionnaire, supported by a demographic survey (see attached) will be available for completion online via the SPORE website.

It is intended to have a period of two months for collection of quantitative data. These data will be analysed using path analysis in the first instance. This will identify the nature of the relationships between the variables, specifically which of the variables are most closely related to an adaptive (resilient) outcome. Other analyses will be conducted as required.

Data will also be analysed by country, by professional role and potentially by gender. Detailed and reliable analysis will largely be dependent on the number of participants involved. Upward of 750 in total would be ideal.

All analyses of the complete database will be conducted in the UK, however, local researchers will be provided with the data from their countries in order to interrogate the data to answer local questions.

Data will be analysed (number or participants permitting) using Structural Equation Modelling. This is a statistical technique that examines and tests the causal relationships between different variables. This method should help us understand the significance of the relationships between all the different factors being measured by the SSM and therefore helps organizations and individuals focus on the most important ones.
The list of questionnaires used in survey:

- Work Environment Scale (WES)
- Emotional Control Questionnaire (ECQ)
- Stress-Related Growth Scale (SRG)
- C-SURV
- Resilient Coping Style Questionnaire (RCSQ)
- Coping Styles Questionnaire (CSQ)
- Physical Work Environment Satisfaction Questionnaire (PWESQ)
- Job Satisfaction Index (JSI)
- Conscientiousness (NEO-PI-R)
- Supervision Scale (SS)
- Interpersonal Workplace Trust Scale (IWTS)
- The Psychological Empowerment Instrument

Qualitative methodology and analyses

Alongside the quantitative investigation, qualitative research is also necessary. Key areas to consider using qualitative methods include:

- Cultural differences
- Practice differences
- Perceived rewards of the work
- Perceived costs of the work
- Organisational good practice
- Organisational poor practice

Much of the qualitative work will need to be undertaken by local researchers. Focus group protocols will be constructed and Elizabeth Hayes (expert consultant) will support this aspect of the work. Analyses will include thematic evaluation of responses and possibly some quantification of responses where data are amenable. The use of Thematic Content Analysis to manage the focus group data will be discussed at the researchers meeting in June. There are likely to be varying levels of experience using this method and consideration needs to be given to ensuring consistency across the projects.
Desk Studies

Each partner country is due to undertake a Desk Study alongside the international data gathering. This involves local researchers undertaking a number of tasks in support of both the quantitative and qualitative research. These tasks include:

- A local literature search and synthesis
  - To include national published and unpublished research
  - Reports of organization about plans, project, evaluations
  - Policies and programmes

- Collection of organisational data
  - Offender data including:
    - Number of offenders under supervision –
      Number of offenders each local area has under their supervision – average numbers.
      Number of clients per year.
      Average number of the case load.
    - Levels of risk
      Low, medium, high risk – the division is similar in all countries. Cutoff points for risks are matter of convention – it can be described but cannot be compared. High risk of re-offending and high risk of being dangerous – information about the combination of both needs to be collected as it can be the most difficult to work with.
    - Places of contact (Office, offenders home, neutral public place, prison)
      Not the exact numbers, only the way it is organized – to understand the risk zones and what can be more stressful
    - Incidents involving offenders and staff
      Number and nature of the incidents.
      If there are no data for this – it can be compared, described. It can be linked with the culture of the country.

Offender data to collect as hard data: number and types, levels of risk, average length of sentence. Judicial titles under which the clients function in organization – conditional release etc.
- **Staff data including:**
  - **Sickness absence**
    Average number of days sick per year (the method of the calculations could be - number of days sick for a year divided with the number of staff).
    It is necessary to collect information about the last three or four years.
  - **Staff turnover**
    Average length people stay in their jobs.
    Number of people who leave in the first year. Information about last three years.
    Breakdown – front line staff, middle managers, senior managers.
    Add a comment, give a context of the situation - leaves because of the crisis etc. (e.g. in Latvia more recently employed had to leave first).
  - **Salary scales**
    Comparison to average salary in the country.
    This data should not be compared within different countries.
  - **Disciplinary actions**
    Gives information about the culture of the organization.
    Number of actions, nature of the actions, against whom (manager, front line worker etc.)
    Front line workers’ complaints about managers, clients’ complaints about the organization.
  - **Supervision structures**
    Researchers should report what is the setup of the supervision structures (more in a supportive way – gathering to talk over the problems) in each country.
  - **Outcome monitoring (targets, audit data etc)**
    Qualitative questions around the audit process (is there audit in place, is it helpful, are things being improved, are they hard to improve, does not happen, takes a long time?)
  - **Staff survey information**
    Whether or not the organization runs a staff survey? How often, etc?
Senior Manager data:

- Judicial context – probation in the national criminal justice context

All of the following issues regarding Senior Manager data will be discussed in the Focus Groups for managers.
- Views of judges and prosecutors
- Co-operation with wider CJS
- Nature and prevalence of sanctions
- The political context – budgets
- Political attitudes to sentencing
- Independence of probation
- Societal attitudes to probation
- How probation officers think politicians and society view their work

- Promotion/professional development opportunities for probation staff
- Training opportunities

What is required, what is optional?
- Health and safety regulations to keep staff safe

Do probation workers go to clients’ homes alone or have to take someone with them? What safety measures are taken?
- Organisational culture
- Social benefits

Are there any special benefits for the probation workers?
- **Preparation of local report**
  - Introduction
  - Organisational overview
  - Synthesis of literature
  - Methods
    - Literature search terms
      - In terms of concept: resilience, mental toughness, hardiness, job satisfaction, wellbeing and burnout.
      - In terms of settings: criminal justice, social care, social work, prison, probation, forensic, hospitals, police
      - Sick absence as a general term, to which can be added other key words + coping, emotional strain, emotional labor. As there are a lot of words, trying different combinations is recommended.
    - Data collection methods
      - Where to look for information - Human resources directors of the organizations, police, military, hospitals, psychiatric facilities and secure units.
      - Search engines – PsycINFO and MEDLINE – for Senior Researcher, Google Scholar – for all the researchers.
  - Results
    - A summary of the key findings
  - Discussion
    - Bringing together the theoretical (literature search) and operational (organizational data) findings
  - Conclusions and recommendations
    - Based on the discussion and in the context of the quantitative and qualitative research to come

**Ethical Considerations**

The research has gone through the ethical approval in United Kingdom. The research is considered low risk in terms of likelihood of causing distress to participants; however, each country will provide contacts of person who can assist respondent if answering to questions has caused any concerns.

**Consent and support**

The project will be described in full on the SPORE website and at the start of the questionnaires. All responses will be anonymous, ensuring confidentiality. Consent will be implicit in the submission of completed questionnaires. The anonymous nature of the submissions means withdrawal of data at a later date will not be possible.
References
