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Emotional state of police personnel in times of pandemic

Abstract

The emotional state of the police personnel working in this emergency situation has led to situations of emotional instability at the individual, family and work levels. This study aims to analyze the emotional state of four police officers who provide security and patrol services in a state of health emergency by COVID-19; they were interviewed in a semi-structured manner. For this study, the qualitative phenomenological design approach was used. The results show that the participants present emotional difficulties such as fear, anxiety, depression, melancholy and stress due to their risk exposure to the state of health emergency.

Key words: emotional state, health emergency, emotional instability police

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2004b) specifies that health is not just the absence of disease; it is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. Based on this concept, the research focused on explaining how the situation caused by the VIDOC-19 affects the physical and emotional state and the decrease in the state of well-being of the participants. Well-being in people's lives and its measurement goes beyond evaluating feelings and psychological, affective, social, and occupational capacities, among others (Hervás and Vázquez, 2013).

In an international public health emergency such as the one we are experiencing, it is urgent to investigate the psychological impact that the pandemic is producing in the various populations; in view of this, various strategies

must be developed in order to reduce the psychological impact (symptoms) caused by the crisis. Thus, Shigemura, Ursano, Morganstein, Kurosawa and Benedek (2020) report that people's early emotional responses include extreme fear and uncertainty. On the other hand, given the fear and distorted perceptions of risk and harmful consequences, negative social behaviors are reported.

These states and behaviors can lead to public mental health problems such as distress reactions (insomnia, anger, extreme fear of illness even in unexposed people) and health risk behaviors such as increased use of alcohol, tobacco and social isolation; as well as specific disorders such as post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression and somatization. Addressing the impact of the pandemic on mental health is important both to improve health and to avoid

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other social problems such as stigmatization of individuals, lack of adherence to prevention measures, and mourning the loss of loved ones. In short, these factors play a fundamental role in addressing the pandemic in a comprehensive manner (Taylor, 2019).

COVID - 19 is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus, which has gone through several names, at first was called new coronavirus 2019 or 2019- nCov; this type of virus belongs to the family of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some varieties of common cold (World Health Organization, 2020). For this reason, the Director General of the World Health Organization (2020) stated that the outbreak is considered an international health emergency. On March 11 of the present year the WHO pronounces itself declaring the pandemic by COVID-19 because it is in 119 countries outside China, including Peru. The President of the Republic Martín Vizcarra (2020) stated in a message to the nation about the first case of coronavirus in Peru (Centro de Operaciones de Emergencia Nacional, 2020, p.1).

The psychological impact of COVID-19 and its figures on the population is clear, but it should be emphasized that a large majority of people will not suffer from mental disorders as a result of it. However, a significant percentage will experience severe reactions to prolonged quarantine, loss of loved ones or economic crisis (Inchausti, 2020). This implies that people must prepare themselves psychologically and perceive security in the face of possible adverse situations that they still have to experience. It also implies preventing and facing the crisis by managing effective social and health measures (Wang, et.al, 2019).

On the other hand, there are limitations in strategic planning by the police command; in this regard, the strategic plan of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, 2019) stated that it is developed within a context of limited resources. The recommendations of the member states have been taken into account when focusing the Organization's work on areas where it is clear that PAHO has functions. The plan establishes a framework for stratification of programmatic priorities to complement PAHO's budget policy. This policy governs the allocation of PAHO's regular biennial budget resources among the three levels of the Organization (regional, subregional and country). Although the budget policy is structured by institutional level, the framework for stratification of programme priorities is organized by programme area and is a key input to guide resource mobilization for the implementation of the strategic plan.

Another problem that is evident in the Peruvian police command is inadequate

logistical planning. Marín and Gutiérrez (2013) state, in their theory of constraints (TOC), that this allows for dynamic and synchronized operations in addition to logistical decisions in the supply chain. It focuses on the active management of constraints that prevent a company from reaching its highest performance in relation to its goal with erroneous decision criteria in key processes.

Due to the events experienced, the Executive Branch, led by the President of the Republic (Peru), has been implementing a series of legal measures, one of which is Supreme Decree N°044-2020 which declared a State of National Emergency due to the serious circumstances affecting the life of the nation as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Article 44 of the Magna Letter indicates that it is a priority of the state to guarantee the full validity of human rights, protecting society from threats to its security for the benefit of its integral well-being (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, PCM 2020, p.1).

On the other hand, police personnel have been emotionally impacted since they are anxious, afraid of exposing their health; their greatest concern is to get home and infect their families, understandably because it is not easy to work in the pandemic emergency situation. Some experiences during working hours can be considered traumatic for any person, producing in the police a series of cognitive, behavioral, emotional and physical reactions that can potentially interfere with their ability to respond to the event, as well as their return to work, family and social life (Ventura, Reyes, Moreno, Torres and Gil, 2008; Mollaei, et al, 2014).

According to the newspaper Perú 21 (2020), police officers are prone to being infected with Covid19 ; therefore, it is a risk group due to their exposure to people who are likely to be infected. There have been confirmed cases of infection, including more than 45 deaths so far. The newspaper El Comercio (2020) reports that it found assistants in the corridors and rooms of the police hospital who were afraid of contracting the virus due to the lack of such elementary implements as masks, glasses and biosecurity suits to examine those infected.

As a way of interpreting the emotional feelings of the police personnel under investigation, the presence of collaborators who can express the feelings of these personnel was required. In addition, Garcia (2015) emphasized that the inherent dangers and police risks are the stressors with the greatest potential because of their intensity; it is known that the impact on mental health occurs not only among those who suffer losses directly, but also among those who participate in relief efforts (Ventura, 2011).

First responders in emergencies and disasters (including paramedics, firefighters, civil protection, military, police, doctors, nurses and psychologists) are exposed to special working conditions where they witness many deaths, serious injuries to people and animals, patterns of despair and excessive human suffering, situations that threaten their own physical integrity. These conditions test their endurance, courage and abilities to carry out their work (Ventura, Reyes, Moreno, Torres and Gil, 2008).

The European Commission (2010) refers to stress as a set of mechanisms and actions, depression and pathogenic crises, which can cause disease. Coping with stress will make people stronger whether it is because of this or another epidemic; the emotional impact can be stressful for people; likewise, anxiety and fear can cause strong emotions and can be overwhelming (El Comercio, 2020). In any of these situations, it is normal for different alterations to appear in mental health, even triggering stressogenic and even psychotraumatic manifestations (Lorenzo, Martínez, Ventura and Mesa, 2008).

The emergency situation leads to emotional instability such as an emotional imbalance that can cause anxiety, distress, fear, among others (Jaramillo and Yáñez, 2015). Since the beginning of human history, there has been a fear of the unknown (Valero, 2011) and, precisely, police personnel are faced with something unknown; certain virus mutations have brought humanity to its knees, entering into uncertainty since we do not know what the future holds.

In recent months, it is known that there is great exposure to the new coronavirus COVID-19 originating in China, according to CDC (2020). This country, in its evolution of the pandemic, is the first one that has been able to overcome the disease (Forbes, 2020). On the other hand, Italy is the country most affected by this disease and in America it is Brazil that has the highest number of deaths, with the number of deaths being 4,032 up to March 21st, according to the BBC (2020).

Spain is another country that has been most affected by this pandemic since, according to the newspaper El País (2020), there are 28,572 infected people and 1,753 deaths. The Spanish government has decided to extend the confinement of its population for a fortnight in order not to spread the virus (Velloso, Yanke y Munera, 2020).

This pandemic, at a global level, has established itself in the Asian and European continent, has expanded to 170 countries worldwide (World Health Organization, cited in, Arroyo, 2020), police personnel from different countries, including Peru, are exposed to an

emotional state that this emergency situation entails. It should be pointed out that these data are a reference given their tendency to rise due to the high degree of contagion.

In this regard, the psychiatrist Héféz (2020), quoted in the newspaper Gestión (2020), states that this pandemic can create instability in the emotional state generating insomnia, depression, anxiety, even cognitive problems. According to Pérez (2020), in Spain, there are more than 2 million elderly people living alone; therefore, confinement can cause depression and anxiety. Leal (2019) mentions that it is important to treat depression in older adults as this population is very vulnerable.

Police work in pandemic situations leads to anxiety, stress, emotional instability and even depression in many cases (Gonzales, 2020). To this end, Callejo (2020) recommends certain techniques such as fear management, meditation, relaxation, living in the here and now, among other activities. At the same time, the Madrid College of Psychologists (2020) provides certain guidelines for dealing with the emotional impact of the coronavirus; if it is not affected by the disease, one should not generate high anxiety emotions, but rather maintain an optimistic attitude, avoid talking about the subject frequently, and turn to official sources. The emotional state and the manifestations of the effects will depend, mainly, on the personal resources one has, including the repertoire of learned responses and whether they were positive or negative in previous situations (Ruiz and Guerrero, 2017).

Currently, there are few studies on the various emotional states in police personnel as a result of this pandemic. However, the COVID-19 epidemic in our country has collapsed the Peruvian health system. This situation forces the Government to decree a state of emergency and quarantine. This scenario causes a negative psychological impact on police personnel and the most vulnerable population, triggering fear, stress, frustration, concern, boredom, fear, confusion, anger, loneliness, stigma, anxiety, emotional instability, hopelessness, guilt, depression and suicide. The objective of this research was to analyze the emotional state of police personnel in the performance of their duties.

Method

The research was developed within the interpretative paradigm, since it seeks to make sense of the phenomena based on the information provided by the participants (Hernández and Mendoza, 2018). The study employed the qualitative approach that focuses on understanding phenomena, which are

explored in a natural environment and from the subject's perspective in relation to the context. The method used was the phenomenological-hermeneutic one of empirical nature (it gathers the experience) and reflective nature (it analyses its meanings). For Van Manen, quoted by Fuster, 2019, this methodology is directed by the description of experiences in a personal way, the conversational interview and close observation.

Four members of Peru's National Police between the ages of 25 and 30 participated in the study. The participants were on patrol and security duty in the streets, but did not present symptoms of COVID-19. All of them participated voluntarily, signing the respective agreement. They were also informed about the objectives of the study and the commitment to protect the confidentiality of the information collected.

Participants were contacted through the snowball technique; for this purpose, the initial contacts were asked if they knew other people who met the inclusion criteria to participate in this study. In this line, the number of interviewees will be defined based on the criterion of saturation, as there is redundancy in the information collected in relation to the emotions expressed by the participants (Flick, 2015).

In the study, the interview technique was used. Clay (2018) indicated that the interview serves as a support for data collection; it is composed of open-ended questions. For the present research, the semi-structured interview was used, which will be given in a colloquial way, according to the specific nature of the interviewees and the peculiarity of the research (Martínez, 2006). According to Nuez (2015), the interview guide is defined as a list of topics and subtopics that the researcher wished to address according to the objectives of his research. The semi-structured interview guide consists of two areas: institutional and emotional. The criteria used for research in qualitative studies and their methodological rigor are related to consistency, credibility, auditability, and transferability (Flick, 2015; Franklin and Ballau, 2005; and Mertens, 2005).

Results

As for the health training of the personnel, there is a lack of a better health program for the police officers due to the lack of preparation for the current situation and the lack of knowledge about the COVID. It should be noted that training is important if it is to be given to police personnel, thus improving their ability to communicate and interact with citizens.

One of the difficulties expressed by the interviewees was the fact that there were deficiencies in the strategic activities carried out by the command in this emergency situation,

which altered the daily routine and created concern about contagion. There is a lot of improvisation due to the dangers inherent in the job and the police risks that have been evident.

The police command has deficiencies in logistical planning, as does the health service; therefore, they must improve their planning for these emergency situations.

Regarding health policy, adequate clothing must be provided, daily routines and services must be modified, since the State must be more flexible and help people who need to work with the acquisition and distribution of the various health resources available. The infrastructure system must be improved and the treatment of the personnel who need its health service must be improved; on the other hand, the transport of police personnel is inadequate. New hygiene habits must be reinforced, since there are limitations due to the lack of adequate time and place for feeding; basic elements of biosecurity (psychological assistance) must be implemented.

With respect to social responsibility, the interviewees affirm that there is a lack of commitment with respect to the care of the order and distance that originate contagion for the servant and his or her relatives, and there should be greater implementation in the use of utensils that avoid contagion; however, they are prepared to serve the country and the institutional values; nevertheless, the population presents a lack of awareness and social commitment by not respecting the dispositions of the Government and, in this way, generates greater conflicts; it is important to educate the population in order to make possible their self-control based on possibilities of help.

In the emotional area, fear, sadness, discomfort and fear of personal and family contagion create situations of anxiety and concern; this is compounded by the lack of civility in the population. Likewise, being exposed to danger and the risk of losing a family member cause a feeling of helplessness when one cannot do anything. Police officers are very concerned about the impact of the epidemic, and are saddened and grieved to learn that their colleagues have died and others have been contaminated. Police personnel are emotionally distrustful, frustrated and discouraged by both the lack of help and the lack of solidarity from the police command.

As regards emotional instability, situations of anxiety and uncertainty in the face of the unknown cause fear, discomfort and fear of personal and family contamination so some of these experiences can be considered very worrying for any person; however, they are situations that police personnel face as part of their daily work, producing a series of cognitive, behavioural, emotional and physical reactions

that can potentially interfere with their work situation and their future return to work, family and social life.

With regard to emotional support, the population shows its appreciation for the work

they have been doing in their patrolling and security activities, but they do not receive recognition for their work from the institutional command. Family love is a good motivation for the fulfillment of duty.

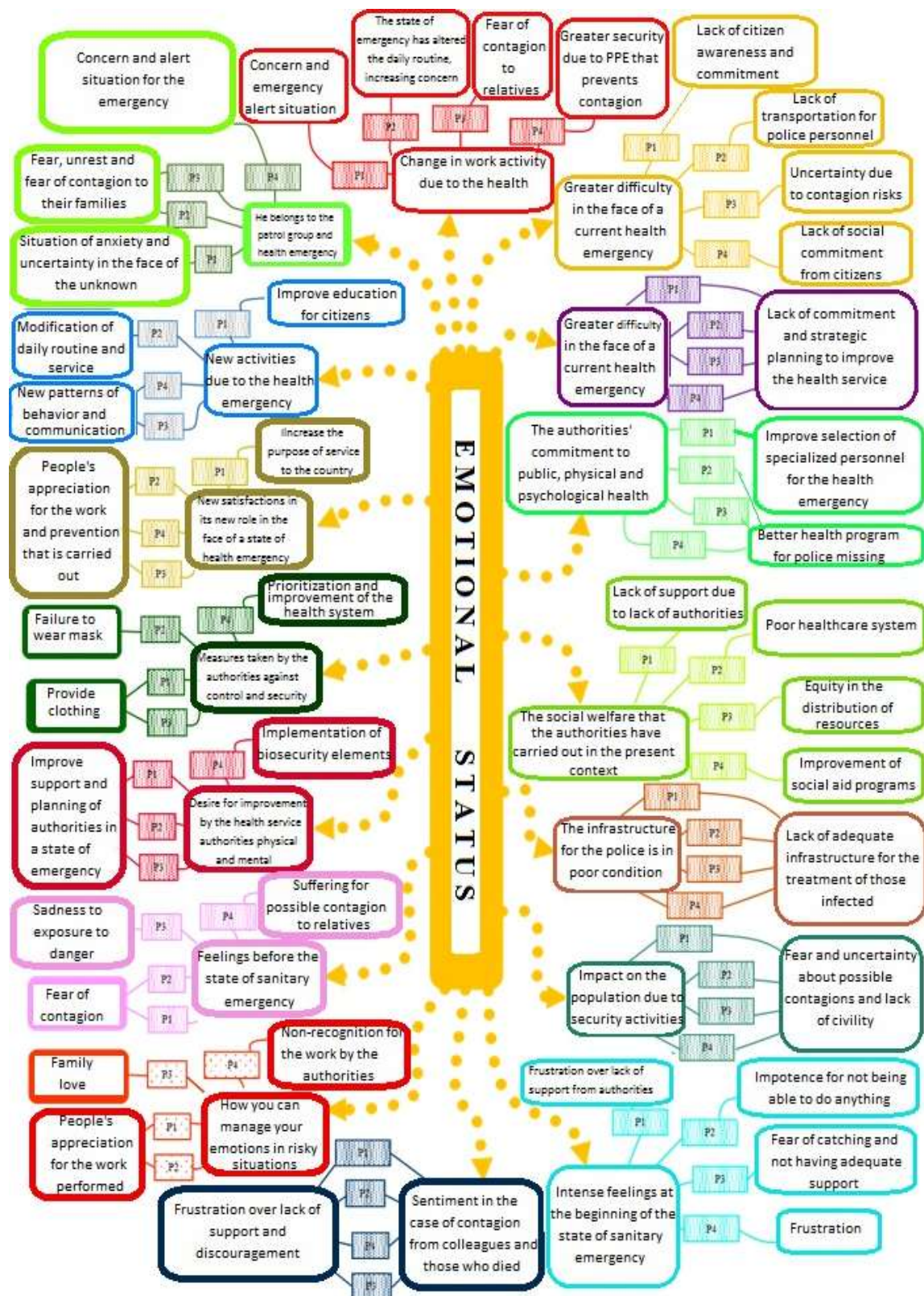


Figure 1. Organizer of the group physiognomy (own elaboration)

Discussion

The study reports on the emotional state of police personnel in the first stage of the pandemic in Peru; it shows an impact on mental health, expressed in feelings of fear, uncertainty and anguish, typical of a sense of rupture in daily life and loss of predictability that this pandemic entails, especially due to the isolation it entails. However, there are also other aspects valued as positive by the population, for example, the recognition of the work done by police personnel in their duties of patrolling and serving in the street.

With regard to the health training of personnel, there is a lack of a better health programme for police officers, since they do not know about the COVID; likewise, adequate clothing should be provided to police officers, and the health system should be prioritized and improved. Likewise, in training, behavior modification must be achieved, meaning learning new social patterns by improving communication and better behavior patterns.

The strategic approach is important due to the concern about contagion and the rotation of service that has not been adequate, therefore, a better selection of specialized personnel is required, as well as the development of training programs. There is much improvisation and, in this regard, García (2015) indicates that both inherent dangers and police risks are the stressors with the greatest potential.

The impact on mental health is known to occur not only among those who suffer losses directly. Similarly, there is an urgent need to assume the commitment and strategic planning of the health service; PAHO (2019) stated that the plan will be implemented in a context of limited resources and in response to the recommendations of the Member States to focus the work of the Organization on areas where it is evident that PAHO adds value; in the Plan, a framework for stratification of programmatic priorities is established to complement PAHO's budget policy.

This policy governs the allocation of PAHO's regular biennial budget resources among the three levels of the Organization (regional, subregional and country). Although the budget policy is structured by institutional level, the framework for stratification of programme priorities is organized by programme area and is a key input to guide resource mobilization for the implementation of the strategic plan.

Logistical planning is geared towards improving the health service; therefore, support and planning by the authorities are essential. Logistics planning is important; of the above; Marín and Gutiérrez (2013) indicated that the

theory of constraints (TOC) allows for dynamic and synchronized logistics operations and decisions in the supply chain.

Conclusions

This situation of pandemic by the COVID 19 has significantly impacted the emotional and labor state of the police personnel that gives service of patrol and security to the citizenship. At present, there are a large number of infected police personnel, with nearly 2,000 personnel to date and more than 45 deaths. This situation has had an impact on the emotional state of the personnel, presenting situations of fear, frustration and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, due to the loss of many of these officers and the lack of support from the command, since their strategic planning to deal with this problem has not been successful.

It is suggested that the police mental health service carry out preventive rehabilitation programs for police service personnel in order to prevent difficulties or problems of socio-emotional imbalance. It is also suggested that the strategic planning systems of the police command be improved in order to improve the acquisition and distribution of logistics, thus providing them with full support in terms of the distribution of clothing necessary for the prevention of this pandemic. Similarly, improve the means of transport for police personnel, since many of them live in very remote areas. The National Police has a fleet of buses that should be at the service of its personnel, especially in this pandemic situation.

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