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A Note on
the Application of Stress Research Findings
to Problems of Police Job Stress

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The empirical work of Kroes and Hurrell on job stress among policemen is probably the only recent effort on this critical issue, and it naturally warrants an expansion with larger numbers, and in a variety of police systems. Furthermore, it is my hope that such survey findings can be properly analyzed, reported, and "fed back" into the system--to police employee organizations (unions and similar organizations) and to police managements--for the purpose of developing internal police and program changes designed to mitigate and reduce the source of stress identified through this progress. I don't believe that we should place all our priorities on "rehabilitative" efforts that are essentially programs designed to cure the patient after the onset of the illness. A more important priority, in my opinion, is a preventive approach which we all pay rhetorical homage to, and do very little to implement.

Increasingly, it appears that organizations are coming to recognize the potential value of using organizational survey data as a basis for identification and solution/prevention of problems areas that impede the effectiveness of the organization and the well-being of individual numbers of that organization. Job stress and its sources are worthy of attack for its own sake, i.e., the well-being of the individual employee (physical and psychological health). But there need be no mutual exclusiveness between this goal and the goals of the organization for which individuals work.

It is vital that we bring to the attention of police officers and police managers--as well as other key decision-makers and administrators, not to mention the general public--that many physiological disorders are traceable to psychosocial factors, and that working conditions, our worklives, are the source of many of those psychosocial factors. Furthermore, among the so-called specialists, it is time to rebel against the academic-discipline walls that prevent us from learning from each other in the quest to understand, control, and prevent the negative results of stress in our work lives. Occupational medicine, for example, must be combined with industrial engineering and industrial social psychology (including organizational analysis).

I'm emphasizing the physical health indices here partly because it is not widely enough recognized that working conditions over and above the obvious physical environmental ones can be a source of physiological disorders, but also because I believe that in the striving of many industrial/occupational social scientists to achieve organizational recognition of the importance of the stress-potential of such work elements as police-community relations, shift work, position in the organizational hierarchy, resource adequacy, and time in court, for example, that achievement of recognition of those work elements has a better chance of success if it can be demonstrated that such work attributes play a role in health status. I say this because in our type of society,

there is an uncontested consensus concerning the value of good health. Never mind the obvious cost-benefit dimensions of this issue.

Kroes and Hurrell have made some significant first steps "on the journey of a thousand miles," and have identified in their work some of the more frequently cited stressors derived from interviews with policemen and police administrators. I don't have to repeat their findings here for this meeting. Their next effort contemplates a large sample of approximately 15,000 interviews. The project obviously has the great advantage of allowing them to conduct virtually unlimited number of comparative analyses of the several sub-samples, for example by city, type of police system, and disaggregated demographic characteristics. And to repeat, it should potentially provide for an opportunity to feedback the analyses of stress sources as a basis for possible interventions within police organizations. While the project in its present form does not include the direct measurement of physiological and health status concomitants of reported stress attributes, I believe that sooner or later such projects must deal with this topic. Any large-scale attack on police job stress should naturally show how this phenomenon affects such organizational matters as turnover, absenteeism, alcoholism, and other job performance criteria. But, to continue one of the major themes in this paper, a more systematic contribution to the problem of stress must deal with the health aspects of this problem.

I would like now to turn to some more general considerations of stress as a basis for giving us further clues and conceptual insights as applied to the occupational world of policemen. My basic source in this connection is the valuable volume edited by Lennart Levi (of Stockholm's Karolinska Institute, Stress Research Laboratory), The Psychosocial Environment and Psychosomatic Diseases, Vol. I in a series of symposia publications on Society, Stress and Disease (Oxford University Press, 1971). The World Health Organization's Aubrey Kagan, for example, develops the thesis that social incongruity increases the risk of disease. It "arises with changes demand adaptation that is not made or is inadequate." This proposition and viewpoint are similar to the widely used theory of expectancies and the degree to which, in our special field of interest, the realities of the work situation are congruent with expectations and aspirations. In my own recent research with a wide variety of white male blue collar workers, a measure of "discontent" based on measures of discrepancy between expectation and reality concerning the job suggests that some of the salient features in the jobs of the "discontented" vs. the other workers have to do with degree of variety, autonomy, and initiative (and promotion opportunities) allowed or provided in the job.

I should hasten to add that this generalization especially applies to workers with relatively non-authoritarian personalities, and that these non-authoritarian workers were disproportionately young. This latter dual observation is pertinent to the issue of the age-education profile of the current sources for police recruitment.

But to return to the concept of incongruity, the obvious fact that incongruities and expectation-reality discrepancies occur in our work lives needs more than recognition. It demands policy and program attention. We should not ignore such findings as those by R. H. Rahe (cited by Kagan) who found that, out of a list of 42 life events ranked in decreasing order of their saliency in social readjustment, at least four of the top half of life

events are related to the job. Death of a spouse; divorce; marital separation; imprisonment; death of a close family member; a personal injury or illness; and marriage are the seven life events that have a greater priority over any work-related event. And actually, personal injury or illness can itself be work-connected.

Kagan also refers to research findings by a number of authorities that might be generalized to the field of police work. For example, American white males in industry whose fathers were not themselves industrial workers had a higher sickness absence rate than workers with fathers who were industrial workers. Workers with continuously changing workmates have higher serum cholesterol than workers in the same workplace but with unchanging work associates. London Transport workers employed in relatively sheltered conditions, in comparison to London Transport bus drivers and conductors exposed over the years to London's traffic, had fewer absences for functional nervous disorders; indeed, fewer sickness absences for all causes. One of the critical features of such findings is that they are essentially a product of epidemiological analysis, not based on personal attitudinal surveys or on self-reported illnesses and identification of possible stressors.

Another significant contribution to the Levi volume is by Bertil Gardell of Stockholm University Psychological Laboratory, on "Alienation and Mental Health in the Modern Industrial Environment." One of Gardell's major findings is that the "instrumental" attitude toward work (viewing one's job as acceptable almost exclusively in terms of its financial rewards) can be a product of long exposure to negative features of the work environment. Remaining in the same job or occupation for a long time (in other words, low turnover) is therefore not necessarily a perfect index of "job satisfaction." Many persons become "trapped" in dissatisfying, stressful jobs because of the material benefits associated with tenure in those jobs -- benefits that cannot be transferred to another occupation or employer. The phenomenon of "burned-out" police officers may be one manifestation of such alienation from one's work. Instrumentalism may thus serve as a justifier-to-self mechanism, which allows for a certain level of psychological tolerance of one's job. But it does not prevent a lowering of self-esteem, nor sustain a useful contribution by the individual to his work organization's purpose and goals.

Another conclusion I derived from Gardell's work is that the personnel selection model ("finding the right person for the right job") is inadequate, especially if this approach blinds us to the impact, over time, of work experience upon the individual. The selection approach should not be used as an excuse to ignore necessary changes in job structures, job assignments, the nature of hierarchical command, and other dimensions of the work environment.

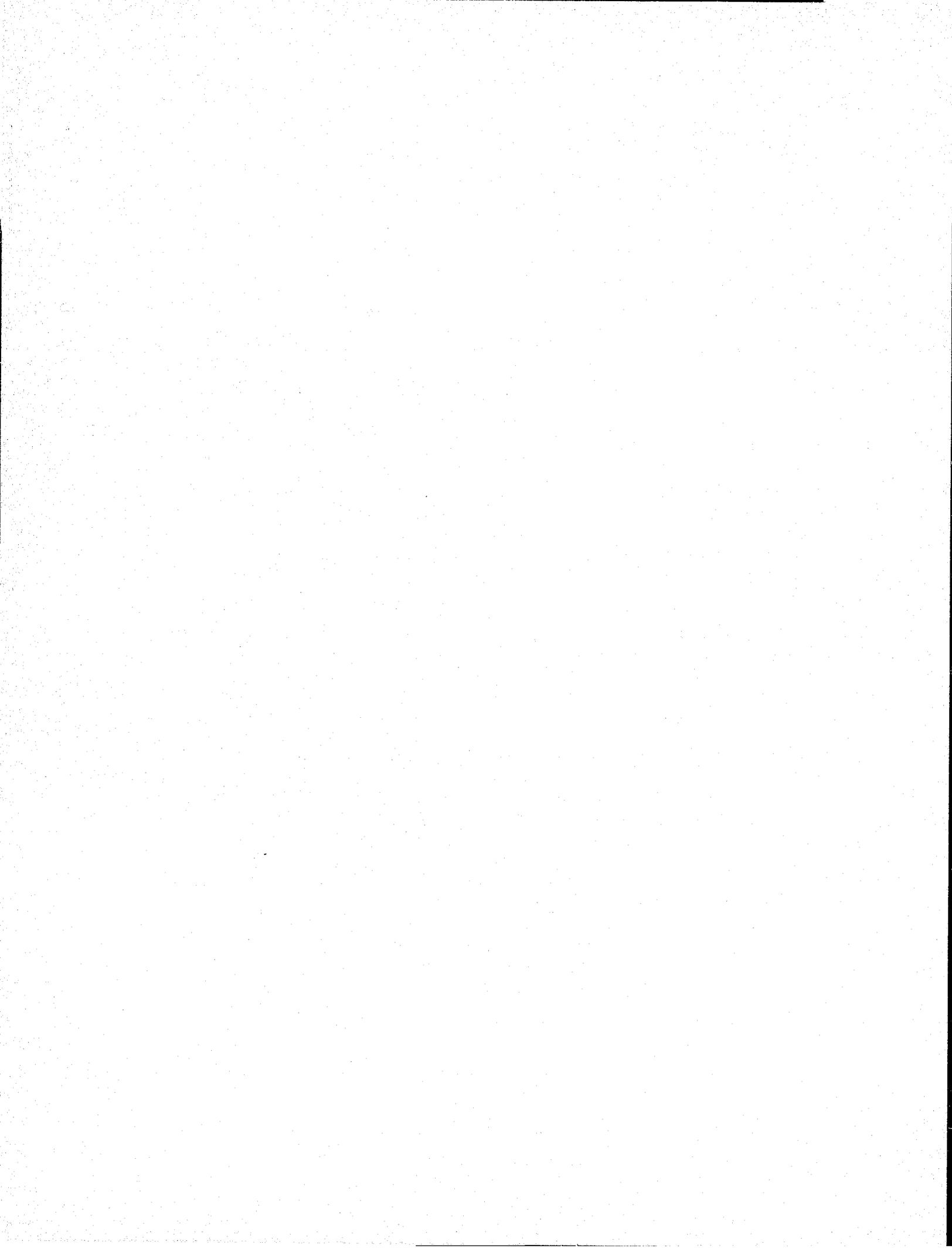
Ohio State University's Samuel Corson, a Professor in Psychiatry in the College of Medicine, discusses in the Levi volume "The Lack of Feedback in Today's Societies--A Psychosocial Stressor." I am sure that his generalized propositions have relevance to the problem in contemporary police organizations. Many an organizational analysis has discovered the disfunctional role played by the failure to provide reciprocal feedback among the hierarchical echelons, especially within the context of a broader society imbued with democratic values and strivings. The need to know what's happening in the organization, and to be told how well one is performing in his or her job task assignments,

can affect the nature and quality of job performance and commitment to the work role. Corson writes that "the lack of feedback and the realization that the central control mechanism...does not respond to afferent signals has contributed significantly to the development of alienation, particularly, among the younger generation." If we consider that self-image and self-esteem have social origins, that is, based on how "significant others" define and treat us, we can begin to see the positive function played by personnel policies in the police organization that include the active implementation of feedback. John French's findings regarding the relationship of participation to stress levels among police should be noted in this context.

The chapter by West German Hanover's Jan Brod on hypertension, first of all, refers to studies that indicate that essential hypertension is only 20 percent attributable to genetic inheritance, 80 percent to psychoemotional environmental stress. What might we infer from the finding that higher blood pressure levels are found among front-line soldiers than among soldiers stationed well behind the lines in barracks, or higher than the blood pressure levels of civilians? Long-term exposure to the "front line" in hazardous occupations only serves to aggravate the illness, perhaps to the point where removal from the front line does not serve to reduce the hypertension; it seems to develop a "functional autonomy" of its own. Can we find an analogy here to the occupational world of policemen?

If taxi drivers, as reported by Brod, have above-average rates of hypertension, what about police car patrolmen assigned such tasks on a regular, daily basis (and furthermore, subjected to other events and experiences in the course of their duties)?

Finally, I think it important that we not trap ourselves in the unproductive argument about whether or not policemen experience greater stress, on the average, than most other segments of our workforce. What is important is to recognize the phenomenon of heterogeneity within the task attributes of any occupation as far as stressors are concerned, and to identify those work dimensions in the police role that must be dealt with in order to reduce whatever proportion of stress is found to be interfering with the effective work and personal lives of our criminal justice system's employees.



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