Workplace stressors for investigative interviewers of child-abuse victims

Author(s):

Martine B. Powell (School of Psychology, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia)

Belinda L. Guadagno (School of Psychology, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia)

Peter Cassematis (Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia)

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Abstract:

Purpose

– The purpose of this study is to identify the nature and prevalence of workplace stressors faced by interviewers of child sexual assault victims.

Design/methodology/approach

– Totally, 68 professionals (police and child protection workers) were invited to anonymously post their perceptions of workplace stressors on an internet forum as part of an investigative interviewing online training course. Specifically, participants were asked to reflect on salient sources of stress encountered in their role of interviewing sexually abused children.

Findings

– Three key stressors were identified across the study's professional groups: inadequate recognition of specialised skills; high-workload demands; and interagency tensions. Consistent with previous research, exposure to child-abuse reports was not raised as a stressor.
**Research limitations/implications**

– The study generated suggestions for modifying management practices; however, future research should identify and trial strategies for improving workplace climate in child-abuse investigation.

**Practical implications**

– As the stressors isolated by participants related to workplace climate rather than exposure to victims’ accounts of child abuse, minimising negative consequences of work stressors requires changes to workplace culture and practice. Workplace climates need to be modified so that the demands are offset by resources.

**Originality/value**

– Because of its online, anonymous nature, this was the first study to offer participants the opportunity to honestly disclose primary sources of stress in child-abuse investigation. The research also makes a much-needed contribution to an area of police practice that is vital yet often overlooked.

It is well established that those who work in the area of child maltreatment can develop mental disorders such as depression and anxiety (Bennett et al., 2005; Russ et al., 2009; Sabin-Farrell and Turpin, 2003). Such disorders can have debilitating consequences for individual wellbeing and can also severely undermine job productivity. Mental illness, for example, is associated with high staff turnover, frequent absenteeism and reduced job performance (Bennett et al., 2005; Russ et al., 2009; Strand and Dore, 2009). If psychological disturbance is shown to be long-lasting and associated with exposure to crimes against children, and it is concluded that reasonable precaution was not taken in the workplace to reduce the injuries, then the organisation may be required to provide financial compensation to the individual. One such compensation case involved a female Australian police officer named Beth Seedsman.

Seedsman, a specialised child-abuse investigator, was required to respond to initial complaints of alleged physical and sexual abuse and criminal neglect involving children or other vulnerable persons. Her responsibilities included victim support and liaison (which inevitably resulted in exposure to victims’ stories) and her symptoms included hyper vigilance, constant apprehension, nightmares, insomnia, tearfulness and anxiety which escalated after the birth of her own son. She was awarded $750,000 as compensation for mental injury defined as post-traumatic stress disorder (New South Wales v. Seedsman, 2000). Post-traumatic stress disorder refers to the development of a specific cluster of anxiety-related psychological disturbances (according to the DSM-IV there are three groups of symptoms; hyperarousal, re-experiencing the trauma, emotional/numbing although confirmatory factor analyses has identified a fourth “dysphoria” factor) following exposure to an extreme stressor (Elklit and Shevlin, 2007). Worker compensation was awarded to Officer Seedsman because the court concluded that the stressor which caused Seedsman’s injury was intensive prolonged exposure to crimes committed against children and that the police service in which Seedsman worked had not provided a safe system of work that would protect her and other employees from the foreseeable risk.
The process of limiting harm to employees who work in the area of child maltreatment, however, is a complex and under-researched issue. It requires, in the first instance, a good understanding of the whole range of conditions under which employee distress manifests. While overcoming mental injury may not necessarily require a thorough understanding of its aetiology, prevention models depend on modifying the precise aspects of the organisational environment, policies and procedures that directly compromise employee safety (Goddard and Hunt, 2011; Russ et al., 2009). So far, the dominant explanation for the development of stress symptoms among those who work in the area of child maltreatment is that of vicarious traumatisation. Vicarious traumatisation refers to the cumulative transformative effect in the self of a worker that result from engagement with traumatised clients and their reports of traumatic experiences (Sabin-Farrell and Turpin, 2003). The traumatisation manifests itself in increasingly negative ways of interpreting and experiencing the world, often accompanied by debilitating psychological symptoms (Lerias and Byrne, 2003; Sabin-Farrell and Turpin, 2003).

Vicarious traumatisation is generally considered to be a phenomenon specific to caring professions such as social workers, psychologists and specialist trauma counsellors (Sabin-Farrell and Turpin, 2003). A broad range of occupational groups, however, perform roles that require exposure to traumatised client groups. Police who work with maltreated children may also be vulnerable to experiencing vicarious traumatisation. For example, Seedsman’s contracting of post-traumatic stress disorder subsequent to working with maltreated children is consistent with a process of vicarious traumatisation (Sabin-Farrell and Turpin, 2003). It begs the question; how many other WorkCover claims with diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder will arise within the context of child-abuse investigation?

It needs to be noted, however, that intense contact with maltreated children is not the only potential stressor that child maltreatment workers are exposed to. Such workers face a wide range of more direct role-specific and general organisational stressors, all of which could potentially contribute to mental breakdown. For example, Stanley and Goddard (2002, cited in Goddard and Hunt, 2011) reported that child protection workers often face direct trauma such as verbal abuse, threats of harm and physical assaults. Direct assaults on child protection workers have been found to be associated with increased levels of psychological dysfunction while greater exposure to traumatised children has not (Cornille and Meyers, 1999). Child protection workers have also highlighted workplace issues such as high workload, non-supportive co-workers and supervisors, and feeling undervalued as employees as being important sources of distress (Goddard and Hunt, 2011). Qualitative research with police tells a similar tale; where organisational stressors have been reported by child-abuse investigators to be even more distressing and harmful than operational stressors (Hart and Cotton, 2002; Maguen et al., 2009; McCreary and Thompson, 2006; Shane, 2010). For example, Wright et al. (2006), who conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 25 police officers working in child-abuse units, found that heavy caseload and disputes in the context of professional collaboration were key sources of negative work stress whereas the content of the casework was not reported to be a concern at all.
Further, it needs to be acknowledged that not all child maltreatment workers who are exposed to a wide range of stressors develop psychological dysfunction. Powell and Tomyn (2011) revealed that, among a group of 214 police officers working in the area of child abuse investigation, a measure of life satisfaction (known to be related to clinical depression) was well within the expected adult normative range. Correlations between measures of wellbeing and exposure to traumatised clients have been small and not always negative (Sabin-Farrell and Turpin, 2003) and between 50 and 70 per cent of research participants have been free of any psychopathology (Russ et al., 2009).

Collectively, the prior work suggests that: vicarious trauma may not be a common phenomenon within the population that works with maltreated children; and employee distress (when it arises) could potentially be due to exposure to casework as well as the broader workplace environment. The development of workplace strategies for limiting harm, therefore, must be grounded within a broad organisational climate framework; a framework that considers levels of role stress, leadership facilitation and support, and work-group cooperation as factors that influence work attitudes, job performance, response to stressors and employee wellbeing (Arnetz et al., 2011; Carr et al., 2003; D’Amato and Zijlstra, 2008; Hart and Cotton, 2002; Parker et al., 2003).

Research is still in its infancy and work is still needed to establish the nature of the stressors facing professionals in the child maltreatment arena. The current research extends prior work by allowing child maltreatment professionals another opportunity to present their perspectives on what causes them distress in their work with abused children, whether these stressors be empathic or located within the broad organisational climate. Although this study is exploratory and subjective in nature, it is important to stay grounded in the qualitative framework unconstrained by predetermined analytical categories and meanings ascribed to workplace stress (Minichiello et al., 1995). The two unique aspects of this investigation are its inclusion of a heterogeneous sample (including police, social workers and psychologists in the one study) and the elicitation of participants perceptions in a completely anonymous (i.e. online) environment as opposed to face-to-face in the workplace. We expect that, consistent with research by Ho and McLeod (2008) the anonymity afforded by completely anonymous online communication would maximise the likelihood of participants revealing personal vulnerability.

Method

Participants

The participants included 68 professionals (15 males, 53 females) specialising in the area of child-abuse investigation from all seven states of Australia. In all, 41 of the professionals were police officers working within specialised child-abuse units and 27 of the professionals were child protection workers (social workers or psychologists). The qualifications, background experience and length of service varied among participants. The estimated number of child-abuse interviews previously conducted by the participants ranged from 6 to 300 (M=127.96, SD=110.30), formal qualifications ranged from high school diploma to doctoral degree, and length of employment in the child-abuse area ranged from 1 to 29 years (M=11.66, SD=7.39).
Recruitment and online discussion procedure

All of the participants were in the process of completing an online forensic interview training programme entitled “Advanced Practice in Forensic Interviewing of Children”, run through the first two authors’ university. Participants enrolled in the online training course in cohorts of between 10 and 20, and completed the course in the year of enrolment. The data were collected over a six-year period, from 2006 to 2011. Participants were told that their decision to engage in the research component was completely voluntary and would not impact their relationship with the trainers. All participants consented and no participant who provided consent was excluded. Overall, the online training course involved 12 modules (delivered over 24 weeks) requiring a time commitment of approximately three hours per week. Modules 1 to 11 focused solely on open-ended questioning and techniques to improve interview practice. This included the ability to describe what constitutes “best practice” guidelines in interviewing children, the capacity to recognise interviews that adhere to such guidelines, the ability to define and label appropriate questions and provide reasons for their effectiveness, and the ability to demonstrate the use of open-ended questions in mock interviews.

From the beginning of the training course, the anonymous and voluntary discussion forum was made available to all participants electronically via the university’s online student “blackboard”. In the first ten modules the discussion focused on providing feedback about the exercises participants were required to complete. The modules did not address broader workplace issues. The anonymous discussion forum about organisational stressors was introduced in Module 11, the second-last module of the course. Importantly, by the time Module 11 was commenced, participants had already become familiar with the blackboard system and were openly and anonymously conversing with each other about the challenges they faced in relation to completing the learning exercises.

In the online discussion task related to workplace stressors (the focus of this study) participants were instructed to reflect on the last few months at work and to think about the stressors that may have impacted their performance and/or led to feelings of work stress. The participants were encouraged to generate a variety of stressors and to “post” or upload comments about each. As a guide, the following questions were to be reflected on when writing about each stressor: why is (the stressor) a source of stress for you? Precisely how does (the stressor) affect you? What practical strategies can your organisation implement to overcome (the stressor)? Participants were aware that their comments were anonymous and could not be linked back to them unless participants provided identifying information within their text. When uploading their text on the system, participants were asked to state their occupation-type so that comments could be considered within the nature of the work conducted (policing or child protection). Participants were also encouraged to read preceding online comments prior to offering their own remarks so that the forum could be interactive. This was intended to encourage communication and compliance with the task by normalising the process of critical self-reflection and providing a framework for responding (i.e. comparisons could be drawn between their own and others’ experiences).
All responses were archived and printed for analysis. Although participants’ responses were anonymous, the online system allowed us to determine whether the feedback was an initial or subsequent posting of the same person. The data set consisted of 68 initial comments as well as 43 additional responses made by individuals (usually in response to a comment made by another individual). The length of the initial comments were, on average, 748 words (range 102-1,257 words), which is roughly equivalent to one A4 page of single-spaced text. The 43 responses to colleagues’ comments were much briefer (M=103 words, range=19-207) and were predominantly an expression of sympathy and understanding of another's situation. At the completion of the research, all of the comments were downloaded from the online system and copied into a word document for analysis. Thematic analysis, which involves the process of locating common patterns within a data set (Gifford, 1998), was used to systematically analyse the participants’ comments.

The process of extrapolating key themes within the data set began with the second author independently reading each comment several times, followed by the concurrent reading of the entire data set in order to get a sense of the overall range of organisational stressors identified. Elaborate notes were made about the stressors identified, and a collaborative discussion was held with the first author (who had also read the comments) to communicate and debate the emerging themes. A coding manual was developed by authors and all of the participants’ comments were subsequently re-read and coded and a table of organisational stressors was developed. The table also included a list of specific concerns relating to each organisational stressor (including the impact on interview performance) and a list of suggested strategies for overcoming each stressor. It should be noted that participant responses did not differ on the basis of demography. Therefore all the reported results refer to the sample as a whole.

Results

All of the professionals acknowledged the existence of workplace stressors which were significant enough to undermine work satisfaction and performance; however, the nature of the case material was not a salient concern in these comments. Three key stressors were identified by the participants and these were reported across both professional groups. The stressors included: inadequate recognition of specialised skills, high-workload demands and interagency tensions. Each of these stressors will now be described, along with the suggestions offered by participants for addressing them. Quotes are provided to illustrate the professionals’ opinions.

**Inadequate recognition of specialised skills**

The first stressor identified by participants was inadequate recognition or acknowledgement within the workplace of the complex, specialist skills required to conduct best practice interviews with children about abuse. More specifically, some participants perceived that their management's lack of support undermined the development and maintenance of good interview technique as well as job satisfaction and mental wellbeing:
I will never forget a comment made to me by a senior police detective. He said to me, “there is no mystery to child abuse investigations. They are like any other investigation. The only thing that is extra is the interview with the child, and that is not hard.” I didn’t bother challenging this comment […] It would have fallen on deaf ears. As long as attitudes such as these continue to be held by senior police, the skill development of junior police in dealing with sexual and physical offences against children will be jeopardised (Police Officer).

The importance of, and skill level required to, interview children is frequently minimised and undervalued within the other day-to-day challenges of protective services work. I feel appreciated because I know my new manager understands I have specialist skill. This enhances my confidence and work satisfaction which in turn has made me a better interviewer. […] Most of my colleagues are not so lucky (Child Protection Worker).

Some of the participants drew a direct link between job satisfaction, performance and recognition of the specialised nature of their work, commenting that organisational policies needed to better promote awareness of the specialist skills required in child-abuse work. Several police officers called for a change to “rotational” policies that restricted them from being employed within child-abuse units for more than three years, complaining that the maximum tenure policy was leading to a shortage of skilled staff and mentors. Child protection workers, in contrast, commented on the lack of incentive to up-skill or improve their performance in the area:

Where I work, the police officers can only stay for a maximum of 3 years due to our tenure policy. Regardless of the fact that we have compulsory 3 month psychological tests, they still won’t let us stay. How are we meant to become specialised and experts at talking to children after just 3 years? I love what I do, but they won’t let me keep doing it. And if the best interviewers are moved on, who are going to be the role models? The policy of maximum tenure needs to change if we are ever going to acquire and maintain best practice (Police Officer).

When people don’t believe what you do is challenging then there are no checks and balances and so things deteriorate over time. Lack of specialised training, lack of resources and lack of skilled workers leave many workers feeling overwhelmed about the process that needs to be followed. So why are these checks and balances not in place? Part of the problem is likely to be individual apathy, but there is no external incentive to lift your game because the organisation doesn’t really think it’s a difficult task. People feel unsupported by the system and are often disheartened (Child Protection Worker).

Increasing senior management's recognition of the specialised skills needed in child-abuse investigations was advocated by many of the professionals as one way to overcome the perceived impediment that under-recognition of the specialty of their work presents. Not surprisingly, given the focus of the online training course was on interviewing, comments concentrated on the lack of support in relation to this skill. Participants suggested that management could support improved interview performance by allocating more time for workers to engage in practice opportunities and
providing greater access to expert evaluation and feedback. Participants associated the unavailability of professional development opportunities (training and feedback) with the lack of recognition of their skills:

*I think management could show their support for our work by allocating resources to getting in experts in the area who can spend time with us looking over an interview transcript or two and giving us feedback about our strengths and areas for further development. I thought this was the most beneficial part of this course [online course] – nothing compares to having the opportunity to review and critique your work with an expert (Police Officer).*

**High-workload demands**

The second organisational stressor was high caseload. All participants commented on the “relentless” nature of their work and the perceived need to “take on more and more” diverse and competing tasks:

*Child Protection has historically struggled to maintain sufficient staffing levels and this is due to a variety of reasons, not least of which is due to the stress caused by the extraordinary workload and the impact this has on interview preparedness and quality (Child Protection Worker).*

*It is about “complete that file and while doing that move on to the next pile sitting there”. There is either no time or procedure to evaluate the file just completed and reflect and learn how and if the interview could have been done better (Police Officer).*

Complaints about high workload were usually accompanied by complaints about the inadequate recognition for what participants do:

*Prior to moving into this area, I had no idea of the large amount of work that was passing through these units. Over time, I have noticed how the constant intake of work continually leads to stress within the office. The stress is not only associated with this type of work, but the stress from management who continually expect you to keep performing with less staff and more incoming work. Management are blind to the amount of work undertaken in this area because relatively few matters are prosecuted for a variety of reasons. It is very disheartening working in this field, seeing how few of the many jobs we do actually get to Court (Police Officer).*

Simply trying to manage the cases on a daily basis had a wide range of implications for the professionals and their mental wellbeing and job performance. High caseload undermined the ability to adequately prepare for cases, monitor performance and complete investigations thoroughly.
Some professionals reported feeling a sense of guilt and anxiety about their ability to represent each child client in the best manner possible:

*These matters require time and attention to compile the best possible brief for presentation to court and you always feel that you have not had sufficient time to do this. This leaves you feeling a sense of guilt and anxiety as you always want to put forward the best case possible for the victim. In matters of child abuse, the responsibility felt by investigators for outcomes is huge (Police Officer).*

*The worry of failure and letting down the child stresses me (Child Protection Worker).*

*We always get the message that we are not doing enough and in that culture it is very easy to start to question yourself and your competence, “Am I not doing enough?”, “Am I working too slowly?”, “Am I not up to scratch?”, “How good an interviewer am I really?” [...] If my seniors had a better understanding of the busy and oftentimes mishmash nature of this work and if they offered greater space in my workload for training and professional development activities I would feel more confident, more competent, and this would drive my motivation and efficiency. Second-guessing your interviewing skill wastes time and impacts productivity. It's a crazy cycle (Child Protection Worker).*

Two distinct suggestions were offered by the professionals to reduce the stress caused by heavy caseloads. First, the professionals called for improved communication from the courts and other divisions within their organisation about the progress of cases and the professionals’ contribution to case outcomes. The professionals perceived that better feedback about cases would facilitate discussions with child clients and their families, and would offer professionals closure (allowing mental and emotional attention to be directed towards other cases). The professionals also called for greater recognition among senior management of workers’ heavy caseloads and the array of other work expectations placed upon them. It was suggested that management could more explicitly articulate workload expectations and should ensure that adequate time is allocated in workers’ loads for case preparation and professional development activities.

*Interagency tensions*

The third organisational stressor isolated by participants in the study related to the difficulty of working in partnership with other agencies. In particular, the tension between police and child protection agencies in the context of conducting joint investigations was prominent. Overall, the source of interagency tension and negative emotional reactions associated with conducting joint investigations appeared to be process conflict (i.e. conflict over how to perform the task, logistical issues of procedure, timeframes, roles and planning) and inadequate information and debriefing opportunities to equip professionals to deal with and interpret conflicts adequately. For example, a number of professionals in the study reported feeling frustrated when decisions were made without consultation and when delays were caused because of the other organisation’s procedural
requirements. There was clear tension related to differences between professionals experience, skills and attitudes:

*Child protection is also involved in joint investigations with police (in the case of physical and sexual abuse of children) and this often results in some tensions. It can be frustrating for child protection staff when police inquiries take considerable time before any charges are laid (sometimes many months), and once charges are laid it can be a year before the matter is brought to Court. These long delays make it difficult for child protection to protect children in the family when police do not want us to talk to alleged offenders before they complete their interviews especially when we need to take immediate action to protect the children (Child Protection Worker).*

*I think that there is confusion between the agencies as to the techniques utilised, skills possessed and nature of information being sought. This does lead to some disharmony in terms of police wanting to be the lead interviewers in every field situation we encounter, because generally members do not trust the experience, skills and attitudes of members from outside of their organisation (Police Officer).*

Importantly, several professionals who had participated in joint-agency training programmes felt that the training helped to alleviate interagency tensions which, in turn, improved practice:

*I have heard others in the area talk about the negative impact that workers from different agencies can have on your confidence and interview skill. I was trained with police members in a group interagency training course and I must say that I haven’t experienced any problems working collaboratively with police since then. We are all trained the same way and so when we work together we can assist one another because we’re both on the same page [...] We give each other feedback and we build each other’s confidence [...] I think my interviewing is all the better because of it (Child Protection Worker).*

Although interagency tensions existed for many of the professionals in the sample, all had a positive attitude to working collaboratively and were open to discussing the tensions faced. Some participants suggested that joint training might help to foster more effective working relationships, while others called for regular online discussion, focus groups or other forums through which interagency communication about the tensions and concerns arising from collaboration could be achieved:

*It appears there is a general lack of understanding about the role of police and child protection in investigating child abuse and that more joint training and collaboration between these agencies at grass root level would be beneficial. Participating in this research meant that I got to read the comments of people from other professions and this has helped me to understand their experiences for the first time. Online forums or newsletters may be one way to open*
communication between us and give us an opportunity to learn what each other does and the climate that we each work within (Child Protection Worker).

A final suggestion for reducing the impact of workplace stressors was increasing opportunities for formal debriefing. This theme was raised by just under half of the professionals in the sample. While informal debriefing was commonplace among colleagues, and none of the professionals reported experiencing major psychological or other illness as a result of their work, the potential for psychological harm was acknowledged. Debriefing was not merely needed to deal with reactions to case content. Some participants referred to debriefing as an educative process whereby participants could be helped to identify strategies for enhancing interagency collaboration and time management (i.e. enhancing skills such as prioritisation, planning and handling interruptions). Debriefing was perceived as a requirement of any specialised job that involved casework (not merely child protection work) and inadequate support in this regard was seen as part of the general lack of recognition for the high demands, high workload and stressful conditions that staff worked under:

I think the importance of staff being able to be debriefed is misunderstood by management. Within our work location, peer debriefing is conducted nearly every day whether it is peers sharing humour or merely discussing each notification, it is a form of talking and sharing how one is feeling. We rely on peer support but sometimes that doesn’t cut it. The stress affects personal life and I know it affects work life – even though few would be willing to admit it (Police Officer).

Within my role I have spoken to numerous children disclosing sexual experiences well beyond their years to scrolling through computers with child pornography to gather evidence to just the other day delivering a death message to a child, and like most other members within the same units as mine I have never been debriefed. We need to start seriously considering our wellbeing so that we can best approach the way we conduct interviews (Police Officer).

Discussion

This study has highlighted that child-abuse investigation work is associated with numerous stressors including high workload, tensions related to working in partnership with other agencies and inadequate recognition of (and opportunity to develop) specialised skills required to perform the job adequately. Indeed, these workplace climate factors were more noticeable stressors than exposure to child-abuse experiences and reports. The stress associated with case content was not a theme raised in response to our questions.

Could omission of case content as a perceived stressor merely be compliance (among the professionals) with a preconception that they should be able to deal with the content? It is well established that employees will refrain from displaying true feelings if these run counter to prevailing norms (Glomb and Tews, 2004). We suspect that the answer is “no”, for five reasons. First, there is no anecdotal support for such normative expectations on the online forum discussion, and
second, the nature and content of the responses were remarkably similar to previous studies which have sought qualitative feedback in quite different participant samples and contexts (Maguen et al., 2009; Russ et al., 2009; Sabin-Farrell and Turpin, 2003; Shane, 2010; Strand and Dore, 2009). Third, the participants demonstrated the ability to vocalise sensitive and personal matters using the anonymous blackboard system, and were aware of the potential of trauma content to negatively impact wellbeing. Fourth, the findings were consistent across all professional groups, even practising psychologists who are well accustomed to talking about symptoms and vicarious stress.

Finally, the findings fit well within a prominent stress model; the Job Demands-Resources model. According to this model, employees are exposed to occupation-specific characteristics (i.e. physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of the work environment) characterised as either job resources or job demands. Job resources possess motivational qualities and thereby contribute to work goal achievement. Examples include autonomy, availability of feedback, support, opportunities for development, positive workplace climate and rewards and recognition (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Crawford et al., 2010). Job demands, in contrast, are contextual strains that erode wellbeing if the physical or psychological energy required to cope exceeds the employees energy level (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Crawford et al., 2010). Examples of job demands include work overload, physically demanding work environment and emotionally draining client contact (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Job resources offset the negative impact of job demands and this becomes particularly important when tasks are especially demanding in terms of workload and emotional challenge (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2010). An expanded list of demands, differentiated into challenge and hindrance stressors, has been included in recent research aimed at refining the model. Challenge stressors are those which, although energy depleting, also have motivating potential as overcoming the challenge provides benefits such as need satisfaction, goal achievement and personal growth. Employees perceive challenge stressors as those which can be managed and stimulate problem-focused coping (e.g. workload, deadlines and job responsibility; Crawford et al., 2010; Van den Broeck et al., 2010). Hindrance stressors are energy depleting without compensatory motivational potential. These prevent the attainment of growth needs, satisfaction and goal achievement, and tend to be countered with emotion-focused coping (e.g. role conflict, role overload, organisational politics, administrative hassles, emotional conflict and inadequate resources; Crawford et al., 2010; Van den Broeck et al., 2010).

The stressors revealed by the participants in this study, and the frustration and dissatisfaction engendered by these, suggest that the participants are routinely faced with demands-rich – resource-scare workplaces (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). For example, comments related to inadequate specialisation indicate a lack of resources such as support, recognition, positive workplace climate and opportunities for development. Interagency tensions indicate the presence of hindrance demands such as emotional and role conflict, administrative hassles and the absence of resources such as positive workplace climate and opportunities for development and support. High workload (accompanied by absence of resources such as adequate recovery time, positive workplace climate, recognition from management and professional development opportunities) was seen as a source of energy depletion and frustration without any motivational potential.
Within the model, it is possible that child sex abuse case content was not mentioned as a source of distress because (while energy depleting) it was perceived to be a challenge stressor; satisfaction is obtained from the idea of protecting children which in turn confers resilience to the employee (Burns et al., 2008; Conrad and Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Russ et al., 2009). Workplace stressors, in contrast are sources of distress because they impose demands without contributing any compensatory energy (Crawford et al., 2010; Shane, 2010; Van den Broeck et al., 2010). For example, success increases investigator self-efficacy, and self-efficacy focuses attention on the positive aspects of the job such as the personal satisfaction derived from protecting children (Burns et al., 2008). However, participants often did not know the fate of children and so have no obvious signs of success. In the absence of obvious success the participants feel less competent and are deprived of a source of work satisfaction which, in turn, reduces workers’ perception of the workplace climate and their reliance on organisational support. Similarly, heavy caseload, inadequate training opportunities and interagency conflicts interfere with attaining satisfaction that would otherwise be met through child-abuse investigation work.

With regards to how organisations should respond to these stressors, several suggestions were offered by the participants. These included: formalised structures and processes to facilitate interagency collaboration; better recognition and feedback regarding professionals’ performance and its impact on case outcome; and increasing opportunities for professional development, formal debriefing and case preparation. These suggestions are consistent with prior evaluations (Powell and Wright, 2009, 2012) and fit well within the Jobs Demands-Resources Model. Essentially, the suggestions are requests for more resources. For example, inadequate specialisation could be addressed through recognition of participant skills by management and opportunities for professional development through training and access to feedback. Interagency tensions could be reduced through providing debriefing and joint training sessions which would provide forums for professional development, addressing sources of emotional conflict and increasing interagency support. If the resource deficiency was addressed, it may be possible for high workload to be changed from an energy-depleting demand to a challenge demand. Management recognition of the high workload could accrue resources such as providing adequate time for recovery, case preparation and professional development activities. Better communication from courts and inside organisations would provide the resource of feedback. Access to feedback would also provide closure, allowing employees to conserve and redirect their energy to incomplete cases thereby sustaining a higher average level of performance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Whittaker et al., 2007).

Addressing the stressors identified by participants is possible but will require numerous changes, including a major cultural shift in attitudes towards professionals. When writing about each of the stressors and their needs and challenges, participants were complaining about limitations in the amount of professional self-efficacy and their value within the organisations. A strong orientation towards prioritisation of child-abuse investigation (i.e. the need for better recognition or appreciation by management) was reflected in the way the professionals perceived their role within the organisation, the quality of their work and their relationship with other service providers. This issue is probably heightened in the area of child abuse because few cases go to court and when they do, professionals are often unaware of the case outcomes.
A shift in culture is likely to have a flow on effect to the perception of the workplace psychological climate held by individual investigators (Patterson et al., 2005). For example, employee recognition influences perceived quality of the workplace climate, perceived organisational support and the quality of the leader-member exchange, all of which are positively associated with performance and employee wellbeing (Brown and Leigh, 1996; Carr et al., 2003; Erdogan and Enders, 2007; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Stajkovic and Luthans, 2003; Wayne et al., 2002; Yukl et al., 2009). Another example is the issue of excessive workload. This has been shown to increase the likelihood of experiencing symptoms of physical and psychological problems across occupational groups (Nixon et al., 2011; Schultz et al., 2010). However, excessive workload is only reported to be stressful when the organisational climate is poor (Cotton and Hart, 2003).

There are several directions for future research. First, we need to identify and trial strategies for addressing workplace stress in order to prevent occupational injury and increase professional satisfaction. Second, we need to develop techniques for identifying those few individual officers who are experiencing (or who may be at risk of developing) psychological problems. None of our participants showed evidence of significant psychological harm associated with their job which is consistent with other work showing that (as a group) child-abuse investigators do not display a lower level of life satisfaction (which is indicative of burnout) compared to the mainstream population (Powell and Tomyn, 2011). However, this does not mean police or other occupational groups exposed to traumatised children cannot suffer some form of empathic harm. For example, Burns et al. (2008) who interviewed a group of professionals who specialised in the investigation of child internet exploitation revealed the existence of symptoms consistent with secondary traumatisation. It needs to be ascertained the degree to which the different prevalence in reporting trauma symptoms between the current study and that of Burns et al. is due to the different nature of the work (child internet exploitation work vs general child-abuse work) or the different task requirement (describing incidents that challenged coping mechanisms vs describing the challenges of child-abuse work in general). Child internet exploitation work is unique in that it is highly focused on viewing graphic images and audiovisual recordings of young children being sexually assaulted and tortured. A substantial aspect of the work is on the investigation, identification and location of victims and suspects. The job can also involve covert work (i.e. pretending to be a victim online in order to entrap offenders). Thus, there is also scope to build on this study by adding a quantitative element and comparing between groups who specialise in different populations of traumatised clients.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated that child-abuse investigators attribute distress to features of the perceived workplace climate rather than exposure to detailed accounts of child abuse provided by victims. The three focal stressors identified were excessive caseload, tensions arising from interagency collaboration and management’s failure to recognise that these are highly skilled specialists. Thus, controlling the negative influence of work stress on investigative interviewers requires (at least in the first instance) modification of the work environment rather than attempts to limit exposure to case material through maximum tenure and forced job rotation which undermine opportunities for specialisation.
References


About the authors

Martine B. Powell (PhD, MClinPsych) is a Professor with a broad research profile in the area of child witness testimony, particularly investigative interviewing and the trial process. Martine B. Powell is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: martine.powell@deakin.edu.au

Belinda L. Guadagno (DPsych Forensic) is a Lecturer with particular interest in the development of investigative interviewer training strategies.

Peter Cassematis (PhD) is an Organisational Psychologist and Research Fellow with expertise in the identification and management of health impacts arising from the investigation of child internet exploitation.