
E78 Feeling Stress at Work? Stress, Support, and Decision-Making of Forensic Examiners

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the unique nature of stress in forensic science and how it may impact decision making. This presentation will also address the importance of workplace support and interactions and will present findings of a study conducted in forensic laboratories. In the study, data was collected on forensic examiners' experiences about workplace stress and support.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing data and insights about an issue that has been largely overlooked in forensic laboratories: the experiences of stress and support and their impact on forensic decision-making. The data reveals the sources of workplace stress and levels of support experienced by forensic examiners, in addition to whether they consider stress as a factor that affects their judgments.

Forensic examiners operate in stressful environments where they are faced with various sources of workplace stress. Some stress factors, such as high caseloads and backlogs, are common across occupations. However, other factors, such as exposure to bloody crime scenes and working in a culture of "zero errors," are specific characteristic of forensic science. Constructive relationships and adequate support are primary factors associated with stress (or the lack thereof) among criminal justice employees in general. Forensic examiners interact and develop relationships with multiple stakeholders, some internal to their crime laboratory, such as managers and supervisors, and some external stakeholders, such as lawyers. These can be a source of stress, but can also be supportive and reduce stress.

One must also remember that stress is not necessarily negative. Stress, at moderate levels, can in fact be a motivating factor. Hence, undertaking research to understand and assess levels of support and the sources of workplace stress and their potential effects on forensic examiners' well-being and decision making is important, yet still lacking. While stress has been extensively studied for decades in many professional domains, forensic science has seen less than a handful of attempts to consider this human factor and its implication to forensic work.

The study reported here surveyed practicing forensic examiners ($N=41$) from two laboratories. The forensic examiners were asked about the sources of their stress, its potential influence on their decisions, and the support they receive. Insights into the factors that may mediate stress were explored by investigating workplace stress as a function of the forensic field, the examiners' years of experience, and sex. Both descriptive and inferential statistics of the data are presented.

The data revealed that stress was caused by managers, supervisors, and case backlogs. Crime scene examiners felt higher stress than analytical examiners because of the nature of their cases and due to personal reasons. Female examiners felt more stressed than male examiners in general and also specifically in workplace stress. Different levels of experience affected two areas of stress—personal and work-related circumstances. No significant associations were found between management support and either general or workplace stress. Furthermore, the impact of stress on judgments provided a mixed finding; examiners were divided whether stress affected their judgments. The findings have practical implications for improving the decision-making environment of examiners. In the broader context, the development of a working culture that can address the negative impact of stress on examiners and its effect on forensic science judgements is needed.

Workplace Stress, Human Factors, Expert Decision-Making