



## Thesis explores the connection between the work of military police officers and psychological distress

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### Mental health | A study based on a socio-historical analysis investigates how work characteristics contribute to professionals' illness

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The inherent characteristics of the professional activities of military police officers in Rio Grande do Sul, such as a deeply ingrained hierarchical military tradition, resource and staffing challenges, inherent occupational dangers, and a lack of recognition both within and outside the corps, are directly associated with the illnesses and psychological suffering experienced by this group. This is the conclusion of a master's thesis defended at the Graduate Program in Sociology of UFRGS, entitled ["The Organization of Work and the Psychic Suffering of Soldiers and Sergeants of the Military Police of RS"](#).

In the research paper, the author, Alexandra Estefânia Regner da Silva, proposed to analyze how the work within the corporation contributes to the development of mental suffering among soldiers and sergeants. Silva conducted a case study involving the 1st Company of the 9th Military Police Battalion located in the Historic Center of Porto Alegre. The study included eleven semi-structured interviews, observations, recording of impressions related to work processes, and keeping a field diary.

The entire data collection process was conducted in two phases. The first one, in 2016, the president of the Antônio Mendes Filho Beneficent Association, which represents soldiers and sergeants of the Military Brigade, three soldiers, four sergeants, and a psychiatrist medical captain were interviewed. The second phase took place in 2019, when two sergeants working in an administrative capacity were interviewed.

The author has introduced three crucial concepts for analysis. First, there's 'work,' which encompasses the training of police officers within the force and the risks and dangers they face. The second concept deals with the organization of work, which includes working conditions and hierarchical relationships. Finally, the analysis focuses on psychological suffering, which revolves around issues such as lack of recognition, dissatisfaction, sources of tension, signs of illness, and related stigmas.

#### Tension within and beyond the institution

At the time of the research, working conditions were marked by structural, material, and personnel challenges. According to the Company commander, there were only 61 police officers on the team, whereas the ideal number should have been 191. Furthermore, there is a significant challenge in defining the scope of their work, as police officers must remain prepared for a wide range of situations, all while facing the inherent risks and dangers of their profession.

Most interviewees emphasize the inherent danger that triggers an adrenaline rush. Silva suggests that this surge of adrenaline rush can lead to poor risk assessment and decision-making skills, surpassing what formal training teaches. This leads to a scenario where these risks become ingrained in the everyday life of the profession and are often downplayed. Simultaneously, the researcher points out, "You must also learn how to manage this surge of adrenaline in various situations, as failing to do so can hinder your ability to assert yourself in confrontational scenarios,"

Moreover, the training is insufficient and far from reality. Silva highlights the shortcomings of the Basic Military Police Training Course, which typically lasts six to eight months for soldiers. She emphasizes that the course focuses more on the principles of militarism than on practical work techniques. "A recurring concern among the interviewees was the emphasis on military aspects in certain subjects," she notes. The Military Police officers reported feeling unprepared for real-world situations, suggesting a lack of practical training. Additionally, many instructors do not have proper pedagogical training.

The researcher has uncovered a concerning trend within the organization. The shortage of equipment or the inefficiency of the provided gear pushes police officers to acquire their own tools. Cases of moral harassment have also come to light. The study emphasizes that due to the organization's culture of hierarchy and discipline, these issues are not openly discussed, and certain commanders take advantage of their subordinates when it comes to scheduling and shifts.

The persistent absence of institutional recognition remains a significant issue, as does the absence of a clear career plan ensuring the soldiers' professional growth. Advancement opportunities are confined to internal competitions, which, being arduous, often result in demotivation. Notably, in 2016, during the administration of former governor José Ivo Sartori, the state's public servants faced the disconcerting situation of receiving their salaries in installments.

However, Silva points out that the absence of recognition from the population seems to be more relevant for police officers than the absence of institutional recognition. A significant number of those interviewed expressed challenges in handling [the negative] public criticism, asserting that it applies to only a minority of professionals.

When asked about their dissatisfaction, most interviewees pointed to a lack of comprehension from the public. At the same time, the most satisfying thing was the ability to resolve a citizen's problem. According to the author, it's not just about satisfaction within the institution; it's about being perceived positively by society."

#### Psychic suffering, estrangement, and stigma

Interview excerpts also reveal difficulties in resting and disconnecting from work, as officers remain on call even during their off-duty hours, contributing to sleep deprivation and a lack of relaxation. Moreover, there is constant exposure to violence, which makes emotional detachment a formidable task for these officers.

According to Silva, each narrative tells impactful stories that can contribute to the development of mental health issues. And, for these officers, the strategy to avoid confronting their suffering is to keep working – which, she adds, may already be a sign of mental exhaustion.

Getting people to seek help at the onset of a depressive episode is a challenge, notes the psychiatrist interviewed in the study. This difficulty is rooted in cultural factors, including the pervasive idea of handling pain in isolation, and avoiding the display of vulnerability. To hide their suffering, some individuals seek relief through drugs such as alcohol and cocaine. This behavior is linked to the macho institutional perspective, as well as a lack of information and awareness about available support services. "It's as if depression affects only those 'out here,' but that's not the case," Silva affirms.

The consequence of seeking mental health care can be hospitalization or enduring stigma. Silva points out that the prevailing notion within organizational culture is that seeking care is perceived as a sign of weakness. Beyond the stigma of seeking treatment, there is a fear that it will affect the professionals' careers. All that remains is to stay with the problem.

The thesis also highlights the fact that, although suicide is a taboo topic, it is, somewhat trivialized within the corporation. The interviewees reveal that, following a colleague's suicide, the workplace atmosphere swiftly returns to normal. For the author, this indicates not only a lack of acceptance by colleagues but also a notable lack of space to reflect on the gravity of such incidents.

The researcher explains that there is already a mental health care structure but deems it insufficient. She advocates addressing these issues in training programs. Another suggested approach is creating spaces for conversations and lectures to demystify the stigma of mental health issues, "so that the officer's perspective of the institution changes, ensuring they know there's support available in times of illness," she concludes.

Translated into English by [Pedro Henrique Marques Sieburger](#), undergraduate student enrolled in the course "Supervised Translation Training II (English)" of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Márcia Montenegro Velho (M.A.) – IL/UFRGS.

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