Korean Police Officers’ Perceptions of Public Satisfaction and Its Effect on their Job Satisfaction and Work Performance

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Abstract

This article examines police officers’ perceptions of public satisfaction and the effect of public satisfaction on the officers’ own job satisfaction and work performance in Korea. There have been several quantitative research studies about public satisfaction toward police or police job satisfaction. However, few studies have been conducted correlating these two themes: police officers’ perceptions of public satisfaction and its effect on police job satisfaction and work performance. Having identified this gap, this research employs qualitative semi-structured interviews as a primary data collection method to analyze the perceptions of police officers toward public support and its effect on job satisfaction and work performance. Interview findings are discussed under the four sections: (1) police officers’ general perceptions of public satisfaction, (2) the influence of negative public satisfaction on their job satisfaction and job performance, (3) opinions about police reaction to negative public behavior, and (4) opinions about ways to improve public satisfaction.

Keywords : Public Satisfaction, Job Satisfaction, Work Performance, Korean Police, Qualitative Interview

1. Introduction

Judge et al.[1][2] argue that work performance is related to job satisfaction, generally, and the police profession is not an exception to this proposition. In particular, citizen support and satisfaction for the police has a direct effect of increasing police professionals’ job satisfaction. Elements of community policing include close cooperation between police and the public in dealing with crime and increasing public safety. Nevertheless, there have been only a few studies on public satisfaction with the police[3][4], and job satisfaction of the police[5-9]. It is widely accepted that public satisfaction with the police is quite low in Korea, and thus Korean police officers consider public attitude as being more negative, compared to public perceptions of the police in western countries[10]. Nonetheless, little evidence-based research has been

Received (October 16, 2016), Review Result (October 28, 2016) 
Accepted (November 4, 2016), Published (January 31, 2017)

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* 이 논문은 2016년도 성신여자대학교 학술연구조성비 기원에 의하여 연구되었다.

ISSN: 2383-5281 AJMAHS
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conducted yet on Korean police officers' perceptions of citizen satisfaction and its effect on police officers' job satisfaction and work performance. A comprehensive literature review on the topic shows that only one empirical study was carried out on police officers' attitude toward public support[10]. The study's survey indicates that the majority of South Korean officers feel that citizens seldom show them respect. However, this study does not analyze how public satisfaction is expressed nor does it explore how seriously such public attitudes affect police and their performance. For the purpose of filling the research gap, this paper attempts to investigate how police officers perceive public satisfaction and how it can affect their job satisfaction and work performance in South Korea.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Job satisfaction determinants

Two important factors mainly comprise job satisfaction determinants in the South Korean police force. Firstly, demographic factors including gender, rank, education, and years of service have been often recognized as police officers' job satisfaction determinants in South Korea.[5][6][7][8]. However, there is one study which argued that rank is not a significant predictor of job satisfaction[11]. Secondly, Hwang[9] compared the job satisfaction of police officers in metropolitan cities with that of officers in smaller areas in South Korea. The findings showed that there is no significant difference between metropolitan and smaller cities with rural areas. The meaningful differences this study noted were related to such factors as length of service and rank. It was found that those factors potentially negatively affected officers' job satisfaction in metropolitan areas while this was not the case in smaller cities and rural areas.

2.2 Relationship between job satisfaction and job performance

There is no research on the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance in Korea, and so western literature was examined instead. Judge et al.[2] found that satisfaction-performance relationships can be specified in different ways. For this, they reviewed and analyzed seven different models that characterize past research on the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance. The first model illustrates how job performance is directly related to job satisfaction. This model, which was based on early human relations, suggests that higher morale leads to improved productivity[12]. The second model deals with the notion that
job performance produces job satisfaction. In particular, based on a psychological point of view, this model assumes that attitude follows behavior, unlike other psychological models which assume that behavior follows attitude. The third model is associated with the way job performance interacts with job satisfaction. This reciprocal relationship between job satisfaction and job performance is a hybrid model of the previous two approaches. The fourth model suggests that there is no direct and real relationship between job satisfaction and job performance. It is argued here that there is another unmeasured variable, such as self-esteem, that contributes to the relationship between two variables[13]. The fifth model explains that other variables moderate the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance[2]. Among several of these possible moderator variables, the most frequently used moderator is termed “reward contingency”. The sixth model posits that there is no relationship between job satisfaction and job performance. The last model attempts to develop alternative conceptualizations of job satisfaction and/or job performance. Inside this model, there are three different sub-models: “reconceptualizing attitudes”, “reconceptualizing performance”, and “an organizational level of analysis”. In summary, the exact causal mechanism between job satisfaction and performance has not been demonstrated clearly but many studies have partly demonstrated there are some positive correlations between the factors.

2.3 Public satisfaction (Citizen Support)

Public satisfaction and/or citizen support does have more meaning in South Korea than in Western countries. Compared to its counterparts in Western countries, Korean police officers have little public support[9]. Many officers have had the painful experience of breathing tear gas and ducking stones hurled at them while policing citizens’ protests against the military regime. Hwang[9] also points out the social control and policing differences in South Korea in comparison to Western countries: everything from the hierarchical national system of headquarters and police patrol sub-stations or boxes in South Korea, to the fact that Korean men, from which most of the police ranks are filled, have been required to complete military service. Western countries view the police as an agency responsible for crime control, order maintenance, and citizen safety, while this may be less of the case in South Korea.

2.4 Officers’ perceptions of public satisfaction

According to Moon and Zager [10], understanding the fact that police officers’ perceptions of
citizens' support influences their attitudes is crucial. This is because those attitudes could significantly affect the ways police officers interact with citizens. Regarding police officer's attitudes toward citizen support, seniority and the size of a police station within which an officer works, are significantly related. That is, more senior police officers are more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes towards citizen support. Furthermore, police officers who worked at a third-tier police station (i.e., relatively small size stations) were more likely to have positive job satisfaction than officers assigned to the first-level police station. However, Moon and Zagner[10] found that a majority of Korean police officers perceived that they were not supported by citizens, and concluded that distrust and antagonism between the police and citizens is deep-rooted in the minds of the Korean police.

3. Research Methodology

The chosen design for this research is a semi-structured interview that seeks to qualitatively explore the perceptions of police officers about public satisfaction and the effect of public satisfaction on the officers' job satisfaction and work performance. In total, sixteen police officers, each of whom had at least several years of front-line experience, were interviewed by way of telephone between January and May, 2011. To get more effective results, basic questions had been distributed in advance. The telephone interviews took usually between 40 minutes and one hour. Since the interviews were conducted in Korean, all the summarizing and direct comments have been translated by the authors. When the direct citations were needed, the authors tried to translate them word by word.

The questions were divided into three sections. The first section is regarding how police officers generally perceive public satisfaction, for example, either negatively or positively. To understand more thoroughly what kinds of factors cause them to believe that public opinion is negative or positive, the following types of questions were formulated: 1) If they think the public attitude is negative, what do they think the main reasons are?, 2) Do police officers suppose public attitude is different according to specific roles such as crime investigation, law enforcement, or community policing?, 3) What kinds of public reaction do police officers mainly recognize as negative?, and 4) Do they think public trust has been changing? If so, in what ways has it changed and will it change towards more positive, or more negative?

The second section is about how public satisfaction or attitude affects job satisfaction as well as daily performance. The questions are as follows: 1) To what extent does public attitude affect job satisfaction in comparison to other conventional motivations such as individual
factors, and other working environment factors?, 2) Do police officers believe that daily job performance is affected by negative public attitude? If so, have they had that experience personally?, and 3) Do police officers believe that they react properly when they face negative public behavior or much more aggressive situations?

The last section is associated with how public satisfaction can be changed, and so the following questions are created: 1) What or who is the most responsible for changes in public satisfaction or attitude?, 2) Do police officers agree the responsible agencies or institutions are properly managing public satisfaction? If not, what should be done to improve public satisfaction or public attitude?

4. Conclusion: Interview Findings and Discussion

4.1. General perception of public satisfaction

Ten out of sixteen interviewees thought that public attitude in South Korea was negative while others replied that it was positive and one answered that it was neutral. So if only the percentage of responses is considered, it might be inferred, generally, that Korean police officers perceive public attitude toward them is negative.

Here, it is necessary to define the criteria as to what constitutes negative public behavior which can be considered as public dissatisfaction. In order to figure out how much public attitude is negative and what police officers think in this regard, participants were asked to provide some examples of experiences either that they had personally had or that they had heard of from their colleagues. The examples and ideas were collected from all the participants, but these questions were mainly for interviewees who replied that the public are mainly dissatisfied with police. When asked to estimate the level of negative attitude as a percentage [where 100% was completely negative], Korean officers held views that the public attitude towards the police was between 50% and 80% negative.

The Korean police officers declared that negative attitude was quite commonly displayed around police boxes or areas where protests are commonly held. The commonly encountered scenarios involving indications of poor public satisfaction with the police ranged from insulting officers either directly or indirectly, to not following officers' instructions. In particular, Korean police officers replied that many aggressive situations took place around police boxes at night by drunken people, which usually are situated in proximity to residential or commercial areas. Also, in areas where protests manifested, protesters blamed and criticized officers, sometimes
not following their instructions and even breaking laws by occupying roads.

With regard to the reasons for why the public had negative attitudes toward the police, Korean officers cited mass-media as one of the biggest factors that induced a negative appreciation of the police. A common thread in the opinions given was that newspapers or news broadcasts usually reported on sensational issues, and frequently blamed the police process in order to draw people’s attention. Apart from the daily news, they blamed soap operas or crime-themed movies for building fantasies in the minds of people of super cops that can solve crimes with few clues very quickly. However, since reality is significantly different from the images depicted in these dramas, officers said that the fact that police officers cannot physically perform in the same way currently contributes to the negative appreciation of the police.

Apart from the mass media, most of the Korean police officers additionally expressed a belief that citizens receive a negative image of the police resulting from ignorance and ambiguous prejudice generated by the past, e.g., under the Japanese rule, rather than from individual and direct experience. Even though they do not deny that negative images come from the mixture of direct and indirect experiences, they thought negative sentiment was seldom caused by bad experience with the police. Another interesting aspect that many interviewees expressed was that victims or suspects seem to think that they might be treated unfairly since they didn’t have any close contacts with the police.

4.2. The effect of public satisfaction on job satisfaction and work performance

The police officers expressed significantly different attitudes toward negative public behaviors. These attitudes can be categorized into two different clusters. One group believed that negative public attitudes had a negative influence on their job satisfaction whereas the other group did not. There are no significant variations between rank and a working role, but female officers, especially those who did not have long years of service, showed much sensitivity toward public attitudes. One of the female participants who worked as a frontline officer in the transport police answered that negative public behavior damaged her motivation significantly. She felt not only a lack of support, but also disregard from the general public. One Korean male police officer pointed out that the level of public satisfaction should be considered as an important factor since he believed it to directly influence motivations.

Some Korean officers who worked in an administrative role also agreed that negative public attitudes could be one of the most influencing factors in relation to job satisfaction for the
frontline officers. One interesting facet discovered during the interview process was that the officers who answered that negative public behavior did not have much effect on their job satisfaction, also pointed out that they were already aware of the public opinion that the police were viewed negatively before joining the police. Thus, they were not surprised at all when they faced negative people during the course of their duties. Other comments indicated that although they were not affected by the public's attitude, they did believe that their colleagues might be influenced.

For this, interview questions were asked in order to find out whether officers believed that their routine work was affected by those negative attitudes when they happen to meet such public attitudes. The opinions of South Korean police officers about their daily job performance in relation to law enforcement varied and did not show specific patterns in relation to rank, as they had various answers relating to whether negative public satisfaction had an effect on their job satisfaction. In general, half of the interviewees did not think that they were affected while facing disapproving citizens. However, some of the officers that thought they were not affected considered that other frontline police officers might be affected negatively and could be intimidated by the negative public atmosphere. Some officers added that the attitude of the public was important to many of officers and had a direct or indirect effect, regardless of their rank or role.

The second group pertained to those officers that thought their job performance was significantly affected by negative public behavior. Five of sixteen participants were of this opinion and expressed that they had experienced depression, and sometimes they even regretted their career choice, which consequently made them work in a passive way. It was found that even the officers who occupied administrative roles expected that the work performance of frontline officers might be affected by negative public attitude. They thought that negative public attitude caused frontline officers to act in a more halfhearted way. The participants indicated that some frontline officers were too passive and did not respond properly even to illegally violent citizens. The reactions to this class of behavior will be discussed in the next section in more detail.

4.3. Responses against negative public attitudes

The participants freely expressed their opinions concerning their own reactions as well as those of their colleagues. Particularly, questions about how they deal with drunken people were asked to all of the interviewees in order to get comparable answers. In South Korea, many
participants believed that the ways officers treated negative or aggressive members of the public were not reasonable. For example, when drunken people cause disturbances in police boxes, many of officers did not actively restrain them, even when the drunks were directly aggressive to the police officers. Some officers thought that drunken or belligerent people simply took their frustrations out on the police officers. Many interviewees thought that some police officers were too passive and did not control the aggressive situation properly. The participants thought the many Korean officers just endured unpleasant or aggressive situations for the following reasons:

The first reason given was that individual officers simply did not want to create more work for themselves. The next factor mentioned was that many frontline officers are afraid that something could go wrong while restraining drunken or aggressive citizens. They thought they would be reprimanded for any such events by their superiors and the mass-media. They expressed that this would result in many more difficulties for them. These participants felt that their superiors or the Korean National Police Agency (KNPA) had become too sensitive to the press and that if a story that describes the police in a negative way were reported by the press, the officers responsible for that situation would find themselves in trouble and would also experience disadvantages in their workplaces, such as reprimand or being required to write a letter of apology. The participants replied that simply avoiding problems is better than dealing with aggressive citizens assertively. However, some Korean police officers pointed out that the officers' general reactions had been quite passive, but this phenomenon was gradually changing in a positive fashion. Regarding aggressive actions against police officers, more and more police officers have begun to cope with those situations properly, instead of avoiding or suppressing an appropriate response, as was the most recent typical reaction. Also, some officers believed that more citizens were beginning to recognize that the police must start to show zero tolerance for any unprovoked irrational and aggressive behaviours against police officers.

4.4. Opinions on methods to improve public satisfaction

Half of the interviewees thought that high-ranking police officers of the KNPA and their superiors should have made more effort to improve public satisfaction. Police executives have more responsibilities than any other individual officer. These participants believed that frontline officers experienced difficulties in dealing with aggressive citizens and they were not fully supported by their superiors and the KNPA. The others responded that every police officer and
department in the police force is collectively and equally responsible and would have to make more effort. These acknowledged that frontline officers would need to feel more responsibility because they face citizens in close quarters and produce direct images as representatives of the police. A few officers are still producing anecdotal images of police incompetence and corruption. Also, these wary participants highlighted that citizens would need to change their attitudes, because they still tend to judge the police through negative images generated by historical experience. They cite public dissatisfaction as originating largely from the past events, such as the Japanese occupation of the country, and that, despite efforts by the police, this has not changed. Officers felt that the public were unaware of how much the police have been striving for change of late. Ultimately, the frontline officers are responsible for generating positive images that represent the modern Korean police force. Furthermore, a few of the young officers cautiously expressed that some of older officers were not competent, and thus failed to model good policing behavior for their subordinates.

Most of the Korean participants responded that all of the police force, from individuals to the KNPA, has been trying to improve the negative image of the police. Even though the public continues to be dissatisfied with the police, the situation is improving and will continue to improve in the future. The interviewees did not agree that all of the policies and policing were successful in changing public opinion, but they believed that the Korean police force was trying to meet public demands.

Korean police officers thought that police officers tend to be considered as a whole agency rather than as a collective of local police forces. Therefore, developing positive Agency publicity would be the most important thing to do at present.

References


