Emotional overload in forensic work: A narrative review of the literature

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ABSTRACT
The work of the scientific police in the investigation of violent crimes can cause an emotional overload of those professionals due to routine exposure to traumatic situations suffered by third parties, in addition to other stressors present in forensic work.

Thus, the study aimed to investigate the factors inherent to forensic work capable of generating emotional overload in forensic professionals. It deals with a narrative review of the publications contained in the databases PubMed, Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS), and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO). The results indicate that the manipulation of cadavers in several stages; the examination of the body of crime in victims of violence and the contact with family members in suffering; acting in grotesque scenes of homicides, suicides, and accidents; exposure to details of crimes in investigations from traumatic audiovisual material; and the responsibility for the expert report are aspects of the expert work that potentially trigger psychic alterations due to the emotional overload required to perform these activities. It is concluded that forensic police officers are vulnerable to the development of mental disorders due to the type of work activity performed, and there is a need to adopt preventive measures and health promotion for this population from institutional support.

Keywords: Forensic sciences, occupational risks, emotional stress, exposure to violence.

1 INTRODUCTION

Considering that public security is a duty of the State, a right and responsibility of all, being exercised, at the level of state and Federal District, by its civil and military police, aims to preserve public order, as well as the safety of people and property, as provided for in the Federal Constitution of 1988 in its article No. 144 (BRAZIL, 2016). Among the bodies that make up that segment, is Forensic Expertise, which, through criminal expertise, plays a relevant role in the network of public security and criminal justice, whose essential value is to link science and justice, reconciling the social interest in carrying out an effective investigation of crimes, with respect for human rights (RODRIGUES; SILVA; TRUZZI, 2010)

In this sense, the expert work is of paramount importance for the execution of Justice and reduction of injuries to human rights and citizenship, benefiting society as a whole, since scientific evidence contributes to the identification of the true perpetrators of crimes, in addition to exonerating

those wrongly accused, so that they are judged by the Criminal Justice (RODRIGUES; SILVA; TRUZZI, 2010). Forensic work has a wide scope of activities that are demanded by a diversity of audiences. It begins with criminal expertise at a crime scene, when the recognition and collection of material evidence potentially relevant to the unraveling of the crime occurs, proceeding with analysis and evaluation of the results obtained from the services of Legal Medicine, laboratory and human identification, after analysis of the body, material or object involved in the crime (LIRA, 2021; UNODC, 2010).

To carry out the role of investigation of accidents and violent events, to contribute to the development of police investigations and criminal lawsuits, forensic professionals deal with traumatic situations through care for their victims and families, as well as the investigation at the scene of the crime. Thus, those professionals are exposed to violence indirectly, through constant contact with situations of violence suffered by third parties, and may also be exposed to violence directly, situations in which they may be victims.

Studies show that the frequent exposure of police officers to situations of violence makes them vulnerable and susceptible to the presentation of the most varied psychic sufferings, if compared to the rest of the population (DA CUNHA; DICK; SAUCER; PINTO, 2019; ODGERS; Russell, 2017; SAINTS; HAUER; FURTADO, 2019). Therefore, it is of paramount importance to understand how violence can affect the mental health of certain population groups, as is the case of those who experience situations of violence in their work routine.

In this context, this study aimed to investigate the factors inherent to forensic work capable of generating emotional overload in forensic professionals.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is a narrative review that included field studies and open-access theorists available in virtual databases. The narrative review consists of a literature search, data interpretation, and critical qualitative analysis of the researcher, starting from a broader research question (ÂNIMA, 2014), and this type of study was chosen because it allows the incorporation of different aspects of the same theme (APPOLINÁRIO, 2006; BOSI M.L.M., 2012; Garcia, 2014; GIL, 2008).

Initially, the following research question was defined: *which aspects of forensic work are capable of generating emotional overload in forensic professionals?* After the elaboration of the question, keywords were identified that would enable the capture of articles related to the theme. For this purpose, the following words were used: *forensics; necrotomists; forensic medicine; forensic science; police stress; dirty work.*

The articles were located in the databases PubMed, Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS), and *Scientific Electronic Library Online* (SciELO), published in English, Spanish, or Portuguese. The contexts of interest were those related to forensic forensic work. To make a pre-selection of the articles, the titles and abstracts were read and evaluated, and those that dealt with the theme and that, supposedly, were able to answer the research question were selected. Subsequently, a floating reading of the selected texts was performed to identify content approximations.

In the end, the content of the texts was divided into thematic categories, which were developed narratively through the dialogue of the content addressed by the various authors on the theme in question, to answer the research question and, consequently, achieve the objective of the study.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In forensic work, physical and emotional overload is present due to the very characteristics inherent to the expert activity, which expose professionals to direct violence, when they are the victim, and indirect, as a result of working with victims of violence. Work with the dead; contact with the pain and suffering of victims of violence and their families; the activities carried out at the scene of crime and accident; exposure to audiovisual material of pedophile crimes; and the responsibility for the construction of the expert report are the main sources of psychological suffering of these professionals. In addition, forensic police officers are also subject to physical violence, especially during the forensic examination at a crime scene, as well as psychological and moral violence by colleagues and superiors, as in any work activity.

3.1 RISK FACTORS OF EMOTIONAL OVERLOAD

The exposure to violence (direct and indirect) in the execution of forensic expertise work is capable of generating an emotional overload of professionals. There are numerous situations of exposure, among them the manipulation of corpses in various stages; the examination of the body of crime in victims of violence and the contact with family members in suffering; acting in grotesque scenes of homicides, suicides, and accidents; exposure to details of crimes in investigations from traumatic audiovisual material; and the responsibility for the expert report are situations that potentially trigger psychic changes that can manifest themselves in various ways, from mild symptoms of stress and anxiety to the triggering of severe disorders and suicidal ideation.

3.2 CADAVERIC EXAMINATION: THE ROUTINE OF WORKING WITH THE DEAD

Death is a theme that society avoids talking about since it exposes human frailty in the face of

the finitude of life and refers to concerns and fears about what will happen next, causing suffering in the face of loss to be hidden and silent. In this context, professionals who deal daily with death, especially that which is the result of violence, are also deprived of talking about their work, and may even be stigmatized, since work with death is not considered "normal", since it is something undesirable (CAVEDON, 2010), and is often frowned upon, even by the relatives of those who perform it (PAULA; RUIZ, 2020), which can make you more emotionally burdensome, given the lack of family support.

Working with the dead is not always a choice, but an alternative in the face of the lack of better work options (PAULA; RUIZ, 2020). The execution of activities related to disgusting, unpleasant jobs that involve dead people brings varied risks to health, both physical and psycho-emotional (SILVA; LEE; Smith, 2015).

The cadaveric examination is among the works considered repugnant, being denied, rejected, and forgotten by society (BARROS; Smith, 2004; SILVA; LEE; Smith, 2015). This type of work, perceived as degrading and causing disgust, aversion, or detachment, was coined by Hughes in 1958 as "dirty work", and the individuals who perform it are stigmatized as dirty since the activity performed can be "dirty" or "stain" the individual physically, socially and morally (PEREIRA; P; IRIGARAY, 2021). The physical dimension of dirty work can be observed in occupations that deal with sewage, garbage, and body fluids and those that deal directly with corpses, such as the gravedigger, the undertaker, and the autopsy assistants, also called necrotomists (ASHFORTH; KREINER, 1999), which, although beneficial and necessary to society, are, in general, stigmatized and sustain marks of social discredit and invisibility (BENDASSOLLI; DA ROCHA FALCÃO, 2013; HUGHES, 1962).

The handling of the corpse is done by the assistant of necrotomist expertise, who deals directly with the body, from the beginning to the end of the cadaveric examination, under the guidance of the medical examiner, who keeps making his notes in a medical record (SILVA; LEE; Smith, 2015). A study by Silva *et al.* (2016) evidenced that these professionals are doubly stigmatized, first due to their contact with human corpses; second due to popular ignorance about their activities. This last factor culminates in degrading and prejudiced attitudes directed at the necrotomist professional, producing a series of mistaken and pejorative representations, such as labels that are socially attributed to them ("cannibals", "pigs", "dirty", among others), which harm the life of the latter, since they are a source of suffering. Because of this, the work with cadavers can influence the social behavior of the individual, tending to maintain a regime of social isolation (PAULA; RUIZ, 2020).

The fact of working with the dead, handling the corpses, especially victims of violence, has been pointed out, in some studies, as a source of psychic suffering by professionals who perform necropsies (LIMA-SILVA; ZAMBRONI-DE-SOUZA; ARAÚJO; PINTO, 2021; PAULA; Ruiz, 2020;

SILVA; LEE; Smith, 2015; SILVA; SOUZA; ARAÚJO; PINTO, 2016). In a study by Paula and Ruiz (2020), autopsy assistants reported that their work interfered with the psychological factor, triggering manifestations of sadness and crying when dealing with the corpses and families of deceased people, in addition to suffering and going through depressive moments, even outside of work, due to issues experienced in their day-to-day.

In addition, some types of bodies are presented as capable of arousing more intense emotions, such as those in a state of putrefaction (SILVA; LEE; Smith, 2015); death of children, especially victims of violent deaths involving abuse or brutal crimes (LIMA-SILVA; ZAMBRONI-DE-SOUZA; ARAÚJO; PINTO, 2021; PAULA; RUIZ, 2020); deaths resulting from accidents, in which the body is fragmented into multiple parts; and death of known people, with whom the professional had some intense emotional connection, such as family and friends, a situation that compromises the technical capacity of the professional, given the inability to dissociate the dead human being from the work object (PAULA; RUIZ, 2020).

The sensory experiences experienced in the work with the dead also constitute a factor that produces negative psych emotional effects, especially at the beginning of the career, when the defense strategies are not yet consolidated. The visualization of corpses in different situations, as well as the visualization of their faces; the unpleasant smell of corpses, some in an advanced stage of putrefaction exuding a strong foul odor; images of worms and scavenging insects coming out of decomposing bodies and manual contact with their softened flesh are striking sensory experiences that stir the psychological of those who work in the necropsy service, who often carry in their own body the bad smell of their work environment (LIMA-SILVA; ZAMBRONI-DE-SOUZA; ARAÚJO; PINTO, 2021).

In this context, many forensic professionals, especially those who deal directly with death, can develop a kind of constant fear in their personal life, by imagining that the situations experienced by the victims they serve may also occur to them or their loved ones. In this way, many tend to change their habits of life and those of their families, becoming more cautious, given the evidence, in their routine of working with the dead, of the volatility of life, which can fade suddenly, often due to banal and ordinary causes (PAULA; RUIZ, 2020).

The emotional overload of working with violent deaths makes professionals seek to develop *coping* strategies with a view to "protecting" their mental health. Among such strategies are the use of jokes and relaxation, with the use of jokes, laughter and jocular expressions as a way to soften the heavy climate; as well as the use of the disembodiment/objectification of its work object, from which the body is not seen as a human being, but as an object to be worked on from the technical point of view, reduced to organs and injuries (BARROS; Smith, 2004; CAVEDON, 2010; LIMA-SMITH;

ZAMBRONI-DE-SOUZA; ARAÚJO; PINTO, 2021; PAULA; Ruiz, 2020; SILVA; LEE; Smith, 2015; SILVA; SOUZA; ARAÚJO; PINTO, 2016). Such strategies cause the individual to adapt to that type of work, although they can lead to the development of an emotional "coldness" (PAULA; Ruiz, 2020; SILVA; LEE; Smith, 2015).

It should also be added that adherence to religion and alcohol consumption have also been used as defensive strategies to adapt to the emotional overload existing in the work of necrotomists, which generates tension and anxiety (LIMA-SILVA; ZAMBRONI-DE-SOUZA; ARAÚJO; PINTO, 2021; PAULA; RUIZ, 2020). In this context, many professionals choose to give up their careers because they cannot develop strategies to cope with the traumatic situation (CAVEDON, 2010; SILVA; LEE; Smith, 2015),

3.3 EXAMINATION OF THE BODY OF CRIME: DEALING WITH THE SUFFERING OF VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE AND THEIR FAMILIES

The empathic process resulting from the professional practice in forensic expertise demonstrates a kind of transfer of the situation experienced by the other to his own life when the professional imagines himself in the place of the family member in suffering on the assumption that the victim could have been a loved one of his (LIMA-SILVA; ZAMBRONI-DE-SOUZA; ARAÚJO; PINTO, 2021). The bonds of empathy of professionals towards victims of violence and their families can be intensified by a process of identification of the professional's life history (being a father, husband, or brother, for example) with that associated with the way the violence occurred (PAULA; RUIZ, 2020). This process represents the existence of feelings of disturbance and discomfort that are felt by someone when observing the other suffering, in danger, or disadvantage (SAMPAIO; CAMINO; ROAZZI, 2009).

The feelings aroused by the victims of violence in the professionals who attend them, whether of approximation or distance, may be related to the gender of the professional and the nature of the violence suffered, with sexual violence being the generator of more intense feelings. In a study by Eizirik *et al.* (2007) with psychiatry residents, and therapists of victims of psychic trauma resulting from sexual violence in childhood, current sexual violence and urban violence, it was observed that the nature of the trauma significantly influenced the pattern against transference of professionals, with a predominance of feelings of approximation of female therapists in the care of victims of both types of violence. Regarding male professionals, feelings of closeness predominated only in care provided to victims of sexual violence; while feelings of distancing were more prevalent in the care of patients who were victims of assault or with dead family members. Such distancing, when it occurs, may

represent a mechanism of protection for the professional, to avoid the psychic pain itself (EIZIRIK; SCHESTATSKY; KNIJNIK; TERRA *et al.,* 2006).

The fact of dealing with families in suffering is quite exhausting for forensic professionals, being pointed out, by the professionals themselves, as a more difficult and emotionally charged situation than dealing with corpses (PAULA; RUIZ, 2020). In the study by Paula and Ruiz (2020) with professionals from the morgue of the Forensic Expertise of Ceará, the expert assistants working in the reception of families who will remove the bodies after necropsy, or make the recognition of the corpse, reported a reaction of empathy when perceiving and sharing the pain and suffering of those family members.

In a study by Silva, Lopes and Silva (2015), professionals who performed necropsy at the Scientific Police Institute of Paraíba stated that there is pressure exerted by the family to expedite the release of the body, being characterized, by the authors, as a psychological risk factor for those professionals. Moreover, the moment of recognition of the body is permeated by a high emotional load, given the most varied forms of manifestation of suffering by the victim's family member (LIMA-SILVA; ZAMBRONI-DE-SOUZA; ARAÚJO; PINTO, 2021).

Given the above, the professional needs to develop an empathetic contact with the person assisted to the extent that it is possible to preserve their ability to think and survive the intense suffering aroused in both (EIZIRIK; SCHESTATSKY; KNIJNIK; TERRA *et al.* , 2006), that is, forensic professionals must have sufficient empathy to better serve victims of violence and their families without, however, compromising their technical capacity and mental health, constituting, therefore, a challenge.

3.4 CRIME OR ACCIDENT SCENE: THE TRAGIC AND DYNAMIC SCENARIO PERMEATED WITH EMOTIONS

The work of forensics at crime scenes is permeated by uncertainties since much of the forensic activity is linked to the unforeseen. The situation of tension generated by the need to be available for a service about which it is not known exactly when it will occur or what will arise in that case induces in the professionals of criminal expertise a feeling of "emotion" and "adrenaline" that is directly related to the intensity of the affections. Added to this, the adversities that may present themselves during the care, such as acting in risk areas, coping with the marks of violence, unhealthy working conditions and the imminent danger to one's own life (CAVEDON; AMADOR, 2012).

People working at the scene of the crime can be exposed to various health and safety hazards, many of which cannot be identified immediately as they may arise in the course of forensic examination. Such hazards include contact with chemicals, contaminated biological material,

unexploded ordnance and firearms; adverse environmental factors, such as cold or excessive heat; unsafe structures at explosion and/or fire crime scenes; unsafe environment due to the possibility that the suspect of committing the crime is still in the forensic area; in addition to the possibility of exposure to sharp objects, radiological, nuclear and electrical hazards, gases, etc. (UNODC, 2010).

Upon arriving at a place of homicide, the expert can find the body in different states, from the partially preserved, with few injuries, to the most impactful forms, such as torn, mutilated or decomposing bodies (CAVEDON; AMADOR, 2012). The difficulty of dealing with the smell of putrefied bodies at crime scenes is one of the factors that cause psycho-emotional damage (CAVEDON, 2010), since olfactory perceptions can remain in the memory for years, causing the odoriferous emanations to refer to sensations and emotions previously experienced, where the odors were striking (CAVEDON, 2014).

In a study by Cavedon (2014), a criminal expert could not use rubber gloves to clean the house since its smell resembled death since it was the same type of glove used to handle corpses; while a retired servant associated the smell of criolin, present in surveys carried out in prisons, with the feeling of imminent danger. This fact shows that olfactory perceptions have high emotional significance in the lives of experts, even after retirement (CAVEDON, 2014). Because of this, some professionals, to face the emotional discomfort caused by the smell and mask odors present at crime scenes, start to use psychoactive substances, such as alcohol or tobacco (CAVEDON, 2010; 2014).

In addition, the emotional load in the investigative work can change according to the type of crime. Study by Roach; Cartwright; Sharratt (2017) identified that police homicide investigators experience different cognitive and emotional effects, in type and intensity, when investigating child homicides, with child homicide investigations generating significantly more difficult emotional effects to deal with than those of adult homicides, leading to greater emotional involvement of police officers and greater occurrence of intrusive thoughts when those professionals are not at work (OXBURGH; OST; MORRIS; Cherryman, 2015; ROACH; CARTWRIGHT; SHARRATT, 2017).

The visual experiences of violent events are also striking in the psychoemotional aspect. However, it is possible to increase the level of emotional tolerance for violence by exhaustively exposing human sensitivity to scenes of horror, to the vision of the suffering of others and the contemplation of mistreated, wounded, shattered bodies, causing the exposed person to become relatively indifferent (KEHL, 2015). This fact may represent another mechanism of human resilience as a form of protection.

However, the work in a crime scene, in addition to having chemical, physical, biological, and emotional risks, requires a state of attention and intense alertness, because each situation presents itself as a unique opportunity, with no possibility of error because there is no more chance to return and

correct the failure; in addition to the fact that the expert report, when stating that the evidence is linked to the crime, is taken as truth by the judicial authority (CAVEDON, 2010).

In addition, the tension resulting from the expert examination itself can be intensified by the presence of the family in the place to be examined, which generates an emotional impact on the performance of the expert's work and requires extra effort from him so that his impartiality, necessary for the accomplishment of his work, is not affected by the suffering and despair of the family members (CAVEDON; AMADOR, 2012).

Thus, the work at a crime scene can be complex from an emotional point of view, and there may be a need for psychological monitoring of the expert team after performing it (UNODC, 2010).

3.5 EXPOSURE TO TRAUMATIC AUDIOVISUAL MATERIAL IN THE INVESTIGATION OF CHILD ABUSE CRIME

The frequent exposure of forensic professionals to graphic details of crimes against children makes them susceptible to various social and emotional problems arising from the nature of their work (FANSHER; ZEDAKER; BRADY, 2020). Thus, the investigation of child exploitation/abuse on computers is a segment of policing associated with high levels of stress at work, potentially contributing to the development of mental disorders and other health-related problems (TOMYN; POWELL; CASSEMATIS; SMALLBONE *et al.,* 2015).

As seen earlier, repeated exposure to details related to child abuse, including through electronic media, film, or photographs, as long as it is due to work, is capable of causing post-traumatic stress disorder (APA, 2013), since this type of work requires individuals to perform a series of tasks to identify victims and locate perpetrators, which include the visualization of images in photos and videos of children being sexually assaulted and tortured, leading the individuals involved who perform this work to the greatest risk of suffering secondary traumatic stress (TST) resulting from exposure to sounds and graphic images (BURNS; MORLEY; BRADSHAW; DOMENE, 2008).

In this sense, the psychological impact of viewing disturbing media on the work of computer forensic investigators deserves special attention, since these professionals are at risk of developing mental disorders, especially ETS and Burnout (BO). In a study of employees of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force in the United States, it was found that one in four employees exhibited low compassion satisfaction and high levels of BO and ETS, being associated with frequent indirect exposure to disturbing materials, low organizational support, and feeling overwhelmed at work (BRADY, 2017). Perez *et al.* (2010) identified a relationship between greater exposure to disturbing media and higher levels of secondary traumatic stress disorder and burnout, as well as low psychological well-being of forensic professionals investigating computer child pornography cases. In

addition, researchers with poorer psychological health experienced a sense of greater protection from their loved ones and greater distrust of others.

However, to deal with potentially significant sources of negative stress in the workplace, professionals who deal with this type of traumatic material develop resilience mechanisms, facilitated by organizational and informal social support, to be able to withstand the conflicting nature of their work (TOMYN; POWELL; CASSEMATIS; SMALLBONE *et al.,* 2015).

3.6 THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EXPERT REPORT

The responsibility for the construction of the expert reports has also been pointed out as a source of psychic suffering by the experts, since these professionals are legal representatives of the State whose function is to list evidence and the *cause of death* of the subject, contributing to Justice (SILVA; LEE; Smith, 2015). The responsibility of the work of the expert to prepare the expert report induces an intense emotional load, given that, to the extent that the expert has public faith, he needs to be attentive to the preparation of the expert report since it can release guilty or blame an innocent (CAVEDON, 2010).

The material evidence consists of a set of technical and scientific analyses derived from examinations carried out by various specialties of criminal expertise and that will result in reports that usually complement each other. However, eventually, there may be divergences between the reports, and situations in which the experts responsible for the examinations may be called upon to clarify them at a hearing. It is worth mentioning that the justice system does not always understand the expert work and its limitations, causing professionals of expertise to often face uncomfortable judicial demands arising from the excess of summons for hearings, the request for examinations that cannot be performed for technical reasons or the imposition of unenforceable deadlines (BRASIL, 2022).

There are also cases in which it is not possible to prepare a report that assists in the resolution of a crime, situations in which no traces were identified that would allow a relevant analysis of the case, generating inconclusive reports. This fact can lead to frustration or a feeling of powerlessness of the expert in the face of the experimentation of the limit and the impossibility of collaborating with the elucidation of the crime, being its activity prevented a source of suffering (CAVEDON; AMADOR, 2012).

In this context, the expert work with the criminal justice system is a potential source of psychological distress in the experts, given the responsibility attributed to them from the construction of the expert report to the possible attendance at judicial hearings to provide clarification on it.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The psychic illness resulting from exposure to violence, like any health and illness process, is influenced by several factors, among them, working conditions. Thus, working with the sequelae of violence can lead to a psychoemotional overload for the forensic professional, which makes this population vulnerable to the development of mental disorders in their most varied forms and severity.

It is necessary, therefore, a differentiated look at this population, to identify situations of greater risk for the development of mental disorders, as well as to adopt preventive actions and health promotion of professionals. Institutional support plays a crucial role in this process.

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