

# Impact of the stressors of undercover operations



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The present paper has three purposes: (a) to discuss undercover operatives and the stressors inherent to undercover operations based on literature review, (b) to outline the proposed research project, (c) and to examine the expecting findings, conclusions, limitations and relevance for policy and practice of the proposed research project.

Keywords: undercover officer, police, stress, personality test

It is almost impossible to turn on the news or to watch prime time television without a reference to a takedown or a main character on a sitcom who is an undercover operative. Society is fascinated and romanticizes undercover operatives. These operatives are often portrayed in high risk situations which they usually take on and survive triumphantly. Nevertheless, what most of these news headlines and sitcoms miss is the very complex and difficult work that make up most successful undercover operations. In fact, the public rarely if ever hears or reads about the impact that undercover operations have on the operatives and their personal lives.

With the increase in the numbers of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents working undercover, in 1979 the FBI administration became concerned with the detrimental aspects of the personal commitment required for undercover operations. In 1980 a study was conducted to determine the nature and extent of the stressors being experience by undercover operatives in order to devise methods of reducing their negative effects.

The current study will replicate the analysis conducted in 1980. In addition, the present study will further examine the stressors inherent to undercover

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operations and will focus on undercover operative's negative emotions, reactive behaviors and coping strategies.

## **Problem Statement**

Undercover operations impact not only the undercover operatives' professional life but their personal life as well. There is very little research that addresses this impact or the strengths and limitations of undercover work. The empirical research on police stress in general and undercover stress specifically is limited by quantity, how current and relevant the results are, and the methods employed. The current study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by examining the stressors inherent to undercover operations and determining an undercover agents' coping strategies (personality, psychological and social) when dealing with these stressors.

## **Relevance of the Problem**

As the numbers of FBI agent and task force officers conducting undercover work continue to increase, so do the numbers of psychological assessments being conducted by the FBI Undercover Safeguard Unit (USU). Currently, many of these undercover operations include the infiltration of terrorist and extremist groups. These types of operations have successfully prevented planned terrorist operations in Portland, WA and Baltimore, MD.

Nevertheless, the literature has little to offer on the stress brought on by issues such as "dual betrayal" which is inherent in these types of operations, and represents one of a number singular stressors involved in undercover operations. It is important to examine "dual betrayal" and other stressors inherent to undercover work in order to determine the risk factors

as well as the protective factors that can contribute to the psychological well being of an undercover operative.

## **Implications for policy and/or practice**

Based on the results of this study recommendations can be made on selection, supervision and administrative procedures designed. These recommendations will seek to minimize the extraneous forms of stress which may negatively impact an undercover operative.

In addition, the outcome of this study should help to sensitize the undercover operative and their supervisors to the most destructive forms of stress and to identify the warning signs which indicate that these forms of stress have reached a dangerous level.

Lastly, the result of this study can be used to develop new and innovative investigative approaches and techniques in psychological assessments and counseling that would address the undercover employee's psychological well-being and operational readiness to engage and/or continue to function in covert or day to day investigations.

## **Literature Review**

Law enforcement officers (LEOs) are faced with very unique and stressful situations. These situations may include face to face encounters with violent offenders as well as crime scenes with diseased and injured offenders and victims. Many times these law enforcement officers are rejected by the same community they have taken an oath to protect. There are communities which lack respect and admiration for an institution they deem as cruel and corrupt. Therefore, law enforcement officers must effectively mediate and

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counteract the inherent job related stressors as well as those stressors which are unique to their identity as police officers (Noblet, Rodwell, & Allisey, 2009; Adams & Buck, 2010; Shane, 2010; McCarty, Zhao & Garland, 2007).

Many LEOs are unable to successfully incorporate adaptive strategies for mediating occupational stressors. Unfortunately, some of these LEOs succumb to traditionally maladaptive coping mechanisms. This in turn negatively impacts their personal and professional lives which results in more stress and unfavorable outcomes. There are particular segments of the law enforcement community that are exposed to greater number of systemic stressors than others. These LEOs often have workloads that significantly impact their opportunity and ability to utilize coping strategies and to minimize the effects of experienced stressors (Waters & Ussery, 2007; Gersho, Barocas, Caonto, Li & Vlahov, 2009).

Undercover operations attract LEOs who are highly conscientious and have performed well and reliably under stressful and demanding circumstances. Undercover operations are sought out by agents/taskforce officers and their supervisors alike. These types of assignments are often viewed as a stepping stones to professional advancement and personal achievement. There are LEOs who excel in undercover assignments; these officers successfully adapt potentially harmful distress changing it into beneficial stress (eustress). Nevertheless, a review of the literature indicates that LEOs who have healthy coping mechanism are the exception and not the rule. Undercover operations impact the LEO as well as those who surround them. Long-term undercover operations in particular required excessive amounts of time and dedication that are at times inconsistent with the perception and ideologies

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of many experienced officers (Cuttler & Muchinsky, 2006; Cochrane, Tett, & Vandecreek, 2003).

Long-term operations require the development of a unique relationship with the target. Additionally there is a different relationship between these undercover operatives and their supervisors which at times can intensify an undercover's feelings of isolation and abandonment. These undercover LEOs role playing requirements can be confusing and distressing which in turn negatively impacts their social relationships. Many times the unspecified but understood requirements of undercover operations can end in the downward spiral of a brilliant career, resulting in dysfunctional relationships, personal hardship, a loss of self-esteem and self-respect, and mental and physical damage (Noblet, Rodwell, & Allisey, 2009).

Several factors can contribute to this downward spiral. Lack of adequate training, lack of effective supervision, unrealistic work demands and an under cover's constant need to succeed in an operation are some of the factors that have been observed. Unfortunately, undercover operatives who do not succeed in their respective operations as perceived by the undercover or their supervisors succumb to feelings of shame and embarrassment, become withdrawn, irritable, at times lashing out against the target due to fear, frustration or displaced anger. Undercover operations would seem to heighten the emotional stressors already present in the law enforcement community. Nevertheless, those undercover operatives who acknowledged the negative effects of stressors and reach out for assistance are likely to be ridiculed and ostracized by their colleagues and supervisors. These officers

are at times labeled as weak, untrustworthy and/or damaged goods (Cuttler & Muchinsky, 2006).

In order to understand the impact of stress on law enforcement operatives, it is important to examine stress from an individual's perspective. This examination should include the detrimental and beneficial impact of undercover operations on the professional, personal and social environment of an operative.

Most individual's seek to minimize stressors and maximize the rewards (psychological at times) in order to carry on their everyday lives. The sense of purpose from successfully performing an assignment at work and at home can be one such reward. An individual's occupation can provide a source of pride, accomplishment and personal achievement. Nevertheless, this same occupation can be embedded in a stressful environment that fosters frustration causing mental and physical harm. LEOs are constantly exposed to dangerous situations, emotional distress by others, threats to personal safety and life altering split second decisions. This may be compounded by the lack of respect from the public, frustration with the criminal justice system and accumulated experiences of critical incidents. This leaves the LEO susceptible to chronic stress. This is considered a unique trait of the law enforcement profession (Swenson & Plebanski, 2009).

Additionally, an undercover operatives self expectations and demands from the law enforcement subculture can add to the experiential stressors and behavioral responses. Unique coping strategies in dealing with these stressors have been observed within the law enforcement community. The

literature has examined the maladaptive coping strategies that are utilized and the impact that these strategies may have on undercover operatives personal, professional and social lives. These maladaptive coping strategies include but are not limited to; emotional detachment cynicism, alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and high risk behavior (McCarty, Zhao, & Garland, 2007; Shane, 2010)

. The impact that these maladaptive coping strategies may have on the undercover operatives' life has not been succinctly analyzed or discussed in the literature. The empirical research indicates that work assignment can be related to levels of experienced stress within the law enforcement community and can contribute to the subsequent use and acceptance of alcohol as an attempt to mediate levels of stress. Coping strategies that are utilized to address the issue of work related stress are serious concerns for all LEOs; however, some assignments within the law enforcement community may be seen as more stressful than others and may be more pertinent for examination of both work related stress and coping strategies (Gershon, Barocas, Canton, Li, & Vlahov, 2009).

Undercover assignments, for instance, have been identified as one of the most stressful duties within the law enforcement community. Consequently, further examining the impact of undercover assignments on LEOs can provide a valuable contribution to the literature on police stress (Krause, 2008; Varela, Boccaccini, Scogin, Stump, & Caputo, 2004).

The psychological problems that can be encountered by a LEO in undercover operation include but are not limited to paranoia, isolation, nervous tension,

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depression, fear, and anger. Furthermore, more serious personality disorders appear common among officers, both during and after the completion of undercover operations. These disorders also may involve depression, anger-hostility, differing phobias, paranoia, psychotic ideation, and interpersonal insensitivity (Adams & Buck, 2010; Carlan & Nored, 2008).

Overall, the level of suspicion that many officers encounter, and cannot effectively deal with, may cause problems in all areas of their professional and personal lives. In addition to the inherent stressors of undercover work, officers also can experience levels of alienation from society, as well as from their colleagues. The anger and resentment experienced by undercover officers may lead to a self alienation, which exacerbates previous feelings and contributes to the stressors being experienced by the LEO (Carlan & Nored, 2008).

Finally, undercover assignments can place additional, and sometimes overwhelming, pressure on the personal lives of those involved in such operations. Partners of those assigned to undercover operations are subjected to odd working hours and unpredictable schedules. They are faced with days and even weeks of the officer partner being away from home, and they may experience continual concern for the safety of the LEO.

Additionally, operatives engaged in undercover operations are often involved in a role that requires late night partying, the consumption of alcohol, and interactions with members of the opposite sex with whom the officer is attempting to gain trust and confidence. In this setting, the officer may undergo changes in personality and lifestyle as a result of the role, which becomes apparent to the significant other. These stressors represent only a

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number of the issues that most undercover operatives must effectively deal with day in and day out.

## **Research Strategy**

Undercover law enforcement officers are dealing with a number of stressors such as divorce, psychological disorders and suicide. In some cases undercover law enforcement officers, given these and other stressors, have been involved in criminal behavior, corruption, and espionage. It is important to determine the nature and extent of the stressors inherent with undercover work and to devise methods of reducing their effects.

The purpose of this study is to: Identify those stressors inherent to undercover assignments within federal and local LEOs and to determine the relationship between specific personality, psychological and interpersonal relations orientation styles and the ability to cope with stressors prevalent in undercover operations.

The questions being examined are:

- Is there a significant correlation between personality styles (independent variable) and an undercover law enforcement officer's ability to cope with stressors prevalent in undercover assignment (dependent variable)?
- Is there a significant correlation between psychological characteristics (independent variable) and an undercover law enforcement officer's ability to cope with stressors prevalent in undercover assignment (dependent variable)?

- Is there a significant correlation between interpersonal relations orientation (independent variable) and an undercover law enforcement officer's ability to cope with stressors prevalent in undercover assignment (dependent variable)?

The research questions will be addressed through the use of validated and reliable psychometric tests. A quantitative research design consisting of psychometric test administered to LEOs assigned and formerly assigned to undercover operations, as well as those who never have been so assigned, will be utilized.

Recognizing the impact of undercover assignments on the individual officers involved can assist in addressing the bigger issue of the impact on the law enforcement community. This research has implications for law enforcement agencies concerned with the emotional and professional welfare of officers assigned to undercover duties, and it provides some understanding of the effects of such operations on officers at the individual, social, and professional levels. Furthermore, the results of this study can provide valuable insight into the human toll of undercover operations and allows for the examination of this issue from a holistic and concerned perspective.

## **Data**

### **Independent Variable**

The independent variables will an under cover's personality style as measured by the 16PF or 16 Personality Factors test. An under cover's psychological characteristics as determined by the MMPI-II, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. Lastly an under cover's interpersonal

relations orientation will be analyzed with the FIRO-B, the fundamental interpersonal relations orientation assessment.

## **Dependant Variable**

Ideally, measuring the stressors inherent to undercover operations and the coping strategies used by undercover operatives would address the research questions. Thus, the dependant variables measured will be the inherent stressors of undercover operations and coping strategies used.

## **Sample**

The sample of participants will be a representative stratified sample. The focus will be on undercover law enforcement officers. Ideally, there will be a total of approximately 100 participants in the control and three experimental groups in order to conduct an adequate statistical analysis. This would be a total of 400 participants.

## **Methods**

Approximately 400 undercover law enforcement officers will be separated into four categories:

No experience (control group)- No actual experience as an operative although may possess considerable experience in undercover operations as a contact of back up.

Occasional experience (experimental group)- Occasional assignment as an undercover operative for short periods of time (2 days or less).

Frequent experience (experimental group)- Frequent assignment as undercover operative but not extended or continuous undercover role requirements (30 days or less).

Long term experience (experimental group)- Long term or deep cover experience with extended or continuous role requirements (in excess of 30 days).

## **Execution**

Procedure: The undercover law enforcement officers will be administered the following test during regularly scheduled safeguard assessments:

16 PF: 16 personality factors a personality assessment (APPENDIX I.)

MMPI-II: Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) is test is used to assist in identifying personality structure and psychopathology (or SCL-90R, Millan Instrument MCMI-3) (APPENDIX II.)

FIRO-B: Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO) is an assessment for interpersonal relations (APPENDIX III.)

The Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale: The Holmes and Rahe stress scale is a list of 43 stressful life events that can contribute to illness. (APPENDIX IV.)

The Coping Strategies Inventory: is an assessment designed by Rory C. Reid, MSW, Provo Counseling Center. (APPENDIX V.)

## **Anticipated Data Analysis Plan**

The researchers plans on using Structural Equation Modeling in order to test and estimate causal relations (between personality traits, psychological

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characteristics, interpersonal relations orientation and an UC's ability to cope with stressors) using a combination of statistical data and qualitative causal assumptions.

## **Expected Findings and Conclusions**

I expect to identify the stressors inherent to undercover operations. In addition, to determining the specific personality, psychological and interpersonal relations orientation needed to effectively cope with the stressor inherent to undercover work.

## **Expected Relevance for Policy and Practice**

Research focused on police stress and undercover operations has provided important, but limited insight into the impact of undercover operations on the professional, personal, and social lives of the operatives. There is a lack of empirical research addressing the positive values of undercover assignments from the individual perspective. Therefore, further research is required to identify the impact that undercover assignments have on the lives of those who function in this capacity. Such an understanding is required for efforts to prevent the psychological and physiological damage that can result from continual and high impact stressors faced in undercover operations, and reduce the maladaptive coping methods utilized to counterbalance such stressors.

## **Limitations of the Research**

The results of this study can only be generalized to the undercover law enforcement population. The researcher also understands that sample size will also determine the generalizability, validity and reliability of this study

results to the undercover community. In addition, the operational definitions for four categories of undercover officer, coping strategies and inherent stressors to undercover operations can create bias and may affect the end results of the study.

## **Relevant IRB Issues**

The IRB will be concerned with determining and assuring that the information obtained on the undercover operatives is recorded in such a manner that the operatives can't be readily identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the operatives; and any disclosure of the operative's responses outside the research could reasonably place the operative at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the operatives' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Given the fact that the study will use historical data currently stored at the Undercover Safeguard Unit (USU), the IRB will further be concerned with making sure that the collection or study of existing data, documents, and records is recorded by the investigator in such a manner again that operatives cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the operatives.

Lastly the IRB will ensure that the approvals of academic and professional department or agency heads are obtained.