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Protective and Enabling Factors That Facilitate Undercover Police Work: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Inadequate coping strategies in dealing with occupational stress have been linked to negative outcomes such as burnout. Research in police forces has somewhat overlooked protective factors that sustain this type of work. This study aimed to explore coping and detection avoidance strategies that enable police officers to be effective undercover operatives. This qualitative study was part of a wider mixed methods project. Participants were recruited from a Portuguese Police Force. Twenty-five police officers with undercover/plainclothes experience were interviewed using non-probability purposive sampling. Results of the study identified seven themes which addressed the research aims: ‘Secrecy’, ‘Work Satisfaction’, ‘Undercover Tactics’, ‘Stress’, ‘Deception’, ‘Support’ and ‘Things to Improve’. Overall, the findings of this study provide some support to the scarce literature available on this topic. The study indicates that participants generally seem able to cope well with detection avoidance strategies (e.g. secrecy, adaptation to the environment, use of cover stories/improvisation, deception and submersion to fictitious identities). Having an appropriate selection of undercover operatives is crucial to determine their psychological health and safety. The need for more research in this area is highlighted and discussed in reference to alternative study designs. In addition, an overview of implications for practice is provided.

Keywords Undercover operatives · Police · Deception · Coping · Stress · Secrecy

Introduction

‘...Undercover agents do not retire; they just go deeper.’
(NCIS: Los Angeles, 2010)

Law enforcement officers, and in particular undercover operatives (UCOs), have been reported to experience high levels of stress (Anshel 2000; Arter 2008; Dantzer 1987; Loo 1984; Martinez 2023). This is due to being exposed to very high risks including risk of detection, physical injury and violence (e.g. through retribution), as well as risk to their psychological well-being (e.g. spending long periods of

time living as someone else, without the support of friends or family) (Curran 2021; Geller 1993; House Affairs Committee 2013; Macleod 1995). Unfortunately, there is scant literature referring to undercover policing and even less published research concerning the psychological aspects of UCOs (Jacobs 1992; Macleod 1995). It is suggested that this is due to the clandestine nature inherent to this type of work as well as to the law enforcement’s vaunted closure to ‘outsiders’ (Jacobs 1992; Kowalczyk and Sharps 2017).

Within the available literature in this area however, it is clear that the fundamental objective of all undercover operations is to develop prosecutable evidence through access to individuals and their activities from the inside (Miller 2006). To achieve this, depending on the type of operation, different methods of cover are employed ranging from short-term ‘buy-bust’ scenarios (i.e. catching the suspect in small illegal transactions by pretending to have an interest in the product) to long-term processes (i.e. infiltrations that can take months or years) (Band and Sheehan 1999). Moreover, the most basic level of undercover operation is ‘plainclothes’ surveillance and enforcement, which is led by non-uniformed police officers, who, when the deal has been made, identify

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themselves and make the necessary detentions and seizures (Miller 2006). In some cases, they may call other teams to handle this, in order to preserve their identity. The next level of undercover operation is ‘deep undercover’ which involves changing the identity of the officer with false documents, altering his/her appearance through grooming and attire, and restricting contact with family, friends and colleagues (Miller 2006). These operations (both short and long) seem to have a shared principle which is the cover agent ‘has to pretend to be someone else by falsifying his/her true identity and acting out a part designed to create trust and acceptance by the targeted persons’ (Girodo et al. 2002, p. 631–632, cited in Edelman 2010).

Psychologically, the core of these operations is underpinned by the same principle: ‘UCOs knowingly and purposefully develop relationships that they will eventually betray’ (Miller 2006, p. 2). When considering all the aspects of undercover policing, mentioned above, it is crucial to bear in mind the difficulties associated with this kind of job and the potential for stress and traumatic reactions that derive from it and that can impact on meeting task demands (Love et al. 2008).

A few studies found clinical symptoms reported by UCOs and compared these in relation to the UCOs status (i.e. currently undercover, formerly, and with no undercover experience). Farkas (1986) reported in his study that anxiety, loneliness/isolation, over-suspiciousness, problems within relationships and marriages, and alcohol abuse were the most frequently indicated symptoms by UCOs at the termination of their undercover assignments. Furthermore, he found that an increase in time spent undercover was linked to a decrease in the level of psychological symptoms experienced by UCOs (Farkas 1986). Girodo (1991b) found a link between undercover experience and a wide range of clinical symptoms consistent with the Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90), although he did not specify the symptoms. It is important to note that Girodo’s paper was the only source that found a positive link between psychological issues and length of service as a UCO (Kowalczyk and Sharps 2017). In a different study, Girodo found a positive correlation between undercover experience, drug use and disciplinary actions (1991a). Love et al. (2008) found no significant links between the length of service and psychological symptoms. In effect, they found that current UCOs reported lower levels of clinical symptoms in comparison to former UCOs or officers without undercover experience (Love et al. 2008). Martinez (2023), in a study with former UCOs, found that job satisfaction was higher while working undercover as opposed to other assignments. This may be explained due to UCOs perceptions of the positive features embedded in undercover operations. UCOs reported being a member of a cohesive team, being supervised by managers who use a democratic style and treat them as equals, and perceiving

that their assignments were of high importance/priority to society (Love et al. 2008).

In general, symptom themes found in research demonstrate that UCOs and conventional police officers show highly similar symptom profiles, which is suggestive of similar origins and coping strategies being used by both groups. However, some specific symptoms—‘divergent’—are more likely to be found in UCOs than in their counterparts (Kowalczyk and Sharps 2017). These include isolation/loneliness, fear of abandonment, hallucinations, depersonalisation, persona re-emergence, perceived lack of administrative support, sympathy towards some criminals and memory impairment (Kowalczyk and Sharps 2017). Depression and anxiety were also found to be common following an undercover operation, especially if the UCOs were not allowed to discuss their experiences (Kowalczyk and Sharps 2017; Macleod 1995); this was found to be worsened by a lack of engagement in active coping (Picañol 2009). Carver et al. (1989) demonstrated in their study of coping that positive characteristics of personality such as optimism, hardiness, feeling in control and self-esteem were associated with active coping strategies. In contrast, negative characteristics of personality were positively correlated to trait anxiety and negatively correlated to the above-mentioned positive characteristics (Picañol 2009).

Some studies have identified desirable/undesirable qualities and attributes required from UCOs. The ‘ideal UCO’ should have a profile consistent with the following characteristics: be an experienced officer with weapons/tactics/legal principles knowledge, have a secure police identity, have life experience (and mature age) outside the police, be willing to accept training and supervision, volunteer for the undercover assignment and actually believe in its effectiveness (Band and Sheehan 1999; Macleod 1995; Miller 2006). The officers are expected to demonstrate appropriate ethical and moral values, perseverance, proficiency, flexibility and resourcefulness as well as adaptability to ever changing scenarios (Band and Sheehan 1999; Miller 2006). Moreover, it is anticipated that they should be ‘convincing actors’ and have good coping skills while maintaining their core beliefs and commitment to the missions, which often translates into being available to spend long periods of time away from their family and friends (Band and Sheehan 1999; Miller 2006). They should also be able to exert good judgement and calm behaviour while under considerable amounts of stress, demonstrate high levels of self-confidence and a self-perception of effectiveness (i.e. when a moderate dosage of narcissistic traits can be useful) and be decisive and capable of working independently as well as in a team (Band and Sheehan 1999; Macleod 1995; Miller 2006). UCOs are not expected to be prone to distractibility or impulsivity and have mental health vulnerabilities (e.g. anxiety and depression). Instead, they are expected to

be stress-resilient, psychologically stable and able to form and maintain relationships with a variety of different people which they will eventually betray (Band and Sheehan 1999; Macleod 1995; Miller 2006).

A final desirable characteristic key to carry out undercover work is the ability to deceive in order to submerge into a fictitious identity (Jacobs 1992) and ensure that their cover is not ruined (Atkinson 2023). Agents are expected to 'fit in' with targeted groups and cultures in ways that conceal their identity (Jacobs 1992). To achieve this, UCOs must prepare themselves using a series of techniques, such as rehearsal whereby agents prepare themselves by studying the targets' background and connections with a view to establishing their credibility. However, it is known that it is impossible to address all possibilities and, therefore, improvisation is crucial (Ekman 2001; Jacobs 1992). They can also use a manipulation of appearance (Jacobs 1992), using matching appearance and attire to the targeted group, as well as verbal and physical diversions to communicate effectively with the targets (Jacobs 1992) and develop a rapport (Atkinson 2023). Competency in using these techniques is of paramount importance; if anxiety surfaces and the UCO demonstrates his/her real identity, their credibility can be undermined and their safety endangered (Jacobs 1992).

In accordance to this, Vrij et al. (2010) authored one of the few articles addressing what constitutes a 'good liar'. The list compiled was the result of numerous studies conducted by researchers on the deception theory, people's views about how liars react, persuasion theory and impression formation theory. It established some criteria that is deemed relevant for effective deception and could aide UCOs in portraying convincing characters during their operations.

The criteria included specific characteristics that would benefit 'good liars' including being manipulators (i.e. high in Machiavellianism), good actors and expressive (because they seem more credible). It was also considered desirable to be physically attractive, as well as being a natural performer (Ekman and Frank 1993; Vrij et al. 2010). In relation to emotions, it would be preferable if feelings of guilt and fear were not experienced. According to Ekman (2001), spies may have this characteristic inherently because lying is 'authorised' since they are 'doing good' by protecting the interests of their country and because values are not shared with the targeted group. Experiencing little guilt due to this 'permission' to lie may significantly help UCOs in concealing this emotion. Moreover, it was expected that experience in lying and feeling confident while doing so would help in masking or disguising guilt or fear (Vrij et al. 2010). The capacity to maintain a low cognitive load while lying was also deemed relevant. Good liars should choose concealing information instead of using outright lies whenever possible, be eloquent, well prepared, say as little as possible and say things that are impossible to verify, as well as use original

and rapid thinking (i.e. having an ability to come up rapidly with answers) (Vrij et al. 2010). Being intelligent, having a good memory, staying with the truth (or approximations) and using good decoding skills (i.e. being quick in noticing suspicion in others) were also considered key characteristics for effective deception (Vrij 2008; Vrij et al. 2010).

In summary, additional research is critically needed in this area. Undercover operations greatly contribute to the work developed by law enforcement agencies as well as to protect society, and the extant literature in this area is very limited and dated. Findings in this area can support decision-making at selection and recruitment, as well as have an important impact on the well-being and safety of UCOs and mainstream police officers.

Research Aims

This study, which was part of a wider mixed methods project, aimed to explore the perceptions of police officers with undercover/plainclothes experience regarding their coping strategies, abilities to meet their job demands and to maintain secrecy/deception (both professionally and personally) given the undercover nature of the work they do.

Methodology

Sample

Twenty-five ($n = 22$ male; $n = 3$ female) Portuguese police officers with undercover/plainclothes experience were interviewed for this study, using semi-structured interviews. The mean age of participants was 40.44 ($SD = 7.73$, range 26–55) at the time of the interview. Given that disabilities and marital status may impact on coping strategies, this data was gathered from participants. No participants indicated having a disability. The majority of participants were married ($n = 14$), and the minority were divorced ($n = 3$). The remaining eight were single.

The average time of experience in the police force was 17.44 years ($SD = 8.10$, range 1–39) (see Fig. 1). The average time of experience as an undercover/plainclothes police officer was 10.16 years ($SD = 5.81$, range 4 months/0–21 years) (see Fig. 2).

Procedure

A proposal was submitted to the Command of the Police Force outlining the study and its aims. Following approval for the study to proceed, non-probability purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person. Interviews lasted between fourteen minutes and one and a half hours, with an average

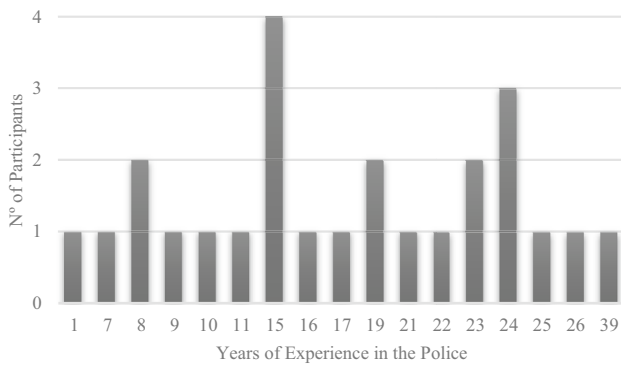


Fig. 1 Total time of experience in the police force

of half an hour per interview. These were audio recorded to ensure participants' responses during the interview could be accurately recorded and transcribed in preparation for the analysis of data. The officers who participated belonged to teams based across the country (i.e. north, centre and south of Portugal), and the interviews were conducted in their respective bases, as per agreement with their operational command.

The interview schedule was translated into Portuguese, and the interviews were conducted in Portuguese. The interviews were then transcribed and translated back into English to be analysed.

The officers were provided with information about the study and were asked to sign a written consent form. The names of the participants were all re-coded to numbers to guarantee anonymity of the data.

Materials and Measures

The schedule of the semi-structured interviews was created with the objective of exploring the officers' perceptions of their coping strategies, abilities to meet their job demands and to maintain secrecy/deception (both professionally and personally) given the undercover nature of the work they do. The interview considered their perceived strategies and

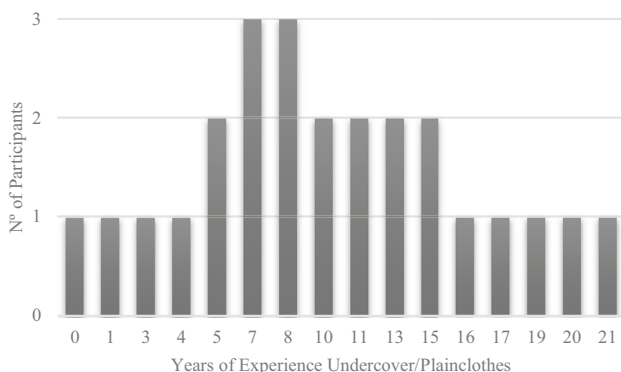


Fig. 2 Time of undercover/plainclothes experience

personal characteristics which could facilitate the officers' capacity to be deceptive/keep secrets and maintain cover, while also exploring the types of support available to cope with these pressures. The final questions aimed to investigate the psychological support available within their organisation and the potential need for this and other types of further support. Some questions integrated previous knowledge from the literature of what makes undercover operatives effective, as discussed in the introduction. All the questions in the interview were intended to allow participants to express their opinions freely.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved, reviewed and carried out in accordance with the University of Birmingham's Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee. Furthermore, approval for the study to be conducted was granted by the Portuguese Police Force.

Treatment of Data

The qualitative data were analysed using the analytic procedure, Thematic Analysis, which was found to be the most appropriate to the study, since the researcher wanted to explore the participants' perceptions exhaustively. This technique involved 'identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 79). Through its theoretical independence, this offered a flexible and advantageous approach to analysis, which provided a valuable and meticulous interpretation of data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Cajada 2011). In this study, the method used was realist, because it 'reported experiences, meanings and the reality of participants' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 81). The themes that emerged from the data were acknowledged in both inductive (Patton 2002) and deductive (Hayes 1997) ways because on one side, they were data driven, and on the other side, the researcher had specific analytic interests (Cajada 2011). The level at which the themes were recognised was semantic, as the researcher was only interested in what the participants said explicitly (Boyatzis 1998; Cajada 2011).

During the process of analysis, several steps were taken. At the beginning, there was a familiarisation with the data collected in the interviews. The steps that followed consisted of generating initial codes of comments made by participants, and after that, similar codes were collated into themes and sub-themes; this was an iterative process. To ensure the rigour of the analysis, regular meetings took place with colleagues to discuss and review the codes and themes. The creation of the thematic table was the step that arose after having gathered some sense of the codes and the themes. This allowed for a clearer

idea of the themes and labels, as well as to exclude those that were not entirely supported by the interviews. The researcher kept a reflexive diary throughout the process in order to consider any biases or issues which may have impacted on data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019).

Results

Thematic analysis of all the interviews revealed seven main themes: secrecy, work satisfaction, undercover tactics, stress, deception, support, and things to improve (see Table 1). These themes were identified following the steps described in the ‘Treatment of Data’ section.

Theme 1: Secrecy

All participants discussed the vital importance of secrecy in preserving the integrity of the operations and guarantee the success of their tasks. Secrecy was described as a necessity across the board, that is, at work with colleagues, suspects, witnesses and any other intervening person, as well as at home with family, friends and neighbours. The easiness and difficulties in maintaining secrets were discussed and the following sub-themes emerged.

1.1 At Work

1.1.1. The vast majority of participants considered maintaining secrecy at work as ‘all in a day’s work’. They explained how it was a natural process, something that was normal and, therefore, did not cause any major issues. This was the case even when colleagues from other departments tried to obtain

information that they could not share: ‘Quietly, it’s my job, I do it daily without any stress. I can stand beside a colleague and have him/her under surveillance, for example.’ (P006, p. 2).

Even in the Court context, some participants reported that the Judges would protect their work by not allowing lawyers to ask questions that could expose their cover. For example, ‘... most Judges would see that we could not reveal certain things... defended us and immediately prohibited the question from lawyers.’ (P012, p. 2).

Participants highlighted the importance of secrecy within their role, i.e. that secrecy is key to their own safety and the success of their mission: ‘...we do not tell everything to everyone, even at home we do not have the habit of coming home and telling everything we saw on the street, or everything we did at work... our safety comes first.’ (P013, p. 2). In addition, a participant commented that the secrecy may have a personal cost but it is still essential: ‘It is actually the nature of the work, regardless of the costs that this may have on a personal level.’ (P019, p. 2).

1.1.2. A small number of participants reported that maintaining secrecy, even within a work context, could be a complicated and uneasy task: ‘It’s not easy... we end up distrusting everything and everyone, always’ (P020, p. 2).

1.2 At Home

1.2.1. Participants agreed again that it was important to maintain a certain level of secrecy within the home context (e.g. with family and friends): ‘...we have to separate friendships and our job... It is a crime for us to disclose information that is in the secret of justice.’ (P003, p. 3).

Participants’ views differed on whether this was considered an easy task. Some participants discussed that maintaining secrecy occurred constantly and was a natural part

Table 1 Themes and sub-themes derived from data analysis

Themes	1. Secrecy	2. Work satisfaction	3. Undercover tactics	4. Stress	5. Deception	6. Support	7. Things to improve
Sub-themes	1.1 At work 1.1.1 All in a day’s work 1.1.2 Complicated	2.1 Pros and cons 2.1.1 Adrenaline/absence of monotony 2.1.2 Lack of schedule, structure and appreciation	3.1 Adaptation to environment 3.2 Cover story vs. improvisation 3.2.1 Hobbies/aspects of real life 3.3 Heightened awareness	4.1 Personal coping strategies 4.2 Belief in improvement 4.3 It is normal	5.1 Perceptions of deception 5.2 Good deceiver? 5.2.1 Underlying thought processes	6.1 Psychological support 6.1.1 Never used it 6.1.2 Myths 6.1.3 Should be proactive 6.2 Operational support 6.2.1 Good given financial restraints 6.2.2 Need for more resources 6.3 Command and team support	7.1 Training and CPD 7.2 Supervision

of the job: 'It is a normal adaptation for those who work in this type of service. You have to lie. We lie to outsiders, we lie to insiders. It is part of the professional performance.' (P014, p. 3), while others stated that it was complicated and they felt compelled to deceive their loved ones at times: 'If we are here and we continue here, we know that everything else will always be a bit more complicated, but also, if we are here, it is because we know how to manage complicated.' (P013, p. 3); '...some pressure... to know how to manage a lie and unavailability to have a drink with friends or go out with the girlfriend. I have to resort to lies in order to manage this situation.' (P020, p. 2).

Just over half the sample reported that their family and friends are so aware of the importance of secrecy within their lines of work that they do not even attempt to ask questions.

1.2.2. For some participants, the task of keeping secrets from their loved ones was considered extremely complicated which prompted participants to discuss the strain this caused on their relationships:

It's always complicated, especially in affective relationships, because 'who are you with?', 'what are you doing?', and we have to respond: 'I'll explain later,' and the 'I'll explain later' never comes. The people around us know the bare minimum of what we do. Never know the reality... and people either accept it, or not... (P013, p. 2).

1.3 Personal Characteristics

Most participants considered that being discreet and reserved were helpful characteristics in relation to the secrecy aspect of the job: 'I am a little closed, I'm a little guarded shall we say... I like to go very unnoticed.' (P005, p. 3). A participant highlighted the importance of personalities adequate for the job: '...personalities that tend to be more reserved, help. Aspects of your life end up absorbing more naturally this whole process of acculturation, of reserve and secrecy that is associated with our mission...' (P015, p. 3). Some participants also mentioned that specific characteristics can either be learnt over time or be intrinsic to the person: 'We become more aware, we become more sensitive.' (P011, p. 3).

Theme 2: Work Satisfaction

When discussing the experience of being in undercover operations, carrying out surveillances and searching for information, all participants reported that they enjoy their job. Through an exploration of the facets of the work that they do and how gratifying they find it, one sub-theme emerged within this theme with polarised views: pros and cons.

2.1 Pros and Cons

2.1.1. Many participants spoke of the thrill of undercover work. Participants explained that the absence of monotony and adrenaline created by what they are tasked to do were factors that contributed towards their satisfaction: 'Love it. I really like what I do... it's always different.' (P001, p. 3). 'My job is excellent, it's the best job in the world. Adrenaline is addictive.' (P013, p. 4).

A few participants also mentioned the relevance of undercover operations towards the overall success of criminal investigations, as well as the opportunity to contribute towards a safer society: '...it is a necessary work and it can boost the investigation activity by increasing its quality... it is one of the decisive factors that can dictate the success of an investigation.' (P015, p. 4).

2.1.2. Approximately half of the sample mentioned some of the negative aspects inherent to this line of investigation. Participants emphasised the negative impact that the lack of a structured schedule, i.e. 9 to 5 pm, can have on their personal life. For example, 'The only thing that complicates it has to do with schedules, because it takes up a lot of our personal time.' (P004, p. 3).

Furthermore, a small number of participants highlighted their feelings over a lack of appreciation regarding their work. They explained that while it is essential to their work that the public are unaware of their existence, they sometimes feel that even within the police force, their work is not acknowledged: '...we are invisible, we are all of that... but then there is another part, we are not recognised for the work that we have done... we fall a bit into oblivion.' (P019, p. 9).

Theme 3: Undercover Tactics

Three sub-themes emerged in regards to undercover tactics: the need for a thorough adaptation to the environment where the operation takes place, the use of a cover story versus the use of improvisation within undercover operations, and a heightened or reduced awareness regarding the possibility of being 'caught out' during the operations.

3.1 Adaptation to the Environment

All participants mentioned the need to adapt to the environment in which the investigation is taking place in order to maintain their cover and conduct their tasks effectively:

It depends on the situation, it depends on the location. Our cover story can vary and our way of being depends on where we are and the person concerned...

we have to adapt to the situation and to the person [target]. (P001, p. 4)

While the preferred methodologies involved minimum direct contact with the individuals under investigation, participants recognised that sometimes it is impossible to avoid contact with the targets: ‘...we always try that the person who is watching us does not notice that we are not from there... our job is to be ghosts. We do not exist.’ (P013, p. 5).

When contact is inevitable, they mentioned techniques including planning for possible interactions through a study of the environment: ‘There is always a prior planning before going to the field. A site and target study...’ (P016, p. 7). Acting naturally was also mentioned by most participants, with a couple of participants commenting that going into operations with agents from both genders facilitates the task of blending in: ‘In Rome do as the Romans do.’ (P002, p. 6). ‘...acting naturally is the way to give credibility to the disguise.’ (P003, p. 5). ‘...it gives us something more of being invisible, acting like a couple...’ (P022, p. 5). Changing the way they dress and/or speak, including the languages/accents used, was also highlighted by the majority of participants: ‘...adaptation to the environment, way to dress, way to speak, posture, all of this...’ (P009, p. 4). ‘I often change my beard, hair and clothing... We always find strategies and refuges. Just wear a double-sided coat, a backpack, a hat... adapt to the situation.’ (P011, p. 6).

A participant summarised the adaptation to the environment: ‘...it is the art of being forgotten, often when we are in operational action, we need to suppress some features of our individuality to go as unnoticed as possible in a certain environment.’ (P015, p. 4).

3.2 Cover Story Versus Improvisation

A few divergent opinions emerged during discussions regarding the use of a cover story or improvisation in order for the agents to maintain their cover when dealing with the targets (or anyone else they might come into contact with). Some participants stated they create a cover story in preparation for the operations and do not deviate from it: ‘We try, in general, not to improvise. We always try to have a predefined story because sometimes it can go wrong otherwise... improvisation can go wrong.’ (P014, p. 5).

In contrast, others reported they use improvisation and stated that whatever comes to their mind at the time of need is what they will say in the event of direct contact with the targets: ‘Spontaneity. Spontaneous state, without any stress. And I act in a completely natural, normal and in a totally moulded way to the situation, the place, the type of people. 100% of improvisation.’ (P018, p. 4).

Almost half of the sample explained that they use both methodologies, meaning that they start by preparing a cover

story and make use of improvisation when needed, in order to maintain coherence within the story and also to account for unforeseen circumstances or scenarios.

...when we go to a certain place, we follow the rule of undercover operations that we must take a cover story already prepared, not to be caught out. If it is a thing of the moment, then we use improvisation and the ability of each one to improvise. (P002, p. 4)

3.2.1. Within the prepared cover stories and/or improvisation, the majority of participants mentioned that they use some point of truth regarding their real lives (e.g. hobbies and interests) in order to make their stories more convincing. They reported that using these real-life aspects supports their effectiveness during the cover as they master the topics they are using: ‘We will not use a cover story on a subject we do not master.’ (P002, p. 5). In contrast, a minority of participants stated they keep everything separate (i.e. work and real-life), and just completely fabricate the topics of cover stories and improvisation.

3.3 Heightened Awareness

When asked if they have ever been ‘caught out’ during operations, the majority of participants acknowledged that it is very likely that they have been detected to some extent, at some point in their careers, because offenders use their own counter surveillance techniques and, in reality, they are not ‘invisible’:

Already a number of times... it has to happen because we are not invisible. We are investigators, we do surveillance, tracking of movements, but we are not invisible and other people are not stupid, so they sometimes detect us. The best is s/he sees me and cannot figure out if I'm a police officer or not. (P006, p. 5)

It emerged that the protocol for when agents suspect they have been detected includes exiting the surveillance and ‘disappearing’ from that case for a while (with a possibility of re-joining the operation at a different time), replacing staff and vehicles, and notifying the rest of the team to protect the investigation: ‘Yes, I left the area... The clothes change, the beard grows, put on sunglasses, already the look is totally different...’ (P007, p. 4).

A minority of participants reported that, in their view, they have never been detected during operations while also recognising that, at times, agents may believe they have been detected and this is not necessarily true. Agents also discussed the strain they feel regarding the possibility of detection due to the implications it may have:

...it is always the fear of jeopardising an investigation that may have been going on for months or years and everything the government has invested in the inves-

tigation... it is a situation that alone provokes in us that pressure of 'will we put the operation at risk'? (P020, p. 5)

Theme 4: Stress

The majority of participants acknowledged that this is a stressful profession and described the coping strategies they used.

4.1 Personalised Coping Strategies

There were a number of distinctive coping strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive, that agents claimed they use in order to deal with stress and cope with the pressure of this profession. Amongst the personalised coping strategies, some participants reported that they practice sports or exercise: 'I do sports, it's a way of dealing with stress... a way to control my emotions and keep my cool under pressure.' (P010, p. 4). Others stated they smoke cigarettes or used to do it in the past: 'When I smoked, I would light a cigarette in the aftermath of the situation; not anymore.' (P004, p. 4).

Some participants reported that having a balance of colleagues who are more relaxed and others who are more 'rushed' is helpful: 'It is good that one [colleague] is more fast-paced and another less hasty, consequently we balance each other.' (P008, p. 5), while others mentioned that sometimes they need to retreat and be by themselves: 'It has phases, it is not easy... it is exhausting, tiring and sometimes we need those moments of retreat, of pause, of disconnecting the record no matter how much you like what you do...' (P020, p. 4). A few participants also reported that their family and friends have a crucial role in keeping them calm and supporting them in releasing the pressure through spending time together and doing a number of activities: '...[to deal with it] cinema, tours, a bit of everything. I mainly try to choose to do as a family, to compensate for times when I am not there and they are affected.' (P020, p. 4).

A minority of participants stated that they feel sometimes the levels of stress get too high and it is challenging to try to manage it: '[Keep calm under pressure] Honestly no... we accumulate internally and eventually corrode ourselves internally and we do not demonstrate what we truly feel and we accumulate, accumulate, to the point at which 'the bubble will burst'...' (P020, p. 4).

4.2 Belief in Improvement

A minority of officers mentioned that they strongly believe they became better at dealing with stress and keeping calm under pressure due to their years of work and life experience, as well as due to learning from their experienced colleagues/

superiors: 'It's what I say: experience does everything; at the beginning it was complicated, then with the experience of life [improved].' (P005, p. 5).

4.3 It is Normal

Almost half of the sample described dealing with stress as a normal process and something that is inherent to this line of work: '...it is mechanised already ... I am in a position of coordination and I have to try to keep calm.' (P003, p. 5). A couple of participants reported that they are unable to live without stress or adrenaline and that is one of the reasons that keeps them in the job: 'I cannot live without stress... I live better with that adrenaline always present.' (P006, p. 5), while some participants went as far as to say that they do not experience stress as a result of their work: 'I do not have stress. It's rare, very rare. I am a very calm person, I do not become easily nervous.' (P007, p. 4).

Theme 5: Deception

Being able to deceive others effectively was considered a core coping/detection avoidance strategy for undercover police officers, as explained in the introduction of the current paper. Participants revealed different views about deception and examined their own efficacy in deceiving others, both on professional and personal levels.

5.1 Perceptions of Deception

Participants described different perceptions and beliefs about deception, as well as different techniques they use to appear convincing when lying. Some officers reported that, in order to appear credible, they have to believe in the information they are conveying and sometimes include points of truth: '...I'll try to believe what I'm saying is true; if I convince myself, it's easier to persuade others.' (P010, p. 4). A couple of participants mentioned that they need to be firm, calm and 'appear confident', otherwise, they may start to tremble and the lie falls apart: '...in any lie, it is essential to keep a firm tone of voice and keep ourselves as calm as possible. Avoid nervousness.' (P002, p. 6).

5.2 Good Deceiver?

5.2.1. The vast majority of participants reported that they are able to deceive, explaining they are trained for that and need to have an ability to do it in order to carry out the job safely: 'Maybe this job gives us a bit of 'chameleon skin'... To adapt ourselves to certain circumstances or get out of certain situations. It ends up giving us some ability to lie...' (P002, p.

7). 'Yes, I am. For my defence, for my protection I can easily make up an excuse... I know I can be realistic in a lie.' (P011, p. 6). The majority of those participants made a clear distinction between the professional and personal contexts. Lying for work purposes is seen as being for the 'greater good' and, therefore, does not carry an emotional weight, whereas they cannot lie in a personal context because they do not see it as warranted:

It's easy to lie. It's hard to lie at home when you love a person. It is difficult to lie to a child, it is difficult to lie to a wife, to a mother, but in terms of work, is easy. It's easy because it's part of the game... (P023, p. 22).

In contrast, a very small number of participants reported that they are unable to lie, be that in the professional context or at a personal level. In order to bridge this gap, they stated they stick with basic day-to-day topics if they need to interact with targets: '[at work] I wander between weather or television themes, because I cannot lie.' (P021, p. 5).

Theme 6: Support

The types of support available, or lack thereof, to assist and ease the undercover officers' job as well as their general well-being, were discussed during the interviews.

6.1 Psychological Support

Psychological support generated responses which were transversal to the whole sample (e.g. in terms of accessing it), as well as diverse patterns of response in terms of current and future service provision.

6.1.1. All participants reported they have never accessed psychological support within the Force. Some reported they know of colleagues who have accessed it. However, the majority indicated they feel like they never needed it.

A small number of participants claimed they have needed the support and have, indeed, felt slightly lost in their identity and purpose, however, the support was never offered to them: 'Because I've been out on the streets for twenty years and I'm tired of chasing after 'bad guys'. I've been through a lot. No one approached me [to offer support].' (P012, p. 8). Some officers reported that they were unsure about the psychologists' functions and their usefulness within the service.

6.1.2. Some myths around psychological support were brought up during the interviews. A very small minority of participants did not believe or were unsure whether psychological support exists within the police force: 'I do not know. I've never seen Psychology...' (P021, p. 6). A small number of participants believed there is support available, but only for extreme cases (e.g. suicidal ideation) or to be used as a 'last resort' (P009, p. 5). A participant stated, 'There is a

psychological support structure. But not for these situations. They are for extreme situations where the officer is the target of violence... their families... deaths.' (P017, p. 7).

The majority of participants were aware of the existence of some form of Psychology service, either as a Department/Clinical Centre within the Command or as phone helpline that officers are able to access if they feel the need. Of these participants, a small number believed the service available is useful and effective: 'I believe that it [the Psychology service] has preventive measures in certain types of phenomena linked to the psychology of the officers.' (P015, p. 7). A small minority of participants reported they do not believe anyone has been truly and meaningfully supported by the service: '...I did not see anyone being helped here in a truly meaningful way. And there are many cases that need a lot of help. Lots of help...' (P023, p. 26). The remaining participants did not provide an opinion regarding the perceived efficacy or their level of trust in the service.

6.1.3. Almost half of the sample highlighted the issue of not having a Psychology service aimed at these teams. Some participants claimed the service should be more proactive in the sense of being offered/volunteered on a regular basis with the psychologists visiting the teams, instead of expecting agents to go to their offices to see them: '...there is psychological support available if we set out to find it. Now, to be here and someone [psychologist] come to see us, no. [Would it be welcomed?] Yes, it would be. It might be used [then].' (P014, p. 7). They pointed out that their well-being and mental health is of paramount importance for the success of their work, which in turn reflects positively on the police force: '[improve] psychological support, be more present and proactive in all units... because my well-being will be reflected in the results of the Institution.' (P020, p. 6).

A small number of participants drew attention to reasons that may make officers not actively seek out psychological support. These reasons included a fear of stigmatisation whereby officers may refrain from seeking support because of the negative consequences they fear that may have on their reputation (due to being a minority who seeks help), as well as the issue with the fact that people who really need support, often do not ask for it: 'Usually suicide is spoken of in the security forces but it is the same as suicide outside [of the security forces]. No one ever asks for help before [committing] suicide. That is the problem.' (P013, p. 7).

6.2 Operational Support

The majority of participants listed the operational/material support available (e.g. vehicles, technological means such as cameras, surveillance houses, human resources). In spite of having different views, there was quite a lot of overlap in the opinions expressed.

6.2.1. More than half of the sample believed that, given the financial constraints and the economic situation that the country lives, the current provision of operational support is good: ‘...within the normal parameters of the available funding, we have support.’ (P011, p. 7). Some members of specific teams acknowledged they are better equipped than their counterparts in the national average: ‘In terms of material [support] we have it... we are very well equipped.’ (P002, p. 7).

6.2.2. A great number of participants, including some that believed the current provision is good, reiterated that more support at all levels (i.e. technological, vehicles, human resources) is always needed and would be highly beneficial for the general efficacy of the teams. A minority of participants reflected that the support available is below the expectation and more investment should be made with regards to this.

6.3 Command and Team Support

Participants discussed the support provided by their direct team and the remaining hierarchical chain. All participants reported the fundamental importance of the trust they place in their team mates, both for the success of the operations and for their well-being:

[trust them] Yes, no doubt, in this area [of work] mainly because certain actions have a very high degree of danger and if we do not constantly trust who is by our side, it does not go well because we will not be focused on what we are doing. (P016, p. 8)

Most participants added that their teams are their only form of support while conducting the tasks and reflected on their importance in terms of processing traumatic experiences faced at work: ‘...support? Honestly, it's the team colleagues I have on my side, the team, nothing more.’ (P008, p. 7). ‘We have a small nucleus and we have to comfort one another.’ (P011, p. 7). Similarly, just over half the sample mentioned their direct managers and claimed to feel 100% supported by them.

In terms of Command/Upper Management, nearly half of the sample discussed that level of support, demonstrating mixed feelings and opinions. Some participants described feeling fully supported by the entire chain of command. Others reported feeling like the higher echelons do not have a complete understanding and sensitivity regarding the work conducted within criminal investigation in general, and these teams in particular: ‘Maybe sometimes at the managerial level, they do not understand our type of service. The upper management, I believe they think that sometimes we come into work almost to play...’ (P004, p. 6). It was suggested by some participants that

commanders and managers from higher ranks should spend some time in the field or talking to these officers in order to gain a greater understanding of their tasks and challenges: ‘It would be good for them to spend time in the field... the upper management...’ (P005, p. 9).

Theme 7: Things to Improve

Aspects that could be improved, both at an individual level and within the institution, were discussed throughout the interviews and are reflected across the different themes within these results’ section. Despite the overlap, the final question asked participants for specific things they thought could be improved to promote their well-being and enhance their effectiveness within the role. Two main sub-themes emerged: training/continuing professional development (CPD) and supervision.

7.1 Training/CPD

While all participants reported believing that training is crucial, a small minority felt the current provision of training is enough and appropriate, noting that it has increased over time. However, the vast majority of participants emphasised the need for more training and pointed out areas where, they feel, it is lacking severely.

...there are colleagues who have not attended a training or a refresher course/CPD in fifteen years. The ‘update’ turns out to be a bit done on the field with the situations that come up and with which we learn every day. The police force has been somewhat unconcerned about training. (P003, p. 7)

Participants highlighted areas in which improvements could be made, such as new and refresher courses, CPD, and updates, in order to keep up with the reality of new technologies, defensive driving, laws and criminal trends: ‘...there should be more update of contents, more specific courses for specific areas.’ (P025, p. 7).

...we need refresher courses/CPD... because CPD is always good; in a [training] course of investigation there is always a class with a prosecutor, with a lawyer, with a jurist... Especially in terms of the Law, it is always necessary. Laws are always changing. (P013, p. 8)

...in the training of tracking movements and surveillances, I think that it's a lot [to grasp] in a limited period of time and the practice side of it is very brief; I think they should give more time; maybe the practice should be twice as long for the staff to [have the opportunity to] practice and have a sense of what to do or not to do. (P010, p. 6)

7.2 Supervision

Most participants also agreed that supervision is important. However, the current arrangements of supervision generated mixed opinions. Just under half of the sample described their current supervision as adequate and balanced:

...I think it's balanced. In this type of service there is never a lot of pressure from the managers. They make us feel at ease to avoid stress. We have to justify the service and give the information to higher ranks... things always go well. (P011, p. 8)

A very small minority claimed there should be no supervision because the higher ranks, who provide it, are not entirely clear on the undercover officers' roles and, therefore, are hindering their work more than supporting it: 'No. Many of them only hinder, it's because they have no sensitivity for investigation, nor do they want to have. So sometimes it's better not to have it.' (P007, p. 6). Conversely, a third of the participants stated that more and better supervision should be in place and could only improve their work, making the officers feel more confident within their roles: 'It would only have benefits. ... more supervision, more education, more updates...' (P005, p. 10).

Discussion

Previous studies (e.g. Kowalczyk and Sharps 2017; Love et al. 2008) have highlighted the need to conduct more research with undercover officers, not only due to their increased importance within law enforcement and society, but also to better understand how officers cope with the physiological and psychological impact this special assignment has on them. This study aimed, therefore, to explore the factors related to coping and detection avoidance strategies that enable police officers to be effective undercover.

Results of the study revealed that participants need to maintain secrecy both in the professional and personal context, at all times, in order to carry out their work safely. While some viewed this as natural and did not describe any trouble in doing so, others expressed difficulties with these strict rules. Literature has provided support to the idea that the level of secrecy required of police officers in general, and undercover officers in particular, may lead them to experience high levels of stress. Farkas (1986) described the strain on family and social relationships as one of the main stressors experienced by undercover agents, in part due to not being able to talk to anyone about their assignment. Kowalczyk and Sharps (2017) also agreed that the preclusion imposed on undercover officers from discussing their experiences with anyone outside of their operational context could lead them to isolation as well as self-censorship.

All participants reported they enjoy their work, citing the thrill and adrenaline associated with it as crucial factors. Indeed, it has been described in the literature that police officers who perform in undercover roles tend to have sensation-seeking personality styles. Having these personality styles is not only seen as a strength, but also as one of the reasons why they are so effective in this type of work (Miller 2006). Participants mentioned that a drawback associated with their work was a lack of schedule and structure and the impact this has on their personal lives. Research dating back to the early 1990s had already noted that shift work, excessive overtime, and heavy workload were ranked highly amongst the stressors that police officers faced (Brown and Campbell 1990; Violanti and Aron 1994). Similarly to the issue of secrecy, Yun et al. (2013) highlighted that these stressors could adversely impact the police officers' roles within their families, predicting more stress and burnout.

All participants agreed that there is a need for adaptation to the environment where the operation is taking place in order to be able to maintain their cover. This adaptation requires a thorough study of the targets and can include changing the way they dress and/or speak in order to 'fit in'. There were different opinions regarding the need for a cover story for every operation and/or the use of improvisation. Finally, there were different views regarding the possibility of having had, or not had, their cover blown before, as well as the awareness of the possibility of such happening in the future. Research indicates that, unsurprisingly, a cover identity is a central feature in undercover operations (Miller 2006). Undercover operatives need to prepare themselves to sound and look as convincing as possible for long periods of time because their safety depends on that (Miller 2006). It has been established that in order to create greater chances of success, the undercover role portrayed should be as close as possible to the officer's real identity (Miller 2006). This is in accordance with the majority of participants in this study, who mentioned that they use some point of truth within their cover. The guiding principle appears to be that the fewer the features of the role that have to be fabricated, the less opportunity there is for surprises and mistakes (Miller 2006).

Participants acknowledged that their profession is stressful, and while some discussed the coping strategies they use to deal with stress, others reported they believe coping with stress gets easier with experience, and others stated they are not affected by stress. Some participants reported what has been described in the literature as 'maladaptive coping' such as isolation and smoking (Band and Sheehan 1999; Gershon et al. 2009; Yun et al. 2013), while others reported using what has been described as 'adaptive coping' such as doing physical exercise and spending time with friends and family (Curran 2021; Yun et al. 2013). It would be plausible to assume that the participants who mentioned they do not feel as affected by stress or are able to overcome it and remain

calm under situations of pressure, are highly resilient individuals. An alternative explanation, which is common within the police culture, could be that some of these participants feared they would appear to be somewhat vulnerable or weak by admitting that they feel stressed due to their job (Beshears 2017) and chose to avoid reporting that. Another option still could be that they were simply unable to recognise, in themselves, symptoms of stress.

The vast majority of participants reported that they are able to deceive, explaining they are 'trained for that'. Participants reported they use techniques such as trying to believe in the information and including points of truth, for easiness in keeping up with the lies. Research suggests good liars should choose concealing information instead of using outright lies whenever possible, be well prepared, and staying with the truth (or approximations) (Vrij 2008; Vrij et al. 2010). Participants stated they need to be calm and avoid signs of nervousness. Research recommends that good liars should not attract suspicion, should not find it cognitively challenging to lie, and should not experience fear or guilt when being deceptive (Vrij 2008). Furthermore, the degree of importance for the liar of being caught or not can have great effects on whether s/he is caught or not. This happens because when people are most worried about getting away with their lies is when they display more cues indicative of deception which may make it easier for others to spot them (Cajada 2011; DePaulo and Morris 2004). This suggests that avoiding signs of nervousness can actually be a good way of concealing the fact that they are being deceptive. Participants made a clear distinction between the professional and personal contexts, whereby lying for work purposes was seen as being for the 'greater good', and therefore, it did not carry an emotional weight. According to Ekman (2001), spies feel that lying is 'authorised' since they are 'doing good' by protecting the interests of their country, which in turn reduces their negative emotions when lying; it would be plausible to assume that UCOs feel similarly.

In relation to psychological support, all participants reported they have never accessed it, and although the majority stated they feel like they never needed it, a minority declared they have needed it but that the support was not offered to them. Some participants demonstrated a degree of confusion/uncertainty over whether the police force has a psychology service and what is its usefulness, and most importantly, participants feel that there is no psychological support directed specifically at them. It is important to note that research demonstrates police officers are frequently sceptical to seek psychological support and refrain from doing so, because that is considered stigmatising in their profession (Papazoglou and Tuttle 2018). Therefore, there is a high probability that officers generally underreport psychological symptoms (Stuart 2008) due to fears of being stigmatised and because they may

consider that their need of psychological support is indicative of a lack of professional competency (Miller 2004). Regarding operational support, the majority of participants expressed satisfaction with the current provision noting, however, that more support is always beneficial. A minority of participants believed the current provision is below the expectation and highlighted the need for more investment to be made in order to increase the efficacy of their work. According to the literature, poor working conditions have been a stressor in the police forces for a long time. Due to the global financial recession, police have been pressured constantly with the task of doing 'more with less' (Yun et al. 2013, p. 789), meaning they find themselves burdened with a lack of technical and human resources. When discussing command and team support, all participants explained that their team has a fundamental importance, both for the success of the operations and for their well-being, even saying that they are their only form of support. Participants also feel supported by their direct managers and some described this feeling regarding the entire chain of command. Others, however, reported feeling that the higher echelons do not have a complete understanding and sensitivity regarding their work. This issue does not appear to be new or isolated, as Miller (2006) and Martinez (2023) also denoted that given the massive investment and the risks involved in undercover operations, it would appear strange that many UCOs believed that they lacked support and commitment from their supervisors.

All participants agreed on the importance of training and CPD for the effectiveness in their roles, with the majority reporting that there is room for improvement. Research dating back over thirty years (e.g. Farkas 1986) indicates the lack of training and supervision for UCOs has been noted as a problem for a while. The objective of training is to develop and perfect UCOs operational performance, through the transmission of theoretical knowledge and the practical skills needed to excel in the role (Miller 2006). Participants also discussed how they feel about supervision. While the majority described that supervision in the sense of guiding and support is welcomed and essential, not all agreed that they are currently in receipt of this type of supervision. Some participants reported their supervision is adequate and balanced; others stated they feel the need for better/more supervision; and others yet declared that the supervision they have is inadequate due to a lack of sensitivity and understanding of their tasks, from their supervisors, which ends up hindering their performance. Indeed, Farkas (1986) reported the agent-supervisor relationship as one of the main stressor sources that UCOs face.

Overall, the findings of this study provide some support to the scarce literature available on this topic. Officers with undercover experience generally seem able to cope well with

detection avoidance strategies such as maintaining secrecy, adapting to the environment of the target, using cover stories and improvisation, making use of deception and submerging into their fictitious identities. There is always a risk, however, as discussed in other studies (e.g. Balmer et al. 2014), that officers may have underreported symptoms such as how stressed/strained they feel within their roles, as well as the need for more support, in an attempt to uphold an image of healthy psychological and physical functioning. Unquestionably, having an appropriate selection of UCOs with a priori measurement of attributes such as personality traits is crucial to determine these agents' psychological health and safety (Macleod 1995) and may predict their ability to cope with specific stressors inherent to undercover work (Fyhn et al. 2016).

Strengths and Limitations of the Studies

The main strength of this project is that to the authors' knowledge, this was the first of its kind to be conducted. In addition to that, a good sample size was achieved. This was an achievement given the extraordinary difficulties in gaining access to participants who work in this speciality assignment. The study does, however, have limitations which are acknowledged below.

One limitation is the potential bias in interview responses. Due to the fact that officers were asked sensitive questions (e.g. relating to deception, emotions, etc.) they may have been reticent or inaccurate in some of their responses. This is always a concern with sensitive topics as respondents may wish to provide socially desirable answers. In addition, there may have been a concern that, despite the anonymity, responses would be seen by senior staff.

A further limitation with the study was regarding the fact that the invitation to participate in the study went through the command structure of the police force which, in turn, meant that the researcher was unaware of how many officers received the invitation and, therefore, could not include the percentage of eligible people who participated in the study. However, it is of note that the sample were recruited from the entire police force, which meant that a mix of officers participated in the study in terms of representing different parts of the country, different ages, different lengths of service, etc.

Finally, this project was limited in that it was conducted in one single police force. This means that results may not be generalisable to all police forces as well as to different countries, taking into account the organisational and operational differences across police forces. Nevertheless, it provides an insight in a fairly unexplored area of undercover policing. Moreover, the issues that officers raised in this police force are unlikely to be substantially different from the issues experienced by officers in other police forces working in similar settings.

Implications for Practice

The following are the suggested implications for practice to sustain undercover work and guarantee the efficacy and well-being of the agents:

- Police forces should administer robust screening prior to the appointment of officers to undercover assignments. Psychological assessment and realistic role-play scenarios are seen as effective ways to screen undercover candidates. Having the right agents working in these operations should determine, to a large degree, their success (Band and Sheehan 1999).
- Training is deemed as key, as insufficient or inadequate training can compromise the undercover operation in many ways. Lack of appropriate training can result in mistakes being made, physical and psychological injuries of the UCOs and/or the targets, as well as legal problems in Court if the procedures do not follow the law (Miller 2006).
- Experienced mental health professionals (e.g. mental health nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers) can play an important role during undercover investigations, particularly in deep undercover, in providing ongoing monitoring of the UCOs well-being (Band and Sheehan 1999). Upon completion of the operation, psychological monitoring and post-operational debriefings are also beneficial for the operatives to transition back to traditional police work (Band and Sheehan 1999). This can take place by decreasing the restrictiveness of the undercover role and increasing self-identification with uniformed officers (Kowalczyk and Sharps 2017). It is recommended that uniformed officers also have psychoeducation on the role of undercover officers, to translate into the former recognising their work and being more inclusive towards the agents working in these assignments.
- It is recommended that psychology services are implemented, where they do not yet exist, and that work is done to improve existing psychology centres within the police forces. These services should work more proactively and offer compulsory sessions (e.g. Carlan and Nored 2008). This should be offered to all officers who are involved in speciality assignments, providing them with the opportunity to discuss things should they feel the need, and reducing the stigmatisation associated with seeking support. The police culture has traditionally been unwilling to accept psychological support, seeing it as risky and interfering with the officers' reputation and job prospects (Evans et al. 2013; Violanti et al. 2017). Scientific research highlights the benefits of psychological interventions in supporting police officers dealing with trauma and occupational stress (Evans et al. 2013;

Papazoglou and Tuttle 2018). Having professional psychologists treating officers with confidence privilege, appreciation, respect and a sense of equality would likely make officers more comfortable in seeking psychological support (Macleod 1995; Miller 2004, 2006; Papazoglou and Tuttle 2018).

- It is recommended that law enforcement agencies aim to give their officers a certain level of freedom to carry out their tasks, when possible, and provide them with supportive supervision. This appears to be ideal for the officers to effectively reduce job strain and negative psychological impacts. Officers who perceive their jobs as demanding, have been found to have insufficient control over their work and have low levels of social support, putting them at greater risk of experiencing job strain and psychological issues (Stuart 2008).
- Finally, it is recommended that officers are provided with extensive social support from teammates, as UCOs are not usually allowed to discuss matters of ongoing investigations outside of the nucleus of their team. It is, therefore, important to have systems in place for social support to be facilitated within the workplace, especially when it is assumed the officers are under high strain (Fyhn et al. 2016; Pole et al. 2006). Moreover, research indicates that having these meaningful social support systems can diminish the occupational stressors felt by police officers by enhancing their coping mechanisms and shielding them from psychological injury (Balmer et al. 2014).

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is needed in order to understand the key differences between agents who, under similar stresses and strains, use adaptive coping strategies and agents who develop physical/psychological issues. In order to ascertain these differences, research could compare two groups of police officers, preferably those working under high strain assignments such as undercover officers, taking into account their self-reported levels of stress. One group of agents would be comprised of agents self-reporting low levels of stress and minimum physical/psychological issues and the other one would be comprised of agents reporting strain and potential issues derived from stress.

Another way forward, as previously suggested by Acquadro Maran et al. (2018), would be to make studies in this area more scientific by using clinical assessments and validated psychometric instruments to assess the actual stress levels of the agents in comparison to the coping strategies used.

Finally, it is recommended that more longitudinal studies are conducted with police officers. The longitudinal investigation of coping and detection avoidance strategies as well as stress, across periods of the officers' careers, could assist in establishing causal relationships between these variables.

Further research with police officers, in general, and undercover operatives, in particular, is of the utmost importance in informing the trajectory of policy, procedures and practice contributing to these officers' well-being and ultimately to a safer society.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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