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The experience of stress, coping and support for prison officer negotiators in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service

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Abstract

Purpose: Negotiation is an established strategy used by the police and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to manage serious incidents. Whilst the literature acknowledges the role of the negotiator to be stressful, little is known about the experience of stress and the coping strategies used by negotiators, when undertaking this role. This is the first known study to explore the experience of negotiators working in a prison setting.

Design/methodology/approach: The study adopted a qualitative methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen prison officer negotiators based in public sector prisons in the North West of England. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings: Four overarching themes were identified relating to stressors; the experience of stress; use of coping strategies; and use of support. An underlying theme was identified relating to negotiating within the structure of a prison regime.

Originality/value: This paper contributes new insights into the management of serious incidents and the negotiator experience in prisons in England and Wales.

Practical implications: People involved in the management of serious incidents should be familiar with the negotiator role. Debriefing negotiators after a lone deployment and offering support to negotiators in the days following an incident, is critical for staff wellbeing. Further, record keeping from the perspective of the negotiator should become formalised.

Keywords: negotiation; negotiator; prison; incident; hostage; prison officer; stress; coping; support; corrections.

The experience of stress, coping and support for prison officer negotiators in HMPPS

Article classification: Research paper

Introduction

Prison officers deal with serious incidents every day. Recent government statistics revealed that there were 13,788 prisoner-on-prisoner assaults and 7,356 assaults on staff in the 12-month period to September 2022 (Ministry of Justice, 2023). During the same 12-month period there were 54,761 reported incidents of self-harm. Whilst every one of those incidents could be described as serious, the current paper will focus on serious incidents which require the deployment of a specialist trained team(s) of staff to bring about a resolution. In His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), these incidents typically include riots, barricades, incidents at height, hostage situations, and concerted indiscipline.

The Management of Serious Incidents in HMPPS

During a serious incident, the most senior ranking governor in the establishment will normally assume the role of Silver Commander (College of Policing, 2013). Whilst the Silver Commander has a number of specialist trained teams of prison officers who can physically intervene to resolve an incident, the preferred method is to achieve a peaceful resolution through negotiation. Negotiators in HMPPS are prison officers who have completed additional training to perform this specialist role. Similar to police negotiators (Grubb, 2016; Spence and Millott, 2016) this is a voluntary role, undertaken in addition to their day-to-day prison officer duties.

The Experience of Negotiators

Stress. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 19), stress is "any situation in which internal demands, external demands, or both, are appraised as taxing or exceeding the adaptive or coping resources of an individual or group". Stressors have been defined as "environmental demands encountered by an individual" (Lazarus, 1999, p. 329). Lazarus and

Folkman's transactional model of stress is now well established in the stress literature (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The model conceptualises stress as encompassing a stressor, the individual's appraisal of it, coping, and the emotional response. Lazarus and Folkman consider that the way one appraises an event influences the number and type of coping responses an individual will use. Specifically, if the event is perceived as a threat or a challenge, and how controllable it is perceived to be.

Developments in stress and coping research found the presence of positive emotion in the stress process (e.g., Bonanno and Keltner, 1997; Folkman, 1997; Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). Following this development, Folkman and Moskowitz (2000, 2004) updated Lazarus and Folkman's model (1984) to illustrate that both positive and negative stress can co-occur in the same incident. In the context of occupational stress and burnout, Maslach and Jackson's (Maslach and Jackson, 1981) multidimensional theory conceptualises burnout as incorporating three elements i) emotional exhaustion ii) depersonalisation (an excessive detachment from others) and iii) feelings of reduced personal accomplishment. When stress is not well-managed, burnout is a risk for employees. Understanding stressors related to the workplace and one's ability to cope with workplace stress is therefore worthy of attention by researchers.

The extant literature pertaining to negotiator stress is largely theoretical and anecdotal in nature. These narrative reviews unequivocally consider the experience of stress to be negative; however, the empirical literature presents a more colourful picture that stress is experienced on a continuum from negative/harmful stress through to it being a positive experience (e.g., Grubb, 2016; Sachs, 1996). These findings align with the model of stress proposed by Folkman and Moskowitz (2000, 2004), previously outlined.

The empirical literature has identified negative stressors as being related to role ambiguity due to the negotiator role being at odds with their police officer role (Grubb,

2016); unmet physical needs (Sachs, 1996); thoughts of criticism, scrutiny, and inquiry into their performance (Sachs, 1996; Spence and Millott, 2016); interference in negotiations from untrained colleagues (Grubb, 2016; Sachs, 1996; Spence and Millott, 2016); poor scene management (Grubb, 2016), and negotiating alone (Grubb, 2016). Some have described their experience of stress as 'different', but no more stressful than their day-to-day role (Grubb, 2016; Spence and Millott, 2016). Stress has also been perceived as a positive experience whereby the situation is viewed as a challenge rather than a problem (Grubb, 2016).

Given the potential for stress to have a negative impact on performance (Iskamto, 2021), understanding the sources and experience of stress for negotiators is essential. The importance is related not only to ensuring they can perform at the highest level, but also for long term physical and psychological health (Leviton, 2004; Rosenbluh, 2001).

Coping. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping strategies can be seen as the cognitive and behavioural efforts an individual employs to manage, tolerate, or reduce a stressor. Their model categorises coping strategies in terms of problem- versus emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Here problem-focused coping refers to managing or altering the problem that is causing distress (task-oriented), while emotion-focused coping refers to managing one's emotional response to the situation. Originating from research with prison staff, examining how to protect their psychological health, Clarke's Model of Dynamic Adaptation (Clarke, 2011) conceptualises how workers in critical occupations are constantly striving to adapt to their surroundings. To manage the resultant stress, it is essential that employees have a repertoire of coping strategies.

An understanding of the coping strategies adopted by negotiators is limited; however, some studies with police negotiators have identified coping strategies. Grubb (2016) found police negotiators adopted the behavioural coping strategies of using the formal post-incident debrief; exercise; and drinking alcohol to manage the stress of negotiation work. An

operational debrief to talk through the incident and having 'clear the air' talks with team members has also been found to be beneficial (Bohl, 2001; Sachs, 1996). Sachs (1996) highlighted the importance of the debrief as a place to receive feedback and for self-reflection to improve performance. Other cognitive strategies have been identified, including externalising responsibility onto decision-makers for negative outcomes (Sachs, 1996; Terhune-Bickler, 2005), and avoiding thinking about the negative feelings associated with the incident (Bohl, 2001). In terms of behavioural strategies, several researchers have reported the benefits of humour (Sachs, 1996; Spence and Millott, 2016; Terhune-Bickler, 2005), and using training in stress and emotional management techniques.

Support. Social support (e.g., family, friends, and co-workers) is viewed as a coping resource (Thoits, 1995). Within an occupational context, support may also be available from services provided by the organisation. The small number of studies that have explored support options available to negotiators, have consistently found that social support is preferred to organisational support (Grubb, 2016; Spence and Millott, 2016; Terhune-Bickler, 2005).

Only a small number of participants reported to having accessed formal support, with many considering that it would not be helpful or that it had been offered too soon (Terhune-Bickler, 2005). Terhune-Bickler (2005) hypothesised that a help-seeking stigma prevented negotiators from accessing formal support, while participants in the study by Spence and Millott (2016) specifically reported the presence of a help-seeking stigma. Some participants suggested the fear of stigma could be circumvented if referrals to occupational health services were mandatory. This could suggest that whilst there may be a stigma associated with *asking* for support, it is seen as acceptable to accept it when it is offered.

The Current Study

Whilst prison officers share the same professional categorisation as police, they work in a unique environment. As such, whilst the extant literature has illuminated the field of critical incident negotiation, findings from police samples cannot be assumed to be generalisable to those working in a prison setting.

Taking forward some of the recommendations from previous studies, a qualitative methodology was used (Young, 2016), and views in relation to support mechanisms was explored (Bohl, 1992; Spence and Millott, 2016). The aim of the current study was to explore the experiences of prison officer negotiators. The research questions are:

1. What are the sources of incident-related stress for prison officer negotiators and how do they experience stress?
2. How does the prison officer negotiator cope with incident-related stress?
3. What support mechanisms are available to the prison officer negotiator and how do they view them?

Method

Design

A qualitative methodology was deemed the most appropriate as it enables the researcher to identify and understand the complexities in participant accounts (Shaw *et al*., 2008). Whilst qualitative data is not generalisable, it is possible to make inferences from the data gathered (Carminati, 2018). The study was conducted from a realist perspective, in which accounts from semi-structured interviews were treated as a form of testimony from the experiences and reality of the participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited from HMPPS public sector prisons in the North West of England using a purposive sampling strategy. This strategy was chosen to select respondents who are most likely to have in-depth knowledge and experience of being a prison officer negotiator (Campbell *et al.,* 2020). Upon request, Security Departments in the selected prisons provided the names of their trained prison officer negotiators. In total, there were 30 trained prison officer negotiators (n=20 male and n=10 female). Participants were trained prison officer negotiators who had attended at least one live negotiation incident in the 12 months prior to interview. From the 30 negotiators invited to take part, 14 negotiators agreed and were deemed eligible.

The sample consisted of 10 male and four female participants. All participants identified themselves as White British. The ethnicity of non-respondents is not known. The length of time served as a negotiator ranged from 1 to 20 years (M = 6 years 9 months). The minimum number of incidents attended by a participant was six. Whilst the participants were based in North West prisons at the time of interview, most had worked in prisons across England.

Data Collection

The interview guide was devised considering the existing literature and the research questions. Thirteen interviews were conducted face-to-face and one interview was conducted via telephone. The duration of interviews ranged from 33 minutes to 83 minutes. The sum total of audio data was 779 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Ethical Considerations

HMPPS National Research Committee and Governing Governors granted permission to conduct the research. Ethical approval was granted from the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee at the University of Birmingham Fully informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Reflexivity Statement

The lead researcher is employed by HMPPS and has been a trained Negotiation Advisor (NA) for 20 years. To maintain objectivity, the researcher used a reflexive journal to remain mindful of how their biases and experiences may influence decisions and interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Strategies used to manage biases were basing the interview questions on the literature, using prompts to gain further information, and extracting data during the analysis that contradicted their assumptions.

Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was used due its theoretical flexibility to answer all the research questions and as research in the field is just developing (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As the research questions were exploratory in nature, an experiential orientation was taken to the data where coding sought to identify participants' experiences and perspectives. The six steps in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis were followed in an iterative manner. The first and third research questions had two aims. The two-fold nature of these questions did not affect the analysis.

Results

In keeping with the realist methodology, a descriptive form of thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Four overarching themes were identified: *'Stressors';*

'Experience of Stress'; *'Coping Strategies';* and *'Support Mechanisms'*. Each theme consists of sub-themes which demonstrate the different facets of the overarching theme (see Table 1).

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes from Interviews with Negotiators

Themes	Subthemes
1. Stressors	1.1 Lone Deployments
	1.2 Cognitively Demanding
	1.3 Risk to Life and Limb
	1.4 Physical Stressors
	1.5 Scene Management
	1.6 Legal Scrutiny
2. Experience of Stress	2.1 Not stressful… or is it?
	2.2 A Different Kind of Stress
	2.3 Positive Affect
3. Coping Strategies	3.1 Incident-Related Strategies
	3.2 Post-Incident Strategies
4. Support Mechanisms	4.1 Organisational
	4.2 Social
	4.3 Help-seeking Stigma

Source: Authors own creation

Theme 1: Stressors

Most participants denied the role was stressful though several factors were identified where it was clear they contributed to increased pressure. Six sub-themes were identified:

Lone deployments. This was a strong theme throughout the data. Negotiators work in a team of three, or two as a minimum; however, participants frequently spoke of attending incidents on their own. There seemed to be three reasons why this might occur: 1) there were no other negotiators available; 2) the incident was deemed as not requiring the deployment of a negotiator team; or 3) it was in an effort to resolve a situation in a timelier manner to deploying a full negotiator team.

Lone deployments appear to cause role ambiguity for participants due to lack of clarity in whether they are being sent to act as a negotiator, or as a prison officer who has had specialist training. *"'Oh just go over there, it's not a negotiation but you're a negotiator, see what you can do'" – [P2]*. Participants also described lack of understanding amongst non-negotiator trained colleagues about what the role is, and what it is not:

> *"I was once on Y Wing talking to a lad who'd took another lad hostage and I was there on my own for hours… … I was thinking 'Please god somebody walk up these stairs in a minute' you know, and when I asked why [no one had helped] they said, 'Oh we leave negotiators to it, they're in charge', they yes, me no" – [P3]*

Many participants also described an internal conflict they experience when asked to attend an incident alone. On the one hand it was considered non-compliant with policy and

so the wrong thing to do, and on the other that it was morally the right thing to do to support colleagues and prisoners:

> *"and they'll say to you, 'Such a body's self-harmed behind his door can you go and have a word with him?', 'Am I a negotiator?', 'Well we've not opened the Command Suite', but I can't, , it's not in me to say, 'Well no then'…the wing'll deal with that'- that lad's behind his door, he's severely cut his arm… I probably am the best person to go and talk to him but officially I shouldn't because I'm not a negotiator at that point, but I do, I go." – [P3]*

It was also clear that lone working came with increased emotional and cognitive challenges. This appeared to be caused by feeling the full weight of the responsibility for the situation and a lack of support in dealing with the practical, cognitive, and emotional challenges:

> *"I don't like the fact that when you are on a roof and in a cherry picker, you're on your own, I hate that. Who's giving me support there? Who's giving me an alternative?" – [P3]*

Cognitively demanding. Whilst the cognitive demands of the role were identified as challenging, participants viewed the demands in a largely positive way - as a personal challenge to be relished. Many participants described having to multi-task.

> *"your mouth's doing one thing talking to them but your brain's somewhere else thinking 'right, this this this'… [you] analyse what they're telling you and then you've*

got to move information backwards and receive information coming forwards…all the time your brain's going and analysing the next step" – [P10]

Several participants embraced the cognitive challenge seeing it as an opportunity to test their mental agility.

" [it's] a bit like a mental game of chess, erm, taking someone on on a brain level… twisting things round, negatives into positives… I like the challenge it gives me..." – [P11]

Risk to life and limb. All participants described attending at least one incident where there had been a risk of serious harm and the majority had witnessed actual physical harm being inflicted. Most participants described feelings of helplessness during these times:

"but then the perp started physically harming his hostage and started cutting him pretty bad… it wasn't easy you know, it's not nice watching someone being cut in front of you" – [P10]

Physical stressors. The majority of participants described factors pertaining to their physical comfort during negotiations but not all participants felt that their physical needs were considered:

"I think our Silver Commanders are really good… they always make sure that we're fed and watered which is, you know, a god send sometimes, especially when you're negotiating through your lunch period" – [P5]

> *"it's almost like no one cares of what we've been through… sometimes, I do think that… I was five hours on the door…, gasping for a drink" - [P13]*

Scene management. Most participants spoke about their job being made more difficult by untrained staff becoming directly or indirectly involved in negotiations. It was considered that this problem was due to a lack of understanding of the management of incidents, as opposed to any malintent:

> *"we have had a couple of incidences of governors turning up… and absolutely taking all of the momentum out of something because they think they're there to solve a problem and they turn up, erm, say, "No, bugger off" and you're absolutely knackered again aren't you?... I mean they're trying to expediate things, but they don't have any idea as to how the process works" – [P9]*

Some participants discussed feeling under pressure and distracted when they were being observed by colleagues or prisoners *"rubber-necking" – [P14]*. An internalised fear that colleagues would negatively critique their performance and subsequent embarrassment were common features across the data:

> *"the risk of embarrassment more than anything and the kind of thought that if you don't get anywhere that it kind of reflects negatively on yourself, on your ability" – [P5]*

Legal scrutiny. Less than half the participants discussed fear over legal comeback in the event of a negative outcome; however, for those that did, there was significant concern of 'finger pointing':

"If he ends up cutting his jugular and he dies in front of me then it'll be stressful but it won't be my fault, but also a part of you is thinking someone will come looking to try and see if it is your fault, someone'll be looking for a scapegoat" – [P13]

Related to this was the consequence of an absence of mandatory post-incident paperwork for negotiators:

"I remember thinking, 'I'm going to be interviewed by the police and I've forgotten everything. I remember that in the immediate days thinking, 'Oh shit I've forgotten everything, what was it, who was it, where was it, who was there', and I remember that, I was dreading the police interview" – [P12]

Theme 2: Experience of Stress

Three sub-themes were identified that encapsulate the flavour of how participants perceive their experiences and the emotional impact.

Not stressful… or is it? Most participants denied that the role was stressful in a negative sense although some of those participants went on to describe an emotionally difficult event that had left a lasting impression.

"I'd say that was the worst one out of all of them and erm, that one, I can still to this day see… visions of it in my head, I can visually picture it… it's clear as day, it's in my head… but no it doesn't bother me" – [P8]

Several participants wondered whether there might be a *"drip, drip" – [P13]* effect in that negative stress might be building up but they were unaware of how it might be impacting on them:

"you don't know if there's gonna be any effects of what you're experiencing… one point tips you over the edge and it's not that one little thing, it's all the things that have gone before… I've never felt [stressed]… but you don't know the effect it's having… because you don't think about it a lot you don't know if it's having any impact" – [P13]

A different kind of stress. Many participants described negotiating as a different kind of stress to their regular job. A theme across the data was having a greater number of people and problems to deal with simultaneously in their general role. In some respects, this made the negotiator role less stressful for some participants:

"I think the day-to-day stuff is that you're juggling several things all at once and they're all very serious, you know. With being a negotiator, you've got one thing in front of you, you block everything out and you deal with the thing in front of you, that's quite easy" – [P12]

Some participants explained the differences in relation to the speed and intensity of the physiological stress response. The less intense experience of stress during negotiation could be explained by a greater feeling of safety for themselves and others not directly involved.

> *"As a negotiator, [stress levels] don't suddenly rocket up there. if a general alarm goes now your stress levels are gonna have a quicker jump and they might stay high for the rest of the day, higher than they could be for a negotiation, because during that negotiation you're thinking, 'I'm safe , my colleagues are safe and the only person who's potentially not safe is the person who's doing something to themselves'" – [P13]*

Positive affect. Some participants described positive feelings and emotions associated with negotiating which seemed to energise and inspire them. This could be explained by an incident breaking up the monotony of the day: *"it gets you off the wing… it's a change" – [P5]*. The narratives suggest a perception of the role as being unique, perhaps making it more appealing and exciting.

> *"it just <u>fires</u> you up… it's that sort of er anticipation, apprehension, excitement and er and it just gets me pumped… it's just different… it's really exciting" – [P4]*

Theme 3: Coping Strategies

All participants talked of using cognitive and behavioural strategies during and after an incident.

Incident-related strategies. Most participants found it difficult to describe how they managed to stay calm when negotiating; however, some strategies were identified amongst the narratives. Cognitive strategies were identified as thoughts the participants told themselves which served the function of keeping them calm and focused. Half of the participants described thoughts that could be understood as playing down the seriousness of the situation.

> *"The hostage situation staff wise was a bit hairy but at no point did I think that the member of staff was in any real danger, they were in danger, don't get me wrong but that's what I told myself to get myself through it" – [P11]*

Participants spoke in terms of responsibility taking for the incident. These participants were clear that the Silver Commander is responsible for the situation. Some participants expressed that the perpetrator must take responsibility:

> *"once I'm negotiating I'm just the mouth piece of Silver, I'm not responsible" – [P2]*

> *"he'd cut himself and you could see blood coming down his hand… but I'm thinking he's made that decision to do that" – [P13]*

All participants spoke of coping behaviours. Working in a team and drawing on training and experiences was a strong theme across the data:

> *"I don't particularly get apprehensive… I feel quite suitably trained… for* <u>*us*</u>*, because it's fairly regular, we work well together, and I think that offers you a lot of support and a lot of comfort" – [P5]*

Post-incident strategies. Just less than half of participants described a conscious process of pushing the negative thoughts, emotions, and images associated with difficult experiences to the back of their minds. Participants described putting thoughts *"into boxes"* while some specifically described their efforts as compartmentalising. Whilst all participants considered it to be an effective strategy for them, some participants reflected that it might not be a healthy strategy:

> *"I compartmentalise… you know, you can only have a certain amount of those [observing serious self-harm] before you start learning that there's pieces of your brain that you just don't visit… but after that one I cried, that's when the process of compartmentalising started building up inside me" – [P2]*

All participants described reflecting on how the incident had been managed and on their personal performance. For the most part, participants seemed to have balance in their reflections; however, there seemed to be greater emphasis on how they could have performed better:

> *"I'm probably very overly self-critical and analyse… I always debrief from everything… so yeah I always think about it cause it's all about self-improvement isn't it" – [P13]*

The debrief was a key coping mechanism. This was related to the importance placed on personal growth and as an opportunity to discuss frustrations:

"Talking to the NA [Negotiation Advisor] is good… they can give you some feedback.. Feedback from your colleagues always helps" – [P10]

"the debrief you obviously get to have your say so that helps to get a few things off your chest" – [P7]

Some participants described the benefit of being debriefed as a negotiator team by the Silver Commander:

"hopefully whoever's been silver will debrief you, because you can say things there… that you might not want to say at the debrief" – [P4]

There was discontent from most participants that a debrief was not provided after lone deployments. This is an important finding as lone deployments were often the most difficult. Further, on occasions where incidents had been resolved late, the debrief was often held the following day. This meant that some participants did not get a debrief:

"it finished about half eleven at night… and it was a case of everyone just wanted to wrap up and go home…. I think I was a rest day the next day anyway so… came back to work… and everyone had forgotten about it by then"- [P10]

Many participants spoke about the use of humour as a coping strategy. Good natured humour was a way to bond with colleagues and demonstrate you were accepted as part of the team:

> *"and you've got the gallows humour…. new members coming on to the team we get to know them and we take the mickey out of them and you bond that way" – [P10]*

> *"there's loads [banter] I think that's what gets you through, that you all work together… there's always somebody who'll cheer you up" – [P14]*

Participants also described engaging in distraction activities to take their mind away from the situation, for example, listening to the radio, watching television, reading, or having a bath.

Theme 4: Support Mechanisms

The fourth theme encompasses support mechanisms and attitudes towards them. They differ to coping strategies in that they are resources that a person can draw on.

Organisational mechanisms. All participants spoke of the local Care Team – a formally arranged peer support group. A member of the Care Team will usually approach staff immediately after an incident is resolved. Care Team users rated it highly: *"I've used them a few times, er, really good, … I think just having a cup of tea with somebody and just having a chat with them, it just helps" – [P5]*. Some participants that had not utilised the Care Team adopted a negative view in that members were no more trained than their friends: *"I might as well just talk to my mate" – [P11]*, or were just doing a job: *"it's just a tick box exercise" – [P2]*

It was Interesting to note that most participants were not ready to talk about the incident until they had had time to reflect on it; however, having previously declined the offer of a chat, it was generally not offered again, leaving the negotiator with an unmet need:

> *"if somebody said to me 'Are you alright?' straight after, I'll always say, 'Yeah, I'm fine', it may be two or three days after I'll have had that time to mull it over and 'Do you know, actually I was a bit annoyed by this or a bit frustrated by this, but by then it's [offer of support] gone'" – [P3]*

When specifically asked about the national Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), all participants were aware of its existence though not all were aware of the services they provide, or how to access it: *"employee support? I don't know. What do they actually do?" – [P11]*. No participants reported using the service for negotiation related incidents. It was noted that participants who had accessed the EAP for other reasons had been referred by their manager and found it helpful. This could suggest managerial input is important to ensuring staff access appropriate services:

> *"it was actually my boss who put me onto all of the options and they did actually provide counselling for me… they're there for a reason and they're usually pretty good" – [P9]*

Social support. All participants were content to discuss difficult incidents with negotiator colleagues. This was considered important for development and wellbeing;

however, pressures caused by low staffing levels meant time was not available for them to meet:

> *"to meet as a group and talk through the incidents… … you can say 'I struggled a bit with that', 'Why don't you-', cause if it's another negotiator telling you that you should really speak to someone you're more likely to take that" – [P1]*

> *"talk it over with colleagues if we get chance, which we haven't been able to in the last couple of years because you don't get chance, you can have a conversation on the phone" – [P7]*

The majority of participants chose not to talk to their partner about the incidents they attend. The themes across the data were that if you have not experienced working in a prison then you would not understand, it would be too difficult to explain, and it might cause their partner to worry. The cognitive demands of the role meant they were tired, which lowered their tolerance for being asked questions and having detailed conversations:

> *"I don't wanna talk about it to [partner], I've just talked the hell out of it for hours, like 'How's your day?', 'We had one on the roof', 'Oh what happened?', I don't wanna go through this again, you knoI.I'm getting frustrated now because I'm having to explain everything about the prison service and not actually the incident, I'd rather speak to somebody from work who knows what I'm saying" – [P3]*

Help-seeking stigma. The presence of a help-seeking stigma was perceived by the majority of participants and given as a reason why they would not ask for help. Interestingly,

whilst help would not actively be sought, most participants would accept support if it was offered. Help-seeking stigma could be seen by the subtle way that support is offered: *"where ever I've worked, a prison officer's way of asking you if you're alright is 'D'yer wanna brew?' he's really putting his arm round me saying 'Everything alright?'" – [P3]*, as well as explicit statements pertaining to an unwillingness to seek support:

> *"I'm not gonna go voluntarily and see the Care Team, I'm not, nobody is… everyone wears a coat of armour, whether you're a prisoner or a prison officer, so to see a weakness, it's hard to admit… it would take somebody to approach* ***me****" – [P3]*

Discussion

The first research question can be answered by the themes '*Stressors*' and '*Experience of Stress*'. Identifying the sources of negotiator stress can be answered by the theme '*Stressors'*. Several sources of stress replicated those found in the empirical and non-empirical literature with police officer negotiators, including: being observed (McMains and Mullins, 2015); physical stressors (McMains and Mullins, 2015); fear of poor performance (Bohl, 1992; Sachs, 1996; Spence and Millott, 2016); a lack of understanding of the negotiator role from colleagues (McMains and Mullins, 2015; Norton and Petz, 2012); formal inquiry into their performance (Spence and Millott, 2016); lack of control at the scene (Fagan, 2003; Grubb, 2016); non-negotiator trained colleagues becoming directly involved (Grubb, 2016; Sachs, 1996); threats of harm (Sachs, 1996); and negotiating alone (Grubb, 2016). Legal scrutiny was identified as a stressor in the current study but not in the studies with police officer samples. It is possible that this is due to prison officers' lack of knowledge of the law and judicial system which would not be the case for the police.

The pressure of the prison regime alongside staffing levels, means that it is not always possible to deploy a full negotiator team. Further, a lack of negotiators on some shifts may increase the likelihood of being deployed alone. Working as a lone negotiator was a stressor also identified by Grubb (2016). In both studies the stressor was related to feeling isolated and difficulty in communications with the Silver Commander. It seems working in a prison setting brings other stressors from a lone deployment in relation to role ambiguity and some negotiators' perceptions they are working outside of policy. It is important for this to be addressed as ambiguous role expectations have shown to contribute to stress in prison officers (Armstrong and Griffin, 2004; Schaufeli and Peeters, 2000) and that role clarity can be a protective factor to mental health difficulties (Kinman *et al.,*2017). Poor management of the scene was a key finding in the current study that was also reported by Grubb (2016). This related to non-negotiation trained staff becoming directly involved in negotiations and indirectly involved by stopping to observe. Participants considered that colleagues lacked understanding of how they should behave during serious incidents and how they could support their negotiator colleagues.

In relation to how negotiators experience stress, participants in the current study reported a similar experience of incident-related stress to that found by Grubb (2016) and Spence and Millott (2016) in terms of the range of feelings and emotions experienced. In the current study, negative experiences were linked to observing a risk to, or actual, serious harm; lone deployments; and fear of legal comeback. 'Frustrations' were linked to physical stressors and poor scene management. Positive affect was linked to the role being cognitively demanding and the mental challenge that the role can bring. These findings provide support for Folkman and Moskowitz's (2000, 2004) model of stress that purports positive and negative stress may co-occur during the same stressful incident. Maslach and Jackson's (Maslach and Jackson, 1981) multidimensional theory of stress and burnout was not found to

be of relevance in the current study; however, only one role of being a prison officer was explored and not the job as a whole. Whilst emotional exhaustion could be present immediately following some incidents, this did not seem to prevail and could be alleviated by the positive affect experienced. Further, contrary to depersonalisation, the role seemed to facilitate connectedness.

The second research question can be answered by the theme '*Coping Strategies'*. Several cognitive and behavioural coping strategies were identified that negotiators used during and after incidents. Given the nature of negotiator work and the presence of a help-seeking stigma within the workplace, it is perhaps not surprising that the majority of strategies focused on managing one's emotional response. In line with previous studies (Grubb, 2016; Sachs, 1996; Spence and Millott, 2016; Terhune-Bickler, 2005), humour was used by several negotiators. Humour is well established in the literature as a coping strategy for prison officers (Arnold, 2017; Barry, 2017; Crawley, 2004), and other human service workers who face traumatic incidents (Tracy *et al.*, 2006). It has been suggested that humour serves to lighten the air and boost camaraderie (Scott, 2007). Zijderveld (1983, p.45) claims that through laughter and joking "emotional experiences which are hard to express verbally are [thus] made collective and communicable. Cognitive and emotional dissonances are lifted, and reality is restored". This explanation would seem to fit with the function of humour in the current context considering the reluctance to ask for help when needed. From a theoretical perspective, the function of humour here can be understood by relief theory which postulates that humour serves to release tension (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2004; Meyer, 2000). In this model, laughter acts as a mechanism to release an accumulation of tension or energy allowing the individual to return to a state of normality.

It was interesting to find that most negotiators found it difficult to identify how they coped whilst negotiating and would refer to just going into 'autopilot'. Barry (2017) found a

similar phenomenon in a study exploring how prison officers cope dealing with a death in custody. This could be explained by 'turning off' the emotional impact of the incident so they can focus on the task. Indeed, Arnold (2017) suggested that emotional detachment can help prison officers cope by providing a buffer to emotional discomfort, allowing them to do the job. The resilience practice of awe found with police negotiators (Thompson and Jensen, 2023) could be seen in the current study by participants having confidence in their abilities, the abilities of their colleagues, and their experience of positive emotions.

Debriefs were considered a key task-oriented coping strategy by all participants. It is pertinent that debriefs and proactive Care Team involvement were not provided after lone deployments, as these were often the most difficult to deal with. This is likely due to several of the strongest stressors coming together: '*Lone deployment'*; '*Poor scene management'* (as it is not an 'official' incident); and the prisoner being *"Broken"*. In these cases, due to the pressure of the prison regime, the negotiator will simply finish the 'job' and move onto the next one. The culture that you have to keep on going and get back to normal as quickly as possible is a common finding in the prison officer literature (e.g., Barry, 2017; Crawley, 2004). This is not surprising given there are several hundred prisoners who would be affected if the regime needed to be curtailed due to staff not being in the required place. It is important for managers to be aware of a 'get back to normal' culture as when stressors co-occur, this can reduce one's ability to maintain emotional detachment, placing psychological wellbeing at risk. This point is reinforced by Clarke's Model of Dynamic Adaptation (Clarke, 2011) which suggests that psychological health can be placed at risk when workers are constantly having to adapt.

The third research question can be answered by the theme '*Support Mechanisms'*. Organisational support mechanisms were similar to those found with police samples, with the addition of a formal peer support team available in each prison. Similar to the studies by

Grubb (2016) and Spence and Millott (2016), participants in the current study had different experiences in terms of the support available. Some negotiators had previously enjoyed negotiator meetings; however, the pressure of maintaining the regime under reduced staffing levels limited these opportunities.

Social support from co-workers was important for all participants, supporting the findings with police samples (e.g., Grubb, 2016; Spence and Millott, 2016; Terhune-Bickler, 2005). Those studies also found that some negotiators would seek support from their spouse, or other family member. In contrast, almost all participants in the current study reported they would not discuss the incident with their partner. The reasons for this were the partner's lack of understanding of prison life and secondly, they did not want their partner to worry. Unfortunately, the studies with police samples did not report the reasons behind the choice of social support and so comparisons cannot be made.

Help-seeking stigma was apparent across the current data. Previous studies have hypothesised that negotiators have not sought support due to perceived stigma (Spence and Millott, 2016; Terhune-Bickler, 2005), though this had not previously been explored. The current study appears to demonstrate a situation whereby organisational support mechanisms are being offered to negotiators at the wrong time (too soon after the incident) and not being offered at the right time (after a period of reflection). Social support from co-workers and supervisors has frequently shown positive outcomes for prison officer wellbeing (Lambert *et al.*, 2010; Schaufeli and Peeters, 2000); however, if emotional discomfort is masked, social support figures may not pick up cues that support is needed and so not provide it.

Limitations of the Study

A strength of the study is the qualitative design which enabled an exploration of the experiences of prison officer negotiators. The range in the length of service as a negotiator,

and the diversity of incidents the participants had experienced, allowed for a variety of experiences to be captured. The study does, however, have limitations.

Participant bias may have been introduced given participation was voluntary and it is not known how the perspectives of those that did not participate differ from those that did (Costigan and Cox, 2001). The sample was also based in one geographical area; however, the majority of participants had experienced working as a negotiator in establishments across England, providing a more holistic picture of HMPPS negotiator experiences. As with all self-report data, participants choose what to disclose and how they want to present it. Our view of our experiences can also change over time, or in the context of the situation the experience is recounted. It is therefore possible that a participant's account may have differed had the interview been conducted on another day. Related to this is the recency and experience of the participant's most recent negotiation event which may have coloured the lens of their view of other events. However, all participants spoke of different incidents throughout the interview. It would have been useful to have a participant sample which is representative (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity) of the national negotiator team; however, it was not possible to access information on the demographics of the whole group. The potential for the introduction of researcher bias must also be acknowledged. The positionality of the lead researcher has been noted in relation to their employment within HMPPS and role as a Negotiation Advisor and whilst mitigations were put in place, the potential for researcher bias is acknowledged.

Implications for Practice

- It is important for prison staff to understand the role and responsibilities of the negotiator and how they can assist negotiators during incidents.

- Managers must understand the role of negotiators during lone deployments and ensure the incident scene is controlled at all times.
- Care Teams and/or the Negotiation Advisor should approach negotiators in the days following an incident to offer post-incident support.
- Given the presence of a help-seeking stigma, consideration should be given to introducing routine mental health wellbeing checks.
- Consideration should be given to (re)-introducing negotiator team meetings for peer support, reflection, and learning.
- Negotiators should have a separate post-incident debriefing by the Silver Commander and/or Negotiation Advisor.
- Record keeping of incidents from the perspective of the negotiator should be formalised.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could compare the general coping style of negotiators against their incident-related coping strategies. This would be useful to develop awareness in stress management and positive coping techniques. Folkman and Moskowitz's (2000, 2004) model of stress could be tested by examining if there is a correlation between how a negotiator appraises an incident (as a threat or as a challenge) and their experience of stress (negative, neutral or positive). The findings could help to explain the finding that some negotiators view negotiation as a challenge and that some do not find negotiation stressful. A quantitative design, with a larger more representative sample (potentially using a survey method or psychometrics), would be beneficial here. Future research could also expand theoretical

knowledge of awe as a resilience and wellbeing strategy as well as its utility as a coping strategy amongst prison officer negotiators. This could be approached using qualitative and quantitative designs.

Finally, it is noted that there were no participants from a minority ethnic background in this study. Due to lack of information on non-respondents, it is not known whether prison officers from a minority ethnic background are represented in the negotiator pool or whether officers from a minority ethnic background are less likely to train as negotiators. This is worthy of exploration so that teams of negotiators can be demographically representative of the communities within which they work.

Conclusion

This study has provided the first insight into the role of the prison officer negotiator. The findings have been shared with North West Governors, regional Care Team leads, Psychology Services Group leads for serious incident management and prison safety, Negotiation Advisors, and the Head of National Incident Management Unit. Some recommendations for practice have been taken forward, including the development of a post-incident report template for negotiators and post-incident support being offered to negotiators in the days following an incident. Negotiator training has been revised (delivery of it has yet to be commenced) and now includes training in the new post-incident report and more detailed information about post-incident care. Silver Commander training includes information about the importance of holding a separate post-incident negotiator team briefing.

The finding that negotiating is a positive and enjoyable role fairs well for the retention of trained staff and future recruitment. Increasing knowledge of the negotiator role and management of serious incidents for untrained staff has been recommended to address the

key stressors of the role. Further, it has been identified that support may be more relevant in the days following a serious incident rather than immediately after it. With this knowledge, the Care Team and Negotiation Advisors can ensure support is provided at the right time. Finally, when considering the findings of the current study with the experiences of police negotiators, it would seem a key difference with prison work is the complicating factor of the prison regime.

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