Coping mechanisms of hostage and crisis negotiators during acute stress and its effect on performance

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore coping mechanisms used in acute stress situations and how these effect performance. Specifically, the aim was to study how hostage and crisis negotiators use different types of coping mechanisms to reach a positive result in negotiations. Crisis negotiations have several attributes that make them interesting to study from a coping perspective. They regularly present high-stake situations where people’s well-being and lives can be at risk, creating a highly stressful situation for the negotiator. These situations are often very emotionally charged and the negotiator has to deal with both the emotions of the person they are negotiating with as well as their own. A qualitative method was used in the study and the data was collected in semi-structured interviews. A content analysis was carried out to analyse the material. Five categories were distilled from the material; team, internal skills, negotiation tools, physical techniques and organisation. Themes that particularly stood out were the importance of the support from the team, internal skills such as self-control and lowering physiological stress reactions by deep breathing. These were all seen as contributing to an increased performance.

Key words

Coping mechanisms, stress, performance, hostage and crisis negotiations
Introduction

Why is it that some people can handle high levels of stress and perform well or even better in those circumstances? In certain occupations, high pressure situations are common, for example the police, the emergency services and the military. However, because of the complexity and quick changes in world politics, environment and other areas; dealing with crisis and performing under pressure have also become more important for business leaders and government agencies.

There is a lot of research on stress and different types of coping mechanisms. Research on acute stress and how to deal with it in a constructive manner is less common. There is however some research to be found, for example within the military sector where potential life and death situations are a natural part of the occupation (Larsson and Kallenberg, 2006).

The aim of this study was to explore coping mechanisms used in acute stress situations and how these effect performance. Specifically, the aim was to study how hostage and crisis negotiators use different types of coping mechanisms to perform well during negotiations.

Crisis negotiations have several attributes that make them interesting to study from a coping perspective. They regularly present high stakes situations where people’s well-being and lives can be at risk, creating a highly stressful situation for the negotiator. These situations are also often very emotionally charged. The person that the negotiator is talking with (the subject) is often in some form of personal crisis which has led to the involvement of the negotiator. The crisis negotiator must deal with the subjects’ high emotions as well as being able to deal with his or her own emotional reactions to a challenging situation. Further, it is not only a highly stressful situation but it is also a situation where one or a few individuals can have a major impact on the outcome of the situation. Most police negotiators work in teams (Polisen, 2016), and roles can be shifted during a negotiation but there is mainly one or two people that are responsible for creating a relation to the subject, at least initially. There is very little research to be found on psychological aspects of crisis negotiation. Some research is
concerned with different profiles of the subject/perpetrator from a mental health perspective. It is less common to focus studies on the negotiator. It is also hard to access relevant data from crisis negotiations as there is often confidentiality surrounding the events, both formal and informal.

The research question being posed in this study is: “How do crisis negotiators deal with acute stress during negotiations?” Also of interest is what kind of coping mechanisms are viewed as having had a positive effect on their performance.

Stress

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have been very influential on stress and coping research for several decades. According to their transactional model stress does not exist independently of the person experiencing it and the situation that is presented. The importance lies on how the individual interprets (appraises) a particular situation. Is it a threat, loss or challenge? In a second appraisal of the situation the resources that are available to deal with the event is measured. The highest stress is found in situations that are interpreted as a threat and the resources to deal with the threat are considered low. Lazarus (2006) later developed the model further by associating the appraisal with preceding emotions. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) also put emphasis on the fact that the appraisal of a situation is very individual and therefore certain situations will create a stress response for some people but not for others.

Acute stress and performance

This study focused on the intense, short-duration stress that is regularly experienced by the negotiator during a negotiation. This type of stress is often referred to as acute stress. The American Psychological Association (2018) describes acute stress as short-term stress that in small doses can be experienced as thrilling but in large doses can have both physical and emotional negative consequences. Experiencing highly stressful situations repeatedly can also lead to cumulative stress, that can have long-term negative consequences (Miller, 2009).

There are several effects of stress that can affect the level of performance. **Physiological reactions** include: increased heart rate, increased blood pressure and muscular tension. These changes prepare the body for the often-mentioned fight or flight response (Larsson & Kallenberg, 2006). These bodily changes can affect the
performance by distracting the person from the task at hand. It is common that the physiological changes are over interpreted and ascribed more importance than necessary which can clog up the information processing capacities (Salas, Driskell & Hughes, 1996). Examples of common cognitive changes that occur under stress are attentional narrowing and working-memory loss (Wickes and Hollands, 2000). Both changes can be problematic when dealing with a complex task under stress. The attentional narrowing can make the negotiator too focused on one aspect while completely missing another more important aspect of the situation. The loss of working memory can be reflected in forgetting parts of the conversation, something that can seriously undermine the subject’s trust in the negotiator. The subject can be left with a feeling of the negotiator not being interested. Other cognitive effects of stress include; distraction, tunnel vision, decreased searching activity, response rigidity, longer reaction time and increased error (Salas et al., 1996). Emotional reactions to stress can include: fear, anxiety, annoyance, tension, frustration and increased concern for well-being of self and others (Salas et al., 1996). Some research proposes that being clear about your own feelings in acute stress situations has a positive effect on performance (Gohm, Baumann, & Sniezek, 2001). The logic behind this is similar to the effects of physiological responses on performance; the attention to emotional reactions divert attention from task performance. Social effects of stress include: a reduction in tendency to help others, neglect of social and interpersonal cues, aggression and less cooperative behaviour (Salas et al., 1996).

Levels of stress are important to performance. According to the Yerkes Dodson Law (Yerkes and Dodson, 1908) there is an optimal level of stress for a good performance. If the stress is too low or too high the performance goes down. This theory has been quite widely criticised since, among other things, it is uncertain if their research based on mice can be extended to humans (Staal, 2004). However, it raises the interesting concept of optimal levels of stress. When Csikszentmihalyi (2013) describes flow he talks about a form of optimal stress level. The characteristics of what he calls optimal experiences, that are conducive to flow, are situations where one’s skills are adequate to cope with a challenge that a person is involved in. It is goal directed and feedback on performance is clear. It is also a situation where the person involved in the activity can be so focused that he or she loses all sense of time.
Coping

Coping is defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.141). According to Lazarus and Folkman there are two main functions of coping; one is problem focused and the other is emotion focused. The first type is focusing on trying to solve the situation that is perceived as stressful and the second is focusing on dealing with the emotions that have arisen from the situation (Lazarus, 2006).

Other aspects of coping involve social support. Social resources can support a person’s coping ability. These resources can be people in a person’s surrounding that can give emotional support, informative support and practical support (Larsson, 2010).

Techniques aimed at lowering the physiological responses to stress is another tool when dealing with stress. One common strategy is to use what is called deep or diaphragmatic breathing which aims to trigger a relaxation response (Miller, 2008). Coping strategies can have both negative and positive effects on well-being, however, this is more defined by the particular situation they are used in rather than them being inherently good or bad. A coping strategy can also have a good short-term effect but be bad in the long-term and vice versa (Hasson, 2012).

The focus of this study was on high stress during negotiations and coping mechanisms used in close proximity of this short-term stress. However, there are also some more long-term coping mechanisms that have been included in the results as these have an effect on the cumulative stress and therefore indirectly affect the stress-levels of the negotiator when dealing with high intensity stress. If a negotiator is experiencing high levels of long-term stress he or she will already have depleted resources to deal with the stress that arises in a stressful negotiation.

Crisis and hostage negotiations

The most known type of police crisis negotiation is hostage situations. A hostage is defined as ”a person being held involuntary by another person as leverage to force fulfilment of demands on a third party” (Thompson, 2014). However, this type of situation is only a very small part of the situations in which crisis negotiations are used overall. According to statistics from the FBI, only 4 percent of cases are considered a hostage situation. The other 96 percent of cases are described as ”Emotionally driven
situations with no substantive demands and the person does not need anything from the police” (Thompson, 2014). The type of negotiation is important as the negotiator has different tools to work with. When there is a demand there is something to bargain with, whereas when it is a more emotionally driven situation other tools have to be applied.

The most common crisis negotiation situations in Sweden are risk of suicide and dangerous persons (refers to when a criminal is considered dangerous during a police intervention). These two categories constitute 40 percent of all cases (Polisen, 2016).

Even though most negotiation situations are different there are some similarities. According to McMains and Mullins (1996) there are generally speaking four stages to a crisis incident: pre-crisis, crisis, accommodation/negotiation and resolution. For the negotiator, the pre-crisis stage is when things are normal. He or she might be on their normal policing duties and only be a negotiator on call during specific times. For the subject/perpetrator this is before a crisis has fully developed. During the crisis stage, something has triggered the crisis and the subject is not able to resolve it in a conducive manner. This has led to one of the situations mentioned above where a negotiator is called in. The police will attempt to control the scene. There will also be an attempt to start communicating with the subject, for example via phone (Miller, 2005). After the initial crisis, where the emotions of the subject are often very high, there is an accommodation/negotiation stage where the subject is less emotional and more open to alternatives to solve the situation (McMains and Mullins, 1996). One of the aims of the negotiator is to build rapport and trust with the subject. This is then used to facilitate a safe resolution to the situation. The main underlying technique of negotiations is active listening which contributes to the perpetrator feeling understood, creating trust and seeing the negotiator as someone who can be helpful in resolving the situation (Lanceley, 2003).

**Crisis negotiating and stress**

In negotiation literature, there are several possible sources of stress mentioned for negotiators (Bohl, 1992). Depending on the situation that has led to the negotiation the stressors will be different (hostage, suicide, apprehension of violent individual etc.). The stress perceived by the negotiator also depends on individual factors specific to each negotiator. One of the most important stressors in crisis negotiation, and in hostage
negotiation in particular, is that the stakes can be very high. If the negotiation does not go well lives could be lost and this understandably can put very high pressure on the negotiator. External stressors could come from other parts of the police organisation who want to use different ways of resolving the situation. Factors such as restricting access to the negotiation site and thereby blocking traffic or public access can lead to increased time pressure. As well as situations that require face to face negotiations and public exposure (McMains and Mullins, 1996).

According to McMains and Mullin (1996) there could also be a role ambiguity. The negotiator’s role is to establish trust and talk to a person that in many cases is a criminal. The normal role of a police officer is to apprehend a criminal, often coming from a role of authority and social power. In a negotiation situation, the negotiator might have to establish a ‘positive’ relationship with a criminal who is threatening to do hideous things. The power balance is also shifted. Other stressors could come from physical and mental exhaustion if the negotiations stretch over long periods of time. The performance of the negotiator can also be highly monitored.

Methods

Participants

There were five participants interviewed in this study, two men and three women. Being a hostage and crisis negotiator is an uncommon occupation and it is also very hard to gain access to the practitioners. Therefore, the selection of participants was based on convenience and because of that a set of strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were not possible to apply. However, to be able to fully explore the coping mechanisms used during crisis negotiation, long experience was an important inclusion criteria in the study. The participants had between 10-35 years of experience (M: 21 years). Three participants were Swedish, one American and one Canadian.

Materials and Procedure

The qualitative data was collected during five interviews ranging from 48-82 minutes, in total the interviews lasted for 5 hours and 35 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured using open-ended questions based on an interview guide that was developed for the study (for interview guide see Annex A). Two pilot studies were
conducted to test the interview guide and develop the scope of the study. The first questions of the guide were aimed at gaining background information and a context to the participants’ experience with crisis negotiations. The rest of the questions were specifically aimed at understanding stress and coping mechanisms. Since the participants were Swedish and North American all interviews were conducted in English so that the interview material would be easier to compare. Four of the interviews were carried out over Skype with video and one over phone. All interviews started with a scripted introduction where information about the study, the structure and methodological style of the interview, ethical considerations and a brief background of the interviewer were given. The two main concepts of the study; acute stress and coping mechanisms were also defined and the participant was encouraged to keep this in mind during the interview.

Analysis

The study was carried out using qualitative methods as the aim of it was to explore individual negotiator’s experiences of using coping mechanisms. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. A content analysis was carried out in stages based on, for the purpose of this study, an adapted version of Burnard’s analysis framework (1991). First the transcripts were read and re-read for full immersion while making notes on themes. Then the content was coded and divided into categories and sub-categories. The coding and categorisation were done manually. After that the categories and sub-categories were revised in conjunction with the transcripts several times. The categories were mainly based on the explicit content in the interviews, however to create a thread through the material some inference was used to help guide the reader through the meaning of the content.

Ethical considerations

The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were given a general outline of the questions that they were going to be asked. They were informed that participation is voluntary, that they could withdraw at any moment and that they did not have to answer a question if they did not want to. The participants were also told that their answers will be anonymous and that the interview would be recorded. They
were also informed that the information obtained would only be used in this study and that the recordings would be destroyed after the analysis.

Results

The aim of the study was to explore coping mechanisms used by crisis negotiators during acute stress and how these effect performance. There were several coping mechanisms that negotiators experienced as useful when dealing with acute stress and that were seen as having a positive effect on performance. These can be summarized into the categories: team, internal skills, negotiation tools, physical techniques and organisation, see table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the categories and sub-categories identified in the content analysis

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<td>Team</td>
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<td>Problem-solving support</td>
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<td>Negotiation tools</td>
<td>Subject-related strategies</td>
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Stressful situations

To provide context to the coping mechanisms employed by negotiators a look at what they experience as the most stressful situations is beneficial. The stress relates both to the type of negotiation that is carried out as well as the different parts of the negotiation process. Situations that involved threat to life or loss of life were considered very stressful. However, it was not just the pure fact of a life and death
situation it was also affected by the perception of those involved in the situation. In situations where the people that were threatened or killed were considered “innocent”, in particular children, this caused higher stress. The view of the subject as “good” or “bad” also affected the perceived stress. However, one of the participants expressed the opinion that it is rarely as clear cut as a “good” or a “bad” subject. In a lot of situations, one can be empathetic with how a person ended up in a situation even if not agreeing with their actions. Types of negotiating situations that were mentioned as particularly stressful were suicide and kidnapping. “When you are on the phone and they hang up and they say they are going to saw somebody’s head off…and they do.”

There were also different parts of the crisis negotiation process that were described as more stressful. The first call or contact with the subject was perceived as stressful by several participants, mainly due to a feeling of not knowing what to expect. Will the person be aggressive, calm or communicative for example? One participant also mentioned the stress she experiences when approaching a deadline (set by the subject) as high. However, if the deadline was passed without something negative happening this was a good indication that the negotiation might have a good outcome. The end or resolution of a negotiation was in some situations also seen as stressful, in particular in relation to kidnapping and extortion cases, as there were no guarantees of a good outcome at the handover.

Some participants also mentioned a more long-term cumulative stress. “I think the danger in this business is the cumulative effects and I think that is what got me”. “…it wasn’t one or two or […] 50, 100, 200…it’s that one drop of water that spills over the edge of the glass and you go uh-oh I’m not coping that well.”

**Team**

This was one of the clearest themes that stood out from the interviews. The partner negotiator and the surrounding team in a negotiation situation were expressed as very important for coping with a situation and to perform well. “..a true team setting is probably the biggest factor in coping with stress. We used to say we rise and fall as a team”.
Problem-solving support

The team and partner were seen as having several supportive functions to coping. One type of support was problem-solving. The team had a crucial role in supporting the primary negotiator with strategies, decision-making and giving and receiving information from other groups on the scene. As the secondary negotiator focused on those aspects, the primary negotiator felt they could fully focus on listening to the subject, which was something that was seen as absolutely necessary to be able to do a good job. Being able to focus on the negotiation in these high intense situations was also seen as a major stress-reliever. The secondary negotiator listens in to the negotiation and can visualise information on white boards and write small notes with suggestions when the primary negotiator has run out of options. In between calls the participants felt they could use the team to strategize together. This had two functions; collectively they could come up with better strategies, it also gave confidence to the primary negotiator moving forward, as the decision was made in consensus. This also reduced the stress by making the decision a shared responsibility of the group, rather than resting on one person’s shoulders, particularly in cases that had a bad outcome.

Emotional support

The team and the partner also had a role in emotional support. The partner gave positive reinforcement during the negotiations by letting the primary negotiator know that they were on the right track, showed a thumbs up or put an encouraging hand on their shoulder. The team around the negotiator often consists of fellow negotiators and SWAT personnel. This gave the primary negotiator a feeling of physical safety which allowed them to fully concentrate on the negotiation.

Some of the coping mechanisms were important both during the stressful situation but also as long-term coping mechanisms. The team and other social networks were seen as having a large impact on dealing with stress after a negotiation. A formal debriefing or a casual chat with colleagues after an incident were seen as an important form of long-term coping to avoid accumulating stress. It was also pointed out that it is important to have trust and openness within the team. Some of the participants described a very close relation to the others in the team “…we are really like a family, we talk about everything. If I have a problem with my husband, they now about it, if my child is ill, they know about it, and we hug and comfort each other…” To be successful
and not put oneself unnecessarily in a too stressful situation, openness about the negotiators current state of mind and life situation were seen as important by some participants. In a group with open communication a negotiator can stand back from a particular situation and let the partner take the lead instead.

Reassurance was another important aspect of the team, particularly in relation to suicide situations.

“Some people finally work up the nerve, and regardless of how good you are as a negotiator, how appropriate everything you said is, how nurturing and supportive and empathetic...they are going to jump. And when they do it is going to hit the negotiator like a ton of bricks.”

A reminder from a colleague that the ultimate decision of what was going to happen lies with the subject, was seen as helpful for not putting too much blame on oneself. Another coping mechanism that was mentioned in relation to social support was consumption of alcohol.

**Social network**

Another aspect of social support was brought up in relation to building an extended network of support. This was mentioned in relation to working with international kidnapping situations in high stress environments, such as war zones.

**Internal skills**

Another strong theme that came through the interviews was that of individual/internal coping strategies.

**Self-control**

One strategy that was often mentioned was the use of self-control during highly stressful situations. To not let the severity of the situation overpower the negotiator while dealing with it. “... if there is a loss of life it can be devastating but also... ok, we lost that life but there are six more hostages in there. We can’t afford to mourn this person we have to move on and try and save the others”. There were some differences in views on how to deal with emotions. Some negotiators saw them as something that should always be blocked, other negotiators used softer terms such as “controlled”.

Staying calm was described as another important aspect to reach a good outcome. Staying calm aided their own coping with the situation but it was also seen as a positive contagion for the subject as well as one’s own team. Projecting a calm exterior was seen as important even in cases where the internal state was in turmoil. A related strategy was to not take anything personally. “…you have a sort of layer of...almost like oil or Teflon […] it brushes off you and if you took everything personally you couldn’t perform”.

**Disengage**

A common strategy to reduce stress was to temporarily disengage from the situation, when possible. “All my guys get mad at me. – What are you doing going swimming in the middle of a negotiation? […] I know I’m shutting it out and I’m not going to sit in an office for 14 hours a day and trying to figure this out. I’m going to the pool for two hours and I’m going to chill.” Disengagement was specifically mentioned in relation to negotiations where the negotiator was highly visible. For example, in face-to-face negotiations and when in close proximity to family members in kidnapping cases. The strategy of a bathroom visit was commonly used to get a short amount of space and breathing time. Switching focus was also seen as important. This could be switching focus to something completely different for relaxation if possible, even small things such as closing your eyes or taking a quick walk. A technique that was mentioned several times was to shift focus from oneself, including one’s own emotional reactions, to fully focus on the subject and be absorbed in listening to him or her. In some cases, the participants described this as a complete focus on the task and that time would disappear. “I thought I had talked to him for 40 minutes at the most but I had talked to him for an hour and 40 minutes.” One participant described how she is very afraid of heights. Rappelling from heights during training would reduce her to tears and screaming. However, while getting up on a bridge or church tower for example where she had to negotiate, she was so fully focused on the subject and the negotiation that she was not noticing her own fear. Once it was over the fear came back and sometimes the rescue services had to help her down. The participants also described different types of outlets for frustration and stress. One participant described how she used the high-speed drive in the police car going to the scene to let out the adrenaline that the notification of a negotiation job had built up. Once she arrived at the scene she felt calmer. Other
outlets that were used were venting, ranting, screaming and swearing after having hung up the phone. “…In that case I calmed myself down with some screaming in the bus”.

Experience
The long and solid experience in negotiations was also described as something that led to less stress by the participants. By recognising elements in new situations from previous ones, the negotiation situation induced less stress.

Self-awareness
Some of the participants described self-awareness as very important. Being able to identify one’s own emotions and general state of mind when entering a negotiation was seen as positive for performance. The participants differed in their views of their skills at detecting their own emotions. However, most of them felt that they were very good at it.

Negotiation tools
The negotiators used a range of different techniques during the negotiations to affect both their own stress levels but also the stress levels of the subject.

Subject-related strategies
When strong emotions were experienced by the negotiator these could be expressed to the subject if it was beneficial for the negotiation process. For the negotiator, this serves both as a way of coping with the intense feelings that were experienced as well as a way of creating rapport with the subject. For example, by telling the subject that when you tell me about your situation it makes me sad. Sometimes showing vulnerability can affect the subject in a positive way. There were other negotiating situations where it was directly counterproductive to show or describe the negotiators’ emotions, for example, where the subject was trying to aggravate or provoke the negotiator. Then the emotions were viewed as something that should be set aside and not showed at all. In all instances, the display of emotion was described as controlled and a tool that could be used at an appropriate time in the negotiation. There were several strategies in relation to the subject that were seen as both useful negotiation strategies but also served as lowering stress levels of the negotiator. Being
honest and truthful in the negotiation was seen as important. This can also make the situation less stressful for the negotiator as it is taxing to uphold a façade or invent stories and stick to them. The aim of the negotiation is to build trust so the negotiator can influence the resolution of the situation. Sticking closely to the truth was seen to build that trust rather than making up stories, for example about why the escape car is delayed. It was also expressed by one of the participants that there is no point in trying to outguess the subject or think that the subject always has a master plan with what they are doing. In the participant’s experience, most of the time the subject had got themselves into a situation that they could not get out of. It was described as calming not to have to try and outguess the perpetrator. Another aspect was to not be afraid of saying the wrong thing. It is okay to apologise if something counterproductive was said by the negotiator. This reduced the anxiety of the negotiator about what to say and worked as a stress reliever.

**Slow down**

Slowing down was seen as a major help in the negotiation. Not only to de-escalate the situation with the subject but also for the sake of the negotiator. When something was really important some participants described how they consciously spoke slower and in some cases deepened their voice. Taking one’s time was a related technique. “The older you get, the more experience you get, you realise it’s got to take a little time […] you have to earn the right to influence someone.” Time also helps the subject to calm down, and sometimes the situation was resolved and the subject gave up as they got tired, needed food or a bathroom.

**Physical techniques**

**During acute stress**

One of the most mentioned techniques used during high stress was breathing. Breathing was mentioned 22 times in the interviews. Some of the participants saw it as something they did intuitively but for others it had taken some years before realising the benefits of the technique and was now consciously using it to lower stress levels. One participant regularly practiced meditation and yoga and then actively used those breathing techniques in stressful situations.
Long-term

One participant also mentioned more long term physical techniques to reduce stress. These included exercise, sleep and proper downtime. This also included more organisational aspects such as making sure that there are enough resources for the assignments so that it is possible to get proper rest and rotate staff in and out of stressful environments.

Organisation

Organisational training

Several participants showed surprise and interest when they heard the subject of the interview. They reflected that coping mechanism, in particular those used during acute stress, are rarely talked about. “Interestingly enough we learn a lot about what increased emotion levels does to the subject but during my time as negotiator we didn’t talk as much about what the same thing did to us as negotiators”. Most participants talked about it as something they do intuitively but had not been taught or even explicitly thought about. Several saw the benefit of organisations taking a more active approach to developing these skills and incorporate it in training programs.

Emotional culture

There was a clear difference in the participants’ descriptions of the organisation’s emotional cultures and acceptance of talking about coping and emotions. When talking about the culture one of the participants said that the reason that coping was rarely talked about was the macho nature of the organisation. “I don’t think they have the courage to do it”. Other participants described their culture as very open about emotions and sharing feelings.

Performance

Coping mechanisms and techniques that managed to reduce the negotiators stress both in the moment and long term were seen as having a positive effect on performance and the possibility of a good outcome. There were some
questions around what a “good outcome” meant. Whether it was a positive resolution to
the situation or in terms of well-being of the negotiator or both.

Discussion

Stress is highly individual and dependant on the situation (Folkman &
Lazarus, 1984). However, there were some types of negotiation situations and particular
parts of the negotiation process that most participants considered more stressful. The
perception of victims as innocent and the subject/perpetrator as “good” or “bad” also
contributed to how stressful the negotiation was perceived. Cumulative stress was also
included in the results, even if the focus of this study was on acute stress, long-term
stress can affect how well a person can cope with the extra strain of short term stress.

Team

The strong emphasis on team and social support as the main coping
mechanism during acute stress was somewhat surprising for the author. This is due to
several aspects. One is the popular portrayal of the crisis negotiator as a single person
effort; a hero that saves the day on his or her own in popular culture such as Hollywood
films. That perception of negotiators is also underpinned by the media that in search of
heroes highlights individual persons rather than the team effort when reporting on cases.
Some negotiator teams actively work against the glorification of individual team
members as it is seen as something that might impede the performance of the team in
the long term. In reverse, it also puts too much pressure and responsibility on one
particular individual, if the outcome of the situation was bad. The other aspect of why it
is somewhat surprising is that social support often is mentioned as a contextual, long
term, resource in coping with stress (Larsson, 2010). However, the participants
described team as one of the most important aspects in dealing with acute stress during
a negotiation. There were two team aspects that were particularly important during a
stressful negotiation; emotional support and problem-solving support. The problem-
solving support was related to the primary negotiator’s ability to focus intently on
listening to the subject. The secondary negotiator supported with strategic thinking,
picking up on missed information in the conversation and handling external
communications. These activities seemed to counter some of the cognitive challenges
that are a product of stress, such as attentional narrowing and working-memory loss mentioned by Wickens and Holland (2000). The emotional support that was expressed during a negotiation was mostly in the form of positive reassurance. By sharing the responsibility for decisions with the team the primary negotiator also received emotional support in case the situation ended badly.

The benefits of long term social support in terms of a casual chat or debrief after a stressful negotiation was also mentioned by all the interviewees. These findings harmonise with literature on social emotional support being an important resource in helping individuals cope with stressful situations. Larsson and Kallenberg (2006), for example, outlines the importance of support in the form of debrief and other methods after an acutely stressful event.

**Internal skills**

There was a strong theme of using self-control as a coping mechanism which was seen to increase performance during a negotiation. Self-control included aspects of controlling emotions, not taking things personally and staying calm. These aspects fit into Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) emotion focused coping mechanisms. Self-control was used to avoid being overwhelmed by emotions and to stay focused, particularly during situations where there were fatalities or risk of fatalities. This view of self-control in order to stay task focused can be found in research on performance under stress (Driskell, Salas, Johnston, & Wollert, 2008). However, there were some subtle nuances in how the different participants viewed the degree of control of emotions. Some participants saw it as something that should be blocked whereas other spoke about letting some emotions out as a stress release as well as it being beneficial for the negotiation in terms of building trust and rapport. This view is reflected in research on military leadership during acute stress. A good leader during acute stress shall display a reasonable level of emotion. Appearing too cold or incapable of dealing with emotions will diminish trust in the leader. However, uncontrolled emotions can lead to a loss of authority (Larsson, Gal & Zander, 2006).

Self-awareness was another aspect that was seen as important for a good negotiator by some of the participants. This aligns with Gohm et al. (2001) proposition that self-awareness and clarity of own emotions leads to an increased performance.
The negotiator’s long experience led to a perceived reduction in stress. According to Sapolsky (2004) repeated exposure to a similar situation leads to less stress and a sharper on/off switch for the stress response in relation to a particular situation.

Disengagement and shifting focus were also perceived as necessary for a good performance and stress reduction.

**Negotiation tools**

Within the category of negotiation tools the emergence of the subcategory “subject-related strategies” was unexpected, due to the author’s preconceived view of the subject as an “opponent”. The participants provided several examples of negotiation tools or concepts in relation to the subject that had a stress reducing effect. For example, describing one’s own emotional reactions to what the subject was saying. Several theories on stress and performance describe emotions as something that gets in the way of performance (Driskell, et. al., 2008). However, it is interesting that in this case using emotions is described as positive for the performance.

Other subject-related strategies such as not trying to outguess the subject and that it is okay to say the wrong thing and then apologise, were also seen as stress reducing.

**Physical techniques**

Breathing was the main physical tool that was used by all participants and described as a common way for negotiators to reduce stress during negotiations. Deep breathing as a tool to lower physiological responses to stress has plenty of support in literature on coping (Miller, 2009; Sharps, 2017).

**Organisation**

All of the negotiators work as a part of an organisation which will affect how they carry out their work and influence their attitudes toward coping mechanisms. There were some differences in the description of the organisational attitudes towards talking about stress, coping and emotions. One organisation was described as macho and not able to have an open discussion about introspective subjects. Another organisation was described as the opposite, explicitly stating that you did not have to be
macho to work there. This organisation was described as having a culture that actively supported openness about feelings and stress. However, none of the organisations were seen as active in helping the negotiators reflect on their coping mechanisms or had it as an explicit part of their training programs. The differences in organisational culture coincided with different countries. The material in this study is too small to draw any conclusion from that fact, however, it would be an interesting future study to see if there are differences in cultural attitudes toward coping as well as what impact that would have on performance.

Incorporating knowledge about stress and coping mechanisms in trainings provided by the organisations were seen as beneficial for a higher negotiator performance.

**Performance**

The interview questions were formulated in a way that linked coping techniques and performance. Therefore, the absolute majority of the coping skills mentioned in the interviews were seen as positive in relation to performance. There was only one coping mechanism, the consumption of alcohol that could be classified as negative. Sometimes the coping mechanisms had a dual nature. Self-control, for example, was seen as increasing performance short term but if emotions were left unmanaged it could decrease long-term performance. Some participants described a very intense focus on the subject and how time could disappear while they were absorbed in the negotiation. This aligns with Csikszentmihalyi (2013) description of *flow*. One interpretation is that in those instances the negotiators experienced an optimal level of stress where the challenge and their skills to deal with it were equal.

**Method discussion**

There is a clear limitation on the results of this study as it contained only five participants. As mentioned in the beginning of this study it is hard to gain access to crisis negotiators to interview them. However, once a contact was established the participants were very engaged and willing to share their experiences. As it is an explorative study with a low number of participants it is unwise to extend the findings into generalisations. However, some strong themes emerged from the material that could be interesting to explore further in future studies. Those themes were the support
given from the team, internal skills such as self-control and staying calm and deep breathing.

The fact that the participants came from different countries made the experiences of coping mechanisms richer, however, it could also affect the results making it hard to know if differences between participants were due to the environment, individual differences or both.

The use of a convenience based selection of participants is problematic as it is hard to have strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. However, the important inclusion criteria of long experience was maintained. The focus on acute stress was sometimes hard to maintain during interviews. Even though a definition of acute stress was given to the participants at the beginning of the interview it was difficult to adhere to a strict interpretation of the term during the interviews. However, the interview questions were aimed at supporting the participants in focusing on examples that were characterised by high stress and how they coped with it.

Using Skype made it possible to reach more participants in different geographic locations. However, there are some negative aspects of using Skype. It is harder to create swift trust and an open dialog with someone over Skype in comparison to having a dialog in person. It is harder to pick up on nuances in participant’s voices or body language. There is also the risk of technical problems that can disturb the interview. However, being excellent communicators in difficult situations the minor technical issues that were experienced in the interviews did not seem to distract the participants. Using English made it easier to compare the interview material but since three of the interviewees were non-native English speakers there is a possibility that different words and concepts were used to describe similar phenomena.

**Practical implications and further research**

One practical implication is to include self-reflection and knowledge about stress and coping mechanisms in training. Examples of this could be critical reflection of one’s own habitually used coping mechanisms and how useful they are in different situations. Another aspect is to develop a sensitivity to individual physical and emotional changes during high stress. By not being surprised by physical sensations and knowing how to calm them, attention is reserved for task performance. Having strategies to quickly identify and deal with any negative emotions that can arise from a
highly stressful situation would also increase task performance. The organisation can also put processes in place to facilitate the team support. Creating possibilities for debriefs and promoting an organisational culture that is open around coping, emotions and stress.

As mentioned earlier it would be interesting to see further exploration of the team support, internal skills and breathing techniques as they were themes present in all of the interviews and the participants placed a lot of importance on them. Another interesting aspect to consider in future studies is different countries’ organisational cultures to see how they affect coping and performance under stress.
References


Yerkes, R. M. & Dodson, J. D. (1908). The Relation of Strength of Stimulus to Rapidity of Habit-Formation. *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology*, 18, 459-482
Interview guide

1. When you first heard about the subjects for this interview, what were your thoughts?

2. How long have you been working with crisis/hostage negotiations?
   a. How often were you involved in these kinds of negotiations?

3. What type of negotiating situations do you experience as the most stressful ones?
   a. Can you give me an example?

4. What do you do to deal with acute stress during negotiations?
   a. Can you give me an example?
   b. Any other ways you use to manage a high stress situation?

5. Has your way of coping with stressful situations changed from when you started as a negotiator?
   a. If someone new started what would be the most important things to tell them about coping?

6. Can you tell me about a situation where you felt like you performed well even though the situation was highly stressful?
   a. How did you deal with stress in that instance?
   b. Why was it a successful?

7. What do you do if you experience strong emotions during a stressful negotiation?
   a. How important is it to deal with emotions for stress reduction?
   b. How do they contribute to a positive outcome?

8. What role does the colleagues and the team around you play in stressful situations?
   a. Why is it important?
   b. How important is it for a positive outcome?
c. Examples?

9. Is there something you would like to add that hasn’t come up during the interview?