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An Exploratory Study of the Lived Experience of Being an Intelligence Analyst

Sharon Moss
*Edith Cowan University, smoss1@our.ecu.edu.au*

Jeff Corkill
*Edith Cowan University, j.corkill@ecu.edu.au*

Eyal Gringart
*Edith Cowan University, e.gringart@ecu.edu.au*

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BEING AN INTELLIGENCE ANALYST

Sharon Moss1; Jeff Corkill2, Eyal Gringart1
School of Psychology and Social Science1
Security Research Institute2
Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

Abstract
Since the World Trade Centre terror attacks of 2001 the intelligence domain has grown rapidly. In keeping with this growth has been a significant increase of scholarly interest in the domain. The intelligence literature is dominated by research into the failures of the discipline, organisational structure and the politics of intelligence. The intelligence analyst is a critical component of the intelligence domain yet is remarkably absent from the intelligence literature. This research seeks to address that imbalance by examining the lived experience of the analyst operating in the law enforcement intelligence domain. To this end, interpretive phenomenology was employed to understand the meanings attributed to analysts’ subjective experiences in order to identify enablers and barriers that impact their crucial function in law enforcement. A purposive sample of eight analysts participated in in-depth, semi structured interviews. Transcripts were subjected in interpretive phenomenological analysis, which revealed two superordinate themes: Self and Work/Home Divide. These referred to internal and external factors that impacted upon participants’ functioning, some of which may have a negative impact on psychological wellbeing while others are relevant to efficient functioning within the workplace. Two subthemes being communication and internal conflict are discussed in depth.

Keywords
Intelligence Analyst, Intelligence, Analysis, Law Enforcement

INTRODUCTION
Intelligence whilst historically associated with national security and defence has for at least the last 30 years been evolving steadily as an important function of law enforcement. Despite changes in policing practices to increase effectiveness and reduce expenditures, the cost of crime in Australia remains high, currently estimated at $36 billion each year (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2013). While such cost has remained fairly consistent over the past decade, it is a substantial impost on the Australian economy. Law enforcement and crime prevention are considered to be the most effective approach to reducing crime and its long term associated costs (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2012); a strategy in which the law enforcement intelligence analysts play a key role.

Intelligence focused research spans a variety of perspectives including: intelligence studies (Gill & Phythian, 2006; Mangio & Wilkinson, 2008; O’Brien, 2009), analytic process (Ben-Israel, 1989; Corkill, 2011; Marrin, 2011) and intelligence led policing (Carter, 2005; Gottschalk & Gudmundsen, 2010; J. H. Ratcliffe, 2008), but few studies have focused specifically on law enforcement intelligence analysts (Evans & Kebbell, 2011; D. Osborne, 2006). As Osborne (2006) has previously noted, to understand the workings of a particular workplace or the experience of a particular role within a workplace research must begin with those who are in the role. This project set out to gain an insight and understanding of the law enforcement intelligence analyst. It is only by exploring the analysts’ real life lived experience that an understanding of the enablers and barriers inherent in the intelligence analysts’ day-to-day life can be identified and subsequently, addressed. To this end, the aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of being an intelligence analyst within the Western Australian Police (WAPOL). Eight analysts were interviewed for this study and from these interviews emerged a broad range of themes relevant to their lived experiences. This paper will discuss two of the significant themes to emerge from the study. Firstly, the role and importance of communication in the life of the analyst is considered. Second the difficulty of internal conflict and its impact on the intelligence capability of the organisation.
WHY THE ANALYST LIVED EXPERIENCE MATTERS?
A review of the literature specific to law enforcement intelligence analysts raised the following concerns. Firstly, there exists a meagre amount of information. There are few studies that have examined the role and practice of intelligence analysis using analysts as participants specifically in the law enforcement domain (Evans & Kebbell, 2011; Green, 2008; D. Osborne, 2006; 2001; Taylor, Kowalik, & Boba, 2007). Of these, only the Evans and Kebbell study was Australian based. The other studies comprised American law enforcement intelligence personnel, in American law enforcement settings. Secondly, although it is reasonable to extrapolate from American studies to the Australian context, findings are not necessarily generalizable to Australia, due to differences in Government policies, agendas and practices, and the specific cultural composition of Australian population. Lastly, there exist no studies conducted on Australian law enforcement intelligence analysts’ lived experiences, despite it being evident from the literature that aspects of the lived experience may be vital to their functioning.

The exploration of analysts’ views of the factors that adversely and favourably influence their function is necessary and vital for several reasons. First, it will facilitate the beginnings of an informed knowledgebase, resulting in relevant and testable avenues of investigation. Second, knowledge facilitated informed decision making which in turn would prevent the disposal or modification of existing effective methods and strategies. Finally, identification and understanding of existing effective practices can enhance practices in other needy arenas. Therefore the analysts’ lived experiences, as well as their subjective worldviews in relation to their role are vital to an accurate and comprehensive understanding of their function, psychological wellbeing and performance. The intelligence analysis in turn is crucial to successful crime reduction. Hence, empirical studies regarding this specific population are important.

In Western Australia, there are slightly more than 80 law enforcement intelligence analysts, deployed across urban and rural policing districts (personal communication, April 9, 2013). The core group of analysts, ranked at level 5, make up the majority of this population. Subordinate to them are assistant analysts (level 3) and above them are senior analysts (level 6). The highest ranking analysts (level 7) are analytic managers who manage and oversee the WAPOL intelligence analysis capability. Law enforcement intelligence analysts identify, source and analyse information relevant to crimes and crime trends. Their intelligence products are then presented to their superiors, policy makers or other decision makers. In so doing, they apply proper and meticulous intelligence analysis, crucial to helping the police reduce and prevent crime(J. Ratcliffe, 2002). In the modern police force intelligence analysts are a critical component in the overall force structure.

METHOD
This study was undertaken in the qualitative tradition and utilised a phenomenological theoretical perspective. Phenomenology regards one’s experience as a standalone topic of enquiry. It focuses on meanings attributed to the experience based on rich descriptions and relationships, fundamentally looking at people’s perceptions of their reality, their lived experience (Langridge, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). An understanding of the world people live in provides a rich source of ideas and avenues for comprehending and examining their lived experience, which in turn informs and deepens our understanding of reality (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretive phenomenology (IPA) is the specific branch of phenomenology underpinning this study. IPA is an inductive, iterative, dynamic and emergent process of data analysis. A process which necessitates the researcher continually immerses herself in the data; processing, analyzing and interpreting the key emergent relationships and themes (Smith, 2007). Emphasis is on a reflective focus, a commitment to interpretation and an experiential understanding of participants’ worldviews. Eight WAPOL intelligence analysts were interviewed in the course of the study. The eight analysts consisted of a mix of male and female analysts with between three and twenty years’ experience.
FINDINGS

The superordinate themes, which emerged from the data, and best captured participants’ lived experience as analysts were; self and work-home divide. Both include several subthemes, which facilitate a richer and more nuanced understanding of the analyst. These themes and their subthemes are presented in Table 1. While each theme was examined separately, they are not mutually exclusive and overlap considerably. Such overlap is evident in the following discussion of the subthemes of communication and workplace conflict.

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Analysts and communication

All participants noted communication in its varying forms as a skill, fundamental to the analytic performance. Similar findings were noted by Evans and Kebbell, (2011), who noted communication with the consumer to be critically important to the analysts’ ability to effectively disseminate their product. Participants noted that in addition to subject matter expertise, communication also necessitates an understanding of interpersonal communication. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

“The way I look at it [verbal communication], you have to put that person in a position where they can’t refuse your advice. So you’ve got to form an argument almost tailored to the personality of the individual you are dealing with and some people are area a lot easier to talk to and convince than others…”, “Well it’s understanding who your audience is and what your audience is about”.

Here, the participants expressed the need for effective interpersonal skills, by stating that irrespective of product design (written document or oration), it only becomes useful when accepted and acted upon by the recipient. In order to achieve this, the analyst needs to be flexible and versatile in their communications so as to accommodate their audiences’ differing personalities, needs and aims. Emotional intelligence offers a different conceptualisation of interpersonal communications and relations. Findings demonstrate that enhanced emotional intelligence results in improved communication skills leading to more effective and fulfilling relationships (Schutte et al., 2001).

Such statements allude to more of the responsibility being placed with the analyst which was then perceived as disproportionately and unfairly expected of them. One participant stated: “It’s really unfair in a way. I mean, its not like they take the intelligence we provide willingly, we just about need to sell it so to speak… but hey, that’s just the way it is”. This unbalanced appropriation of
with analysts’ individual responsibility was reflected in participants’ despondent demeanour and so may also factor in the existing conflictual relationship between analysts and police officers, discussed later in more detail.

A different perspective was offered by another participant who said: “...you got to be able to work with people, otherwise you can’t really interact with them”; “You just need to be open communication wise, everyone has to give each other the information they know or otherwise you are only working with half a picture”. By emphasising how effective communication leads to successful teamwork, the recipient and information providers are equally responsible for communication efficacy. Conventional knowledge also proposes effective communication to result from a dynamic, communication cycle, wherein the communicator and recipient have equal influence on the efficiency of communication. Translated to the crime analysis realm, the analyst and police officer need to engage in productive communication if they are to succeed as a team and function at their respective optimum levels.

Participants also intimated that effective communication is underscored by an understanding and acceptance of human diversity. For example: “You need to be able to get along with others from different walks of life and different personalities”. For analysts, the skilfulness of effective communication thus extends far beyond subject matter expertise to incorporate aspects such as, an appreciation of individuality in the work place. Such an understanding of communication was perceived by participants as fundamental to succeeding in the analyst role.

It is interesting to note, that despite analysts’ general appreciation of the need to accept individual differences there exists an attitude of them (police officers) versus us (analysts) in the workplace. Although discussed later in more detail, it is worthwhile noting at this juncture, that such an attitude stems from and encourages value laden differences, as opposed to, differences being accepted and regarded as neutral. Thus, despite a cognitive awareness, attitudinal and behavioural manifestations may further jeopardise analysts’ communications efforts.

Based on the aforementioned revelations, communication presents as central to effective analytic performance. The importance of communication is also noted in a variety of existing studies. For instance Johnston’s ethnographic study of the analytic culture of the CIA (2005) regards communication as a stand-alone taxon, because of its wide application as an influence on the analytic process and on personnel both producers and recipients. It is considered a link between individuals and amongst groups and includes both formal and informal communications within the organisation, amongst organisations between individuals and the social networks they create. This is in agreement with the functional core competencies for intelligence analysis described by Moore, Kirzan and Moore (2005). Johnston (2005) highlighted the need for further research into this area due to its importance. Collaboration and support between officers and analysts are prevalent themes in Osborne’s (2006) research. Collaboration enhances the process of analysis, and like support form police officers, motivates the analysts to function at their optimum. Similar to present findings, because success depends on effective team-work between analysts and police officers’, its absence carries a high cost to the respective organisations, their employees and society.

The ill fit of police officers and analysts was also noted by Taylor et al,(2007). The authors’ noted that analysts’ perceptions of police officers’ lacking recognition of their efforts can be detrimental to the officers’ timely transformation of crime data into ‘actionable intelligence’. On the other hand, Evans and Kebbell (2011) also emphasise the team-playing attribute. However, they note, that an effective analyst needs to be a team player with a ‘global perspective’. That is, being able to perceive how the intelligence product fits into the bigger picture of the organisation, the problem at hand, the intelligence unit, the police service and the wider community. Thus, perhaps the poor communications perceived by participants of the current study is resultant of both groups not being sufficiently informed of the others’ aims, objectives and procedures.
Workplace conflict

Conflict within the workplace is inevitable, ubiquitous and a complex occurrence, resultant where differences, contradictions, incompatibility and controversy arise. It refers both to the process and outcome of resolving existing difference (Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994). It is especially pertinent in the workplace where a diverse group of people are brought together to achieve a common goal. There exist a myriad of reasons causing conflict and the analysts’ workplace is no exception. However, key to the analysts’ function is the necessity for teamwork between them and police officers and conflict, perceived or real, poses an enormous barrier to efficient and effective team work.

Participants suggested that workplace conflict appeared to stem from analysts’ perceptions of differences between them and police officers. In conversation with the researcher, this distinction appeared to be underpinned by an ‘us’ and ‘them’ attitude. A phenomenon commonly found in conflictual group situations and referred to as in-group and out-group (Forsyth, 1999). Although such an attitude can benefit each group independently, resulting in enhanced group cohesion, it can also lead to conflict. Similarly, research evidences group heterogeneity to underscore inter-group conflict (Lovelace, Shapiro, & Weingart, 2001). Since participants were analysts and their worldview was being examined, the ‘us’ refers to analysts (in-group), whereas the ‘them’ consists of police officers (out-group), as can be seen in the following: “Some coppers think they rank higher than you, they actually think you answer to them... they think if you’re not sworn in then you can’t contribute”.

Implicated in this statement is an inequality of status perceived by the analysts to result from them not wearing a police uniform, a uniform, which in and of itself is seen as a symbol of status and authority. Thus, the analyst implies that its absence leads the officer/s to view analysts in a lesser standing. An extension to the perceived reduced status is the perception that police officers do not understand the analytic role. A previous study also revealed that the general perception of analysts was that police officers did not recognise or understand their analytic function (Taylor et al., 2007).

In the following example, the analyst acknowledges their lack of expertise regarding policing and goes on to lament the police officer/s perceived superior attitude of knowing more about analysis than the analysts themselves: “They have been coppers for years. We are not coppers, but they think they know more about intelligence than you do...they seem to just think that automatically we are like customer service officers or data entry people and they treat you like that...or they are very dismissive of intelligence and they don’t want to hear about it and they will be very abrupt and very rude”.

The implied lack of understanding regarding the analytic function is reflected in current literature. For instance, Osborne (2006), states that not only is crime analysis not institutionalised in law enforcement, it is also not well understood by police officers and managers. Also illustrated in the above quote is the officer’s perceived lack of equality and professional respect toward the analyst. This is inferred in the analysts being likened to administrative support personnel instead of being recognised as equal partners in criminal investigations. The absence of equality between co-workers, at group level results in a ‘them’ and ‘us’ attitude, further sustaining conflict as exemplified in the following statement: “It’s almost derogatory for a civilian to tell a police officer how to make a decision...for them to take advice or even acknowledge that they’ve used something that a civilian has provided makes them look bad”.

The above highlights a more explicit distinction between the groups. The analyst’s perceived lesser status is reflected in the participant’s use of the term “derogatory” and their perception that analysts’ contributions to an investigation adversely impacts the officers’ image or standing. These groups also differ in their socialisation processes. In so much that police officers are seen to socialise with work colleagues outside of work, whereas analysts tend to avoid socialising with work colleagues outside of work. “Their [police officers’] friendships are built around their jobs very much so, they send txt messages after hours, their network is built on bravado and there is an ongoing
social banter that is kind of continual, most analysts’ friendship circles aren’t built around the job. Friendship circles are built around people they know external to work, so most analysts do their jobs then they go home”.

On the face of it such a difference should not present a problem. However, when viewed as defining group characteristics, the potential for conflict increases. For example, analysts’ preference to not socialise with work colleagues, especially if not understood, may be perceived by officers as a sign of dislike, arrogance, aloofness and the like. Alternatively, socialising banter from outside of work may be brought into work by officers as they share their experiences. This type of interaction is perceived as a distraction by the analysts who prefer to separate social and professional engagements. If prolonged, such sentiments can foster conflict.

Nevertheless, not all interactions between analysts and police officers are conflictual. One participant described their positive experience of working with police officers as: “I have worked in some mint places where it took me nine months to prove myself but after that 95% of the time they would listen to what I have to say. They would still dial out, but 95% of the time they would listen to what I have to say, which was amazing”.

The officers’ attentiveness resulted in the analyst feeling professionally respected and valued. So much so, that even when they fail to listen (‘dial out’), because it occurs much less frequently, the analyst is accepting of it, does not regard it as problematic and conflict is avoided. Premised in part on this and similar positive experiences, the same analyst went on to say:

“I say to people, part of your job as an analyst is you analyse the environment you work in. You sit there and within the first month or two you know pretty quickly the people that are going to be receptive to the kind of work you do and those that are not. You focus on those that are and don’t worry about converting those that aren’t...”, and “When you [analyst] are in the minority, you kind of have to change your game to fit theirs. That is just the way it goes”.

The above demonstrates acceptance, not to be confused with condonance, of police officers’ perceived problematic attitude toward analysts. Subsequently, the analyst’s focus shifts from contending to coping with said attitude thereby averting conflict. Lastly, acceptance of a minority status results in the analyst reconciling to the onus for adaptation resting with them. Such adaptive strategies can be compared to the behavioural component of resilience, defined as underlying the individual’s ability to stay focused on and carry out relevant tasks and goals (Robertson & Cooper, 2013).

As can be seen in this analysis of the two subthemes, communication and workplace conflict there is intertwining and overlap of concepts. The lived experience of the analyst is complex even contradictory yet this examination of lived experience has highlighted the significance of communication as a function of intelligence.

CONCLUSION
The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experience of being an intelligence analyst within WAPOL. Key findings identified internal and external factors that impacted upon the analyst’s role. The former comprised aspects of the self, including subthemes of Professional and Personal/Social Persona. The latter referred to the subtheme of Work/Home Divide, its determinants and threat to the analysts’ psychological wellbeing. Professional persona comprised the skills and attributes perceived by analysts as most salient (i.e., communication and resilience) and workplace conflicts. Personal/Social personal comprised personality characteristics perceived by analysts as valuable to their job performance (i.e., self-confidence, ability to reflect and flexibility), and more general aspects of their personal life such as friendships and interests outside of work. This paper focused specifically on two critical sub themes, communication and internal conflict.
Communication emerged as the most important enabler to impact upon analysts’ production and delivery of their analytic product. Specifically and irrespective of product quality, for law enforcement intelligence analysis to be beneficial, it needs to be adequately and favourable received by the consumer. Communication skills were identified as fundamental to successful product delivery. Internal conflict on the other hand emerged as the most significant barrier to the effective exploitation of law enforcement intelligence.

This study makes a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the area of law enforcement intelligence analysis. Firstly, it is the only study, thus far, that focused specifically on the lived experience of being a law enforcement intelligence analyst. Secondly, it is the first study of this nature in the Australian context. Thirdly, the findings highlight the need for further research and provide a foundation that can be built upon.

REFERENCES


