

Rational Considerations for Undercover Officers Returning to Mainstream Roles

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ABSTRACT

Undercover law enforcement operations constitute a psychologically transformative experience, as officers must navigate chronic stress, identity conflicts, and the ethical dilemmas inherent in prolonged deception. Such assignments necessitate the adoption of false personas that often conflict with an officer's personal values, creating profound challenges when they attempt to reconcile these identities upon returning to mainstream duties. Consequently, establishing robust resocialization frameworks is essential to mitigate the adverse psychological impacts of this transition and to support the long-term well-being of these personnel. Despite the critical nature of this transition, the empirical literature regarding the post-deployment re-assimilation of operatives remains fragmented and limited in scope. This study, therefore, seeks to address this void by examining the rational considerations to facilitate successful reintegration of the undercover officers to their mainstream roles. The result of the study shows that rational considerations is essential and play a significant role for undercover officers and it should be included as part of the basic training, the in-service training and the undercover training for undercover officers.

Keywords: undercover, rational choice, reintegration, law enforcement

INTRODUCTION

Undercover operations serve as a critical mechanism for law enforcement agencies globally, particularly within intelligence-based investigations targeting complex corruption and organized crime (Cajada et al., 2024). Despite their operational effectiveness, these assignments frequently subject personnel to chronic stress, moral dilemmas, and significant identity conflicts (Moretti et al., 2025). These individuals often endure role ambiguity when their covert personas blur with their authentic identities, leading to profound psychological distress (Curran, 2021; Spinella, 2020). This phenomenon is further exacerbated by the inherent difficulty of transitioning from clandestine, high-stakes environments back to the structured norms of mainstream police duties (Curran, 2021; French, 2003). Resocialization involves applying social identity theory to systematically deconstruct the psychological processes associated with this reintegration phase (French, 2003).

In Malaysia, undercover intelligence operations have been employed by various law enforcement agencies, such as the Royal Malaysia Police, the Royal Malaysian Customs Department, the Malaysian Immigration Department, the Road Transport Department, and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC). For the MACC, this approach forms part of an intelligence-based investigation strategy (Aziz, 2017; Chuan, 2011; M. S. A. A. Manan & Aziz, 2014; Yahaya, 2016). Under this strategy, intelligence officers designated as undercover agents infiltrate syndicate networks for the duration of the operation. Upon the operation's conclusion, they return to their parent departments and undergo a process known as the reintegration phase—a period of readjustment to the formal work environment and their original social lives (Miller, 2006).

The reintegration process for undercover officers following the completion of an assignment is a complex phase, as it involves psychological, social, and various other dimensions. Typically, undercover officers face numerous

challenges when returning to their original departments and readjusting to normal life. Key challenges frequently reported include psychological stress, identity confusion, and difficulties in re-establishing professional and personal relationships (French, 2003). These issues arise because undercover intelligence assignments require officers to adopt new identities and live lives isolated from their original social environments.

Consequently, the reintegration process for undercover officers requires rational considerations to help them manage stress and confront the challenges they face. Rational considerations is a collocation that can be understood as deliberate, analytical assessments of one's circumstances, options, and potential outcomes, grounded in objective evaluation rather than instinctive reaction (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). These considerations encompass several dimensions, including emotional cost-benefit analysis (such as evaluating the toll of stress on personal wellbeing and relationships), cognitive or informational appraisal (such as weighing available options and gathering relevant data for problem-solving), and material planning (such as assessing financial resources and logistical requirements). Each officer must weigh different considerations based on their specific mental, physical, emotional, social, knowledge-related, financial, and logistical circumstances. Therefore, the need for rational deliberation varies and is fulfilled through ongoing analytical reflection and systematic evaluation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resocialization functions as a critical mechanism to reconcile the officer's internal identity with the rigid norms of the organizational subculture (M. S. A. Manan et al., 2025). There have been tremendous studies in the past on resocialization. Some of them include studies from Duggins (2024), Love (2022) Rivers et al. (2017) and Vivares (2023). Duggins (2024) explored the experiences of correctional officers who have been assaulted by inmates, with particular emphasis on how these incidents affect their resocialization into the workplace. Three main themes emerged from the study. First, assaults affect correctional officers both physically and emotionally, with injuries ranging from minor to severe. Second, coping strategies, reintegration, and organizational support are important, but officers face difficulties due to the absence of a consistent support system. Third, the complex and unpredictable behavior of inmates makes it hard for officers to understand why assaults occur. Meanwhile, Love (2022) studied on licensed practical nurses' reintegration into acute care and its effects on patients' views of care delivery. This research suggests that appropriate bedside nursing resources play a crucial role in determining patient outcomes and influencing patients' perceptions of the quality of care experienced during their inpatient admission. Besides that,. Next, Rivers et al. (2017) researched on the reintegration experiences of en route care nurses post-deployment through a mixed-methods design. The purpose of this study was to comprehend the post-deployment behavior health symptoms and readjustment/reintegration experienced by military nurses who provided en route care while serving in Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom. Furthermore, Vivares (2023) examined the life of seven ex-convicts in their reintegration into society, particularly Ozamiz City. This study identified several key themes, including challenges in securing employment, difficulties in maintaining a livelihood, experiencing a lack of support or concern from family members and relatives, facing negative treatment from others, efforts to rebuild their lives, maintaining a positive attitude despite hardships, and seeking reconciliation with their families. The reviewed studies demonstrate that reintegration after a significant transition or disruptive experience is a multidimensional process influenced by psychological, social, and organizational factors.

On the other hand, there are also past studies focusing on the resocialization of undercover officers which pose a significant correlation with this paper's theme. French (2003) conducted a study on Identity Stressors Associated with The Reintegration Experiences of Australasian Undercover Police Officers. The result of the study highlighted that former operatives remain committed to their policing profession, however, those who experienced identity stress during the re-assimilation process were less satisfied with their current work duties and failed to find their work interesting. Moreover, there are other studies outlined by Michel Girodo on resocialization of undercover officers which centralized on the ideas of entry and re-entry strain of undercover officers, identity disturbances among undercover officers and symptomatic reactions to undercover works (Girodo, 1991, 2006; Girodo et al., 2002). Additionally, Curran (2021) investigates the impact that covert and undercover policing has on the well-being of former officers who have undertaken this role, and how they utilised

coping strategies. The results of the present study indicate that fearing discovery is a potent stressor in undercover policing and has a detrimental impact on psychological well-being.

Like criminals, undercover officers are exposed to crimes; hence making them to do calculated decision before committing a crime by weighing the potential benefits against the potential costs and risks. One of the primary factors a person evaluates during this process is their "chance of getting caught". Extending this discussion, there are also past studies on rational consideration which include studies done by Alif et al. (2021), Cornish & Clarke (2014, 1987). Alif et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review on Recidivism and the main theories of criminal behaviour. The review highlighted that Recidivism is repetitive criminal behaviour that causes ex-prisoners to return to prison and the researchers in this study highlighted how poor rational considerations can make a criminal commit the same crime. Besides that, Cornish & Clarke (1987) proposed the valuable framework for examining and informing crime control policies which is the "choice-structuring properties". This framework posits the configuration of opportunities, costs, and benefits associated with specific types of crime. This paper seeks to extend rational choice theory and enhance the analysis of crime displacement. The next study is on The Reasoning Criminal: Rational Choice Perspectives of Offending (Cornish & Clarke, 2014). The researchers of this book argue that offending is a purposive behavior designed to benefit the offender. Instead of seeing crime as purely pathological, the authors suggest that criminals make specific choices—though often with limited information—to maximize their gains and minimize their risks.

Despite the numerous studies on rational considerations of criminals in committing the crime, there have yet a study on rational considerations of undercover officers in doing the same thing. Although a great deal of research has examined the rational decision-making processes of criminals during the commission of offenses, comparatively few studies have focused on the calculated judgments made by undercover officers who operate within the same environment. It is this very gap that the authors of this paper aim to address.

METHODOLOGY

Studies on resocialization have been tremendous in the past. This study adopted a qualitative research design specifically a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding and examine the experiences of former intelligence officers engaged in undercover operations related to corruption cases, as well as their reintegration process into the work environment after the completion of such operations. This approach was chosen to enable the researcher to comprehend the psychosocial dimensions and subjective experiences of the officers, in line with the qualitative approach suggested by Creswell & Creswell (2018). It also allows for the nuanced exploration of undercover officers' lived experiences, perspectives, and underlying decision-making processes. In this study, rational considerations are measured using Kahneman's (2003) Dual Process Theory on System 1 (fast, intuitive thinking) and System 2 (slow, analytical thinking), especially in Thinking, Fast and Slow.

A total of nine informants were selected through purposive sampling (Yunus & Burhan, 2023), based on criteria of having investigative experience in intelligence-led operations, particularly those involving undercover assignments in syndicated corruption cases. All informants were former officers of the Intelligence Division of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), with diverse socio-demographic backgrounds in terms of age, length of service, and the types and number of undercover operations they had participated in. Participants were selected using a non-probability purposive sampling technique, which targets individuals who possess rich, relevant experience regarding undercover and intelligence. To be eligible, participants met the following inclusion criteria: (1) Served as an undercover operative in corruption investigations, (2) Carried out undercover assignments lasting more than three months, and (3) All interviewees were former MACC undercover officers. A final sample of $N = 9$ participants was determined using the principle of data saturation (Guest et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2018). Data collection was continued until consecutive interviews yielded no new thematic codes or novel insights, indicating that the core dimensions of the phenomenon had been sufficiently captured. The interviews were conducted in Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur, depending on the convenience of the informants. Each session lasted between one to two hours, depending on the availability of the informants. The interviews were also conducted in conducive settings that ensured the informants' safety and comfort. The selection of informants was facilitated by the Head of the Project Implementation Branch after formal approval was obtained

from the Director of the Intelligence Division. This procedure was consistent with the principles of purposive sampling, which emphasize the suitability and accessibility of data sources to meaningfully address the research questions (Awang & Alavi, 2020).

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing the informants to share their experiences more openly and reflectively. The interviews were carried out in a safe and comfortable environment, with due consideration for security and the confidentiality of the informants' identities. The data collection process continued until it reached the point of no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Each interview lasted at least one hour and was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcription and data analysis were conducted inductively using thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2014), focusing on the development of themes, sub-themes, and domains related to social support and reintegration challenges (Abdullah et al., 2024). The analysis began with an overall familiarization of the data, followed by initial coding, and the mapping of key themes emerging from the informants' narratives.

To ensure compliance with research ethics principles, the researcher obtained verbal consent from each informant after providing an explanation regarding the study's purpose, data collection procedures, the right to withdraw, and the potential implications of the study for the organization. Special emphasis was also placed on confidentiality and information protection, given the sensitive nature of the informants' former roles as undercover officers. The study adhered to principles of academic integrity while safeguarding the well-being of the informants and honoring the interests of the institution.

Theoretocal Framework

Grounded in Kahneman's (2003) Dual Process Theory, this study assumes that reasoning involves two distinct modes: an automatic, intuitive process that rapidly proposes answers, and a controlled, deliberative process that intervenes only when it detects an error and has enough mental resources to correct it. Consequently, people may fail to report the right answer not because they lack the knowledge to find it, but because the deliberative system never engaged. Dual Process Theory offers a powerful cognitive framework for understanding why resocializing undercover officers is so difficult: undercover work rewires System 1 (fast, automatic intuition), and resocialization requires System 2 (slow, deliberate control) to constantly override it, an effortful process that fails predictably under stress or fatigue (Moretti et al., 2025).

Undercover officers spend months or years in high-stakes environments where survival depends on automatic, intuitive responses. Over time, System 1 adapts to treat deception, manipulation, and reading for threats become automatic scripts; detachment and emotional flatness become the intuitive stance; Hypervigilance and suspicion of everyone become the default mode; Moral intuitions shift to accommodate criminal norms; "us vs. them" blurs; the false persona becomes cognitively fused with the self (French, 2003; Moretti et al., 2025). When the officer returns to mainstream policing, the organization expects transparency, rule-following, trust in colleagues, and service-oriented behavior. But these are now non-default responses. The officer must use System 2 to suppress suspicion and treat citizens and colleagues as trustworthy by default, switch communication scripts from covert deception to open, accountable dialogue, override moral intuitions that have adapted to criminal subcultures, manage identity boundaries between the "undercover self" and the "police self" which is cognitively expensive.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Reintegration Goal (Return To Law Enforcement Duty) Option For Reintegration

Based on the research and interviews that had been conducted, the researches have come out with several themes that are deemed to be important for this study's analysis. The main themes that have emerged from undercover officers who would return to law enforcement duty include reintegration with family and reintegration with working environment or the previous job. Whereas for undercover officers that would like to remain in undercover, the considerations include resisting routine work, receiving offer to remain as undercover officer, having the opportunity to use the undercover facilities, and finding both the persona and the assigned undercover task enjoyable. The analysis yielded several notable outcomes and themes, as outline below:

Reintegration with family

Restore Family Relationships

Informant Fayyadh;

“...I left my wife while she was pregnant. Our relationship was certainly challenging. I was torn between my duties and my wife! ...It was difficult to make her understand when I left, but for the sake of my career... I assured her that the assignment was only temporary... She eventually understood! ...So, once the overseas posting ended, I had to rebuild the relationship and return to family life, just like everyone else...”

Improving the relationship with one's wife and children

Informant Dwen;

“...I have to leave my UC role once the operation ends... many issues arise, particularly regarding communication with my wife and children. Being away for so long, I sometimes feel a sense of emotional distance. It takes time for the children to reconnect with me; they've become accustomed to being left behind. When I return... I notice they aren't close to me anymore...”

Reclaiming identity and the role of a family unit member.

Informant Azarock;

“...I really need to bond with my children. Once I'm back from undercover duty... I need to devote attention to my wife and kids. To me... family is everything. Even though we are committed to our work... committed to the organization... family deserves proper attention too. So, once the undercover operation ends... I must focus on family activities at home!!... no matter what... making the most of the time—whether during meals or just relaxing and chatting!!...”

Informant Razman;

“...One of my children is ill and requires weekly treatment. All this time, I've left that responsibility to my wife; I've entrusted it entirely to her whenever I was away. She has sacrificed so much for me and the children. Once my UC assignment ends, I must return to my family. I need to take over the burden my wife has been shouldering alone. So, when the operation concludes... I have to return to my duties as the head of the family!...”

Reintegration into the work environment (mainstream / law enforcement culture)

Returning to the identity of the enforcement officer

Informant Dwen

“...Back then, I worked according to the syndicate's schedule. I'd sleep during the day and stay awake at night. After the operation, I initially struggled to adjust my work and sleep schedule!!... ...I was used to waking up late!... because I used to work late nights at a gambling den. Working nights and waking up late had become my routine. It was a problem when I returned to a regular job, though, because I had to reset my schedule. I had to report to the office and clock in...”

Informant Jack;

“...After returning, I had to readjust my schedule. It isn't easy to switch back to working office hours—especially with the need to clock in and adhere to office regulations. Undercover officers require a period of readjustment; it takes time, and none of it is easy!...”

Leaving the undercover roles (authorized deviance)

Informant Jacky;

“...Returning from an undercover operation... I reported back to the department, and it was incredibly stressful because I had grown accustomed to a completely different work environment while undercover. Everything changed upon my return; I had to go back to being an enforcement officer. We were bound by Annual Work Targets (SKT)—we had to adhere to the specific tasks assigned to us! ...I had to quickly catch up on the office workload!...”

Informant Fayyadh;

“...There is a stark difference between working in undercover operations and working within the Department. The work cultures are completely different—it’s like night and day. When I was doing undercover work, I was fully immersed in technical matters—tasks that required me to focus on specific issues, conduct assessments, and compile reports. I had to validate those reports! It was a different world compared to standard enforcement duties. I had to relearn how to adapt to the work culture I had left behind. At the same time, I had to unlearn certain habits I had picked up during those operations...”

Option To Remain Undercover

1. Resisting routine work because it does not align with their temperament (slowing down operations, failing to submit accurate undercover reports, or displaying a lack of interest).

Informant Dwen;

“...I feel reluctant to return to the department because I’ve started to feel comfortable and confident in handling other cases elsewhere... I have the option to continue working undercover even though the operation has ended... I can gather new information... I have sources who can provide information regarding corruption... If I keep going, it will be even harder for me to return to the office!...”

Informant Bent;

“... I sometimes feel reluctant to go into the office... other tasks seem tedious... Working on the UC project is more enjoyable. It offers more freedom, and I don’t have to worry about office-bound tasks. I certainly can’t deny that I enjoy the UC work. If possible, I like to maximize my time on it—there’s no need to head back early. So, I maintain a pace that suits my own schedule...”

2. Opportunity to return to undercover operations (uncovering new information and volunteering as an undercover officer for similar cases or intelligence gathering)

Informant Bent;

“...Once the operation wrapped up, I was already planning to launch a new lead! I provided information indicating that a source was ready to share fresh details. I needed to develop high-quality intelligence... so I instructed the supervisor to remain in the field to secure evidence... I find undercover work more exciting than other assignments... so I have to prove to the boss that I can handle a new undercover operation!...”

3. Opportunity to utilize the facilities while acting as an undercover officer (volunteering to serve as an undercover officer for other cases).

Informant Razman;

“...Comfortable with the ongoing undercover operation!... there are perks... There are benefits to undercover work. We get access to certain facilities. To me, that serves as a source of motivation for the undercover operative to do the job. Sometimes, however, when an operative gains access to these facilities, they might forget that the

perks are only temporary—not permanent... some might even drag out the operation’s conclusion... running it according to their own schedule...”

4. Finding the persona and the job enjoyable

Informant Dwen;

“...None of the personas I adopted there offered any real benefit worth holding onto. I had to step back to avoid the habits associated with that role. Working as a runner at that gambling den was, in a way, exciting—it was a highly social environment, and the atmosphere was addictive. So, when I left, I’d actually feel an urge to go back. But when I reflect on the consequences... there was absolutely no benefit. I saw nothing there that was truly worthwhile!!... I really had to move on completely. I’m never going back there... I have to remember that I have a job!!... I am a civil servant. I am an anti-corruption enforcement officer!!...”

Informant Razman

“...I sometimes feel like going back to that UC environment... it’s just that... it really is fun because you have freedom. You don’t have to follow the usual office routine. Sometimes, I even think about finding an excuse to stay on as a UC. But that’s all just fleeting enjoyment. Then I remember what my boss said: ‘Don’t get any wild ideas. You might end up never coming back!’... There have been UCs in the past who enjoyed the role so much they forgot what their actual job was. So, I take that as a lesson. Once the UC assignment ends... I have to let go of that persona... I have to protect my career. It’s not easy becoming an MACC officer!...”

Based on the following findings, when evaluating career transitions, undercover officers who choose to return to standard law enforcement duties are primarily driven by family reintegration and readjustment to their previous workplace. Conversely, officers who opt to remain in undercover roles are motivated by an aversion to routine duties, opportunities to retain undercover privileges and facilities, direct offers to extend their assignment, and a strong personal alignment with the undercover role and its tasks. This career transition, according to The Dual Process Theory by Kahneman (2003), can be framed as System 2 which overrides decision that succeeds only when it is anchored by a strong System 1 counter-default. In other words, the choice to return to standard duties is not purely rational; it happens because family and workplace familiarity create a low-resistance path for a depleted deliberative mind to abandon the undercover identity. Besides that, guilt over absence and desire to reconnect are fast, automatic responses that create immediate cognitive dissonance with continued undercover life. Plus, family routines (meals, childcare, intimacy) are highly automatic; they do not demand the costly script-switching that undercover work requires. Since family bonds trigger fast and intuitive rewards, they provide the motivational fuel that a depleted System 2 cannot generate on its own. The officer does not merely decide to return for their family; their System 1 begins to feel the undercover role as wrong, which lowers the threshold for System 2 to authorize a career change.

If family reintegration provides the motivation, readjustment to the previous workplace provides the cognitive permission. From a Dual Process perspective, returning to a known standard-duty environment is cognitively cheaper than transitioning to an entirely new career. This is due to the fact that it relies primarily on fast, automatic mental processes, whereas shifting to a new career demands slower, effortful reasoning. According to Daniel Kahneman, System 1 operates quickly, automatically, and with little conscious effort, while System 2 is slower, deliberative, and cognitively demanding. When individuals return to a known work environment, many tasks—routines, decision patterns, social interactions—are already internalized. These can be executed through System 1 with minimal mental strain.

Evaluating a career transition after undercover work requires more than abstract reasoning; it demands emotional motivation like family reintegration, to break away from the undercover identity. Additionally, it relies on the cognitive ease of returning to a familiar workplace to prevent mental exhaustion during the transition. Therefore, transitioning to an entirely new career activates System 2 more heavily. Individuals must learn new norms, acquire unfamiliar skills, evaluate risks, and make deliberate decisions. This process involves higher levels of uncertainty and continuous conscious monitoring, all of which increase cognitive load. In other words, when an officer evaluates returning to standard duties, System 2 essentially asks two questions as such:

"Do I have a strong enough reason to leave?" → Answered by System 1 emotional signals from family.

"Can I actually succeed once I leave?" → Answered by System 2 assessment of workplace familiarity.

If only the family driver exists but the workplace feels alien or hostile, System 2 may calculate that the transition is too costly and abort the override. If only the workplace driver exists but there is no emotional counter-identity at home, System 2 lacks the motivational resources to initiate the transition at all.

In short, exiting undercover work is less a single decisive choice than a drawn-out series of mental corrections, where a fatigued System 2 must repeatedly override the automatic habits that covert duty has entrenched. Family and workplace factors each solve a different problem: loved ones supply the emotional pull that makes change feel necessary, while a known work environment provides the structural ease that makes change feel possible. It is only when both are present that System 2 gains enough motivation and breathing room to commit to the transition. Remove one, and the process stalls, either because the path seems too difficult to walk alone, or because there is no reason to take the first step. Successful reintegration, therefore, depends less on an officer's sheer determination than on the rare alignment of a compelling home life and a forgiving professional setting that together make abandoning the undercover default cognitively achievable.

CONCLUSIONS

Applying a rational-choice framework to the resocialization of undercover officers offers a valuable lens for analyzing crime control policies, as it requires carefully balancing operational demands against the long-term human sustainability of the officers themselves. To achieve this, agencies should adopt a holistic reintegration model that integrates rational considerations to deconstruct the friction between covert personas and professional policing roles (French, 2003). Furthermore, policy adaptations must mandate structured transition programs that include trainings on rational considerations to provide targeted clinical interventions for the specific stressors of identity confusion and moral conflict inherent in covert operations. Last but not least, future empirical investigations should prioritize longitudinal studies to assess the efficacy of these interventions in reducing maladaptive coping mechanisms and enhancing overall psychological resilience which could be priceless to be included as part of the basic training, the in-service training and the undercover training for undercover officers.

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