

Silent Professionals in Blue: Lifeworld of Drug Enforcement Operatives in Cebu City Police Office

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of Drug Enforcement Operatives (DEOs) of the Philippine National Police assigned in Cebu City. Using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen (SCK) method as adapted by Moustakas (1994), in-depth interviews with ten experienced operatives revealed eleven emergent themes organized into three major categories. Positive experiences included The Airtight Pipeline, Cross-Jurisdictional Synergy, Procedural Rigor & Adaptation, and Unwritten Tactical Reliance, highlighting fulfillment, collaboration, meticulous procedures, and deep trust. Negative experiences encompassed Tactical Subversion, Systemic Judicial Setbacks, Cognitive Burnout & Interference, and Institutional Resource Deficits, reflecting challenges from adversaries, legal technicalities, chronic stress, and inadequate resources. To cope, operatives utilized Tactical Recalibration, Structural Legal Shielding, Interpersonal Solidarity, and Career Compartmentalization, demonstrating adaptive strategies, precise documentation, team support, and balance between work and personal life. Aspirations centered on Holistic Up-skilling, Technological Modernization, and Inter-Jurisdictional Synchronization, emphasizing advanced training, digital transformation, and seamless cooperation across units. Anchored in Self-Efficacy Theory, Competence Motivation Theory, and Team Performance Theory, this research provides actionable insights for policy, training, and institutional support, ultimately advancing the welfare and effectiveness of frontline anti-narcotics personnel.

Keywords: Drug enforcement operatives, phenomenology, lived experiences, coping mechanisms and aspirations

INTRODUCTION

Drug enforcement operatives are often described as “silent professionals” due to the discreet and high-risk nature of their work, which exposes them to daily threats from organized crime, violence, and intense psychological stress (Garcia, 2025). These challenges are compounded by public scrutiny and institutional pressures, particularly in urban centers like Cebu City where drug-related issues are complex and pervasive.

International agencies such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), INTERPOL, and the World Health Organization (WHO) significantly influence global and local drug enforcement efforts by offering technical assistance, policy guidance, and specialized training that includes a focus on human rights, ethics, and the protection of vulnerable groups (UNODC, 2023; INTERPOL, 2022; WHO, 2021). INTERPOL enhances cross-border operations and intelligence sharing, while WHO emphasizes integrating public health and mental health support into law enforcement strategies. These organizations also promote community engagement and the development of cross-cultural competencies, setting standards that encourage ethical, effective, and human rights-based practices worldwide.

In the Philippines, these international recommendations are especially pertinent. Drug enforcement operatives frequently experience trauma, moral injury, and burnout, yet institutional support for their psychological well-being is limited. Strengthening these support structures and adopting international best practices are crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by Philippine operatives.

Within the Philippine National Police (PNP), drug enforcement personnel are rigorously selected and trained under Republic Act No. 9165, working in partnership with the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) to conduct high-risk operations. In Cebu City, operatives drawn from elite PNP units are expected to maintain exceptional professionalism and integrity, adapting national standards to the local context. However, most research has focused on operational outcomes rather than the lived experiences of the operatives, leaving a significant gap in understanding their psychological resilience, ethical dilemmas, and coping mechanisms—especially in Cebu City.

This study seeks to examine the lived experiences of Drug Enforcement Operatives in the Cebu City Police Office, focusing on their duties, coping strategies, and aspirations for improving service quality. The researcher's direct involvement in law enforcement and ongoing graduate studies in Criminal Justice provide both practical and theoretical expertise for this work.

By illuminating the realities faced by these silent professionals, the study aims to inform policy, enhance institutional support systems, and promote mental health services and ethical practices within the PNP. Ultimately, it seeks to foster empathy and informed dialogue among policymakers, law enforcement leaders, and the public.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study is grounded in Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977), Competence Motivation Theory (White, 1959), and Team Performance Theory (Hackman, 1987). Self-Efficacy Theory emphasizes how belief in one's capabilities enhances motivation, resilience, and adaptability traits vital for drug enforcement operatives facing high-risk, complex scenarios (Bandura, 1977; 1997). Operatives with high self-efficacy are more likely to persist through setbacks and contribute effectively to team efforts (Bandura, 1986).

Competence Motivation Theory posits that individuals are intrinsically driven to develop and demonstrate skills, seeking mastery and deriving satisfaction from overcoming challenges (White, 1959). In drug enforcement, this motivation supports continuous skill development and job satisfaction, especially through structured training and feedback (White, 1959).

Team Performance Theory highlights the importance of communication, cohesion, and leadership in achieving collective goals (Hackman, 1987). Effective teamwork amplifies individual efficacy and competence, supporting operational success and resilience under pressure (Hackman, 1987).

Legally, drug enforcement in the Philippines is anchored on Republic Act No. 9165 (Baylon, 2016; Santos, 2018), detailing protocols and accountability for agencies like PDEA and the PNP. Literature shows the importance of compliance with due process (Torres, 2019; Gonzales, 2019), effective teamwork, intelligence sharing (Estrella, 2018; Labrador, 2017), and continuous training (Villanueva, 2021).

Studies also note the psychological toll on operatives, highlighting the need for resilience strategies and institutional support (Delos Santos, 2020; Cruz, 2017; Lim, 2020), as well as the ethical dimension of enforcement (Reyes, 2019; Labrador, 2017). Community trust and multi-sectoral collaboration have been shown to enhance operational outcomes (David et al., 2019; La Vina, 2018; Alvarez, 2017; Suarez, 2021; Reyes, 2022).

Persistent challenges include procedural weaknesses and the need for adaptability to evolving tactics (Bacalso, 2018; Bersales, 2021; Acuña, 2019). Feedback mechanisms and reflective practices, as suggested by Team Performance Theory, are vital for continuous improvement. Overall, literature underscores the need to balance operational effectiveness with ethics and community engagement in Cebu City's drug enforcement work.

Statement of the Problem

This study explored the lifeworld of Drug Enforcement Operatives of Cebu City Police Office, Cebu City, Philippines.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions.

1. What were the experiences of the informants in performance of their duties?
2. How does the informant cope with the challenges they encountered in the performance of their duties?
3. What were the aspirations of informants to improve the quality of their services?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study uses a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Cebu City drug enforcement operatives. This approach is suitable for capturing the depth and complexity of their realities, including psychological stress, ethical dilemmas, and coping strategies, through in-depth interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transcendental phenomenology, following Husserl and Moustakas, emphasizes bracketing researcher biases to authentically present participants' perspectives (Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994).

Research Environment. The study is conducted in Cebu City, a major urban center in the Philippines with a diverse population and 80 barangays. Focus is on five key police stations known for significant anti-drug operations. The Cebu City Police Office (CCPO) is the primary law enforcement agency, and the selected stations are pivotal due to their high number of drug-related arrests.

Research Informants Ten (10) drug enforcement operatives with at least three years of experience, vetted and cleared by the PNP, will participate. Individual in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes) will elicit narratives about operational challenges, motivations, and coping mechanisms. This ensures authentic and nuanced insights into their lived experiences.

Research Instrument. A structured interview guide with open-ended questions covers: (1) positive and negative experiences, (2) coping mechanisms, and (3) aspirations. Data collection tools include the validated interview guide, voice recorder, and field notes. Ethical review and informed consent procedures ensure voluntary, confidential participation.

Research Procedures. Permission is sought from the CCPO director. Upon approval, informants are briefed, consent obtained, and interviews conducted. Interviews are completed within a month, focusing on capturing the lifeworlds of the operatives. The researcher employs a phenomenological approach, seeking emergent themes from participants' narratives.

Data Analysis. The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen (SCK) method (Moustakas, 1994) is used. Steps include bracketing, immersion in transcripts, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and synthesizing individual and composite descriptions. Participant validation enhances credibility.

Ethical Considerations. Strict confidentiality and anonymity protocols are followed. Principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy guide the research. Participants are informed of their rights and can withdraw at any time.

Trustworthiness. Credibility is ensured through member checking, audit trails, and use of participants' native dialect. Transferability is supported by thick descriptions and documentation. Dependability is addressed by detailed process records, and conformability by grounding findings in participants' accounts, using bracketing and reflexivity throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To ensure methodological transparency and to comprehensively capture the informants' lifeworld, the findings are structured along two interrelated dimensions: *textural descriptions*, which articulate what the operatives experienced by incorporating verbatim accounts and affective undertones; and *structural descriptions*, which elucidate how institutional, spatial, and social contexts shaped these lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The resulting thematic grounds reveal the intricate relationships among positive and negative experience, coping

mechanism and aspirations encountered by drug enforcement operatives, thereby offering nuanced academic discussions.

The emergent themes presented below are the result of a comprehensive thematic analysis, faithfully reflecting the lived experiences and perspectives articulated by the informants.

I. Experience of the informants in performance of their duties.

A. Positive Experience

1. The Airtight Pipeline. This theme explains that operational success is only truly realized when high-stakes field interdiction, accurate target identification, and major contraband seizures are seamlessly translated into airtight legal evidence capable of securing convictions and withstanding aggressive judicial scrutiny. Informants experienced a profound sense of professional fulfilment, deep validation, and professional triumph when their prolonged field surveillance directly materialized into high-stakes intercepts:

Informant 1 has this to say:

Fulfilling kaayo isip mga drug operatives... kung ang pag-casing o surveillance direktang nakatabang sa malampusong pag-aresto sa mga suspek sa ilegal nga druga (IDI1:SS1). (Fulfilling it as drug operatives... when casing or surveillance directly contributed to the successful apprehension of illegal drug suspects).

Informant 2 recounted the visceral thrill of seizing substantial quantities of contraband ranging from hundreds of grams to multiple kilograms of illicit drugs. He has this to say:

Mga fulfilling nga higayon samtang nagpahigayon og mga buy-bust operation inubanan sa pagtinabangay sa ubang law enforcement agencies o uban pang operational units sama sa CIU (IDI 2:SS1). (Fulfilling moments while conducting buy-bust operations in collaboration with law enforcement agencies or other operational units like CIU).

Drug Enforcement Operatives (DEOs) experience true professional fulfilment not just during arrests, but when their fieldwork results in legally robust case folders that withstand courtroom scrutiny. This sense of accomplishment comes from seeing their surveillance and evidence-gathering lead to successful convictions, which validates their mastery and commitment (Arble et al., 2019; Cao & Burton, 2020). Successfully defending cases in court reinforces their professional identity and motivates on-going dedication, as legal validation is seen as the ultimate test of their work (Blumberg et al., 2022). Thus, transforming operations into strong cases fulfills their intrinsic drive for competence and long-term engagement.

2. Cross-Jurisdictional Synergy. This emergent theme explains professional validation and operational confidence are deeply elevated through synchronized, flawless joint missions, transparent intelligence sharing, and mutual tactical backing among localized territorial units and regional task forces.

Operatives experienced a profound surge in operational confidence, institutional pride, and a sense of shared security when executing collaborative missions.

The informants has this to say:

O sir, sa mga court hearing ba... makapataas gyud sa kompiyansa kung ang mga territorial unit motabang og tudlo o mo-identify sa subject (IDI2: SS3). (Yes sir, during court hearings... it gives confidence when territorial units help point out the subject).

Drug Enforcement Operatives (DEOs) experience greater confidence and institutional pride when local stations, specialized units, and regional task forces collaborate on joint missions. This unified approach turns geographic fragmentation into operational strength, enhancing safety, intelligence sharing, and efficiency. Supported by Hackman's (1987) Team Performance Theory, such collaboration fosters clear roles and mutual trust, with

research showing it improves outcomes, morale, and adaptability in anti-narcotics operations (Maguire & King, 2022; Klap et al., 2021; Duxbury & Higgins, 2020).

3. Procedural Rigor & Adaptation. This emergent theme explains operatives safeguard their cases against legal loopholes by strictly adhering to immediate chain-of-custody markings, rigid post-arrest inventory protocols, and using hyper-local community networks (e.g., habal-habal) to blend invisibly into volatile environments.

The informants experienced a sense of control, calculated precision, and administrative security by mastering local field craft and strict procedural timelines.

Informant 4 has this to say:

Tungod sa epektibo nga koordinasyon sa lugar, bisan og sige og ka-usab-usab (dynamic) ang final nga lokasyon sa target, nagmalampuson gihapon mi. (IDI4:SS13) (Effective coordination in the area makes the final target location dynamic but successful).

For informant 4, the positive experience emerges when this chaos is successfully countered by real-time, spatial communication and intra-unit synchronization. The operative experiences a profound sense of tactical mastery and triumph because the team's shared agility transforms a potentially compromised or failed mission into a successful interdiction. Structurally, the operative's sense of security and achievement does not rely on a rigid, unyielding pre-operational plan, but rather on the flexibility of the communication loop

Informant 5 the informant emphasizes the demanding requirements of procedure as mandated by law, reflects the operative's deep-seated need for procedural perfection at the crime scene.

Informant 5 has this to say:

Kinahanglan masiguro ang limpyo nga pag-coordinate sa mga testigo ug ang proseso sa pag-inventory samtang nag-operate, para dili gyud ma-dismiss ang kaso sa piskal. (IDI5:SS18)(Ensuring clean witness coordination and inventory processes during the operation so the case won't be dismissed by the fiscal).

Drug Enforcement Operatives (DEOs) emphasize that strict adherence to protocols such as chain-of-custody and meticulous evidence handling combined with adaptive strategies like blending into local settings, is critical for operational and legal success. Research confirms that disciplined documentation and adaptability lead to higher conviction rates, enhanced confidence, and greater organizational credibility (Lee et al., 2021; Rorie & Kochel, 2019; Chen & Wang, 2022; Innes & Weston, 2025; Alketbi, 2023). This approach embodies the evolving professionalism in law enforcement.

4. Unwritten Tactical Reliance. This emergent theme explains shared survival in high-risk zones creates an intuitive, unspoken tactical reliance among operatives, which anchors and sustains their multi-year institutional endurance to shield the broader Cebuano community from harm despite ongoing personal peril.

Informant 4 captures the intense bonding that occurs under physical peril during multi-agency assignments. The informant explicitly links collective survival. The informant has this to say:

Ang pag-survive sa mga joint operation... kung dungan ninyong masagubang ang dugang nga mga risgo, makatukod gyud na og lawom nga pagsalig sa usag-usa sa team. (IDI 4: SS14) Survival in joint operations when you survive additional risks together, it builds deep team reliance).

Informant 7 statement explores the deep connection that develops when entering hostile environments, such as dense, high-crime urban pockets. The informant introduces the concept of an unwritten tactical reliance.

Ang dungan nga pag-navigate sa mga high-risk nga lugar makamugna og unwritten o dili masulti nga tactical reliance taliwala sa mga operative (IDI 7: SS9). Navigating high-risk areas together builds an unwritten tactical reliance among operatives.

Among DEOs, teamwork in high-risk operations often relies on non-verbal cues and deep mutual trust, allowing teams to anticipate each other's actions and maintain operational security. This intuitive, implicit coordination minimizes risks and strengthens resilience under pressure (Klap et al., 2021; McLean & Wolfe, 2020). Sustained peer support and seamless teamwork not only improve immediate performance but also foster long-term job satisfaction and psychological well-being (Karam & Browning, 2023).

B. Negative Experiences

1. Tactical Subversion. Field operations are severely disrupted and compromised when targets employ advanced counter-surveillance (e.g., syndicate CCTV networks), compromise undercover identities through facial recognition (*Familiar Matico*), or weaponize active physical resistance (*Kusuka*) and community defense barriers to force tactical evasions.

Informant 1 statement outlines the loss of anonymity, which is one of the most severe operational hazards for an undercover operative. The informant introduces the localized phenomenon of being *Familiar Matico*: a state where the operative's identity has been permanently compromised by the target or their immediate kinship network through repeated exposure in a sector.

According to Informant 1:

Kung ang mga suspek o ang ilang pamilya pamilyar na sa among mga nawong (Familiar Matico), delikado na kaayo para sa among safety inig buy-bust (IDI 1: SS11). (When suspects or their families become familiar with our faces compromising our safety during the buy-bust).

The negative experience here is not a single, sudden crisis, but rather the chronic anxiety of maintaining a false identity within an environment that is looking to expose you. Trying to blend into a hostile neighborhood while knowing that a single slip-up will lead to immediate violence creates an exhausting baseline of stress. This negative experience is structured through sustained psychological tension and environmental friction. Basically, the undercover operative lives in a state of double-consciousness. They must perfectly mirror the social dynamics of a hostile environment while internally maintaining their mind-set as a police officer. The difficulty of keeping up this deception in tight, high-risk spaces structures the experience as a continuous psychological battle against exposure (Blumberg et al., 2022).

2. Systemic Judicial Setbacks. Operatives face deep systemic frustration when meticulous, high-risk investigations and multi-kilogram drug seizures are easily undone in court due to zero-tolerance judicial rulings on minor procedural errors, gaps in evidence custodian markings, or the physical absence of mandatory inventory witnesses.

Informant 3 has this to say:

Nakasinate gyud mi og kalit nga pagsaka sa mga na-dismiss nga kaso sugod sa 2025 hangtod karong 2026 tungod sa ka-agresibo sa mga defense lawyer nga mi-target sa among chain of custody.(IDI3:SS15) (Experiencing a distinct surge in dismissed cases from 2025 to 2026 due to aggressive defense tactics targeting the chain of custody).

This statement accounts the severe emotional and professional toll of judicial dismissals. The informant describes the deep pain of seeing a case they spent weeks carefully preparing get thrown out of court over a minor procedural error. This experience undermines the operative's professional pride and motivation. The experience is structured as an unbalanced ratio of effort to outcome. Structurally, the operative's world is fractured when immense physical effort and careful planning are erased by a tiny procedural mistake. This imbalance causes deep professional frustration, as the judicial system is seen as valuing rigid procedural technicalities over the real-world danger and work put into the operation (Patel & Chen, 2022).

3. Cognitive Burnout & Interference. Operatives endure severe psychological wear and chronic stress caused by the constant dread of technical legal failures, the intense anxiety of memory fatigue during gruelling cross-examinations, and feelings of harassment from outside political or syndicate meddling.

The operative experiences intense external pressure from outside forces trying to manipulate or disrupt active cases. This interference comes from both corrupted political figures and organized drug syndicates creating an environment of hostility before the case even reaches the courtroom.

Informant 2 explained:

Mabatyagan gyud ang pressure ug murag ma-harass mi sa mga intervention gikan sa gawas, sama sa mga politiko o sa mga drug syndicate mismo nga mosulay og kumpas o manggulo sa operasyon (IDI2:SS14). (Feeling harassed by outside interventions, such as political figures or drug syndicates trying to intervene).

This negative experience goes beyond the standard hazards of police work; it reveals a profound vulnerability. The operative is deeply aware that while they risk their life on the streets, the institutional and legal framework behind them is fragile and filled with loopholes.

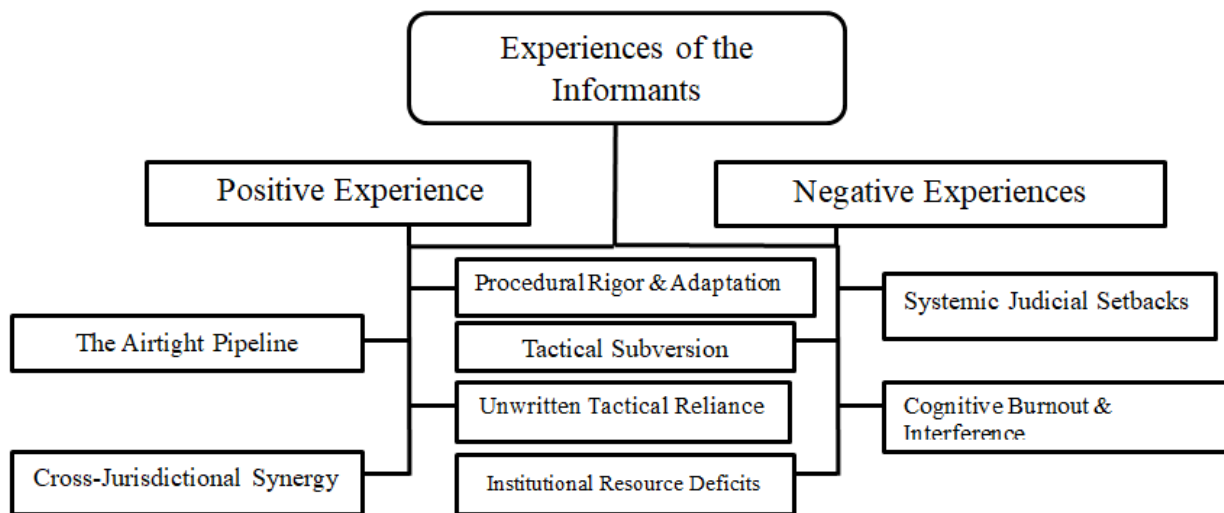


Figure 1: Emergent Themes under Positive and Negative Experience

4. Institutional Resource Deficits. The operational capacity and safety of undercover units are heavily handicapped by severe budgetary deficits, broken communication lines across local stations, a lack of advanced spy optics, and an unfair personal burden of paying out-of-pocket for gas, vehicle upkeep, and field operations.

Informant 1 describes a bitter and frustrating experience caused by a breakdown in teamwork and communication between different law enforcement agencies or local territorial units.

Informant 1 described it this way:

Lisod ug pait kaayo nga kasinatian sa koordinasyon taliwala sa mga law enforcement agency o mga territorial unit, nga moresulta gyud og bati nga epekto sa operasyon. IDI 1: SS5). (Difficult experience with coordination between law enforcement agencies or territorial units that negatively impacts the operation).

Informant 7 describes an alarming lack of basic field resources, specifically highlighting the absence of standard medical gear for treating injuries during raids, as well as the on-going personal cost of paying for fuel and keeping operational vehicles running. This merges the physical dangers of the street with personal financial strain. The operative must pay out-of-pocket just to drive to a high-risk area, knowing that if they are injured, the team lacks the basic medical supplies to treat them on-scene.

In the words of Informant 7:

Grabe nga kakulang sa resources, ilabi na ang kakuwang sa standard nga medical equipment ug ang personal nga palas-anon sa pagpautod og tubil (gas) ug gasto sa maintenance sa sakyanan (IDI7:SS30). (Severe resource constraints, specifically the lack of standard medical equipment and the personal burden of gas and vehicle maintenance expenses).

This negative experience is structured through compounded physical and financial vulnerability. Structurally, the state's failure to provide essential supplies affects both the mechanical tools of the job (vehicles and fuel) and human survival assets (medical kits). This structures the lifeworld of the operative as a high-risk gamble, where they must take on personal financial debt and physical danger just to perform their basic duties (Ahmed et al., 2021).

II: Informants coping with the challenges they encountered in the performance of their duties.

1. Tactical Recalibration. This theme captures the immediate, real-time adjustments teams make to handle operational failures, counter-surveillance, and hazardous environments. Operatives manage active field failures, surveillance blind spots, and counter-surveillance threats by executing immediate tactical retreats, leveraging senior investigator expertise, keeping exhaustive field logs for instant adaptation, and using real-time local intelligence to dynamically alter approach paths.

Informant 1 explained:

Pag-surmount o pag-overcome sa mga bati nga kasinatian pinaagi sa pag-regroup uban sa team para i-reassess ang among operational plan. (IDI1:SS14) (Overcoming negative experiences by regrouping with the team to reassess among the operational plan).

Moving from administrative consultation to immediate physical survival, the informant describes the physical steps taken when a surveillance operation is blown. When an observation point is compromised, the operative copes by immediately abandoning the position and resetting the team's perimeter to a safer location.

According to Informant 5:

Pag-cope up kung ma-compromise ang surveillance zone pinaagi sa paspas nga pag-pull back ug pagbalhin (shifting) sa among operational perimeter ngadto sa mas luwas nga lugar (IDI5:SS19). (Coping with compromised surveillance zones by instantly pulling back and shifting operational perimeters to a safer area).

This experience is structured through unpredictable mobility and real-time situational tracking. Structurally, the team avoids falling into predictable routines. By using continuous updates to change their physical approach to a target location, the operative turns a high-risk environment into a navigable space, outwitting the suspect's counter-surveillance and ensuring a safe, successful entry (Garcia & Munoz, 2021).

2. Structural Legal Shielding. This theme combines the use of strict administrative perfection, civilian disguises, and factual boundaries to protect both cases and operatives. Mastering covert tradecraft (e.g., plainclothes disguises, utilizing *habal-habal* transit), restricting tactical intelligence circles, building visually flawless case files, and strictly maintaining an unassailable, conservative factual baseline when on the witness stand.

Informant 4 describes a deliberate shift toward extreme administrative perfectionism to protect their hard work from courtroom attacks.

The informant has this to say:

Pag-adjust sa mga pamaagi sa pag-dokumento sa kaso (case documentation), sama sa pag-andam og perpekto ug walay sipyat nga mga litrato ug folder, para makasugakod sa agresibo nga cross-examination sa mga defense lawyer (IDI4: SS14). (Adapting case documentation tactics, such as preparing flawless photographs and folders, to survive aggressive defense cross-examinations).

The informant's way of coping comes from anticipatory legal mastery, where generating error-free evidence files allows the operative to confidently withstand intense cross-examination by defense attorneys. This experience is structured by proactive legal defense and administrative thoroughness. Structurally, the operative shifts their mindset from standard police work to anticipating defense tactics. By ensuring that case files are flawless before setting foot in court, the operative redefines the case folder as an unassailable record that shields their professional reputation during hostile cross-examinations (Tan & Ricard, 2025).

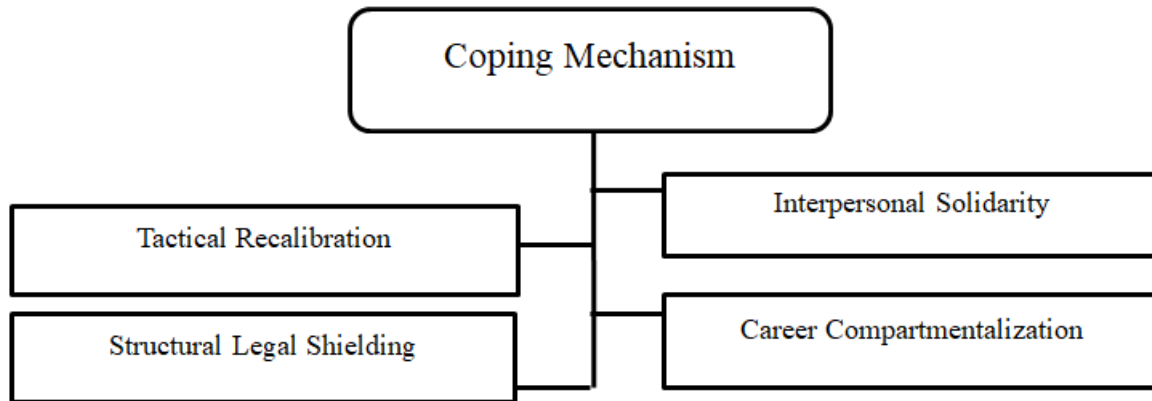


Figure 2. Emergent Themes under coping Mechanism

3. Interpersonal Solidarity. This theme captures the internal support networks, highlighting how shared faith, peer debriefings, and open group dialogues process trauma. High-stress field trauma and tactical frictions are processed through deep team solidarity, reassuring leadership, informal intra-unit peer counseling, structured group dialogues and a profound reliance on shared spiritual faith and divine guidance to preserve collective mental health.

Informants cope with operational failures (like a blown reconnaissance mission) by instantly pulling closer to their immediate peers. Instead of isolating themselves in guilt or frustration, they use active group communication and intense squad unity as a collective psychological anchor to restore their fractured motivation.

Informant shared that:

Nagsalig gyud mi og maayo sa panaghiusa sa team (team unity) ug sa internal communication para magpabilin nga motivated human sa usa ka na-compromise nga casing attempt. (IDI1: SS5) (Relying heavily on team unity and internal communication to stay motivated after a compromised casing attempt).

The coping mechanism is structured through interpersonal buffering. The squad functions as a defensive emotional envelope; by immediately processing tactical setbacks through open group dialogue, individual shame or despair is transformed into shared, collective responsibility.

Informants scale up their personal faith into a shared institutional coping shield by actively nurturing the spiritual life of the entire team. They cope with the unrelenting, daily threats to their lives by integrating shared faith routines. This manner of coping is structured as an intentional cathartic loop. Holding these dialogues in open, neutral spaces temporarily breaks down rigid military hierarchies, creating a safe zone for honest expression. This lets the operative purge trauma and anxiety from their system, restoring the group trust and emotional clarity required to go back into the field (Martinez & Jenkins, 2023)

4. Career Compartmentalization. This theme reflects the long-term cognitive adjustments used to balance systemic deficits, personal sacrifices, and severe work-life intrusion. Long-term operational longevity is sustained by completely segmenting street trauma from home life, rationalizing out-of-pocket financial expenses through career goals, balancing high-risk operations with administrative desk duties, and reframing continuous training and the safety of the broader city campaign as the core purposes of their vocation.

Informants cope with trauma and operational stress by drawing a strict mental boundary between the violence of the streets and the peace of their homes. Instead of bleeding their frustrations into the family circle, they transform their household responsibilities into a powerful engine for motivation. The desire to provide for their loved ones turns their daily stress into a meaningful sacrifice.

As shared by informant 2:

Pagpalahi sa grabeng operational stress gikan sa kinabuhi sa pamilya, ug pagkuha og kusog o motivation gikan sa pangandoy nga makasustento ug makasustener sa pamilya (IDI2:SS19). (Separating intense operational stress from family life, drawing motivation from the desire to support the household).

The coping mechanism acts as an intellectual counterbalance to the exhaustion of street duties. By focusing on future professional and intellectual growth, informants prevent themselves from being worn down by the demands of daily operations. Actively pursuing further training allows them to reframe their current stressful circumstances as temporary challenges, helping them maintain their sense of identity as developing professionals rather than just fatigued street operatives.

Aspirations of informants to improve the quality of their services.

1. Holistic Up-skilling. This theme highlights the pressing need for advanced investigative training, effective legal case-building skills, and comprehensive psychological and spiritual wellness programs. Operatives aim to reach both professional and tactical excellence by advocating for equitable, unit-wide access to specialized courses targeted narcotics seminars to address evolving syndicate methods, and institutionalized support systems that promote the psychological and spiritual well-being of the entire team.

Informants 1 aspire to step away from outdated, basic policing models by acquiring advanced, modern investigative techniques. They want their intellectual training to directly match the heavy, complex demands of high-stakes anti-narcotics fieldwork, bridging the gap between current street challenges and available investigative methods.

Informant 1 has this to say:

Ang naay mga advanced investigative approach nga motugbang sa mga panginahanglanon sa among fieldwork isip mga drug operative (IDI1:SS8). (Acquiring advanced investigative approaches that match our fieldwork demands as drug operatives).

The aspiration is structured as a demand for methodological evolution. Structurally, the informant recognizes that traditional techniques are no longer enough. They seek an updated intellectual framework that allows them to process intelligence more deeply, aligning their everyday investigative approaches with the fluid realities of modern operations (Martinez & Jenkins, 2023).

2. Technological Modernization. This theme emphasizes the urgent need for modern covert technology, specialized vehicles, reliable office infrastructure, and sustained funding. To ensure operational safety and effective case management, operatives require advanced surveillance tools (such as drones, spy optics, and body-worn trackers), robust workstations and tracking databases, compact vehicles for navigating high-risk urban areas, and a permanent, dedicated budget to eliminate the need for personal out-of-pocket spending.

They want to upgrade their investigative capabilities so they can capture clear, undeniable visual proof during drug stings. This digital documentation is essential to build ironclad case files that can easily survive tough defenses and legal technicalities in court.

Informant 5 has this to say:

Pag-provide og mga high-resolution nga hidden optics ug digital gear para makahimo og lig-on ug nga mga evidence folder (IDI5: SS30). (Providing high-resolution hidden optics and digital gear to build unassailable evidence folders).

The aspiration is structured as forensic modernization. Structurally, the informant seeks to replace weak, disputable verbal testimony with solid, high-definition digital proof. By integrating covert optics into their operations, they strengthen the chain of evidence right at the point of capture, protecting the entire investigation from early dismissal (Hayes & Sterling, 2025).

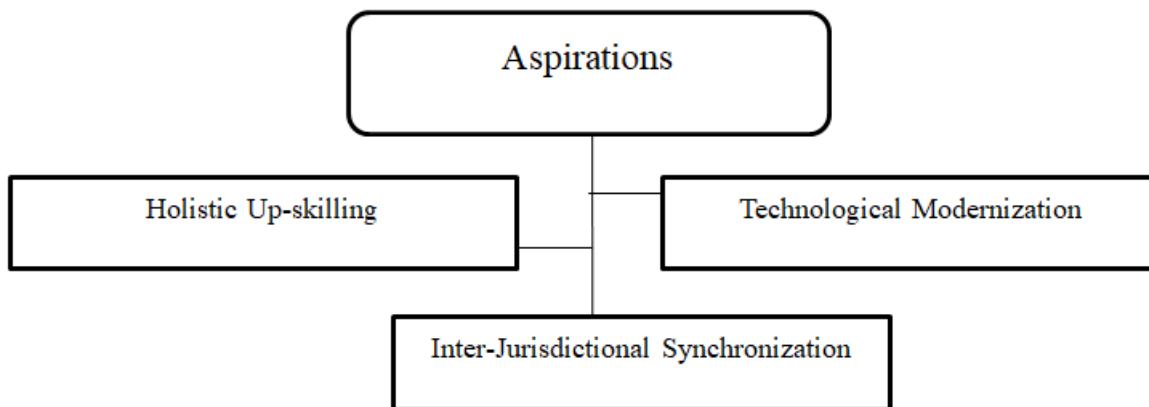


Figure 3. Emergent Themes under Aspirations of the Informants

3. Inter-Jurisdictional Synchronization. This theme focuses on strategies for seamless cross-border coordination and integrated intelligence sharing. To eliminate information gaps and reduce tactical risks, operatives call for a secure, unified digital data and radio network connecting all stations, clearly defined task boundaries, standardized cross-border hot pursuit protocols, and mandatory monthly alignment briefings across stations.

Informant 5 has described it this way:

Naa untay mag-buhat og usa ka unified communication platform tali sa mga lokal nga stasyon ug sa mga regional operational asset.(IDI5:SS28) (Formulating a unified communication platform between local stations and regional operational assets)

The aspiration is structured by a proactive feedback loop. Usually, drug networks operate across multiple areas, while police stations usually look only at their own local sectors. This structure fixes that imbalance by creating a regular schedule for stations to share data, turning isolated local notes into a shared, powerful regional map of intelligence (O'Connor & Novak, 2024).

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study offer important practical and scholarly contributions to drug enforcement and public safety in Cebu City and beyond. By synthesizing the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of Drug Enforcement Operatives (DEOs), this research delivers actionable insights for decision-makers, law enforcement leaders, and policymakers.

For DEOs, the study validates and recognizes their challenges, highlighting the urgent need for tailored mental health and wellness programs. For the Philippine National Police (PNP) and Cebu City Police Office (CCPO), the findings reinforce the importance of responsive policies, improved support systems, and evidence-based resource allocation. Leaders at all levels from station commanders to agency heads—can apply these findings to enhance training, oversight, and team management, strengthening both operational effectiveness and personnel welfare.

The research also equips prosecutors, courts, and the judiciary with a deeper understanding of the operational realities of anti-drug work, supporting fairer case assessments and stronger collaboration with law enforcement. Oversight bodies such as NAPOLCOM and local government units (LGUs) are provided with empirical evidence to refine training, review welfare policies, and allocate resources more strategically. Ultimately, these



insights serve as a foundation for fostering greater public trust, inter-agency cooperation, and community engagement.

These findings also highlight important directions for future research. Phenomenological studies on the experiences of operatives' families, the ethical dilemmas faced by officers, and community perceptions of drug enforcement could deepen understanding and guide more holistic policy development. Addressing these areas will further enhance our appreciation of the human dimension of drug enforcement and support ongoing improvements in institutional practices and support systems.

Thus, this study sheds light on the operational and psychological challenges faced by drug enforcement operatives in Cebu City and paves the way for more responsive, ethical, and evidence-based approaches in the ongoing fight against illegal drugs.

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