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CRISS (HOSTAGE) NEGOTIATION TRAINING

A Preliminary Evaluation of Program Efficacy

VINCENT B. VAN HASSELT
Nova Southeastern University

MONTY T. BAKER
MacDill Air Force Base

STEPHEN J. ROMANO
Federal Bureau of Investigation

KARI M. SCHLESSINGER

MARC ZUCKER

ROMINA DRAGONE

AIMEE L. PERERA
Nova Southeastern University

This study represents one of the first empirical investigations of the efficacy of crisis (hostage) negotiation training. Forty-five special agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) were assessed on a role-play test of crisis negotiation skill before and after completing the FBI’s 2-week National Crisis Negotiation Course at the FBI Academy. This multiple-component, behaviorally based program focuses on the training of active list skills (e.g., paraphrasing, emotional labeling) and a number of other vital competencies requisite to successful diffusion and resolution of crisis situations. Results showed significant pre-post differences on nearly all active listening skills for course participants. Further, attempts to problem solve, often detrimental in early phases of crisis negotiation, decreased as related to training.

Keywords: crisis negotiation; hostage negotiation; critical incidents; training; active listening skills

Applications of crisis intervention and management strategies to critical incidents in law enforcement have proliferated in recent
years (Hatcher, Mohandie, Turner, & Gelles, 1998; Romano & McCann, 1997). In the past decade, the acceleration of efforts in this area is related, in part, to the burgeoning number of crises and threats (e.g., natural disasters, domestic violence, terrorist acts, suicides, school and workplace violence) to which law enforcement professionals must respond, both nationally and internationally. These numerous and varied challenges have served as a major impetus for the implementation of innovative approaches to problem remediation and conflict resolution (e.g., Noesner & Webster, 1997; Vecchi, 2002). The heightened activities in this area are perhaps best illustrated by significant developments over the past two decades in the area of crisis and hostage negotiation (see Fuselier, 1981; Lanceley, 1999; Noesner & Dolan, 1992).

As Regini (2002) cogently points out, “Crisis negotiation is one of law enforcement’s most effective tools. The successful resolution of tens of thousands of hostage, barricade, attempted suicide, and kidnapping cases throughout the world repeatedly has demonstrated its value” (p. 1). This contention is supported by data from the Hostage Barricade Database System (HOBAS) established by the Crisis Negotiation Unit (CNU) of the FBI. HOBAS serves as a database on hostage/crisis incidents through the systematic collection of cases (post-incident) from law enforcement agencies across the country. In an analysis of HOBAS data from 2002-2003, results showed that approximately 82% of reported incidents were resolved without death or injury to the subject or the victim (Flood, 2003). A considerable number of case studies and anecdotal reports in law enforcement further attest to the efficacy of crisis negotiation (see McMains & Mullins, 2001; Rogan, Hammer, & Van Zandt, 1997).

Crisis negotiation traces its origins to the pioneering efforts of Bolz and Schlossberg (see Bolz & Hershey, 1979; Schlossberg, 1979) of
the New York City Police Department (NYPD). Their program offered the first “soft” negotiation approach, which incorporated principles of conflict and dispute resolution. This was a marked departure from the earlier traditional law enforcement approaches that emphasized use of “hard” tactical techniques. By contrast, Bolz and Schlossberg (and almost all crisis negotiators since) underscored the importance of (a) containing and negotiating with a hostage-taker or barricaded subject, (b) ascertaining motivation and personality factors underlying and driving the subject’s actions, and (c) “slowing down” an incident, thus expanding the time frame and allowing the subject the opportunity to vent his or her feelings (e.g., anger, frustration, anxiety), in turn defusing an acute emotional state.

More recently, and consistent with the work by the NYPD, Hatcher et al. (1998) stated, “The goal or mission of crisis/hostage negotiation is to utilize verbal strategies to buy time and intervene so that the emotions of perpetrator can decrease and rationality can increase” (p. 455). The specific verbal strategies employed to accomplish this goal fall under the rubric of “active listening skills” (e.g., emotion labeling, paraphrasing, mirroring, and open-ended questions), which have proven (a) critical for the establishment of social relationships and the interpersonal alliances in previous psychological research (Cairns, 1979) and (b) effective in peacefully resolving volatile confrontations (Dolan & Fuselier, 1989; Noesner & Webster, 1997; Webster, 2003). Further, the primary vehicle for evaluation and training of active listening skills in crisis negotiation has been the behavioral assessment strategy known as role-playing (Bellack & Hersen, 1998; Sharp, 2000; Van Hasselt et al., in press).

Another milestone in the area of crisis negotiations was the National Crisis Negotiation Course (NCNC) developed by the CNU. This course has provided training for FBI agents and other law enforcement professionals from around the world since 1979. A major emphasis of the NCNC has been the training of active listening skills through the combination of didactic instructions modeling, behavioral rehearsal, and the performance feedback in the context of role-play scenarios involving crisis situations. Nearly all extant crisis negotiation training programs have incorporated similar training methods in their effort to develop optimally effective negotiators and negotiation teams (see Botting, Lanceley, & Noesner, 1995; Greenstone, 1995; Regini, 2002).
Although crisis negotiation has become a major area of interest in law enforcement, and specialized training in negotiation skills is now widely available, empirical evaluations of these programs have yet to be carried out. This is a serious void given the potentially volatile nature of this work (for victims, perpetrators, and responding police officers alike) and the need for properly trained negotiators at this time in the field of law enforcement.

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to provide an overview of the curriculum and training components of the FBI’s NCNC, and (b) to conduct an empirical assessment of the effectiveness of the NCNC in training targeted negotiation skills. To the authors’ knowledge, this is one of the first attempts to formally evaluate the efficacy of training in crisis negotiations.

**METHOD**

**PARTICIPANTS**

Thirty-five male and 10 female special agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) participated in the study. All were participants in the FBI NCNC (described below) conducted by the CNU, which is part of the Critical Incident Response Group, at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. Participants were from FBI field offices around the country and were selected for the course on the basis of (a) interest in crisis negotiations as demonstrated to supervisors through a variety of means (e.g., voluntary participation as “auxiliary” negotiators, assisting field office negotiation coordinators in training exercises, prior law enforcement experience in the area of negotiation) and (b) identification by supervisors as possessing the interpersonal skills that would make them potentially effective negotiators. Involvement in the research was voluntary, and participants were notified that participation may be discontinued at any time without penalty. Of the 45 participants who initially participated, 1 was eliminated due to an audiotape recording error.

To obtain demographic information (age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, education level, and years in law enforcement), each participant was asked to complete a one-page questionnaire. The age of par...
Participants ranged from 28 to 48, with a mean of 37.91 years (SD = 5.71). Married participants (n = 33) accounted for 54.1% of participants; unmarried participants (n = 9) accounted for 14.8%; 3.3% of participants (n = 2) reported that they were divorced. Educational attainment varied from college to graduate degrees, with an average grade level of 16.88 (SD = 1.52). Every participant had law enforcement experience, with a mean of 10.86 years (SD = 6.11). Table 1 provides a summary of age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, and educational level, as well as years in law enforcement.

**TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>37.91</td>
<td>5.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (in years)</td>
<td>16.88</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in law enforcement</td>
<td>10.86</td>
<td>6.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: N = 45.
a. Participated in a 2-week Crisis Negotiation Training Course at the FBI Academy.

The procedure involved observation and recording of participants’ behavior in a role-play test of crisis negotiation skills both before and after their involvement in the FBI’s NCNC.

**National Crisis Negotiation Course (NCNC).** The hostage negotiation program of the FBI was first established in 1973 at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. The NCNC was originally instituted by the program to meet the needs of special agents who may be directly involved in hostage, barricade, kidnapping, and/or suicide situations.
The 2-week curriculum is comprehensive in scope and covers a wide range of topics in crisis negotiation. Some of these include basic principles of negotiation, crisis and suicide intervention, abnormal psychology, third-party intermediaries, and equipment and technical consideration (e.g., use of communication systems, command posts). A major emphasis of the NCNC is the training of active listening skills (see below), which serve as the basis for relationship/rapport building, negotiation, and ultimately, conflict resolution, when dealing with subjects in critical incidents and crisis situations. In addition, these skills are honed throughout the NCNC via a series of brief and extended role-play scenarios and enactments in high-risk situations requiring negotiation. In this behaviorally based, skill-oriented approach, instructors employ a combination of direct instructions, performance feedback, modeling, behavioral rehearsal, and positive reinforcement to shape newly trained negotiation skills. Students must demonstrate skill acquisition in a series of practical field exercises to successfully complete the NCNC.

MEASURES

Role-play test of crisis negotiation skill. This study employed the role-play test (RPT) procedure originally developed by supervisory special agents at the CNU (see Noesner & Romano, 2002) and recently validated by Van Hasselt et al. (2005). This RPT was specially designed for evaluation and training of negotiators in skills requisite to the successful resolution of critical incidents. Further, all of these role-play scenarios are narrative adaptations of actual hostage or barricaded subject incidents that have occurred over the past several years and have necessitated a law enforcement response. In their role as an international law enforcement resource for resolution of hostage and barricade incidents, CNU personnel are unique in having extensive expertise in crisis negotiation and management. The RPT items employed in this investigation are derived from their years of experience in this field and reflect their direct involvement in numerous critical incidents over the past 20 years.

The RPT developed by the CNU, and employed in this study, included 12 audiotaped narrated scenarios describing various crisis negotiation situations, with four scenarios in each of three categories:
(a) family-domestic, (b) workplace, and (c) suicide. Further, each role-play scenario included four prearranged prompts provided by a role-play partner (confederate) to facilitate an extended interaction and to make RPT items more similar to real-life encounters (see Bellack, 1983; Van Hasselt et al., 2005). Also, each prompt was sufficiently neutral in content so as to be appropriate and facilitative, irrespective of the participant’s responses. (Examples of RPT items from each of the three above-mentioned categories are provided in the Appendix.)

RPT scenarios were presented in a standardized fashion via audiotape; participants’ responses to scenarios were audiotaped and retrospectively rated on verbal categories considered requisite to effective crisis negotiations (see below). Each participant was seated in a comfortable chair at a 180-degree angle to the researcher who was, therefore, not in the direct view of the participant. The researcher first explained the procedure to the participant by stating the following:

The purpose of the study is to assess your responses to a series of role-play items involving crisis situations. You will be presented with 12 audiotaped scenarios. Each scenario will be repeated twice. After you hear the scenario the first time, I would like you to imagine that you are actually faced with that situation as a crisis negotiator, and think of what you would say to the subject if the scenario was actually taking place. You will then hear the scenario a second time. This will be followed by a brief statement by the subject in the scenario. Once you have heard his first statement, please respond to the way you would if you were actually dealing with this subject. Take as much time as you need. Your response can be as long or as short as you feel is necessary. There is no time limit. You will then hear four additional statements from the subject. As with the first statement, please respond to each of the next three as you would if the scenario were actually taking place. Do you have any questions?

**Scoring.** Audiotaped responses to the RPT were subsequently rated on behavioral components of crisis negotiation skill identified by Noesner and Webster (1997) and their colleagues at the CNU. These included the following: paraphrasing—repeating in one’s own words the meaning of the subjects’ messages back to them; emotion labeling—attachment of a tentative label to the feelings expressed or
implied by the subjects’ words or actions; reflecting/mirroring—use of statements indicating ability to take the perspective of the subject; open-ended questioning—questions that stimulate the subject to talk and do not elicit short or one-word answers. Further, overall active listening skill was also rated on the RPT and was calculated by adding the total number of active listening skills. Two additional response elements were also rated in this study: Response duration (participants’ total scenario response time measured in seconds) was scored in light of previous contentions that a “good crisis negotiator is a good listener” rather than an overly active speaker (Dolan & Fuselier, 1989); problem solving (statements directed toward determining a solution to the subject’s problem) was rated given the tendency for nonexpert negotiators to attempt, too quickly, to solve or “fix” the subject’s current difficulties before adequate rapport has been established. All ratings were made by trained research assistants (doctoral candidates in clinical psychology) who were blind as to which assessment point (pre- or post-training) they were evaluating. Raters were trained based on criterion definitions provided above. (For more detailed behavioral definitions, see Noesner & Webster, 1997.)

RESULTS

RELIABILITY OF RATINGS

As mentioned above, raters were trained based on criterion definitions of active listening skills provided by Noesner and Webster (1997) and using sample responses to role-play scenarios. Raters first learned to match criterion ratings and then practiced independently until each verbal category was rated with an interrater reliability coefficient of at least Kappa ($\kappa = .80$). Initial tapes from this protocol were rated independently by the primary raters and then jointly by the rater and one of the authors to further ensure accuracy and consistency of ratings. All ratings were scored based on the occurrence or nonoccurrence of the active listening skill. One third of the audiotapes (drawn proportionately and randomly from pre- and post-training participant groups) were scored by an independent rater to provide a reliability
check. Interrater reliability was high for all behavioral categories, ranging from \( \kappa = .81 \) to \( .92 (M = .89; SD = 4.47) \).

### EVALUATION OF TRAINING EFFECTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the efficacy of crisis negotiation training by assessing pre- to post-training changes on requisite behavioral skills. Means and standard deviations of pre- and post-training scores on negotiation skill components are presented in Table 2. Chi-square statistical procedures were conducted across behavioral categories to ascertain the relationship between negotiation level and participation in the program. As evident from Table 2, participants demonstrated significantly higher frequencies of paraphrasing, emotion labeling, and reflecting/mirroring after training. In addition, they had significantly higher scores on overall active listening skills conducted by an independent set of raters (see Table 2 for values and significance levels).

Further, problem solving was significantly lower at the post-assessment, which is consistent with training efforts to decrease use of such statements, particularly in early phases of negotiation. Finally, response duration and open-ended questioning, although not statistically significant, yielded means in the expected direction (i.e., participants’ responses were shorter after training) for the former category.

### TABLE 2: Comparison of Pre-Training and Post-Training Responses on Behavioral Components for Negotiation Skill

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Pre-Training</th>
<th>Post-Training</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrasing</td>
<td>8.04</td>
<td>10.32</td>
<td>19.13</td>
<td>11.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion labeling</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>11.40</td>
<td>6.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting/mirroring</td>
<td>12.16</td>
<td>9.66</td>
<td>16.91</td>
<td>12.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended questioning</td>
<td>9.13</td>
<td>10.88</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ALS</td>
<td>33.60</td>
<td>18.25</td>
<td>53.07</td>
<td>15.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>20.09</td>
<td>16.32</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>5.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response duration (in seconds)</td>
<td>9.92</td>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>6.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: ALS = active listening skills.
DISCUSSION

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the FBI’s NCNC in training skills requisite to successful negotiations in critical incidents and crisis situations. Level of negotiation skill in participating FBI special agents was assessed via measurement of active listening skills (paraphrasing, emotion labeling, mirroring/reflecting, open-ended questioning) and additional response categories (problem solving, response duration, overall active listening skill) previously identified as important in the crisis negotiation process (Lanceley, 1999; McMains & Mullins, 2001; Noesner & Webster, 1997). Further, skill acquisition was evaluated in the context of a role-play procedure specifically validated as a vehicle for crisis negotiation assessment (Van Hasselt et al., 2005).

Results indicated that participants displayed significantly higher levels of three out of the four targeted active listening skills (paraphrasing, emotion labeling, reflecting/mirroring) and overall active listening skills as they related to training. In addition, rates of problem solving significantly decreased at post-test. These findings are particularly encouraging in light of the current emphasis on empathic listening and effective communication, hallmarks of crisis intervention in general, and more recently, crisis negotiation, in particular (Hatcher et al., 1998). According to McMains and Mullins (2001), “Active listening skills are fundamental to negotiations. They open the door for developing a relationship with the subject, they give the negotiator a non-threatening way of responding to the subject that is disarming and invites cooperation” (p. 85).

Further, the challenge of training law enforcement professionals in crisis negotiation is well known to those who have been involved in such efforts (see Lanceley, 1999; Rogan et al., 1997). In particular, problem solving (“quick fix”) approaches are a historical trademark of police responding. Indeed, police officers are evaluated on their ability to “clear their call” in as short a period of time as possible in order to handle the next call for service. Sergeant James Fuda, of the King County (Seattle, Washington) Police Department (cited in McMains & Mullins, 1996), accurately points out,
Police officers are taught to take charge—to act quickly and with authority. The principles of hostage negotiation fly in the face of that training. A negotiator must fight the inner urge to “act.” Instead he or she must sit back and use words to diffuse critical, life-and-death situations. (p. 40)

It is interesting (and positive) that participants in our study displayed less of a problem-solving orientation following training.

Overall, these results provide preliminary support for the utility of the FBI NCNC and, by extension, other curricula that include behaviorally based training of negotiation skills. However, several limitations of this study deserve mention. First, training did not result in significant changes for all behavioral components (open-ended questions and response duration). It is possible that the relatively brief format of the role-play procedure did not permit an adequate opportunity for changes on these components to occur. For example, use of open-ended questions might be more likely with lengthier interactions than what was possible in this role-play format.

Second, this study only included FBI special agents. It is possible that a different pattern of results may have emerged with the use of other law enforcement groups. For example, federal-level law enforcement professionals tend to have more formal education than nonfederal counterparts (e.g., a bachelor’s degree is one of the requirements for applying to the FBI). Consequently, the generalization of these findings to other law enforcement personnel is unclear. However, based on the authors’ experience teaching federal, state, and local law enforcement officers, similar training issues appear to traverse all three. Specifically, a significant proportion of law enforcement professionals have difficulty shifting from an ingrained emphasis on problem solving (as mentioned above) to the more time-consuming, rapport-building strategy that is unique to crisis negotiation. Finally, but hardly least of all, the primary vehicle for assessment of skill acquisition in our investigation was a role-play procedure. Although the measure has validational support from previous research (Van Hasselt et al., 2005), the extent to which trained responses transfer from role-play scenarios to real-world critical incidents has yet to be ascertained. A related issue concerns the generalization over time (i.e., maintenance) of newly
acquired negotiation skills. That is, are improvements in behavioral competencies observed post-training still evident 6 months or 1 year (or more) later? As Van Hasselt et al. (2005) point out, "Conducting such research is admittedly difficult due to the ‘low-frequency, high-magnitude’ pattern of critical incidents, which limits opportunities for in vivo observation of negotiation skill in actual crisis situations" (p. 17). Nevertheless, investigations of such factors are warranted. Further work might, for example, evaluate the level of negotiation skill in actual critical incidents that have been audiotaped and can be retrospectively rated for use of active listening and other negotiation skills. Also, examination of “after-action” reports, although not allowing for the “fine-grained” analyses of performance possible with taped interactions, would provide at least a broad assessment of negotiator effectiveness.

Despite the voluminous writings and anecdotal reports, empirical research in crisis negotiation is at an early stage. Further development and assessment of heuristic strategies for negotiator training and outcome evaluation is imperative. Although these findings must be viewed as preliminary, they are, nevertheless, encouraging in showing that current training endeavors appear to have some utility in developing negotiation skills. However, additional empirical research in the crisis negotiation field, in general, is seriously needed.

APPENDIX
Examples of Role-Play Test Items

Family-Domestic

Narrator: Jim Smith has abducted his common law wife and their son from a distant state. She had obtained a court order preventing him from seeing her or their son. She has repeatedly rejected his efforts at reconciliation and he has stalked and harassed her in the past. He kidnapped her and the child in the middle of the night from her parents’ home and drove her to an unoccupied farmhouse nearby where he ran out of gas. Authorities located his vehicle and then discovered them held up in the farmhouse.

Prompt 1: “I’m not letting her take my son away from me.”
Prompt 2: “I’ve tried over and over to get her to come back to me.”
Prompt 3: “My son is what I live for.”
Prompt 4: “I don’t think I can take any more.”
Workplace

Narrator: John Henry is angry because the factory where he has worked for 10 years fired most of the senior workers to reduce payroll and increase profits. He blames the factory manager for the loss of his job. He brought a gun into his office and is threatening to kill him if he doesn’t get his job back. He feels he has been treated badly and has not been given the respect he has earned after 10 years of hard work.

Prompt 1: “I’ve given 10 years of my life to this place.”
Prompt 2: “It’s that damn manager’s fault.”
Prompt 3: “They had no right doing this to me.”
Prompt 4: “If I can’t work, I can’t support my family.”

Suicide

Narrator: Frank was a successful banker who has been living the good life. Unfortunately, several of his investments and financial decisions have failed and he is facing financial ruin. He feels he will bring shame to his family, his wife will leave him, and his possessions will be taken away. He feels hopeless and helpless. He believes that killing himself is the only way out. One of his bank employees observed him with a gun in his office and called the police to intervene.

Prompt 1: “I’m ruined; my life is over.”
Prompt 2: “My family will be so ashamed of me.”
Prompt 3: “This is hopeless; I can’t go on.”
Prompt 4: “Killing myself is the only answer.”

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Noesner, G. W., & Romano, S. J. (2002). A role play test of crisis (hostage) negotiation skill. Unpublished manuscript, Crisis Negotiation Unit, FBI Academy, Quantico, VA.


