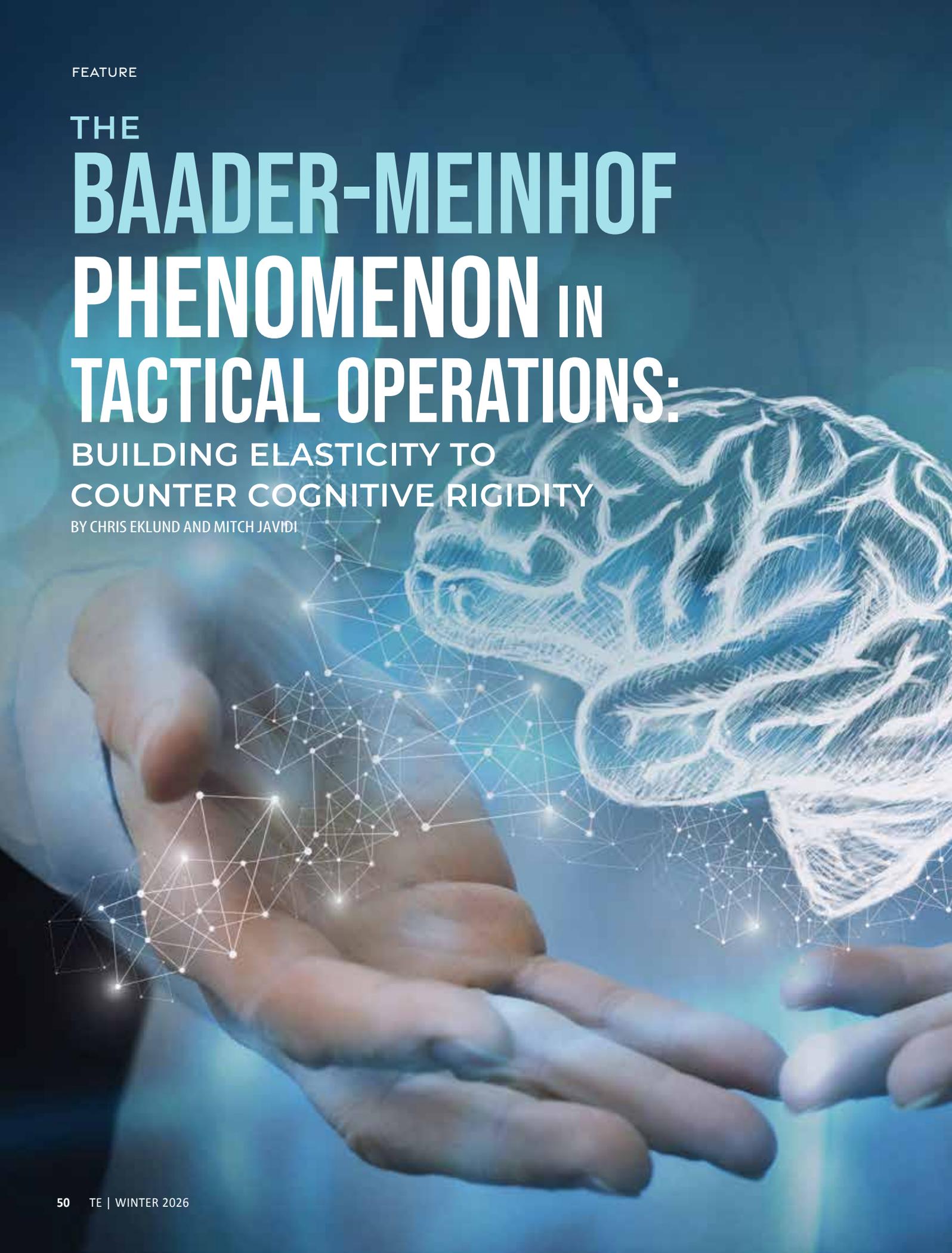


FEATURE

THE BAADER-MEINHOF PHENOMENON IN TACTICAL OPERATIONS:

BUILDING ELASTICITY TO COUNTER COGNITIVE RIGIDITY

BY CHRIS EKLUND AND MITCH JAVIDI





Through elasticity — the capacity to recover, adapt and flex under pressure — teams can mitigate the negative effects and improve decision-making.

Tactical teams operate in environments where split-second decisions carry life-and-death consequences. Cognitive biases, while natural, can impair judgment and increase risk during operations. One such bias, the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, also known as the “frequency illusion,” occurs when individuals, once exposed to a stimulus, begin perceiving it everywhere.

As an example, you purchase a new car of a particular color, and you suddenly start to see the same model and/or color car everywhere. Your new purchase has made that particular car more relevant in your mind, causing you to recognize it more often than before.

In tactical settings, this phenomenon can distort situational awareness, elevate stress and amplify risk. However, through elasticity — the capacity to recover, adapt and flex under pressure — teams can mitigate the negative effects and improve decision-making.

Understanding the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon

The Baader-Meinhof phenomenon arises from two cognitive processes:

1. **Selective attention** — Once an item is emphasized (e.g., fentanyl powder), the brain unconsciously filters for it.
2. **Confirmation bias** — Each new observation reinforces the perception that it is “everywhere,” creating an illusion of frequency.

In tactical operations, this can result in overreaction to benign cues, tunnel vision and compromised judgment.

Case Example: The Fentanyl Search Warrant

A tactical team is briefed before a high-risk warrant that fentanyl in powder form may be present. The team leader emphasizes its appearance and dangers, creating heightened awareness.

During the operation, team members begin perceiving any white powder — flour, drywall dust or even harmless residue — as fentanyl. This hypersensitivity, while rooted in caution, creates unnecessary stress and potential distraction.

There is certainly a positive relationship to this heightened awareness of the drug; however, it creates a negative impact on critical thinking when the awareness is focused on the fentanyl and draws away from the many other hazards related to search warrant service.

THE BAADER-MEINHOF PHENOMENON, ALSO KNOWN AS THE “FREQUENCY ILLUSION,” OCCURS WHEN INDIVIDUALS, ONCE EXPOSED TO A STIMULUS, BEGIN PERCEIVING IT EVERYWHERE.

Another related phenomenon: The doorway effect

The brain works in many ways, particularly as it relates to operators in the tactical environment. A memory phenomenon known as the “doorway effect” impacts operators in a number of ways. Passing through a threshold creates a memory boundary in our mind. Entering from one room to another creates a need for our brain to observe new information in the new room and disregard information we had from the last room. Related to the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, our brain is making the new room’s information more relevant now that we are there.

We have all experienced operators placing great importance on thresholds as they come into view. Oftentimes, the threshold itself draws the attention of operators even before we can see into the room on the other side. This is because the operator has found people inside a threshold before and has now made that relevant. Unfortunately, operators have also been observed looking at these thresholds, which provide no feedback, while dismissing other areas of exposure.

Again, there is certainly value in paying attention to relevant locations within a structure, such as thresholds, because we know people may come from there or be inside them. That relevance should not be overly prioritized when we have no real-time intelligence that someone is, in fact, there or worse, when we can see no one is there. The inanimate threshold itself becomes the relevant area.

The brain serves as the most important tool we bring with us on tactical operations. The best tactical gear, including weapon systems, cannot be properly utilized without messages relayed through cognitive processing capabilities. Recognizing the very real existence of subconscious biases, such as Baader-Meinhof, allows us to perform at a higher cognitive level during tactical operations.

Elasticity and antifragility: An operational model

Elasticity refers to the mental, emotional and team flexibility required to withstand stress, recover quickly and adapt effectively. Yet recovery alone is not enough in tactical environments. Operators and teams must also develop antifragility, the ability to grow stronger from stress so that bias triggers become training repetitions, not liabilities. This

is how we can find wins in events where we were otherwise not victorious, learning from mistakes.

In the context of the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon and the doorway effect, the combined model of elasticity and antifragility equips operators to:

1. **Balance vigilance and objectivity** — Stay alert without succumbing to perceptual distortion.
2. **Regulate stress responses** — Employ breathing and cadence control to prevent adrenaline-driven overreactions.
3. **Expand perceptual flexibility** — Recognize multiple environmental cues instead of over-fixating on a single perceived threat.
4. **Strengthen collective agency** — Use team-based cross-checks to challenge assumptions and validate reality.
5. **Transform bias into skill** — Capture bias spikes during training and operations, then use structured debriefs to convert them into new drills within 72 hours.

The RESET protocol

A rapid, field-ready process to counter bias in real time:

- **Recognize** — Name the bias when it emerges (possible frequency illusion)
- **Expand** — Widen scan 120 degrees; deliberately identify one non-matching cue
- **Slow** — Take a 4-count inhale/6-count exhale to stabilize physiology
- **Exchange** — Partner confirms or disconfirms the observation out loud
- **Track** — Log the bias during AAR for team-level learning

Drill example: Competing-cue threshold run

- **Setup:** Stage both decoy thresholds and low-salience peripheral hazards.
- **Execution:** Operators move through under mild stress load, required to call both threshold and peripheral cues.
- **Measure:** Score using the perceptual flexibility index (PFI) = correct peripheral IDs ÷ total cues.

By embedding both elasticity and antifragility into tactical culture, teams move beyond merely resisting bias; they systematically improve because of it, sustaining sharper

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judgment, reducing operational risk and elevating mission effectiveness. (See Figure 1)

Training for elastic awareness

To mitigate the Baader-Meinhof effect, tactical training should deliberately incorporate elasticity-building practices, such as:

- **Perceptual flexibility drills:** Introduce varied, competing stimuli during training to reduce tunnel vision.

- **Stress inoculation exercises:** Simulate high-pressure environments while teaching strategies for physiological regulation.

- **Debriefing for bias recognition:** After missions, openly discuss where bias or “false positives” may have shaped perception.

- **Cross-check protocols:** Establish team norms for verifying observations before escalating responses.

Operational implications

Left unchecked, the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon can:

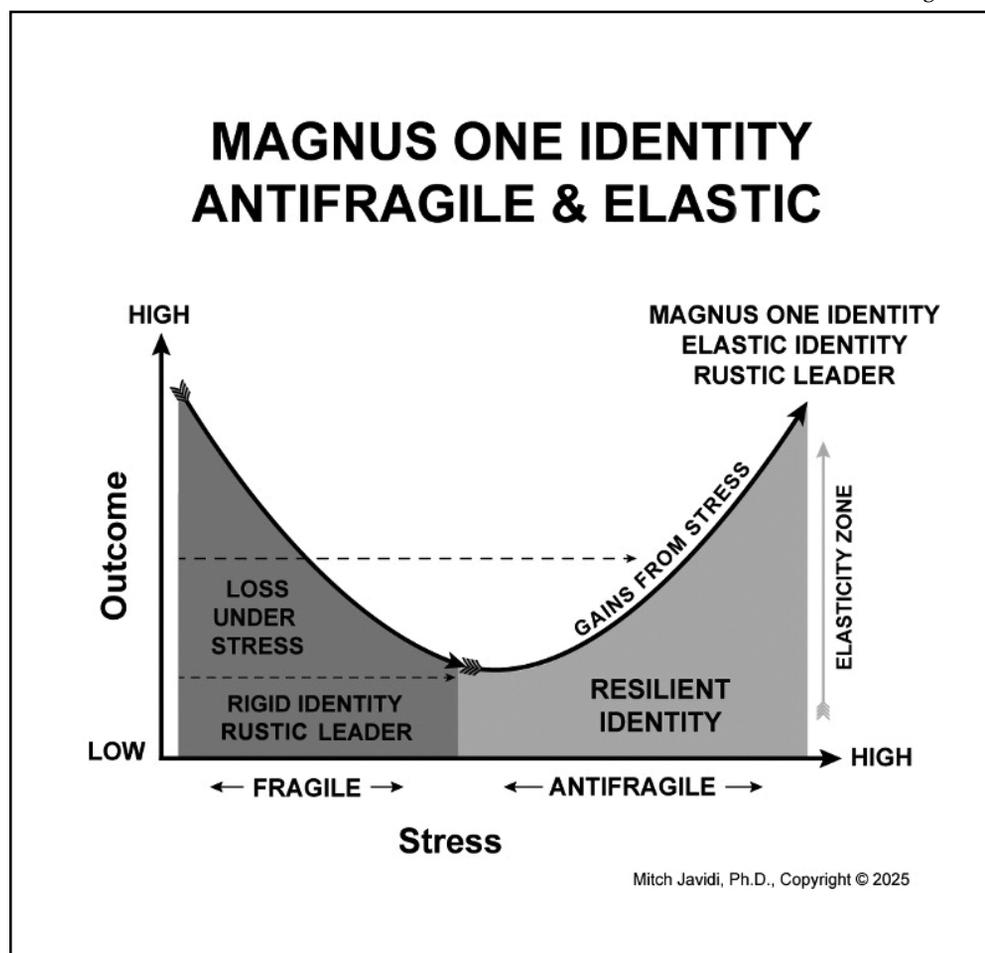
- Heighten stress levels unnecessarily
- Increase operational hesitation or false alarms
- Decrease trust in observations if repeated false identifications occur

By embedding elasticity into tactical culture, teams sharpen judgment, reduce risk and sustain operational effectiveness.

Conclusion

In tactical environments, perception is as critical as skill. The Baader-Meinhof phenomenon demonstrates how awareness can slip into bias, narrowing focus and heightening stress. Building elasticity, individually and collectively, provides a counterbalance, ensuring that tactical teams remain resilient, adaptable and mission-ready.

This integration of neuroscience, psychology and tactical training represents a critical frontier for the profession: equipping officers not only with tools but with the mental elasticity to use them wisely.



This framework illustrates how identity responds to stress. Fragile and rigid identities experience loss under pressure, while resilient identities adapt to challenges. At the highest level, the MAGNUS ONE Identity becomes both elastic and antifragile — gaining strength, growth and leadership capacity from stress within the Elasticity Zone.

About the authors

Chris Eklund is a senior instructor for the NTOA. A 25-year law enforcement veteran, he retired as a sergeant after serving in patrol and special operations. He has extensive experience as a SWAT team leader and instructor, specializing in tactical decision-making, crisis response and leadership under pressure. At NTOA, Eklund oversees national training programs, curriculum development and standards for tactical operators across the United States. He has authored numerous articles on tactical leadership and cognitive performance in high-stress environments and continues to teach and advise agencies nationwide.

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