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OFFICERS

The Use of Psychological Screening  
In the Selection of Recruit Police Officers

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### Abstract

Psychological screening has become a standard part of the selection process for law enforcement officers. The primary purpose of psychological screening is to identify those applicants who demonstrate a personality disorder and therefore would not be suitable law enforcement officers. Two psychological tests used frequently are the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and the California Personality Inventory. These tests are designed to provide recommendations based on data indicating the probabilities of success or failure of these officers. This paper presents a review of the literature on the use, validity, and job relatedness of psychological screening for recruit police officers and the predictive success of these officers based on the evaluations.

The police personnel selection process is performed for the specific purpose of providing the highest level of police service to the community by selecting the most qualified applicants. This selection process is designed to evaluate the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the applicants. The presumption is that the selection of quality personnel translates into effective job performance. The National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals (1973) recommended that every police agency use a formal process for selecting police recruits. The process should include an oral interview, a physical examination, and a background investigation. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (1967) recommended that the selection process include psychological tests that determine emotional stability and measure cognitive ability, aptitudes, and personality (Meier, Farmer, & Maxwell, 1987). Most law enforcement agencies have incorporated these recommendations and have added several screening instruments to the selection process. These instruments include the completion of a formal application, a written examination, a physical abilities evaluation, and a polygraph examination or voice stress analyzer. While the selection process may vary from one jurisdiction to another, the process generally includes several of these testing instruments.

A major concern in the selection process in using a screening instrument that screens-out a candidate is the identification of the minimum standard of performance that each screening device is measuring in the evaluation process (Bennett, 1990). This minimum standard is the lowest level of performance a candidate may demonstrate and still perform the job function satisfactorily. There must be a causal connection between low test scores that screen-out a candidate and poor job performance (Bridgeport, 1977). A candidate will be removed from consideration for failure to attain the minimum score required to 'pass' any of the screening instruments. The compensatory or non-compensatory nature of the test scores has been studied. Research indicates that each score must stand alone. Each screening instrument measures a specific ability, skill, or personal characteristic important to police officer job performance (Faust, Frost, McQuilkin, & Russell, 1990). The identification of these personal characteristics, the identification of the qualities of job performance, and the development of the job performance predictors, and anything used to make an educated guess concerning the officer's level of performance (Bernard, Dwyer, & Erich, 1990) are developed by using a job task analysis. A job task analysis identifies knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) required for successful job performance. The information gathered during the job task analysis is used to identify

criteria on which the standards of performance for each position within a job classification are based. The processes to identify candidates who meet these requirements are then developed (Roberg, Novak, & Cordner, 2009). Each criterion used in the evaluation process must be valid. Validity is defined as the probability that each criterion used in the evaluation process will accurately predict good job performance (Bernard, Prien, & Dwyer, 1990). The development of valid performance standards requires the identifying and the defining of each job requirement, the determination of what tests are to be used to measure the abilities needed to fulfill these job requirements, and the development of data to support the conclusions made that the test scores are indicative of good job performance (Bernard, Dwyer, & Erich, 1990).

Psychological screening is used to identify those candidates who have difficulty coping with physical and emotional pressures and whose behavior might escalate incidents into life threatening situations (Inwald, Knatz, & Shusman, 1987). An in-depth assessment of the gamut of psychological responses that police officers have to job related situations is needed to identify and establish screening norms. The results of these evaluations must validly predict poor law enforcement job performance. The predictive value of these norms cannot be merely an assumption of poor job performance based on a

clinical evaluation. There is a question whether the clinical judgment of psychologists is of any value when predicting the future performance of a police officer candidate (Bernard, Dwyer, & Erich, 1990). The decision to accept or reject an applicant is based on information that may be more appropriate in a clinical context than in an employment setting in which factors associated with job analysis are of prime importance (Hargrave, 1985). The clinical model is based on norms demonstrated by the general population. Police officers may possess certain emotional qualities and personality traits that differ from the general population to the point where characteristics considered atypical in the general population may have to be considered normal in the personality structure of the police officer (Aylard, 1985). These predictability norms must be developed based on a law enforcement model. This is particularly important in the development of a psychological screening instrument because of the interpretive nature of the evaluation process. The other steps in the screening process such as the written examination and the physical abilities evaluation are quantifiable in that there is a numerical value attached to each step in the process. The interpretive results of the psychological evaluation are the psychologist's best guess as to the level of success of the candidate's job performance. Psychologists can identify most candidates suffering from psychoses or other severe

character disorders that may affect functioning on the job but they cannot do much more than increase the odds of screening out poor performance (Inwald, 1985). Predicting the psychological stability of a recruit police officer, either for the short-term or over the length of a career, is a daunting function. The psychological characteristics of the ideal police officer have yet to be defined. The diversity in American policing and the complexity of the police role make identifying the characteristics of the ideal officer very unlikely (Scaramella, Cox, & McCamey, 2011). Bartol and Bartol (1989) believe attempts to identify a particular personality type best suited for policing will probably not be productive. Benner (1989) concluded:

It matters little that the field of psychology is only marginally capable of predicting 'bad' officer candidates. Psychologists and psychiatrists are expected, not only, to screen out the 'bad' but be able to screen in the 'good.' Unfortunately, consensus definitions of 'good' or 'suitable' have not been developed either among the professionals or member of the lay public. (p.33)

For these reasons psychologists offer a very broad interpretation of the results of the evaluation. A psychological report generally will not endorse a candidate when the candidate successfully completes the evaluation but the report will recommend against hiring a candidate whose results were less than satisfactory.

Job related criteria change over time and from department to department (Alyward, 1985). Psychologists must identify those individuals with the potential to take on the kind of specialized roles demanded by the complexity of the emerging police function in the future (Bennett, 1990). A police officer may change job function either through promotion or special assignment, during the course of a career. There may be specific personality characteristics that are essential for certain assignments within the police department that may be different than those characteristics identified as appropriate for a uniform police officer. For example, those officers that work vice or narcotics must have the ability to change from the police officer personality to the criminal personality and back to the police officer personality to effectively perform the job function required by the assignment. The danger with these types of assignments is that over time the officer may have trouble identifying the line between right and wrong and the criminal personality may become the dominant working personality.

The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-Revised (MMPI) is the most frequently used screening instrument in the evaluation of recruit police officers. There have been numerous studies that have focused on the MMPI and its use in law enforcement screening. The MMPI appears to readily identify those candidates that demonstrate



gross or abnormal psychopathy; it does not always identify those candidates that demonstrate patterns of behavior that are within a less pathological range (Inwald, Knatz, & Shusman, 1987). Hargrave (1985) studied clinician's decisions on the suitability of law enforcement officers based on the interpretive results of the MMPI. Two experienced psychologists sorted MMPI profiles in a simulated selection process using law enforcement officers that had been on the job for differing periods of time. The psychologists' decisions were analyzed for agreement and then compared to performance evaluations results provided by supervisors. The results indicated that the psychologists used very different selection strategies and disagreed on the proper classification of the candidates in about one-third of the cases. This study identified a critical flaw in the MMPI. The flaw appeared to be a lack of significant difference in the MMPI scores of those candidates hired and those candidates who were not hired (Alyward, 1985). While the MMPI is commonly used in the psychological screening of law enforcement officers, it may not provide an accurate profile on which clinicians base their decisions. The MMPI was originally developed, validated, and normalized as a diagnostic screening tool for hospital patients, students, and other populations different from law enforcement (Inwald, 1985). Hargrave and Hiatt (1988) conducted a study where they examined the job performance

of fifty-five recruit police officers hired by an urban law enforcement agency and evaluated them for a period of three years. Of the fifty-five candidates hired, forty candidates were classified as having performed satisfactorily on the psychological evaluation and fifteen candidates were classified as having performed unsatisfactorily on the psychological evaluation. The psychologist's evaluation of the individual officer candidates was based on the results of the MMPI, the California Personality Inventory (CPI) and the clinical judgment of the psychologist based on an interview. The results of the study indicated that psychological screening correctly identified the expected job performance of 69% of the recruits. This indicates that for a majority of the recruits tested, those that were expected to perform satisfactorily did so and those who were expected to perform unsatisfactorily also did so. Most of the misclassifications of the expected job performance occurred in the group of officers who were judged suitable but then had subsequent job problems. This misclassification occurred in 24% of the candidates evaluated.

When combining the MMPI with the CPI the agreement among psychologists as to a candidate's suitability significantly increased. These results add a measure of support for the use of the MMPI when used jointly with the CPI in the selection process (Hargrave, 1985). Study results indicated a significant improvement in the validity of the

psychologist's decisions using the MMPI and the CPI when used in conjunction with a personal interview (Hargrave, 1985).

The Inwald Personality Inventory (IPI) was developed specifically to measure personality attributes and behavior patterns of law enforcement officers (Inwald, Knatz, & Shusman, 1987). The IPI was compared with the MMPI for predictive validity of performance criteria. The study revealed the IPI classified officer correctly ore times than did the MMPI and that the combination of the MMPI and the IPI further increased the classification accuracy (Shusman, Inwald, & Landa, 1984). The indication is that the IPI is better able to predict satisfactory job performance than is the MMPI.

## Discussion

The focus of this paper is reviewing the literature assessing the use of psychological screening in the selection process of recruit police officers. While the use of psychological screening has become widely accepted as a criterion in the selection of recruit police officers, the overall validity has been subject to question. There appears to be no doubt that psychological screening can identify those individuals that demonstrate gross or abnormal psychopathy and that those individuals have no place in law enforcement. The issue is not as clear when attempting to identify those individuals that demonstrate less than

gross or abnormal psychopathy but do not perform to the minimum standard once employment with a police department has begun. What is clear is that misclassification occurs in a significant number of evaluations and these misclassifications occur in candidates that have performed satisfactorily during the evaluation process. The findings of Hargrave (1985) suggested that when different psychologists used the MMPI and a clinical interview to evaluate a control group of police officers, the findings were in disagreement on the officer classifications in 33% of the cases. When the MMPI was used in conjunction with the CPI and a clinical evaluation, the results showed a misclassification in 24% of the cases (Hargrave & Hiatt, 1988). When the MMPI and the IPI were used to predict job performance, the predictive value was marginally greater than what would be expected by chance alone (Inwald, Knatz, & Shusman, 1987). What these statistics indicate is that anywhere from 24% to 50% of the officer on a given department may be misclassified as to the predictability of satisfactory job performance.

The psychological evaluation instruments commonly used to screen-out unsatisfactory candidates do not appear to be reliable. Having between 24% and 50% of the police department not performing to a minimum acceptable level may not meet the

community standard. An alternative approach for identifying successful candidates needs to be developed.

One solution is a screen-in process that will identify applicants that demonstrate particular qualities desired by the police department. Sanders (2003) concluded that the psychological assessment tools generally used to screen-out candidates offer less reliability when used in an attempt to screen-in candidates. These findings may be a result of a failure to properly identify department specific qualities and developing a measuring device based on these identified qualities. The first step in identifying these qualities is to complete a comprehensive job task analysis of the police officer position that is specific to the department. The second step in identifying these qualities is to develop a detailed psychological profile of the desired candidate base on the needs of the department.

As a practical demonstration of the use of a screen-in instrument, the following example is offered. The recruiting police department has a thirty officer compliment. The majority of the patrol personnel have less than seven years on the job. The department has had a series of retirements from the command staff. The openings created by these retirements were filled through promotion. The officers promoted could realistically be expected to be with the department an additional fifteen to twenty-five years. The department

has several openings for recruit police officers to fill the patrol openings created when the promotions took effect. The department may consider recruiting candidates that would make good career patrol officers but not demonstrate the qualities needed for supervisory positions. The department may significantly reduce the organizational frustration that may occur by having a patrol force of young officers with promotional aspirations but no upward mobility due to the relative youth of the command staff. Psychologists would need to develop an instrument that would identify the characteristics the department would identify as essential for a career patrol officer. The psychologists would then develop a measuring instrument designed to identify or screen-in those candidates. The candidates that would demonstrate the essential characteristics of a career patrol officer would finish near the top of the recruit list. The department would have identified the ideal candidate as one who has no desire or ability to seek promotion.

A screen-in instrument would be an effective tool in the selection of officers for special assignment. Not all officers may perform effectively and efficiently in some specialized areas. For example, a sniper on a SWAT team has to be able to pull the trigger and neutralize a suspect at the direction of the commander. The sniper does not have the luxury to think about what he is doing or is about to

do but must react instantaneously. Not all officers are psychologically equipped to perform this task.

A screen-in instrument would also be an effective tool in the promotional process. A patrol sergeant, a vice sergeant, and a sergeant in charge of the community oriented policing program may need to possess different psychological profiles to function optimally in their assignments.

A department considering implementing a screen-in evaluation process should be aware that a significant investment of time is required. A job task analysis is an arduous and time consuming process. The process of developing a screen-in instrument would require the extensive use of psychologists to develop and validate the screening instrument and the extensive use of the department legal staff to ensure that the instrument does not violate mandated hiring practices and do not have a disparate impact on the evaluation and selection process. A department considering implementing a screen-in process must be aware that the evaluation instrument must change to meet the needs of the changing department and the changing society.

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