

Psychological Examination of Peace Officer Applicants: Theory and Practice

Gary L. Fischler, Ph.D.
Minneapolis, MN

For decades, law enforcement agencies have attempted to maximize the quality of their officers through psychological selection procedures. Since 1978, psychological examination of all new peace officer hires in the State of Minnesota has been required under the POST board rules. This mandate assures that prior to joining a department, new officers are screened for psychological conditions or characteristics which may compromise their ability to function effectively as peace officers. This article describes the psychological factors generally considered to be critical in determining the suitability of new personnel, the rationale for these factors, and how they can be appraised through the psychological evaluation process.

WHY IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SCREENING NECESSARY?

While the answer to this question may seem fairly obvious, it is interesting to note that not all states require psychological pre-employment screening. Historically, psychological screening has often been seen as a way to screen out the "crazies": individuals with obvious mental illnesses that would make them clear and immediate threats to public safety because of their access to firearms. Individuals with suicidal or homicidal tendencies, or those whose grasp of reality is tenuous and unpredictable, were obvious candidates to be screened out. However, with the ongoing professionalization of law enforcement, including increased educational requirements and more careful and comprehensive background investigation methods, such individuals are rarely given conditional job offers.

On the other hand, due to the ever-increasing litigiousness in our society, as well as increased public awareness of the abuses of a small number of problem officers in now-famous cases involving Rodney King and O.J. Simpson, for example, public safety administrators recognize a need for more comprehensive and rigorous psychological assessment. Such assessment not only screens out clearly inappropriate individuals, but attempts to identify and measure personal qualities which are associated with successful law enforcement careers in an era of increased focus on community and people orientation, and a deemphasis on aggressive enforcement strategies. The bottom line is that sophisticated psychological screening can help protect the public, while saving departments economic and public relations fiascoes caused by hiring errors.

WHAT PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ARE MOST IMPORTANT?

INTELLIGENCE: The complexity of police work and the need for good problem-solving skills indicates that at least average general intelligence is necessary. Higher than average intelligence can be an advantage, but not necessarily so. Below average general intelligence can be a reason why candidates are not recommended.

JUDGMENT: Peace officers need to act appropriately and decisively in stressful and nonstressful situations. The ability to exercise good judgment in a wide range of

interpersonal situations is critical to success in the job. Officers who show good judgment on tests and in their history are rated more positively by their superiors and have fewer disciplinary problems. Questionable judgment is a common reason for not recommending a candidate.

LACK OF IMPULSIVITY: Law enforcement requires rapid responses in critical situations. However, the tendency to act too quickly, without considering sufficient alternatives or consequences, can spell disaster. Candidates who show high impulsivity as a personality trait on testing or in their life history -- for example, those who gamble, drink heavily, or have problems managing their finances -- are poor risks for employment.

HONESTY AND INTEGRITY: These are important qualities in almost any line of work, but especially important in law enforcement work for many obvious reasons. Several psychological tests measure the candidate's honesty. The ability and willingness to give information that is consistent with the background investigation information is also a measure of honesty. Any indication of dishonesty, including important omissions, during the psychological evaluation process is generally seen as sufficient reason to not recommend the candidate.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS: Although a willingness to use physical force as a last resort is necessary for the job, candidates must show that they know how to deal with conflict and anger without undue hostility or aggression. Police need to be able to relate in a positive, compassionate way towards citizens in crisis situations. High aggressiveness, dominance, or "hard liner" attitudes are negative indicators for a successful career. These attitudes may be shown on testing or in a history of physical fighting or verbal abusiveness.

ABSENCE OF BIAS: Obviously, peace officers must be able to enforce the law fairly, regardless of ethnicity or gender of a victim, suspect, or other citizen. Although candidates will rarely disclose biased attitudes freely, they may be identified through the psychological testing process. Also, careful background information from friends, family, acquaintances, and employers may yield important information about prejudicial attitudes.

ATTITUDES TOWARD SUPERVISION: The ability to accept constructive criticism is important in any line of work. Because of the hierarchical, paramilitaristic nature of the organizational structure, the ability to accept criticism, supervision, and chain-of-command directives is particularly important in police work. Candidates may be rejected if they have demonstrated difficulty relating to supervisors without undue resentment or argumentativeness, or if test results suggest unacceptable levels of rebelliousness or difficulty deferring to authority.

TEAM ORIENTATION: Peace officers generally work in teams, and must be able to depend on each other for back-up in life-and-death situations. Candidates must demonstrate that they are at least somewhat outgoing and willing to develop positive relationships with colleagues. Candidates should generally show healthy relationships with friends and family. Individuals who are extremely aloof or have very poor social skills, or who have difficulty trusting others or engendering trust from others, may not be recommended for appointment.

APPROPRIATE MOTIVATIONS: Most people go into law enforcement for commendable reasons -- they want to help or serve their community. Many want a secure, interesting job

with good pay and benefits. A desire for "authority" or "power" may be a negative indicator.

ABILITY TO DEAL WITH TEDIOUS OR BORING TASKS: Many candidates seek out careers in law enforcement because they think it is exciting and rarely routine. However, many tasks in the daily life of an officer may be quite dull and tedious. Candidates who have shown that they deal ineffectively with routine details and are primarily motivated by excitement-seeking may not be appropriate choices for hire.

DEPENDABILITY: It is critical that officers demonstrate that they can be relied upon by their supervisors, coworkers, and the public. Officers typically score higher on tests of responsibility than the general population. Individuals who score poorly on these tests or who have demonstrated a history of irresponsible behavior in their driving record, arrest record, or school or work history, for example, are likely to have problems as police officers.

REASONABLE COURAGE: Some individuals are averse to risk-taking under almost any circumstances and may not be suitable for police work. Candidates who are particularly risk-averse or show significant passivity may have problems with command presence which will limit their effectiveness.

CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE USE: Police officers are theoretically on duty 24 hours a day, and must be available on short notice in case of an emergency. Being absent from work because of substance use or coming to work with hangovers are unacceptable behaviors. Officers must be able to think clearly and react quickly. Any candidate who does not demonstrate an ability to control his or her use of substances at all times cannot be recommended for appointment. Psychological test results will often help identify individuals who may have a problem in this area. In addition, current heavy drinking patterns, a history of using illegal drugs, or a history of driving while intoxicated, are all negative signs that may result in a decision not to recommend a candidate.

ABSENCE OF SERIOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS: Candidates are never rejected simply because they have had a mental health problem or have sought professional treatment for personal problems in the past. In fact, it is important that officers seek out appropriate help during difficult periods of their lives. However, certain psychological disturbances are not compatible with police work. Recurrent major depression with suicidal tendencies or any type of recurrent psychotic disorder are two obvious examples of such disturbances. Other problems such as panic attacks, certain phobias, and certain personality disorders may also render an individual unsuitable for police work.

STRESS TOLERANCE: Related to an absence of serious mental health problems is an individual's ability to tolerate chronically moderate to high levels of stress and pressure without undue personal costs. Individuals without such ability will eventually "burn out" of law enforcement work. In addition, candidates who react very negatively to stress may exercise poor judgment in critical situations. Stress tolerance may be inferred from history, test results, or observing the behavior of the candidate during the psychological examination, which in itself can be a moderately stressful experience.

ABSENCE OF SEXUAL DISTURBANCE: While an officer's sexual life should generally be considered a private matter, irrelevant to his or her ability to function on the job, certain sexual issues should be considered. Because officers deal with vulnerable others, have

significant power and authority over citizens, and should have the trust of citizens, they have an opportunity to be sexually manipulative, exploitive, or even predatory. Individuals with deviant sexual attitudes or behavioral histories which are considered to pose a possible threat to public safety will not be recommended. It should be noted that individuals are never rejected solely because they have a gay or lesbian sexual orientation.

WHAT ARE THE BEST METHODS TO USE?

The Police Psychological Services Section of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) has established guidelines for providers of pre-employment psychological evaluation services to law enforcement agencies. These guidelines require that only licensed psychologists who are familiar with the research literature available on psychological testing for law enforcement officers should conduct the examinations.

Testing should consist of objective, validated psychological instruments. Fixed cut-off scores should generally be avoided. It is strongly recommended that individual, face-to-face standardized interviews with candidates be conducted, and that the interviews are conducted after the psychologist has had an opportunity to review all test data and available background information. After a "hire/no hire" recommendation is made, the examining psychologist should be prepared to defend his or her procedures, conclusions, and recommendations if a hiring decision made even in part on psychological data is challenged. Finally, data regarding possible adverse impact related to gender and ethnicity should be maintained.

Given these guidelines, the vast majority of psychologists who do pre-employment screening use some combination of interview and test procedures. However, the exact type and number of tests used is a matter of preference of the psychologist. While some psychologists use only a single instrument, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), others find that a battery of several tests provides the best results.

The Institute for Forensic Psychology (IFP) has been evaluating public safety officers for over 20 years. IFP has offices in eight U.S. cities, Australia, and Trinidad and has examined over 14,000 public safety officers for over 300 departments. The IFP test battery is quite extensive, requiring approximately six hours for most candidates to complete. The battery is constructed to give the best available information to assess the essential psychological factors described earlier.

In addition to an in-depth personal interview of approximately one hour in length, the battery consists of ten psychological tests/procedures. Two are measures of intelligence, one measuring general and one measuring "social" intelligence. One samples a candidate's report writing skills. Three are well-standardized and validated tests of personality, including the MMPI and California Personality Inventory (CPI).

IFP also utilizes four proprietary instruments to measure attitudes towards forcefulness and bias, how much control candidates feel over their own lives, and how good their judgment is in hypothetical critical situations. IFP's most powerful predictor of a candidate's future success as a law enforcement officer, however, is a "bio-data" instrument called the Candidate and Officer Personnel Survey (the "COPS" test). This instrument, which has now been normed on over 4000 officers, is based on research which correlates life history events with departmental ratings of officer performance. For example, research indicates that there are significant relationships between various life history events -- such as

military involvement, alcohol and drug use, family problems, driving record, criminal record, number of jobs held in the past two years, number of times the candidate moved as a child, number of tattoos -- and probability of success as a public safety officer. While no single life event can predict job success, the statistical combination of many of these events often provides an accurate prediction of job performance as a law enforcement officer.

Finally, while no system of prediction can be 100% accurate, it is critical that the psychologist communicate a clear "hire/no hire" recommendation within a reasonable degree of psychological certainty to the referring agency, so that the agency can make the most appropriate hiring decision. In ambiguous cases, it is often helpful to discuss the evaluation results with the appropriate administrative officer prior to issuing a written report to help the psychologist determine which potential problems may be workable due to the training program and/or the specific job duties in a specific agency, and which problems would present too large an obstacle to be overcome. In any case, the information contained in the written report may be very useful to alert training officers to potential problems, and suggest solutions to be applied during training.

SUMMARY

From a public safety perspective, it is clear that law enforcement agencies must do their best to select job applicants who are emotionally and behaviorally stable, interact appropriately with colleagues and the public, can handle rapid and complex decision-making processes, are basically dependable and honest, can deal with high levels of stress, manage anger effectively, and are free of bias. While no method of prediction can be 100% accurate, a sophisticated pre-employment psychological evaluation which utilizes multi-faceted test batteries, in-depth interview information, and thorough background information can greatly assist agencies in selecting the best personnel and screening out inappropriate individuals.

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