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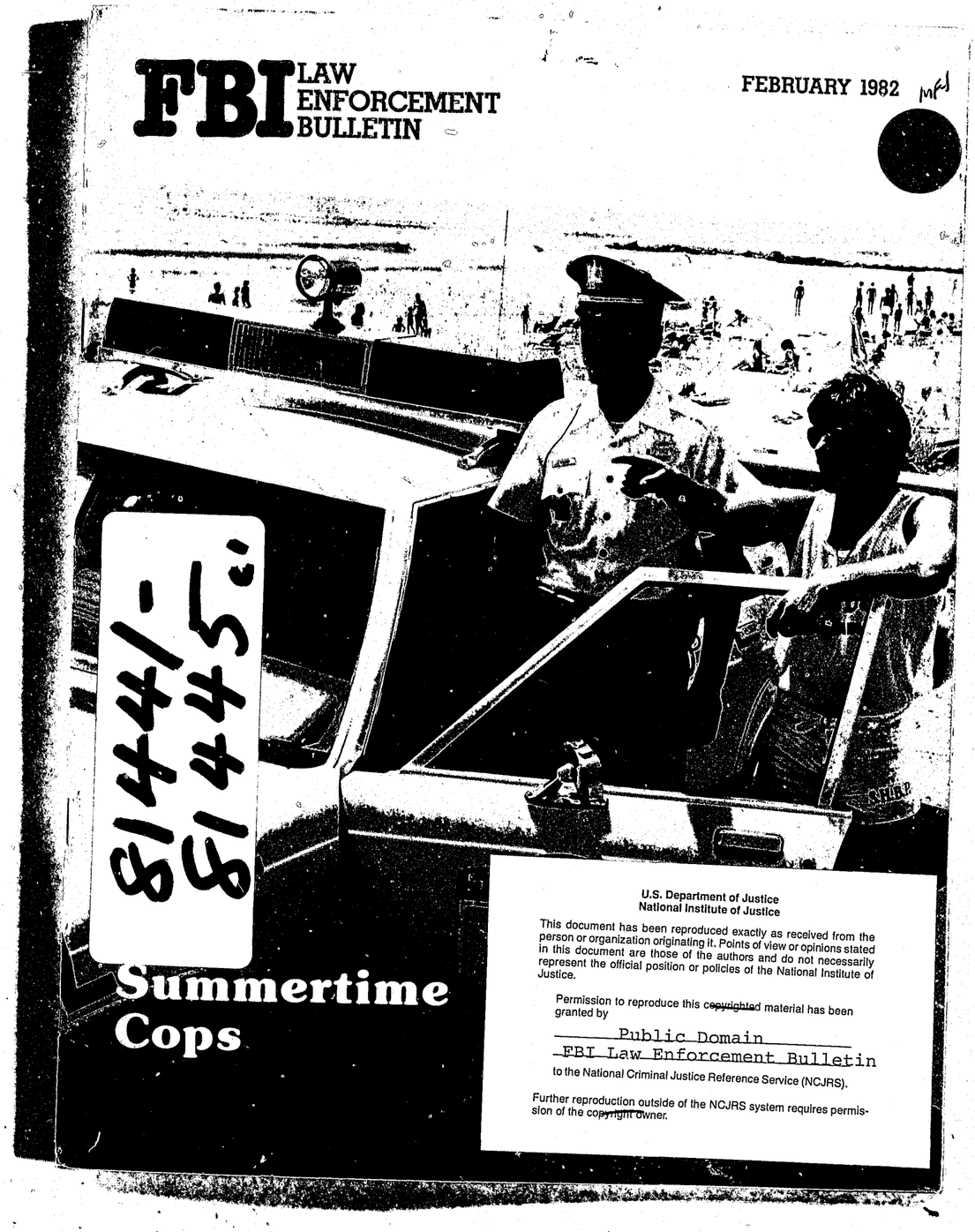

Summertime Cops

The MMPI and The Prediction of Police Job Performance

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The inappropriate use of authority by police and the bizarre behavior of people encountered by them, combined with the stresses, risks, and violence in the job, have led to an increase in the use of psychological tools to aid in police selection. Psychologists and psychiatrists have been employed to participate in this evaluation process with the intent of selecting emotionally suitable individuals capable of handling the various requirements of law enforcement. However, both psychologists and police administrators have a tendency to overlook the crucial issue of validity in their approach to psychological assessment. Much of the research conducted has failed to consider whether the procedures employed are predictive of successful police performance. A major obstacle lies in the unavailability of followup of individuals that are disqualified from entering the system.

The paradoxical nature and requirements of police work must be examined in order to establish the appropriateness of psychological assessment.[1] The demands of policing have multiplied in today's society. Officers often are expected to respond to many situations filled with contradiction and ambiguity. Issuing a traffic ticket, settling family disputes or barroom conflicts, apprehending a robbery or murder suspect, and assisting in riot control are only a few of the myriad of duties today's police officer may be called upon to perform.

The nature of academy training and type of services actually provided are often discrepant. Seventy to 90 percent of police training is devoted to crime control, laws, and police procedures, while frequently 70 to 90 percent of subsequent job duties are devoted to interpersonal communication and interaction.[2]

Procedures are often taught in either/or styles of presentation, with one appropriate legal response. The variety of interpersonal skills required in actual situations does not lend easily to this one-way approach. Situations and tasks an officer may be involved in, and hopefully prepared for over the length of his/her career, are almost too divergent to classify in any single or simplistic way.

While a police officer may be expected to perform many professional duties in the service of his community, the time he is currently given to master these skills range from a few short weeks to an upper limit of approximately 6 months. The high school graduate applicant is expected to learn all the laws relative to his enforcement duties, as well as service-oriented duties, in less that half a year. Doctors, lawyers, and other professionals are given as much as 8 years of specialized training. It is expected that police provide a diversity of professional services with little more training than semiskilled workers receive. Limited training time makes it necessary to concentrate on the laws, legal aspects, and procedures of the job, leaving minimal time for developing social and interpersonal skills.

In addition to a paucity of training in interpersonal communication, police officers are rarely rewarded by their employers, the citizen-clients, or the media for interpersonal skills.[3] Crime-related rather than service-related efforts are given greater publicity and recognition.

The quasi-military organization of law enforcement presents a second paradox. Agencies have established a hierarchical profile characterized by uniform and rank. The system is organized rigidly.[4] Yet, officers make decisions and perform with little direct supervisory contact, particularly at the lower ranks. Paradoxically, a consistent finding has been that police seem to prefer direction within structured situations.[5] Thus, one finds a personal conflict for officers who must behave

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along an assertiveness-dependency continuum.[6] The quasi-military component fosters dependency, while the policing aspect itself requires considerable independent assertiveness.

Opposing factions in the community add a third paradox to the climate in which officers perform law enforcement services. Police find themselves caught between forces pressing for sociological change and those forces bent on a rigid, punitive approach to enforcement. Liberal voices command a nonviolent approach to conflict; conservative forces dictate militant control. The physical power, delegated by the community, is met with emotions ranging from indifference to outright hostility. There is often resentment from the very community that depends on police services. Since policing demands individuals who are capable of coping with these paradoxes and other stresses, the use of appropriate and effective psychological assessments could prove valuable.

Social, legal, and economic issues lend an urgency to improved police selection strategies. Police perform important public services that openly and dramatically affect lives. In addition, law enforcement is considered one of the most stressful occupations in the country.[7] Thus, the authoritarian position and the potential for inappropriate use of power evoke a strong need for improved police screening and selection.

The presence of even a few undesirable officers has enormous consequences, making the identification of valid predictors important to American society. Excessive use of force by an emotionally unstable officer can have tragic results. Severe problems of low job satisfaction, overstress, disability benefits, and early retirement plague both police administrators and the community. In spite of massive expenditures allocated as a result of the Law Enforcement Assistance Act (LEAA), the crime rate remains on the increase and the number of community victims at the hands of the police is on the rise.

Personnel selection procedures have come under critical review for alleged discriminatory employment practices. Guidelines have been set down by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), calling for the validation of selection procedures.[8] Court decisions during the past decade have mandated equal opportunities for minorities and women, as well as job-related validation. Nevertheless, instruments and procedures are widely used in the psychological selection process without empirical validation.

An officer who terminates employment because of misconduct or stress disability becomes a monetary deficit. The cost of training an officer is approximately $10,000 to $20,000 and disability benefits cost between $250,000 and $500,000 over the officer's lifespan. The unresolved question lies in the procedures that will best eliminate this waste.

The primary criterion for assessing police applicants has deviated little from the process used 150 years ago by the Metropolitan Police of London, England. J. H. Chenoweth described this selection process as follows:

> "Of the first 2,800 men recruited into that organization at least 2,238 (or approximately 80 percent) had to be dismissed from the force. All 2,800 officers had been hand picked by a very careful system of selection. Each candidate had to submit three

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written testimonials of character, one of these being from his last employer; the writers of these testimonials were personally interviewed. If the candidate passed through this stage, he reported for a medical examination which in practice meant an inquiry into both his physical qualifications and his general intelligence. Less than one in three of the applicants were successful in passing through this stage. Those who did were then interviewed by an experienced personnel officer who eliminated the candidates obviously not suited for police work and passed the survivors on to the first two Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police, who again interviewed the remaining candidates. The disapproval of either Commissioner was sufficient to reject the candidate." [9]

Current police selection procedures consist of minimum and maximum qualification levels on criteria of age, general health, physical fitness, visual acuity, civil service "aptitude," character, and sometimes, residency.[10] For the most part, there have been attempts but little success in relating these factors to effective job performance.

The most widely used personality instrument in screening and selection has been the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI).[11] This research instrument is easily administered and objectively scored.[12] However, there are also objective, interpretive procedures available.

The MMPI consists of 566 statements covering a variety of self-report items. The examinee responds "true" or "false" or leaves the statement unanswered. The standard MMPI profile consists of 4 validity scales, 10 clinical scales, and 11 experimental scales.

any psychologists and departments continue to use this instrument even though there has not been any clear relationship established between the test and effective policing. They believe that an applicant's responses to over 500 statements can determine if the individual is psychologically suited to be a police officer.

The Study

This investigation was an effort to demonstrate the validity of the MMPI in predicting successful policing in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (the largest sheriff's department in the world and fifth largest law enforcement agency in the United States). All applicants had previously passed written civil service and oral examinations, background investigations, and physicals. The MMPI was group administered and was a requirement, but not a disqualifier, in the application process.

Two phases were used to demonstrate the validity of the MMPI in predicting police performance. The first phase attempted to identify MMPI scores predictive of success at three levels—academy acceptance, academy graduation, and field employment.

The second and more interesting phase was a longitudinal study to identify personality dimensions measured by the MMPI that might relate to effective police job performance. It studied an identified sample of police officers who had graduated from the academy 5 years prior and were currently working in custody, civil, patrol, and technical services divisions. In addition to

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MMPI scores, educational level, marital status at time of application, and academy grade point average were also examined as predictors. Supervisory ratings, absences, internal investigations, and injuries on duty were used as measures to determine successful performance.

To determine supervisory ratings, a questionnaire was developed by both police personnel and psychologists to provide for the multifaceted nature of police roles. It consisted of 11 bipolar performance items relating to concerns about health, energy level, altercations, self-confidence, attention to detail, organization under pressure, decisionmaking, view toward society, supervisor/rules, interpersonal relations, and communication skills with public (talking and listening). These dimensions were categorized into behaviors that were easily observable, required on the job, and not overlapping.

Direct line supervisors (sergeants) were interviewed individually by psychologists trained in administering the questionnaire, in order that the items were clearly understood. These supervisors were requested to respond to each item by selecting one of five behaviorally anchored statements (assigned a weighted value) that best described the subject. Trial evaluation sessions were conducted with supervisors who were not a part of the study to develop uniformity of the interviews.

The critical aspect of data collection constituted obtaining accurate ratings by the supervisory staff. In order to minimize common rating errors due to indifference, prejudice, the halo effect, leniency, and error of central tendency, the following steps were taken:

1) All evaluations remained confidential. The data were retained for statistical analyses and then destroyed.
2) No promotion or transfer decisions were based on the ratings.
3) Individual identity remained unimportant beyond relating test scores to group performance.

This study attempted to resolve systematically whether the MMPI had the capacity to "screen out" the few extreme clinically undesirable candidates and "select in" desirable individuals that were potentially well-suited to police work. The possibility was also explored that certain traits deemed "pathological" by the MMPI may, in fact, be essential for successful police performance.

Results

A comparison of successful and nonsuccessful groups at all three states (entry, academy, and field) showed no useful differences in MMPI scores. The data from phase 1 reflected that although some comparative groups differed significantly on certain scales, the strength of the relationships was very weak and discounted the validity of the MMPI to differentiate even the highest 10 percent from the lowest 10 percent of scores. The results from phase 2 were even clearer in producing slight significances accompanied by extremely weak associations between the variables. Thus, the use of the MMPI as a prime predictor in either police screening or selection was not upheld by this research.

The results suggest that the agency's prescreening strategies (oral and civil service written tests, background investigations, and two-phase medical examinations), as well as the self-selection process of applicants, have done an exceptionally fine job and produced a generally able and emotionally suitable applicant group. There is little variation between the profiles of the different groups.

The conclusion that the MMPI is not a useful predictor of success in law enforcement cannot be generalized without replication. Law enforcement organizations differ considerably in size, philosophy, and community services, requiring that assessment be specific to the organization.

There were a few significant but weak relationships between MMPI measures and successful policing defined by entrance into academy, graduation from academy, retention in field, and behaviorally anchored supervisory ratings. Applicants produced profiles within the Minnesota norms and presented an emotionally healthy image. As several researchers have already observed,[13] as a group they tend to have slightly higher scores on particular measures. However, there was no evidence to support the MMPI as a predictor of police performance.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to assess the validity of the MMPI for determining an applicant's success in police work. Scores on the MMPI bore no relationship as to how officers actually performed on the job, and to date, there has been no systematic correlation of tests or interviews with an individual's subsequent behavior and success or nonsuccess in law enforcement. However, psychologists and

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agencies continue to reject candidates on the basis of unvalidated strategies whether they be tests, clinical interviews, or both.

Although psychological testing may be important, it is the job of the evaluator to prove that he/she has the knowledge and tools to assess those emotionally suited for police work. Presently, it is doubtful that the psychological profession has the ability to screen or select law enforcement applicants in a valid and reliable manner. Thus, it is the task of psychologists to stay within EEOC guidelines, validate their procedures, and prove that what they purport to do, they actually can accomplish.

The results of this study call for an increased emphasis on the correlation of tests, interview questions, and psychological examinations with an officer's subsequent performance. The evaluator and the tests must be carefully examined to determine whether their use is ultimately detrimental to the individual, society, and law enforcement. The abandonment of psychological testing for law enforcement applicants is not being advocated. Rather, a more scientific approach, greater understanding of the issues involved, and caution by all involved are proposed.

Screening and selection are the two general approaches used to solve the hiring dilemma. Screening is the process of evaluating an applicant's fitness within acceptable psychological limits. If this can be accomplished, screening appears to be the more appropriate procedure, professionally and legally. R. J. Levy has summarized the following drawbacks to a screening approach:

1) The mere absence of unwanted qualities prior to employment does not indicate a continued absence after employment;
2) Psychological tests have not been demonstrated to have predictive value;
3) The definition of emotional suitability for law enforcement remains undetermined; and
4) Some traits which are often deemed pathological may be essential for the stress tolerance needed in effective policing.[14]

In selection, applicants are chosen for their optimal potential on the job. Some psychologists claim to have developed methods to determine specific traits seen as important in police work, such as logical reasoning, decisiveness, organizational compatibility, self-confidence, sensitivity, stress tolerance, nonverbal impact, positive motivation, behavioral flexibility, and/or others.[15] However, with documented inability of psychologists to predict even extreme behavior such as violence, the chances of more refined predictions of behavior seem remote.[16] Psychological instruments as tools to assess nonpathological traits are extremely limited, with clinical interviews faring no better.[17] Unless scientifically validated, the selection approach does not meet acceptable EEOC guidelines and is questioned as an appropriate role for psychologists.

Given the "state of the art" in psychological evaluation of police applicants, psychologists should be limited to screening out the pathological and leaving the determination of selection to other aspects of the application process. The subsequent months of intensive training and observation by the training academy and the continual evaluation during the officers' probationary year provide a more logical opportunity by police personnel to make final judgments about an individual's capacity to handle the job on certain identified dimensions. The screening approach is also seen as advantageous to the successful operation of law enforcement organizations. Progress and more optimal services occur within agencies that are open to new ideas, innovative approaches, and change stimulated by the employment of a diversity of people.

In the current process of screening or selection, psychologists in the same geographic area, using the same test data in conjunction with interviews, reach different decisions on the same applicant. This also happens in other areas of the criminal justice system wherein psychologists, called as expert witnesses in competency and sanity hearings, emerge with conflicting assessments.

Psychology is an inexact science which needs refinement before making decisions about people's futures. With many departments seeking psychological evaluations of applicants, psychologists must develop approaches and methods that are validated, reliable, and legal. Human behavior is complex, and as yet, impossible to predict. In the area of selection, practitioners of psychology must aim to make it more of an exact science by discarding arbitrary tests and subjective interviews that make arbitrary and subjective predictions and decisions about people and human behavior.

Some psychologists appear quick to claim an ability to evaluate police officers, but are hesitant when it comes to assessing themselves or other professionals in critical occupations, whether they be psychiatrists, surgeons, airplane pilots, or in other careers which dramatically affect people's lives. One can only imagine the reaction of psychologists if they had to be psychologically tested and interviewed before graduation or licensure. Many would consider this approach ridiculous. The fact that none of the previously mentioned careers have this type of screening speaks for itself.

A final implication of this study is the overreliance in selection on a personality explanation of behavior. Perhaps this approach is not as important as an exploration of the job environment (societal and organizational) and the effects it has on normal individuals.

Milgram demonstrated that extremely stressful situations can produce inhumane behavior in otherwise normal people.[18] Likewise, R. Zimbardo and his associates found adverse effects on a "normal" sample of college students in a role-play prison study.[19] They reported that one-third of the "guards" became more aggressive and dehumanizing toward "prisoners" than would be expected in a simulated study. Kirkham joined a police force and experienced a radical shift in both his attitudes and behaviors.[20] He observed that becoming part of the system resulted in an increased politically conservative attitude, greater irritability, and a suspicious nature.

M. E. Wolfgang viewed officers as individuals who become socially isolated, alienated, and forced to retreat within themselves, thereby losing identity with a community that seems to resent them.[21] H. Hahn discussed the same isolation, suspicion, and public animosity that appear to result from the police experience.[22] J. G. Stratton examined the changes that can occur in the officers' social and family relationships, and A. Niederhoffer found that the increased cynicism in police directly relates to time on the force.[23]

Supporters of a situational explanation of behavior propose that selection is not the vehicle by which quality policing will be attained. They propose change in society and the law enforcement system itself, as well as continual training and evaluations by police supervisors.

Greater gains might be made by examining situational factors and their interaction with personality traits. Since the organizational structure of an occupation appears to influence behavior, an important direction for further research would be an examination of the existing law enforcement system and the society in which it functions. A study of the structure, attitudes, values, training, and reinforcement patterns in law enforcement could, perhaps, provide for better policing methods and healthier officers. **FBI**

Footnotes

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