



Talent Selection that Transcends Culture and Time

Leverage Assessments, Inc. | Info@leverageassessments.com | CUNY on the Concourse - 2501 Grand Concourse, 3rd floor, Bronx, NY, 10468

Psychological Assessments for Public Safety Candidates in Response to the Death of George Floyd

3rd June, 2020

Psychological Assessments for Public Safety Candidates in Response to the Death of George Floyd.

Police incidents which incite outrage seem to be unending. The untimely death of George Floyd is the latest. A bystander's video captured disturbing footage of the handcuffed, unarmed Minneapolis resident under the knee of former officer Chauvin, as Mr. Floyd repeated a familiar phrase; "I can't breathe." As the world grapples with the graphic footage, questions surface about how these incidents can be prevented in the future. "Maybe we need to focus on vetting these officers before they begin", stated MSNBC Legal Analyst, Greg Kirshner during a nightly news broadcast.

It is estimated that more than 90% of police departments require a psychological evaluation as part of their selection and hiring process (Cochrane, R. E., Tett, R. P., & Vandecreek, L. 2003). According to 2011-2014 data provided by the Philadelphia Police Department, 72.5 percent of the 262 black applicants passed the psychological evaluation, compared with 81.2 percent of the 823 white candidates (Avril, 2015). Let's look at the data and explore the role of psychological evaluations in the vetting process.

Psychological Evaluation as Part of the Vetting Process

Studies of large departments show a considerable disparity between the candidates who pass the psychological evaluation and the populations of the municipalities that they represent. *Governing* conducted a national study of 269 departments serving as primary law enforcement agencies in areas with populations exceeding 100,000. The study found that minority groups remain underrepresented to varying degrees in the vast majority of larger police departments, particularly in jurisdictions experiencing rapid demographic shifts (Maciag, 2015). According to the *Chicago Reporter*, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) has also experienced a long history of difficulty recruiting black officers. African Americans represent 23 percent of the CPD, although they are one third of the population of Chicago as a whole (Stark and Little, 2018). Similarly, in Irving, Texas, 70 percent of city residents are minorities, while minorities account for only 17 percent of Irving Police Department (Maciag, 2015).

Is the psychological assessment process a barrier for minority police applicants?

While many of the larger police departments have implemented psychological assessments, the screening process has functioned to decrease diversity in departments, in some cases. Using assessments are important, but ensuring their effectiveness is a critical goal of its own.

For psychological evaluations to be effective in the reduction of incidents of lethal use of force, two considerations will be explored: 1) the cultural competence of clinical psychologists conducting the evaluation, and 2) the selection of appropriate valid tests.

Cultural Competence of Psychologists

A defining characteristic of diverse metropolitan communities, is the multiplicity of cultural backgrounds. In the pre-employment selection process, assessing applicants who belong to a wide-range of cultures may result in inaccurate evaluations due to a rigid process that overlooks individual differences.

Ridley et al. (2008) assert that culture must be accounted for in all aspects of the psychological assessment process. The authors introduce the concept of Multicultural Assessment Validity (MAV), which involves a process of progressive decision-making. The process follows gradual changes in a clinical psychologist's (clinician's) understanding of applicants, whereby the clinician recognizes the influence of culture in assessment and incorporates these influences in his/her ability to gather and interpret applicant problem presentations - shaping the clinician's conceptualization of the applicant.

Clinicians are highly trained to identify or rule out red-flags, which may include excessively high levels of distress, major personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, drug and alcohol abuse/addictions or clinical depression (Main, C.J., Philips, C.J., & Watson, P.J. 2005). Equivalently, clinicians should be trained to identify red-flags associated with a language barrier, socioeconomic status or racial and ethnic norms, and incorporate these understandings into the decision-making process. To avoid discriminatory selection and hiring practices that screen-out minority applicants, clinicians need to be recruited, employed and trained to serve populations representative of diverse communities. Law enforcement agencies may consider sourcing culturally competent clinicians with diversity and inclusivity training and experience to serve their diverse communities, in an effort to reduce biased decisions during psychological evaluation interviews. Ridley et al. (2008) explain that the progressive decision-making of the psychological evaluation process is inevitably invalid without accounting for culture.

Clinicians who associate with the applicant population i.e. share socioeconomic, demographic linguistic or cultural characteristics may better interpret an applicant's red-flagged responses. Red-flagged responses serve as signs that inform and alert a clinician to a candidate's history, personality and social behaviors, that may indicate a potential for future problems and threaten a candidate's favorable performance in an assessment (Greenhalgh, S & Selfe, J. 2006). Thus, it is critical to select the appropriate test.

Selection of Tests

Though the psychological evaluation process for law enforcement applicants is not standardized across the United States (Dantzker 2011), empirical research findings, recommendations for best practices, and guidelines outlined by professional associations provide a framework for structuring the process. The lack of standardization provides agencies with the opportunity to adapt elements of the process to the unique needs of their communities - particularly police departments serving diverse metropolitan communities.

Cochrane et al. (2003) found that the typical department uses approximately three or four different psychological tests, with the MMPI-2, IPI, and CPI demonstrating the greatest predictive validity. Similarly, Mufson and Mufson (1998) also suggested at the time that the two most widely-used pre-screening psychological tests for police hiring and selection in urban areas were the MMPI and the IPI.

In the past, the Minneapolis Police Department faced numerous accusations of discriminatory hiring practices. Previous psychologists (identified as all-white males) contracted by the department were challenged on the basis that their pre-screening processes were biased against minority applicants (Gilbert, 2008).

In January 2018, the Minneapolis Police Department awarded a contract to Aspen Psychological Consulting for psychological evaluation services. Aspen Psychological Consulting, owned by Dr. Jan Tyson Roberts, an African-American female licensed psychologist - previously administered psychological tests, but never for police officer fitness for duty evaluations. In its request to approve the contract with Aspen Psychological Consulting LLC, the police department noted that, in addition to her strong clinical record, Tyson Roberts has a "demonstrated record of experience working with and understanding diverse populations." Dr. Tyson Roberts plans to administer two psychological tests and an additional test designed to identify positive traits such as integrity and sociability (Gilbert, 2008).

Dr. Tyson Roberts' approach appears to follow a hybrid strategy that uses psychopathological tests to 'screen-out' or eliminate candidates who are unsuitable for employment and personality tests to 'screen-in' or identify positive attributes of a candidate. Although the screen-out approach is more widely used in law enforcement hiring and selection, due to advancements in personality testing and pre-employment assessment development, psychologists are better able to assess or screen-in candidates subsequent to screening-out (Lough, Jonathan & Von Treuer, Kathryn 2013). This combination approach allows psychologists to first eliminate unsuitable candidates, then identify candidates who exhibit the KSAOs and competencies required for successful job performance as a police officer (Diecidue, D.D. 2002).

The prevalence of 'screen-out' approaches can be attributed to the widespread acceptance across law enforcement professionals of unsuitable attributes and the lack of consensus concerning suitable attributes that predict successful job performance. One way law enforcement agencies can identify the suitable attributes associated with successful job performance as an officer is to conduct a job analysis. An Industrial/Organizational Psychologist is typically tasked with the collection and analysis of job data that provide the necessary insight to 'screen-in' attributes - the KSAOs and competencies required for successful job performance as a police officer (Aamodt, 2000).

The Minneapolis Police Department currently faces further hiring and selection scrutiny, this time due to the excessive use of force by Derek Chauvin. Officer Chauvin, who joined the Minneapolis Police Academy in October 2001 has reportedly exhibited, what can be considered red-flags during his tenure - which include at least 10 conduct complaints, use-of-force incidents and at least one lawsuit related to an allegation of violations of a prisoner's federal constitutional rights (Erik O., Donna M., & Jon S., 2020)

It is hoped that the recent change to the Minneapolis Police Department's psychological evaluation process and the expertise of Dr. Tyson Roberts can set an example to other agencies and impact the department's overall selection and hiring decisions. Not only can psychological evaluations assist to foster diversity in hiring, but they can also screen-out the unsuitable and screen-in the suitable based on requirements of the job that predict successful performance in the officer role.

Based on our exploration of the role of psychological evaluations in the law enforcement vetting process, multiple areas of psychological research and hiring best practices can assist in answering the question, 'how will these incidents be prevented in the future?' Although each vetting process will be different to meet the unique needs of each community, for psychological evaluations to prove effective, see the recommendations below:

Recommendations

- Require clinical psychologists to undergo specialized in-depth diversity training.
- Recruit clinical psychologists (locally) from the served community, if possible.
- Administer more than one psychological test.
- Employ a combination of pathological tests and personality tests to 'screen-out' and 'screen-in' candidates, if possible.
- Routinely update job analyses to reflect changes in job tasks, required KSAOs and competencies to inform aspects of psychological fitness.
- Align the psychological interview decision-making process and interview/probing questions with the job competencies required.
- Re-review the psychological evaluations and examine any red-flags for already hired officers with multiple complaints of misconduct.
- Select additional tests that align with the needs of the organization (e.g. diversity, transformational leadership, community-oriented policing) following guidelines, best practices and empirical research.

Citations

- Avril, T. (2015) Blacks Fail Philly Police Psych Screening More than Whites. The Philadelphia Inquirer. Retrieved from:
https://www.inquirer.com/philly/health/20151216_Blacks_fail_Philly_police_psych_screening_more_than_whites.html
- Aamodt, Michael. (2000). The role of the I/O psychologist in police psychology. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*. 15. 8-10. 10.1007/BF02802660.
- Ben-Porath, Y. S., Fico, J., Hibler, N. S., Inwald, R., Kruml, J., & Roberts, M. R. (2011) "Assessing the Psychological Suitability of Candidates for Law Enforcement Positions," *The Police Chief* 78, p. 64–70.
- Cochrane, R. E., Tett, R. P., & Vandecreek, L. (2003). Psychological Testing and the Selection of Police Officers: A National Survey. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 30(5), 511–537. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854803257241>
- Dantzker, M. L. (2011). Psychological preemployment screening for police candidates: Seeking consistency if not standardization. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 42(3), 276–283. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023736>
- Diecidue, D.D. (2002). Development of Pre-Employment Psychological "Screening-In" Testing for Police Dispatchers.
- Erik O., Donna M., & Jon S. (2020) Officer at Center of George Floyd's Death had History of Prior Complaints. NBC News. Retrieved from: <https://news.yahoo.com/officer-center-george-floyds-death-005400813.html>
- Gilbert, Curtis. (2018). Minneapolis increases psychological testing for police officers. *APM Reports*. Retrieved from: <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2018/01/31/minneapolis-psychological-testing-police>
- Greenhalgh, S & Selfe, J. (2006) *Red Flags: a guide to identifying serious pathology of the spine*. Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh.
- Lough, Jonathan & Von Treuer, Kathryn. (2013). A critical review of psychological instruments used in police officer selection. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management*. 36. 10.1108/PIJPSM-11-2012-0104.
- Main, C.J., Philips, C.J., & Watson, P.J. (2005) Secondary prevention in healthcare and occupational settings in musculoskeletal conditions (focusing on low back pain) in *Handbook of complex occupational disability claims: Early risk identification, intervention and prevention*. Z Schultz & R J Gatchel, (eds) Springer Science & Business Media, New York.
- Maciag, M. (2015). Diversity on the Force: Where Police Don't Mirror Communities. *A Governing: Special Report*. Retrieved from:
<http://images.centerdigitaled.com/documents/policediversityreport.pdf>
- Maciag, M. (2015). Where Police Don't Mirror Communities and Why It Matters. *Governing*. Retrieved from: <https://www.governing.com/topics/public-justice-safety/gov-police-department-diversity.html>
- Ridley, C. R., Tracy, M. L., Pruitt-Stephens, L., Wimsatt, M. K., & Beard, J. (2008). Multicultural assessment validity: The preeminent ethical issue in psychological assessment. In L. A. Suzuki & J. G. Ponterotto (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural*

assessment: Clinical, psychological, and educational applications (p. 22–33). Jossey-Bass.

Stark, K. & Little, D. (2018). More African-Americans Apply to Become Cops, But Few Make it to Finish Line. The Chicago Reporter. Retrieved from:
<https://www.chicagoreporter.com/more-african-americans-apply-to-become-cops-but-few-make-it-to-finish-line/>

U.S. Department of Justice. (2007). Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS). Retrieved from Bureau of Justice Statistics.
<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/so07st.pdf>