

The Role of the I/O Psychologist in Police Psychology

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This article explains the role of the industrial/organizational psychologist for students interested in a career in police psychology. The article describes what I/O psychologists do and the education and training necessary to enter this career field.

INDUSTRIAL/organizational psychologists, more commonly known as I/O psychologists, are professionals who apply their knowledge of psychology to the workplace. For most I/O psychologists, the focus is in such organizations as IBM, AT&T, and Microsoft. However, for others such as myself, law enforcement agencies are the organizations for which we concentrate our efforts. In general, the role of the I/O psychologist is to help select, train, evaluate, and motivate law enforcement personnel.

WHAT WE DO

Police Selection

To select the best law enforcement personnel, we begin by conducting a job analysis. A job analysis is an extensive study to determine the tasks that are performed by police officers in a particular department. Once these tasks have been determined, we then identify the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) needed to perform those tasks. For example, after interviewing 30 police officers, watching them perform their jobs over a period of

time, and having them complete questionnaires (called task inventories), we might find that common tasks for a police officer include writing reports, testifying in court, and conducting traffic accident investigations. To perform these tasks, we might determine that essential KSAOs include good writing, math, grammar, and oral presentation skills.

Once we have identified the important KSAOs, our next task is to find ways to measure the extent to which applicants possess those KSAOs. Common methods of doing this include structured behavioral interviews, cognitive ability tests, personality tests, physical agility tests, education and experience requirements, assessment centers, biodata, and background investigations. Depending on the situation (e.g., size of the department, budget, time constraints), we will either purchase tests “off the shelf” or create them on our own.

To ensure that these tests will actually predict future performance, we often conduct a criterion validity study. With such a study, we administer our test battery to current employees and then correlate their test scores with measures

of work performance. These measures often include grades in the academy, supervisor rating of on-the-job performance, activity (e.g., arrests, traffic citations), commendations, and discipline problems (e.g., complaints, suspensions, rules violations).

Due to their extensive training in job analysis, test construction, recruitment, employee selection methods, employment law, and similar human resource areas, I/O psychologists are the only psychologists who meet the national competency standards required to ethically engage in personnel selection.

Evaluation of Law Enforcement Personnel

Once police officers have been hired, it is necessary to monitor and evaluate their performance so that we know who needs additional training, deserves salary increases, or should be terminated. To properly evaluate performance, we create a job-related performance appraisal instrument, identify relevant objective measures of performance (e.g., complaints, arrests made, traffic citations issued), provide a means for routinely documenting behavior, and train supervisors on how to rate and then provide feedback to their subordinates.

Training

I find training officers and their supervisors to be one of the most enjoyable tasks performed by I/O psychologists. We conduct training workshops for individual departments as well as for regional police academies. Common topics for which I/O psychologists conduct training include employment law, interviewing skills, evaluating performance, leadership, motivation, stress management, and a host of people skills (e.g., conflict

management, dealing with angry people, communication skills). Because I am also heavily involved with forensic psychology, I also conduct training programs on such topics as detecting deception, eyewitness testimony, and understanding the criminal mind.

Human Resource Consulting

Another interesting aspect of being an I/O psychologist is consulting with police departments that need help with human resource issues. These issues might include increasing job satisfaction, morale, and motivational levels; correcting problems with organizational communication; or dealing with organizational change.

Research

An important aspect of the I/O psychologist working with law enforcement agencies is conducting research and analyzing data. Some I/O psychologists are full-time researchers whereas for others (e.g., consultants, academicians), conducting research is only part of their job.

Profiling. Though some criminal profiling uses a clinical or “gut” approach, the majority is research and statistically based. To create a statistical profile, information about a crime is compared to information about the person who committed the crime. For example, a researcher might statistically compare the times of day that churches are burned with the ages of the people found guilty of the arson and based on this comparison, predict that an arson committed early in the morning was probably conducted by an adult rather than a teen. Such statistical profiling helps law enforcement agencies focus on probable suspects to a crime.

Community Surveys. With the increased emphasis on community oriented policing, law enforcement agencies are increasingly conducting research to determine citizen attitudes toward the police and citizen perceptions of the safety of their community. This research is usually conducted by distributing surveys to citizens and conducting neighborhood focus groups.

General Research. I/O psychologists also conduct research on a wide variety of general law enforcement issues. For example, recent studies conducted by psychologists have concluded that:

- after controlling for age, race, and sex, law enforcement personnel are no more likely to commit suicide than the general public
- officers with college degrees outperform officers who only have a high school diploma
- many officer-involved shootings are actually the result of “suicide by cop”

HOW TO BECOME AN I/O PSYCHOLOGIST WHO WORKS WITH POLICE DEPARTMENTS

To perform the duties described throughout this article, at least a master’s degree in I/O psychology is needed. A Ph.D. is necessary to perform most of these duties without supervision. A complete list of graduate programs in this area can be found at the end of Chapter 1 in Aamodt (1999) or at the Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology web site (www.siop.org). In addition to a graduate degree in I/O psychology, essential skills for this field include knowledge of statistics and research, excellent writing skills, and excellent public speaking skills.

Career opportunities include working for a large law enforcement agency (e.g., LAPD, Washington Highway Patrol, FBI), a state or municipal human resource department, or a consulting firm. Many I/O psychologists who work with law enforcement agencies are employed as college professors and do consulting on the side.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT I/O PSYCHOLOGY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

General Text Books

- Aamodt, M. G. (1999). *Applied Industrial/Organizational Psychology* (3rd edition). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing.
- Riggio, R. E. (2000). *Introduction to Industrial/Organizational Psychology* (3rd edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Web Sites

Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP)
www.siop.org

International Personnel Management Association Assessment Council (IPMAAC)
www.ipmaac.org

International Personnel Management Association
www.ipma-hr.org

Society for Police and Criminal Psychology
www.jmu.edu/psych/spcp

Center for Organizational and Personnel Police
www.copp-psychology.org/index.html