

Police Personality: What Is It and Why Are They Like That?

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Debate has swirled around the issue of the term "Police Personality." The debate over this has been mainly over the issues of definition and development; i.e., what is a police personality and how does it form? Is it a predispositional model of personality or is it created by the nature of the work itself (an occupational-socialization model)? Perhaps the issue is not as simply dichotomous as that; perhaps it is a combination of both predisposition and experiences that forms this elusive personality. This paper will review the relevant literature pertaining to police personality, both predispositional notions and job created notions, as well as the literature on personality theories in a broader perspective.

PERSONALITY THEORIES IN GENERAL

PRIOR RESEARCH has found major deficiencies in the efforts to identify a police personality. The first deficiency deals with the tendency to treat each negative aspect of the police personality as a separate entity, rather than as a multidimensional phenomenon. The second deficiency is that very little prior research has focused on the making or the formation of the police personality, or to distinguish the phases of development. The third deficiency is that past research has failed to link measurable personality traits to discernable behavior as measured by performance evaluations (Gould, 2000). Underscoring each of these deficiencies is the premise that personality is developed on a continuum, indeed it is a dynamic process. Thus, the development of a police personality model depends as much on the theoretical framework of the

personality theory as on the recognition of the extraordinary job experiences unique to policing.

It is useful to discuss the classical theories of personality and how they relate to the construct of police personality.

Kelly (1955), theorizing from the vantage point of personality as a personal construct model, discussed personality constructs and the development of personality. He said: "[Personality is] our abstraction of the activity of a person and our subsequent generalization of this abstraction to all matters of his relationship to other persons, known and unknown, as well as to anything else that may seem particularly valuable." Kelly's view supports the notion that police personality is *made or shaped* by the experiences of an officer, once he is on the job.

Allport (1937), the humanistic trait and self theorist, discusses the development of personality as a three-pronged task for the individual:

- Self-objectification--“that peculiar detachment of the mature person when he surveys his own pretensions in relation to his abilities, his comparison with the equipment of others, and his opinion of himself in relation to the opinion others hold of him”;
- Extension of self--“going beyond self to invest energies in causes and goal-seeking that transcend his or her individual life”;
- Unifying philosophies of life--“mature persons live their lives by some dominant guiding principals by which they place themselves in the scheme of things.”

Allport further said that personality can best be understood as:

- a mixture of major and minor “traits” by which a single life is known,
- a personality “trait” is a biological, psychological and social mixture that disposes a person toward specific kinds of action under specific circumstances. (Monte, 1999). With respect to the development of the police personality, Allport can be said to be adhering to the predispositional model-that a certain type of person becomes a police officer as opposed to the notion that job experiences shape the personality construct.

Kohut’s model of the self is particularly instructive in understanding the subject of police personality. He posited that normal development was a process of interaction between the growing infant and his mirroring and

idealizing self-objects (Kohut & Wolff, 1978). This theory tends to favor the view that police personality is a combination of the predispositional model and the experience model.

The construct of “self-capacities” (Kohut, 1977) has been modified by Briere (1998) and involves the notion that successful adult functioning is partly due to the extent to which the individual is able to accomplish three tasks:

1. Maintain a sense of personal identity and self-awareness that is relatively stable across affects, situations and interactions with other people.
2. Tolerate and control strong (especially negative) affect without resorting to avoidance strategies such as dissociation, substance abuse, or external tension reducing behaviors.
3. Form and maintain meaningful relationships with other people that are not disturbed by inappropriate projections, inordinate fear of abandonment, or activities that intentionally or inadvertently challenge or subvert normal “self-other” connections.

A stable sense of self and personal ideology is definitely an important aspect of psychological functioning, particularly for a police officer. Certainly, the ability to modulate negative affect is also important for a police officer. Individuals with problems in affect regulation are prone to mood swings, dysphoria, and hyperactivity. Because they are unable to modulate negative affect sufficiently, they may respond with external behaviors, such as substance abuse, inappro-

priate or excessive sexual behavior and impulsivity (Briere, 1998). Clearly, not the attributes one would expect or wish to see exhibited by police officers.

But, what exactly are the traits that construct a police personality? Regardless of the process by which this personality has developed, there are still very unique attributes to this model that must be defined.

POLICE PERSONALITY DEFINED: MYTH AND POPULAR CULTURAL DEFINITIONS

The characteristics usually associated with police personalities in present times are machismo, bravery, authoritarianism, cynicism and aggression. Additional characteristics have been associated with police personalities as well: suspicious, solidaristic, conservative, alienated and thoroughly bigoted (Balch, 1977, Skolnick, 1977). Indeed, the current notion of police personality is a far cry from the notion of three or four decades ago, that of the happy Irish cop, the friendly officer walking the beat, stopping to untangle a child's kite from a tree or to lecture a teen about staying out too late (Balch, p. 26). These days, most people think of police officers as idealized super cops like the Mel Gibson character in the "Lethal Weapon" films or as the brutal, sadistic cops like the Denzel Washington character in the film "Training Day." Popular culture as well as the media shape our perceptions of what police officers are like and how they behave.

However, what is rarely recognized or, in fact, known is that police officers undergo strict screening procedures prior to their acceptance into the department. The screenings serve several purposes (some discussed here) mainly to assist in the hiring of the best candidates. How-

ever, the most important purpose the screenings serve to the discussion of police personality is, that due to the stringent nature of the selection process, only candidates who display particular personality profiles are selected for the force. This means that in terms of the debate over the genesis of police personality, the pre-employment psychological screening provides a baseline personality construct from which to compare the construct of the experienced officers. Essentially, we know what they are going in like and can compare that to what they become after time spent on the force.

The screening procedures most germane to this discussion of police personality, as a phenomenon, are the psychological screenings, conducted by psychologists. These screenings are comprehensive and involve the use of such sophisticated and validated personality assessment instruments as the: MMPI-2, California Personality Inventory (CPI), the Inwald Personality Inventory (IPI), the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS) and projective tests such as, The House, Tree and Person and Rorschach. In fact, the Rorschach has only recently been added to the canon of tests used to screen officers (Weiss, 2002).

Unfortunately, these assessment instruments do not necessarily tell you what a police personality is; they can, however, tell you what a police personality is not. The bulk of research in the area of assessment screenings of police candidates has been either descriptive (i.e., what types of instruments are used) or directed toward the efficacy and use of such instruments toward detecting potentially unfit candidates (Hogan & Kurtines, 1975). Ideally, to promote future research and greater develop existing re-

search is to devise some type of instrument (or scale of an already existing instrument) to define police personality. Until that happens, the definition of police personality can be devised by deconstructing the profiles of unsuccessful candidates, in order to provide a baseline of sorts from which a model can be constructed.

What the police personality is not: As defined by psychological screening methods

Past research on personality attributes of police officers show that the personality qualities least likely to lend themselves to successful careers in law enforcement are: excessive absences, tendency towards disciplinary infractions, derelictions, lack of assertiveness, a history of driving violations, civilian complaints, poor supervisor evaluations and time on restricted duty. The foregoing listed those qualities of already sworn officers. But, what are the qualities of those candidates who seek to become officers? What are the personality traits they bring to the selection process? What attributes are most likely to be deemed as unfit for duty?

Most departments, nowadays, use psychologists to administer pre-employment, psychological screenings to candidates. The application of a battery of psychological tests intends to “weed out” police applicants who are psychologically and mentally unfit to serve because of the appearance of abnormal personality traits and deficiencies in psychometric (e.g., intelligence) measures (Ho, 2001).

The rationale behind the screening process of potential recruits is to ensure that only the best psychologically fit candidates are selected because the job itself is so demanding emotionally and

psychologically. The nature of the job is to be extremely stressful and causes extreme emotional reactions in officers, accordingly departments have increasingly resorted to the use of these pre-employment screenings. Additionally, pre-employment assessments are designed not only, to weed out unfit candidates but to select the candidates most likely to maintain psychological fitness relative to future job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; McQuilkin, Russell, Frost & Faust, 1990). This way, departments can shield themselves from “negligent hiring” lawsuits brought by civilians who have been victimized by rogue officers (Ho, p. 321).

Police departments have been using screenings since the early part of the 20th century (Bartol, 1996). The qualities, at that time, deemed acceptable were intelligence and aptitude. Through the years, however, the focus on desirable traits shifted from cognitive abilities to personality traits (e.g., emotional stability) due to the potential adverse effects on minority police applicants, although many of the personality tests used by police departments have a component of intelligence testing (Ho, p. 320).

According to research, the qualities exhibited by candidates, as discerned through pre-employment psychological testing, are such undesirable personality traits as: hostility, lack of impulse control, potential for alcohol and/or substance abuse, psychoses, paranoia and the like. In fact, the MMPI-2 successfully screens out the candidates who obtain significantly elevated, clinical T scores. In this case, significant elevations are any that are 65 and above (Detrick, Chibnall, & Rosso, 2001).

Another instrument used by departments is the CPI. Hogan’s and Kurtine’s (1975) research on the use of the CPI in

police selection processes provided evidence on three points: a. the modal personality of police; b. the personality characteristics associated with persistence in police work; and c. the personality correlates of effective performance. They found some very interesting results in their analyses of the differences between unsuccessful applicants and police officers. These significant differences were:

- In terms of personal effectiveness, the *unsuccessful* (emphasis added) applicants were a reasonably sound group;
- The unsuccessful applicants and the police officers were significantly different on nine of the 19 CPI scales;
- The police officers were more assertive (dominance);
- Had more potential for social mobility (capacity for status);
- More social poise and self confidence (social presence);
- A more pronounced sense of self worth (self-acceptance);
- More need for autonomous achievement (achievement via independence);
- More functional intelligence (intellectual efficiency);
- More psychological-mindedness (psychological-mindedness);
- More masculine (femininity); and,
- Possessed greater social acuity (empathy). (Hogan & Kurtines, p. 291).

This suggests that, on the whole, successful candidates displayed more poise and self assurance and had a higher level of achievement potential, intellectual efficiency and social insight. This is in contrast to the notion that police officers

are cynical, suspicious, violence prone authoritarians (Hogan & Kurtines, p. 294).

Hargrave and Hiatt (1989) researched the use of the CPI in law enforcement selection, as well. Their research, likewise, was a comparison of profiles between the unsuccessful applicants and police officers; however their study differed in that it compared the profiles of the unsuccessful cadets (identified as unsuitable by their academy instructors) to the pre-employment profiles of academy graduates. This is an important distinction because it provides better material for the baseline model of police personality. Interestingly, the subjects for their study consisted of candidates from three different law enforcement academies, *none of which included psychological screening as a component of the selection process (emphasis added)*. The battery of psychological tests were administered once they were accepted into the police training academies.

What Hargrave and Hiatt found was that the cadets who were ultimately found to be unsuited to police work had significantly lower overall CPI profiles. Generally, those cadets who were better adjusted (as measured by higher CPI profile elevation) performed better in training. The successful cadets displayed better functional intelligence, were more outgoing and sociable individuals.

Other widely used assessment instruments to screen applicants are the IPI and the MMPI-2. According to Mufson and Mufson (1998), many researchers have found the IPI to be a better predictor of job performance of police officers than the MMPI-2 in that it was better in predicting: the likelihood of an officer being the subject of citizens' complaints, negative ratings from supervisors and an overall negative composite. They found

that, in particular, the following scales were effective predictors of future performance and were useful in distinguishing between recruits who were terminated and those who continued on the job:

- Undue suspiciousness
- Anxiety
- Sexual concerns
- Depression
- Phobic personality
- Drugs and/or alcohol
- Family conflicts
- Guardedness
- Rigid type
- Loner type
- Illness concerns
- Excessive absences
- Antisocial attitudes
- Hyperactivity
- Unusual experiences (they did not specify exactly what type, however)

Bartol (1991) reported that prior research, with respect to the use of the MMPI-2 as a predictive instrument, found that unsatisfactorily performing officers had higher mean scores on 11 of the 13 MMPI scales, particularly the 6 and the 9 scales (Paranoia and Hypomania). Elevations on these particular scales are indicative of increased likelihood of fear of others and suspiciousness and excitability and impulsivity.

Bartol's findings were a bit different, however. His research indicated that elevations on the L, Pd and Ma scales of the MMPI were indicative of poor job performance and in distinguishing those officers who were eventually terminated. It must be understood, however, that the MMPI was initially designed for clinicians to be able to differentiate between "normal" and "abnormal" groups of in-

dividuals. The scales were empirically constructed and validated by making comparisons of the scores obtained on various items by each of the two (normal and abnormal) groups. It was not constructed to be a personality measure that would provide a dimension of personality traits in police candidates (Bartol, p. 131). However, in terms of its use with selection and screening of police candidates, there have been some empirical data which are illustrative of the traits considered to be indicators of the likelihood of poor, future performance. As Bartol (1991) said: "[T]he relationship between the Ma scale elevation and unsatisfactory police performance is reported frequently in the literature. High scorers on this scale tend to be impulsive and moody and have a low frustration tolerance." The elevations on the Pd scale, by themselves, are not of sufficient predictive quality but when combined with elevations on the Ma scale often "[d]emonstrate a marked disregard for social standards and values. They frequently get into trouble with the authorities because of antisocial behavior" (Graham, 1987, p. 109). However, in terms of Bartol's study, the elevations in the Pa and Ma scales did not have appreciable predictive power until merged with elevations on the L scale. When those three particular scales are elevated, the officers tended to be those who were unable to execute quick, independent and appropriate decision making under emergency or crisis situations without becoming confused and disorganized.

Thus, in order to facilitate our understanding of what traits comprise the police personality, we can begin by eliminating those traits exhibited by those individuals who either did not pass the pre-employment screenings or who were hired but subsequently terminated.

We know that the personality of the successful police officer does not contain traits of: impulsivity, hostility, undue aggression, lack of autonomy, immaturity, anti-social tendencies, potentials for alcohol and/or drug abuse, emotional lability, social introversion, paranoia and psychoses. It is clear from a review of the literature on the instruments used to screen applicants that the foregoing is a fairly comprehensive and highly accurate list of traits which do not exist on the dimensions of a distinct police personality.

What the Police Professionals Think

Police officers surround themselves in "image armor" and perceive the expression of emotion as a weakness. They are themselves suspicious people, and many find it hard to trust and confide in others, so they isolate their feelings (Kureczka, 2002).

Hanewicz (2001) begins his attempt to define police personality by first defining personality by using Thomas Gray's (1975) notion of *affinity*: "...a predisposition to adhere partially to a set of distinctive sentiments that can be expanded and reinforced by training and socialization." Hanewicz identifies two major positions: 1. The police personality is something that police possess by virtue of their being police; or 2. The police personality is something that people have who become police.

In the first instance, he is describing a characteristic or a set of characteristics that are acquired by the individual officer after they become officers and are illustrative of personality attributes possessed by police officers alone and in the second instance he is describing a set of personality characteristics *common* to police officers, but not necessarily exclusively so (Hanewicz, p. 153). Hanewicz said

that, for his purposes, in order to define a police personality, it is useful to search for a definition in terms of commonality, not exclusivity. What are the traits that all (or most) police officers share in common? According to Rubin (1973) people who enter police work tend to be: psychologically healthy and competent young men who display common personality features. They are generally assertive and restless, with a high degree of physical energy. Watson and Sterling (1969) describe police officers as possessing these attributes: pragmatism, action oriented, valuing common sense rather than theory and success more than ideas. They also suggest that the tendency towards pragmatism is closely related to cynicism.

Police cynicism was defined as an attitude of "contemptuous distrust of human nature and motives (Behrend, 1980). According to Graves (1996) police cynicism is a distinct characteristic of police personality. He stated that cynicism, particularly prevalent in larger urban departments, develops as a result of burn-out and stress, the emotional conditions caused largely by the excessive demands of police work. Graves felt that cynicism is largely counterproductive and ultimately harmful to, not only the individual officer, but the department at large and is largely a precursor to misconduct, brutality and corruption.

Lester, Babcock, Cassisi, Genz and Butler (1980) discussed their findings of the results of the administration of the EPPS to both American state and local police and English police. The results for the American officers indicated the following consistencies: high scores in the need for exhibition, dominance and for heterosexuality. The English recruits were high in change and aggression. These results suggest that not only are

police officers' personality constructs different from those of non-police officers, but in fact, different from each other in terms of country.

Skolnick (1966, 2000) discussed the sense of isolation and distrust many officers feel. These feelings become part of what he terms the police officer's "working personality." The working personality is comprised of three main components: danger, authority and efficiency. The working personalities component of danger makes the police officer suspicious of peoples' behavior; this attribute contributes to his feelings of isolation and alienation. If he is suspicious of the motives of others, he is less likely to engage in social discourse with non-officers (Skolnick, 2000). The danger of police work not only draws officers together as a group but separates them from the rest of the population (Skolnick, 1977).

Authoritarian behavior comes as a result of the officer's interaction with the public; the officer is necessarily in charge in certain situations like traffic stops and crime scene investigation. This sense of authority-which separates the cop from the public-feeds into the officer's feelings of isolation. It is an "us vs. them" mindset, which is further reinforced by the feelings of solidarity he experiences with his fellow officers. The notion of efficiency is fueled by the means by which an officer performs his job, as exemplified by the officer's use of deception. Police officers view deception as a natural tool to catch bad guys. Deception is likewise endorsed by the court system and the police subculture in that it is practiced in the investigative and daily activities of police work. Again, the use of deception to aid in the efficiency in which an officer performs his duties also serves to increase the

sense of isolation and alienation from others (Skolnick, 2000).

Police officer alienation is described, very poignantly, by Ankony (1997) in his research on community policing. Inherent in the idea of community policing is the notion that the officer feel that he is a part of the community, indeed that he feel integrated into the daily workings of the community-that he shares the beliefs and values of the majority of the citizens. But what the previously cited research indicates is that the officer rarely feels integrated with the community, in fact he feels that he is isolated and alienated. These feelings have more to do with how the officer's personality has developed due to the experiences of his job. Ankony (1997, p. 4) defines alienation as a condition in social relationships where there is a low degree of integration or common values and a high degree of distance and isolation between people in a community.

The notion of the alienation as a component of the police personality was tested and subsequently rejected, however, by Perrot and Taylor (1994). They stated that community alienation and high in-group identification in the police suggest ethnocentrism. However, what they found was that the sense of alienation lay more with the community's perceptions of officers rather than the officers themselves. That, indeed, the public's perception of officers being distinct and different was the catalyst for police feelings of alienation. Or, as Skolnick (1977) put it, "[T]he element of authority, like the element of danger, is thus seen to contribute to the solidarity of policemen. To the extent that policemen share the experience of *receiving hostility from the public* (emphasis added), they are also drawn together and become dependent upon one another." He devel-

ops resources within his own world to combat social rejection (Skolnick, 1977, p. 21).

As Balch stated (1977) there is a consensus among researchers in the police personality field who agree that there are a number of characteristics unique to the police mentality. These characteristics are: suspicion, conventionality, cynicism, prejudice and distrust of the unusual. A good policeman suspects evil wherever he goes (Balch, p. 27).

The final word on this topic should rest with Bennett and Greenstein (1975) and their research, which tested the pre-dispositional model of police personality. They defined police personality as a value orientation, specific to law enforcement officers. The police personality is represented by a clustering of values that differentiate police officers from other members of society. They quoted Rokeach, Miller and Snyder (1971) as saying that a "value gap" existed between police officers and non-officers. Rokeach concluded that a distinctive police personality does exist, but that it is a pre-dispositional model of personality rather than as a result of occupational socialization. The findings of Rokeach et al. suggest that the personality is distinct and intact prior to employment. Bennett and Greenstein, however, found that by testing the pre-dispositional model on two groups of individuals (students studying police science and anticipating joining the police department and non-police students vs. students studying police science and anticipating joining the police department and experienced police officers) that police science students do not differ in values from non-police science students, but that they do differ significantly from experienced police officers. Thus, they concluded that, while the police person-

ality is a uniquely characterized phenomenon, it is created by occupational socialization rather than existing as a pre-dispositional model.

Cultural Shield

There is also the question of whether the "Police Culture" is an all-inclusive mechanism developed to shield individual officers and behind which all officers can protect themselves from a working environment "characterized by uncertainty, danger, and a coercive authority" (Paoline, Myers & Worden, 2000). Indeed, if this is the case, then one expects that although there are certain personality traits that are common to all police officers-that not all police officers are alike. That, in fact, despite varying degrees of various individual personality traits, police officers do tend to come together behind a wall of police culture, or a cultural shield, which defines a sort of working personality. It is this working personality that the public sees and deals with, thus lending credence to the notion that there exists a distinct "police personality," ephemeral as it may be.

It is this image that people respond to; not the individual characteristics that a particular officer may possess. The notion of police culture is strengthened by the public image of uniformed officers whose eyes are hidden behind the dark sunglasses, who maintain inscrutable facial expressions, hold strict postures and wear dark blue uniforms; a cultural shield. But, what is the culture? Is it the combination of the individual personalities or is it the unique working environment of police officers? And, how does it add to the discussion of "police personality?"

Thus far, we have examined the psychological and the sociological perspectives on police personality. The

psychological paradigm suggests that people with certain personality traits are drawn to police work—the predispositional model. The sociological paradigm suggests that police personality is formed through the process of occupational socialization. But, the anthropological paradigm offers a more holistic explanation on the notion of “police personality”—indeed, an intriguing alternative. The anthropological paradigm suggests that police are members of a unique occupational subculture; it is this subculture which provides officers with a working personality. Officers begin to develop a belief in an “insider/outsider” structure that instructs officers that while fellow officers are trustworthy (insiders), they should be skeptical and ever vigilant of non-police (outsiders). Police training that, constantly, emphasizes the potential for danger in police work reinforces this particular mindset. (Kappeler, Sluder & Alpert, found online: <http://www.policestudies.eku.edu/KAPP/ELER/pands15.htm>). Officers cope with the danger and uncertainty of their occupational environment by *being suspicious and maintaining the edge* (Paoline, et al, p. 578). Officers “maintain the edge by employing a take-charge approach to their work as they create, display and maintain their authority to be “one up” on citizens (the outsiders).

Thus, while officers share a working personality, many still maintain individual differences in temperament and personality traits. Brown (1988) found differences in officers’ aggressiveness and selectivity. He explained that “[L]oyalty and individualism are the opposite sides of the coin: the police culture demands loyalty but *grants autonomy*.” Broderick (1977), Muir (1977) and White (1972) likewise found a measure of “individualism” in police officers.

Police culture is reinforced by the way recruits are selected, trained and accepted into the police ranks. Persons who can demonstrate characteristics and traits like those *already on the force* stand a greater chance of being hired. Likewise, the formal training at the police academy helps to further the cultural assimilation into the way things are done. (Harrison, S.J., found online: <http://www.pamij.com/harrison.htm>).

So, even though there may exist individual differences in personality among police officers, there is a mechanism, i.e., screening, academy training, that creates and then reinforces the working personality or cultural shield.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to define police personality and in doing so, settle the question of whether it is a pre-existing condition, thus predisposing certain individuals to police work, or whether it is as a result of occupational socialization (on the job experiences). I sought to do this by examining the literature on police screening methods to determine if there is a baseline model for personality and by reviewing the literature that deals specifically with police personality as an entity. What I discovered is that the police departments rigorously attempt to screen out individuals who exhibit certain personality traits, thus most cadets have basically the same personality constructs going in to the force—in essence, a baseline. What happens to these officers during the course of their careers continues to shape their personalities and ultimately, it is the job related experiences that form the “police personality.” This is certainly along the lines of the theories espoused by classical personality theorists who discuss personality as a

dynamic process, one that is constantly changing in relation to the stimuli and experiences of the individual.

Police culture, the working personality, on the other hand, is believed to consist of the following: widely shared attitudes, values and norms that manage the strains, which find their genesis in these work environments (Crank, 1997). Reiner (1992) depicts "cop culture" as consisting of "mission/action/cynicism/pessimism, suspicion, isolation/solidarity, conservatism, machismo, racial prejudice and pragmatism." Police culture forms the basis for the "working personality" that is most evident to the public.

Police personality, as a distinct entity, does exist. It exists as a result of the confluence of a specific baseline set of desirable personality traits and occupational socialization. It is also a function of, and is strongly characterized by, a police culture, created by the needs of officers to maintain personal safety and enhance their professional capabilities.

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