Selection of Police Special Operations Officers: The Role of the Psychologist

18

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The use of psychologists and of psychological testing in the selection of police officers has increased dramatically over the last decades (Cochrane et al., 2003). This is due primarily to the high cost of admitting unqualified personnel into the service. This negative impact can be seen on citizen safety, the reputation of the service, or monetarily as when expensive training is applied to personnel who cannot perform the work as expected (Cochrane et al., 2003; Shusman, Inwald, & Landa, 1984). Thus, attention has focused on the entry-level recruit's psychological or emotional adequacy regarding police service. However, a lack of consistency and standardization in pre-employment screening is found between police agencies (Dantzker, 2011), with huge differences in levels of sophistication (Cochrane et al., 2003). This is probably even truer with regard to different types of law enforcement personnel. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to outline the role of the psychologist in the selection of personnel for the Norwegian National Counter-Terrorism Unit (Delta Norway).

The selection of personnel to special operation forces units is of special importance to law enforcement and military organizations around the world. These types of personnel are expected to perform high-risk operations involving extreme stressors. The expectations from officials and the public are that they successfully perform their missions, that is no-fail tasks. Such tasks put great emphasis on the operators' intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, the use of technologically sophisticated equipment and advanced tactics involves a steep learning curve and demands the ability to quickly absorb new information.

Historical Background

The Delta Norway (Norwegian *Beredskapstroppen*) was founded in 1975. The decision to establish the organization was based on risk assessment of possible terrorist threats toward the nation's oil production facilities, as well as a general recognition among citizens of the increased terrorist threat level. The unit was designated to be a national resource on counter-terrorism, hostage rescue, and general high-risk operations involving armed perpetrators. The unit performs 400 to 500 armed missions each year. Since the Norwegian Police usually are unarmed (armed when ordered), these missions mostly include activities where there is expected to be

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291

armed confrontations with dangerous suspects. Originally, the selection procedure was modeled after the Norwegian Army Special Forces selection course. This course was based on the British Special Air Service selection program.

During the last couple of decades, a need for a more tailor-made selection program emerged, anchored more on characteristics of police personnel and police-type missions. The major difference regarding personnel was that the Delta Norway recruited experienced police officers with 3 years of education from the National Police Academy and included a bachelor degree and at least 3 years of operational experience. However, beginning in 2014, personnel directly out of the police academy could apply. The applicants must be of a minimum age of 25 years. The mean age of active personnel in the unit is 37 years. This is in contrast to the Army Special Forces, who recruit from the mandatory military service, with recruits usually around 20 years of age. Furthermore, although there are some similarities in missions (i.e., Direct Actions), the main bulk of operations were predicted to be high-intensity, high-risk, police missions where, for instance, experience in execution of a "force pyramid" (use of adequate means of power) was important.

Relevant Theory and Research

Personality and Job Performance

Several meta-analyses have supported the conclusion that personality predicts overall job performance (Barrick & Mount, 2003). It has been reported that personality measures have shown incremental validity over both biodata (McManus & Kelly, 1999) and evaluations of managerial potential performed by an assessment center (Goffin, Rothstein, & Johnston, 1996). Furthermore, Schmidt and Hunter (1998) showed that by combining meta-analysis with structural equation modeling, it was estimated that the Big-Five dimension of Conscientiousness added significant incremental validity over general mental ability for most jobs. The Big-Five approach

describes the personality of an individual in terms of five broad dimensions (Digman, 1990; Costa & McCrae, 1992). These dimensions are: Neuroticism (emotional stability), Extroversion (a tendency to be social active and a preference for social settings), Openness for experience (broad field of interest, imagination and creativity), Agreeableness (quality of social interactions and empathic ability), and Conscientiousness (ability to plan and achieve goals).

However, several investigators have challenged the notion of conscientiousness as a predictor for job performance in police officers. Barret, Miguel, Hurd, Lueke, & Tan (2003) showed that conscientiousness was not a stable predictor for job performance in law enforcement officers. They separated data for different law enforcements units and were not able to replicate the findings of Barrick and Mount (2003). They advised practitioners to be cautious in believing that Conscientiousness scales alone predicted law enforcement's job performance.

In spite of this, Rothstein and Goffin (2006) concluded that numerous meta-analytic studies on personality-job performance relations conducted during the 1990s demonstrated that personality measures contribute to the prediction of job performance criteria, and if used appropriately, may add value to personnel selection practices. The Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality has become increasingly popular among researchers and practitioners, contributing to the renewal of interest in personality-job performance relations. However, more specific, narrow personality measures continue to demonstrate equal or greater utility for personnel selection. For example, psychological hardiness has been found to predict performance of military cadets, over and above the Big-Five factors (Bartone, Eid, Johnsen, Laberg, & Snook, 2009), and also predicts success in a US Army Special Forces selection course (Bartone, Roland, Picano & Williams, 2008). Furthermore, the choice of an appropriate personality measure for use in predicting job performance should be based on careful consideration of the expected theoretical or conceptual relations between the personality predictor and performance criterion of interest.

Predicting Job Performance in Police Officers

In a review, Sanders (2003) pointed out two challenges in detecting a generic police personality. Firstly, there is a problem in measuring job performance in policing, and linking it to personality. One reason for this relates to the diversity of police tasks. The other problem in identifying a common police personality concerns the impact of organizational culture. This culture could mask the effect of personality on job performance. However, several characteristics have been presented in the literature (Sanders, 2003). Most frequently described are intelligence, honesty, conscientiousness, and common sense. Other, more inconsistent, characteristics reported are interpersonal skills, communication skills, sensitivity, empathy, and flexibility.

Personality Testing in Police Selection

Traditionally, most personality testing has been conducted using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the California Personality Inventory (CPI; Sanders, 2003). The MMPI has often been used in order to detect psychopathology or characteristics not compatible with the role as a police officer (i.e., negative selection). Scogin, Schumacher, Gardner, and Chaplin (1995) showed predictive validity of the MMPI when the test was administered at entry-level police training and performance data were collected during a 1-year follow-up. Bernstein, Schoenfeld, and Costello (1982) found that MMPI scores recorded at the academy predicted sick leave, citizen complaints, and injuries later in the officer's career. Both MMPI and CPI have proven to be related to attrition from the police academy and low ratings of suitability by instructors (Hargrave, 1985). CPI scores have also been related to social abilities, well-being, and self-control (James, Cambell, & Lovegrove, 1984).

More recently, the instruments tapping the Big-Five have been more commonly used. In a meta-analysis, Barrick and Mount (1991) identified a positive association between some of the broad domains of the Big-Five and the performance of police officers. According to Barrick and Mount (1991), the strongest predictor of police performance was the domain of Conscientiousness. Neuroticism, Extroversion, and Agreeableness also showed predictive power, but there was no association between Openness to experience and performance. All domains except agreeableness have also predicted police training effects (Black, 2000). Furthermore, the "Big-Five" approach has been able to predict team performance. In a review article investigating the Five Factor Model and its relation to personnel selection, Rothstein and Goffin (2006) reported that 11 of the 15 studies reviewed found a correlation between Extroversion and team-related behavior. This included "team-performance, group interaction style, oral communication, emergent leadership, task role behavior and leadership task behavior" (Rothstein and Goffinn, 2006, p. 165).

Assessment Centers

Assessment centers (AC) were introduced about 60 years ago and have gained enormous popularity as a selection procedure. Most selection courses within the police and military environment have characteristics in common with AC. Assessment centers is a method that involves a combination of procedures as outlined in Guidelines and Ethical Considerations of Assessment Center Operations (see Guidelines; International Task Force, 2008). When used for selection, the aim of the AC is to provide a prediction of a candidate's ability to be successful in new assignments. The characteristics of AC include the use of trained assessors in evaluation of candidate's performance in a series of simulations based on work analyses. Characteristics that could be defined in terms of behavioral observations (i.e., leadership behavior, interpersonal skills, fighting spirit) have potential for evaluation. Observers use a systematic process of recording and evaluation of behavioral observations. Often, additional information is used in order to complement the information recorded

during the AC. This type of information often comprises the candidate's resume, background checks, and interviews with people who know the candidate. Tests of individual differences (cognitive, personality, multi-source rating) could also be used. The evaluation of each candidate is often done by combining input from different assessors to create an overall assessment rating. This could be done by sharing and discussing the input, or by using a more statistical approach.

The predictive validity of ACs has varied from 0.37 (Schmitt, Gooding, Noe & Kirch, 1984) to 0.41 (Gaugler, Rosenthal, Thornton, & Bentson, 1987). Thornton and Gibbons (2009, p. 183) concluded that "research and practice suggest that ACs are valid, fair, legally defensible, and acceptable to candidates and other stakeholders in a wide variety of jobs. Furthermore, that evidence suggests that the AC method offers a viable alternative and supplement to other personnel selection methods."

Guidelines for Selection

Professional guidelines for personnel selection have been developed (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology; SIOP, 2003). The guidelines involve a four-step process. The first step is performing a job analysis. The job analysis often includes one or a combination of methods such as, behavioral observation, interviews of subject matter experts, and the use of questionnaires. The job analysis should include a translation of characteristics obtained from observations (or other inputs) to psychological terms in order to identify the personal characteristics and professional competencies required. This could further guide the actual assessment scales that are included in the selection procedures. The second step is to conduct a validity study. The purpose of a validity study is to provide empirical support for the accuracy of the assessment scales related to the present job. As an alternative, often used when local validation cannot be done, validity generalization is an accepted practice. Validity generalization refers to the demonstration that the validities of assessment tools generalize

across new settings. The third step recommended by SIOP (2003) is to create a personality profile based on step one and step two. The profile should specify the scales that will be used in order to make decisions. During this step, cutoff scores should be established for each scale used in the assessment. The last step is to conduct adverse impact analyses which should protect the applicant from discrimination based on demographics. This could be done, for example, by comparing mean assessment scale scores among demographic groups.

The two latter steps are important when assessment scales are used within a framework of cutoff scores, where decisions or recommendations by the psychologist are often given in a pass or fail style.

Selection of Police Special Officers

The Norwegian Police Response Personnel are categorized into five echelons, indicating the type of service as well as the level of training. Category five is the Police Reserve. They do not receive any annual training, and could be called upon in a national crisis. The other four echelons consist of active police personnel graduated from the National Police Academy (3-year program). Category four is the main group of Police Response Personnel, and constitutes frontline police officers as well as some investigators, criminal technicians, control-room operators, etc. This group receives annual retraining (minimum 48 hours), and completes a yearly test in order to be certified to carry firearms if instructed to do so. Category three is made up of the local area response teams (SWAT-type), which receive enhanced annual training (minimum 103 hours per year). Category two is the Dignitary Protection Unit, which is dedicated to protect national and foreign dignitaries as well as the Royal family. Category one is the National Counter-Terrorism Unit (Delta Norway), where 50% of the time is dedicated to training. These personnel also train regularly with both Norwegian Army and Navy Special Operation Forces.

Desirable Personal Characteristics for Officers in Delta Norway

The personal characteristics wanted for police officers in the Delta Norway are based on a job analysis performed by the unit itself. During discussions with the selection psychologist, these terms were translated into psychological constructs which could be suitable for testing and observation. The characteristics sought after include an ability to motivate oneself during hardship (intrinsic motivation), fighting spirit, resiliency, stress tolerance in acute settings, and emphatic ability. Some of these characteristics are also described in the advertisements used to recruit personnel.

Practical Considerations

Although psychological tests are used, these are not relied on as stand-alone tools. The psychologists work in close relationship with the leader of the selection program. The leader of the selection program is educated in operational psychology and has basic knowledge of personality psychology and test development. Furthermore, the psychological tests used are viewed as information to be input on the same level as information collected by other methods. This means that tests form the basis for hypotheses with regard to the applicant, and are not used as tools for acceptance or rejection into the program. The basic idea is for the leadership of the program to have hypotheses on the candidate that can be confirmed or rejected based on other information available. This information could be gathered from service history, references, and most commonly performance in the AC. The idea of using psychological tests as a form of "hypotheses testing" in combination with other aspects of the selection procedures increases the knowledge about the applicant and gives rise to a better decision with regard to acceptance or not into the unit. With regard to the selection procedure it increases the incremental validity. The use of psychological tests in combination with other "sensors" is explicitly relayed to the applicants.

The final evaluation of the applicants (in or out) is done by the leader of the selection program.

One challenge when using tests in this form is to translate personality characteristics into observable behaviors. In order to do so, the psychologist must have extensive knowledge about the unit that is selecting the personnel, as well as the content of the total selection procedure. The translation is done in a discussion with the leadership of the selection program.

Ethical Considerations

Applicants to the Delta Norway selection program are extensively evaluated without feedback or control over target characteristics and behavior. They are scrutinized by means of tests, background checks, and performance. The evaluation is done by colleagues who the applicants potentially are going to work with if accepted into the unit, or will likely meet professionally if they are rejected. This gives rise to several ethical concerns. The main challenge is handling of information about the applicants. With regard to information from psychological testing, only the leadership of the selection program (two persons) in addition to the psychologist has access to this type of information. These persons are attached to the training wing and not involved in operational personnel. It is a clear mutual understanding that the information is restricted and should merely be used as hypotheses, and the principal aim is to reject these hypotheses. During the selection course, the psychologist is working in close relation to the leadership of the program to ensure that this information is not relayed to other assessors.

Other ethical aspects for the psychologist are related to the intensity of the course. It is in the nature of a selection procedure to special operation personnel that they will have to endure extreme physical and psychological hardship. It is vital that experienced, knowledgeable leaders with high integrity are in charge of the selection. Once again, a close relationship between the psychologist and the leadership of the course is important in order to support the leadership with

expert knowledge on topics such as sleep deprivation and mental load.

Procedures for Selection

Figure 18.1 outlines the selection course for the Delta Norway. Applicants are first recruited through job advertisements in national police journals and police intranet sites. The unit also actively recruits in police academies of large police districts. Originally, the criteria for applying included: age between 25 and 32 years, 3 years of Police Academy, and 3 years of job experience in the police force. Following recent revisions, applicants over 32 years of age can be considered for service if their background (e.g., military special forces) is of interest. Students could also be admitted directly from the Police Academy. Applicants who meet these criteria are given a physical test, and then they are administered a test battery of two personality inventories. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) is mainly used to test for psychopathology (i.e., negative selection) as well as resiliency.
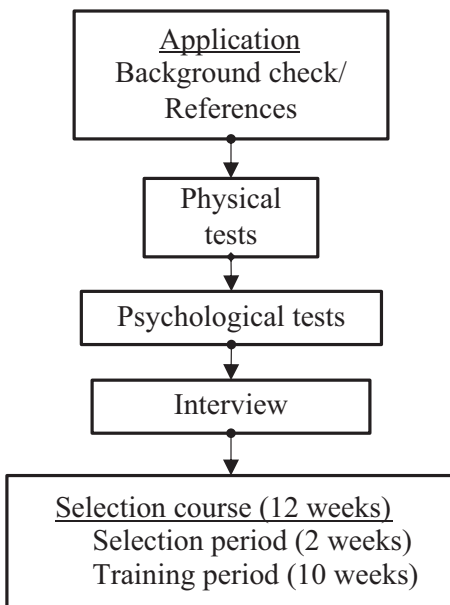
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│  Training period (10 weeks)   │
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Fig.18 1 Graphic outline of the selection program used to evaluate candidates for the Norwegian National Counter-Terrorism Unit

Clinical Scales, sub- and content scales are all examined and interpreted. The NEO PI-R is used to derive hypotheses on emotional stability, stress tolerance, stamina, and empathic ability. The hypotheses are conveyed to the leaders of the selection course before the candidate meets the interview board. This information is used in the background check and in the interview itself.

Applicants passing the physical and psychological tests as well as the interview and background check next meet for a 12-week long selection course. This is done in an AC manner and observations are made on a 24-h basis. The first 2 weeks focus on selection. Half of the 2-week period is dedicated to selection on individual characteristics using situational tests and expert evaluators from the Delta Norway. The rest of the period is focused on team performance. The evaluators provide individual ratings of all applicants, and these ratings are considered by the leadership of the program. The role of the psychologist is to give expert input on the situational tests, make evaluations of the applicants in cooperation with the course leadership, and provide lectures on behavioral markers of target characteristics for the observers. For instance, lectures on markers of team behavior were based on Salas, Sims, and Burke (2005), who emphasize team leadership, monitoring, support behavior, team attitude, and team adaptability. Lectures on sleep deprivation and coping are also given to the applicants early in the course.

Close supervision and guidance of the trainees is crucial during this phase. Since individual limits of the applicants are pushed (i.e., sleep deprivation and fatigue) the role of the psychologist would be as a "sparring partner" of the course leadership. Thus, course leadership is vital, and the decisions are always made by the leader of the course. In this phase, there should always be room for flexibility both on a course and individual level. No course would be identical due to, for instance, weather conditions. This could result in some courses having more extreme stressors compared to previous courses. Individual flexibility is also vital. For instance, in order not to select only on physical strengths, applicants with superior physical capabilities could be driven

harder compared to others in order to test stamina and stress tolerance.

After the 2-week selection period, the course is mainly dedicated to instruction and training. Although it is during the selection period when most applicants are selected out, a few will be rejected during this later phase. The main reason for drop-outs during this phase is applicants not being able to follow the steep learning curve for tactics and individual performance. The psychologist has a minor role during this phase of the course, for example providing consultation for rejected personnel.

Psychological Consultation with Rejected Personnel

Since personnel applying for this course have put an enormous effort into preparation as well as the actual performance during the course, the disappointment of being rejected is high. In addition, stressors inflicted on the personnel can create new and disturbing experiences. For instance, sleep deprivation frequently causes hallucinations and occasionally causes thought disturbances. These aspects are often the topic of the consultations after rejection. Another topic is a psycho-educative approach on possible physical and psychological reactions in the weeks following the course. Since the selection course is extremely physical, demanding physiological reactions like increased sweating, digestive or nutrition problems as well as fatigue could occur. Psychological symptoms of intrusion and avoidance are also possible. Another issue covered in this psycho-educative approach is the mental preparation of personnel returning to their units, and sometimes meeting their families who have had high expectations for them.

Based on the course conducted in 2014, a total of 92 police officers applied for the selection course. Sixty-five of these applicants participated in the physical and psychological tests. Forty of these passed on to the interview, and of these 25 were selected to continue the course. Of these 25, only 12 passed the selection course resulting in an admission rate into the unit of 13%. Experience

from several of these selection programs shows that these figures are representative across time. Clearly, it is a difficult and highly selective course.

Relevance Beyond the Police Organization

An obvious relevance beyond the police establishment for this type of selection is for the selection of military personnel into special operation units. The use of situational testing in the Armed Forces is not new. German military psychologists started situational testing after World War I, and this was adopted for use by the British and the US military during World War II (Pynes & Bernadin, 1992). Personality measures are also commonly used as selection tools. However, the role of the psychologist as presented in this chapter is more rare, in which the psychologist does not evaluate candidate in an approved or rejected manner, but presents hypotheses to further be tested and observed in situational tests or by other information-gathering procedures. The psychologist is an active partner and works in close relationship with the leadership during the complete selection program. As a result, the psychological tools applied form an integrated part of the complete selection program. This is in contrast to the more frequently described selection procedures where candidates are approved or rejected solely on the basis of personality or aptitude test scores (see also Picano et al., Chap. 26, this volume).

Conclusions

The present chapter describes the role of the psychologist in the selection of Police Special Officers into the elite National Counter-Terrorism Unit in Norway. This includes the use of personality tests as a basis for forming hypotheses about strengths and underdeveloped sides in a candidate. By forming hypotheses that can be falsified or accepted, this provides the leadership of the selection program the final decision in admitting personnel into the unit, while also increasing

the leadership's responsibility for selecting the right personnel. It also increases the overall validity of the selection program. An active role in the complete selection program ensures that psychological knowledge is applied both in designing situational tests and evaluation of candidates, as well as a focus on ethical sides of testing. Feedback from the leaders and evaluators has also shown an increased credibility for the psychologist as a result of the close interactions between psychologists and the evaluators. Psychologists play a key role in the selection process by providing directions for observation, being accessible to discuss issues occurring during the selection course, and by that contributing to reducing the number of errors made in the selection process.

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