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Definition of police psychology: The role of psychologist in the police

Sabina Alispahić¹, Bakir Alispahić²

^{1 2} University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Philosophy, the Department of Psychology/Associate professor

sabina_alispahic@hotmail.com¹, balispahic@fkn.unsa.ba²

Abstract. Police psychology is a sub discipline of forensic psychology. By definition, police psychology is ‘the research and application of psychological principles and clinical skills for law enforcement and public safety’. The basic tasks of a police psychologist are evaluation, conducting training and coaching of police officers, assisting in organizational development and providing psychological services. The practice of calling a psychologist to the police service only when necessary should be changed because in that way not all the benefits of a wide range of talents and skills that a psychologist can provide to the police can be obtained. Police psychology offers much more than individual interventions. Despite the evident interest in this area of psychology, in our region it is still not clear enough what police psychology is and what is the role of psychologists in the police. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to try to define the field of police psychology through a detailed description of the role of psychologists in the police forces.

Keywords. police, police officers, police psychology, police culture

Introduction

Police job is challenging in many ways. Police officers have to deal with and respond to violent situations such as crime, terrorist attacks etc. In doing so, they are often bound to use force and firearms to efficiently deal with such dangerous incidents. In addition, they are called to rescue and protect victims of crime (for example, abused women and children) i.e. to be ‘compassionate warriors’ (Chopko, 2011).

During their careers, police officers are exposed to potentially traumatic experiences and extreme stress. Although research results indicate that police officers are more resilient to stress in comparison with the general population (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2013), prolonged exposure to traumatic events, losses and other stressors can have consequences on their health and general well-being (Papazoglu, 2013; Steinkopf, Hakala, Hasselt, 2015; Stepka & Basinska, 2014).

Considering specific psychological challenges of the police job, police agencies began hiring psychologists back in the 1960s (Reiser, 1972). Since there was a need for assessment methods that would improve quality of candidates selected for police jobs, police departments began to seek psychological expertise to enable them to make selection of the emotionally stable candidates with the personality characteristics suitable for the police jobs. Therefore, one of the first tasks of police psychologists was assessment of candidates for the jobs in police forces

through application of psychological tests. Later on, when clinical services were required, police psychologists embarked upon counselling work to help police officers deal with stressful nature of their job (Stratton, 1980).

Psychologists have introduced a new set of intervention skills such as response to critical incidents such as shooting, hostage crisis negotiation skills, crime profiling and forensic hypnosis. They have also developed a series of programs for combating stress typical for police officers (Reese, 1987). As the police psychology developed as a discipline in its own right, the American Psychological Association (APA) and the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) have developed special sections for police psychology within their respective organizations.

Current research projects witness development of psychological services in the police context. Although the personnel selection and counselling still remain the main tasks of police psychologists, many police departments see a much wider role of psychologists.

Police psychology is expanded in the research context as well as in the professional practice. The indicators of an increasing interest in police psychology include a growing number of professional associations, specialized magazines, empirical research, books, special editions and professional conferences aimed at researching the field of police psychology (Snook et al., 2008).

Despite of evident interest for this field of psychology, in our region it is still not clear enough what is police psychology, as well as the role of psychologists in the police. This paper therefore attempts to define the field of police psychology through a description of the role of psychologist in the police.

What is police psychology?

Police psychology is a sub discipline of forensic psychology. According to the definition, police psychology is ‘research and application of psychological principles and clinical skills for the law enforcement and public security’ (Bartol & Bartol, 2012). Forensic psychologists, in addition to working in the police, can perform a wide range of jobs: in the legal department, in the crime and delinquency department, with victims of crime, in correctional institutions, court, children’s prevention associations, scientific institutes, universities, legal offices etc. (Bartol & Bartol, 2006).

A police psychologist has to be well acquainted with police work and police culture. All professions have their ‘culture’. According to Manning (1995) these are ‘adopted practices, rules and principles of work applied with regard to the situation and generalized rationales and beliefs’. Police officers work to create and maintain a unique professional culture which implies isolation, solidarity, danger, suspicion and authority (Baboselac-Marić, 2014).

Isolation refers to the mutual support of police officers in the organization vs. a management structure. There is also the phenomenon that police officers believe that that other people outside their ‘system’ cannot be of help to them.

Solidarity stems from the need for protection in dangerous situations. More than in some other professions, police officers depend on each other with regard to the protection and socio-emotional support necessary to perform police work.

Danger is a key feature of police work. Police officers are often preoccupied with the expectation of potentially violent situations and the dangers arising from their work environment.

Suspicion is considered a ‘necessary tool’ in the police profession. Due to constant exposure to potentially dangerous situations, police officers can become sensitive to the signs of possible danger and suspicious in most of their professional and private activities.

Authority is an indispensable determinant of the organization of police work. Police officers perceive assigned authority as a privilege and have a sense of pride for the complexity and importance of the role they perform.

Without understanding police culture and gaining the trust, acceptance and respect of members of police agencies, and without recognizing the specific characteristics of police culture, a novice police psychologist is likely to achieve limited success.

Ethical issues. Sensibility for ethical issues is important for all psychologists, and especially for police psychologists. It is important to pay attention to the possibility of dual relationships. For example, if a psychologist provided individual counselling to a police officer or a member of his family, or if he was in a psychotherapeutic relationship with the persons belonging to the same department, or for whom he performed a psychological assessment to evaluate progress, there is a risk of so-called *dual relationships* or conflict of interest.

According to ethical standards, psychologists mustn't be in dual relationships, and have to avoid conflicts of interest. Another topic that could be debatable concerns psychologists who provide services outside of their expertise, i.e. the services for which they are not educated. For example, these could be organizational psychologists who apply instruments for assessment of clinical nature for which they are not trained, or clinical psychologists who make job classification or task analysis which is not usually within their area of competence.

The role of psychologists in the police

According to Kurke and Scrivner (2013), the main tasks of a police psychologist are evaluation, training and coaching of police officers, assisting organizational development and rendering psychological services. We will explain each of these tasks below.

1) Evaluation

The evaluation role of psychologists in the police has laid the foundations of police psychology. It traditionally refers to the maintenance of quality police personnel and the employment of emotionally stable persons. It also provides guidance to police departments in case of conflict situations when the police officer in question is referred to a police psychologist who makes an assessment and makes recommendations for future functioning of the officer in question (Kurke and Scrivner, 1995).

Today, most police agencies recognize and use psychological assessment as part of the selection of police officers. Typically, the assessment is performed by licensed clinical psychologists. Some psychologists use a 'selection' assessment strategy, seeking candidates who demonstrate the qualities needed to succeed at work and recommending that police agencies admit them to law enforcement training. Other psychologists search for the applicants who show undesirable characteristics and recommend that police agencies no longer take them into consideration for employment. Evaluations typically include giving a series of psychological tests, interviewing, conducting situational tests and writing selection recommendations (Craig, 2005).

The batteries of psychological tests that psychologists use include intelligence tests, personality tests, projective tests and situational tests. Intelligence tests such as Stanford-Binet intelligence test, measure cognitive abilities. Psychologists also use personality tests to measure relatively stable characteristics or traits of the candidates. A commonly used test is Minnesota Multiphase Personality Inventory (MMPI). Research has shown that such tests are useful in predicting behaviour of police officers such as: tardiness or absence from work, substance abuse, violation of police rules and procedures, and the use of excessive force. Fewer psychologists still use projective tests that require candidates to seek answers to unstructured

situations or stimuli, such as the Rorschach test. Situational tests in which police candidates participate in role-playing exercises which usually represent job related working conditions, are also rarely in use. Psychologists supplement test results with information obtained from interviews with the candidate, which is a common component of psychological assessment. Interview is usually structured, however, sometimes specific questions are asked at the request of the police agency. Individual interviews with police candidates assist psychologists in interpreting and validating test results.

2) Conducting training of police officers

The police is responsible for maintaining peace and order, law enforcement and protecting the well-being of the community. These types of duties constantly involve the possibility of danger and the exposure of police officers to risk, hence requiring special education and training. Critical issues in police education and training to which psychologists have paid significant attention are negotiating in hostage situations, dealing with people with psychological difficulties, conducting criminal investigations and managing work related stress. Trainings are designed according to current needs arising from different experiences, in order to improve police practice. Below we will list some of the common topics for which it is important to provide additional education and training of police officers.

Hostage negotiation

Most police agencies have special units to deal with special high-risk situations. In the early 1970s, psychologists developed verbal tactics as an alternative to the attack option. Such tactics were intended for police officers to gain time to de-escalate the situation and persuade suspects to surrender. Police records have revealed that negotiating teams for crisis interventions successfully deal with most high-risk situations without injuring participants. When police agencies involved clinical psychologists to negotiate in such situations, the success rate increased without injury to participants increased (Kurke and Scrivner, 1995).

Negotiating activities are primarily aimed at keeping suspects, negotiating with them, detecting personal factors that motivate their behaviour, and prolonging the time of the incident, giving suspects the opportunity to express their feelings and make rational decisions. Negotiation training usually involves developing active listening skills through role-playing.

Dealing with people with psychological difficulties

Police officers have more contacts with persons with psychological difficulties than some other professions. Researchers have estimated that between 5% and 10% of police contacts with citizens involve persons with psychological difficulties. Contacts often take place in a person's home, and police usually handles calls without incidents (Police Research Forum, 1997).

Police officers need to be educated and trained for dealing with persons with psychological difficulties. It is important that they know that psychological disorder is not a crime, and that persons with mental illness live in their communities, have their professions and also need the services of the police. In addition, police officers need to be made aware of the fact that there is a link between psychological disorders and criminal behaviour. For example, persons who suffer from bipolar disorder or schizophrenia are more likely to express antisocial behaviour that society criminalizes.

Conducting criminal investigations

Psychologists have studied the actions and tactics used by the police in criminal investigations. They created psychological knowledge and helped police to apply in criminal investigations such as witness identification. What psychologists know about tactics of police interrogation is that some of them lead to false confessions. For example, if police officer has a suspect in crime and questions him for several hours, questioning can be a very stressful experience. In a state of high stress, some suspects are very suggestible and might believe that the accusations made by the officer are true. Other suspects might confess if the officer threatens with punishment or makes promises during questioning – even if the suspect knows he is innocent. In other cases, desire for attention or fame, especially in a high-profile crime, could motivate the suspect to confess even though he has done nothing wrong (Cutler and Penrod, 1995).

Police detection of the lies told by the suspects during questioning has attracted significant attention from psychologists. One of the investigative techniques could be hypnosis. Usually psychologists, psychiatrists or trained forensic hypnotists conducts conversations using hypnosis. The technique is mainly used to obtain information from eyewitnesses or victims, and rarely to obtain information from suspects. There is little empirical evidence to support the belief that hypnosis evokes reliable memories.

Managing stress at workplace

Police stress is a reaction caused by unfavourable physical, psychological or social factors. Reactions may include physical, cognitive, behavioural and affective changes in police behaviour. Police stress can be a consequence of law enforcement work, personal life, the criminal justice system, police organization or the public. Stress related to law enforcement work has gained significant attention in research, training and counselling, especially in the incidents involving force by and against the police, such as shooting involving police officers.

Police agencies train and educate their officers to manage tasks that can be stressful. Curricula include recognizing stress reactions and learning skills to manage their potentially harmful effects. Police agencies should provide regular information to their employees and their families about stress at workplace and mental health support (McNally and Solomon, 1999).

Post-incident debriefing is common after critical police interventions. They serve as an opportunity for early crisis intervention, they facilitate discussion with police officers and help restore the normalcy of their lives. They help police managers to identify officers who need professional psychological support. Peer support teams are usually part of post-incident debriefing.

3) Organizational development support

This type of psychological support refers to program development and consultations. Examples are strengthening of organizational departments through internal empowerment, for example through team strengthening and managing organizational strategies. A special aspect is the assessment of work tasks and the assessment of work abilities.

Evaluation of work tasks and duties

Organizational psychologists have contributed most to studying police officers in the workplace. Job analysis determines what responsibilities a police officer has, what tasks he performs, what knowledge and skills he possesses and what results he achieves.

Methods of analysis primarily include reviewing literature on police agencies, reviewing literature on departments (for example, operational manuals, rules and procedures, policies and

general orders), observing officers at work, conducting interviews with police staff and applying opinion poll questionnaires. This battery of techniques provides an exhaustive list of work tasks, such as crime prevention and law enforcement, arrest and report writing. Police agencies use information from job analysis to make informed decisions on organizational operations such as police selection and promotion procedures (Bartol and Bartol, 2012).

Job analysis is long and expensive. It requires organizational collaboration and commitment on all levels; it validates standards and selection procedures prior to employment. Keeping up with consistent analyses of jobs provides police agencies with certain protection from requests for discriminatory selection procedures.

Conducting work aptitude assessments

Police agencies have a responsibility to monitor psychological readiness of their policemen. They have the right to order a psychological assessment of the officers who develop patterns of problematic work related behaviour. Misconduct can take the form of abuse of power, use of excessive force, substance and alcohol abuse, and participation in criminal behaviour.

Police agencies have to collect and document information on problematic behaviour they wish to correct. Documentation may include performance assessments, pre-employment psychological examination reports, disciplinary measures, medical or counselling records, and other types of relevant reports that support work ability appraisal (Bartol, 1996).

Only licensed or certified psychologists (or psychiatrists) with clinical experience can perform aptitude assessment. In doing so, their client is the police agency requesting the assessment, and not the police officer passing it. The mental readiness assessment usually involves reviewing general data, applying a series of psychological tests, conducting a clinical interview, generating reports and making recommendations.

4) Providing psychological services

Police psychologists can render a variety of psychological services (Table 1) which can be divided into three categories: a) clinical services for individual police officers and their families, b) program development support, and c) operational support.

Table 1. Services that can be provided by a police psychologist (Kurke and Scrivner, 2013)

<i>Individual services</i>	Clinical supervision Crisis interventions Emergency interventions for police officers and their families Individual counselling Individual, marriage and family psychotherapy Stress management counselling Well-being programs
<i>Program/technical support</i>	Development of career advancement programs Post crisis interventions support Coordination with mental health services for persons in custody Conducting research on organizational management

Operational support

Development of assessment tests
Selection and assessment of tests for physical readiness
Helping employees adjust
Seminars on stress management
Team building
Testing/interviewing candidates for police jobs
Psychological training/Lecturing

Active function of police officer with regular police duties
Consulting/Training
Giving recommendations for disciplinary measures and complaints
Employee performance appraisal
Expert witness in connection with police management (e.g. in case of discrimination)
Assessment of ability to perform duties
Management consulting
Organizational evaluation/development
Member of governing board for organizational policies
Peer support team training
Pre-employment and advancement testing
Organizational policy advice
Keeping reports on post-traumatic incidents
Program development and evaluation
Psychological evaluations (for personnel selection or assignment of specific tasks)
Consultations on a specific case using psychological techniques
Criminal profiling
Investigation/analysis of crime scene
Deceit detection
Family violence support
Expert witness in a criminal trial
Hostage negotiation or other similar situations
Research on human factors and operations related to the legal improvement of equipment or systems
Interviewing suspects, victims and witnesses
Consultations on research strategies
Investigative hypnosis
Support in the investigation of kidnapping or murder
Identification of perpetrators
Research on operational issues

Conclusion

It is clear that police psychology is becoming a multispecialty requiring different expertise. It is necessary to change the practice of calling psychologist to the police service only when necessary, because in that way not all the benefits of wide range of talents and skills that a psychologist can provide to the police can be obtained. Police psychology offers much more than individual interventions.

Law enforcement is rapidly changing. New forms of crime, advanced technologies and community relations are changing the foundations of police work.

New tools and a new police strategy are needed – one that goes beyond law enforcement alone or community engagement. Success in these changes will require a transition to new principles of organization of police agencies where psychologists will certainly have a very important role to play.

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