COMMENTARY

Investigating the dark side of personality: A case for derailer assessment in police

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Dhanani et al. (2022) highlight limitations with the personality measures typically used for police selection, but they overlooked aspects of personality that may be critical for police officer selection and training. As Dhanani et al. noted, law enforcement agencies rely too heavily on personality measures that are not optimized to predict behaviors critical to effective policework. For example, clinical measures target chronic, extreme disorders and have a limited ability to reflect additional problematic behaviors that occur infrequently or only under some circumstances. Further, organizational psychologists have emphasized potential legal constraints associated with assessing clinical disorders in selection (Melson-Silimon et al., 2019). Other frequently used personality assessments targeted at the normal range of behavior, such as measures based on the five factor model, may predict some components of police performance (e.g., Black, 2000; Detrick & Chibnall, 2006; Forero et al., 2009; Hogan, 1971; Hogan & Kurtines, 1975; Winterberg et al., in press) better than clinical personality measures (Varela et al., 2004), but still fall short in the prediction of behaviors and decisions in less frequent, high-threat situations. Although rarer, these situations are of greater concern when evaluating police performance and outcomes as they potentially have life-threatening consequences for both officers and civilians, and have been identified as critical instances when adverse effects on minorities are most likely to occur.

However, going unmentioned in Dhanani et al. are subclinical dark personality measures, often referred to as derailers in work settings, that are specifically designed to address deficiencies in both clinical and normal-range personality measures (Guenole, 2014; Spain et al., 2014). Subclinical traits are personality tendencies that are frequently interpersonally aversive but are not necessarily dysfunctional at a level that would require clinical interventions. Rather, these tendencies represent potentially toxic strategies for dealing with frustrations and advancing one's own agenda (Hogan et al., 2021). Consequently, derailers frequently manifest as important predictors of behavior in high-stress situations or when individuals feel little need to self-monitor their behaviors (Spain et al., 2016; Harms, 2022). Derailers are thus relevant to law enforcement work because it is characterized by regular exposure to high-stress environments, ambiguous situations requiring quick decisions, and primary and secondary trauma. Indeed, both police subject matter experts and samples of the US public agree that many subclinical traits are important for successful police performance (Winterberg et al., in press). Many applied personality researchers are familiar with the dark triad (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy). However, measures of subclinical traits used in selection settings, such as the Hogan Development Survey (Hogan & Hogan, 2009), include a broader array of subclinical traits that map closely to the DSM-IV Axis-2 personality disorders and capture subclinical tendencies toward paranoia, emotional outbursts, disingenuous compliance, and passive-aggressive behaviors.

Subclinical dark trait assessments have important advantages useful for selection in the law enforcement context. Available evidence suggests relatively high base rates of derailer tendencies

in law enforcement populations. For example, Lefkowitz (1975) reported heightened tendencies toward suspiciousness of others and subclinical impulsive aggression among law enforcement personnel. In addition, more recent studies have shown that law enforcement incumbents tend to score higher than applicants on most subclinical traits (Winterberg et al., in press), and that a majority of individuals in law enforcement samples exhibit elevated derailer profiles (Harmata & Sherman, 2021). Further, subclinical dark personality measures predict job performance and workplace deviance outcomes above and beyond normal-range personality measures, both in civilian and military contexts (Ellen et al., 2021; Harms et al., 2011). Derailers also predict behaviors deemed critical for police performance, such as integrity, decision-making, handling stress, rule compliance, managing conflict, caring about people, and listening to others (Winterberg et al., in press).

Using subclinical personality assessments for police selection may also help mitigate the misalignment between demographic composition of law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. Many of the most frequently used selection tools in law enforcement, such as background checks and physical ability tests, tend to have adverse impact on minority applicants (Dhanani et al.; Hough et al., 2010). In contrast, well-constructed assessments of subclinical personality traits show little or no adverse impact for racial background or gender (Hogan Assessment Systems, 2021; Winterberg et al., in press).

This brings us to another point of departure between Dhanani et al.'s suggestions and our own. Although they discouraged the usage of proprietary instruments for selection, we would argue that the choice among instruments should focus on the psychometric and practical qualities of the tool rather than the status as proprietary or not. The need for rigorous screening of potentially dangerous traits requires high-quality instruments professionally designed for selection contexts that are resistant to faking attempts and are free from adverse effects. This is particularly true in recent years where law enforcement applicant pools have dwindled and there is a temptation to lower standards for incoming officers in order to fill the ranks. Although nonproprietary measures play a crucial role in academic research, proprietary measures may offer practical advantages toward such needs. Whereas nonproprietary measures typically have no one directly charged with monitoring biases in item content and modifying content appropriately to reduce such biases, proprietary assessment vendors frequently take substantial precautions to preserve test security to reduce faking concerns and employ psychometricians tasked with maintaining item fairness and functioning.

Beyond selection, we also see potential in the usage of subclinical assessment devices as a training tool. One concern raised by Dhanani et al. and others is the potential for biases to manifest themselves into dangerous behaviors and decisions in ambiguous or high-stress situations. Many officer shooting incidents are the result of decisions made with mere seconds or even less time to assess and evaluate potentially dangerous situations. Knowing how officers are prone to behave in such contexts from subclinical dark personality assessment may enable trainers to teach them how to deal with their own anxieties and biases, and to deescalate or reevaluate situations. New officers could partner with experienced officers who could model and mentor effective policing behaviors and the value of restraint.

Whether for selection or for training, we believe that assessment and utilization of subclinical personality measures is ideally suited for law enforcement contexts. Policing is an indispensable service and warrants the highest level of attention from the government, the community, and organizational psychologists. A better understanding of what the job entails and how best to design selection and training for police officers is needed. We believe that the utilization of subclinical measures of personality potentially represents an important step in achieving that goal. For the safety and welfare of our communities, and of the police officers themselves, we must be ready to explore, adapt, and implement selection and training protocols that promote safe, respectful, and unbiased behaviors in our police forces.

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