

***The Pre-employment Clinical Assessment of Police Candidates:  
Principles and Guidelines for Canadian Psychologists***

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***Preface and Rationale***

Identification and selection of acceptable police candidates is a complex and multi-step process. The Canadian Police Sector Council has articulated a comprehensive process by which appropriate candidates can be identified, and candidates who are likely to be unsatisfactory police officers can be eliminated from consideration (see *A Guide to Constable Selection: A Best practice Approach and Research Update* (July, 2011, hereafter to be referred to as the PSC Guide).

The current Guidelines describe one aspect of the selection process outlined in the PSC Guide, the clinical psychological assessment. The purpose of the clinical assessment is primarily to identify candidates who exhibit personality traits, behaviour patterns or psychological characteristics that are likely to be problematic in the police workplace. The clinical assessment is intended to contribute information to be considered in the overall assessment of suitability, but it is not a selection decision in and of itself.

As is stipulated in the PSC Guide, there are a number of ways in which psychologists and other specialists with expertise in employment selection and measurement can be involved in the pre-employment selection and assessment of police candidates. At the broadest level, they may play an integral role in the overall development of a selection process. They may be involved in activities such as conducting job analyses, identification of job-related competencies, and development of a range of procedures to identify suitable candidates. They may also participate directly in the job selection process through assessments of various types of competency and relevant personality characteristics. This set of Guidelines does not speak to that broad continuum of activities but rather assumes it has been completed at the organizational level, prior to the assessment of individual candidates. These Guidelines also do not speak to the assessment of job-related reasoning, problem-solving, intellectual ability or other job-related cognitive abilities. Rather, these Guidelines address a narrower aspect of the employee selection process, the issue of the identification of personality and behavioural characteristics that may either enhance or interfere with successful performance as a police officer and thus affect the degree of risk to the individual, the organization or the public. In other words, these Guidelines are concerned with types of assessments that are generally referred to as “clinical” assessments of candidates, which include both identification of characteristics which may be inconsistent with identified selection criteria, and also identification of positive characteristics related to suitability criteria as determined through job analysis (see PSC Guide).

Suitability, in the context of police pre-employment assessments, generally refers to the presence of personal factors that effectively contribute to human reliability in the particular occupation and the absence of factors that might pose a risk to the individual or the society. The clinical assessment is of course not the sole determinant of suitability, but it may contribute to the overall assessment of suitability.

Notably, a presence or history of mental illnesses does not necessarily imply that a candidate would not meet the selection criteria. However, behavioural patterns associated with some mental illnesses MAY be inconsistent with selection criteria, and thus may be identified in the clinical assessment for further consideration in the selection process. Similarly, a person with no history of any mental illness may well display psychological characteristics that have a negative impact on the eventual selection decision..

One challenge that faces Canadian psychologists when they carry out clinical assessments is that there is no general Canadian standard for such assessments. Although some provinces have developed procedures for their own jurisdictions (e.g., Alberta and Ontario), Canadian psychologists often rely on American processes and legal precedents. Although informative, some US standards and precedents do not transfer well to the Canadian context.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned above, the principles outlined in this document presuppose that the psychologist conducting the assessment is working from the framework of a pre-existing comprehensive hiring process and a job analysis that has identified and verified the characteristics and psychological abilities necessary for the position of police constable. The current Guidelines refer specifically to the competency framework as outlined in the PSC Guide. However, there are other similar lists of characteristics elsewhere in the literature and the field. The PSC Guide identifies the following characteristics as being relevant in this context:

- adaptability
- ethical accountability and responsibility
- interactive communication
- problem-solving
- risk management
- stress tolerance
- teamwork
- reliability
- emotional stability
- work ethic/conscientiousness

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<sup>1</sup> Consider for example that a number of States in the US have specific legislation that precludes hiring of any person who has any Axis 1 disorder as a police officer. In Canada, this would be considered a violation of human rights legislation in most if not all jurisdictions.

The principles described in the present document are intended reflect a reasonable standard that a clinical assessment should meet. On the one hand, the decision to deny someone employment is not to be made lightly and not to be made based on weak or unreliable data. On the other hand, hiring the wrong people in policing can have significant adverse consequences. The proposed model balances organizational and societal needs with the rights of the candidates and the professional standards of the psychologist. Depending on the needs and expectations of the individual police service as well as the overall hiring structure, the methods, goals and extent of the psychological assessment may vary. Given the variety of police organizations in Canada, it is not reasonable that a single uniform procedure for the clinical assessment would be applicable to all police services. However, with rare exceptions, it would be desirable for the eventual conclusions reached by psychologists with regard to a specific assessment to be more or less uniform. In other words, in most cases, two different psychologists assessing the same candidate, but for two different police services, should reach the same conclusion. Hopefully, this eventuality can be facilitated by specifying a common set of principles, and by identifying the best common practice as it currently is in Canada.

These Principles and Guidelines draw on a number of other documents and Guidelines; generally processes that are consistent with these Guidelines would also be consistent with:

- the aforementioned PSC Guide
- Alberta Police Recruit Selection Standards: Guidelines for Alberta Psychologists
- OACP Constable Selection System: Guidelines for Psychologists
- IACP Pre-Employment Psychological Evaluation Guidelines<sup>2</sup>
- Reports of the working group on psychological assessment from the PSC<sup>3</sup> Other sources listed in the bibliography

This document is composed of two sections. The first, the Statement of Principles, sets out the standards for “best practice” in this area, and identifies the enduring principles that should be adhered to by any psychologist conducting a pre-employment clinical assessment for a police candidate. The second section is a set of Guidelines for Users, developed and compiled based on two national surveys of psychologists who work with police services, and the input of members of the Special Interest Group in Police Psychology of the Criminal Justice Section of CPA . Users should bear in mind that practice changes over time, as new tests and new knowledge emerge. These Guidelines may provide direction to the novice or to those who are interested in comparing their own techniques to those used by others in this field. They reflect contemporary practice in Canada as well as the contemporary knowledge base.

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<sup>2</sup> Readers should bear in mind that the IACP Guidelines reflect US law which differs in relevant ways from Canadian law

<sup>3</sup> These reports can be obtained from the Police Sector Council—[www.policecouncil.ca](http://www.policecouncil.ca)

***Principles for Conducting Pre-employment Clinical Assessments:***

*Principle I:*

*The psychologist should have sufficient foundational knowledge to engage in the process of pre-employment clinical assessment for police officers*

1. A person who provides the pre-employment clinical assessment component of police-officer selection should be registered or licensed to practice in the jurisdiction in which the assessment takes place.
2. The psychologist should have sufficient knowledge of, and understanding of, both normal and abnormal behavior to appropriately conduct a clinical assessment. (Although many psychologists who conduct “clinical” assessment will be licensed to practice clinical psychology, this is not necessarily the case. For example, counseling psychologists and industrial/organizational psychologists may also have this skill set.)
3. The psychologist should be familiar with the process of employment selection in general, as well as with the research literature and practice as relates to the predictive ability of the various sources of information. While it is unlikely that the clinical psychologist will be responsible for the design of the overall selection process, they should have sufficient foundational knowledge in this area to determine whether their contribution to the process is appropriate.
4. The psychologist should possess a strong background and comprehensive knowledge of psychometric theory, including experience and familiarity with the specific tests employed. In particular, understanding of the nature of the standardization sample and norms for a given test, as compared to the population being tested, is essential.
5. The psychologist should have familiarity with the research literature specific to hiring for police and public safety positions.
6. The psychologist should be well acquainted with the laws, standards and ethical guidelines that are relevant to employment selection for police officers, including but not limited to the following:
  - a. Professional codes of conduct and ethical standards;
  - b. Employment standards legislation;
  - c. Privacy legislation;
  - d. Human rights law;

- e. Police standards acts (or equivalents).

*Principle II:*

*The Psychologist should have sufficient understanding of the specific needs of individual police services with whom they work*

1. The psychologist should be familiar with the overall hiring/selection process of each police service for which they conduct assessments, so that their assessments are consistent with and appropriate within the specific process of each police service, as well as the local needs for that police service.
2. The psychologist should be familiar with the specific job-related competencies identified as essential and desirable by a given police service—or in the absence of a local competence structure, be familiar with and utilize a generally applicable set of competencies, such as those articulated in the PSC Guide.
3. The psychologist should reach an understanding with each police service as to the exact nature and extent of the assessment that is required, including clarification of whether the assessment will go beyond the identification of unsuitable candidates to include information about other assets and liabilities.
4. The psychologist should reach an agreement with each police service in regard to matters of confidentiality and custody of the files, the nature and extent of consent, and the distribution, sharing, and protection of test results. This agreement must be consistent with law, the psychologist's standards of professional conduct, and local policy.

*Principle III:*

*The psychologist should conduct a comprehensive and defensible assessment process that conforms to generally accepted standards in the profession*

1. The psychologist should obtain informed consent from the candidate being assessed, regardless of whether consent has already been obtained elsewhere in the selection process.
2. The psychologist should clarify with each police organization the nature and extent of background information available for the assessment, clarify the assessment process, and

determine who is to provide specific information (police service, psychologist). This information may include—but is not limited to-- substance use history, employment history, and sexual behaviour problems, for example.

3. The psychologist should select specific tests and measures whose application for this purpose is evidence-based and supportable by research, or (in the case of newer measures) by foundational theoretical work that is defensible and credible. Ordinarily, the selection of tests and measures will be made in consultation with those responsible for the design and/or implementation of the selection process. These tests should also meet the criteria recommended by the Standard for Psychological and Education tests, promulgated by the American Psychological Association as well as the Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Tests, from the Society for Industrial Organizational Psychology.
4. The psychologist should be able to identify clear links between any measure selected, and the aforementioned behaviours, personality characteristics and job requirements.
5. The psychologist should base his/her conclusions on sufficient data sources in order to ensure that the conclusions are robust, valid and defensible.
6. Conclusions should also be consistent with the referral question and data in that a clinical assessment may be appropriate to address the extent to which a candidate displays the characteristics which have been identified as relevant to police work. However, the clinical assessment does not provide a definitive answer to the question of whether a particular candidate should or should not be hired. The clinical assessment is not a selection process in and of itself but rather a component part of a selection process.
7. Psychologists' standards of professional conduct require that they identify limits to the certainty with which diagnoses, opinions, or predictions can be made about individuals or groups. Conclusions drawn from any assessment process must be supported by the available data, consistent with generally accepted standards, and should not exceed the data available. Definitive recommendations should not be based on scant data.
8. Reports and conclusions should be expressed in clear and understandable language that is easily interpreted by police human resources personnel. Reports must contain sufficient information so that a police service can reasonably interpret the findings, assess the degree to which they should be relied on, and understand the relevant strengths and weaknesses of the candidate with regard to the factors being assessed.

#### *Principle IV*

*The timing of the psychological assessment, in the context of the overall hiring process, should be consistent with the nature and goals of the assessment.*

1. Assessments addressing psychological strengths and weaknesses may be completed at various times during the hiring and selection process, once the candidate has been identified as meeting the other basic requirements for the position as police constable. The exact timing of this aspect of an assessment should be determined when the overall selection process is designed, taking into account the sequence of other aspects of the process.<sup>4</sup>
2. Assessments addressing potentially sensitive characteristics that may be protected under human rights legislation, such as history of mental illness, should only be conducted once a candidate is being seriously considered for hire and has demonstrated other basic job competencies as determined using procedures such as those outlined in the PSC Guide.

Given #1 and #2, a psychological assessment may be completed at one point in time or at more than one point in time in the hiring process. The assessment of strengths and weaknesses may occur either early or later in the process, while the assessment of mental illness and psychopathology (which may in some contexts be considered a medical assessment) will generally occur later, at a time at which the candidate has been demonstrated to meet the basic requirements for the position.

3. Ideally the psychological assessment will be iterative and interact with other components of the selection process. Although it is important that more invasive parts of the assessment not be conducted too early in the process, it is also important that the psychological assessment not be conducted too late in the process. Results of the psychological assessment may inform inquiries made in conjunction with components such as reference checks and background checks—just as reference checks and background checks may identify questions which could be addressed in the psychological assessment.
4. It is also important that the clinical psychological assessment not be deferred to the extent that a decision has already been made de facto, making the clinical psychological assessment purely a formality.

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<sup>4</sup> Typically, a clinical psychologist will not be responsible for the design of the overall selection process.

## *Practice Guidelines*

These Practice Guidelines are intended to reflect both the above Principles, and the current optimal practice in Canada. They are in essence the operationalization of the Principles.

- A. *The overall process:* The acceptable police pre-employment clinical assessment would take place in the context of a comprehensive hiring process and a pre-existing job analysis with identified competencies.
- B. *Measures:* In Canada, the measures and processes commonly used to address the questions of both psychopathology and suitability, as defined in these competency frameworks include:
1. A measure of normal personality characteristics that includes traits known to be relevant to policing and identified in the PSC or other job analyses. (The 16PF and the NEO-PI-R are commonly used for this purpose in Canada but other measures may be appropriate), and
  2. A test of abnormal psychological and personality traits with empirical evidence that links it to police work. (The MMPI-2 and the Personality Assessment Inventory [PAI] are commonly used for this purpose in Canada but other tests may also be appropriate), and
  3. At least one additional source of data, such as the following:
    - a. a file review or review of other background information including analysis of the candidate's resume and work history and other written application materials,
    - b. a structured follow up interview to clarify test scores and responses, and further investigate specific characteristics and traits,
    - c. secondary tests of psychopathology and suitability (including but not limited to the MCMI III, or specific measures of anger and aggression) as needed, depending on the strength and cohesion of the aforementioned information, measures of specific job related attributes such as anger management, impulsivity, or other relevant attributes,
    - d. specific police selection tools such as the MPULSE or the Inwald Personality Inventory.

4. In all cases however, the measures selected should be related to the competencies identified and consistent with the overall selection system design.

C. *Conclusions*: Based on the findings, conclusions should be

- a. confined to, and consistent with, the data obtained,.
- b. consistent with the current state of research and knowledge in regard to score interpretation, cut-offs and other data analysis.

D. *Reports*: The report to the police organization should indicate:.

- a. a general classification of the candidate as suitable, suitable with reservations, or not suitable (or a similar mutually acceptable categorization) with regard to the specific criteria being assessed,
- b. clear identification of areas of concern when the candidate is viewed as not suitable or suitable with reservations,
- c. comments or ratings on any characteristics that were identified as strengths or weaknesses,
- d. an explanation of the basis and the information upon which the conclusions were made,
- e. any recommendations for further information collection in regard to the candidate (which may include additional background information, references, or further testing),
- f. the psychologist's opinion as to the strength and validity of the assessment and recommendations.

E. The clinical assessment should not represent a selection decision but rather should provide information that can be utilized within a comprehensive selection system in order to inform an eventual decision.

*NB: Although in rare cases the presence of a mental disorder may become evident in a pre-employment assessment, psychologists should exercise extreme caution in deciding if that information will be reported to a police service, bearing in the mind the implications it may have under Human Rights legislation. In most instances, reports should not identify the presence or absence of a mental illness or disorder but should as noted reflect the assessment of the candidate in view of the identified job-related criteria.*

## ***Key References***

These recommendations do not constitute a comprehensive review of the literature. However they are informed by the following documents which may be useful to the reader.

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