

The Relationship between Integrity and Personality in Law Enforcement Applicants

Jennifer L. Tooker

Abstract

Suitability to the law enforcement profession requires assessment on several levels—physical, mental, and, perhaps most importantly, integrity. Police officers are required to make decisions about the behavior of others. Is the behavior right or wrong, e.g., criminal? Good or bad, e.g., dangerous? Without sound moral fortitude and legally acceptable determinants of these qualities, the police officer becomes susceptible to mishandling his or her authority. Expectancy of police officers to possess high moral standards is no secret. Yet, many police applicants, even those of seeming superior moral character, are often compelled to purposefully provide false information during the application process. A survey of current literature indicates that willingness to violate one's own personal integrity in order to gain entry into a setting of high professional integrity may be much more complex than simply employing competitive edge tactics. This paper seeks to edify some of those more obscure matters which may underlie the practice of deception by candidates during the police application process. The concept of deception and some of the basic motivators for this practice will be incorporated into an examination of personality types of those who are typically drawn to public service, investigating whether or not a relationship exists between personality type and a willingness to deviate from a normal practice of integrity. Finally, various social constructs will be examined and offered as possible explanation for such deviation from norm, e.g., violation of one's own personal integrity, in seeking employment in a position of professional integrity.

The Relationship between Integrity and Personality in Law Enforcement Applicants

*"On my honor, I will never betray my badge,
my integrity, my character or the public trust."*
(IACP, 2011)

Law enforcement is a position of honor, integrity, and public trust. The profession of public safety, in general, is instituted in the exemplar that those who are selected to, or choose to, serve the societal interests of public duty are best able to provide this service if they, themselves, possess and practice high moral bounds, i.e., integrity. It seems to reason, then, that integrity is high among the traits for which law enforcement candidates are, and should be, screened regarding suitability to the profession.

Suitability to the law enforcement profession requires assessment on several levels. For example, physical agility tests are designed to assess an applicant's projected capabilities to meet the physical demands of police service. Psychological evaluations, similarly, are designed to assess mental fitness for police service. The daily ebb and flow of critical stressors police officers face underscore the need for such fitness. This daily ebb and flow of critical stressors combine with constant deliberations of right and wrong, good and bad. This is the focus of integrity testing.

Police officers are required to make decisions about the behavior of others. Is the behavior right or wrong, e.g., criminal? Is the behavior good or bad, e.g., dangerous? Without sound moral fortitude and socially, legally acceptable determinants of these qualities—right, wrong, good, bad—the police

Jennifer Tooker is a certified LE and PCSOT polygraph examiner, having served professionally in uniform and civilian law enforcement capacities. She is a former research biologist, possessing a master's degree in forensic psychology, and nearing completion of her Ph.D. in general psychology. Ms. Tooker can be contacted at Jennifer.Tooker@1-veritas.com.

officer becomes susceptible to mishandling his or her authority, which would violate public trust. Again, this is the purpose of integrity testing law enforcement candidates.

The expectation of high standards of integrity is well-known, to the general public, and, as well, to the police applicant. Yet, as the author has personally observed through extensive professional experience, many police applicants, even those of seeming high moral character, and who otherwise possess traits desirable to the profession, are often compelled to practice deception, i.e., purposefully provide false information, during the application process.

Undoubtedly, entry into the profession of law enforcement is exceptionally competitive. Competitive edge, therefore, is presumed to be an underlying influence in any decision to practice deception within this setting. Moreover, there are basic, nominal motivators to deceive, even for those of usual high integrity. However, a survey of current literature indicates that willingness to violate one's own personal integrity to gain entry into a setting of high professional integrity, as in some law enforcement candidates, may be much more complex than simply employing competitive edge and nominal deception tactics.

This paper seeks to edify the more obscure matters which may underlie the practice of deception by candidates during the police application process. The concept of deception and some of the basic motivators for its practice will be incorporated into an examination of personality types of those who are typically drawn to public service. This intends to investigate whether or not a relationship exists between personality type and a willingness to deviate from a normal practice of integrity. Finally, various social principles will be examined and offered as possible explanation for such deviation from norm, e.g., the violation of one's own personal integrity in seeking employment in a position of professional integrity and public trust.

Literature Review

In order to develop greater insight into motivations, specifically, by law enforcement candidates, to risk integrity violation in order

to become a representative of integrity, i.e., a police officer, a foundational understanding of what constitutes deception is necessary. With this understanding come theories and motivations for practicing deception. Personality traits and types have been typified by findings in studies concerning the kind of person who is most often the type to answer the call of public service and duty. These studies may expose why the vulnerability of integrity seems to exist in otherwise highly honorable individuals.

The Psychology of Deception

Lying has likely been in practice since the earliest times of human communication, and methods for establishing integrity followed soon thereafter. Abrams (1989) describes some of the most primitive methods of integrity testing. In Ancient Greece, Diogenes, the Cynic, is said to have long sought an honest man as he carried a lantern in daylight throughout Athens. Early Asian societies tested those suspected of lying by having him or her chew on dried rice, because spitting out rice that remained dry was an indication of guilt, or deception. Similarly, early Arabs tested truthfulness by applying a hot blade to a suspect's tongue, on the premise that honest individuals with nothing to fear would maintain wet, cooling tongues which would not be scorched by a hot blade as would the dry tongue of a liar. Truth serums, hypnosis, trial by torture, and trial by third degree are methods that have been employed in more recent times to gain access to the truth (Abrams, 1989). So, truth, and therefore integrity, have been pursued and expected since the dawn of man.

Intuitively, we know what lying is, or so we think, but a lie is not necessarily a deception. Commonly, a lie is considered to be "something that is said that is not true or implies a false idea" (Lankowski, 2003). Some lies are certainly told without malice, e.g., "No, dear, you look perfect in that dress," and some lies are told even without the teller knowing the information is false. However, this is where lies and deception part company. Deception is more specifically defined, and, importantly, is wholly related to *intent* (Ekman, 2001; Grandpre, 1993; Vrij, 2000), whereas simple lying, as previously described, may lack any form of malice or intent whatsoever.

Although there are varying definitions of deception based upon the context in which the term is used, even the most benign definitions implicate intent as a requisite property of deception. Grandpre (1993) presents the core of deception simply as "...an intentional act designed to change another person's belief" (p. 2). So, whereas lying does involve relaying false information, an intention to mislead may be lacking. Without intent, such an act is not deceptive, because deception requires that the deliverer of the message knows the information is false or untrue and that he or she will deliver that message with a premeditated purpose (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996; Ekman, 2001; Vrij, 2000).

Especially as applicable to psychophysiological research, what constitutes deception has evolved into the more current and more appropriately descriptive definitions posed separately, but similarly, by Ekman (2001) and Vrij (2000), who are both highly regarded as experts on deception in current times (DePaulo & Morris, 2004; Granhag & Strömwall, 2004).

In Ekman's (2001) view, deception requires not only deliberate intent to mislead another person, but to do so without providing advanced notice, or having been given permission to do so. Vrij (2000) agrees with Ekman but takes the definition a step further by addressing whether or not the attempt at deception is *successful*. In Vrij's assessment, the mere *attempt* to deceive is, in and of itself, deception, regardless of whether or not the deception is effective. So, to further stipulate, Vrij (2000) defines deception as "a successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue" (p. 15).

Although the distinction between *lie* and *deception* may seem a small one, and the words are certainly used interchangeably, even herein, it is a significant difference of which to understand conceptually. The polygraph, for example, cannot detect lies, unless those lies are being told with intent, as in deception. Recall, deception is an intentional, willful act, not simply an "unintentional misremembrance" (Granhag & Strömwall, 2004, p. 5). Thus, it is clearly

established that deception is a conscious act, and not subliminal.

White, big fat, and harmless little lies. There are numerous ways to carry out deception. Lying, concealing or omitting, equivocating, and telling incomplete truths or "half-truths" are the general ways in which people engage in "information falsification" (Lankowski, 2003, p. 8). Lying is largely distinguished as either outright lies, exaggerations, or subtle lies. Vrij (2000) defines these classes of deception as follows. Subtle lies are truths which are used to intentionally mislead; exaggerations are overstated information or facts which are relayed in a manner that exceeds the truth; and outright lies are blatant falsifications, where the information being sent is completely different from, or an actual contradiction to, the truth (Vrij, 2000). Interestingly, some studies have found that two out of three lies told in everyday life are outright lies or total falsehoods (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996).

Why lie? Given that deception is an "intentional verbal message that does not honestly reflect an individual's actual opinion" (Decaire, 2000, p. 2), it is not too difficult to understand why humans, including police applicants, engage in such behavior. The motivation to practice deception stems from several possibilities, which will generally fall into one of three categories: self-oriented, other-oriented, or a combination of self- and other-oriented lies (Vrij, 2000; DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996). Self-oriented lies are those lies told to make the teller appear better or to gain some personal advantage. Such would be the case when someone inflates his or her résumé to reflect either more experience or more achievement than what is authentic. Other-oriented lies are those which are told to make others look better or to benefit another person, such as a parent sending a note to school regarding a child's absence due to illness, when in fact, he or she allowed the child to stay home to complete an assignment that was due. Social lies are an example of the third category, combining both a benefit to self and to others, such as when one feigns an excuse not to attend the boss's holiday party.

According to Vrij (2000), half of all lies told are those told for personal gain, the self-

oriented type. Detection of deception, in general, is most concerned with these self-oriented lies. To a lesser extent, other-oriented lies are the subject of query as well, since a person may falsely confess to a crime or conceal knowledge about a crime, which would be examples of other-oriented lies told to benefit someone else. However, overall, the reasons people lie generally include making a positive impression, protecting self or other from embarrassment or disapproval, obtaining an advantage in a situation; or avoiding punishment (Vrij, 2000).

Of these reasons to lie, the most common reason seems to be to avoid punishment (Barland, 1984; Barland & Raskin, 1973; Davis, 1961; Grandpre, 1993). This would surely be the case with criminal polygraph, where the subject is often attempting to avoid the possible consequence of incarceration. It would also be likely motivation for a deceptive applicant during a screening pre-employment polygraph, where the 'punishment' is likely to be perceived by the examinee as denied employment resultant of 'failing' the polygraph. However, as will later be made more apparent, the other reasons stated as to why people lie, especially those regarding self-image, are aligned with very influential social principles which may be seen as tolerant of deception in certain circumstances.

For the time being, though, comprehending types of lies and reasons for lying has served to narrow focus in examining motivation for practicing deception, i.e., intentional lies told, particularly by law enforcement candidates hoping to gain entry into a field of honor, integrity, and public trust.

Police Applicant Personality Types

Personality profiles have been found useful in predicting how police officers deal with stress (Lau, Hem, & Berg, 2006). Therefore, this becomes an important screening factor in selecting police candidates. It is often heard that the police profession attracts Type A personalities. This refers to a high-strung versus easy-going, or Type B, personality dichotomy suggested, first, in the 1950's. The label, Type A, emerged from a study showing persons with this type of personality were at significantly greater risk

for coronary disease (Rosenman, 1975) (as cited in Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2008). Relevant to our purposes, Type A individuals are considered to be ambitious, aggressive, controlling, highly competitive, impatient, status-oriented, time-conscious, and tightly-wound. These traits are not unlike the traits identified below as being generally associated with "police personalities". So, Type A may informally be an appropriate label for some police officers and officer candidates. However, for purposes of this paper, personality types and traits will be restricted to those descriptors developed through social psychology research and the application of psychological instruments, such as personality tests.

The rescue personality. Mitchell and colleagues have been attributed with defining the concept of the "rescue personality" (Wagner, 2005). This personality is said to describe people who work in emergency services as being "inner-directed, action oriented, obsessed with higher standards of performance, traditional, socially conservative, easily bored, and highly dedicated" (para. 3). Other studies have attributed additional characteristics to those seeking high-risk occupations, such as police work, which include fearlessness, low communion, low openness, low agreeableness (Fannin & Dabbs, 2003), aggressiveness, tough mindedness (Fabricator, Azen, Schoentgen, & Snibbe, 1978), and "low" neuroticism (Fenster & Locke, 1973). In studies using Eysenck's model of personality theory (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975), "low" neuroticism, in police and other public safety personnel, is considered to be a "positive attribute" (Wagner, 2005), §4).

Police personality tests. The psychological instruments and scales often employed in evaluating police officer candidates include scales aligned with well-known personality theories, such as the 16 Personality Factors (16PF) model (Cattell & Krug, 1986); Eysenck's Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975); and the Five Factor Model (Costa & McCrae, 2011). This list is not exhaustive by any means, merely a representative sample. The different measures in each of these scales provides further insight into the characteristics that are somehow—experientially or

otherwise—perceived to be relevant to identifying potentially good police officers.

Cattell's 16PF (Cattell & Krug, 1986) is an instrument that uses the following sixteen dimensions: cool/warm; concrete thinking/abstract thinking; affected by feelings/emotionally stable; submissive/dominant; sober/enthusiastic; expedient/conscientious; shy/bold; tough minded/tender minded; trusting/suspicious; practical/imaginative; forthright/shrewd; self-assured/apprehensive; conservative/experimenting; group-oriented/self-sufficient; undisciplined self-conflict/following self-image; and relaxed/tense (Cattell & Krug, 1986). Eysenck's conceptualization of personality combined three prevailing factors—extraversion, neuroticism, and psychotism (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). Each of these “factors” represents a broad dimension of specific traits, and the personality profile is built with the EPQ utilizing self-report of these specific traits. Based on etymologically described behavior, the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality conceptualizes five dimensions of personality—extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 2011).

These three personality models, as mentioned, are not the only ones that exist, or that are used in testing police applicants. The purpose in presenting them here is to demonstrate the types of personality tests used, which, in turn, provide a look at the character traits of greater importance in selecting law enforcement personnel. It should not be assumed, however, that such testing criteria is universally applicable, nor is the idea that all law enforcement officers are so closely natured in any specific personality type. Yet, it does provide information as to a certain degree of trait commonality among law enforcement officers.

Other than one rescue personality?

As Wagner (2005) is careful to instruct, many studies on personality type have been conducted without attention to specific profession. For instance, volunteer rescuers were found to have different primary character traits when compared with paid professionals (Thompson & Solomon, 1991), with similar differences also seen between firefighters and paramedics (Fannin & Dabbs, 2003). Police

officers, firefighters, and paramedics, are all considered public safety personnel, and although they are often subject to similar risks and stressors as emergency responders, as a whole, their distinct duties and profession-oriented stressors are significantly different. The influence of specific type of high-risk occupation has been sparsely studied to date, however, and may or may not impact character traits attributable to any specific high-risk occupations.

One further difference cited in personality traits of various high-risk occupation personnel is worth addressing here. Police officers and military personnel are often considered to possess similar drives and personality traits, at least by layman and personnel hiring managers at numerous law enforcement agencies across the country. It is certainly true that after completing service, many former military personnel seek employment in local or federal law enforcement jurisdictions. There are data here to suggest, however, that the duties and preferable personalities of police and military personnel may not be so precisely aligned. Neuroticism is a personality trait addressed by different personality screening measures, even in law enforcement (Cattell & Krug, 1986; Costa & McCrae, 2011; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). In low, regular doses, neuroticism has been seen to be a likely positive attribute in police officers (Wagner, 2005). Although the study is single in nature and more than thirty years old, Fenster and Locke (1973) found that police officers scored lower for neuroticism than did non-police civilians. This is in contrast to the findings of Hui and colleagues (2001) in their study of military rescuers, who had been identified to exhibit high neuroticism.

This noteworthy difference speaks to two separate issues—the first being that police and military personalities cannot be assumed to be one in the same. Second, one study does not a universal application make. The Hui et al. study (2001), as just described, involved looking at traits of Chinese military personnel. Although war and military share some universal concepts and situational exposures, cultural differences in upbringing and culturally different behavioral norms can certainly influence the impact of both war and military personality. So, there should be no

assumption that Chinese personality findings are directly transferrable to American personality traits. Further, although heightened neuroticism was described in the Chinese military personnel, this characteristic may be biased in assessment due to the goal of the Hui et al. study, which was to assess the relationship between neuroticism and posttraumatic stress disorder.

There is no scarcity of interest or study with regard to police personality. However, unlike the umbrella definition that Eber's "rescue personality" (1991)(as cited in Lorr & Strack, 1994) would like to convey, there has not been established any single law enforcement personality type. Several characteristics, though, seem to be apposite to police officer candidates, while some predominant in actual police officers. The goal in police officer selection, then, should be one of matching desirable officer traits with assessed or projected evaluative traits in candidates.

So far, the literature has presented us with a glimpse into police personality, but, what of the police *applicant* personality?

Police Candidate Personality

Eber (1991) (as cited in Lorr & Strack, 1994) hoped to find a "distinct police personality style" (p. 200) when he analyzed several large-scale studies of law enforcement candidates (N=15,000+ police candidates from more than 60 law enforcement agencies throughout the United States [(Eber, 1991)(as cited in Lorr & Strack, 1994)]). Although he was also looking for an explanation for incidents of occasional police brutality, a goal of which he fell short, Eber did establish what was considered to be a distinctive police personality profile. He used the Clinical Analysis Questionnaire (CAQ) (Krug, Cattell, & IPAT, 1980), which combines Cattell's 16PF with 12 measures of psychopathology.

With regard to the psychopathology measures, the police candidates were found to be relatively free of psychopathology (i.e., no explanation for brutality), less depressed, less confused, less given to self-harm, higher in thrill-seeking, and higher in disregard for social conventions, all as compared to the general population (Eber, 1991)(as cited in Lorr & Strack, 1994). With regard to the police personality profile as developed by 16PF

scale scores, the typical police officer candidate was found to be highly controlled, low in anxiety, strongly tough-minded, and slightly dependent. This pattern was expressed by the five second-order factors of the 16PF—Extraversion, Anxiety, Tough Poise, Independence, and Control (Krug et al., 1980).

Lorr and Strack (1994) conjectured that Eber's study was so large that it may have "masked the presence of multiple personality profiles" (p. 201). They re-examined part of Eber's data and applied cluster analytic techniques. By doing so, the researchers hypothesized two or three distinct police personality types would be revealed. The intent of cluster analysis was to group subjects into subsets or clusters based on similarities across a set of characteristics. Lorr and Strack divided samples of Eber's original subjects into clusters based on results from the psychopathology portion of the CAQ. Subsequently, three clusters were formed based on the constructs of Emotional Adjustment, Integrity/Control, Intellectual Efficiency, and Interpersonal Relations.

The results of Lorr and Strack's (1994) re-examination of Eber's data (1991)(as cited in Lorr & Strack, 1994) did support their hypothesis and unmasked three distinct personality types. The largest cluster group resembled Eber's "typical cop"—quite controlled or self-disciplined, independent or socially bold, extraverted, (emotionally) tough, and very low in anxiety. In the second largest group, the police candidates were found to be highly controlled and tough, but low in anxiety level. Police candidates from the third group were found to be tough and independent, borderline low in anxiety, neither high nor low on Control, but much lower on Control than either of the other two groups. Also, even though this cluster was the smallest group, more than one quarter of these candidates were "associated with relatively high levels of paranoia, schizophrenia, psychasthenia, and other symptoms" (Lorr & Strack, p. 206). They appeared no more or less tough or independent than the "typical cop" described by Eber and represented by the largest group in the analysis conducted by Lorr and Strack (1994), but compared to this same group, were found to be lower in self-control and extraversion, and much higher in anxiety.

The three separate and distinct personality types, as described by Lorr and Strack (1994), from the perspective of this author's professional experience, represent a practical and recognizable difference personally observed in police officer candidates. The idea of three different personality types certainly is more realistic than a single distinct type, as proposed by Eber (1991)(as cited in Lorr & Strack, 1994).

Interestingly, no studies have been undertaken in which actual police officers, themselves, were asked to describe personality traits or characteristics desirable in police officers, but a study of police field training officers has (Detrick & Chibnall, 2006). Those who had supervised entry level police officers for their first year in the field, described the most desirable police traits to include low levels of neuroticism and high levels of conscientiousness and extraversion, with average levels of openness and agreeableness. Note that, "low" neuroticism, previously seen as a possible positive attribute, in combination with high conscientiousness, is considered highly desirable in many job selection contexts, and is often an important predictor of actual job performance (Barrick & Mount, 2005).

Essentially, the literature has described the typical police officer as someone who is self-disciplined, dedicated, fearless, somewhat thrill-seeking, tough-minded, low in anxiety, low sociability, high conscientiousness, and low neuroticism (Eber, 1991)(as cited in (Detrick & Chibnall, 2006; Lorr & Strack, 1994; Wagner, 2005). Those who apply for positions in law enforcement have been observed to be comprised of three different personality types—1) one which aligns with that of the typical police officer; 2) one that is more highly-controlled and tough than the typical police officer; and 3) one that is potentially problematic in that twenty-five percent of this personality type were observed to have significant symptoms of such disorders as paranoia, schizophrenia, psychasthenia, and others (Lorr & Strack, 1994). (See Table 1 for a summary of personality traits in police officers and applicants.)

Given that there is a preferred personality type for law enforcement

personnel, even though one has not yet been specifically defined, personality testing presents value to the police officer selection process. It, therefore, is necessarily inherent that personality testing evaluate coping strategies, sense of self, self-perception, and perception of others.

Social Pressures, Survival Pressures, Perception, and Social Influence

Not everyone is suitable for police work. As mentioned early on, screening for law enforcement candidates is done at physical, psychological, and behavioral levels, with integrity a critical focus of primary screening techniques, such as polygraph examination and psychological evaluation. In order to assemble the full model of why people with certain personality types or character traits seem to be attracted to the profession of law enforcement, it would be useful to gain a sense of what might be so attractive. Salary has seldom been named as a feature of attraction to any high-risk occupation. This may be a relevant consideration when assessing the personality type and drives of the person who seeks the challenges and stressors of police work.

Police stressors. In addition to the common stressors of adult life in working America—work interference with family life, excessive workload, lack of control, and lack of support (Morash, Haar, & Kwak, 2006)—law enforcement personnel face several other sources of significant stressors which can be grouped as "community interaction" stressors. For example: hostile suspects and offenders, emotionally distraught victims (Garcia, Nesbary, & Gu, 2004), and uncivil actions with co-workers (Collins & Gibbs, 2003). Added to encountering these negative interactions, whether community or coworker, is the stress of *faking* emotions. Social stress places significant emotional demand on the police officer. In general, however, the police officer is restrained from expressing related emotions, maintaining an "appropriate demeanor", whether this is the expectation of the public, the individual officer, or the police department (Adams & Buck, 2010).

Most applicants to the police profession are aware of inherent dangers to police work, the scheduling demands, and the psyche of being on duty "24/7". Rather than

Table 1. Personality Traits of Police Officers and Candidates

POLICE OFFICER TRAITS		ENTRY LEVEL	POLICE CANDIDATE TRAITS ⁷		
	Eber's "Typical Cop" ⁵	OFFICER TRAITS ⁶	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
inner-directed ¹	highly controlled	"low" neuroticism	quite controlled or self-disciplined	highly controlled	tough
action oriented ¹	low in anxiety	high conscientiousness	independent or socially bold	tough	independent
obsessed with higher standards of performance ¹	strongly tough-minded	high extraversion	extraverted	low in anxiety	borderline low in anxiety
traditional ¹	slightly dependent	average openness	(emotionally) tough		not low or high control, but lower than Type 1 or Type 2
socially conservative ¹		average agreeableness	very low in anxiety		25% chance of paranoia, schizophrenia, psychasthenia, other symptoms
easily bored ¹					
highly dedicated ¹					
fearlessness ²					
low communion ²					
low openness ²					
low agreeableness ²					
aggressiveness ³					
tough mindedness ³					
"low" neuroticism ⁴					

¹"rescue personality" as described in Wagner, 2005; ²Fannin & Dabbs, 2003; ³Fabricator, et al. 1978

⁴Fenster & Locke, 1973; ⁵Eber, 1991 (as cited in Lorr & Strack, 1994); ⁶Detrick & Chibnall, 2006; ⁷Lorr & Strack, 1994

the stress of faking emotions, as described above, applicants consider the only stressor to be the inherent dangers. With the personality features of candidates and officers alike, presented previously, it is easy to understand how situations which would be perceived as extreme stressors by the non-police population would instead be perceived as *challenges* by the police applicant. Nonetheless, attraction to high-risk, potentially life-shortening stressors, and perceiving all this as a desired “challenge”, naturally requires personality testing. Revisiting personality testing briefly will present beginning conceptualizations as to how positive personality characteristics, indicating suitability for police work, may be the same characteristics that contribute to integrity violation, or the risk of lying to get the job.

Positive response distortion.

Personnel selection is considered a high-demand situation (Detrick, Chibnall, & Call, 2010). Police candidate selection is likely to be an even higher-demand situation, based on the idea that most people who seek positions in law enforcement have sought to do so for quite some time, and many have lived their lives as free as possible of what may be construed as derogatory behavior, knowing they someday wanted to become a police officer. Under such conditions, applicants are frequently motivated to create a good impression (Schmit & Ryan, 1993). In terms of personality inventories, this means selecting responses to inventory items to reflect highly positive attributes and matching responses to perceived job demands, rather than providing “factually” accurate responses (Detrick et al., 2010). This is known as positive response distortion.

Response distortion can be either positive or negative. Contrary to positive response distortion, negative response distortion occurs when a person exaggerates his or her faults while underreporting or denying his or her virtues. Although there are some situations when one might perceive it would be advantageous to appear flawed, e.g., the military draft for some, negative distortions are rarely observed in the context of personnel selection (Detrick et al., 2010)

Positive response distortion arises when a person wants to present him- or

herself in a more favorable light—more favorable than what is real or true. This would include over-reporting basic virtues and underreporting faults (Detrick et al., 2010), whether self-perceived or actual. Interestingly, positive response distortion was first considered a form of deception, albeit not necessarily conscious and a form of self-deceptive enhancement (Paulhus, 1984)(as cited in Detrick et al. 2010). More recently, however, positive response distortion is viewed as a form of bias, egoistic versus moralistic (Paulhus & John, 1998 as cited in Detrick et al., 2010). Egoistic bias is seen as a function of agency or action and speaks to the power and administration through exaggerated social status, intellectual status, and “superhero” attributes. Moralistic bias, on the other hand, is a function of sense of communion or sociability and speaks to social harmony through claims of “saint-like” attributes and exaggerated agreeableness and dependability (Detrick et al., 2010).

Recalling some of the personality traits of police officers and candidates identified by Eber (1991)(as cited in Lorr & Strack, 1994) and by Lorr and Strack (1994), the traits most align with an egoistic bias. However, keeping in mind the high-demand situation of applying for a desired job and the concepts of positive answer distortion, it may make more sense for the police candidate to exercise his or her moralistic bias, presenting a more socially desirable image and complying with perceived external social perceptions. This was indeed found to be the case in several studies (Pauls & Crost, 2004; Pauls & Crost, 2005).

The prevalence of positive response distortion has been debated, with studies finding positive response distortion “rare” being criticized for utilizing study participants who actually were job incumbents who had been asked to answer as if they were applicants (e.g., Ryan & Sackett, 1987). In a study done where legitimate applicants as well as incumbents were utilized, positive response distortion was observed, in fact, to be high (Rosse, Stecher, Miller, & Levin, 1998). One of the more interesting results of this study pertinent to the current discussion is that there was considerable individual difference in positive response distortion, “exhibiting extreme levels of response distortion more than three standard deviations above the

mean” (p. 641). This gives pause to consider whether such a deviation is related to personality type, though this was not the intent of the study.

Although the specific prevalence of positive response distortion is not known among police officer candidates, or any specific job seeking population, indications are that its occurrence is far from rare. Additionally, the author would suggest that positive response distortion is not just instigated in personality testing. In the case of police applicants, response distortion has been observed in job application, completion of personal history statements, and during the pre-test interview of polygraph examination, which is not unlike a job interview. While perhaps a type of positive response distortion, these distortions are more easily understood in terms of self-presentation.

Self-presentation. Self-presentation is related to the theory of social desirability (Johnson, 1981), i.e., a person presents him- or herself in a manner he or she believes is most attractive to society. People generally have an image of themselves that they wish to convey, or with which they would like to be credited. Self-presentation is likely to vary, dependent upon the situation in which the image is being projected. For example, a person seeking forgiveness from the judge so he or she is not imposed with a “stiff fine” is apt to present an image of innocence, humbleness, and respect. That same person, at an interview for a job handling customer complaints may also want to present him- or herself as respectful, but rather than humble and innocent—connotatively timid features—may present him- or herself as bold and highly self-confident—traits more in line with the perceived duties of the job.

Self-presentation is the capacity one has, after surveying his or personality traits, to convey those items in an image of him- or herself, which he or she perceives meets the expectations or desires of the audience to whom the image is being presented (Johnson, 1981; Kassin et al., 2008). This seems like a perfectly acceptable thing to do, especially in the competitive environment of seeking a highly desired job.

Self-presentation and positive response distortion are related in their goal to present an image that is perceived desirable for the situation. As previously discussed, one of the criticisms in using personality inventories to classify police officer personality types is related to positive response distortion, especially since it has been suggested that personality inventories represent self-presentation, rather than self-report (Hogan, 1991). To clarify, self-report, ideally, is a source of *factual* information about the self, also referred to as “self-disclosure”, whereas self-presentation is a manner used to instruct others about how one is to be regarded (Johnson, 1981). An important distinction confers that self-presentation may include providing factual information about oneself, but it often overextends by providing information which may be false, in order to project that desired self-image.

Detrick, Chibnall, and Call (2010) suggest that such is precisely a concern in police officer applicants, who are generally applying for a strongly desired job under high-demand conditions. Also, as earlier alluded, individual differences in positive response distortion in personality testing of applicants can be considerably high. Since positive response distortion and self-presentation have the same goals, it is reasonable to consider the high demand of seeking a desired position, which is the usual case in law enforcement, will increase motivation even more, to inflate positive image through self-presentation. Law enforcement positions, being highly sought by highly driven, aggressive, and tough-minded individuals (Lorr & Strack, 1994), prime the police applicant, in particular, for exaggerated self-presentation. When one places a greater concern with self-presentation, as is suggested in some police applicants, then self-presentation taps into the concept impression management.

Impression management. Exaggerated self-presentation involves image projection that is not real, and in which incongruent beliefs are adopted. In this sense, it may seem as if self-presentation could lead to cognitive dissonance. However, the challenge to this theory is that self-presentation in the context of job-seeking, which is the context relevant to this paper, does not involve long-term adoption of

incongruent beliefs, but only those with temporary purpose, i.e., however long it takes to get through the psychological evaluation, the polygraph examination, or the panel review.

So, because the altered image is intended temporarily with purpose, the more fitting relationship of self-presentation lies with impression management, which is only concerned with momentary or situational appearance. Impression management is the process through which one manages information about him- or herself so that he or she may be viewed in the way he or she would like to be viewed (Carlson, Carlson, & Ferguson, 2011). Although the role of deception is not fully understood in the process of impression management, Carlson, et al. (2011) have found previously that impression management, as part of organizational behavior, which includes job-seeking, likely contains deceptive acts (Carlson et al., 2004)(as cited in Carson et al., 2011).

Carson et al. (2011) suggest that a motivation to enhance impression management with deception is strongly related to situations in which successful impression management is likely to result in significant benefits to the individual. Again with regard to the police applicant, desire to gain entry into the law enforcement field is typically decidedly desired by the applicant. The stakes for field entry are high and motivation to exercise every possible advantage arise, in part, from the limited availability of such positions, even in the best of economic times, creating an enormously competitive environment. Considering the personality traits of usual police applicants, there would also be suggestion of an inherent motivation to exercise every possible advantage to achieve the goal—“obsessed with higher standards of performance” (Wagner, 2005, para. 3), “fearlessness” (Fannin & Dobbs, 2003, p. 107), and “aggressiveness” (Fabricator et al., 1978, p. 63).

One thing that bears to mind in considering personality traits and motivations to impress is that the personality traits of police officer and officer candidates, as described herein, were developed through administering various personality tests—the

very instruments which have, also herein, been called into question with regard to validity due to some probable degree of positive response distortion. Even though the personal observation through professional experience of the author recognizes the various identified traits to be contextually accurate, the caution is worthy.

The issue of deception in impression management is one which requires delineation between the incidences of deception which portray personal or situational attribution, e.g., is the applicant a liar, or is he or she lying to get the job? Understandably, deceptive practice is not desirable in a position of publically and professionally assumed integrity. However, as most things are relative and can be viewed circumstantially, is there a degree to which lying is acceptable in the police application process? Although intended as a rhetorical question, it may be that the answer will be found in the definition of “integrity”, a word with the primary meaning addressing the “state of being complete” (*Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, 2008).

Conclusion and Summary

This review of the literature substantiates the concept that even those who want to join the ranks of honor and integrity to become police officers may engage in deception to do so. The hope, from the standpoint of social desirability and public perception is one of two scenarios, with preference being for the first—people who lie should not become police officers. However, the second scenario is more likely—the lie is a tool, not a character trait to gain something desperately desired.

Without going into the evolutionary strategy of lying and deception—worthy of an entire paper of its own—suffice it to say that people lie. And, with daily frequency (DePaulo, et al., 1996). And why lie specifically during the process of attempting to gain entry into a profession—law enforcement—that is dependent upon “truth, justice, and the American way” (Superman, circa 1950’s)? That is what this paper sought to illuminate, and is what this review of literature, in fact, satisfied to a large extent.

Within the examination of deception, reasons people engage in deception, and the types of deception people are most likely to engage in, it was clearly delineated that deception is an intentional act—the *deceiver* means to lead the *receiver* into a false awareness. The most common type of lie is the self-oriented lie—one that is told to make the teller appear better or to gain some personal advantage. This resonates self-presentation, which resonates self-image, which resonates self-determined, which resonates self-preservation, and so on.

“Self” is, in fact, the salient theme that has run throughout this entire discourse. This is not coincidence, however, especially after gaining insight into the trends in character traits and personality types common to the target population, i.e., police officer candidates. When this feature is paired with the practical application of various social principles, such as response distortion, self-presentation, impression management, and attribution, the manifestation of this self-salience becomes expected.

There are character traits that seem to explain why an otherwise worthy individual would risk being found deceptive during the application process to his or her desired profession. Aligning with some of the social principles that seem to provide some understanding for this less than desirable behavior of deception during the police application process are four of the most common reasons people engage in deception: 1) making a positive impression; 2) protecting oneself from embarrassment or disapproval; 3) obtaining an advantage in the situation; and 4) avoiding punishment. Immediately, it can be seen that the first two items in this list are related to self-presentation and impression management. “Obtaining an advantage in the situation” speaks directly to maintaining or establishing a competitive edge. These three features, together, are supported by what the police candidate may perceive as being necessary to achieve his or her goal—a noble goal, perhaps even held by a noble person. However, the nobility becomes tarnished by deception, at least as some would perceive.

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