

Expert Opinion

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Operational Psychology: An Emerging Discipline

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At a recent conference, an esteemed psychologist presented his work on violence risk assessment. Although there were a handful of psychologists present, the majority of the audience consisted of law enforcement investigators. The presentation began with an historical overview of the clinical violence risk assessment research. The psychologist then discussed the clinical versus actuarial risk assessment debate and their associated violence risk assessment tools. Finally, he presented his own research and the development of his violence risk assessment tool. As he went through his slides, the reaction of the audience ranged from copious note-taking, to confused looks, to glazed eyes. Being a Clinical and Forensic Psychologist by training, I appreciated the valuable information presented by my colleague. However, in my current role as an Operational Psychologist, I understood why my colleague's presentation was lost on this crowd.

What my colleague missed was the importance of understanding the limitations of his research to the audience's investigative mission. His presentation would have been excellent for an AP-LS conference where the audience consists of academic researchers and forensic clinicians. But when briefing an audience of "operators" (police officers, detectives, and special agents), clinical research falls on deaf ears. With this type of audience, the information must be operationally useful.

Traditional violence risk assessment tools – both actuarial and clinical – were created for clinical settings. They provide models for making determinations of violence risk in specific clinical situations, such as determining discharge from a treatment facility. Such tools lose their utility when applied to investigations of stalking, workplace violence, school violence, and other threat assessment crimes. Actuarial tools fail due to the low base rates of severe targeted violence. Clinical tools fail because the role of mental illness may be unknown or nonexistent, and clinical techniques such as interviews and psychological tests may provide partial, inaccurate, or irrelevant information related to the potential act of targeted violence (Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, & Berglund, 1999).

Providing law enforcement investigators with violence risk factors used in controlled clinical settings is not useful for their operational missions. Constructs such as psychopathy, substance abuse, and mental illness do not empower special agents with the ability to make decisions on a subject's violence risk and strategize a case management plan. They are the fodder of psychologists. What is more important is having the special agent investigate these factors within the context of the violent behavior, including the circumstances of, patterns of, and specific triggers to the vio-

lent behavior. This information is passed to an Operational Psychologist, who assesses and interprets the information for the special agent. The two then partner together to develop a threat assessment of the subject and design a strategy to manage the subject's violence risk (Gelles, Sasaki-Swindle, & Palarea, 2002).

Operational Psychology: The Birth of a Field

The field of Operational Psychology first emerged in the mid-1940s. At that time, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS – precursor to the CIA) produced *The Assessment of Men*, a book describing the use of psychologists for personnel assessment and selection for counterintelligence military operations (OSS, 1948). Since then, a variety of fields have employed psychologists in applied roles, including the military, law enforcement, and intelligence communities. Although Operational Psychologists are employed in a wide variety of contexts, little has been published on this field. A current PsycINFO search for "Operational Psychology" revealed only two comprehensive publications on this discipline: the book *Military Psychology: Clinical and Operational Applications* (Kennedy & Zillmer, 2006) and a special issue on Operational Psychology in the journal *Military Psychology* (2006).

Given the scarcity of publications on Operational Psychology, definitions of this specialty are rare. In their book chapter *Introduction to Operational Psychology*, Williams, Picano, and Roland (2006) defined Operational Psychology in military settings as: "... the actions by military psychologists that support the employment and/or sustainment of military forces (and in particular military commanders) to attain their strategic goals in a theater of war or a theater of operations by leveraging and applying their psychological expertise in helping identify enemy capabilities, personalities, and intentions; facilitating and supporting intelligence operations, designing and implementing assessment and selection programs in support of special populations and high-risk missions; and providing an operationally focused level of mental health support." Within their definition, Williams et al. (2006) describe two key points: 1) "... the need for operational psychologists to maintain both mental agility and flexibility in understanding and applying the tools of their profession to support the operational art of warfare," and 2) "... the need to maintain the ability to anticipate the strategic objectives of the ends, ways, and means, the demands of supported commanders, and the anticipation of how to apply psychological expertise to either enhance combat effectiveness or mitigate risk."

Thus, the focus of operational psychology is to provide psychological knowledge, skills, and abilities to the operational mission.



Whether the mission involves assisting a military commander to convince an enemy to surrender or assisting a special agent with managing a workplace violence case, the focus is on consulting with operators on their missions. The Operational Psychologist serves as a translator of mindset and behavior to the operator.

Operational Psychology Consultation for Law Enforcement Agencies: A Partnership Between Investigators and Psychologists
The concept of having psychologists as staff members of law enforcement agencies is by no means new (Reese, 1995). For years, Police Psychologists have provided clinical services to police officers, such as therapy, fitness for duty evaluations, and personnel selection. Some Police Psychology duties have expanded to operational functions, such as consulting on hostage negotiations (Greenstone, 1995; Rowe, Gelles, & Palarea, 2006). Despite this occasional overlap, the two disciplines are uniquely different. Although both are staffed by Clinical Psychologists, Police Psychology embraces its clinical service-provider role. Alternately, Operational Psychology distances itself from the clinical service-provider role and instead aligns with a consultant role. It focuses not on the providing clinical services to police officers, but instead, consulting with police officers on their investigations. Thus, in Police Psychology, the client is often the police officer, whereas in Operational Psychology, the client always is the agency.

One key difference in Operational Psychology is the assimilation of the psychologist into the organization's culture. Where Police Psychologists need to keep a distance from their officer corps – due to the ethical conflict of having multiple (clinical and non-clinical) relationships – Operational Psychologists are required to immerse in the agency's culture and build relationships with their investigator partners. Williams et al. (2006) describe the importance of this concept as viewing the world through the operator's eyes. They state that the psychologist “has a responsibility to learn and understand the military organization they operate within and the likely enemies they face.”

In the law enforcement arena, the psychologist assimilates to the law enforcement culture. Law enforcement is a relationship-based culture. From their beginnings in the police academy, officers are trained on a partnership model. Officers assist each other with investigative duties, pair up on interrogations, and cover each other during a shootout. In order to earn the trust and respect of the investigators, and establish their credibility, Operational Psychologists embrace the law enforcement culture, building relationships with their investigators and “partnering” with them when consulting on cases (Gelles, Sasaki-Swindle, & Palarea; 2002). To facilitate this relationship-building, it is preferred that Operational Psychologists are full-time staff members of their agencies rather than part-time contractors. Like the investigators, the Operational Psychologists need to incorporate the agency's identity into their personal identity, thus building a loyalty to the agency, its mission, and its staff. To further facilitate relationship-building, the Operational Psychologists should be embedded within the investigator corps rather than centralized in an office next to senior leadership. Having regular and frequent contact with investigators strengthens relationships and fosters consultation opportunities.

Although the partnership model provides the basis for consultation, Operational Psychologists are always mindful of their consultant role. In the clinical treatment environment, psychologists are empowered as strategic decision-makers; they make decisions on admissions, discharges, and treatment strategies. However, in the operational environment, Operational Psychologists serve as an adjunct resource to investigators. The Operational Psychologist is not a special agent and does not conduct the investigation or operation. Similarly, the Operational Psychologist does not enter into investigator functions, such as conducting interrogations or collecting evidence at crime scenes. It is paramount that Operational Psychologists “stay in their lanes” by always remaining respectful of the professional and ethical boundaries of their expertise.

The NCIS Psychological Services Unit: A Model for Operational Psychology Law Enforcement Consultation

The Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) provided fertile soil for the development of an Operational Psychology program. NCIS is charged with conducting investigations and operations involving the Department of Navy, which includes the Navy, Marine Corps, dependents of service members, and Department of Navy properties. The NCIS mission is three-fold: preventing terrorism, protecting secrets, and reducing crime. Its small size (approximately 1200 civilian special agents stationed worldwide), unique missions, and innovative culture allowed for opportunities to show Special Agents how psychology can enhance their skill sets and mission success in their investigations and operations. Pioneered by Dr. Michael Gelles (Chief Psychologist, 1993-2006) as a unit of one, the NCIS Psychological Services Unit (PSU) currently consists of four full-time staff psychologists who consult on numerous aspects of the agency's missions. The staff psychologists are stationed at NCIS Headquarters and embedded within each of the agency's directorates, allowing them to have regular interactions with the special agents who monitor the field's investigations and operations. The PSU staff members frequently travel to the agency's field offices around the world to provide onsite support to field agents and are deployable within 24 hours of a crisis situation.

As a result of the unique missions worked by NCIS, the agency established a number of units that focus on specific types of criminal investigations. Within these units, the PSU staff members provide specialized psychological consultation techniques:

- **Counterterrorism Department:** Consultation on counterterrorism investigations and operations, identifying pre-attack behaviors using the behavioral-based threat assessment methodology, assessment of communicated threats
- **Threat Management Unit:** Conduct behavioral-based threat assessments and develop management strategies on stalking, workplace violence, communicated threat, arson, sabotage, high-risk domestic violence, and other major cases
- **Family Violence and Sex Crimes:** Conduct behavioral assessments of sex crimes and family violence cases involving adult and child victims
- **Death Investigations:** Conduct psychological reviews of suicides, homicides, and other major death cases; perform psychological autopsies to assist medical examiners in determin-

ing manner of death; compile the suicide letter/video database; participate in the Death Review Board

- Cold Case Homicide Unit: Conduct victim and suspect assessments; assist with developing operational plans
- Criminal Operations Unit: Conduct undercover agent/cooperating witness assessments for cold case homicide investigations, death investigations, narcotics operations, and other criminal operations

Additionally the NCIS PSU has published a number of articles and book chapters regarding our operational consultation duties. For further information, see:

- Threat Assessment: A Partnership Between Law Enforcement and Mental Health (Gelles, Sasaki-Swindle, & Palarea, 2002)
- Threat Assessment: A Risk Management Approach (Turner & Gelles, 2003)
- Crisis and Hostage Negotiation (Rowe, Gelles, & Palarea, 2006)
- Psychological Autopsy: An Investigative Aid (Gelles, 1995)
- Al Qaeda's Operational Evolution: Behavioral and Organizational Perspectives (Borum & Gelles, 2005)
- Al Qaeda Related Subjects: A Law Enforcement Sample (Gelles, McFadden, Borum, & Vossekuil, 2005)
- Consulting to Government Agencies – Indirect Assessments (Morgan, et al., 2006)
- Ethical Concerns in Forensic Consultation Regarding National Safety and Security (Gelles & Ewing, 2003)

The Way Ahead: Evolution of the Operational Psychology Field

The field of Operational Psychology is young, but quickly evolving. Applications of Operational Psychology have now been defined in the military, intelligence, and law enforcement communities. Given the increasing number of students pursuing graduate degrees in Forensic Psychology, with the ultimate goal of providing psychological consultation on law enforcement investigations, the supply of Operational Psychologists will quickly outweigh the demand of law enforcement agency needs. In order to further the development of Operational Psychology in the law enforcement arena, the psychology community needs to educate law enforcement investigators and their senior leadership on the benefits of psychological consultation on their investigations. Furthermore, the existing Operational Psychology community must define itself by establishing guidelines for graduate psychology degree requirements, core competencies, on-the-job training/mentorship programs, and best practices. Potential ethical conflicts must also be anticipated and addressed. Once these guidelines are in place, Operational Psychology for law enforcement agencies will quickly develop as an established field within applied clinical psychology.

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