

The Need for a Child Protective Services Investigator Psychological Profile

by Daniel Pollack and Khaya Eisenberg

Abstract

This article explores the need for personality profiling when hiring Child Protective Services (CPS) investigators. It begins by looking at the use of profiling when hiring law enforcement officials as an analogy. The article then goes on to discuss the unique stresses of CPS work and explores the possibility that improved screening of candidates may prevent the burnout and turnover pervading this sensitive field. Ideal personality characteristics for CPS workers are identified, followed by a discussion of an emerging movement in some parts of the United States to screen prospective CPS workers more rigorously.

Keywords: Child Protective Services, personality profiling, hiring procedures

Introduction

Personality traits are elemental, stable, essential predispositions that cause individuals to respond consistently to the world around them in particular ways. One's constellation of personality traits, or personality profile, may make an individual more or less suited to fulfilling the requirements of a particular profession. This is especially relevant in the sensitive field of child protective services, which presents a great many complex demands and challenges for its workers. Is there an ideal personality profile for a Child Protective Services (CPS) investigator?

We know that hiring the wrong CPS investigator may result in tragedy. To avoid such a calamity, it seems logical to conduct an in-depth evaluation of a candidate's psychological profile and to compare the individual's results with a psychological profile that has been demonstrated as ideal for this profession. This evaluation could take the form of a battery of

standardized personality tests, not dissimilar to those given for potential police officers. The screening of prospective police officers involves an elaborate process that includes, among other things, a high degree of psychological testing and personality assessment.

Of course, screening is necessary for law enforcement employees since police officers are empowered to use lethal weapons, which can have irrevocable consequences. Still, it is surprising that such procedures are used rarely if at all for selecting a child protective services worker¹ whose decisions also carry serious, if longer-term, consequences. A review of the professional literature yields little information on personality profiling for these professionals.

This article advocates exploration of an ideal CPS investigator psychological profile with certain characteristics forming the cornerstone of that profile. Since a great body of literature is devoted to psychological characteristics that are relevant for performance as a police officer, a brief review of this literature serves as a first step toward creating a similar personality profile and screening process for child protective services investigators.

Use of Psychological Profiles in Law Enforcement

The 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the use of psychological assessment as part of the screening process for law enforcement candidates². Police departments have become more cognizant of the costs of hiring unqualified employees, including a wasted investment of time and money spent training candidates who later prove unable to fulfill their duties,³ lateness and absenteeism which lead in turn to understaffing, overtime pay, and a breakdown of trust among personnel,⁴ the financial and time costs of disciplinary interviews,⁵ and the costs of police brutality and law-

suits.⁶ As such, much research is devoted to identifying the traits that make up an ideal profile for a police officer and the best ways to evaluate these traits.

Guller⁷ lists several traits that are relevant to effective performance as a police officer. These traits include intelligence, honesty and integrity, racial objectivity, the ability to accept supervision, motivation to carry out one's duties, dependability and responsibility, and the ability to be assertive without being authoritarian. Other traits include low anxiety and high control,⁸ good judgment, lack of impulsivity, conflict resolution skills, team orientation, appropriate motivations for entering the field, ability to deal with tedious or boring tasks, willingness to take reasonable risks, absence of substance use, absence of serious psychological problems, stress tolerance, and absence of sexual disturbance.⁹ While many of these traits are relevant to any job (e.g., good judgment; honesty and integrity), some are particularly important for the work of a police officer.

Fischler¹⁰ lists the best methods for screening police officers. He recommends that this screening be completed only by a licensed psychologist and suggests that the screening include objective, validated psychological instruments and a face-to-face, standardized interview only after the psychologist has had the opportunity to review all available background information and test data. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) has been found to be a useful tool in screening prospective police applicants,¹¹ but many evaluators include at least one additional test and possibly an entire battery, selecting from among the California Psychological Inventory (CPI), the Sixteen Factor Personality Questionnaire (16PF), and the Inwald Personality Inventory, among others.¹² Overall, potential police officers undergo a demanding screening process prior to being hired.¹³ Much research evidence supports the use of personality assessment as part of the selection process for law enforcement personnel.¹⁴

In contrast to this multi-step selection process for police officers, instituted in great measure because they are permitted to use lethal force, the selection process for child protection workers varies nationwide¹⁵ but overall seems far less rigorous. A strong case has been made that psychological screening is indicated for selecting capable employees for many law enforcement roles. This would be particularly true in the sensitive and challenging area of child protection.

CPS Stressors and the Need for Improved Screening

Child Protective Services workers' jobs frequently involve heavy caseloads, encounters with negative situations, and hostile interactions with clients, resulting in a high potential for burnout.¹⁶ Burnout is a likely factor influencing the high degree of turnover in this field, with a rate of turnover reported between 30-40% and an average duration of employment cited as less than two years.¹⁷ While studies of burnout in CPS workers frequently cite external causes, e.g., intensity of the job experience and social environment of the work setting,¹⁸ there seems to be little attention paid to the person-environment fit and psychological characteristics of the individual worker, which may be interacting with the demands of the job. This is a discrepancy that has been noted in burnout literature more generally as well.¹⁹

It is also worth noting that in addition to the likely relevance of individual characteristics to burnout, researchers have posited that social workers' biases, personalities, and temperament influence their decisions in general.²⁰ Many individual traits have been found to influence not only burnout but also job performance, job satisfaction, counter-productive work behaviors, and turnover.²¹ Clearly, the personality structure of CPS workers is an area that warrants examination.

Personality Profile Characteristics for a CPS Investigator

Is there an ideal personality profile for a CPS worker? The Bureau of Labor Statistics²² lists the following personal qualities as important for a social worker: compassion, listening skills, organizational skills, people skills, problem-solving skills, and time management skills. Parents have reported that they value CPS workers who are caring, respectful, accepting, friendly, genuine, responsive, supportive, and trustworthy.²³

Findings from research on burnout may also be considered in formulating an ideal personality profile for a CPS worker, given this tension-ridden field's high propensity for burnout and turnover.²⁴ In general, individuals who are high in neuroticism (i.e., anxiety, insecurity) and low in extraversion (defined as cheerfulness, enthusiasm), conscientiousness (efficiency, diligence), and agreeableness (warmth, supportive-

ness) were found to be more susceptible to burnout.²⁵ The research suggests, then, that a personality profile that includes emotional stability and low reactivity to stress, positivity, commitment to working hard, and a tendency to be good-natured would be ideal for avoiding burnout in any profession.

In fact, research specifically relevant to CPS workers found that workers who were high in agreeableness were particularly successful when it came to collaborating with other professionals, sharing information with families, and involving families in planning.²⁶ Another important finding was that CPS workers who were highly conscientious and able to avoid emotional over-involvement with their clients were able to focus on their work duties and complete tasks efficiently, whereas emotional exhaustion led to increased burnout.²⁷ Realistic ideas about the outcomes of their work were also related to better performance for child protective services workers.²⁸ These findings further support the utility of personality profiling in making hiring decisions.

Current Screening Procedures for CPS Investigators

Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a standardized procedure that is widely used for ensuring that child welfare workers possess ideal qualities. Testing requirements vary from state to state.²⁹ Although national agencies recommend a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social work or a related field, and an extensive relevant knowledge base, as recently as 2008 only 40% of states enforced this requirement.³⁰

This is unfortunate as research suggests that child welfare workers with degrees in social work have higher job performance and lower turnover rates.³¹ Flexibility when it comes to educational qualifications, labeled the "de-professionalization" of the field,³² may result in a broader range of child welfare workers. In contrast, in the police force, where the field of applicants is restricted to those meeting certain criteria, the psychological functioning among applicants may be more homogeneous.³³

Researchers have recommended some alternative selection techniques for child welfare agencies. High scores on a cognitive ability test, which measures reasoning, language comprehension, memory, and word fluency, have been found to correlate with employee job performance ratings on critical child welfare tasks

such as assessing safety, risk, and progress.³⁴ Child protective services workers who scored high on a measure of critical thinking were found to be particularly adept at communicating information, writing reports, and evaluating and monitoring safety.³⁵

Other recommended instruments include a situational judgment test measuring the applicant's decision-making skills and a measure of time management and organizational skills.³⁶ Additionally, the Western Regional Recruitment and Retention Project³⁷ noted that personality tests assessing such traits as stress tolerance, adaptability, dependability, attention to detail, initiative, sociability, conscientiousness, extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, and openness to experience could be helpful. They add that tests evaluating a candidate's honesty and integrity have been found to predict job performance and counterproductive behaviors.

Fortunately, efforts are being made to improve the screening process for CPS workers.³⁸ The University of Nebraska's Center on Children, Family, and the Law now uses both a self-assessment tool and a standardized, structured hiring interview to screen prospective CPS workers.³⁹ The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) contracted with Performance Assessment Network (PAN) in 2006 to create a pre-employment screening instrument for CPS applicants. This test quantifies applicants' skill sets so as to hire more qualified candidates and minimize turnover.⁴⁰

In addition to a test of basic knowledge, DFPS also administers the Six Factor Personality Questionnaire (SFPQ). This instrument assesses agreeableness, extraversion, independence, industriousness, degree of being methodical, and openness to experience, qualities which are then calculated to determine the degree to which a candidate is recommended for the position.⁴¹ Evaluators note that after instituting this pre-employment screening, DFPS experienced a lower degree of turnover, although they acknowledged that the new screening process may have been one of many factors.

The movement toward improved screening of CPS investigators is a positive step. Hopefully, the future will see an expansion of this movement so that careful, standardized evaluation of prospective CPS investigators becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Conclusion

Stress, burnout, and high turnover rates limit the entrance and stability of the CPS investigator workforce. Would a psychological profile hurdle serve to further constrict the entrance of interested applicants or would hiring a more suitable employee at the outset curb the burnout and turnover rate? The answer is, of course, unknown.

While there is no single type of lawyer, teacher or soldier, members of the same occupation may display personality similarities. Not everyone is suited to be a CPS investigator. The work style demanded of CPS investigators is unique. It is a brutally reality-based job that needs applicants with stable personality characteristics that will positively affect judgment, performance and error management. Research offers considerable evidence to support the relevance of personality characteristics for success in various occupations, and CPS investigator is likely among them. Consequently, there is a pressing need for more reliable empirical data to identify the relevant criteria related to the ideal personality profile and contours of a CPS investigator, and the best ways to evaluate prospective candidates for this job so that the screening process may be improved. ©

About the Authors

DANIEL POLLACK is Professor, Yeshiva University, School of Social Work, and a frequent expert witness in child welfare cases. Contact: dpollack@yu.edu; Phone: 212-960-0836; Address: 2495 Amsterdam Avenue #818, New York, NY 10033

KHAYA EISENBERG is a clinical psychologist and researcher working in the greater New York City area.

Bibliography

- Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'Social workers', *Occupational outlook handbook, 2012-3 edition*. U.S. Department of Labor (2012-2013). Available: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm>.
- Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP), 'Policy Page: A better understanding of caseworker turnover within child protective services', Austin, TX (2009). Available: www.cppp.org.
- Cochrane, Robert E., Tett, Robert P., & Vandecreek, Leon, 'Psychological testing and the selection of police officers: A national survey,' *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 30(5) (2003): 511-537.
- Davidson-Arad, Bilha, & Benbenishty, Rami, 'Contribution of child protection workers' attitudes to their risk assessments and intervention recommendations: A study in Israel', *Health and Social Care in the Community* 18(1) (2010): 1-9.
- Doris, John, Mazur, Rosaleen, & Thomas, Marney, 'Training in child protective services: A commentary on the Amicus Brief of Bruck and Ceci (1993/1995)', *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 1(2) (1995): 479-493.
- Fischler, Gary L., 'Psychological examination of peace officer applicants: Theory and practice', *Minnesota Police Chief*, 17 (1997): 35-37.
- Forero, Carlos G. et al., 'A longitudinal model for predicting performance of police officers using personality and behavioral data', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 36(6) (2009): 591-606. DOI: 10.1177/0093854809333406
- Garbarino, Sergio et al., 'Personality profiles of special police officers,' *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 27(2) (2012): 99-110.
- Graef, Michelle I., & Potter, Megan E., 'Alternative solutions to the child protective services staffing crisis: Innovations from industrial/organizational psychology,' *Protecting Children* 17(3) (2002): 18-31. Available: http://ccfl.unl.edu/publications/cwtraining/Graef_Potter.pdf.
- Graef, Michelle I., Rohde, Tara L., & Potter, Megan E., 'An intake in-basket test for child protective services trainees,' *Training and Development in Human Services* 2 (2002): 56-60.
- Guller, Matthew (2004). Predicting performance of law enforcement personnel using the candidate and officer personnel survey and other psychological measures, Doctoral Dissertation, College of Education and Human Services, Seton Hall University, New Jersey. (Order No. 3130121, Seton Hall University, College of Education and Human Services). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, , 90-90 p. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/305049657?accountid=15178>. (*prod. academic_MSTAR_305049657*).
- Leung, Patrick, & Willis, Nicole, 'The impact of Title IV-E training on case outcomes for children serviced by CPS', *Journal of Family Strengths* 12(1) (2012): Article 9 Available at: <http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol12/iss1/9>.
- Maiter, Sarah, Palmer, Sally, & Manji, Shehenaz, 'Strengthening social worker-client relationships in child protective services', *Qualitative Social Work* 5 (2006): 167-186.
- McClure, Madeline, 'Stabilization and permanency of children in foster care', Unpublished paper presented at

the meeting of the House Human Services Committee Hearing (Washington, DC, 2008).

Performance Assessment Network, 'APS facility, APS in-home and CPS pre-employment test evaluation' (2007). Available: http://www.ccf.txstate.edu/Projects/Past-Projects/Title-IV-E-Federal-RegionVI-Roundtable/Past-roundtables/11throundtable/contentParagraph/0/content_files/file/2_12_07_Pre_employment%20Evaluation.pdf

Savicki, Victor, & Cooley, Eric, 'Burnout in child protective service workers: A longitudinal study', *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 15(7) (1994): 655-666.

Sellbom, Martin, Fischler, Gary, & Ben-Porath, Yossef, 'Identifying MMPI-2 Predictors of Police Officer Integrity and Misconduct', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 34 (2007): 985-1004.

Shusman, Elizabeth J., Inwald, Robin E., & Landa, Beth, 'Correction officer job performance as predicted by the IPI and the MMPI: A validation and cross-validation study', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 11(3) (1984): 309-329.

Strolin, Jessica, McCarthy, Mary, & Caringi, James, 'Causes and effects of child welfare workforce turnover: Current state of knowledge and future directions', *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 1(2) (2007): 29-52.

Swider, Brian W., & Zimmerman, Ryan D., 'Born to burnout: A meta-analytic path of personality, job burnout, and work outcomes', *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 76 (2010): 487-506.

U.S. General Accounting Office, 'Child Welfare: HHS could play a greater role in helping child welfare agencies recruit and retain staff' (2003): (p. 5). [On-line]. Available: www.gao.gov/new.items/d03357.pdf.

Vargas, Veronica (2005). Five-factor model of personality, burnout, and performance in child protective service work, Doctoral Dissertation, Alliant International University, California School of Organizational Studies, San Diego, CA. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (UMI No. 3166044).

Weiss, William U. et al., 'The Personality Assessment Inventory as a selection device for law enforcement personnel', *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 19(2) (2004): 23-29.

Western Regional Recruitment and Retention Project. SMARRT Manual (Strategies Matrix Approach to Recruitment and Retention Techniques). (2005). Denver, CO. Available: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/site_visit/co9.pdf.

Whitaker, Tracy et al., 'If you're right for the job, it's the best job in the world', National Association of Social

Workers (2008). Available: <http://www.naswdc.org/practice/children/NASWChildWelfareRpt062004.pdf>.

Endnotes

- 1 Michelle I. Graef & Megan E. Potter, 'Alternative solutions to the child protective services staffing crisis: Innovations from industrial/organizational psychology,' *Protecting Children* 17(3) (2002): 18-31.
- 2 Matthew Guller (2004). Predicting performance of law enforcement personnel using the candidate and officer personnel survey and other psychological measures, Doctoral Dissertation, College of Education and Human Services, Seton Hall University, New Jersey.
- 3 Robert E. Cochrane, Robert P. Tett, & Leon Vandecreek, 'Psychological testing and the selection of police officers: A national survey,' *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 30(5) (2003): 511-537.
- 4 Elizabeth J. Shusman, Robin E. Inwald, & Beth Landa, 'Correction officer job performance as predicted by the IPI and the MMPI: A validation and cross-validation study', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 11(3) (1984): 309-329.
- 5 *Id.*
- 6 Matthew Guller, see above.
- 7 *Id.*
- 8 Carlos G. Forero et al., 'A longitudinal model for predicting performance of police officers using personality and behavioral data', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 36(6) (2009): 591-606.
- 9 Gary L. Fischler, 'Psychological examination of peace officer applicants: Theory and practice', *Minnesota Police Chief*, 17 (1997): 35-37.
- 10 *Id.*
- 11 William U. Weiss et al., 'The Personality Assessment Inventory as a selection device for law enforcement personnel', *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 19(2) (2004): 23-29.
- 12 Cochrane et al., see above.
- 13 Sergio Garbarino et al., 'Personality profiles of special police officers,' *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 27(2) (2012): 99-110.
- 14 *Ibid.*; see also Forero et al. above.
- 15 John Doris, Rosaleen Mazur, & Marney Thomas, 'Training in child protective services: A commentary on the Amicus Brief of Bruck and Ceci (1993/1995)', *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 1(2) (1995): 479-493.

- 16 Victor Savicki & Eric Cooley, 'Burnout in child protective service workers: A longitudinal study', *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 15(7) (1994): 655-666.
- 17 Patrick Leung & Nicole Willis, 'The impact of Title IV-E training on case outcomes for children serviced by CPS', *Journal of Family Strengths* 12(1) (2012): Article 9; U.S. General Accounting Office, 'Child Welfare: HHS could play a greater role in helping child welfare agencies recruit and retain staff' (2003): 5.
- 18 Savicki & Cooley, see above.
- 19 Brian W. Swider & Ryan D. Zimmerman, 'Born to burnout: A meta-analytic path of personality, job burnout, and work outcomes', *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 76 (2010): 487-506.
- 20 Bilha Davidson-Arad & Rami Benbenishty, 'Contribution of child protection workers' attitudes to their risk assessments and intervention recommendations: A study in Israel', *Health and Social Care in the Community* 18(1) (2010): 1-9.
- 21 Swider & Zimmerman, see above.
- 22 Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 'Social workers', *Occupational outlook handbook, 2012-3 edition* (2012-2013).
- 23 Sarah Maiter, Sally Palmer, & Shehenaz Manji, 'Strengthening social worker-client relationships in child protective services', *Qualitative Social Work* 5 (2006): 167-186.
- 24 Savicki & Cooley, see above.
- 25 Swider & Zimmerman, see above.
- 26 Michelle I. Graef, Tara L. Rohde, & Megan E. Potter, 'An intake in-basket test for child protective services trainees', *Training and Development in Human Services* 2 (2002): 56-60.
- 27 Veronica Vargas (2005). Five-factor model of personality, burnout, and performance in child protective service work, Doctoral Dissertation, Alliant International University, California School of Organizational Studies, San Diego, CA.
- 28 *Id.*
- 29 Western Regional Recruitment and Retention Project. SMARRT Manual (Strategies Matrix Approach to Recruitment and Retention Techniques). (2005). Denver, CO.
- 30 Madeline McClure, 'Stabilization and permanency of children in foster care', Unpublished paper presented at the meeting of the House Human Services Committee Hearing (Washington, DC, 2008).
- 31 Tracy Whitaker et al., 'If you're right for the job, it's the best job in the world', National Association of Social Workers (2008).
- 32 Jessica Strolin, Mary McCarthy, & James Caringi, 'Causes and effects of child welfare workforce turnover: Current state of knowledge and future directions', *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 1(2) (2007): 29-52.
- 33 Martin Sellbom, Gary Fischler, & Yossef Ben-Porath, 'Identifying MMPI-2 Predictors of Police Officer Integrity and Misconduct', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 34 (2007): 985-1004.
- 34 Graef, Rohde, & Potter; see above
- 35 *Id.*
- 36 Michelle I. Graef & Megan E. Potter, 'Alternative solutions to the child protective services staffing crisis: Innovations from industrial/organizational psychology', *Protecting Children* 17(3) (2002): 18-31.
- 37 See above.
- 38 Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP), 'Policy Page: A better understanding of caseworker turnover within child protective services', (Austin, TX, 2009).
- 39 Graef & Potter, see above; Western Regional Recruitment and Retention Project, see above.
- 40 Performance Assessment Network, 'APS facility, APS in-home and CPS pre-employment test evaluation' (2007).
- 41 *Id.*