
# Preemployment Psychological Screening

## Among Correctional Officers and Effective Practice: Further Clarification and Explanation of Study

GARY E. CHRISTENSEN, PH.D.

I am pleased to offer for clarity further information regarding the relatedness and applicability of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory—2nd Edition (MMPI-2) for use in correctional officer preemployment screening. First, I must reiterate my reason for completing this research. To my knowledge, other than my own small, simple study, *there exists* ***no*** *research to date that validates the use of this instrument (MMPI-2) for preemployment screening of correctional officer candidates.* I must say that I find this curious, given the fact that it is the most widely used psychological instrument employed for this purpose.

There have been several studies that have attempted to validate the use of this instrument with police officer candidates; however, as happens so often within our business, researchers have not seen fit to take the time to study samples comprised solely of correctional officers. Rather, they have assumed that findings correlated with samples of police officers are generalizable and can therefore validate use on correctional officer groups. From my perspective, as a professional who has been committed to the betterment of our profession for over 24 years, *this major assumption on the part of researchers makes claims of applicability moot; for correctional officers' jobs are far different from those of police officers.*

I am flattered by the attention given my study by those who have contacted me as well as Dr. Ben-Porath, who has taken the time to review it in its short form as presented within *American Jails* (2002, Sept/Oct.). I must reiterate that the article that was published previously in *American Jails* represents a much-abridged version of my dissertation, which contains answers to questions raised within the text of Dr. Ben-Porath's response. However, for the benefit of this readership, I would offer the following responses to Dr. Ben Porath's observations.

Regarding the study sample, Ben-Porath raised the following questions and made the ensuing assumptions regarding the study sample:

1. Prospective candidates who were potential "poor performers" were screened out as a result of MMPI-2 testing and were therefore not included within the study sample that was populated by correctional officers employed for a period between 2 and 12 years.

Ben-Porath assumed incorrectly that poor performers were not hired within the facility studied. In fact, due to stringent civil service regulations and less-than-optimum hiring/interview practices, many candidates were hired despite being determined inappropriate or problematic by MMPI-2 outcomes. This questionable hiring practice actually contributed to a robust study with a significant range of candidates.

2. The fact that only officers were included who resigned or were fired 5 years prior to the study date omitted other potential "poor performers" who might have left or been terminated from employment previously.

Dr. Ben-Porath assumed incorrectly that other officers who might have been terminated or left employment were not included within the study. In fact, and again due to stringent civil service regulations and questionable employment practices, few officers were actually terminated and those terminated were included in the study. The period of 5 years was chosen to represent current trends and utilize current performance standards so that objective measurements could be utilized. These standards and measures did not exist in their current form previously; therefore, major, subjective assumptions would have had to have been made to compare MMPI-2 predictions to actual performance.

3. The study sample was small and therefore limited the statistical power with which conclusions might be drawn.

It is true that, relative to statistical analysis, a study sample of 100 is small; however, much of the existing literature claiming effective use of this psychological inventory utilizes samples that are considerably smaller. Why then would we be willing to accept these findings; yet question those that are less flattering?

4. The three performance variables (absenteeism, communication effectiveness, and performance of security functions) do not represent a comprehensive list of performance criteria for the occupation of correctional officer.

The performance variables (absenteeism, communication effectiveness, and performance of security functions) that were chosen for this study represent significant components of a correctional officer's day-to-day performance. In fact, in my opinion, they are representative of skill sets that are absolutely essential for effective performance within our business. Further, these performance variables were measurable through several areas of supervisory appraisal performance scales. It would have been interesting to hear from Dr. Ben-Porath regarding the comprehensive list of performance criteria to which he referred; however, he offered no explanation or indication of actual performance and/or measures that would be contained within such a list.

5. Indirect extraction of information related to a job performance from personnel files as opposed to having supervisors provide this information more systematically limited the validity of the study.

All information contained within the study was obtained from time usage summaries and written supervisory performance appraisals. Within such records, supervisors offered narrative explanation of Likert-style rating scales describing officers' performance in the aforementioned areas of performance. So, in fact, supervisors did provide this information quite systematically and in a format that is reliable as well as valid.

Dr. Ben-Porath stated that this study was limited to analysis of MMPI-2 standard scale scores. It is true that this study was limited to the standard scales or the core of the MMPI-2. It is also true that other scales have been developed and should be studied. However, most vexing is the fact that these scales do exist and are utilized currently despite the fact that there is no *research* proving their validity or reliability with correctional officer samples.

Perhaps most interesting is the fact that this study, while admittedly limited, mirrors the "optimal" solution to which Dr. Ben-Porath referred, for many officers were hired despite being deemed by the MMPI-2 to be marginal or inappropriate. It is true that those officers candidates who were found to have criminal records or extremely questionable pasts were not hired; however, it would be a major mistake to assume that these individuals also would have scored poorly on an MMPI-2 and would have been "poor performers."

Also telling is the fact that Dr. Ben-Porath seemed willing to accept the fact that within this study the MMPI-2 predicted with reasonable statistical certainty an officer's propensity for absenteeism. He also accepted as fact that there was some correlation with performance of security functions despite the study's conclusion that statistical conclusions were inappropriate due to insufficient statistical power. It is interesting that he would even consider these findings, given the significant limitation to which he referred. One must ask why Dr. Ben-Porath would be willing to assume the validity and reliability of the study for findings, which hold the MMPI-2 in a positive light, yet unwilling to accept those findings that are not so positive.

Dr. Ben-Porath's proposed alternative of a construct-based assessment rather than the use of a singular instrument such as the MMPI-2 is an excellent one. Within such an alternative, a battery of tests would be utilized to deter-

mine fitness for employment among correctional officer candidates. This approach represents one which I have advocated in the past. It would still be important to analyze the initial evaluative process based on actual performance in the field of corrections rather than make assumptions regarding its efficacy or applicability.

It is true that any such study would have some limitations or biases; for unless conducted in an extremely controlled environment such as a laboratory, the real world poses variables and limitations that are uncontrollable. However, it seems to this researcher that limited studies are better than none at all. We must not forget that we are spending precious tax dollars to assist us in our hiring decisions for psychological inventories that are untested and unproven for use with correctional officer samples. We must not assume that findings from other groups such as police officers are generalizable to our field. We must insist that research be conducted for the purpose of validating the use of the MMPI-2 or similar instruments or protocols, whether as a stand-alone or as part of construct-based assessments. It is exciting that experts such as Dr. Ben-Porath have shown interest in the use of these instruments for the ultimate betterment of our profession. Perhaps dialogue such as this will yield a process that will ensure, as much as is reasonably possible, that the correctional officer candidates we hire are most suited to negotiate the daily rigors that have become commonplace within the field of corrections.

*Gary E. Christensen has been employed within the correctional field for the past 24 years at the Dutchess County Jail and currently holds the rank of Major. He holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology and has researched many aspects of correctional practice. These include tactical operations, communications, assessment, and hiring, and transitional programming. Dr. Christensen is an NYS certified Master Instructor and for the past 15 years has instructed throughout New York State in various "Train the Trainer" topics ranging from unarmed defensive tactics to instructor development. He is also an adjunct graduate professor at Marist College. Dr. Christensen has worked with the National Institute of Corrections, the American Jail Association, and the American Correctional Association, and has served as a consultant to the Prison Service of Trinidad and Tobago. He has been involved extensively in the overarching work of the Dutchess County Criminal Justice Council, which serves as the expert advisory group to the Dutchess County government for all matters related to criminal justice policy and master planning. In April 2001, Dutchess County Executive William R. Steinhaus appointed Dr. Christensen Chair of this Council, and he continues to serve in this capacity.*

*As part of his responsibility for the overall operation of the Dutchess County Jail, Dr. Christensen authored and initiated the Dutchess County Jail Transition Program (DCJTP) to mitigate high rates of recidivism. Since November 1998, under the leadership of Dr. Christensen, the DCJTP has realized drastically reduced rates of recidivism yielding a positive effect size of .331.*

*He can be reached at (845) 266-5002.*