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International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice  
45 (2016) 103–119

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International  
Journal of Law,  
Crime and Justice

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# Selection practitioners' views on recruitment criteria for the profile of police officers: A comparison between two police organizations

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## Abstract

Social changes, associated shifts in police work, and cultural variations raise interesting questions about the ideal police applicant. These issues were explored by investigating key ‘suitability’ criteria for applicants to join the Swedish National Police and the Catalan Police in Spain. First, criteria and selection procedures in official documents were examined. Next, focus group sessions were carried out with selection practitioners about different criteria. Results indicate several similarities between the organizations in formal criteria and selection procedures, notably an emphasis on peace-making and problem-solving abilities. However, differences were found in areas such as loyalty towards the organization and differences that correspond to different organizational images. The views from the selection practitioners mostly align with the official documents but different outcomes are possible due to different interpretations of how a given construct should manifest itself in actual performance. Practical implications from this study could prove valuable for improving selection practices.

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*Keywords:* Successful; Applicant profile; Police officer; Selection; Organization

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## 1. Introduction

The competencies and qualities required to become a successful police officer have been investigated in many studies rooted in criminal justice and other disciplines. These issues have also received a great deal of public attention. Most previous studies have focused on criteria that may be linked to success as a police officer, or important characteristics for screening out unsuitable applicants (Aylward, 1985; Burbeck and Furnham, 1984; Frost, 1955; Sanders, 2003; Scogin et al., 1995; Varela et al., 2004). A common approach has been to address the relevance and importance of self-reported skills and traits for police officers' performance on duty (Varela et al., 2004). The criteria used in the selection of applicants are often based on existing notions about requirements to do a good job in law enforcement. However, the relevance of these criteria has been rarely investigated from the perspective of professionals within law enforcement organizations, and generally such investigations have focused on American police chiefs' and police departments' ratings of various criteria (Guffey et al., 2007; Hogue et al., 1994; Sanders, 2010). Very few comparative studies have examined similarities and differences between police organizations in different cultures. Thus, the objectives of the present study were to investigate and compare selection practitioners' views on what constitutes 'suitability' in a police applicant selection context, using criteria based on previous research on applicant profiles. The denomination *selection practitioner* refers to the professionals who prepare or make the decisions on whom to select in a selection situation (Anderson et al., 2010; Boes et al., 1997). In a police selection context, the selection practitioners often have a professional background as police officers or psychologists. There is no generally acknowledged professional title as it varies between countries and contexts. For instance, in the U.S. they are often referred to as background investigators, human resource personnel or screening psychologists (Spilberg and Corey, 2014). There are also other more general denominations, such as police selector (Reiner, 1992).

In order to study and compare different police cultures, two European law enforcement organizations are considered: the Swedish National Police and the Catalan Police in Spain.

A general hypothesis is that the qualities selection practitioners seek in police applicants have changed, based on evidence about changes in practical police work, and the modernization of cultures within many organizations, including the police. Notably, the importance of physical performance, previously crucial, has declined (Hogue et al., 1994). Hence, a preference for applicants showing outstanding physical qualities is regarded here as representing a traditional view. Modern cultural elements include a shift towards academic police training in Europe (Hallenberg and Cockcroft, 2014), and associated preferences for qualities such as cognitive skills (intelligence) over more 'practical' qualities such as common sense. Another cultural aspect is the degree to which organizations demand a strong sense of loyalty in their members. Here, the traditional view in police culture is regarded as a strong preference for loyalty and group thinking over individual competencies (Johnson, 1969). The two typologies are not, of course, mutually exclusive and can overlap. However, separating preferences for loyalty and individual competencies can be valuable for classifying and structuring views encountered in an organization. A conceptual framework incorporating the modernization of views that seems to have occurred is also useful for comparing organizations rooted in different current and historical contexts. Furthermore, evidence of support for certain selection criteria across wide cultural spectra could provide powerful indications that they have high intrinsic importance, regardless of historical complications, traditions and current mores. Similarly, more sporadic support could indicate that certain criteria are valued in certain

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