

Questioning the Aptness of Police Pre-Entry Physical Test

One of the major ideological sources of opposition to women in policing has been the assertion that policing involves physical confrontation and therefore is too physically demanding for women (Prenzler 1996). While the position of women in policing has improved considerably, the belief that women are the 'weaker sex' continues to inform resistance to female police officers. Inspiration for this comment surfaced during the recent Third Australasian Women and Policing Conference (held in conjunction with the 40th International Association of Women Police Conference) in October 2002. During the conference it was revealed that discriminatory physical ability tests are still being utilised in most jurisdictions in Australasia. The continued use of physical ability tests was clearly an area of great concern for many of the women police officers attending the conference. Recent debate also reveals that this topic remains highly controversial. It is suggested by McDermont (2003:2) in an outline on the goals of the Australasian Council of Women and Policing (ACWAP) that the 'next immediate project is an Australasia-wide campaign to fully remove discriminatory obstacle course tests from police recruitment'. I will consider the progress of police agencies across Australia in identifying the irrelevant and discriminatory nature of pre-entry physical ability tests for the policing function. Through an examination of research (conducted mostly in the United States) on pre-entry physical tests, this paper will suggest that pre-entry physical tests remain problematic and are of questionable utility.

Are they Valid?

Considerable research has been conducted in the United States questioning the effectiveness and validity of police pre-entry physical tests. Research suggests that female officers remain confronted with the 'traditional view that women do not belong on patrol because of their lack of physical strength and ability to maintain an authoritarian presence in the face of challenges that the public can present to the police' (Grennan 1987:80). However, the common portrayal that police duties involve mayhem, violence, and life-and-death confrontations with armed criminals, desperate fugitives and psychopaths is far from the daily reality faced by police officers (Sherman 1973; Westmarland 2001). A number of studies have found that the amount of police time related to incidents requiring physical force are rare, with approximately 90% of police officers' time being spent on non-criminal or service functions (Taleny 1969; Bell 1982; Charles 1982). Furthermore, it has been found that physical strength is not related to police functioning (Sherman 1973) or to an officer's ability to manage a potentially dangerous situation (Bell 1982). However, Charles (1982) argues that while most police work is largely sedentary, it is important to consider the few occasions which do require physical strength. Charles (1982) asserts that while women may not be as physically strong as men, they may train themselves to achieve levels of fitness well within the normal demands of policing.

As well as underlining the discriminatory nature of the tests, evidence suggests that they fail to effectively measure critical or essential elements of police work (Maher 1988; Charles 1982). According to Maher (1988) and Charles (1982) important factors in physical tests are ignored such as the fact that officers generally work in teams, make use of weapons to subdue suspects and are trained in unarmed defence training. It is concluded by Maher (1988) that physical fitness rather than physical ability is the most appropriate concern for

future police officers and that medical examinations, weaponless defence training and physical conditioning programs are more acceptable alternatives to physical ability tests. In the United States, various court decisions have carefully scrutinised physical ability tests and have generally found that validation arguments are wanting (Gaines et al 1993). Prenzler (1996) argues that while recruitment policies in the United States are moving towards more general health tests, Australia has failed to follow suit.

Australian Research on Pre-Entry Physical Tests

Limited research has been conducted in Australia on the effectiveness and validity of pre-entry physical tests. This may be attributed to the insufficient collection of data by policing agencies (Prenzler & Hayes 2000) and by their failure to publish figures on the gender effects of testing (Prenzler 1996). Yet as Prenzler (1996) argues, the Australian experience reflects findings in the United States that physical tests remain a major obstacle to women's entry into policing. Prenzler (1996) contends that recent evaluation of physical ability tests reveal that they lack validity and may be considered discriminatory under Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) legislation as women have been found to fail the tests at a much higher rate than men.

Ffrench and Waugh (1998) examined the occurrence and frequency of routine physical demands in general duties amongst female and male police officers from the Queensland Police Service. It was found there were very few gender differences in the occurrence or frequency of gender duty activities between males and females, particularly those duties which involve the management of offenders (for example, moving a non-compliant person, using handcuffs or batons, or breaking up fights). It is suggested that these findings do not support the perception that females may be less involved in, or have less ability to deal with non-compliant or aggressive offenders or to perform the physical requirements of policing (Ffrench & Waugh 1998).

More general research conducted on the pre-entry physical tests introduced in the Queensland Police Service in 1994 showed there were four test obstacles in which there were significant differences between males and females (Prenzler 1996). It was found that tests specifically related to upper body strength and height showed significantly higher withdrawal rates and failure rates for women than men (Prenzler 1996).

The most significant and influential research in Australia has been the report by the Queensland Police Service on the relationship between general duties policing and physical competency tests (CJC-QPS 1998b). The research revealed that general duties policing requires repeated and regular performance of several low-demand physical activities (eg. driving, getting in/out of police transport and sitting). It was found that when more demanding activities arise, they tend to involve restraining, lifting and moving objects and persons, rather than a sustained series of highly demanding activities as tested by physical competency tests (CJC-QPS 1998b). Based upon these findings it was concluded that the physical competency tests are not an accurate measure of genuine physical requirements of general duties policing (CJC-QPS 1998b). It was also concluded by the report that the physical competency tests discriminate against women and other categories of applicants (eg. men from certain racial backgrounds) (CJC-QPS 1998b) because of its emphasise on height and upper body strength. The report concluded that as the physical competency tests lack validity and are potentially discriminatory, the tests should be removed and replaced with a health-screening process that focuses on general health.

Australian Jurisdictions: Where is the Consistency?

Within Australian jurisdictions there are wide discrepancies in the utilisation of pre-entry physical tests. Examination of policing agencies across Australia reveals a striking lack of consistency, with pre-entry tests ranging from general health tests to 'job related' assessments. The most significant changes to pre-entry physical tests have occurred in the Queensland Police Service with the release of the aforementioned report by the CJC-QPS (1998). Subsequent to the report, the Queensland Police Service replaced the physical ability tests with a general physical competency test which involves a 2.4 km run (Queensland Police Service 2003).

In Victoria, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Tasmania, Western Australia and South Australia physical assessment tests may be described in varying degrees of rigorousness as 'job task-based' tests (National Centre for Women & Policing 2002). Each of these jurisdictions have developed tests which aim to simulate duties performed by police officers and to measure candidates' ability to perform tasks within established time parameters. In NSW, the pre-entry physical test include the successful completion of push-ups, a flexibility test, a vertical jump, a sprint, hand-grip test, the Illinois Agility Course¹ and a multi-stage fitness test² (Diploma in Policing Practice 2003). Each physical requirement is linked to an operational duty. For example, the completion of push-ups is considered relevant to restraining offenders (Diploma in Policing Practice 2003). Similar tests are conducted in the Northern Territory Police (2003) and Tasmanian Police (2003).

South Australia and Western Australia operate most strongly under the assumption that physical tests should be 'job task based'. In South Australia, applicants are expected to complete a multi stage fitness test and an agility test which includes climbing over four fences (maximum height three metres), leap over a 1.5 metre ditch and drag an 80kg simulated body within a limited time (South Australia Police 2003). The Western Australian Police Service has recently changed its physical assessment program with the major development being the removal of the 75kg dead lift³ (Western Australian Police Service 2003). Applicants are required to complete an obstacle course which includes: traverse a balance beam, climb a 1.6m wall, jump a 1.5 metre gully, dodge obstacles, scale a 2.8m cyclone wire fence and lift/carry a 40kg weight (Western Australian Police 2003).

Positive developments with regards to pre-entry physical tests have been made recently in Victoria. In one of the few publicly accessible reports, research conducted in Victoria into the gender effects of testing, revealed that 33% of women compared to 88% of men passed the initial testing (Victoria Police 1990). It was found that the 'wall and beam' test which requires height and upper-body strength was a major contributing factor to a higher female failure rate (Victoria Police 1990). However, it was not until a decade later with the appointment of Christine Nixon as the Chief Commissioner of the Victoria Police, that significant changes were made to the pre-entry physical tests in Victoria. Soon after the appointment of Nixon in April 2001, the 5.6-foot wall and the 75kg dummy requirement was removed from the physical agility tests (Victoria Police 2003).

1 Purpose is to measure quickness, speed and balance. Involves a sprint while executing a number of turns around a marked course.

2 Purpose is to measure aerobic power. Involves a continuous run of increasing intensity end to end on a 20metre course.

3 This involved lifting a 75kg weight and placing it on bracket 70cm off the ground.

'Tearing Down the Wall'

The National Centre for Women and Policing (NCWP) has drawn attention to the problematic nature of 'job task-based' tests. It is argued that 'job task-based' tests 'typically have an adverse impact on women and therefore must be documented to be job-related and consistent with business necessity in order to minimise adverse impact to the greatest extent possible' (NCWP 2002: 66). They conclude that no research demonstrates that physical agility and strength tests are able to predict the performance of a police officer (NCWP 2002). More recently the NCWP conducted a survey on 64 police agencies in the United States. It was found that agencies which utilised pre-entry physical agility testing had 10.9% sworn female officers, whereas agencies without tests had 15.8%, an increase of 45% (NCWP 2003). The NCWP concludes that the tests be eliminated or replaced with health-based screening to assess general physical fitness (NCWP 2003).

Conclusion

It seems that despite a plethora of research conducted over the last two decades documenting the problematic nature of pre-entry tests, most police services across Australia continue to use such measures to determine the suitability of recruits. There remains a persistent belief that a certain type of physicality remains fundamental to the successful performance of police work; a type of physicality which may be narrowly characterised as tall, athletic and speedy with strong upper body strength. A physique which arguably, may be more easily achieved by male recruits. However, with police services increasingly focusing on policing styles which emphasise community relations/partnerships and are information-driven and problem-orientated, such notions of the physicality seem contradictory and inconsistent. While a number of jurisdictions (namely Queensland) have made significant changes to their pre-entry requirements, many police agencies continue to utilise 'job task-based' tests which may be described as out-dated and far from job-related.

If Australian police agencies are serious about achieving gender equality they must respond to the literature which demonstrates the adverse effects pre-entry physical tests have on female applicants. As demonstrated in the United States, the elimination of pre-entry physical tests contributed to a higher rate of recruitment and retention of women (NCWP 2003). Alternatively, Australian jurisdictions can apply the general physical fitness model utilised by the Queensland Police which considers a 2.4km run to be an adequate assessment. In an interesting move, the Royal Navy in Britain has created a partnership with a chain of health clubs to help ensure that potential recruits are fit enough to pass the fitness assessment (a 2.4km run) (*Daily Telegraph* [UK] 27 June 2003). Such an arrangement may provide the necessary support and assistance to our future police officers. Yet if the health and fitness of our police officers is seriously considered an effective measure of a 'good cop', efforts must be made to encourage police officers to maintain a regular and ongoing health programme. Otherwise the validity, effectiveness and utility of pre-entry tests remain questionable. At the same time, it is important to question the relevance of police officers achieving a general level of health and fitness as measured by a specialised test of endurance. Can the ability of a police officer to run 2.4km really measure their worth as a good cop? Ultimately, whether pre-entry physical tests measure general fitness or aim to simulate job related tasks it is unlikely that either approach will accurately reflect the diverse and dynamic role of the police officer.

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