
New Release: Developing Operational Psychology Competency

Establishing competency in new or emerging areas of psychological practice is always difficult. For practitioners of operational psychology, it is even more challenging due to the requirement for highly specialized skills, novel applications, and the fact that many organizations employing operational psychologists operate in classified or sensitive settings. Despite the ethical obligation to do so, operational psychologists may face challenges in establishing and maintaining their credentials and competency. The following is a summary of an early release article by former Division 19 President Mark Staal (in

press) featured in the *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*. In the article (see link below), Mark outlines the core competencies of operational psychology based on the extant literature, provides case examples illustrating their application, and identifies recommendations for training and consultation necessary for establishing and maintaining competency.

What is Operational Psychology?

Operational psychology is “*the application of psychological science to the operational activities conducted in*

support of national security, national defense, and public safety” (APA, 2023, p. 3). This definition is necessarily broad since it encompasses a wide variety of operational support activities including personnel suitability assessments, intelligence support, insider threat analysis, indirect assessments, interrogation or investigation support, consultation to crisis negotiations, influence messaging, risk assessments and performance coaching. Although its inception dates to efforts that applied psychological science to the methods and personnel of WWI, it experienced massive recent growth following the events of 9/11.

To date, much has been written about this emerging area of specialization and its employment of psychologists (Kennedy & Williams, 2011; Staal & Harvey, 2019; Staal & Stephenson, 2013). In fact, recently, the APA adopted as formal policy professional practice guidelines for operational psychology (APA, 2023). Figure 1 depicts common operational psychology activities, separated by practice settings, across tactical, operational, and strategic tiers. This is not an exhaustive list but meant to illustrate the work of operational psychologists across national security, defense, and public safety sectors.

Figure 1

Operational psychology activities across practice domains



Note. Figure reproduced with permission from author (Staal & Harvey, 2019)

For readers interested in learning more about this emerging specialty, check out the link and the article below (Staal, [in press](#)), and be on the lookout for SJOP’s special issue on Operational Psychology coming soon!

References

- American Psychological Association (2023). *Professional practice guidelines for operational psychology*. <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/operational-psychology.pdf>
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