

AN EXAMINATION OF POLICE OFFICERS' MOTIVATION TO  
PARTICIPATE IN THE PROMOTIONAL PROCESS

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A Research Report

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# AN EXAMINATION OF POLICE OFFICERS' MOTIVATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE PROMOTIONAL PROCESS

## Introduction

The promotional process historically has been a key component in the police personnel system. Promotions in essence are nothing more than a selection process whereby police officials select officers from one level for placement at a higher level. Over time, promotions have been quite problematic. Given the nature of police work, the development of valid and reliable police selection and promotion schemes have been difficult at best (Gaines & Falkenberg, 1998; Falkenberg, Gaines & Cordner, 1991; Gaines & Lewis, 1982). The police are called upon to perform such a wide variety of tasks and functions which makes it exceedingly difficult to identify those who are most capable of performing the job responsibilities for the next level.

Also, over the years, promotions in some departments have come to be seen as a method of earning additional income. Many police departments have flat pay scales where officers reach their maximum level within a few years. Promotions are seen by a number of officers as a method by which to "expand" the pay scale and earn additional income. Such attitudes tend to short-circuit the promotion process to the point that a number of officers who participate in the system are not really interested in the additional responsibilities and new job duties. Individuals who compete in the promotion process such be truly interesting the work associated with the rank. In the 1970s, this problem resulted in police researchers calling for expanded rank systems and expanded pay scales (Lutz & Morgan, 1974).

Indeed, the Los Angeles Police Department, as did several other departments, developed an expanded classification system or rank structure. The department split several ranks into multiple ranks. For example, the rank of sergeant was changed to sergeant I and sergeant II. The sergeant II classification was assigned to positions which were more technical in nature. The system was somewhat similar to the United States Army's specialist ranks. The system was hailed as an innovative means of expanding career tracks for employees. However, over time the expanded rank structure was to prove a failure. Rather than providing departments with more flexibility, the additional ranks actually increased the bureaucratic nature of the department. Once the new ranks were created, civil service regulations generally forbid the department from moving incumbents from one level to another. For example, a sergeant II could not be moved into a sergeant I position because it was considered a demotion. Thus, police managers' latitude in placing officers possessing unique qualifications in particular jobs was substantially restricted.

Since the 1980s, a number of police departments throughout the United States have made substantial progress in obtaining higher salaries for officers. Today, law enforcement in many parts of the country competes fairly successfully with business and industry in terms of salary, working conditions, and benefits. A number of departments are able to consistently obtain

applicant pools which allow them to successfully select qualified applicants. Others have not been so successful and woefully lag behind in terms of salary and benefits. These departments often have difficulty competing for highly qualified applicants.

Recently the Lexington, Kentucky Division of Police experienced a decline in the number of eligible officers taking the promotional exam for sergeant. That is, employees at the officer level showed little interest in being promoted. This situation was alarming to departmental executives. They feared that they were not in a position to promote the "best" candidates in the department.

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors might have contributed to candidates' unwillingness to participate in the promotion process based on their attitudes toward the promotion process itself. Prior to the research, a focus group was held to give the researchers more definitive guidelines by which to structure the research and to assist in devising a methodology.

### **Methodology**

The Q-methodology was used to assess officers' attitudes toward promotions. It is an inductive technique used specifically in exploratory research. The technique allows respondents to describe their perceptions of a particular phenomena by measuring patterns of individual subjectivity. Respondents are requested to sort statements into a quasi-normal, forced distribution. The respondents attempt to describe their feelings about the phenomenon by more or less ranking the statements. The Q-methodology is a powerful methodology in that it uses a forced distribution. The forced distribution makes respondents make decisions relative to the "worth or value" of statements. The grouping of the statements enables researchers to place individuals in groups who have similar perceptions (Stephenson, 1953).

The statements used in this study are derived from Lawler's (1971) discussion of basic human needs. Lawler essentially added autonomy to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs resulting in a total of five intrinsic need areas: physiological, security, social, esteem, autonomy, and self-actualization. In addition to identifying which needs were important, we wanted to see if promotions were instrumental in achieving them (see Vroom, 1964). Statements were structured around each need addressing whether it was important and if a promotion would help fulfilling it. Each subject in the study was asked to rank the statements in a normal distribution.

When using the Q-method, people are treated as variables and the items being sorted are treated as observations. In essence, the Q-method sorts people into groups much like a factor analysis might identify factors within a population of items. Once the people are placed in clusters, the researcher can examine the clusters to determine demographics are a factor in their clustering. The Q-method also uses a forced distribution which causes subjects to make decisions about the relationship among the statements under consideration. This allows researchers to investigate the relative distance of survey items across the clusters of subjects.

## Sample Demographics

The sample size in the Lexington study consisted of 64 officers. Males represented 91% of the sample (n=58), while women comprised 9% (n=6) of the sample. The respondents ranged in age from 21 to 47 years of age, with a mean age of 34.3 years. The majority of respondents (86%) were white (n=55). African-Americans comprised 11% of the sample, and one individual indicating their race as "other," with no specification. The majority of the sample (78%) were married or had a live-in partner (n=50). The remainder of the sample (22%) were either single, separated or widowed (n=14).

The educational levels of the officers ranged from high school diploma to graduate degree. Those having up to sixty hours of college credit constituted 27% (n=17) of the sample; those having 61-120 hours of college credit constituted 27% (n=17). Those individuals having a college degree (B.A., B.S.) comprised 38% (n=24) of the sample. Individuals who either had a graduate degree or were pursuing a graduate degree constituted 6% (n=4) of the sample. Respondents indicating that they were currently students made up only 6% of the sample (n=4), while the remaining 94% indicated that they were not currently enrolled in college courses (n=60).

The majority of the respondents (36%) worked in patrol (n=23), followed closely by those working in the tactical unit (28%; n=18). Sixteen percent of the respondents worked in criminal investigation (n=10), with 11% working in the traffic division (n=7). The remainder of the sample (10%) worked in either administrative assignments, support services or unspecified ("other") positions (n=6). Thus, the sample of officers used in this study was fairly representative of the department.

Most units in the police department worked a four day workweek, ten hours a shift. The shift most often worked by respondents (52%) was day shift (early a.m. to late afternoon) (n=33), followed by those working evening shift (early afternoon to late evening) which comprised 30% of the sample (n=19). Those working the night shift constituted 11% of the sample (n=7), while the remaining 8% worked either rotating shifts or they times which were not consistent with the normal patrol shifts (n=5).

Since the focus of this study was to examine the motivational patterns of officers regarding the departments promotional process, data about officers' part-time jobs were collected. Since the department uses a 4-10 work plan, it is fairly convenient for officers to obtain steady part-time jobs. However, only 22 or 34 percent of the officers held part-time jobs outside the department. The department has a substantial overtime budget and large numbers of officers frequently work large amounts of overtime. Most officers are able to get as much overtime as desired. Salaries of the respondents ranged from \$25,000 to over \$50,000. The majority of respondents (64%) made between \$35,001-\$45,000.

The length of service to the department ranged from three to 25 years with a mean of 10.3

years. The majority of respondents worked from six to ten years which constituted 56% (n=36) of the sample. Thus, the officers in the study sample were veteran officers.

Those who were eligible to take the promotional exam comprised 73% (n=47) of the sample, while those who were ineligible represented 27% (n=17) of the sample. Ineligible officers were included in the study in an effort to ensure that the sample represented the department and to determine if attitudes of ineligible officers were consistent with eligible officers. Twenty-eight percent (n=18) of the respondents had competed for promotion before, 72% (n=46) had never competed for promotion. Of those eligible for promotion, 13% took the most recent exam (n=8).

## Groups

The Q-Sort revealed three distinct groups based on their perceptions of promotional exams. The following are profiles of each group:

### Group #1

The first group consisted of seven members, five men and two women, which constituted 11 % of the entire sample. The racial composition of the group consisted of 43% African-Americans (n=3), 43% whites (n=3), and one Native-American (14%). The age of the group members ranged from 28 to 45 years of age with a mean age of 33.7 years. Eighty-six percent of the group (n=6) were either married or had a live-in partner while the remaining member was single.

The education of the group members ranged from one individual having a high school diploma to 4 individuals (57%) having college degrees. The remaining respondents (n=2) had some college with no more than 60 hours. Two of the individuals indicated that they were currently students, while the remaining five indicated that they were not.

The range of length of work for the department was from 4 to 23 years with the mean number of years of employment being 9.9 years. Salaries ranged from \$25,001-50,000 with the majority (57%) making between \$35,001 and \$40,000 (n=4).

The majority of the group members (57%) worked in the Fourth Platoon (n=4) with two others working in Patrol and the remaining individual working in the Traffic Division. Three of the respondents worked day shift, two worked evening shift, one individual worked a rotating shift and the other worked an unspecified shift. Five of the seven individuals indicated that they did not work part-time.

Six of the seven members had never competed for promotion; however, four out of the seven group members were eligible to take the promotion examination, but did not.

The following is as table of the statements and their descriptions which were highly rated by Group #1. All statements which were ranked at least one standard deviation above the mean were retained.

Item Description	Z-Score	Importance of Need	Instrumentality of Promotion
SECURITY- If promoted, I will have less control over my assignments.	2.640	Yes	No
AUTONOMY- The work I do requires a lot of individual initiative, regardless of my rank.	2.156	Yes	No
SELF-ACTUALIZATION- Feeling that I'm participating in something rewarding has little to do with my rank.	1.687	Yes	No
SECURITY- Failing to get promoted is not a big threat to my feelings of security.	1.619	No	No
ESTEEM- Other people's respect is important, but getting promoted does not guarantee respect.	1.331	Yes	No
ESTEEM- A promotion increases my responsibility by allowing me to supervise others.	1.313	Yes	Yes
ESTEEM- The success that a promotion is supposed to demonstrate is just not important to me.	1.274	No	No
AUTONOMY- It is important to me that I have supervisors who give me guidance regardless of my rank.	1.093	No	No
SELF-ACTUALIZATION- It would be great to have a job where you can realize your potential regardless of rank.	1.039	Yes	No

Please note that for group #1 three esteem statements, two autonomy, two self-actualization, and two security statements were rated high. Of those statements, six indicated that the need was important, and eight statements tended to indicate that promotions were instrumental in fulfilling the needs.

#### Group #2

The second group consisted of 22 members, comprising 34% of the total sample. Ninety-

six percent of the group were males (n=21), with only one member of the group being female. The age range of this group was 27 to 46 years with a mean age of 32.8 years. The entire group (100%) was white. The majority of the group (73%) were married or had a live-in partner (n=16). The remaining 27% were either divorced or single (n=6).

The educational range of this group varied from 31 hours of college credit to a graduate degree. Almost half (46%) had a college degree (n=10). Only one out of the twenty-two respondents indicated that they were a student.

The range of work experience with the department was from four to 23 years with 32% of the group being employed with the department for 7 years (n=7), followed closely by 23% of the respondents working for 4 years (n=5). The mean length of service for group #2 was 9.5 years. The salary range of the group was \$25,001 to- 50,000 with over half (59%) of the respondents making between \$35,001 and \$40,000 (n=13).

Over one-third (36%) of the group worked in Fourth Platoon (n=8), followed by 27% working in Patrol (n=6) and 23% working in Criminal Investigation (n=5). The remaining three individuals worked in Traffic, Administrative or Support and one unspecified area. Fifty percent of the respondents worked day shift (n=11) with 32% working evening shift (n=7). The remaining four individuals worked either night shift or an unspecified shift. A majority (82%) of individuals did not work part-time (n=18), with the remaining 18% indicating that they were employed part-time outside of the department.

Sixteen members of the group (73%) were eligible to take the promotion exam, but only 32% (n=7) took the exam. Forty-one percent were eligible to take the exam but did not (n=9). The remaining six individuals were not eligible to take the exam.

Table

The following is a table of the item descriptions and Z-Scores for Group #2. Again, only those statements with a Z-score of 1.00 or higher were retained.

Item Description	Z-Score	Importance of Need	Instrumentality of Promotion
AUTONOMY- I would like getting promoted and knowing I did it on my own.	2.164	Yes	Yes
AUTONOMY- The work I do requires a lot of individual initiative, regardless of my rank.	1.945	Yes	No
SELF-ACTUALIZATION- It would be great to have a job where you can realize your potential regardless of rank.	1.745	Yes	No

ESTEEM- A promotion increases my responsibility by allowing me to supervise others.	1.689	Yes	Yes
ESTEEM- Other people's respect is important, but getting promoted does not guarantee respect.	1.591	Yes	No
ESTEEM- Getting respect from my co-workers means more to me than higher rank.	1.505	Yes	No
SELF-ACTUALIZATION- People are most satisfied with their work when they are promoted and they are able to use their personal strengths.	1.272	Yes	Yes
SECURITY- Failing to get promoted is not a big threat to my feelings or security.	1.241	No	No
ESTEEM- One of the best ways to show people how I'm bettering myself is by getting promoted.	1.205	Yes	Yes
SELF-ACTUALIZATION- Feeling that I'm participating in something rewarding has little to do with my rank.	1.167	Yes	No
SOCIAL- My family is content with my present rank, so being promoted is not essential.	1.102	Yes	No
AUTONOMY- It is important to me that I have supervisors who give me guidance regardless of my rank.	1.085	No	No
AUTONOMY- I want to have a voice in how I do my job, and a promotion should not affect this.	1.022	Yes	No
SOCIAL- A promotion would allow me to interact with different people.	1.017	Yes	Yes
ESTEEM- High ranking jobs earn more money but I don't pay attention to what people think about the money I earn.	1.008	No	Yes

### Group #3

The third group consisted of 35 members which comprised 55% of the sample. Ninety-one percent of the group was males (n=32) and the remaining 9% were females (n=3). The age range of the group was 28 to 47 years with a mean age of 35.3 years. The majority of the group



was white (n=30 or 86%), with 11% indicating that they were African-American (n=4), and one individual specified that he or she was of another race. Eighty percent of the group was married or had a live-in partner (n=28), with the remaining twenty percent being either single, divorced or separated.

The education of group members ranged from those having a high school diploma to those with a graduate degree. Twenty-nine percent of the group members had a college degree (n=10), while 63% had some college credit. One individual had a graduate degree while another was currently in graduate school. Only one group member indicated that they were a currently a student (3%).

The length of time that respondents worked for the department ranged from three to 25 years with 60% of the individuals working between 6 and 10 years (n=21). The mean length of service was 10.9 years. The salary range of the respondents was from \$25,000 to over \$50,000. Sixty-six percent of the group members made between \$35,001 and \$40,000 (n=23). Twenty percent of the group members made between \$45,001 and \$50,000 (n=7). One individual made between \$25,001 and \$31,000, while one individual made over \$50,000.

Almost half (43%) of the group members worked in Patrol. The remaining officers were distributed almost equally among the other specified divisions: Fourth Platoon (17%; n=6), Traffic (14%; n=5), Criminal Investigation (14%; n=5). The remaining 11% indicated that they worked in divisions other than those specified. Over half of the group members (54%) worked day shift (n=19), followed by 29% indicating that they worked evening shift (n=10). Fourteen percent worked night shift (n=5) and one individual worked an unspecified shift. Almost half (46%) of the group members worked part-time outside of the organization (n=16).

Seventy-seven percent of the group were eligible to take the exam (n=27). Only 23% of the group had ever competed for promotion in a prior cycle (n=8) and only one respondent took the most recent promotion exam. Of the total members of the group, 74% who were eligible to take the promotional exam for sergeant did not take the exam (n=26).

The following is a table of the item descriptions and Z-Scores for Group #3:

Item Description	Z-Score	Importance of Need	Instrumentality of Promotion
SECURITY- If promoted, I will have less control over my assignments.	2.185	Yes	No
ESTEEM- Other people's respect is important, but getting promoted does not guarantee respect.	1.696	Yes	No
AUTONOMY- The work I do requires a lot of individual initiative, regardless of my rank.	1.655	Yes	No
SECURITY- The pay increase that comes with a promotion just is not worth the trouble it would take to get me promoted.	1.551	No	Yes
SECURITY- Failing to get promoted is not a big threat to my feelings of security.	1.547	No	No
ESTEEM- Getting respect from my co-workers means more to me than higher rank.	1.454	Yes	No
SELF-ACTUALIZATION- Feeling that I'm participating in something rewarding has little to do with my rank.	1.362	Yes	No
SECURITY- Failing to get promoted isn't worth getting upset, because there is so little pay difference.	1.330	No	No
SECURITY- Being promoted reduces my chances for overtime.	1.129	Yes	No
SELF-ACTUALIZATION- It would be great to have a job where you can realize your potential regardless of rank.	1.091	Yes	No
SOCIAL- My family is content with my present rank, so being promoted is not essential.	1.074	Yes	No

### Group Comparisons

The purpose of the Q-sort is to allow the researcher to identify groups of individuals who vary as a result of how they ranked the sort items. Once the groups are identified, the researcher then examines the groups in terms of demographics in an effort to determine if demographics contribute to how the items were sorted or ranked. The following section examines the

demographics of each of the three groups.

### Demographics

The group sizes were varied ranging from seven members in Group #1 to 22 members in Group #2 and 35 members in Group #3. The gender compositions of the group were relatively consistent since there were so few females. Group #1 had two females, Group #2 had one female and Group #3 had 3 females. However, proportionally, Group #1 had the highest percentage of females (29%).

The groups did not vary much by age with Group #1 having a mean age of 33.7 years, Group #2 having a mean age of 32.8 years, and Group #3 having a mean age of 35.3 years. Thus, the three groups were separated by a less than three years average age. The racial composition of the groups consisted of majorities of white members in Groups #2 (100%) and #3 (86%), while African-Americans and one Native-American comprised the majority of Group #1 (57%).

The education levels of the groups were somewhat varied. Although Groups #1 and #2 both had half or almost half of its members holding a college degree (57%; 46%), Group #3 had only 29% of its membership having a college degree. There were only four individuals in the entire sample that indicated that they were currently students.

The mean length of service was relatively similar between the groups with Group #1 having 9.9 years, Group #2 having 9.5 years, and Group #3 having 10.9 years. Thus, it appears that age does not account for differences across the groups.

The majority of all three Groups made between \$35,001 and \$40,000 which is fairly substantial for the area. Also, there were a number of officers that made considerable more.

The most consistent work area between the groups was the numbers who worked in Patrol, with Group #1 having 29%, Group #2 having 27%, and Group #3 having 43%. The majority of the members of Group #1 worked in the Fourth Platoon (57%), with over one-third (36%) of the members of Group #2 worked in the Fourth Platoon, while only 17% of the members of Group #3 worked in the Fourth Platoon. Thus, most of the sample were fairly homogeneous in terms of assignment.

With regards to part-time employment, 29% of Group #1 indicated that they worked part-time, 18% of Group #2 worked part-time, while almost half (46%) of the members of Group #3 worked part-time.

None of the members of Group #1 took the promotion exam even though four out of seven were eligible to take it. Only one of the members of Group #1 had ever competed for promotion prior to this cycle. Although 73% of Group #2 were eligible to take the promotional

exam, only 32% did actually take the exam. Twenty-seven percent of Group #2 were not eligible to take the exam. Only one member of Group #3 took the most recent promotional exam, while 74% of those who were eligible to take the exam did not take the test.

In summary, it appears that demographics may have made a only minor contribution to the sorting patterns. There was a substantial amount of consistency across the groups. Group #1 had a larger percentage of African-Americans relative to the other groups, and a greater proportion of Group #2 had part-time jobs. Group #3 had the largest proportion of members to actually be involved in the promotion process. Variables such as length of service, age, assignment, and education were fairly stable across the three groups.

Item Descriptions Across the Groups

Items with a Z-score of 1.00 or higher were retained. When examining the items within each of the groups which were greater than 1.0 the distribution is as follows:

Group	Security	Social	Esteem	Autonomy	Self-Actualization
1	2	0	3	2	2
2	3	4	5	5	5
3	6	3	6	3	3

It seems that police officers' needs cut across the complete spectrum of needs. The composition of needs shows that they are fairly evenly distributed with the highest number in the esteem category. It also appears that lower order needs (security & social needs) are just as important as higher order needs (esteem, autonomy, & self-actualization) at least for group #3. It appears that groups #1 and #2 place a greater importance on the higher order needs.

Those items which had Z-Scores over 1.0 were further examined to determine which were important and instrumental in promotion. The breakdown was as follows:

Group	Number of Important Needs	Instrumentality of Promotion
1	6	1
2	12	6
3	8	1

The data shows that although the officers responded that there were a number of important needs cutting across the complete spectrum of Lawler and Maslow's needs, they felt that promotions did little to facilitate the satisfaction of the needs.

## Discussion

The data clearly indicate that the police officers in this study are motivated by a variety of needs. In the past, many have interpreted Maslow's work as a system whereby people graduate from one level to the next. A more contemporary view is that all needs are important while over time, some needs are more important than others, and the relative importance of specific needs change with time and situations (see Gaines, Angell & Southerland, 1990).

The results of this study are somewhat disturbing, but consistent with officers' behavior relative to the promotion system. Essentially, officers have not embraced the opportunities for promotion in large numbers which coincides with their opinions that promotions do not significantly contribute to their lives. This would seem rather perplexing given that it is commonly assumed that most police officers desire to be promoted and rise within their profession.

The most plausible explanation for the findings is that officers are relatively satisfied with their life situation. For example, the police department provides officers a number of benefits which affect their collective and individual lives. First, the department's salary is average for the area, but the department offers almost unlimited overtime to officers. The department currently has enough federal and state grants as well as special events to allow officers substantial overtime. For example, the second highest paid officer in the department is an officer who does most of the department's accident reconstruction. Thus, the department is able to provide the officers with comfortable salaries. Second, the department has a home fleet program and a liberal usage policy whereby officers can use the vehicles almost unlimited throughout the county. Third, the department uses a ten hour, four day work week and permanent unit assignments. This facilitates officers who desire to do so to have part-time jobs or engage in other sorts of activities. Promotions generally result in a transfer which may interfere with previously established activities. A promotion may also mean moving from a desired unit assignment to a less desirable assignment.

In essence, it may be that promotions, for the most part, offer too many possible drawbacks for too little reward. In years past, police departments and many officers viewed promotions as a vehicle to attain higher salaries (Wilson & McLaren, 1963) which was quite a motivator. However, in the department under study, it appears that many of the officers' needs are fulfilled via other avenues. It appears that the department must find ways of increasing the desirability of promotions if larger numbers of officers are to compete. This can be done by adding additional benefits or substantially increasing the salary differences across the ranks.

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