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# LOCUS OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AMONG OKLAHOMA LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

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***Abstract***: *Emotional intelligence has community positive value for the profession of policing, and knowledge about which police officers within an agency have the highest levels of emotional intelligence is of significant management value within law enforcement agencies. The focus of this study was to determine whether differences in emotional intelligence (EI) levels among binary categories of small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers were statistically significant. Three research questions guided the study, involving statistical comparison of actual EI scores across varying levels of career longevity and promotion within the law enforcement profession by the study participants. The Assessing Emotions Scale (AES) was used to scale the EI levels of the 86 participants. A self-report survey was used to classify participant longevity or promotion. The application of inferential statistics to the data, in the form of multiple t-tests, revealed statistically significant differences in average EI levels, with the higher mean distribution of EI levels present among those with more than 10 years of longevity, a history of rank promotion, and a history of promotion to supervisory status. The study provides analysis and implications for law enforcement leadership and future research.*

***Keywords:*** *Policing, Emotional Intelligence, Law Enforcement*

## Introduction

Policing can be a gratifying profession, but the daily social interactions and job-related duties required of law enforcement officers are highly demanding can be emotionally taxing, mentally draining, and stressful (El Sayed et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2010). The modern law enforcement officer is called upon in various moments to exhibit the disparate attributes of a counselor, legal analyst, soldier, detective, teacher, sharpshooter, events coordinator, and many other roles (Duxbury et al., 2015). The ever-expanding workload and competency expectations for law enforcement officers have been termed "role-overload," and the phenomenon contributes to feelings of inadequacy and burnout (Duxbury & Halinski, 2018, p. 2).

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Within the bureaucracy of police agencies, law enforcement officers often face pressure from other officers, police leadership, other public officials, and from the public – and many of these pressures may be in conflict (Ricciardelli, 2018). Additionally, because being a law enforcement officer requires the assumption of a particular lifestyle and highly affects one's mental state, these emotional pressures can affect personal lives and relationships in life in addition to one's career, with police having higher rates of depression and suicide than the rate among the general public (Larned, 2010; Burke, 1993; Hall et al., 2010). Prior research has shown that there is a correlation between high levels of emotional intelligence and leadership ability, not just within law enforcement but across a vast array of professions (Golnaz, 2012).

This study grows the body of existing knowledge about the link between emotional intelligence and career success in law enforcement leadership by focusing on the workplace environment of small police agencies in Oklahoma. The research questions for this study each focus on measuring the differences in mean emotional intelligence level between binary categories of small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers:

1. How do police officers in supervisory positions differ from police officers in non-supervisory positions in terms of their level of emotional intelligence among police officers in small Oklahoma agencies?
2. How do police officers who have received a promotion in rank differ from police officers who have not received a promotion in rank in terms of their level of emotional intelligence among police officers in small Oklahoma agencies?
3. How do police officers with 10 or more years of experience differ from police officers without 10 or more years of experience in terms of their level of emotional intelligence among police officers in small Oklahoma agencies?

This study identifies whether there are different distributions of emotional intelligence among small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers when comparing average EI levels across categories of rank promotion, supervisor or non-supervisory status, and career longevity.

# 1. Background

The profession of law enforcement is plagued with high levels of employee turnover (Brunetto et al., 2012). As public servants, police officers are often in the lens of media and public scrutiny while performing a demanding and challenging slate of responsibilities (Saunders, 2019). Executives within law enforcement agencies are constantly grasping for solutions to improve the recruitment of new officers who will have lower turnover, better leadership qualities, better performance, and fewer instances of misconduct. There is significant potential that a focus on emotional intelligence could be helpful in assisting law enforcement agency recruitment across each of these factors, especially considering that similar success in utilizing emotional intelligence within the search for new employees has shown promise in other employment sectors.

A survey of 139 police chiefs and other law enforcement leaders showed a statistically significant relationship between high levels of emotional intelligence and a self-perception of being an effective leader (Campbell, 2013). Law enforcement officers with high levels of emotional intelligence are more likely to achieve satisfactory levels of work-life balance compared to law enforcement officers with low emotional intelligence (Kumarasamy et al., 2016). Law enforcement officers who have high levels of emotional intelligence have been shown to score higher peer-awarded scores on job performance even after controlling for mental ability and other personality traits (Al Ali et al., 2012). One meta-analysis has shown that jobs with a high level of emotional labor on a daily basis are precisely the careers that benefit the most from having employees with emotional intelligence (Joseph & Newman, 2010). The high amount of emotional labor demanded of law enforcement officers may mean "certain aspects of police officer official duties could not be performed successfully without essential components of emotional intelligence" (Joseph & Newman, 2010, p. 2).

For law enforcement officers in agency leadership roles, emotional intelligence has been shown to be beneficial because the process of leading the police bureaucracy is inherently a social task in which understanding the emotions of others and the deployment of emotional expression can be used to understand and influence others (Drodge & Murphy, 2002). Because modern realities demand police understanding of cultural diversity, complex interpersonal interactions, and the ability to intuitively understand other people's emotional states, the importance of emotional intelligence in the leadership of law enforcement is crucial to success (Pūraitė & Prokofjeva, 2019).

Other benefits of EI include a reduction in turnover within organizations, improved work product, lower stress levels, improved health outcomes, higher employee and customer satisfaction, higher ethical standards, and fewer instances of employee misconduct (Brunetto et al., 2012; Kumarasamy et al., 2016; Bar-On, 1997; Singh, 2011; Kluemper et al., 2013). Among law enforcement in particular, emotional intelligence has been shown to reduce police burnout, improve career performance, heighten the quality of victim and witness interviewing, and enable law enforcement officers to better navigate complex intercultural and interpersonal interactions (Mayer et al., 2004; Pūraitė & Prokofjeva, 2019).

By identifying where EI is highest and lowest among small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers and whether the variation is statistically significant, agencies can begin to be more proactive in utilizing and deploying their more emotionally intelligent personnel and take steps to more accurately target remedies toward the lower EI personnel. Greater understanding of precisely where the highest levels of EI exist within law enforcement organizations, such as the information produced by this study, may assist the criminal justice profession in resource allocation, training, and deployment decisions.

## 2. Instrument and Methodology

This study involved 86 law enforcement officers in Oklahoma law enforcement agencies with fewer than 100 sworn full-time officers across all ranks. These agencies are not a representative cross-section of American, or even Oklahoma-based law enforcement, as they do not include federal law enforcement, state troopers or highway patrol, or tribal law enforcement.

This research provides information about the differences in emotional intelligence levels among small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers based on grouping participants by different levels of promotion and longevity within the profession. The procedure utilized in this research is the to administer a metric of emotional intelligence, the Assessing Emotions Scale (AES), and statistically analyze the difference in mean emotional intelligence score between law enforcement officers who have been promoted to a supervisory position or not, promoted to a non-supervisory position or not, and officers who have 10 years of longevity within the career field of law enforcement or not. The statistical analysis was done by performing multiple t-tests to determine if differences in mean EI levels between these groups are reliable.

The AES instrument used in this study is a 33 question self-report inventory utilizing a one through five Likert scale for each inquiry, with three of the inquiries being reverse coded. This instrument permits participants to be ranked on their emotional intelligence quotient utilizing an overall scoring scale that ranges from 33 (lowest) to 165 (highest). The instrument takes between five and 10 minutes to complete, thereby permitting widespread use without exhausting or discouraging participants (Schutte et al., 2009). The AES instrument has been found to be a reliable survey with an internal consistency measure of .90 using Cronbach's alpha and two-week retest reliability of .78 (Schutte et al., 1998).

Importantly, the AES instrument has been shown to have both convergent and discriminant validity. The instrument's developer found that scores on the AES were substantially related to attention to emotions and clarity of emotional expression (Schutte et al., 2009; Schutte et al., 1998). Further confirmation of convergent validity was found by Brackett and Mayer (2003), who confirmed that AES scores were correlated with scores on the well-established EQ-i emotional intelligence measurement instrument ($r = .43$) as well as the MSCEIT (Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test) instrument ($r = .18$).

Each participant was employed within an agency with fewer than 100 full-time law enforcement officers and exclusively with an Oklahoma patrol jurisdiction. Among survey participants, 41.9% had accumulated at least 10 years of experience as a full-time law enforcement officer ($N = 36$), and 58.1% had not accumulated at least 10 years of experience as a full-time law enforcement officer ($N = 50$); 64% had experienced at least one promotion in rank at some point in their career ($N = 55$) and 36% had not experienced at least one promotion in rank at some point in their career ($N = 31$); 38.4% had been promoted to supervisory positions over other full-time law enforcement officers ($N = 33$), and 61.6% had not been promoted to supervisory positions over other full-time law enforcement officers ($N = 53$).

# 3. Research Findings

Because this research involves measuring the difference between the means of three sets of two independent groups, three separate t-tests were conducted to see if the mean Assessing Emotions Scale (AES) score of the survey participants was reliably different. The three sets of two groups are:

1. Full-time law enforcement officers in Oklahoma who have experienced promotion to supervisory positions and those who have not.
2. Full-time law enforcement officers in Oklahoma who have experienced promotion, whether supervisory or not, and those who have not.
3. Full-time law enforcement officers in Oklahoma who have served 10 or more years as a law enforcement officer, and those who have not.

The AES utilizes a five-option Likert scale arranged as follows: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The study additionally included three binary inquiries related to law enforcement officer promotion, supervisory status, and longevity. The score on this scale, from survey participants within each group, was assembled into separate data sets based on the binary participant category: supervisor status or not; promoted or not; and 10 years of experience or not.

The data were checked for unequal variance by using an F test. The F test was utilized because the data from the groups are unequal sample sizes and independent samples. For this reason, it is first necessary to determine whether the two independent samples have equal variance, or at least sufficiently equivalent variance, to ensure that a standard t-test for differences in means would produce valid results. Because the F tests did not show statistically significant differences in variance, a standard (as opposed to modified) t-test was applied to each of the groups.

Research question one asked whether police officers in supervisory positions differ from police officers in non-supervisory positions in terms of their level of emotional intelligence. Based on a two-tailed F test, the difference between the standard deviation of the group populations is not statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.204 ($p(x \leq F) = 0.1019$). The F statistic for this test was 0.65, which is within the 95% region of acceptance (between 0.518: 1.84). This acceptable variance similarity means a standard t-test, as opposed to a modified version such as Welch's t-test, was valid as applied to this set of data. A t-test was applied to determine if the two groups are reliably different. Among participants who had not been promoted to supervisory positions, the average AES score was 119; and among participants who had been promoted to supervisory positions, the average AES score was 127.7, indicating higher average emotional intelligence. The test indicated that the groups, supervisory law enforcement officers and non-supervisory law enforcement officers, produced reliably different results on the AES and that this difference was statistically significant ($t[84] = 2.72$, $p < .05$).

Research question two asked whether police officers who have received a promotion in rank differ from police officers who have not received a promotion in rank in terms of their level of emotional intelligence. Based on a two-tailed F test, the difference between the standard deviation of the group populations is not statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.123 ($p(x \leq F) = 0.061$). The F statistic for this test was 0.62, which is within the 95% region of acceptance (between 0.54: 1.95). This acceptable variance similarity means a standard t-test, as opposed to a modified version such as Welch's t-test, was valid as applied to this set of data. A t-test was applied to determine if the two groups are reliably different. Among participants who had not received a promotion, the average AES score was 118; and among participants who had received a promotion, the average AES score was 124.7, indicating higher average emotional intelligence. The test indicated that the two groups produced reliably different results on the AES and that this difference was statistically significant ($t[84] = 1.99$, $p < .05$).

Research question three asked whether police officers with 10 or more years of experience differ from police officers without 10 or more years of experience in terms of their level of emotional intelligence. Based on a two-tailed F test, the difference between the standard deviation of the group populations is not statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.831 ($p(x \leq F) = 0.584$). The F statistic for this test was 1.06, which is within the 95% region of acceptance (between 0.53: 1.83). This acceptable variance similarity means a standard t-test, as opposed to a modified version such as Welch's t-test, was valid as applied to this set of data. A t-test was applied to determine if the two groups are reliably different. Among participants who did not have 10 or more years of experience, the average AES score was 118.3; and among participants who did have 10 or more years of experience, the average AES score was 127.9, indicating higher average emotional intelligence. The test indicated that the two groups produced reliably different results on the AES and that this difference was statistically significant ($t[84] = 3.07$, $p < .05$).

In terms of the raw emotional intelligence scores produced in the data collection for this research, the 86 participants as a combined cohort scored an average of 122.3 on the AES instrument. When survey data were combined to create new groups: one comprising those who had both more than 10 years of experience and promotion to a supervisory status, and a second comprising those who had neither 10 years of experience and no promotion to supervisory status, a test of the difference between the two groups was possible. Among the 86 survey participants, 27.9% had supervisory status and more than 10 years of experience ($N = 24$), and 48.8% had neither supervisory status or 10 years of experience ($N = 42$). A t-test was applied to determine if the two groups are reliably different. Among participants who had supervisory status and 10 or more years of experience, the average AES score was 130.0; and among participants who did not have supervisory status or have 10 or more years of experience, the average AES score was 118.0. The test indicated that the two groups produced reliably different results on the AES and that this difference was highly statistically significant, at a greater level than any of the primary research question results ($t[84] = 3.35$, $p < .05$).

# 4. Discussion

After ensuring acceptable equivalence in variance between the independent samples, the t-tests produced results that were statistically significant in each statistical analysis. In regard to the first research question, there is a reliable difference between emotional intelligence levels when comparing supervisory small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers to non-supervisory officers. In regard to the second research question, there is a reliable difference between emotional intelligence levels when comparing small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers who have received a promotion to those who have not. Finally, in regard to the third research question, there is a reliable difference between emotional intelligence levels when comparing small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers with 10 years or more of longevity within the profession to those who do not have such longevity. When comparing the differences between two combination groups, those with supervisory experience and more than 10 years of experience to those with neither, a highly statistically significant result in differences between the mean score of those groups was found. When groups are combined, such as those who have both longevity and promotion compared to those with neither, the difference in mean emotional intelligence scores is even more significant than when the groups are compared separately.

The application of a t-test to the data collected for the first research question resulted in a rejection of the null hypothesis, finding a statistically significant difference in mean emotional intelligence between participants who had not been promoted to supervisory positions versus those who had been promoted to supervisory positions, with the latter distribution possessing the higher level of EI on average. This result confirms the alternative hypothesis that small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers in supervisory positions possess higher mean emotional intelligence than their counterparts. This result has two major practical implications for the field of law enforcement: the rational consideration of the utility and deployment of supervisory personnel and an understanding of potential career risks and benefits as disparately applied to supervisory and non-supervisory categories of personnel.

Since the alternative hypothesis is verified, and supervisory personnel have been shown to have higher emotional intelligence on average compared to their non-supervisory counterparts, it is valuable for law enforcement agencies to know the importance of utilizing their supervisory officers in ways that acknowledge and utilize their higher EI skill-set to benefit the community and police force. A multitude of such benefits include increased cross-cultural communication ability, enhanced ability to de-escalate emotionally intense situations, and a better ability to effectively interview witnesses and victims (Imai & Gelfand, 2010; Boland & Ross, 2010; Risan et al., 2017).

Because research has shown that higher EI individuals are more likely to utilize mediation tactics in their interpersonal interactions in order to promote agreeable behaviors (Boland & Ross, 2010), the value of emotional intelligence to law enforcement officers can be of great value in de-escalating emotionally charged or angry situations. The findings of this study, which tend to show that higher EI levels are found among supervisory law enforcement officers, may indicate the importance of assigning supervisors to employment spaces where emotional escalation is more likely

to happen so that they are present or nearby to utilize these emotionally mediating abilities in the field (Oliva et al., 2010).

The importance of gaining information from witnesses and victims is a crucial factor in the conduction of investigations pursued by law enforcement, meaning the witness and victim interviewing phase of preliminary and formal investigations into criminal conduct should ideally be conducted by individuals with an enhanced ability to establish communicative rapport (Risan et al., 2016; Oostinga et al., 2018). Prior research has shown that higher EI individuals have this enhanced capability to establish rapport and maintain rapport with witnesses and victims, causing the secondary advantages of gathering more relevant information for the investigation and building confidence in victims (Risan et al., 2017). This greater capacity in interpersonal communication implies that, based on the data from the present study, law enforcement agencies may generate a number of investigative efficacy benefits by ensuring supervisory level involvement in witness and victim interviewing where possible.

The application of a t-test to the data collected for the second research question resulted in a rejection of the null hypothesis, finding a statistically significant difference in mean emotional intelligence between participants who had not been promoted in rank versus those who had been promoted in rank, with the latter distribution possessing the higher level of EI on average. This result confirms the alternative hypothesis that small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers who have experienced promotion in rank possess higher mean emotional intelligence than their counterparts. This result has two major practical implications for the field of law enforcement: the rational consideration of the utility and deployment of higher-ranking personnel and an understanding of potential career risks and benefits as disparately applied to higher ranking and lower-ranking categories of personnel.

Due to increased concern about officer-involved shootings in recent years, law enforcement agencies have been exploring ways to ensure that police officers are sufficiently trained on the use of force and to ensure they are broadly capable of managing emotional reactions to escalating situations (Engel et al., 2020; Rosenbaum & Lawrence, 2017). Lower EI individuals, including police, have been shown to exhibit more frequent aggressive behaviors (Garcia-Sancho et al., 2017; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Based on the results of the present study, training on these topics may best be targeted toward law enforcement officers who are more junior in the ranks or who have been passed over for promotion. Because of the workplace stressors that are uniquely prevalent in careers such as law enforcement, such as frequent shifting and conflicting expectations, increased scrutiny and oversight, and constantly changing technology, the lower or most junior ranks of law enforcement may be at higher risk of this stress-causing burnout and fatigue, as a result of their moderately lower EI as a cohort (Elkin & Rosch, 1990; Burke & Cooper, 2006; Cooper et al., 2001). If agency supervisors and leadership remain careful about monitoring and measuring these self-reported stress levels among non-promoted officers, they may see improvement in both performance and morale. Due to possessing modestly lower levels of EI, this cohort would likely not have the same success in utilizing their own coping mechanisms or the same level of resiliency under pressure as their promoted peers within the agency (Yamani et al., 2014).

The application of a t-test to the data collected for the third research question resulted in a rejection of the null hypothesis, finding a statistically significant difference in mean emotional intelligence between participants who did not have 10 or more years of experience versus those who had 10 or more years of experience, with the latter distribution possessing the higher level of EI on average. This result confirms the alternative hypothesis that small-agency Oklahoma law enforcement officers with more experience in the profession possess higher mean emotional intelligence than their counterparts who do not have at least this level of experience. Additionally, this was the research question where the difference in emotional intelligence between the two groups was most significant, meaning that the amount of experience overshadows supervisory status and promotion in rank as the area where levels of emotional intelligence are most starkly different. The primary practical implication is to acknowledge and utilize this information for the improvement of law enforcement outcomes in small Oklahoma law enforcement agencies. Performance, morale, and a number of other important factors can be improved, according to this data, if law enforcement agencies implement measures to retain law enforcement employees and field more experienced professionals on a more frequent basis.

To some extent, it was predictable that individuals with more experience in law enforcement would have higher levels of emotional intelligence because prior research has indicated that higher levels of EI are correlated with reduced turnover in police organizations (Brunetto et al., 2012). Reduction of turnover is a paramount concern because high attrition rates within law enforcement agencies cause lower morale even among law enforcement officers who are not new to the force, and has a net effect of increasing the likelihood of reduced longevity among police leadership and senior management, including chiefs (Li & Brown, 2019).

It has been widely known that longevity in the law enforcement profession has a number of benefits outside of emotional intelligence. For example, police officers with more years of experience are involved in fewer instances of verbal and physical altercations, even after controlling for other potential causes (Paoline & Terrill, 2007; Donovan, 2007). The present research shows that law enforcement officers with more years of experience possess higher levels of emotional intelligence. The possession of higher average EI among those with longer career longevity aligns with prior findings that indicate the ability to manage one's emotions correlates with less deviant behavior on the job, fewer conflicts in the performance of their duties, and fewer instances of workplace counseling for misbehavior (Kluemper et al., 2013). The present research also aligns with findings that indicate a greater likelihood of ethical competence among higher EI individuals and greater workplace satisfaction in stressful environments among higher EI individuals (Dangmei & Singh, 2017; Mikolajczak et al., 2007).

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