Operational Psychology Post-9/11: A Decade of Evolution

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Operational psychology continues to expand at a rapid rate. Over the course of the last decade, it has emerged from relative obscurity and developed into an exciting, and somewhat controversial, professional subdiscipline within psychology. As the community of operational psychologists has increased and matured, it has reached a tipping point, creating the need for practice guidelines, training programs, and a greater emphasis on operationally relevant empirical research. The starting point for these developments is an integrative definition of operational psychology. In this article, we revisit previous definitions, relevant research literature, and recent developments in this specialty. We propose a definition that emphasizes consultation to an operational decision maker concerning issues of national security and defense.

Keywords: operational, national security, military, 9/11, national defense

Despite more than a decade of rapid expansion, there remains wide-spread disagreement about how to define operational psychology. Although we believe that this disagreement reflects a natural maturational process in the evolution of the discipline, it has the potential to be divisive among a community that is already poorly understood and whose members have been under increased scrutiny by their professional peers (Gravitz, 2009). Lack of agreement has come largely from the fact that psychologists operating in the national security arena function in diverse contexts and roles. Operational psychologists often perform very similar activities; however, because some operate in law enforcement, others in support of the intelligence community, and still others exclusively in a military context, each views operational psychology differently. Further confusing the issue is the lack of consensus concerning how to characterize this area of specialty within psychology. The predominant view among military psychologists is to refer to this specialized activity as “operational psychology” (Gravitz, 2009; Staal & Stephenson, 2006; Williams & Johnson, 2006), whereas many among the civilian intelligence community have more commonly referred to it as “national security psychology” (Kennedy, Borum, & Fein, 2010; Shumate & Borum, 2006) or have referred to its practitioners as simply intelligence community psychologists (Civiello, 2009; Freedman, 2009; Gelles, Brandt, & Dorsey, 2009). For the sake of this article we will use the term operational psychology to refer to a category of practice while we will use the terms national security and national defense to describe practice domains for operational psychologists.

Historically, many of the activities performed by operational psychologists are in support of national security and national defense. Not surprisingly, much of this work is classified or compartmentalized and thus kept secret from the outside world and from other psychologists working outside the national security arena (Picano, Williams, Roland, & Long, 2010). In many instances the sensitive nature of this work prohibits operational psychologists from openly discussing their work with each other based on “need-to-know” restrictions. This situation has had a stove-piping effect, limiting the cross-
pollination of ideas, best practices, and the ability to contribute to the larger profession. Gelles, Brant, and Dorsey (2009) note that this may be “one of the single greatest challenges to consultants” working within intelligence and related agencies (p. 52).

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 ushered in a significant increase in the employment of operational psychologists in support of national security within the intelligence and military communities (Ewing & Gelles, 2003). Several authors recognized barriers that kept operational psychologists from communicating openly between agencies and noted that this situation was only hampering efforts to support national security (Baughman & Dorsey, 2009; Shumate & Borum, 2006). However, only recently has there been an attempt to coalesce and build consensus around our shared national security activities as operational psychologists. This community has reached a tipping point where practice guidelines, professional training programs, and the need for operationally relevant empirical research need to be addressed. The first step in this process is the creation of an operational definition that can be adopted by the majority of those practicing in the arena of national security and national defense. Although we do not expect to adequately represent all of the interests and stake-holders within this broad community of psychologists, we hope to advance the conversation further by adding clarity to previous writing on this subject.

A Brief History of Operational Psychology

Mangelsdorf (2006) and Brandon (2011) chronicle psychology’s involvement in national security activities from World War I (WWI) to the post-9/11 period. Psychology was pressed into service to rapidly assess, select, classify, and place military service members in WWI. Psychologists’ roles were expanded significantly in the intervening years between WWI and WWII. Mangelsdorf (2006) argues that psychologists in the service of national security initially fell into three categories: those focused on performance abilities (studies of individual differences, personnel selection, pilot performance, human factors, and ergonomics), those engaged in the study of intelligence and aptitude differences (personnel selection using test batteries such as the Army Alpha and Beta), and those studying personality differences (tests of psychological fitness and adaptation).

Although psychology has always played a role in the art of war, some have suggested that it reached its zenith toward the close of WWII with the establishment of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, 1948; Banks, 2006). Although well beyond the scope of this article, we would recommend that the reader review the exploits of the OSS and their cadre of distinguished psychologists who made significant impact on America’s clandestine military and intelligence efforts during WWII. Their state-of-the-art special mission personnel selection and training programs have been chronicled by a number of authors (Banks, 2006; Handler, 2001; OSS, 1948; Picano, Williams, & Roland, 2006). It is to this legacy that most contemporary operational psychologists turn when describing what they do and how they do it. The OSS was disbanded by Executive Order and broken up by function between the Department of State (DoS) and the Department of War (DoW) after WWII. The DoS received the OSS’s research and analysis elements, which were combined with existing programs to form the Interim Research and Intelligence Service. The OSS’s clandestine elements were given to the DoW, which formed the Strategic Services Unit. At the same time, findings were released from a Navy study that recommended the creation of a National Security Council and a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which would coordinate national security policy as well as national security intelligence. Many authors have suggested that critical remnants of the OSS were used in the formation of the CIA and the Army’s elite branch of Special Forces (Banks, 2006; Kennedy & Zillmer, 2006; Picano, Williams, & Roland, 2006).

During the years after the OSS, operationally minded psychologists continued to provide support to national security. These activities included special mission personnel selection, influence and information operations consultation, indirect behavioral assessments, Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) oversight, and operational interviewing and debriefing support (Banks, 2006; Williams, Picano, Roland, & Banks, 2006). As in more recent days, the pairing of psychologists with intelligence or special operations support activities raised concerns about potential ethical conflicts.
The terrorist attacks of 9/11 changed everything, including the role of psychologists within national security settings. Although operational psychology expanded its reach into numerous areas of national security following these attacks, two events accelerated the dialogue and scholarship among operational psychologists. First, the number of psychologists recruited to support the expanding role of interrogation and debriefing activities increased, making it necessary to develop formal training programs to prepare nonoperationally trained psychologists to support these activities (Dunivin, Banks, Staal, & Stephenson, 2010). Second, a controversy arose around misinformation regarding the roles psychologists played in their operational support. There was widespread misperception that operational psychologists were engaged in torture and unethical practices (Kalbeitzer, 2009; Lifton, 2004; Marks, 2005; Mayer, 2005). As a result, the operational psychology community recognized the need for greater engagement and open dialogue among its ranks to help dispel the myths surrounding operational psychology (Stephenson & Staal, 2007a).

Although the research literature in the areas of forensic evaluation, law enforcement support, personnel selection, and social influence are well established, very few articles had been published regarding operational psychology (Borum, 2004; Borum, Fein, Vossekuiil, Gelles, & Shumate, 2004; Gelles, Borum, & Palarea, 2005). However, in 2006, *Military Psychology* published a special issue devoted to operational psychology (Williams & Johnson, 2006). This special issue ushered in a wave of papers on this topic and encouraged operational psychologists to speak openly about their operational support activities (Hoyt, 2006; Kennedy & Zillmer, 2006; Reger & Moore, 2006; Saus, Johnsen, Eid, Riisem, Andersen, & Thayer, 2006; Shumate & Borum, 2006; Staal & Stephenson, 2006; Stephenson & Staal, 2007a).

Williams and Johnson (2006) and Williams, Picano, Roland, and Banks (2006) were able to trace the origin of the term “operational psychology” to a number of related sources to include psychological activities supporting manned space travel (Holland & Curtis, 1998), human factors, performance, and selection duties associated with Naval operational medicine (Naval Operational Medicine Institute), and lastly, a reference to the Russian Federal Security Service in which operational psychologists provide training in assessment and selection, antiterrorism, and counterintelligence. It was in this Special Issue of Military Psychology that we find the first published reference to operational psychology as we commonly use the term today. Staal and Stephenson (2006) and Williams and Johnson (2006) discussed operational definitions and described activities involving operational psychology. Shumate and Borum (2006) discussed activities involving operational psychologists in support of counterintelligence activities.

This series was followed by another Special Issue concerning operational psychologists’ support to national security activities published in *Consulting Psychology*, APA Division 13 journal (Civiello, 2009). This collection provided complementary perspectives on national security activities involving operational psychologists working within nonmilitary entities and provided a platform for other operational psychologists to join the evolving professional dialogue. These two communities of operational psychologists (military and civilian) working on national security and defense activities, intelligence, and law enforcement came together to produce a volume on the ethics of operational psychology published by the APA in 2010 (Kennedy & Williams, 2010). These contributions to the operational psychology literature are significant because they provide a means by which to develop an operational definition, identify practice standards, and highlight deficiencies in the empirical literature and continued challenges with the ethical standards.

**Defining Operational Psychology**

Williams and Johnson (2006) and Williams, Picano, Roland, and Banks (2006) defined operational psychology as, “the actions by military psychologists that support the employment and/or sustainment of military forces (through military commanders) to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or theater of operations by leveraging and applying their psychological expertise in helping identify enemy capabilities, personalities, and intentions; facilitating and supporting intelligence operations; designing and implementing assessment and selection
programs in support of special populations and high-risk missions; and providing an operationally focused level of mental health support” (pp. 194–195).

Though this definition describes activities that constitute the work of an operational psychologist, to include goals and whom they work for, it fails to include major portions of the community. Specifically, it identifies operational psychologists as “military psychologists”; yet as stated previously, military psychologists make up just a fraction of operational psychologists. Furthermore, it states that these psychologists are engaged in the support of military forces to attain strategic goals. However, many operational psychology activities are not restricted to the support of military forces nor are they only involved with strategic goals in mind. On the contrary, operational psychology runs the full spectrum of application for, it fails to include major portions of the community. Specifically, it identifies operational psychologists as “military psychologists”; yet as stated previously, military psychologists make up just a fraction of operational psychologists. Furthermore, it states that these psychologists are engaged in the support of military forces to attain strategic goals. However, many operational psychology activities are not restricted to the support of military forces nor are they only involved with strategic goals in mind. On the contrary, operational psychology runs the full spectrum of application from tactical to operational and strategic. Lastly, the Williams et al. (2006) definition includes mental health support as an operational psychology task. Although we would agree that many operational psychologists provide mental health care in some instances, we would argue strongly against including mental health care as an operational psychology activity. There may be times when operational support leads toward direct health care provision (e.g., anxiety management to SERE trainees or mental health assessment with a foreign intelligence source); however, we assert that these activities are a form of health care provision and not an extension of operational psychology.

In contrast, Staal and Stephenson (2006) suggested a much broader (yet still problematic) definition stating that operational psychology was “the use of psychological principles and skills to improve a commander’s decision making as it pertains to conducting combat and/or related operations” (p. 271). Whereas perhaps this definition would have been appropriate for military operational psychology, it too falls flat as a sufficiently inclusive definition for the specialty as a whole. Identifying the operational decision maker as a “commander” and including reference to “combat operations” makes the definition unnecessarily restrictive. Gravitz (2009) rightly criticized both of these previous definitions as overly restrictive and too focused on military applications. In comparison, he proposed that the field should adopt a broader definition that also includes the work of civilian psychologists who provide more comprehensive direct and indirect professional services in support of national security and safety. In an attempt to better capture the broad contributions of operational psychologists, Kennedy and Williams (2010) modified the previous definition and greatly simplified their language suggesting that operational psychology is, “the application of the science and profession of psychology to the operational activities of law enforcement, national intelligence organizations, and national defense activities” (p. 4).

In a similar vein, senior operational psychologists from each of the military services have proposed a joint military definition that may soon be adopted as official doctrine from within the Department of Defense for the uniformed services. They have proposed the following definition: operational psychology is a specialty within the field of psychology that applies behavioral science principles to enable key decision makers to more effectively understand, develop, target, and/or influence an individual, group or organization to accomplish tactical, operational, or strategic objectives (Dean, 2012).

In our review of these past definitions we find many desirable characteristics. As we have spoken to many experienced operational psychologists over the years we continue to see several patterns emerge. Some strongly assert that there can never be an adequate definition that will satisfy the community given its inextricable diversity. They conclude that the intelligence community should assert its own definition, keeping to a label of national security psychology while those in the DoD or uniformed military services should do likewise, holding to their moniker of operational psychology. Others feel that only through the most general definition (e.g., behavioral science applications to operational environments) can we hope to gain consensus. Unfortunately, this approach falls prey to the old adage that when you stand for all things, you ultimately stand for none of them. Despite the difficulties, we will attempt to further refine our previous definition while integrating the various perspectives within the operational psychology community. Our goal is to provide a definition for the specialty of operational psychology which will bring to-
gether the various community elements. Furthermore, we wish to establish this common ground from which the community may begin to build its standards of practice, training programs, and call for operationally relevant empirical research.

With this background in mind, we will attempt to define the parameters of operational psychology by focusing on its purpose, process, methodology, and activity. Operational psychologists are behavioral science consultants. Their consultation is typically used to inform or advise an operational decision maker to understand, develop, target, and/or influence an objective. For the military or national security community psychologist that objective may involve an enemy target, a terrorist cell or organization, or an opposing political regime and therefore may be considered to be in the service of national security or defense. However, for other operational psychologists, objectives would not be limited to these examples and could just as easily include law enforcement or public safety. Although we have identified the domains of national security and defense, we see law enforcement and public safety activities as an extension of this larger framework practiced at the state and local level.

In contrast to previous definitions, we have chosen to focus on three elements: what operational psychologists do (consult), to whom they provide their expertise (an operational decision maker), and through what context and type of expertise they leverage their consultation (national security and defense related). We propose the following:

Operational psychology is a specialty within the field of psychology that applies behavioral science principles to enable key decision makers to more effectively understand, develop, target, and/or influence an individual, group or organization to accomplish tactical, operational, or strategic objectives within the domain of national security or national defense (see Figure 1).

Each of the three elements will be examined in greater detail below: (1) the consultation, (2) the operational decision maker, and (3) understanding, developing, targeting, and influenc-
ing, the objective in the service of national security or defense.

Operational Psychology Consultation

Consultation is at the heart of operational psychology and it is first and foremost a process (Civiello, 2009) that typically involves an exchange between the consultant and the operational decision maker(s). Consultation is typically conducted face-to-face but can occur in any number of venues. It often starts when an operational decision maker faces a problem that he or she feels could benefit from an additional advisor. Finding the right consultant makes all of the difference. Decision makers must balance subject-matter expertise (e.g., someone who knows the culture, the politics, and other dynamics) with an objective outsider’s perspective (not being so close to the problem—or being a product of the environment—that they won’t remain objective; Lowman, 2006). One of the greatest values operational psychologists typically bring to their organizations is the ability to appreciate both internal and external perspectives. Proximity to key operational decision makers is implied and this speaks to the importance of placement and access as a trusted consultant. Among military operational psychologists this often comes in the form of an embedded asset assigned directly to the organizational leader or operational support element of the unit. Similar strategic positioning exists in our civilian agency counterparts.

Most operational psychology consultation consists of both information and a set of recommendations. These recommendations typically result from the collection, analysis, and synthesis of relevant information regarding a given problem. What distinguishes this form of consultation from others is the context and methodology used in leveraging the operational psychologist's expertise regarding behavioral science, group dynamics, individual decision making, and other relevant factors. In practice, these recommendations may take any number of forms given the nature of the consultation. For example, a law enforcement psychologist may be asked to assess the motivations and decision making style of a hostage taker, concluding that the individual in question is likely to be particularly volatile in his decision making and thus leading the police negotiations team to modify their intended approach. Similarly, a military psychologist working in support of detention operations may consult with a military guard unit commander regarding the most advantageous way to address behavioral drift or moral disengagement among the guard force based on the psychologist’s understanding of social learning theory. Such recommendations may result in the guard unit putting new policies in place to mitigate potential risks to such drift, reducing the risk of harm to the detainees.

Who Is the Operational Decision Maker?

In the military, we generally define a commander who is responsible for carrying out combat, intelligence collection, or related operations as the operational decision maker. However, there are a number of individuals or entities who would fit that definition as well. In general terms, such an individual would be responsible for personnel and/or materiel with the authority to conduct an operation against a target or objective (either an individual, group of individuals, or physical structure) or the authority to influence and persuade in a way that achieves a desired tactical, operational, or strategic outcome. Therefore, when we use the term operational, we are referring to national security and defense activities and not a level of influence, application, or policy (e.g., tactical, operational, strategic).

In helping to define what we mean by operational decision maker, it is useful to keep in mind that these individuals are always attempting to achieve an objective with operational impact. The type of impact may vary to include national security issues, intelligence concerns, organizational dynamics, or other such issues. Operational psychology as practiced in most military settings is focused on an operational decision maker who is exercising his influence as an instrument of national power. This influence is often associated with coercive power, whose goal is to get an adversary to change their behavior. But it can also be a deterrent power which prevents an adversary from seeking an advantage or one that protects its citizens in any number of other ways. The military is just one of many sources of power our nation wields to enable us to pursue our national security objectives. We also use our political, diplomatic, information/intelligence, internal security, eco-
nomic, and cultural sources of power to build coalitions, gain competitive advantage, maintain law and order, and deter our adversaries (Obama, 2010). Civilian organizations that are engaged in national security and defense share these same sources of power. Generally, the decision makers who use these powers are attempting to influence individuals or groups toward a desired end state. Such influence might concern senior government officials who wish to influence their international counterparts, but could equally be a field agent or midlevel consulate official attempting to gain a political, financial, or intelligence advantage over a foreign adversary as part of a larger objective. Once again, we would submit that these, also, represent operational decision-making entities and individuals who routinely employ the support of operational psychologists to assist them as consultants as they develop, conduct, or leverage their objectives.

Operational Influence

Operational psychologists’ expertise and knowledge are generally used to inform and increase awareness or understanding about an operationally relevant objective. There are many potential uses of this type of information. These may include attempts to improve the quality of a given decision, to provide information and analysis to guide policy development or organizational change, or to establish a tactical, operational, or strategic advantage over an adversary. As an advisor this means influencing a decision maker or process to enhance operations (an identified objective or target). Williams, Picano, Roland, and Banks (2006) conceptualized using expertise to “help commanders get inside the enemy’s decision loop” (p. 193) and to “facilitate the commander’s probing of the enemy commander’s mind” (p. 199). In both instances, psychologists may simply present data that informs the decision maker. However, in many circumstances this information is accompanied by specific recommendations and guidance that leads a decision maker toward a particular course of action over others.

What Defines an Objective or Target?

As behavioral science consultants, operational psychologists are most useful to decision makers and associated processes when the target of their consultation concerns an element of the human terrain system as opposed to material, structures, or equipment. Military leaders refer to human terrain systems as people from a particular region, cultural group, or organization in which various social science disciplines (anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science) are applied to better understand those groups of interest (Stanton, 2009). For example, when an operational decision maker selects a building as a target to achieve a military or national objective, they seek the advice of an engineer as to the potential vulnerabilities of the structure as well as potential munitions which would be effective against these vulnerabilities, all the while seeking to reduce the chances of collateral damage. Similarly, when the objective relates to an individual personality, cultural group, or organization, the decision maker needs to understand the particular vulnerabilities or likely behavior of the individual or group in order to properly prepare a line of operation, engagement, or influence.

Target Development

In general terms, the development and subsequent leveraging of a target is cyclical. In essence, development enables leveraging which in turn facilitates more development. During the process of development, an objective or target is identified and studied. Decision makers must first understand the target prior to engaging it. For example, if the target was the leadership element of a foreign crime network, then before attempting to engage that target, decision makers would need to understand a number of variables, which include, but are not limited to the following: (1) what motivates the leadership of the network?, (2) how are these motives different from those of their followers?, (3) how much support do they have from internal and external agencies?, (4) are they allied with other organizations of influence?, (5) is their decision making style centralized or distributed?, (6) are they reliant on technologies that could be leveraged?, (7) are there exploitable fractures within their organization?, and (8) what is the political will of the host-nation’s leadership in bringing these elements to justice?

Initial target selection and subsequent development is a complex process that often results
from an intelligence operation or analysis. Consider the example of an indirect assessment (popularly known in the past as a psychological profile). Operational psychologists, often with the assistance of other elements, collect and synthesize large volumes of behavioral data (e.g., public speeches, past decisions, reflections from trusted confidants, private correspondence, etc.) and combine this information with the latest literature in behavioral, learning, and social sciences. The culminating product in this example is an idiographic predictive model of a specific human’s behavior. However, the product of the development phase could just as easily be a predictive model of any individual, group, or organization. In general, the purpose of target leveraging is simply to generate more targets or objectives to develop and engage. There may be tactical or operational advantages in doing so (e.g., removing or disabling enemy capability), or there may be strategic advantages (e.g., changing the behavior of the organization, its intended goals, or influencing its leadership toward reconciliation).

A Need for Practice Guidelines, Training, and Empirical Research

Operational psychology as a discipline has developed to the point where it is time to identify standards of practice, training requirements, and empirically relevant operational research that targets gaps in the extant literature. Rodolfa, Bent, Eisman, Nelson, Rehm, and Ritchie (2005) address the issue of increasing specialization within psychology and propose a model for emerging areas of specialization. Rodolfa et al.’s (2005) model provides a framework for understanding dimensions of competency relevant to specialties in professional psychology. According to these authors, competency consists of three elements: (1) job knowledge, (2) job performance, and (3) job outcomes. In other words, being competent is not simply being trained or being familiar with the research literature. Instead, in the case of operational psychology, it supposes a practical or applied knowledge concerning behavioral science, national security, and the ability to effectively apply that knowledge to achieve a desired outcome. This model identifies three domains of competency found among all specialties in professional psychology. The first domain is a foundational competency that consists of the basic building blocks of psychological practice (e.g., scientific knowledge, methods, relationships, reflective practice, self-assessment, individual and cultural diversity, interdisciplinary systems, and ethical and legal standards or policy). This domain is the foundation upon which functional competency (the second domain) rests. Functional competency includes the knowledge, values, and skills required to perform as a psychologist within a given specialty, such as consultation, assessment, diagnosis, case conceptualization, research, evaluation, intervention, management, administration, supervision, and teaching.

The final domain in Rodolfa et al.’s (2005) model concerns stages of professional development and includes the requisite educational gates, training, and currency requirements that facilitate competent practice through one’s career. For most specialties within professional psychology this encompasses graduate training, internships or residencies, licensure, postdoctoral fellowships, board certification, continuing education programs, and so forth. According to the authors, all specialties share these foundational and functional competency domains and suggest that it isn’t the domains that differentiate specialties but instead it’s the unique way in which these domains are configured and put into practice, the nature of the activities performed, the population supported, and the procedures and contextual demands of each specialty.

Applying the model to operational psychology provides insight into the discipline’s developmental maturity and helps identify issues associated with practice standards and training gaps. Foundational and functional competencies for operational psychology are not necessarily any different than they would be for any other area of specialization within professional psychology. Operational psychologists require a foundation that includes understanding scientific methods, the ability to self-assess and be reflective, an appreciation of relational dynamics, individual differences, cultural diversity, how to interoperate among interdisciplinary systems, and issues associated with ethical and legal policy as well as standards of practice. Likewise, this groundwork provides a foundation upon which the various functional competencies rest. Operational psychologists must be skilled and knowledgeable about how to con-
sult, assess and evaluate, conceptualize, intervene, manage process, supervise and teach others. As we consider how operational psychology is distinct from other areas of psychological specialty, we must address its unique requirements and application of these foundational and functional domains. In other words, how they are put into practice, the nature of the activities performed, who is served or supported, and the procedures and contextual demands present. Operational psychologists use their knowledge of behavioral science (understanding of relational dynamics, cultural diversity, information processing systems, learning theory, and social psychology, etc.) and apply that knowledge through various methods (most often consultation that follows assessment, analysis, and evaluation), to enable a key decision maker to more effectively understand, develop, target, and/or influence an individual, group, or organization to accomplish tactical, operational, or strategic objectives within the arena of national security or defense.

Viewed from the perspective of Rodolfa et al.’s (2005) model, various standards of practice, training objectives, and areas of research development emerge. For example, for operational psychologists to apply principles of behavioral science they first have to be adequately trained in those principles. This would necessarily include, but not be limited to, the dimensions listed above (e.g., understanding of relational dynamics, cultural diversity, information processing systems, learning theory, and social psychology). Moreover, given the unique context of national security, requisite knowledge for operational psychologists would also include whatever was relevant to the operating environment (national strategy and policy, intelligence systems, organizational culture specific to national security agencies, etc.). Moreover, specific research in the areas of social psychology, persuasion and influence, naturalistic decision making, memory function, deception detection, cross-cultural assessment, and others would likely be of particular interest. We have identified consultation as a primary means of application, and therefore, specific training that targets this methodology would also be necessary.

Part of an operational psychologist’s foundational competency includes a working knowledge of ethical and legal policy and standards of practice. The APA ethics code continues to be the standard by which all operational psychologists will be judged (APA, 2010). Although there is nothing in the APA ethics code that precludes operational psychologists from supporting national security activities (APA, 2005), some have suggested that the code may be inadequate in its current form to accommodate the work of operational psychology (Freedman, 2009; Gravitz, 2009). However, it should be noted that the APA ethics code was not designed to address specific practice areas. Instead, it provides a comprehensive set of parameters for psychologists regardless of the context of their work. Despite the complexity and dynamic nature of operational psychology, we believe that the APA ethics code is adequate to guide the ethical behavior of operational psychologists. However, we would agree that operational psychologists require specialty training in how to interpret and apply the code to their unique challenges. Recently, the APA published specialty guidelines for forensic psychology (APA, 2013), which articulate specifically tailored advisory guidance to forensic practitioners using the ethics code as a framework. Perhaps a similar approach would be appropriate for operational psychologists.

Rodolfa et al.’s (2005) last domain concerns stages of professional development. Most operational psychologists begin as clinical psychologists. However, there are likely exceptions to this general practice. Many of the foundational and functional domain elements can be found within the typical graduate training for clinical psychology and, therefore, this background preparation may be uniquely poised to provide the right groundwork as a stepping-off point for would-be operational psychologists. Desirable preparatory coursework is also found among industrial/organizational and social psychology programs. For most clinical psychologists their internships or residencies are a capstone of applied supervised experience. For those that pursue specialization, a postdoctoral fellowship or related supervised specialty training is the pinnacle. For the most part, there are very few graduate programs or postdoctoral fellowships that offer training in operational psychology. Historically, psychologists working in the national security arena learned their tradecraft on the job or through informal mentorship with a senior operational psychologist. Ideally, formal coursework and training at the graduate and
Postdoctoral level would be available. In recent years, a handful of specific coursework has emerged in response to the requirement for more operationally capable psychologists. The Army’s Behavioral Science Consultation Team training course (support to interrogation and detention operations) at Fort Huachuca, AZ is one such example (Dunivin, Banks, Staal, & Stephenson, 2010). The Joint Personnel Recovery Agency’s SERE psychology training curriculum is another (Doran, Hoyt, & Morgan, 2006). Currently, within the uniformed services, only the Air Force offers a postdoctoral training fellowship in operational psychology, but even that is a hybrid of human factors engineering and a conglomeration of various operational and intelligence-related training programs and courses.

The premiere organization that recognizes and certifies specialty training in professional psychology is the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). Currently, there is not recognition for a specialty in operational psychology although a handful of operational psychologists have completed their ABPP certification in clinical psychology while using operationally relevant work samples for their boards. In 2007 the issue was raised with respect to including specialization and board certification for operational psychology (Stephenson & Staal, 2007b). We believe that such a move would certainly be in keeping with other specialty areas that have been born out of clinical psychology (e.g., forensics and neuropsychology). We continue to echo this earlier call and note that it falls nicely within Rodolfa et al.’s (2003) framework as a capstone stage of professional development.

A great deal of progress has been made over the course of the last decade in terms of operationally relevant research and scholarship in the area of operational psychology. Our earlier literature review is a testament to that development. Two additional resources authored by the Intelligence Science Board, Educating Information – Interrogation: Science and Art, Foundations for the Future (Fein, 2006) and Intelligence Interviewing: Teaching Papers and Case Studies (Fein, 2009) deserve mention as well. Both documents address a wide variety of operationally relevant activities supported by operational psychologists to include subjects of interrogation, interviewing, influence, and deception detection. The first focuses on basic empirical research and provides a critical analysis of unclassified published works, while the second introduces a collection of thoughtful case study and training materials concerning psychological support to national security that are particularly useful in helping prepare operational psychologists for work with the intelligence community. Both resources help inform the community of practitioners concerning what is, and is not, known within the research literature concerning the effectiveness and empirical validation of various strategies used by psychologists supporting intelligence-related activities. As Brandon (2011) points out, such documents provide an excellent example of how psychologists are able to advise operational communities concerning outdated or invalid methods or tools. She aptly notes that “science literacy is rare among members of the three branches of government” (p. 503), which simply highlights the need for psychologists’ involvement in such systems.

Summary

The intent of this article was to provide a brief review of relevant literature, propose an integrative definition of operational psychology, and discuss recent developments in this emerging specialty. We have touched on (1) a framework for understanding competency in operational psychology, (2) the need for practice guidelines in this emerging specialty area, and (3) gaps in training and research that must be addressed as the practice of operational psychology continues to mature. Despite these limitations, we are optimistic regarding the future of operational psychology as it continues to establish itself as a recognized specialty within psychology. We see notable growth in the field of operational psychology in the areas of education, scholarship, and related research that was largely absent a decade ago. Increased openness and collaboration among various communities, as well as a growing appreciation and need for the work of operational psychologists, is evident. These facts suggest that the operational psychology community will not only expand its influence, but will also mature and take its
place among other recently recognized psychology specialties.

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