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Misplaced Faith in Psychological Holiness: Murder, Suicide, Swiss Guards, and the Vatican

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Abstract. This article describes some of the problems in employing psychological testing to decrease the probability of murder perpetrated by employees in the job environment.

The Swiss Guards--entrusted with protecting the Roman Catholic Pope--will be employing psychological assessment techniques in the selection process for recruits. The policy to employ such techniques comes in the wake of a probable double homicide and suicide perpetrated by a recruit in 1998. However, this policy may not only not significantly minimize the probability of such or similar events, it may even contribute to a rise in probability.

The problems in employment of psychological assessment techniques are many. First, even if the technique has acceptable predictive validity at the time recruits are evaluated, the recruits may well change with time. Without concomitant evaluation, the initial predictive validity may be worthless--even harmful--if it generates a false sense of complacency about the risks from recruits. (The same rationale weakens discrete versus continuous assessment.) Second, a strong case can be made that assessment techniques seem most reliable and valid in evaluating stable traits. However, a strong case can also be made that double murder combined with suicide frequently has as a significant, proximal cause a more transient change in the intensity of some trait or traits as well as a significant situational precursor. These last two causal components are less amenable to valid assessment. Third, while "selecting out" for significant psychopathologies can be effectively carried out, this very effectiveness is associated with two vulnerabilities--that some of the psychopathologies may be unrelated or even negatively correlated with specific violent behaviors, and that the remaining pool of recruits may be more competent in effecting violence once such a decision is made. Fourth, psychological assessment's track record of predicting violent behavior for specific types of violence, at specific times, in specific situations, for specific characteristics of specific people does not seem to be practically significant. Employing nomothetic findings in personnel decisions may be more effective in engendering lawsuits than greater safety of the Pope.

The very language of scientific psychology as applied to assessment too often is implicated in a subjugating discourse suggesting that prediction and control over human behavior is exact, automatic, and machine-like. On the contrary, a new policy of psychological assessment to minimize violent behavior may be a figurative and at times literal example of getting away with murder. (See Gunn, J. (1996). Let's get serious about dangerousness. *Criminal Behaviour & Mental Health*, 5(1)-64; Mexico, Illicit Drugs, and Psychological Assessment: Reliability and Validity as Pipe Dreams. (September 25, 1998). *IBPP*, 5(13); Monahan, J. (1996). Violence prediction: The past twenty and the next twenty years. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 23, 107-120; Psychological research on violent behavior: Shergill, S.S., & Szmukler, G. (1998). How predictable is violence and suicide in community psychiatric practice? *Journal of Mental Health*, 7, 393-401; Some ongoing problems. (September 18, 1998). *IBPP*, 5(12); Vatican: Mental test for Swiss Guards. (May 5, 1999). *The New York Times*, p. A8.) (Keywords: Murder, Suicide, Swiss Guards, Vatican, Violence.)