Emotional intelligence in policing: a state-of-the-art review

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Abstract

Purpose – Emotional intelligence (EI) reflects an ability to acknowledge one’s own emotional state and keep one’s emotions in balance while recognizing emotions in others, managing interactions and relationships with them and resolving conflict. Considering that police work largely involves interactions with others, the purpose of this paper is to offer a state-of-the-art review of the research on EI in policing.

Design/methodology/approach – Using several online databases, a literature search was performed to collect all peer reviewed studies on EI in policing from around the globe. The authors review the nature of this research and its major findings. They also summarize how EI was conceptualized and measured across studies.

Findings – The authors’ search generated a list of 20 studies carried out in 9 countries. Almost all used survey methods and most adopted an ability-based model of EI. The most common area of focus was on correlates of EI in police officers (N = 12), followed by descriptive studies of EI in police officers (N = 5), and finally assessments of the relevance of EI for police training (N = 3).

Originality/value – Policing research has not paid enough attention to EI. To the authors’ knowledge, this is the first effort to assess the state of this literature. With law enforcement agencies looking for ways to improve citizen trust and legitimacy worldwide, the preliminary evidence suggests EI warrants considerably more empirical and practical consideration.

Keywords Police, Policing, Emotional intelligence, State-of-the-art review, Literature review

Introduction

Human intelligence comes in many forms. In addition to general cognitive ability measured by the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), which only accounts for about 4–20% of human success (Aremu et al., 2011), Gardner (1983) argued there were also linguistic, musical, logical/mathematical, spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal forms of intelligence. Later, psychological work combined the latter two – intra and interpersonal – to form emotional intelligence (EI) (Bar-On, 1988; Goleman, 1995; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Those with interpersonal intelligence are skilled at noticing and interpreting other people’s moods, motivations and intentions, while intra-personally intelligent people are proficient in making sense of their own thoughts and emotions. Thus, EI reflects a general ability to acknowledge one’s own emotional state and keeps one’s emotions and thoughts in balance while also recognizing emotions in others, managing interactions and relationships with them, and resolving conflict using empathy, emotional clues and an awareness of social dynamics (Goleman et al., 2001). It has been colloquially referred to as emotional literacy (Goleman, 1995).

Because Bar-On (1988), Goleman (1995), Salovey and Meyer (1990) and Petrides and Furnham (2001) each defined EI differently, there are several models of EI (Kanesan and Fauzan, 2019). The most widely identified are the ability, mixed and trait models. The ability model consists of four sets of emotion processing skills: perception, appraisal and expression; emotional facilitation of thinking; understanding and analyzing emotions and reflective regulation of emotion (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). According to Kanesan and Fauzan (2019), this model is the most influential in the literature and, because it conceives of EI as an ability,
suggests it can be learned and improved upon over time. Meanwhile, the mixed model conceives of EI as a combination of abilities and fixed traits (Bar-On, 1988; Goleman, 1995). There are five components of Bar-On’s mixed model – intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability, stress management and general mood – while Goleman’s has four – self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. Finally, Petrides and Furnham’s (2001) fixed trait model conceptualized EI into four categories: well-being, self-control, emotionality and sociability. This model has been criticized as measuring personality more so than EI (Kanesan and Fauzan, 2019).

Some scientists estimate that EI accounts for as much as 80% of human intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). It is particularly beneficial in the workplace as it has been linked with the ability to interact with colleagues and handle stress, as well as with improved job performance, job satisfaction and leadership skills (see Al Ali et al., 2012 for a review). In particular, EI is related to better performance in jobs requiring a considerable amount of contact with people (Caruso et al., 2006) since it is characterized by an ability to understand, perceive and express emotions appropriately (Aremu, 2005; Ciarrochi et al., 1987) and is related to citizenship behaviors like altruism and compliance (Carmeli and Josman, 2006). Indeed, "the emerging view is that in order to be successful in any field that involves frequent social interactions, emotional intelligence matters" (Aremu et al., 2011, p. 195). Finally, EI may be related to ethical behavior in the workplace, as low EI employees are more likely to believe unethical tactics are justified to get ahead (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2010).

Policing is a highly stressful job (Violanti and Aron, 1995) involving near constant emotional regulation in the course of “dealing with others” (Al Ali et al., 2012, p. 2; Aremu and Tejumola, 2008). Thus, EI may be especially relevant in this line of work (Blumberg et al., 2019). Most new officers are socialized to check their weaknesses and conceal negative emotions such as anger, disgust or sadness due to cultural values placed on bravery and competence (Chapin et al., 2008). Police officers are also taught emotional regulation formally through training to ensure they are professional, caring, impartial and calm during interactions with citizens. This can be challenging during exchanges involving confrontation, trauma or persons in crisis (Todak and White, 2019). Officers must also show empathy, comfort and sensitivity to a variety of different people, including witnesses, victims, family members and offenders, some of whom may personally disrespect or even attack them (Millar et al., 2019; Risan et al., 2016).

EI may also assist officers in de-escalating and “talking down” citizens in crisis (Al Ali et al., 2012; Arnatt and Beyerlein, 2014). Possibly the most challenging of all, police officers must control their anxiety and fear in the face of real and perceived threats to themselves and others, to ensure appropriate actions are taken, safety is preserved and excessive force is not used (Nieuwenhuys et al., 2012). This is perhaps most important for officers working in special operations units due to “the dynamic and emotionally extreme environment” (Arnatt and Beyerlein, 2014, p. 440). Indeed, research shows these units are significantly more likely to be involved in critical incidents requiring the use of force compared to officers working patrol (Gaub et al., online first). At the individual level, EI may help specialty unit officers to process stressful calls and recover from traumatic experiences, while in team contexts, EI assists leaders with managing, deploying and caring for team members. Meanwhile team members may experience improved collaboration, problem solving and effectiveness if they can monitor their own and their teammates’ emotional states (Grubb et al., 2018; Jordan and Troth, 2004).

EI may also be helpful in other aspects of police work, such as with resilience, mental health and overall well-being. The constant state of emotional regulation that officers are involved in takes a significant emotional toll (Velazquez and Hernandez, 2019). Moreover, “traumatic events experienced by police officers may have long-lasting and significant consequences, including health concerns, emotional difficulties, impairment in social
functioning and they may have an impact on work performance.” (Thornton and Herndon, 2016, p. 304). EI may help individuals process stressful emotions, particularly in the aftermath of trauma, thereby reducing mental harm and promoting resiliency (Chopko and Schwartz, 2009; Hunt and Evans, 2004; Mikolajczak and Luminet, 2008; Salovey et al., 1999).

Taken together, it is possible that a more intentional focus on EI in police recruitment and training could help address many of the critical issues policing is facing today, including low levels of public trust and legitimacy, public perceptions of systemic problems with misconduct, excessive force, and discrimination and police officers’ mental health and wellness (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). To date, however, research has not taken a closely examined the potential relevance of EI for resolving these problems. The current paper seeks to bring attention to this topic and empirically assess its potential importance.

Current study
The current study offers a state-of-the-art review of the research on EI in police officers. Our review included any peer reviewed empirical study guided by research questions about EI in a local law enforcement context conducted in any country. We excluded studies that were not published in a peer reviewed journal and/or that did not include an empirical analysis of data. Theoretical, argument and literature review pieces were used for information but were not included in the review (Blumberg et al., 2019; Elfenbein, 2016; Kanesan, 2019; Risan et al., 2016). We also excluded unpublished theses and dissertations (Ezeogu, 2016; Rible, 2012; Smith, 2010), relevant studies that were not published in English (Curbelo et al., 2006; Nascimento and Primi, 2008) and studies for which we could not access the article (Aremu and Tejumola, 2008; Dar et al., 2011; Nathawat and Dadarwal, 2013; Romosiou et al., 2018). Finally, we excluded studies that only analyzed individual components of EI within a policing context, such as competency in regulating one’s emotions or recognizing distress in others (Berking et al., 2010; Chapin et al., 2008; Thornton and Herndon, 2016). This decision was made both to manage the size of the review and to offer targeted evidence pertaining specifically to the relevance of EI in policing as it is has been scientifically conceptualized (i.e. a combination of distinct but interrelated abilities; Gardner, 1983).

By entering various combinations of the search terms “emotional intelligence,” “police,” “police officer,” “policing” and “law enforcement” into several online databases, a literature search was performed to collect all relevant empirical studies on our topic from around the globe. Titles and abstracts were reviewed to screen for inclusion. Once an article was screened in, the Methods and Findings sections were reviewed to fill in data for Table 1, while front end sections (i.e. Introduction and Literature Review sections) were read for information and to identify other studies that met our criteria for inclusion. We also swept all papers that cited to our selected studies in Google Scholar. Once we felt all relevant studies had been identified, we reviewed the research questions and findings from each paper and identified the following major themes, which ultimately formed the framework for our state-of-the-art review: (1) EI in police officers, (2) the impact of EI on police officers, (3) EI and police training and (4) measurement of EI in policing research.

Table 1 reports a citation, research setting, method, sample description, EI-specific research question, EI measure and EI conceptual model for each of the studies screened into our review. We initially attempted to report the year of data collection for each study, but this information was only included in three papers (Arnatt and Beyerlein, 2014; Ayinde and Ayegun, 2018; Lokesh et al., 2016), so the decision was made to remove the column from the table. We identified 20 studies conducted in 9 countries. All but four used survey methods to collect data, most often from a police officer sample. The vast majority adopted ability-based models of conceptualization and measurement. In the sections that follow, we review the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>EI-specific focus</th>
<th>EI measure/model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bar-On <em>et al.</em> (2000)</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>85 police middle managers and 81 childcare and mental health care professionals in North-Rhine Westphalia</td>
<td>Compare EI scores of the three samples</td>
<td>EQ-I (early version)/Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aremu (2005)</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>200 officers working in the Oyo State Police Command</td>
<td>Measure relationship between EI and career commitment</td>
<td>Unvalidated 8-item scale/Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aremu and Lawal (2009)</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>246 police trainees in the Police Training School in Eleyele in the Oyo State Police Command</td>
<td>Path model predicting career aspirations, including EI as a predictor</td>
<td>15 items from the SREIT 1998/Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aremu <em>et al.</em> (2011)</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Quasi-experiment with survey at 2 time points Survey</td>
<td>300 officers working in the Nigerian Police</td>
<td>Test whether EI moderates the effect of counseling on attitudes towards corruption</td>
<td>8 items from the SREIT 1998/Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunetto <em>et al.</em> (2012)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>193 police officers attending training in one region of an Australian state police service</td>
<td>Examine whether EI explains relationship between affect variables and organizational variables</td>
<td>WLEIS/Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnatt and Beyerlein (2014)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>99 local, state and federal special operations team members and leaders</td>
<td>Compare EI scores of leaders and team members</td>
<td>TEIQue (v. 1.5 Short Form)/Trait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gooty <em>et al.</em> (2014)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Daily diary and survey</td>
<td>145 diary entries and surveys from 29 police officers from two departments</td>
<td>Test whether high EI officers use emotion-focused coping following stressful events</td>
<td>MSCEIT v2.0/Ability</td>
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Table 1. Empirical studies on EI in policing

(continued)
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>EI-specific focus</th>
<th>EI measure/model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blumberg et al. (2016)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>309 recruits from three separate police academies in Southern California ($N = 257$ at T2)</td>
<td>Test whether EI moderates the effect of academy training on integrity</td>
<td>19 items from the SREIT 1998/Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumarasamy et al. (2016)</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>1,566 police officers in Peninsular Malaysia</td>
<td>Measure relationship between EI and work–life balance</td>
<td>WLEIS/Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lokesh et al. (2016)</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>687 police officers from 17 police stations in Mysore</td>
<td>Measure the level of EI in participants and test for demographic correlates</td>
<td>Hyde et al. (2002)’s EI scale/Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olugbemi and Bolaji (2016)</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>258 police officers from 4 police stations in Ibadan</td>
<td>Test for psychosocial and demographic predictors of EI</td>
<td>WLEIS/Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gbadeyan et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>330 police officers from 7 area divisions of the police in Ilorin metropolis of Kwa State</td>
<td>Measure relationship between EI and job performance</td>
<td>Unvalidated 21 item scale/Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayinide and Ayegun (2018)</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>258 officers working in the Osun State Police Command</td>
<td>Measure relationship between EI and readiness to combat crime</td>
<td>BEIS-10/Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grubb et al. (2018)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>177 negotiators and 118 non-negotiators from 21 police forces and 203 university students</td>
<td>Compare EI scores of the three samples</td>
<td>Genos EII-Full Version/Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCutcheon (2018)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>169 police officers from Northeastern agencies</td>
<td>Measure relationship between EI and organizational stress</td>
<td>MSCEIT v2.0/Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millar et al. (2019)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Narrative review</td>
<td>Five peer reviewed articles</td>
<td>Explore children’s experiences with police following exposure to domestic abuse</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.
Evidence from these studies with respect to the four major categories identified in our review. Following, we discuss the implications of our findings for policing and identify gaps in the literature.

**Emotional intelligence in police officers**

Eight studies in our review offered a descriptive assessment of EI in police officer samples. In the only study to examine EI in an aspiring police officer sample, McDowall et al. (2020) measured EI in individuals involved in a pre-academy leadership training program in the United Kingdom (UK). Using non-police individuals as a reference group, they found that their aspiring police officer sample scored higher on following rules, conscientiousness, empathy and emotional control but lower on perceived influence, decisiveness and self-awareness.

Three studies conducted descriptive analyses by either comparing police to non-police samples or testing for within-group differences in police samples by factors such as assignment or rank. Bar-On et al. (2000) compared EI scores among police officers, childcare workers and mental health educators. After no differences were observed between the childcare and mental health care samples, the two groups were combined and it was found that they scored lower than the police sample on most indicators of EI. In particular, the police were scored as more adaptable, focused, able to size up a situation quickly and able to deal with problems more efficiently. They also showed greater interpersonal capacity, assertiveness and ability to cope with stress. Finally, the police were scored as more connected with the community they lived in and more satisfied with what they are doing than the social work samples.

Arnatt and Beyerlein (2014) collected surveys from police specialty operations team members and leaders in the USA and tested for differences in EI between the specialty unit officers and leaders. They found few differences, except that leaders scored higher on sociability (measured as putting oneself in another’s shoes and experiencing their emotions). Grubb et al. (2018) collected data from 117 police hostage and crisis negotiators (HCNs) and 118 non-negotiators from 21 police forces in the UK and compared their EI levels with 203 university students. The police samples had higher EI than the students, however, contrary to expectations, the negotiators did not score higher on EI than non-negotiators. The authors noted that while the police showed higher levels of EI than the civilian sample, “it is difficult to identify whether EI is a construct that is enhanced as a result of police training and operational experience, or whether it is an existing construct that attracts individuals to the role of police work in the first place” (p. 133).

Several studies tested for demographic correlates of EI. Gender emerged as a common predictor of EI in the studies we reviewed, although the direction of the relationship varied.

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<th>EI measure/model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romosionu et al. (2019)</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>RCT with survey at three time points</td>
<td>50 Hellenic police officers (23 treatment and 27 control)</td>
<td>Test effectiveness of training to improve EI</td>
<td>SREIT 1998/ Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McDowall et al. (2020)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>84 participants from a pre-police academy leadership training program</td>
<td>Measure the level of EI in participants before they attend the police academy</td>
<td>Emotions and behaviors at work (EBW) Questionnaire/ Trait</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1.
across studies. For example, both Brunetto et al. (2012) and Lokesh et al. (2016) found women police officers in Australia had higher EI scores than men, while Olugbemi and Bolaji (2016) found the opposite in a sample of officers from Nigeria. As Olugbemi and Bolaji (2016) noted, it is likely women and men differ on individual components of EI. Indeed, Bar-On et al. (2000) found women scored higher on interpersonal skills while men scored higher on stress tolerance and impulse control. Similarly, McDowall et al. (2020) found men scored higher on emotional control and stress resilience while women scored higher on empathy. Thus, it is possible that, among police officers, men perform better on internal aspects of EI while women excel externally via interactions with others.

A few additional factors emerged as correlates of EI in police officer samples. Olugbemi and Bolaji (2016)’s study revealed that police officers in Ibadan, Nigeria who scored higher on neuroticism also scored lower on EI. In Mysore, India, Lokesh et al. (2016) found that unmarried police officers, younger officers and older officers scored higher on EI compared to married and middle aged officers.

Millar et al. (2019) argued that EI is a necessity for police officers responding to domestic abuse calls, which are often perceived as removed from traditional police work and disliked as they trigger intense negative emotions. The authors performed a narrative review of qualitative research investigating children’s experiences with police officers following exposure to domestic abuse. According to their analysis, children found EI traits such as being acknowledged and listened to important in police officers but reported the officers who responded to their homes did not evidence these traits. The authors argued that a lack of EI in police officers may be to blame for negative public perceptions of the police response to domestic abuse. Thus, although studies show police officers tend to score highly on EI, these traits are not necessarily being displayed to civilians.

**Impact of emotional intelligence on police officers**

A total of 11 studies in our review examined the impact of EI on police officer attitudes, wellness and job performance. Several studies showed EI in police officers was positively related to career aspirations (Aremu and Lawal, 2009), career commitment (Aremu, 2005; Brunetto et al., 2012), job satisfaction, engagement and (negatively) turnover (Brunetto et al., 2012). The findings suggest agencies should look for EI in officers to encourage higher levels of work engagement and to minimize turnover.

Two studies found significant positive relationships between EI and officer job performance, even when controlling for important factors like cognitive abilities and personality traits (Al Ali et al., 2012; Gbadeyan et al., 2017). Similarly, another study found a significant positive relationship between EI and readiness to combat crime (Ayinde and Ayegun, 2018). Only one study examined whether EI could be related to reduced misconduct behaviors in police officers. Specifically, Ojedokun (2010) found EI was indirectly related to acceptance of unethical behavior at work. He also found that EI moderated the relationship between effort–reward imbalance (or perceptions that one’s efforts were not being rewarded) and acceptance of unethical behavior. This author posited that an officer with higher levels of EI may be able to regulate their negative reactions to perceived imbalances in rewards at work, thereby reducing their likelihood of engaging in misconduct.

Three studies found higher EI was related to improved wellness outcomes for police officers. Gooty et al. (2014) observed a significant positive relationship between high EI and the ability to cope by letting go of negative emotions following stressful encounters. Their results also tentatively suggest that EI could be related to better task performance following stressful encounters. McCutcheon (2018) found EI predicted less organizational stress even when controlling for years on the force. Finally, Kumarasamy et al. (2016) surveyed police officers in Malaysia and found that EI predicted better work–life balance. Ultimately, this
A small body of work suggests EI could offer a range of benefits for police organizations and officers.

**Emotional intelligence and police training**

Only three studies in our review focused on EI as it relates to police training. Aremu et al. (2011) noted that Nigerian Police are considered by the public to have significant problems with corruption and to be poor at managing citizen interactions. They argued that if EI can assist with reducing this problem, then it “will have passed a stringent test” (p. 195). After implementing two existential-phenomenological counseling approaches designed to promote integrity policing in the Nigerian Police, they found that EI moderated the effectiveness of the training on officers’ attitudes toward corruption. Specifically, the training had stronger effects on reducing attitudes toward corruption for officers with high EI. Blumberg et al. (2016) analyzed the impact of police academy training on recruits’ self-reported integrity and tested whether EI moderated this relationship. The recruits showed higher than average levels of integrity pre-training compared to non-police reference groups. However, they observed no effect of the academy or moderating effect of EI on integrity.

Finally, Romosiou et al. (2018) tested the effectiveness of a training designed to improve EI and other traits using a randomized controlled trial (RCT) research design with the Hellenic Police in Greece. The authors found EI scores significantly improved in the intervention group during the post-test questionnaire but had significantly decreased in the three-month follow up. The authors suggested that a practice component may be needed to ensure participants make use of the new skill following training so it does not deteriorate over time. Clearly, more research is needed to understand whether EI can be trained in police officers and whether higher EI scores can improve officer receptivity to other forms of training.

**Measurement of emotional intelligence in policing research**

The studies in our review made use of 11 different tests for measuring EI, some of which were validated in previous research. The most commonly used test was the Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (the SREIT 1998), developed by Schutte et al. (1998), sometimes referred to as the Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) or the Police Emotional Intelligence Scale (PEIS). The SREIT 1998 includes 33 items with 3 subscales designed to map onto Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) ability-based model of EI. A total of three studies in our review used the full SREIT (Al Ali et al., 2012; Ojedokun, 2010; Romosiou et al., 2019) and three others used modified versions (Aremu et al., 2011; Aremu and Lawal, 2009; Blumberg et al., 2016).

The second most common EI measure in our review was Wong and Law’s EI Scale (WLEIS), which, also adhering to Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) ability-based model of EI, included 16 items comprising four subscales: self-emotion appraisal, others’ emotion appraisal, use of emotion and regulation of emotion. A total of three studies in our review used this scale (Brunetto et al., 2012; Kumarasamy et al., 2016; Olubgemi and Bolaji, 2016). The Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT V2.0) developed by Mayer et al. (2003) measures ability-based emotional intelligence (ABEI). This large test includes 141 items that is divided into 8 sections. The Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) was used in two studies (Gooty et al., 2014; McCutcheon, 2018).

The remaining eight studies in the review used eight distinct measures of EI (see Table 1). In sum, we find that the top three most common EI tests used in policing research were the SREIT 1998, the WLEIS and the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) v2.0, all of which adhere to the ability-based model of EI proposed by Salovey and Mayer (1990). Outside of these studies there was significant variation by measurement and conceptualization. As argued by Lokesh et al. (2016), interpretations of the EI literature must
be made with this variation in mind, though language barriers may prevent some scholars from using validated scales and tests.

Conclusions
Existing research on EI in a variety of workplace contexts suggests it is related to improved employee performance in highly interactive jobs, better wellness outcomes and faster resilience following exposure to trauma (see Al Ali et al., 2012 for a review). Considering the many challenges and controversies facing policing worldwide, in this review we sought to draw attention to the possible relevance of EI and assess the existing evidence regarding its importance for the field. Our findings suggest that policing research has not largely engaged with EI or assessed its potential for addressing many of the critical issues facing policing today. Our literature search produced a list of only 20 studies on this topic that was carried out across nine countries, with seven from the most common research setting, Nigeria. Almost all of the studies used survey methods to collect data from police officer samples. The most common areas of focus were to examine correlates of EI in police officers \( (N = 12) \), to measure the prevalence of EI in police officers and draw comparisons with other samples \( (N = 5) \) and to assess the relevance of EI for police training \( (N = 3) \).

While it is clear from our review that the research on EI in policing is in its infancy, the findings in combination with existing literature on EI in the workplace suggest it may be highly relevant for policing. For example, EI could help police officers be more receptive to training and future research should continue to examine this possibility and its relevance for improving police behaviors and decision-making, such as in deciding whether to use force, minimizing the influence of personal biases and honing the use of procedural justice during encounters with the public. There are also possible implications for EI with respect to improving police officer health and wellness outcomes and resilience following exposure to trauma and other challenges. Given increasing concerns with police officers’ mental health and suicide in recent years (see, e.g., Padilla, 2020), a potential solution that could help improve officers’ wellness and response to trauma should be thoroughly investigated. The body of evidence also suggests EI is related to positive outcomes for police organizations, as officers with higher EI show higher job satisfaction and commitment and lower turnover rates.

In the broadest sense, we believe there is sufficient preliminary evidence here to suggest that a greater focus on EI in policing, in screening, training and practice, could help to address prevalent concerns about policing today, to include poor public legitimacy and levels of trust, as well as perceptions of systemic problems with officer misconduct, excessive force and discrimination. Thus, conversations about police reform would be remiss if they did not seriously consider EI and its potential implications for improving policing worldwide.

Certainly, there are still many questions left to be answered. For example, the limited evidence suggests police officers may have higher than average EI scores compared to members of the public. However, it is not clear whether this is because EI is honed by police officers in the course of their stressful and interactive jobs or if individuals with high EI self-select into policing (Grubb et al., 2018). It is plausible that over the course of managing countless difficult interactions with the public while striving to maintain professionalism and composure and to deal with the emotional and traumatic aspects of the job, police officers naturally hone their EI skills over time without even knowing they are doing so. Future research is needed to better understand why police officers have higher than average EI scores and to investigate whether EI can be better trained in new recruits and novice officers at early stages in their careers.

Moreover, given the findings from Millar et al.’s (2019) systematic review, it is unclear whether high EI scores in police officers on paper translate to the actual use of EI skills in the field during interactions with citizens. These authors found that while children exposed to
domestic violence desired EI traits in the police officers they interacted with, they did not
generally believe the police officers evidenced those traits. Thus, simply ensuring that police
officers have EI is not sufficient if they are not trained to use it in ways perceived as helpful or
comforting to the public.

Ultimately, there is a clear need for more research in the area of EI and policing. In addition
to the limited number of studies, we found there was significant variation in the manner in
which EI has been measured in this literature as well as in the way it is conceptualized across
the three primary models – ability, trait and mixed. Future research should assess the relative
merits of the EI scales and tests used in existing studies and work to identify an optimal
measure to ensure reliability and validity. Overall, we find that the research on EI in policing
is very promising, yet underdeveloped. We highly recommend police researchers and
practitioners take a more serious look at EI.

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