



PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PROFESSIONAL FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEGAL COMPETENCE AMONG LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

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Abstract. *Legal competence is an essential component of professional effectiveness in law enforcement. The work of law enforcement officers requires not only knowledge of legal norms but also the ability to understand, interpret and appropriately apply them in complex social and professional situations. This paper examines the psychological and professional factors associated with the development of legal competence among law enforcement officers. Particular attention is given to legal consciousness, professional responsibility, decision-making, social interaction, the organisational environment and continuous professional training.*

Keywords: *legal competence, law enforcement officers, legal consciousness, professional responsibility, decision-making, professional training, legal culture.*

INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement activity is directly connected with the implementation and protection of legal norms. Officers regularly make decisions that may affect the rights, responsibilities and interests of individuals. Consequently, professional effectiveness in this field requires more than familiarity with legislation. An officer must be able to understand the meaning of legal requirements, identify the legal aspects of a particular situation, select an appropriate course of action and explain decisions in communication with citizens (Tyler, 2006).

In this context, legal competence can be understood as an integrated professional quality that combines legal knowledge, legal consciousness, attitudes towards legal norms and the practical ability to act within the boundaries of law. Such an understanding distinguishes legal competence from the simple memorisation of legislation. Knowledge represents an important foundation, but its professional value becomes evident when an officer can apply it appropriately under real working conditions.

MAIN PART

Law enforcement situations are often socially and psychologically complex. Officers may have to make decisions in conditions of limited time, interpersonal

conflict, emotional tension, incomplete information or competing interests. Under these circumstances, the practical application of legal knowledge is influenced by psychological factors such as responsibility, self-control, professional attitudes, critical thinking and the ability to evaluate alternative decisions. Thus, legal competence develops at the intersection of legal knowledge and psychological readiness to use that knowledge appropriately.

Legal consciousness occupies a particularly important position in this process. It reflects not only an individual's awareness of legal norms but also attitudes towards law, legality, justice, professional duty and responsibility. An officer who knows a legal requirement but perceives it as merely a formal obligation may behave differently from an officer who has internalised legality as a professional value (Tyler, 2006). Therefore, strengthening legal consciousness should be considered an important element in the development of professional legal competence.

Professional responsibility is closely related to legal consciousness. Law enforcement officers exercise powers that can have significant consequences for citizens. Awareness of these consequences may influence the manner in which an officer evaluates available options and applies legal authority. Professional responsibility encourages an individual to consider not only whether a decision is formally possible but also whether it is justified by the circumstances and consistent with professional standards.

The psychological component of legal decision-making is particularly evident when officers exercise discretion. Not every professional situation can be resolved through the mechanical application of a memorised rule. Officers frequently need to interpret information, compare circumstances with legal criteria, determine the relevance of particular facts and choose among legally available alternatives. These processes require analytical thinking and the ability to maintain objectivity despite situational pressure.

Decision-making may also be influenced by previous experience. Professional experience allows officers to recognise recurring situations more quickly and can improve the efficiency of legal assessment. At the same time, experience should not replace systematic legal reasoning. Excessive dependence on habitual responses may create difficulties when a new situation differs from previous cases. Continuous legal education is therefore necessary even for experienced personnel.

Another important factor is professional communication. Legal competence is expressed not only through internal decision-making but also through the ability to

communicate legal requirements clearly and respectfully. During interactions with citizens, officers often need to explain the legal basis of their actions, provide instructions, resolve misunderstandings or communicate decisions that may not be welcomed by the other party. The effectiveness of such communication can influence how legal authority is perceived.

Research on procedural justice demonstrates the importance of respect, neutrality, transparency and opportunities for citizens to express their views during encounters with police (Tyler, 2017). These principles show that the professional implementation of law has an important interpersonal dimension. An officer's legal knowledge becomes more effective when it is combined with communication skills and an understanding of the psychological dynamics of police–citizen interaction (Chan, Bradford & Stott, 2025).

The organisational environment also influences the development of legal competence. Law enforcement officers acquire professional standards not only through formal education but also through interaction with supervisors and colleagues. Organisational expectations, leadership practices, professional examples and informal norms may strengthen or weaken the practical significance of legal knowledge. Supervisors have a particularly important role in this process (Owens et al., 2018). When managers consistently emphasise legally justified decision-making and discuss the legal foundations of professional actions, officers receive a clear message that legal competence is a central element of professional performance. In contrast, when attention is directed exclusively towards operational results without sufficient consideration of the procedures through which those results are achieved, the practical importance of legal standards may be reduced.

Professional groups can also influence attitudes towards law. New officers often learn how formal rules are interpreted in practice by observing experienced colleagues. This process of professional socialisation can be constructive when group norms reinforce legality, responsibility and respectful treatment. However, it also demonstrates why legal education should not be restricted to initial training. Professional attitudes continue to develop throughout an officer's career.

Continuous professional training therefore represents one of the most important conditions for maintaining legal competence. Legislation, institutional procedures and social expectations may change over time. Regular training enables officers to update legal knowledge and relate new requirements to practical professional situations.

Evidence from procedural-justice training research also indicates that structured training can influence officers' attitudes and behaviour, particularly when training principles are reinforced within the organisational environment (Wood, Tyler & Papachristos, 2020).

The format of legal training is also important. Traditional lectures are useful for transmitting information, but knowledge retention does not automatically guarantee its appropriate application. Scenario-based learning may provide additional value because it requires officers to analyse realistic situations, identify relevant legal norms, compare possible decisions and justify their chosen actions.

For example, training scenarios may include situations involving interpersonal conflict, uncertain information, competing rights or the need to make decisions under time pressure. Discussion of such cases allows officers to move from abstract knowledge towards practical legal reasoning. It can also reveal situations in which emotional reactions, stereotypes or habitual professional responses may interfere with objective legal assessment.

Feedback represents another important psychological mechanism in professional development. When officers receive constructive feedback regarding their legal decisions, they can identify gaps between their understanding of a rule and its practical application. Feedback should not function solely as a mechanism for identifying mistakes. It can also encourage self-analysis and strengthen the officer's ability to explain the legal reasoning behind professional actions.

CONCLUSION

Legal competence among law enforcement officers should be considered a multidimensional professional characteristic rather than simply the possession of legal knowledge. Its development involves the interaction of legal consciousness, professional responsibility, decision-making skills, communication abilities, professional experience and organisational influences. Effective development of legal competence requires continuous professional education that combines legal information with realistic professional situations. Scenario-based learning, analysis of professional decisions, constructive feedback and organisational reinforcement of legal standards may help officers transform formal knowledge into practical competence.

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