



The Psychological Influence of the Police Uniform

Author: Richard R. Johnson, M.S.

Introduction

Most people can identify a police officer by the official police uniform. When citizens on a busy street are in need of help, they scan the crowds of pedestrians looking for the distinctive uniform of a police officer. Drivers who come to an intersection occupied by a person in a police uniform usually willingly submit to that person's hand directions. Criminals usually curb their unlawful behavior when they spot a uniformed police officer in the area. Many parents teach their children to respect and trust a person in the police uniform. Police academy recruits relish the day when they may finally wear their official police uniforms. What is so special about a uniform which is often made of cheap polyester and is usually hot and uncomfortable to wear?

The crisp uniform of the police officer conveys power and authority. When a police officer puts on his or her uniform the officer is perceived in a very different way by the public. He or she is viewed as embodying each person's stereotypes about all police officers. Research has suggested that clothing has a powerful impact on how people are perceived, and this goes for the police officer as well. The uniform of a police officer has been found to have a profound psychological impact on those who view it. Research has also suggested that even slight alterations to the style of the uniform will change how citizens will perceive the officer.

The police uniform is a tradition as old as the field of law enforcement itself. In 1829 the first modern police force, the London Metropolitan Police, developed the first standard police apparel. These first police officers, the famous "Bobbies" of London, were issued a dark blue, paramilitary-style uniform. The color blue was chosen to distinguish the police from the British military who wore red and white uniforms at the time. The first official police force in the United States was established in the city of New York in 1845. Based on the London police, the New York City Police Department adopted the dark blue uniform in 1853. Other cities, such as Philadelphia, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Detroit quickly followed suit by establishing police departments based on the London model, including the adoption of the dark blue, paramilitary-style uniform.

To this day, the majority of police uniforms in the United States continue to have a paramilitary appearance and are generally of a dark color. Darker colors may have been preferred for their ease in cleaning and their ability to help conceal the wearer in tactical situations. Dark colors help cover up stains and keep the officer from being easily spotted by lawbreakers, especially at night. However, why do most police agencies insist on dressing patrol officers in uniforms? Is this simply because of tradition? Is it only for the ease of identification by citizens? Maybe it is because the uniform actually psychologically influences how officers are perceived by the public.

The Social Significance of Clothing

When a person encounters a stranger, the person seeks clues from the stranger's appearance which can reveal things about the stranger. One powerful clue to a person's background is clothing. Clothing serves as a mental shortcut to identifying a person's sex, status, group membership, legitimacy, authority, and occupation. Clothing and physical appearance are very important in the initial development of social relationships. Studies have revealed that physical appearance, including clothing, is the factor most often used in developing a first impression of someone. Clothing has been found to have an even greater effect on making first impressions than does personality.

In early social interactions, clothing has a significant psychological influence on people's perceptions. Personnel administrators who were asked to rate the competency of similar female job applicants consistently rated the women in conservative, slightly-masculine attire as the most competent. In another study, both high school students and teachers were asked to rate pictures of female athletes, some of whom were in uniform and the others in casual street clothes. All of the athletes were perceived as being more professional, possessing higher ability, and having more team spirit when viewed in uniform. Both students and teachers, have also rated photos of students in private school-type uniforms as having higher scholastic ability.

The uniform worn by a police officer also elicits stereotypes about that human being's status, authority, attitudes, and motivations. The police uniform serves to identify a person as one vested with the powers of the state to arrest and use force. The uniform also serves to establish order and conformity within the ranks of those who wear it by suppressing individuality. The psychological and physical impact of the police uniform should not be underestimated. Depending on the background of the citizen, the police uniform can elicit emotions ranging from pride and respect, to fear and anger.

The Power of the Police Uniform

Research has supported these suggestions about the police uniform's power and authority. In one study people who were asked to rank order 25 different occupational uniforms by several categories of feelings. The test subjects consistently ranked the police uniform as the one most likely to induce feelings of safety. In another experiment, models were consistently rated as more competent, reliable, intelligent, and helpful when pictured in a police uniform than they were in casual street clothes. Drivers were also found to commit far fewer turn violations at an intersection if a person wearing a police-style uniform was standing on the sidewalk near the corner. This occurred even though the uniform was not that of a real police department in the area and had no badge or weapons. One interesting experiment to test the power of the police uniform was conducted by psychologist Dr. Leonard Bickman. Pedestrians on a city street were approached at random and ordered by a research assistant to either pick up a paper bag, give a dime to another person, or step back from a bus stop. The research assistant was alternately dressed in casual street clothes, a milkman uniform, or a grey, police-style uniform bearing a badge but lacking weapons. Only the police-style uniform resulted in a high rate of cooperation from citizens. Obedience to the police-style uniform usually continued even after the research assistant quickly walked away and did not watch to ensure compliance.

Changes in the Uniform Style

Although the police uniform, in general suggests the authority of the wearer, details about a police officer's uniform, such as the style of hat or the tailoring, can influence the level of authority emanating from the officer. Photographs of uniformed male and female police officers were evaluated wearing nine different styles of head gear, including no hat at all. Even though psychological tests showed that the officers were perceived to have authority under all of the circumstances, the type of hat varied the level of authority attributed to the officer. The traditional "bus driver" garrison cap and the "smoky bear" campaign hat were found to convey more authority than the baseball cap or no hat at all. Many studies have looked at the influence of eliminating the paramilitary style of the police uniform. In one experiment students viewed black and white drawings of three styles of police uniforms. Two of the uniforms were of a traditional paramilitary-style, but were lacking a duty belt or weapons.

The third, nontraditional uniform involved a sport coat blazer over slacks, and a shirt with a tie. Although all three uniforms were rated similarly for objectivity and trustworthiness, the blazer style uniform rated slightly higher for professionalism. However a similar experiment using color photos found the traditional, paramilitary style uniforms rated as more honest, good, helpful, and competent than the blazer uniform.

In 1969, the police in Menlo Park, California dispensed with their traditional navy blue, paramilitary-style uniforms and adopted a nontraditional uniform in hopes of improving police community relations. The new, nontraditional uniform consisted of a forest green sport coat blazer worn over black slacks, a white shirt, and a black tie. The officer's badge was displayed on the blazer and the officer's weapons were concealed under the coat. Once word spread about Menlo Park's attempts, over 400 other police departments in the United States also experimented with a blazer style uniform.

After wearing the new uniforms for 18 months the Menlo Park police officers displayed fewer authoritarian characteristics on psychological tests when compared to officers in the surrounding jurisdictions. Also for that first one-and-one-half years with the new uniforms, assaults on the Menlo Park police decreased by 30% and injuries to civilians by the police dropped 50%. These changes were originally thought to have been a result of the uniform changes but there were other factors at work at the same time. The number of college educated officers in the department increased dramatically and the traditional autocratic management style of the department was abolished during this same time period.

In 1977, after wearing the blazer style uniform for 8 years, the Menlo Park Police Department realized that the sport coat uniform did not command respect and returned to a traditional, paramilitary-style uniform. A final evaluation showed that although assaults on officers had dropped during the first 18 months of wearing the new uniforms, the number of assaults steadily began to rise again until the rate was double that of the year before the uniform change occurred. During the four years after the Menlo Park police returned to a traditional style uniform the number of assaults against their officers dropped steadily. The experiments with the hats and the style of the police uniform suggest that changes in the style of a police uniform can have an effect on the perceived authority, power, and ability to control. What about the color of the police uniform? Does the color of the uniform psychologically influence the people who view it? Does the color have an influence on the officer who is wearing the uniform?

The Influences of Color

The majority of police uniforms in the United States today are produced in darker colors such as black, blue, brown, green, and grey. Just as with the style of the police uniform, the color of the police uniform has meaning. Psychological tests have found that people associate colors with specific moods. For example, red is generally associated with excitement and stimulation, thus explaining why it is often a color in flashing emergency vehicle lights. These tests have also found that the color blue is associated with feelings of security and comfort, and black is most often associated with power and strength.

Studies of both high school and college students in the United States have found that students perceived light colors such as white and yellow as weak, but also good and active, The same students perceived dark colors such as black and brown as strong and passive, but also as bad. These results were not based on cultural influences because they did not vary with the race of the students.

Even people in Europe, Western Asia, Central Africa, and the Middle East had similar perceptions of colors. Across all cultures that have been studied, light colors are consistently associated with goodness and weakness, while dark colors are consistently perceived as strong but evil. On psychological inventories, test subjects rate lighter colors as more pleasant and less dominant. Dark colors on the other hand elicit emotions of anger, hostility, dominance, and aggression.

Color has a considerable impact on clothing and perceptions of the wearer. Clothing color was found as the most common determinant when people rated pictures of models for attractiveness. Job applicants wearing dark business suits were perceived as more powerful and competent than those who wore lighter suits. Another interesting study found that referees who viewed several videotaped plays of a football game were more likely to assess stiffer penalties against a football team wearing a black uniform than a team wearing a brightly colored uniform. The referees consistently perceived the team in black as more aggressive. This experiment was supported by an analysis of all professional football and hockey teams in the U.S. which found that teams who wore dark colored uniforms were assessed far more penalties for roughness than teams who wore lighter uniforms. Again these results suggest that teams in darker uniforms were perceived negatively by the referees.

Experiments have also suggested that athletes tend to act more aggressively when dressed in dark colors. College students were dressed in black jerseys and grouped into teams of five. They were then asked to rank order which sports they would most like to play. The students consistently ranked the most aggressive sports, such as football and rugby, at the top of the list. The experiment was then repeated with a new group of students and white jerseys. This time the students selected less aggressive sports, such as baseball or basketball.

If the results of these studies in color were applied to the police uniform, it would seem to suggest that darker police uniforms may be sending negative subconscious signals to citizens. A dark police uniform may be subconsciously encouraging citizens to perceive officers as aggressive, evil, or corrupt. If this is true, the proliferation of blue-black police uniforms is sending a very negative message to the community. The experiment with the colored jerseys also suggests that police officers in dark uniforms may be subconsciously influenced to act more aggressively. If this is true, police uniform colors need to be modified across the nation.

In one experiment test subjects were presented with color photos of two traditional paramilitary-style uniforms. One of the uniforms, consisted of the dark navy blue shirt and pants that is so commonly worn by municipal police agencies today. The other traditional uniform was that typical of California sheriff deputies, consisting of a khaki shirt and dark green pants. Although both uniforms ranked similarly as good, honest, helpful, and competent, the lighter colored sheriff uniform rated noticeably higher for warmth and friendliness. This finding is significant since the sheriff uniform only has a light colored shirt, with the pants still being very dark. It would appear that a uniform which is only half dark sends a better message than the all blue/black uniform.

With today's focus on community-oriented policing and efforts to present a more friendly image to the public, the color of the police officer's uniform might be making the task more difficult than necessary. Because of the citizen's negative psychological perception of dark colors, he or she may perceive a police officer in a negative manner partly because of the officer's uniform color. If referees believe they are seeing more aggressive behavior from athletes wearing black, it may be assumed that citizens will perceive officers in black uniforms as more aggressive than if they were wearing lighter colored uniforms.

Officer Safety Concerns

The police uniform may also influence the safety level of the officer who wears it. As has already been mentioned, dark colored uniforms may promote subconscious negative feelings from citizens. These negative feelings may encourage some citizens to consider violent action when confronted by the police because the citizen perceives the officer as aggressive.

In addition to the color, the condition of a police officer's uniform and equipment can also have an impact on the officer's safety. Interviews with prison inmates who have murdered police officers indicate that the killers often visually "sized-up" the officer before deciding to use violence.

If the officer looked or acted "unprofessional" in the assailant's eyes, then the assailant felt that he was capable of successfully resisting the officer. A dirty or wrinkled uniform, or a badly worn duty belt may convey a message to a suspect that the officer has a complacent attitude about his or her job. This complacency can be an invitation to violence.

In many situations involving the use of force, the fact that a police officer has a distinguishable uniform can help prevent the officer's injury or death. An officer in plain clothes is at risk of being harmed by citizens and other officers as a result of misidentification. Almost any police officer would immediately draw his or her weapon on a person who is wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and is carrying a gun in his or her hand. A plain clothes officer who is chasing a burglary suspect through backyards at night is at risk of being shot by a home owner who believes the officer to be a criminal. The uniform helps both citizens and fellow police officers identify the wearer as having a legitimate purpose for trespassing, using force, or carrying a weapon.

Summary

The uniform of a police officer conveys the power and authority of the person wearing it. Clothing, including the police uniform, has been found to have a powerful psychological impact on those who view it. When humans contact other humans they subconsciously search for clues about the other person so that they can understand the context of the encounter. The police uniform is a powerful clue as to the wearer's authority, capabilities, and status.

Research has revealed that the uniform has a subconscious psychological influence on people, based on the person's preconceived feelings about police officers. When a person wears the police uniform, citizens tend to be more cooperative with his or her requests. People also tend to curb their illegal or deviant behaviors when a police uniform is visible in the area.

Research has revealed that alterations to the traditional, paramilitary police uniform can result in changes in perceptions by the public. The style of the clothes, the type of hat worn, the color of the material, and even the condition of the clothes and equipment have an influence on how citizens perceive the officer. For these reasons police administrators need to take their uniform policies seriously. The selection of a uniform style, regulations on the proper wear of the uniform, how well uniforms are maintained, and policies on when officers may wear plain clothes should all be taken very seriously. The police uniform should be considered an important tool for every patrol officer.