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**The Police Uniform and Its
Impact on Public Perception**

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ABSTRACT

When someone first looks at another person, the first thing that is noticed is the clothing that each is wearing. This causes each person to formulate an impression about the other. Clothing can help determine a person's gender, social status, occupation, or even if the individual is a person of authority. The police uniform is no exception, and police officers are not exempt from these judgements. In fact, this psychological and sociological phenomenon plays an important part in the public perception of the police.

In today's modern society, the use of military equipment and military uniforms by police departments has negatively influenced the perception of the police as a group of men and women who serve and protect the members of their communities. It has become vitally important that police administrators give serious consideration to the impact of the uniform. It is necessary to strongly consider that the traditional police uniform should be used rather than a military style uniform to maintain an appearance of strength, safety, and security without instilling fear or intimidation into the community. Police are a society's protectors; soldiers are conquerors of nations.

The uniform worn by police must symbolize trust, honesty, and authority. With available studies and empirical data, police administrators can make this choice without damaging the perception of their department. Something as guileless as the uniform an officer wears can determine how a police department will be perceived as a whole. The military style uniform creates an "Us versus Them" mentality and is not conducive to strengthening a positive relationship between law enforcement and the community. The police uniform was created to differentiate the police from the military.

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INTRODUCTION

What someone wears significantly affects an individual's perception of them and what they stand for. Throughout history, clothing has played a vital role determining an individual's social status, gender, associations within a group, occupation, or even the authority they may have. What an individual wears elicits a subconscious and immediate impression. Clothing also has the ability to induce feelings of trustworthiness, honesty, and intelligence or create feelings of fear and dishonesty. Because of these effects of clothing, it is of great importance to determine how this affects the use of the police uniform and if police agencies should maintain traditional uniforms rather than the more military style uniforms, thus ensuring that officers appear less militarized and provide a professional appearance that reflects safety and security.

The police uniform has a long history dating back to 1829, when the London Metropolitan Police first introduced the police uniform. This was done with the specific objective of contradicting the British military of the day. This marked the introduction of the navy blue uniform because it was a stark contrast to British soldiers who wore red. This was later adopted by most police agencies in the United States, beginning in 1853 with the New York Police Department. Since the police uniform was introduced, studies have been conducted to examine the psychological effects of the uniform and its perception by the citizens being policed. It has been found that the police uniform, when viewed by the average citizen, has a significant psychological impact. Because this impact is evident, it was deemed worthy of further investigation, and it has been found that the slightest variation of the color or style of the uniform had a direct impact on how

citizens perceive the officer and the agency that officer represents (Johnson, 2005a, para. 23).

The perception of police agencies and individual officers has long been a topic of concern for many researchers and other criminal justice scholars. However, with recent events in the United States today, such as the shooting death of a young man in Ferguson, Missouri and the police response to that incident, along with several other recent high profile incidents, the subject of the militarization of the police has been brought to the forefront of discussion. The military style equipment used by police does contribute to the negative impression citizens develop about the police, but it is the uniform that the ordinary patrol officer uses that has an immediate impact on a community's impression of its police department and its officers. Police leaders must carefully consider what their officers wear as an official uniform and it should be a traditional uniform rather than a uniform that may provide what some claim have more usefulness but has a more aggressive or militarized appearance.

POSITION

When police administrators are asked what their highest priorities are, the responses are usually similar with statements like crime reduction, youth intervention, and community policing as being most important. What is not heard from these same administrators as being a priority is the importance of the perception that their departments create among the citizens of their communities. The success of a police department is dependent upon a positive perception and concepts like community policing, and crime reduction cannot succeed if the agency is thought of as being dishonest, untrustworthy, or authoritarian. It is important to remember that "persons in

uniform have been found to project a professional bearing as well as perceived competence, reliability and intelligence all of which are critical in establishing community trust” (Bickel, 2012, para. 3). It is equally important to remember that uniforms such as the “BDU”, which is the military acronym for Battle Dress Uniform, by its very nature contradicts and diminishes any efforts that may be made to enhance a community policing program. When an officer is wearing a traditional uniform, citizens have a sense of safety and security, but uniforms like “fatigues, SWAT suits, and other military-issue gear associated with the army... suggest increased aggression. The implication, for those being policed, is that they require extreme measures” (Konnikova, 2014, para.7).

It is important to understand the concept of visual perception in relation to the police uniform to reduce the number of unnecessary obstacles that create tension between the police and the community at large. Most people do not have daily, monthly, or even yearly contact with the police, so creating a professional appearance can be the most notable way of gaining compliance and cooperation from the community. When a militarized atmosphere is created among the police a distrust between the community and police will grow, whereas militarized uniforms, as research shows, decreases trust and creates an “Us versus Them” attitude among citizens.

The level of intimidation and fear associated with the more militarized uniforms of the police was examined by Richard R. Johnson of the University of Cincinnati. Johnson (2005b) began with the most obvious observation stating that “across most cultures white has been consistently associated with good while black was consistently perceived as evil” (p. 59). This observation is based on what is commonly known, that lighter colors create a more calming and pleasant reaction while darker colors have a

tendency to provoke emotions such as anger, hostility or aggression. As Johnson (2005b) sought to answer this question, he developed an experiment to determine if it “is possible that some uniforms promote a negative impression formation, thus making it more difficult than necessary for officers to overcome citizen apprehensions and anxieties” (p. 59). What Johnson found was that black on black uniforms did create perceptions among citizens that police officers were “cold, mean, forceful, unfriendly, aggressive, and corrupt” and lighter colored uniforms such as blue and navy blue “produced perceptions as the most good, nice, warm, gentle, friendly, passive, and honest” (Johnson, 2005b, p. 61).

To prove his hypothesis, Johnson created an experiment to measure the independent variable, which was the uniform color, using seven impression-related dependent variables (Johnson, 2005b, p. 60). This experiment was conducted in a Mid-western city with a population of approximately 60,000, and repeated in a metropolitan area with a population of approximately 120,000. A sample of 737 individuals were shown random photographs of four styles of uniforms with the first consisting of a light blue shirt and navy blue pants. The second uniform included a white shirt and black pants, the third uniform included a black shirt and black pants, and the fourth uniform consisted of a khaki shirt and khaki pants. While reviewing each of the uniforms, participants recorded their impressions of the uniforms on a questionnaire “that included seven, 5-point Likert scales. These Likert scales measured impression formation on the continuums of good/bad, nice/mean, warm/cold, gentle/forceful, friendly/unfriendly, passive/aggressive, and honest/corrupt” (Johnson, 2005b, p. 60).

The results of this experiment proved Johnson's (2005b) hypothesis that the color of the police uniform does influence a person's perception of the police officer. The results found that the most favorably perceived uniform is the light blue and navy blue color scheme, which was identified with attributes such as nice, warm, friendly, and honest. While the least favorable is the black over black uniform that received impressions such as cold, mean, forceful, aggressive, and corrupt. This is empirical data that allows police administrators to actually see what type of impression the officers and the agency as a whole will portray before implementing a departmental change that may be unintentional but catastrophic to the department's image. This experiment demonstrates that the black militarized style of uniform is not well received by the general public.

As it was discovered in Johnson's (2005a) experiment, the militarized style of uniform does not allow citizens to feel comfortable approaching a police officer when help, in the form of service, is needed. The military is known for its ability to fight and wage war as a protector of the nation, but police have a distinctly different role. While the police do have governmental approval to use force against its citizens, the primary role of the police is to serve and to protect the citizens of their given communities. This is a very highly visible statement of the police since it is printed on police cars, in police agencies, on letterheads and just about everywhere the word "Police" is printed the words "To Serve and Protect" follow. But when police officers are dressed like soldiers, an immediate impression of dishonesty, violence, and aggression come to mind. Officers must be approachable so that a lost child will trust the man in the blue uniform

with a badge, an elderly woman can ask for directions because she has become confused, or a man can just walk up and make friendly conversation.

As American society and American policing has progressed, there has been a greater use of the all black militarized style uniform, which has led to a more prevalent combative and uncooperative attitude between the police and citizens. Citizens should never feel that their police are an occupying force. Police officers must work to remind the citizens that they are members of the community as well and are there to provide safety and security to everyone in the community. There was a time and place that these types of uniforms were necessary, Dr. Lynne Tylke of the Institute of Clinical Social Work stated that “we got into such a terror state through the last president’s term of office that fear, anger and prejudice were encouraged and prevalent” (as cited by Doran, 2009, para. 27). It is an important fact to remember that the police uniform, as it was introduced in the 19th century, was meant to appear as different from a military uniform as possible. This is an important fact to remember when police administrators are attempting to determine uniform types and implementing uniform policy. The reaction of the community must be considered at all times, and it is important to remember that “this reaction is heightened when police dress in military gear, which people already associate with a higher level of aggression and menace than a police uniform” (Newitz, 2014, para. 2).

COUNTER POSITION

As with every discussion, there are those that have ideas contrary to what is being presented and the type of uniform that police agencies should use is no different. One counter position to the use of the traditional uniform is that it is important to give an

impression of strength, determination, and preparedness to handle the aggressive nature of policing. Proponents of the more militaristic style of uniform say “Traditional uniforms tend to project a more approachable, service-orientated policing appearance. They might also reflect the history of the department. Tactical uniforms project a more practical, ready-for-anything appearance” (Baldassari, 2012, para. 3).

This “ready-for-anything” approach is what some police departments are specifically looking to achieve. This was clearly demonstrated when Springfield, Massachusetts police commissioner, William Fitchet, said “members of the department's Street Crime Unit will again don black, military-style uniforms as part of his strategy to deal with youth violence” (as cited in “Massachusetts Police,” 2008, para. 1). Using the uniform as a strategy is not a new idea and examples of it can be found dating back to World War II. Watson (2008) stated, “In 1932 Hitler's propaganda chief Heinrich Himmler famously introduced black uniforms for SS police, tailored to project authority and foster fear and respect” (para. 6). Another point that has been addressed is that “blackness can be used to imply malice, but its association to power can also accentuate authority” (Nickels, 2008, p. 87).

Using uniform color and style to deliberately or even inadvertently instill fear is not a method that is conducive to fostering strong relations with the community that is served. As Johnson (2005a) demonstrated during his 2005 experiment, the color and type of uniform has a direct impact on citizens. Fear and intimidation can be created using color and style combinations but this will only instill distrust and aggression toward a police department and could unnecessarily create a deep divide between the police and citizens even if no interaction takes place.

Another common argument is that the black military style uniform provides extra officer safety. The uniform provides more utility, making it easier to carry more equipment and life-saving tools. This has been a common theme among those that feel the uniform is an important part of the safety tools that are used in law enforcement. Chief Jeff Chudwin of the Village of Olympia Fields, Illinois has said, "We're not talking about an issue of just looks, but officer safety and life-saving critical differences by wearing a different type of uniform that allows the carry of additional needed gear" (as cited by Baldassari, 2012, para. 8). But the discussion goes beyond how much "stuff" an officer can put in their pockets and goes to a more in-depth view of officer safety.

The argument of officer safety begins with the initial impression people get of the officer within seconds of the first contact. What the officer wears is equally important as to how the officer acts. The idea that people create impressions of another person and the idea of officer safety have been discussed by Johnson (2005a), who said that after interviewing inmates who had murdered police officers, the offenders often "sized-up" the officer before deciding to use violence. If the officer looked "unprofessional," then the assailant felt that he could successfully resist the officer. The officer's professional appearance and demeanor is the ultimate piece of his or her safety and not a militaristic uniform.

RECOMMENDATION

Uniforms have played an important role in law enforcement since its inception. The purpose of the uniform was specifically designed to differentiate the police from the military because each group has very different job functions. The military has always represented an occupying force that uses violence to accomplish their goals. The

police, on the other hand, are used specifically to provide safety and security to the citizens of the communities in which they serve. But over time, the two functions have become blurred and are not quite as discernable when something as simple as the uniforms they wear have become so similar.

The impression clothing makes is vitally important when determining what perception an agency wants to portray, police administrators must be mindful that the psychological benefits of utilizing the traditional police uniform far outweigh a military styled uniform, and this should be the preferred choice when determining what the best option is for a standard uniform. The importance of this choice has been studied in the psychological and sociological fields and should not be dismissed as unimportant or irrelevant.

Studies have shown that lighter colors produced a feeling of honesty, truthfulness, trustworthiness, and helpfulness, which when used as the standard police uniform can bring a community and its police officers closer together. When a citizen sees the ever familiar man in blue, they know without even speaking to the individual that the uniform he wears is a symbol of integrity. People know that when a person is wearing a police uniform, he is more likely to be an honest person, a helpful person. In contrast to the feelings of honesty and trustworthiness, the new more militarized police uniforms are most commonly in the color black. The same studies that find blue to incite feelings of safety and security find that black incites feelings of aggression, dishonesty, evil, and corruption (Johnson, 2005b). This is important because the uniform does not create an impression of just the officer, but rather the police agency as a whole. If citizens see a police officer dressed all in black, wearing military style equipment, the

first impression that comes to mind is a military occupier and a sense that extreme equipment is needed to police the citizens of the community. This perception is then immediately transferred to the perception of the entire police department and the community as a whole. The perception created is one that the community is not a safe community and that the police are there to forcefully gain compliance to the law.

Maintaining peace and security in a community, regardless of the size of the population, is a challenge that must be carefully balanced. To develop an atmosphere that provides cohesiveness between the citizens and police, while at the same time provides not only safety but usefulness for the officer, the uniform must be chosen wisely and should not be dismissed as just the "same clothes that we all wear". As important as the uniform is to a department, administrators must be realistic in the choices made regarding the uniform. SWAT teams play a very important role in police departments, officers who work highway interdiction have an important role, and officers who work only traffic accidents have equally important but different duties, so it is important to remember that the uniform should provide usefulness to the officer dependent upon the duties that are assigned. The important factor to remember is the department's day to day interaction with citizens and the perception that it creates. The average citizen does not want to be pulled over for a traffic infraction only to see what looks like a SWAT officer approaching their car and being treated as if a capital offense has been committed.

Police officers must maintain a professional appearance and behave in a professional manner that is above reproach so that any time a citizen sees an officer, that officer portrays a helpful, service oriented appearance. Citizens must be able to

look at a police officer from a distance and have the impression that the officer is approachable and there to help, which, in turn, means the department as a whole is a group of men and women who are truly concerned with the welfare of the community. The police uniform has a long history deep in tradition, and it must remind people of where the police come from and why police officers are here, which is "To Serve and To Protect". The importance of the traditional uniform should not be ignored or traded for the aggressive and intimidating appearance of an occupying military force. Police officers are protectors of communities and soldiers are defenders of nations.

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