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Uniform Color: The Effects on Officer Morale and Public Recognition

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by
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ABSTRACT

The concept of color affects an officer's morale and how the public perceives an officer's presence. It has been statistically proven that uniform color has a great effect on morale and self image of the common street officer. Traditionally the dark blue uniform has been associated by the public with that of a police officer, fireman, and many emergency response personnel.

The topic of public recognition of the officers uniform and whether the public recognizes them as police officers will also be addressed. Every department is concerned with visual impression given by its officers. Smartly dressed officers give the impression of a progressive department with good morale, alert, efficient and an asset to the community. The meaning of clothing is deeply interwoven with our values and judgement. A police uniform is the essence of the image presented by the police officer. The color of the uniform is a means of communication that conveys a definite image to the public. Uniforms and the concept of morality become interrelated.

To assess the potential issue of uniform color and morale issues, a sample of police departments within a thirty-mile radius of the City of Fair Oaks Ranch were surveyed. The results were compiled from departments ranging in size often to twenty officers. Reflection of the survey showed that departments have changed their appearance to a new and aggressive, but approachable style and color. The results reflected that the traditional color of dark blue was prominent eight of the twelve departments surveyed. Morale changes were prominently noted in nine of the twelve departments, with positive feed back from the public.

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INTRODUCTION

In January 1999, the Fair Oaks Ranch Police Department set out to change the image of the department. The goal was to establish an updated appearance, one that would boost officer morale and reflect a professional image that is essential to community relations. Since January 1993 the standard uniform colors have been tan and brown, with a smattering of green on the department patch displaying the city seal.

Over the past seven years, the City of Fair Oaks Ranch has grown, increasing it's population from 3100 citizens to more than 5000. The increased calls for service have produced more interactions with citizens and surrounding police agencies.

This study aims to determine whether police uniform color affects the morale of personnel, and whether a professional image is conveyed by a type or color of a uniform. It is hypothesized that color and appearance are the initial steps in building a positive image with the public.

This research will consist of surveys from officers now employed by the City of Fair Oaks Ranch, surrounding departments, results from the Best Dressed Competition sponsored by Law and Order Magazine, and will examine views on the importance of uniform colors and design. Area police and sheriff departments will be sent a series of questions about the development of uniform style, color, incidents that contributed to the change of uniform and the publics perception of the change.

The results of the study will be examined to determine whether uniform color has any affect on officer morale. The implication for law enforcement is why morale/image is an important part of policing and why is it important to maximize these things?

Review of Literature

Every day we select clothing to wear that makes us feel confident, makes us feel good or defines our status or profession. So why shouldn't police uniforms be given the same attention? This paper will help establish the importance of uniform color, style, and the impact uniforms have on officer morale. The topic of public recognition of officers uniform and whether the public recognizes them as police officers will also be addressed. The meaning' of clothing is deeply interwoven with our values and judgment. As Polonius noted in Hamlet, "the apparel oft proclaims the man" (Shaw 1973) When we meet someone, we form an immediate impression, a composite picture in our mind, of the other persons character or position. Clothing is more than superficial, Flugel says: What we actually see and react to are, not the bodies, but the clothes of those about us. It is from their clothes that we form a first impression. The very familiarity causes the role that clothing plays in our social relationships to be overlooked (Shaw 1973). Police uniforms should make an intuitive change of posture, a new attitude, a new way of walking and gesturing. The police uniform in themselves, might have a bearing on police officers action.

Every police department is concerned with visual impression given by its officers. A sloppy looking uniform indicated a slipshod department, inefficient and inadequately equipped with poor morale. A smartly dressed uniformed officer gives the impression of a progressive department, with good morale, alert, efficient and an asset to the community. Uniforms seem to both express, and to be the cause of, attitudes, actions and reactions. Uniforms and the concept of morality becomes interrelated. A police uniform is the essence of the image presented by the

patrol officer. The first impression - and usually the most lasting-is the image presented by the patrol officer.

In selecting uniforms for patrol officers, there are several considerations, the first of which should be the image the department wants to convey. It can be authoritative, commanding immediate respect, or it can be casual, to communicate approachability. (Pilant 1992)

Police uniforms give officers high visibility, the use of appropriate colors is necessary because color has a physiological and psychological effect on people. Color is a means of communication that conveys a definite image to the public (Torres 1978).

Uniform manufacturers and dealers are aware that law enforcement officers need uniforms that reflect authority and confidence, not only for an improved personal image but because the public expects it. Law enforcement officers live in a fish bowl. They are highly visible. Because of their uniforms, the public recognizes them immediately. Police uniforms are effective not only as attention getters, they must also establish public trust and confidence. This requires uniforms that reflect efficiency and confidence in the officer. The uniform is important to the police officer because they are public servants. It identifies them as authority when in contact with people. The uniform provides not only authority but a sense of trust. Meticulous attention to appearance rubs off on the officers who, because they look sharp have pride in their jobs and high morale. (Worth 1975)

Consequently, when the uniform and officer's attitude are altered, there will be a corresponding change in the citizens attitude toward the police. Generally, within the police profession the uniform had incorporated many subtle meanings, customs and practices which have their origins in police tradition. Society views the police uniform as a prime motivator with

police-citizen attitudes and their relations to each other. The perceived authority associated with the uniform has been an essential ingredient in the role of police officers. Interpersonal interaction between the police officer and the citizen is structured by the uniform. Offering a preview of behavior and communications that will be sent and received. Like many other occupations, police officers draw identity from their uniforms. The officer's uniform represents a vibrant symbols of the officer occupational status, solidarity and high level of organizational commitment (Bell 1982).

Police officers wear uniforms that are befitting their perceived role as law enforcement officers. Interaction between police officers and citizens are normally very short. However, the symbolic interaction code process was adequate in determining positive and negative attitudes of the citizens contacted and in judging their reactions to the officers uniform and attitude. Therefore, the attitude of the police officer, in conjunction with the uniform, exerts more influence on the citizens attitude. A combined alteration in attitude and uniform could potentially be a positive improvement for both the police and the citizens they serve (Bell 1982).

A different perspective is that the public places greater emphasis on the functional significance of the uniform as a social necessity as opposed to it's personal or psychological benefits of the wearer (Olsen 1972).

In response to the survey sent to various departments in respect to uniform color, Chief Walt Myers of Garden Ridge Police Department wrote "morale" was only a word in the dictionary. Changing a group of individuals into a uniformed agency took only the selection of a sharp looking suit of clothes and a strict dress code policy. Once the officers became proud of their appearance and felt like they were a member of a special unit, morale soared, camaraderie

developed, effectiveness and productivity increased far beyond what it had been in the past. Behind it all, the uniform instills pride in the individuals and in turn pride in the unit and a sense of belonging. All of this, in turn raises morale among the group and a desire to be impressive (Myers 1999).

In the 1993 and 1999 issues of Law and Order an article was published about the Best Dressed Competition Winners. These are some of the comments made. According to Chief Robert M Beckers, Grandview Police Department, Missouri believes in a commitment to a strong personal appearance is key to developing pride in the profession. "Our officers expect each member to wear the uniform with dignity" he said. "How an officer looks is, in part, how the officer will act and how the public will respond to him." Best Dressed Competition Winner 1993 (Law and Order 1993).

Colonel George Abraham, Provost Marshall, Military District of Washington, states the "The old adage, 'clothes make the man,' is even more true with police officers." (Law and Order 1993).

Assistant Chief C.L. Owens of Mecklenburg County Police Department, Charlotte, North Carolina states "Looking good, feeling good, and doing good" is not only the battle cry of this department, but its attitude as well. "We believe that making a good impression by our officers is extremely important to our image." Best Dressed Competition Winner 1993 (Law and Order 1993).

Paul C. Leccese of the Chesapeake Police Department of Virginia states "Image is very important, the look that our officers project to the public is certainly one of the essential ingredient that enables us to maintain public trust and confidence." Best Dressed Competition

Winner 1999 (Law and Order 1999).

"You never get a second chance to make a first impression" is one that Sergeant Jack Faenza of Long Hill Township Police Department in New Jersey, feels very strongly about. He stated" A clean professional appearance is what people will remember from the first time you make contact with them. They will look at and, many times, form an opinion of what type of officer you are before you even speak a word. Best Dressed Competition Winner (Law and Order 1999).

Sheriff R.L. "Butch" Conway of Gwinnett County Sheriffs Department, Georgia says" The manner of dress and grooming of department employees is an outward reflection of their personal pride, morale and self respect. The professionalism of a law enforcement agency is often judged by the appearance of its personnel." Best Dressed Competition Winner 1999 (Law and Order 1999).

Methodology

Surrounding police and sheriff s departments within a thirty mile radius of the City of Fair Oaks Ranch were surveyed. Department personnel size ranged from ten to twenty officers. The results of the survey showed that there was an overall change of uniform color, and results reflected uniform color was changed to traditional dark blue. Of the departments surveyed eight departments changed uniform color. Nine departments reflected a change in officer morale and public recognition. The written survey was completed to establish past and present uniform colors, the development of their uniform style, color, incidents that contributed to the change of the uniform and the publics perception of the change. Also included are the results of the Fair Oaks Ranch Police Departments entry into the Best Dressed Completion 2000. The following is a

sample of the survey mailed to surrounding agencies:

1. What are the current colors of your present patrol uniforms?
2. How long have you been wearing your present uniform?
3. If this is not the original patrol uniform, what color combination was the prior uniform?
4. What was the reason for the change in patrol uniform and was there a specific reason for the change?
5. Did the public perceive a difference of professionalism and approachability of the patrol officers due to the change of uniform?
6. Have you noticed a difference in officer morale due to the change of uniform, and if so how?
7. How many cases of evading arrest and/or detention has your department experienced due to the suspect not recognizing your past or present uniform as that of a police department?

A second survey was conducted internally with the officers of Fair Oaks Ranch Police Department. Ten patrol officers were surveyed to establish how the officers felt individually about the present departmental uniform. The following questions were presented to the officers through a written survey.

1. What is the color of the present uniform?
2. How long have you worn the present uniform?
3. What color was your uniform before joining this department?
4. How does the public perceive officer presence in the current uniform?
5. What is the perception of neighboring police/sheriffs departments on the appearance of the present uniform?
6. Did the change in uniform color affect officer morale? (change from past to present color of uniform)

7. What type of comments have you received from the public or other agencies about the present uniform?
8. Have you ever been associated with another type of agency or service other than that of a police officer in the current uniform?
9. If you could change the colors and design of the current uniform, what color or style would you choose

Results

Of the twelve departments surveyed the following results have been gathered:

Previous uniform colors of the twelve departments ranged from unknown prior colors to blue/blue, grey/blue, tan/tan, dark brown/tan, dark blue/light blue.

Eight departments reported the present color of the uniform to be dark blue. Two departments reported colors of grey and blue. One department reported the colors of dark blue and tan. The final department stated that the present color of the uniform is tan.

Ten departments reported an noticeable change in officer morale, whereas two reflected no change.

Eight of the twelve departments reported a change of the publics perception and difference in professionalism due to the new uniform color. Four of the recorded departments report no change in public perception or public opinion of professionalism..

Of the ten patrol officers surveyed of the Fair Oaks Ranch Police Department the following was reported. Eight officers stated prior to joining the department, uniform colors ranged from blue/tan, tan /black or dark blue. All ten officers commented on public perception by citizens or surrounding police agencies. Some of the comments included that the department looked like Park Rangers, Security Guards, Border Patrol. Officers commented that have been

asked questions such as What city are you with? We have police in Fair Oaks? When asked if morale was affected because of the current uniform color, all ten officers replied that lack of morale was evident.

After seven years the Fair Oaks Ranch Police Department changed uniform color in December of 1999. The colors selected for the new uniform were chosen by the police officers. Uniforms now consist of medium blue shirts, dark blue pants with green striping. The colors of the department patch were also changed to dark blue, gold and green. Honorable Mentions and judges recognition was awarded to the Fair Oaks Ranch Police Department by the judges of the Best Dressed 2000 competition. These results will be published in the August 2000 edition of Law and Order magazine.

Discussions/Conclusions

This study was aimed to determine whether police uniform color affected the morale of personnel, and whether a professional image was conveyed by the color of a uniform. It was hypothesized that color and appearance were the initial steps in building a positive image with the public.

Fourteen police/sheriffs departments were surveyed. Twelve departments answered the survey reflecting a recent change in uniform colors. Previous colors of uniforms ranged from tan/tan, grey/blue, dark blue/light blue, tan/blue, dark brown/tan. The result reflected that nine of the twelve departments changed uniform color. Eight of the twelve departments changed uniform color to the traditional dark blue shirt and pants. Of the departments surveyed it has been concluded that change to the traditional blue uniform has taken place gradually over the last thirteen years.

On the issue of officer morale, eight departments showed a positive change in officer morale due to uniform color change. Unfortunately only five of the twelve departments stated that there was a positive change in public perception of the officers.

The survey results supported the hypothesis. Results validated that changing the color of an officers uniform has a direct affect on officer morale, making the officer feel that they belong to a special group that instills pride in their appearance. Results also validated the perception of the public as being more receptive to the officers.

The relevance of this study to law enforcement is that a smartly dressed officer reflects a positive image for his/ her department. This study has also shown that when the uniform is altered, there will be a corresponding change in the citizens attitudes toward police.

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June 14,2000

Fair Oaks Ranch Police Department  
Sgt. Suzanne Martin  
7286 Dietz Eikhorn  
Fair Oaks Ranch, TX 78015

Dear Sgt. Martin,

I am pleased to inform you that your department has won an honorable mention in the 2000 Best Dressed Police Department Competition.

The competition has several award categories. Departments that place first receive award plaques and appear in the August edition of *Law & Order* magazine, as do outstanding achievement recipients. Departments with exemplary uniform programs receive honorable mentions at the judges' discretion. These departments receive a certificate suitable for framing.

National and local publicity for competition winners is released by the NAUMD in August. For this reason, we would appreciate if you would not announce news of your status to anyone outside your department until August 15, 2000.

A certificate will be prepared next week, and will list your department name exactly as it appears in this letter. Contact me immediately if a correction should be made. This certificate will be mailed to you in mid-August. Departments requesting photos back will also receive them at this time.

Many thanks for making the 2000 competition an exciting, successful event. As a past entrant, you'll automatically receive an entry blank for next year's contest. Look for it in January 2001.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Melanie Kanegis  
Director of Public Relations

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