Psychological responses to uniform styles of private security personnel – An online-experiment[1]

Alexander Herrmann & Willi Geser

Leopold-Franzens-University of Innsbruck, Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT

This study investigates effects of uniform styles and variations in color, grooming, accessories, and insignia, on social attributions and behavioral intentions towards private security personnel. Based on N = 932 participants in an online experiment, psychological responses include perceived aggressiveness and competence alongside intended compliance and resistance. Most positive responses were associated with the police-style uniform (officer), followed by the elegant dress suit (bouncer). Most unfavorable was the casual uniform style (worker), with least conspicuousness to civilian clothing. Attributed aggressiveness notably played an ambiguous role. More positive responses were obtained for black (compared to brighter) color, tidy grooming, and militarized outfits. The language of badge inscriptions did not play a role. Our findings suggest that uniforms constitute meaning-laden symbols of non-verbal communication influencing attributions and behavioral intentions towards policing personnel. This study contributes to the academic understanding of the policing-perception nexus and may help practitioners to enhance interactions with non-uniformed others.

Keywords

Uniforms – private security – social attribution – behavioral intentions – social perception

1 Introduction

Attire is a key factor in interpersonal interaction and social decision-making, communicating powerful nonverbal messages (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). Clothes provide a first anchor and „mental shortcut" (Johnson, 2005) to identify gender, membership in social groups, and occupations, including signals of status and authority (e.g., Johnson, Schofield & Yurchisin, 2002; Simpson, 2018). In work contexts, dress codes relate to a variety of internal (e.g., employee compliance) and external organizational processes (e.g., recognition, image), as part of the „institutional identity" of a company or agency. Based on the taxonomy of Rafaeli and Pratt (1993), uniforms represent a special type of organizational dress with a high degree of homogeneity, formality, and uniqueness, compared to other types (and civil clothing). Rafaeli and Pratt's (1993) observation that dress is largely overlooked in organizational research is still valid for most uniformed domains.

Previous research has mainly focused on police uniforms, which have been shown to convey legitimacy and authority, influencing interactions and relations with non-uniformed others (Hertz, 2007; Johnson, 2005; Nickels, 2008; Simpson, 2017, 2018; Stott, Adang, Livingstone & Schreiber, 2008; Zhao, Schneider & Thurman, 2002). However, with few notable exceptions (Johnson, 2005; Johnson, Plecas, Anderson & Dolan, 2015; Nickels, 2008; Simpson 2017, 2018), most research on police uniform perceptions is rather dated. Further, while psychological responses of citizens to uniforms by law enforcement are important, other uniformed services are even more under-researched.

Studies on private security uniforms are crucial to understand developments in modern policing and its implications for government agencies, regulatory institutions, and political bodies. This dearth of research is notable, as in many countries substantial aspects of policing have been delegated to private security services (van Steden & de Waard, 2013). In the Europe-

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