

Dressing for disorder

Published on 1 June 2025 Written by Vicky Hebborn, Operations Support Inspector, Norfolk Constabulary

Long read: how enclothed cognition and uniform type affects police officers' self-perception

Going equipped 14 mins read

Introduction

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, while my friends took up baking or learning a new language, I found myself enrolling on a Professional Doctorate with the University of West London, studying Policing, Crime and Security. I spent the next four years researching the impact of uniform on police officer self-perception, specifically comparing 'response' and 'public order' uniform.

Since joining Norfolk Constabulary in 2014, I have worked almost entirely in uniformed response policing. I remember the first time I went out in public in uniform. I felt that everyone must be looking at me. I felt different and was excited and proud to be visibly recognisable as a police officer.

As my career progressed, I became a Police Support Unit (PSU) officer, which requires using specialist tactics and wearing different protective uniform. PSU is not a full-time role in my force and is something that is deployed, either pre-planned or spontaneously, to meet emerging needs.

Much like my first day in uniform, I noticed a shift in my perception of myself when I was wearing PSU kit compared to when I was wearing 'ordinary' uniform. I still felt very much like a police officer. But I felt that my purpose had shifted as a specialist, and the expectations of me were different. My doctoral research intended to explore why that perception shift was happening, and whether it was just me.

I had heard a common anecdote from sources throughout the rank and command structure: as soon as an officer dons their public order uniform, they adopt a new personality. The suggestion behind this anecdote was that the friendly, neighbourhood officer becomes a militarised, homogenous instrument as soon as they change their appearance. This assumption was, on occasion, preventing commanders from selecting a protective dress code, potentially exposing their officers to unnecessary risk. I wanted to understand whether there was any truth in this and, if there

was, why it happens.

Literature review

My literature review considered both policing policy and review, and academic research.

Operationally, there was very limited research or guidance regarding dress codes. 'Adapting to protest' (HMIC, 2009) and the subsequent 'Adapting to protest – nurturing the British model of policing' (HMIC, 2009:2) were two of the few to offer recommendations considering the wearing of public order uniform. They suggested the following.

'The British model [of policing] can be easily eroded by premature displays of formidable public order protective uniform and equipment which give the perception – inadvertent or otherwise – of a hardening of the character of British policing' (HMIC, 2009).

The initial report further suggested that health and safety considerations should not overwhelm the decision-making process of justifying deployment of officers in public order dress (HMIC, 2009).

This position places public order and public safety (POPS) commanders in the difficult position of having to balance the safety of the officers they deploy with the 'character' of the policing operation.

This HMIC guidance is more than 15 years old. High-profile events involving protest and disorder during 2021 and 2022 highlighted that this perspective of public perception over officer safety should be reviewed.

Academically, there was research available into uniform and behaviour. However, this was almost entirely based on people being given a uniform and told to 'imagine' they are a police officer before undertaking tasks or being asked questions about their thoughts and emotions.

There were some notable exceptions involving genuine police officers, including De Camargo, 2017; Andrews, 2023; and Simpson and Sargeant, 2023. In particular, De Camargo (2017) considered how police officer uniform can shape identity. The officers she observed expressed a challenging contradiction in wearing a 'militarised' style of uniform while being expected to undertake friendly, community-based duties. This insight was particularly relevant to my research: whether PSU officers find wearing protective kit to be at odds with delivering a community style of policing.

Original research

The theoretical framework of my research was based on a theory proposed by Adam and Galinsky (2012) called 'Enclothed Cognition'. This identifies two critical factors which must occur for clothing to have an influence on the person wearing it:

- The clothing is actually worn, not simply nearby or hypothetical
- The clothing must hold a meaning to the person wearing it

This theory was something I could test with PSU officers who sometimes find themselves deployed on a 'PSU job' in normal working uniform, with their PSU kit nearby in a van. I wanted to understand how they would feel in that situation. Would their mindset be that of a PSU officer even in 'ordinary' uniform?

I was also interested to understand more about how uniform could hold meaning. I wanted to know how this meaning might evolve as an officer becomes more experienced and has different memories of their time wearing PSU kit.

I developed two research questions which would identify whether changing uniform can change the self-perception of the officer wearing it.

1. What do officers perceive the purpose of their role to be when wearing ordinary, or public order uniform?
2. How do officers perceive their exposure to risk when wearing ordinary, or public order uniform?

An insight into these questions would mean recommendations could be made. These would ensure that any changes to an officer's self-perception are understood and acknowledged.

To understand how officers perceive themselves, and to identify whether this changes in different uniforms, I identified three participant groups and recruited four participants per group:

- Non-PSU officers, who had never undertaken PSU training or deployment
- Novice PSU officers, who were undertaking their initial PSU training, so had limited experience of wearing their uniform in training scenarios. However, they had not been deployed to real incidents
- Experienced PSU officers, who had attended a minimum of three PSU deployments

Participants were interviewed while on duty or during training, and were wearing the uniform they would ordinarily perform their role in. Novice and experienced PSU officers were interviewed twice, once in their ordinary role and once in their PSU role.

Non-PSU officer	Interviewed once	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Normal working clothing: to determine a benchmark perception of a police officer with no experience of operating in a PSU setting. The officer is either wearing operational police uniform, or civilian business wear dependent on their role.
Novice PSU officer (trained but never having deployed to a real incident)	Interviewed twice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Normal working clothing: to determine that officer's self-perception in a non-PSU role.• PSU uniform: with no operational PSU experience, this will determine the officer's self-perception based only on the change of uniform. They will not associate the uniform with a lived experience as they have yet to deploy as a PSU officer.

Experienced PSU officer (deployed to more than three PSU incidents)	Interviewed twice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Normal working clothing: to determine that officer's self-perception in a non-PSU role.• PSU uniform: as an experienced PSU officer, this will determine the officer's self-perception based on enclothed cognition principles. Associating the PSU uniform with their past experiences while wearing it.
--	-------------------	--

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the participants and asked questions around their role, things they enjoyed or disliked, and whether they felt exposed to risk or danger. Interviewing participants in the groups detailed above provided me with data from a total of 20 interviews.

I transcribed the interviews and used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) to look for themes or similar topics that emerged. I then used these themes to explore how these might affect each officer's self-perception in their role.

Findings

The interviews allowed me to look for similarities and differences in how the officers perceived themselves in their ordinary role. And for those with the PSU skill, to compare whether their self-perception changed.

Research question 1:

What do officers perceive the purpose of their role to be when wearing ordinary, or public order uniform?

Participants perceived the primary purpose of their role to be protecting the public from harm. This was easier to achieve when officers were working in dedicated community roles, however the concept of public protection was a universal theme across all roles. Officers highlighted that safeguarding was always at the forefront of their minds, acknowledging that the concept of safeguarding is woven into all elements of policing and training.

Participants experienced a shift in their self-perception when performing a PSU role in comparison to their normal daily role. Although participants acknowledged protecting the public as a priority, PSU officers also indicated that they perceive themselves to be a tactical option to respond to significant violence or disorder.

PSU officers felt that they understood their purpose more in PSU than when performing their daily role. Officers felt that their daily roles required them to respond to such an array of events that their purpose could vary greatly from one job to the next, whereas in PSU, their purpose felt clearer.

PSU officers felt conflicted when deployed on a 'PSU job' while wearing their ordinary uniform. Officers described the challenge of understanding why, if the risk was sufficient to deploy a PSU, they would not be dressed in such a way to use their protective and tactical kit. This supported Adam and Galinsky's (2012) first principle of Enclothed Cognition. This finding is particularly relevant to commanders when considering deploying PSU trained officers but not requiring a PSU dress code, as officers may feel unclear on their purpose.

Research question 2:

How do officers perceive their exposure to risk when wearing ordinary, or public order uniform?

Officers perceived risk to be a part of policing and accepted low-level injury to be an unfortunate byproduct of their role. They regarded their uniform as an enhancement to their safety and felt more confident engaging in dangerous situations when wearing protective kit.

This confidence is built up through experience in training, where PSU officers described being subject to high-end aggression, such as being attacked by missiles and petrol. PSU officers stated they have full confidence in their protective uniform because they have tested it in this way. PSU officers additionally saw their PSU kit as being representative of a level of training that enhanced their confidence in their colleagues. An example of this is as follows.

'I know their skills are up to scratch and I know mine are as well, so I know I've got that trust in that person. I may not know them in any other way, but I know that they're going to be on my shoulder and supporting me, protecting me when I need it and vice versa.' (Participant 11)

Participants felt most at risk when performing their ordinary daily role and attributed this perception to the unpredictability of the role, more limited protection from their uniform and the likelihood of being the only officer attending an incident. PSU officers conversely felt relatively safe when undertaking their role owing to their protective clothing, the presence of additional colleagues and there being a degree of predictability at an incident.

The research can be summarised into four prominent findings:

1. Regardless of the role they are performing, police officers felt that their primary purpose was to protect the community.
2. Participants retained most readily the things that they are repeatedly taught. Overwhelmingly this related to safeguarding but was also demonstrated by PSU officers' association of the PSU role with high levels of violence.
3. PSU officers did not feel that their specialist skills were used appropriately and were not used as well as they should be.
4. Participants demonstrated that they felt most at risk when performing their normal daily role.

Recommendations

It was always my intention for this research to be practical and applicable to policing, and not just an academic endeavour that would sit on a shelf. As such, this research will contribute to the policing of public order incidents in three distinct ways.

1. Development of public order training

The research demonstrated that officers retain the messages they are taught most frequently. If PSU training focuses entirely on 'high-end' scenarios, this means reinforcing the notion that wearing PSU kit is only something you do when you are about to encounter significant disorder. This research demonstrates the importance of building 'low-level' scenarios into training where officers are wearing PSU uniform and working in a community-focused way, such as engaging with protestors or escorting a jubilant crowd.

2. Informing commander decision making

The research demonstrated that officer dress code does affect the mindset of PSU officers. They understand that they are being deployed as a specialist tactical option. Officers do, however, still consider themselves to be community focused and their purpose is to protect the public. Commanders should therefore consider their dress code decisions based on the risk to officers, and the reason they are deploying PSU assets.

3. Influencing the way public order officers are briefed prior to deployment

Effective briefing of officers is integral to ensuring the right style and tone of a policing operation. PSU officers understand whether their role is one of engagement or enforcement as long as this is communicated to them. By wearing PSU kit, officers will retain tactical training and understand that their specialist skills are being used, even in operations that do not lead to significant disorder.

These recommendations support deploying officers in a public order dress code at the earliest stages of an operation, confident in the knowledge that officers will engage with the community and be 'human' even when wearing PSU kit. The research therefore, provides an opportunity for commanders to consider officer safety outside of the restraints of Adapting to protest (HMIC, 2009).

Developments

Within Norfolk Constabulary, my research has contributed towards threat and risk assessments in discussion with POPS commanders. I have demonstrated the value of deploying officers in PSU kit to non-disorder incidents, and have influenced decisions on occasions where commanders were

unsure of the most suitable dress codes.?

In a public order training environment, the operational support unit have developed scenario-based training that requires officers deployed in PSU uniform to police peaceful, low-level events that do not escalate into disorder.?Debrief and discussion with officers following training scenarios has also highlighted the specific public order skills they have used, including cordons and tactical communication, to reinforce the fact that skilled PSU deployments do not inevitably lead to disorder.

In addition to public order, I have worked with other teams in the force to review uniform and dress code, particularly for officers who change uniform to perform in a specialist role, in a similar way to PSU officers.?This has included working with proactive teams who may deploy in uniform or plain clothes.

By providing an overview of enclothed cognition I have been able to support officers and commanders to understand why they are asked to wear certain things. It has also helped them to recognise the influence this uniform might have on their own behaviour and self-perception.

My research findings have been shared with the College of Policing. As a result, I was asked to present at the public and personal safety training (PPST) conference in relation to wearing patrol uniform to undertake PPST.?This led to thought-provoking conversation regarding both enclothed cognition and other clothing-related learning. This included the practical and physical muscle memory of understanding the location of kit and how to access it when required.

To access more materials on this subject,?[**become a member of the National Police Library**](#). Membership is available to all serving UK police officers and staff.??

- This article was peer reviewed by Alistair Price, Lead Public and Personal Safety Trainer, Avon and Somerset Police

References

Adam H and Galinsky AD. (2012). Enclothed cognition. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, volume 48(4), pages 918-925

Andrews T. (2024). [**The superhero effect: How enclothed cognition can impact on the perceptions and actions of serving UK police officers**](#) (OpenAthens account registration required). *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles*, volume 97(3), pages 417-434

Braun V and Clarke V. (2022). 'Thematic Analysis, a practical guide'. London: Sage

De Camargo C. (2017). A uniform not uniform: an ethnography of police clothing, performance, gender and subculture in neighbourhood policing. Salford: University of Salford

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. (2009). [**Adapting to protest**](#) [online]. London: Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. [Accessed 14 April 2025]

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. (2009) (2). [**Adapting to protest – nurturing the British model of policing**](#) [online]. London: Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. [Accessed 14 April 2025]

Simpson R and Sargeant E. (2023). [**Connecting officer appearance with officer safety: a survey of police officers' perceptions of uniforms and accoutrements**](#) (OpenAthens account registration required). In: Farmer C and Evans R. (eds.), 'Policing & firearms: new perspectives and insights.' Cham: Springer, pages 385-403

Download Going equipped

This article is from the 10th issue of Going equipped.

- [**Going equipped: Issue 10 Spring/Summer 2025 \(pdf\) 2.78 MB**](#)

Tags

Going equipped