Understanding Public Perceptions of Police Uniform: How is the Queensland Police Service Uniform perceived by the public?

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Context
Much like a white coat in medicine, or robes in law, the uniform of a police officer is an important symbol in characterising the legitimacy of the institution (Simpson, 2017). The way in which the uniform is interpreted by the public influences the way the police are represented within the community. Therefore, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) are concerned that the introduction of new uniform and equipment has the potential to make officers appear too tactical, and may therefore negatively impact the way members of the community view the police.

The University of Queensland, in conjunction with the Queensland Police Service (QPS), has conducted a study examining public perceptions of a number of variations to the QPS uniform worn by an officer. The aim of this project is to understand how the public perceives these variations, and how this may affect police-community relations. Specifically, we were interested in how changes to the shirt colour, load-bearing vest, and position of the firearm and taser may affect perceptions of police legitimacy, approachability and militarisation. Furthermore, we also looked at how prior police interactions and other demographic variables may influence these attitudes.

The Research
Throughout September 2017, our research team conducted an online survey measuring public perceptions of the police uniform and equipment. The survey focused on modifying four key elements of the QPS uniform: (1) the colour of the shirt worn by officers, (2) the presence of a load bearing vest, (3) the placement of the taser and (4) the placement of the firearm holster. In addition, questions relating to perceptions of police legitimacy, approachability and militarisation were also included. Almost 1000 responses were received from across the state, encompassing a large and diverse cross-section of the population. This enabled us to achieve an in-depth exploration of the ways in which variations to the uniform and equipment worn by Queensland police officers affect public perceptions of legitimacy, approachability and satisfaction.

For the purposes of this study, police legitimacy has been defined as the obligation to obey out of respect and moral alignment with police authority to make decisions (Antrobus et al, 2015). The literature suggests that legitimacy compels voluntary action when there is no threat of punishment, and when the decisions of the institution align with the values of the individual (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003). Our study defines approachability as the accessible nature of the police service from the public’s perspective, such as the ability to easily meet, know and talk with an officer in the social sphere (Keane & Bell, 2013). Lastly, police militarisation was considered to be the process where the police service is influenced by aspects of military culture and equipment (Kraska 2007). An example of this is the load bearing vest and the tactical thigh firearm holster.

The predominant aim of the research was to gauge whether variations in uniform and equipment have an effect on public perceptions of police legitimacy, satisfaction and approachability. In turn, we were also interested in seeing if impressions of legitimacy, approachability and militarisation influence how people regard the uniform variations. In addition, our research aimed to investigate how pre-existing perceptions of the QPS affected current attitudes towards the police, as previous research suggests that negative police-citizen encounters can be highly influential in shaping future attitudes of police as positive experiences (Skogan, 2006). Finally, we aimed to understand the effect that demographic factors had on public opinions of the uniform and equipment, as the other research has highlighted a connection between demographic variables and attitudes towards the police (Lai & Zhao, 2010).

Research Questions:
1. How do different elements of the uniform and equipment worn by members of the Queensland Police Service affect public perceptions of police legitimacy, approachability and militarisation?
2. How do prior interactions with, and pre-existing attitudes towards the Queensland Police Service, influence public perceptions of police legitimacy, approachability and militarisation?
3. Do public perceptions of police uniform and equipment in Queensland vary according to different demographic and social factors?
Key Findings

- The **most approachable** variation of the uniform worn by QLD police was the light blue shirt in the absence of a load-bearing vest with both the firearm and taser positioned on the hip. This uniform combination was also viewed as the **least militaristic**.
- The QPS uniform seen as **most legitimate** by the public was the dark blue shirt with a load-bearing vest present.
- Legitimacy ratings were highest when the firearm was positioned in the tactical thigh holster and the taser placed on the hip.
- The taser positioned on the load-bearing vest was viewed as **militaristic** and negatively impacted approachability.
- Positive pre-existing perceptions of the QPS more positively impacted ratings of legitimacy and approachability of the uniform and equipment.
- Females generally rated all images higher in legitimacy, approachability and militarisation.
- There were no significant differences in ratings of legitimacy, approachability and militarisation due to geographical location.
- The older the individual, the higher their ratings of legitimacy, approachability and militarisation tended to be.

- The uniform combination that was rated as the most favourable, and with the highest legitimacy-type ratings, is the dark shirt with a load-bearing vest present, firearm placed in a tactical thigh holster and the taser positioned on the hip.
- This uniform combination will likely ensure maximum cooperation and approval from the Queensland public as high ratings of police legitimacy have been linked to public satisfaction and law-abiding behaviour (Antrobus et al., 2015).

Based on our findings, it is clear the QPS need to be mindful of the uniform combination they are wearing and how they will be perceived within the community. For example, the variation of the uniform worn by officer A would not be appropriate for situations where the officer must appear to be approachable, like in a school. A uniform combination like officer B would be much more appropriate, as this was rated by the public as the most approachable uniform. However, when the police need to be seen as more legitimate, they could wear a dark shirt with a LBV, thigh firearm holster and the taser worn on the hip. This will likely ensure maximum cooperation and approval from the public, as high ratings of police legitimacy have been linked to public satisfaction and law-abiding behaviour (Mazerolle et al. 2013).

The Research Team at the University of Queensland would like to sincerely thank you for dedicating your time to completing the online survey. Without your valuable contribution, this project would not have been possible.

Thank you again

The Research Team

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Sources: