

Why Outfitting Police in Military Uniforms Encourages Brutality

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As protests over the systemic brutality by law enforcement against Black Americans continue, an enduring image will be of a blue wall of police, outfitted in helmets and riot gear, prepared to stamp out would-be violence. In cities from Seattle to Boston, officers have been covered head-to-toe in battle-ready gear accessorized with batons, shields, and various firearms, appearing more suited to take on a hostile nation's insurgents than protestors on U.S. soil. In many cases—and most prominently in Lafayette Square near the White House—initially calm police behavior transformed into aggression. Frequently, the shift to more combative behavior was unprovoked or unnecessary.

Much of the existing analysis of this police aggression has focused on the perspective of the protesters or observers facing the intimidating and imposing blue wall. But psychological research has consistently demonstrated that human behavior changes based on the clothes we wear. When police departments outfit their officers for battle, the uniforms and gear likely affect officer tendencies, leading to further unrest.

Nearly a decade ago, Bath University professor Hajo Adam and I researched whether an article of clothing can affect the behavior and actions of its wearer. Our [original study](#) was simple in its intent but profound in its implications. We found that when people put on a lab coat described as a doctor's coat, they became more focused in their attention, consistent with the sustained concentration of doctors and scientists. However, when we described the same coat as a painter's coat or participants just viewed a doctor's coat, the coat had no effect on behavior. It was the combination of wearing the coat and having it described as a doctor's coat that increased focused attention.

Based on these connections, we developed a theory we called “enclothed cognition”—that the clothes we wear influence not only how others perceive us, but also our own thought and behavior. Since our original study, numerous studies have replicated this basic enclothed cognition effect. For example, [putting on formal clothing](#) makes people think more abstractly. Similarly, putting on upper-class clothing [increases one's testosterone](#) or [wearing glasses](#) leads people to pay more attention to

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