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ARTICLE



## The thin blue line between cop and soldier: examining public perceptions of the militarized appearance of police

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### ABSTRACT

Research suggests that certain characteristics of police uniforms and equipment influence how the public perceives police officers. The current study expanded on this research by examining how various features related to police militarism (e.g., weaponry) are perceived by the public. Approximately 2000 community members from across Canada were shown a series of photographs of officers that were manipulated to alter their attire and armament. Participants rated each officer on: (1) personal qualities, (2) skills they likely possess or behaviours they are likely to exhibit, and (3) behavioural intentions on the participant's part towards the officers. Findings suggest that the public harbours significant negative perceptions of certain officers donning militarized attire with regards to approachability, trust, and morality, among other qualities. However, these officers are also perceived to be stronger, confident, and more prepared for threatening behaviour/dangerous situations. Given current trends toward equipping officers with tools to deal with emerging threats, public judgments based on officer appearance have important implications for community relations and officer safety.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Public perceptions; police appearance; police militarization

## Introduction

The first standard police uniform was donned by officers in the London Metropolitan Police Service around 1829 (Johnson, 2017). According to Johnson (2017), these officers wore a dark blue paramilitary uniform to distinguish them from members of the British military who wore red and white uniforms. Police departments across North America quickly followed suit (e.g., Toronto Police Force, New York City Police Department), adopting attire based largely on the uniform used in London. There were likely practical and tactical reasons for choosing these particular uniforms (e.g., they could be kept clean and provided greater concealment for officers at night; Johnson, 2017). We know now that such uniform choices also have important psychological implications, such as the fact that they help the wearer to establish social control (among other things) by communicating their policing philosophies and intentions to the public (Simpson, 2018).

The meaning of police uniforms and the public's subsequent behaviour toward those donning them, can be understood through Blumer's (1986) tenants on symbolic interactionism. In short, he stated that humans act toward things based on the meanings they have for them, and that these meanings arise from social interactions. Police uniforms in particular, have multiple, deeply entrenched meanings – as Tinsley et al. (2003) states, 'The uniform stands as one of the most important visual representations of the law enforcement profession . . .' (p. 45). The police uniform,

and by extension, those wearing it, symbolizes an entire institution. Consistent with Blumer (1986), the emblematic nature of the uniform likely has implications for how officers behave, as well as how members of the public perceive officers and interact with them.

Police uniforms can also impact the assumed qualities of the officer. Mauro (1984) found that participants rated officers in traditional uniforms as significantly more valuable, honest, active, helpful, intelligent, and more likely to exercise good judgment, compared to officers in casual wear. Even a simple change in uniform colour can significantly alter public perceptions of officers. Johnson (2005), for example, observed that community members from the United States (US) perceived officers in all-black uniforms to be significantly colder, meaner, forceful, unfriendly, aggressive, and corrupt compared to those donning other colour combinations. De Camargo's (2016) research in the United Kingdom (UK) also indicated that black uniforms convey an air of intimidation, making officers appear more unapproachable to the public.

### ***Perceptions of militarized uniforms and equipment***

While there appears to be no universal definition of police militarization, Kraska (2007) argues that it can be demonstrated through: (1) adoption of military-specific culture (e.g., values), (2) use of Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) or Emergency Response Teams (ERTs), (3) normalized deployment of these specially trained officers, and/or (4) integration of military-grade material, such as weapons (e.g., carbines), diversionary devices (e.g., flashbang grenades), protective equipment (e.g., shields), uniforms (e.g., camouflage), and vehicles (e.g., armoured vehicles). Given the focus of the current study – on how militarized weapons, equipment, and uniforms influence public perceptions of the police – Kraska's last component is most relevant here.

Because of the type of calls that SWAT/ERT officers often attend, their uniforms and equipment are necessarily different from patrol officers, and this may have an impact on how the public perceives (and behaves towards) these officers. Most patrol uniforms consist of a long or short-sleeved shirt (often in blue or grey) worn underneath soft body armour<sup>1</sup> that labels the wearer as a police officer. Officers will also wear trousers, boots, and a duty belt, which may include a pistol, baton, handcuffs, pepper spray, and a conducted energy weapon depending on departmental policy. In contrast, SWAT/ERT members typically wear a tactical, long-sleeved shirt (often in colours that allow for greater concealment, such as dark green, navy, or tan), combat-style pants in similar colours, tactical body armour, and a helmet or gas mask (Salter, 2014). In addition to the items carried by a patrol officer, these officers are often equipped with tools such as carbine rifles, breaching equipment, ballistic shields, and so on.

Not only do the darker colours typically worn by members of SWAT/ERT have the potential to influence public perceptions of the police (see the discussion of Johnson, 2005; De Camargo, 2016 above), the various additions to their uniform are also likely to have an impact. For example, Cooke (2004) found that participants in the UK reported that highly visible weaponry on an officer was viewed as more threatening, intimidating, and aggressive. However, that same officer maintained positive ratings of professionalism, respect, and authority. O'Neill et al. (2017) examined public perceptions of external protective vests worn by officers in the US. Their findings indicated that respondents tended to perceive vests with more external attachments as more militarized and intimidating. Interestingly, however, participants also indicated that militarization and intimidation were the least important attributes of an officer. Rather, how confidence-inspiring the vest was, was deemed the most important attribute.

### ***Militarized uniforms/equipment and public trust in the police***

The research cited above suggests that police militarization, as represented by the uniforms and equipment worn by police officers, might impact the public in multiple ways. On the one hand, militarized uniforms and equipment may increase the degree to which the public fears the police,

without decreasing perceptions of professionalism or respect. This may allow the police to maintain social control and perhaps even enhance officer safety. On the other hand, militarized uniforms and equipment may decrease chances for the police to establish strong trusting relationships with the communities they serve. Accomplishing this might be difficult if an officer's attire makes them appear less friendly or approachable.

While officer safety is obviously important, trust is also a critical concept in policing. It has been argued that trust in the police reflects the public's belief that the police will be effective, fair, and display a strong commitment to the values of the community (Jackson & Bradford, 2010). A loss of such trust can have adverse effects, since trust encourages voluntary compliance with the law, cooperation with the police, and acceptance of their authority (T. Tyler, 2011). In support of this thinking, Tyler (2005) found through phone interviews with New Yorkers that trust was an important predictor of willingness to cooperate with the police. Those who trusted the police were more willing to report crime to the police, provide information about suspects, and inform the police of suspicious activity. Sargeant et al. (2014) reported similar results in an Australian sample.

While several studies have examined how the public responds when exposed to militarized police officers (e.g., Mummolo, 2018) or militarized policing (e.g., Maguire et al., 2018), few studies have directly examined how police militarization impacts trust in the police. One of the few studies that has relied on survey data from 470 protesters who took part in 'Occupy' protests in Israel in 2012 (Perry et al., 2017). In this study, the use of militarized tactics by paramilitary police units had a direct negative effect on trust in the police. Follow-up interviews with the respondents suggested that this 'may be the result of a sense of alienation and criminalization it [paramilitary policing] elicits among protesters who generally perceive themselves as law-abiding citizens' (p. 602).

## **Purpose**

Given the types of findings reported in the literature review, a thorough investigation of militarized uniforms and respective equipment is overdue and may help form an evidence-base from which to make decisions regarding the proliferation of specialized teams and the adoption of militarized uniforms and equipment for patrol officers. The current study explored variations of police officer appearance characteristics related to police militarization to determine how they impact public perception of the presumed characteristics and behaviour of an officer in said attire, along with the public's projected behavioural intentions towards the officer. Consistent with prior research on public perceptions of police militarization, it was hypothesized that officers appearing with militarized uniforms and equipment would be rated more negatively on items pertaining to community relations, but more positively on items related to officer safety, relative to the same officers shown with less militarized uniforms and equipment.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 2617 Canadian residents participated in the current study, which involved an online Qualtrics survey.<sup>2</sup> However, to ensure the reliability and validity of the data, we excluded 526 participants (20.1% of the sample) because they had failed attention checks, and 86 others (3.3% of the sample) because their survey was not completed. Therefore, we retained 2005 participants in the final sample.

The majority of our participants were female (61%,  $n = 1243$ ), Caucasian (83.6%,  $n = 1704$ ), and Canadian citizens (95.9%,  $n = 1946$ ). Many participants had a college degree or other certificate/diploma (26.7%,  $n = 544$ ), although 26.3% ( $n = 537$ ) had obtained only a high school diploma or equivalent, and 20.8% ( $n = 424$ ) had a bachelor's degree. Approximately 40.8% ( $n = 830$ ) of

participants reported working full-time, and a lesser number were retired (19.9%,  $n= 404$ ). The total household income was reported as being 20,000 USD to under 40,000 USD (18.7%,  $n= 380$ ), and most respondents said they resided in British Columbia (42%,  $n= 856$ ) or Alberta (21.6%,  $n= 440$ ). In regard to the sample's familiarity with the police, approximately 45.5% ( $n= 924$ ) indicated they had been questioned by the police, whereas 14.2% ( $n= 287$ ) had been previously arrested, and 16.9% ( $n= 343$ ) had been previously detained.

## Materials

### Demographic questionnaire

A questionnaire asked participants to report on various personal demographic items including their age, gender, province of residence, citizenship, ethnic background, household income, current employment status, highest level of formal education received, and contact with the police.

### Police legitimacy scale

Participants were asked to complete the Police Legitimacy Scale (PLS; Tankebe et al., 2016), which has recently been validated in Canada (Ewanation et al., 2019). The scale includes 16 items (e.g., when the police deal with people, they always behave according to law; the police make decisions based on the facts), which were presented to participants in a randomized order to minimize potential order-effects. Responses to these items are provided on 4-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). The items all have a positive valence, such that higher scores indicate more favourable perceptions of police legitimacy.

### Photographic stimuli<sup>3</sup>

Each of the experimental photographs depicted some aspect of the policing uniform that could represent militarization. Comparisons were made with the control photographs, which showed the same officer in (assumed to be) less militarized ware.<sup>4</sup> Participants were randomly assigned to receive *either* an experimental or control photo from at least one of the following eight conditions:

- (1) An officer wearing a version of the army green SWAT/ERT uniform, carrying a carbine rifle in a depressed-ready position,<sup>5</sup> *or* one of the same officer wearing a standard gray and navy patrol uniform without the carbine rifle (see [Figure 1](#)),
- (2) A male patrol officer in the standard patrol uniform carrying a carbine rifle, *or* one of the same officer wearing the standard patrol uniform with a holstered pistol (see [Figure 2](#)),
- (3) A female patrol officer in the standard patrol uniform carrying a carbine rifle, *or* one of the same officer wearing the standard patrol uniform with a holstered pistol (see [Figure 3](#)),
- (4) An officer wearing a version of the SWAT/ERT uniform carrying a carbine rifle, *or* one of the same officer wearing a standard patrol uniform, also carrying a carbine rifle (see [Figure 4](#)),
- (5) An officer wearing an internal carrier underneath patrol attire, *or* one of the same officer wearing the standard patrol uniform wearing an external carrier on top of the patrol uniform (see [Figure 5](#)),
- (6) An officer wearing a navy special duty uniform reserved for public order and use-of-force/firearms instructors in some agencies, *or* one of the same officer wearing the standard patrol uniform (see [Figure 6](#)),
- (7) An officer wearing a navy special duty uniform with magazine pouches added to their vest, *or* one of the same officer wearing only the special duty uniform (see [Figure 7](#)), and,
- (8) An officer wearing the navy special duty uniform and camouflage pants and an external carrier, *or* one of the same officer wearing only the special duty uniform (see [Figure 8](#)).

### Semantic differential items

Drawing from prior research on public perceptions of the police (e.g., Tinsley et al., 2003), we compiled a list of items that attempted to exhaust the adjectives that could be used to describe the



Figure 1. Photograph of a male officer in Emergency Response Team (ERT)/Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) attire carrying a carbine rifle versus the same officer in a patrol uniform without a carbine rifle.



Figure 2. Photograph of a male officer carrying a carbine rifle versus the same officer in a patrol uniform without a carbine rifle.

character attributes of police officers. In total, 20 items were included, and participants were asked to rate, on a scale ranging from one to seven, the extent to which the officer in the photo





**Figure 3.** Photograph of a female officer carrying a carbine rifle versus the same officer in a patrol uniform without a carbine rifle.

they were shown embodied each attribute. We formatted the items such that a positive attribute appeared at one end of the scale (e.g., *strong, ethical, approachable*) and the antonym of that attribute appeared at the opposite end (e.g., *weak, immoral, intimidating*). A score of one indicated that the officer in the photo was perceived to embody the positive trait to an *extreme* amount; whereas a score of seven indicated the officer embodied the opposing trait to an *extreme* amount. A score of four indicated that participants felt the officer embodied *neither* trait (e.g., they were perceived to be *neither professional nor unprofessional*). One particular item served as a manipulation check and asked if the officer presented appeared more police-like or military-like.

### **Participant behavioural intentions**

We developed nine items (in a similar fashion to the semantic differential items described above) that pertained to the behavioural intentions of the participants toward the officer depicted in the photos they saw. For example, participants were asked ‘*How likely would you be to show aggression towards this officer?*’ Participants rated each item on a seven-point scale ranging from *very unlikely* (1) to *very likely* (7).

### **Perceived behavioural likelihoods**

An additional eight items asked about the participants’ perception of how the officer depicted in the photo would behave. For example, participants were asked ‘*How likely is it that the officer would follow the rules during an arrest?*’ Once again, participants rated each item on a seven-point scale ranging from *very unlikely* (1) to *very likely* (7).



**Figure 4.** Photograph of a male officer in Emergency Response Team (ERT)/Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) attire carrying a carbine rifle versus the same officer in a patrol uniform carrying a carbine rifle.

### ***Suitability for the policing profession***

Participants were asked to rate the question ‘*How suitable is this officer for the policing profession?*’ on a seven-point scale ranging from *very unsuitable* (1) to *very suitable* (7).

### ***Procedure***

Based on Canadian census data, a quota comprised of gender, age, and provincial/territorial dispersion in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016) was provided to Qualtrics, an online crowdsourcing platform. Qualtrics recruits individuals who have agreed to be contacted by a research panel. They are targeted via email lists, website intercepts, pop-up invitations, and/or by links on websites. Participants received monetary incentives (\$3.41 CAD) in return for participating in the online study. They were first asked to complete the demographic questionnaire and the PLS, in addition to several other measures not explored in the current study.

Participants were then randomly exposed to at least one of the eight conditions described above, where they viewed front and side-facing photos of either the control *or* experimental photo.<sup>6</sup> Following each photo, participants were asked to rate the officer on the 20 semantic differential scales, the nine behavioural likelihood scales that asked how likely the participant would be to interact with the officer in various ways, the eight scales that asked how the participant would expect the depicted officer to behave, and the one item that asked participants to rate the suitability of the officer for the policing profession. Like the photos, we randomized both the scales and items to control for potential order effects (i.e., primacy/recency; no such effects were found). Regardless of completion or withdrawal, we provided all participants with a debriefing form.

The protocol was approved by Carleton University’s Ethics Committee for Psychological Research (REB #106546 16–115).





Experimental

Control

**Figure 5.** Photograph of a male officer wearing an internal carrier versus the same officer in a patrol uniform.

## Results

To ensure the internal validity of the analyses, we conducted comparisons between the control and experimental groups on all demographic variables for each of the conditions. The groups were similar on the majority of the demographic variables. However, there was a significant difference between the average household income of participants who were exposed to the officer wearing the internal versus external carrier,  $U = 49,830.50$ ,  $p = .031$ , and for participants who were exposed to the officer wearing a patrol uniform versus a special duty uniform,  $U = 55,458$ ,  $p = .046$ . Furthermore, for the condition examining perceptions of the officer in SWAT/ERT attire carrying a carbine rifle versus the patrol uniform without a carbine rifle, more female ( $n = 244$ ) participants were exposed to the patrol uniform condition, compared to males ( $n = 130$ ),  $X^2(1) = 3.95$ ,  $p = .047$ . Finally, significantly more participants who identified that they were retired were exposed to the officer wearing a patrol uniform ( $n = 81$ ), compared to the same officer in special duty attire ( $n = 59$ ),  $X^2(7) = 17.53$ ,  $p = .014$ . While we cannot think of reasons why these differences would impact the results, the findings reported below should be interpreted in light of these pre-existing differences between groups.

Internal validity was also examined through a series of  $t$ -tests comparing the scores obtained on the PLS for the experimental and control groups to explore participants' perceptions of the police prior to the completion of the study. The results determined that there was only one significant difference observed; the sample exposed to the officer in special duty attire without magazine pouches reported a significantly greater total PLS score ( $M = 44.58$ ,  $SD = 7.60$ ), compared to the same officer with magazine pouches ( $M = 43.35$ ,  $SD = 7.47$ ),  $t(750) = 2.25$ ,  $p = .025$ . Thus, the results of this study cannot be attributed to pre-existing individual differences with respect to perceptions of police legitimacy.



**Figure 6.** Photograph of a male officer wearing special duty attire versus the same officer in a patrol uniform.

To simplify discussion of the results, the items were grouped based on face validity into those pertaining to officer safety, those related to community relations, and those related to professionalism. For example, the items which asked how strong an officer appeared and whether the respondent would show aggression towards the officer are discussed in relation to officer safety, items that asked how helpful an officer appeared and whether a respondent would approach them to discuss sensitive matters are discussed in terms of community relations, and items that asked how hard working an officer appeared and whether the respondent would believe testimony provided by the officer are discussed in terms of professionalism.<sup>7</sup> A manipulation check was included for each condition, which asked participants if the officer presented appeared more police-like or military-like. For all conditions in which there were significant differences on this variable, participants rated the officer designed to represent militarization as significantly more military-like.<sup>8</sup>

### ***SWAT/ERT with a carbine rifle versus patrol officer without a carbine rifle***

There were significant differences in the public's perception of the officer wearing the SWAT/ERT uniform carrying a carbine rifle ( $N= 369$ ) compared to the same officer wearing a patrol uniform without a carbine rifle ( $N= 375$ ) on the majority of items. Generally speaking, the public perceived the officer in the SWAT/ERT uniform carrying a carbine rifle positively on items related to officer-safety (as represented by the triangles in Figure 9). More specifically, on the semantic differential scales, participants rated the officer in the SWAT/ERT uniform carrying a carbine rifle as *more* prepared, strong, and confident compared to the same officer wearing the patrol uniform. Similarly, on the behavioural likelihood scales, participants felt they would be significantly *less* able to overpower the SWAT/ERT officer carrying a carbine rifle, *less* apt to argue and try and talk their way out of a ticket with him, and *less* likely to help the officer if he was in trouble, compared to the



**Figure 7.** Photograph of a male officer wearing special duty attire with added magazine pouches on their vest versus the same officer in only special duty attire.

same officer in patrol attire without a carbine rifle. Effect sizes for the majority of these items ranged from small to medium (Cohen, 1992).

On items that targeted attributes important for community relations (depicted by circles in Figure 9), the SWAT/ERT officer carrying a carbine rifle was rated significantly poorer. For example, on the semantic differential scales, participants perceived the officer in the SWAT/ERT uniform carrying a carbine rifle to be significantly *more* intimidating, aggressive, mean, uncaring, rude, unhelpful, and corruptible compared to the same officer wearing the patrol uniform without a carbine rifle. While we observed small to medium effect sizes for most of these items, there was a large effect ( $d = .85$ ) for the item asking how approachable versus intimidating the officer appeared (Cohen, 1992). Similarly, on the behavioural likelihood scales, participants reported that they would be *less* likely to approach the officer in the SWAT/ERT uniform carrying a carbine rifle if he were in trouble or talk to him about private or sensitive matters. They also thought this officer would be *less* likely to volunteer in the community and use communication to de-escalate situations.

Participants also perceived officers in the SWAT/ERT uniform carrying a carbine rifle to be less professional compared to when they wore the patrol uniform without a carbine rifle (represented by squares in Figure 9). On the semantic differential scales, participants were significantly *more* likely to perceive the officer in the SWAT/ERT uniform carrying a carbine rifle as prejudiced. On the behavioural likelihood scales, participants were *more* likely to believe the SWAT/ERT officer carrying a carbine rifle would use excessive force, show bias against marginalized populations, and break the law, and they were *less* likely to believe that this officer would follow the rules during an arrest and be knowledgeable about the Criminal Code. The effect size for the item related to excessive force was over 1, indicating a large effect (Cohen, 1992). Overall, participants indicated that the SWAT/ERT officer carrying a carbine rifle was significantly *less* suitable for the policing profession.



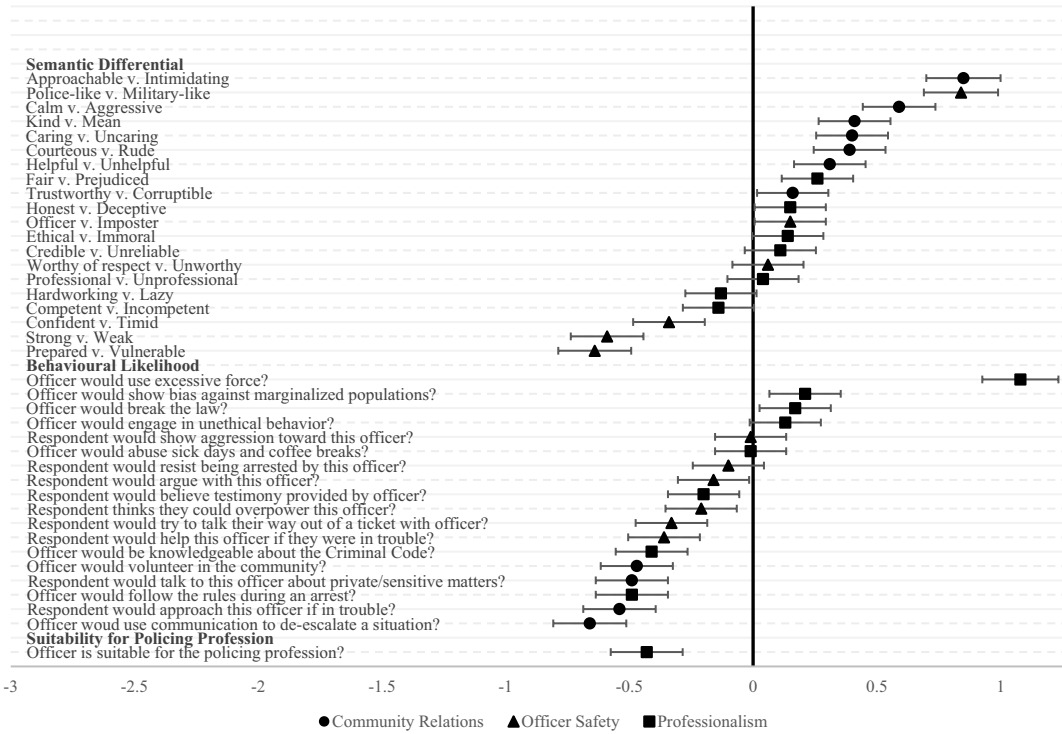
**Figure 8.** Photograph of a male officer wearing special duty attire with camouflage pants versus the same officer in only special duty attire.

### ***Male patrol officer with a carbine rifle versus without a carbine rifle***

There were significant differences observed for most of the items comparing the male officer carrying a carbine rifle ( $N= 356$ ) to the same officer without a carbine rifle ( $N= 375$ ). Overall, the public perceived the officer carrying the carbine positively on various items related to officer-safety (see Figure 10). However, once again, on items that targeted attributes more important for community relations, participants rated the officer carrying a carbine significantly poorer. The perceived likelihood that the officer with the carbine would act professionally was also lower. In fact, the largest effect ( $d = .65$ ) was for the item related to the use of excessive force. Once again, participants rated the more militarized-looking officer (i.e., the one carrying the carbine in this case) as significantly *less* suitable for the policing profession.

### ***Female patrol officer with a carbine rifle versus without a carbine rifle***

There were relatively few significant differences observed between the female patrol officer equipped with a carbine rifle ( $N= 570$ ) compared to the same female without a carbine rifle ( $N= 556$ ; see Figure 11). Of those items that were significant, all were associated with small effect sizes (Cohen, 1992). Participants perceived the female patrol officer carrying a carbine to be *more* prepared and stronger, indicative of greater officer safety. However, it appeared that this officer was also *more* likely to be feared; ratings on the community safety-type items such as approachability and calmness were significantly *lower* for the female officer equipped with a carbine rifle, and her likelihood of using communication to de-escalate situations was rated significantly *lower*, as were items related to the respondent's willingness to talk to or help the officer. In terms of professionalism, the female officer with a carbine rifle was perceived as *more* likely to use



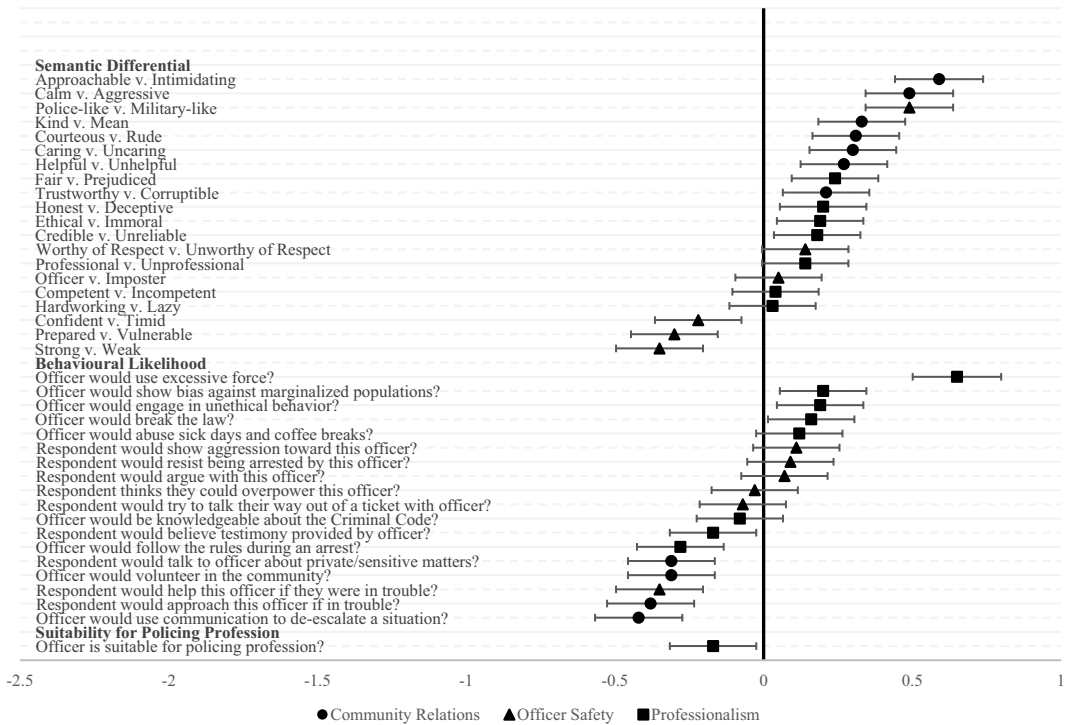
**Figure 9.** Differences in perceptions of a male Emergency Response Team (ERT)/Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) officer carrying a carbine rifle compared to a male patrol officer without a carbine rifle. \*Note that the effect sizes represent Cohen's *d* values and bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

excessive force. Overall, participants rated the female patrol officer with the carbine as significantly *less* suitable for the policing profession compared to when she did not have a carbine.

**SWAT/ERT with a carbine rifle versus patrol officer with a carbine rifle**

Despite both conditions containing elements indicative of militarization, there were still significant differences between the public's perception of the officer wearing a SWAT/ERT uniform and carrying a carbine rifle (*N*= 369) compared to the same officer wearing a patrol uniform and carrying a carbine rifle (*N*= 356; see Figure 12). Overall, the results revealed that the public perceived the officer in full SWAT/ERT attire more positively on items related to officer safety. They were rated as significantly *more* prepared and stronger; someone with whom the public would be *less* apt to argue with, attempt to resist arrest, or believe they could overpower. Comparatively, the officer in the SWAT/ERT uniform was rated significantly *lower* on items relevant to community relations. He was perceived to be *more* intimidating, and participants reported that they would be *less* likely to talk to him about private and/or sensitive matters. They also thought the officer in the SWAT/ERT uniform would be *less* likely to use communication to de-escalation situations. Officers in the SWAT/ERT uniform were also rated as *more* likely to use excessive force, *less* likely to follow the rules during an arrest, and *less* likely to be knowledgeable about the Criminal Code. Overall, participants rated the officer in the SWAT/ERT uniform as significantly *less* suitable for the policing profession. Effect sizes for the majority of these items ranged from small to medium (Cohen, 1992).





**Figure 10.** Differences in perceptions of a male officer carrying a carbine rifle compared to a male officer without a carbine rifle. \*Note that the effect sizes represent Cohen's *d* values and bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

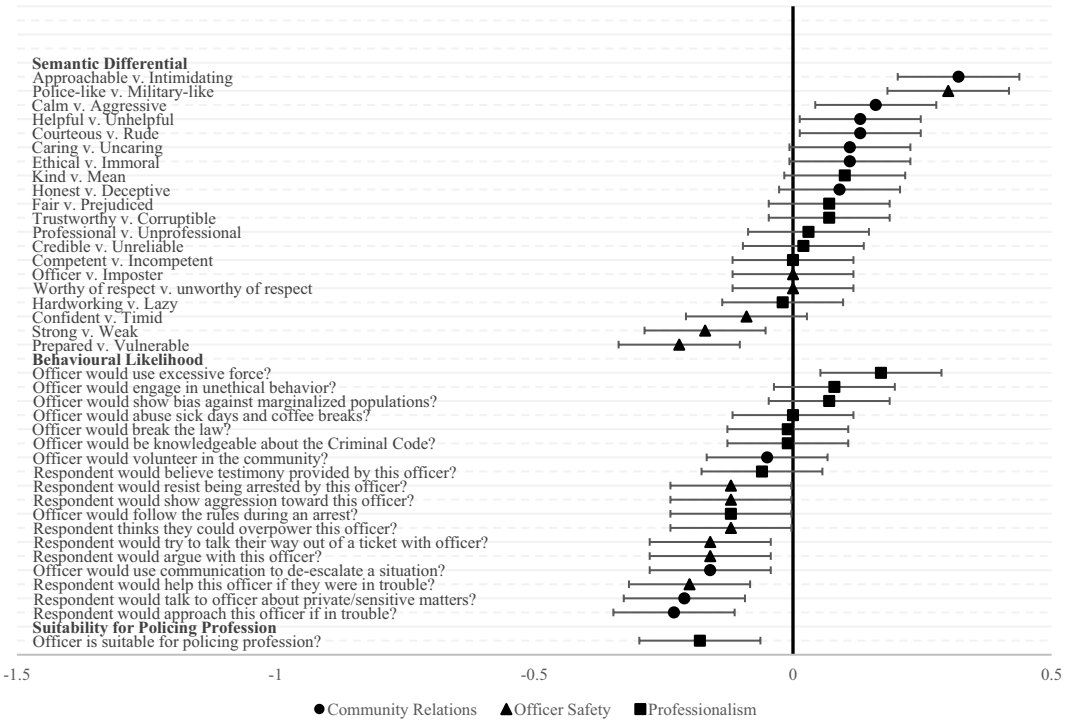
### Internal carrier versus patrol uniform

There were no significant differences in the ratings for the officer wearing an internal carrier ( $N= 354$ ) versus the same officer in standard patrol attire ( $N= 374$ ; see Figure 13). The effect sizes for all items were small (Cohen, 1992).

### Special duty uniform versus patrol uniform

There were significant differences in the public's perception of an officer wearing a special duty uniform ( $N= 387$ ) compared to the same officer wearing a patrol uniform ( $N= 372$ ) on many of the items (see Figure 14). However, it seems that relative to the patrol officer, participants did not perceive the officer in special duty attire to be any safer from confrontation from the public (like other officers with militarized accoutrements, which were rated higher on the officer safety items). The officer in special duty gear did have *lower* scores on items pertaining to their relationship with the public, though. For instance, participants perceived them to be *more* aggressive, intimidating, rude, mean, corruptible, uncaring, and unhelpful. Participants also reported that the special duty officer would be *less* likely to volunteer in the community and use communication to de-escalate situations; not surprisingly, participants would also be *less* inclined to approach such an officer if they were in trouble.

In terms of professionalism, participants favoured the officer in the patrol uniform compared to the same officer wearing the special duty uniform. For instance, participants perceived the special duty officer to be significantly *more* unprofessional, unreliable, and apt to engage in unethical behaviour. This officer was also thought to be *less* likely to follow the rules during an arrest and be *less* knowledgeable about the Criminal Code. Participants also deemed the officer in special duty



**Figure 11.** Differences in perceptions of a female officer carrying a carbine rifle compared to a female officer without a carbine rifle. \*Note that the effect sizes represent Cohen's *d* values and bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

attire to be significantly *less* suitable for the policing profession. The majority of effect sizes were in the small range (Cohen, 1992).

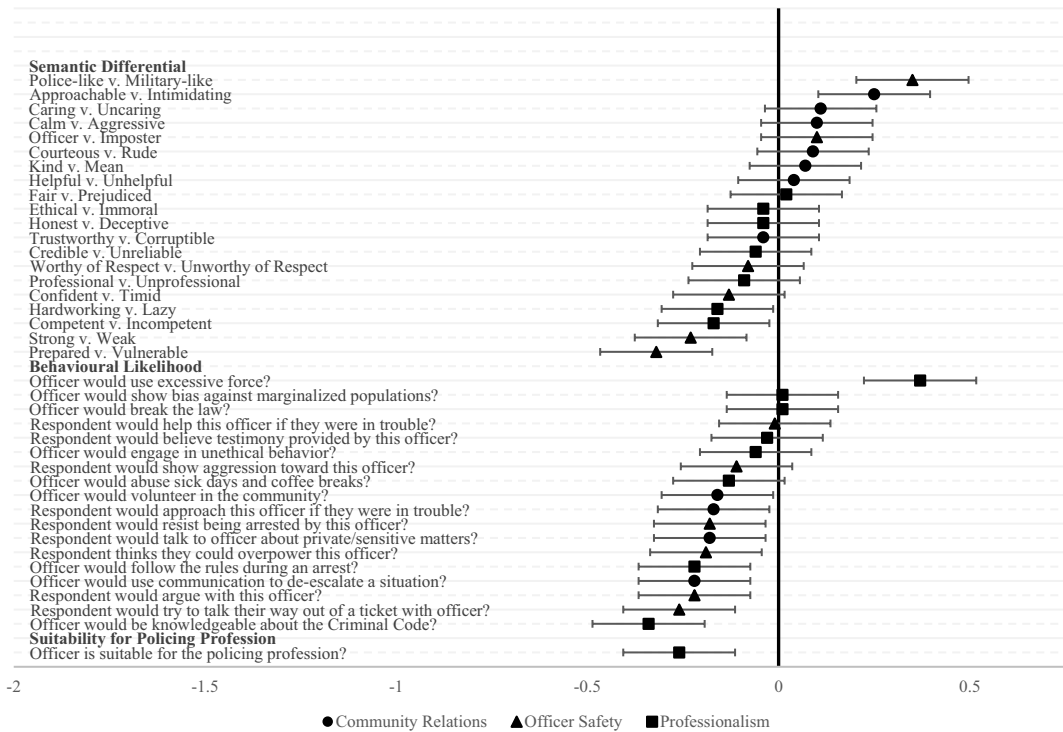
**Magazine pouch on special duty uniform versus special duty uniform**

As evident from Figure 15, all of the differences comparing an officer wearing a special duty uniform with added magazine pouches (*N*= 389) relative to the same officer wearing only the special duty uniform (*N*= 363) had small effect sizes, and none were significant.

**Camouflage pants with special duty uniform versus special duty uniform**

Almost all of the items were significant for the comparison between the officer in the special duty uniform wearing camouflage pants (*N*= 380) and the same officer in the special duty uniform with the matching navy pants (*N*= 372). The findings were mixed across the two conditions (see Figure 16). For instance, participants perceived the officer in camouflage to be *more* unhelpful, intimidating, uncaring, and corruptible. However, participants also rated him as *more* kind, courteous, and calm. Several of these differences had medium to large effect sizes (e.g., *d*= -1.64, -1.43; Cohen, 1992), suggesting that meaningful positive and negative perceptions may simultaneously coexist.

Interestingly though, on average, participants indicated that they would behave in a *more* negative manner toward the officer in camouflage (e.g., not helping them if they were in trouble), and that the officer would act *more* negatively toward them (e.g., not following the rules during an arrest). Participants also thought the officer in camouflage would be *more* likely to engage in unethical behaviour and abuse sick days and coffee breaks, relative to the same officer wearing



**Figure 12.** Differences in perceptions of a male Emergency Response Team (ERT)/Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) officer carrying a carbine rifle compared to a male officer carrying a carbine rifle. \*Note that the effect sizes represent Cohen's  $d$  values and bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

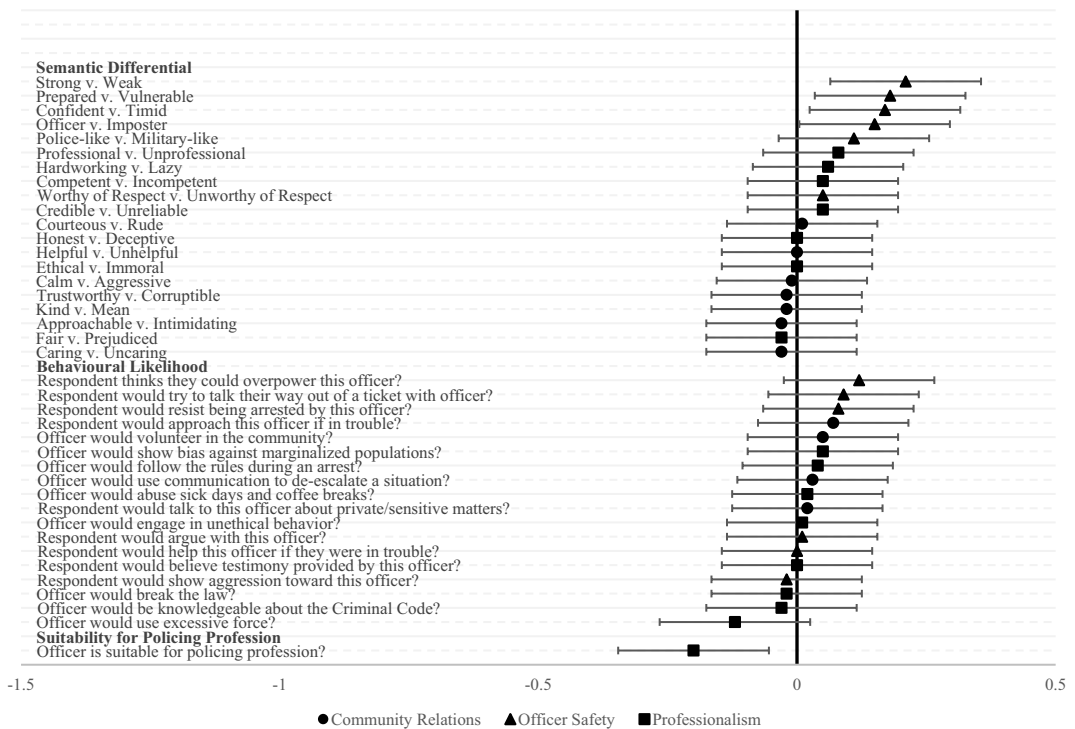
navy pants. Several of these items also had effect sizes well over 1, suggesting large differences (Cohen, 1992).

## Discussion

The current study exposed a large sample of Canadians to a random subset of photos depicting officers in either militarized or patrol apparel and equipment. Based on their first impression of the officer, participants rated them on various characteristics and behavioural intentions. Across the majority of the conditions, three major findings emerged. First, officers who were shown in more militarized attire were frequently perceived to be less professional, and less suited for the policing profession. Second, participants tended to rate the more militarized officers as stronger, more confident, and more prepared for threatening behaviour/dangerous situations. Third, participants were intimidated by the more militarized officers, which might negatively impact police-public relations in a variety of ways. While some of these findings may not necessarily be surprising, it is important that data be collected on these issues so that police services can make evidence-informed decisions about militarized aspects of policing whenever possible.

### Findings relevant to police professionalism

Although not consistently found across conditions, officers in more militarized gear were sometimes perceived to be less knowledgeable, less believable, and more likely to violate rules than officers who appeared in less militarized attire. The more consistent, and perhaps more worrying finding related to professionalism, was that more militarized officers were deemed more likely to



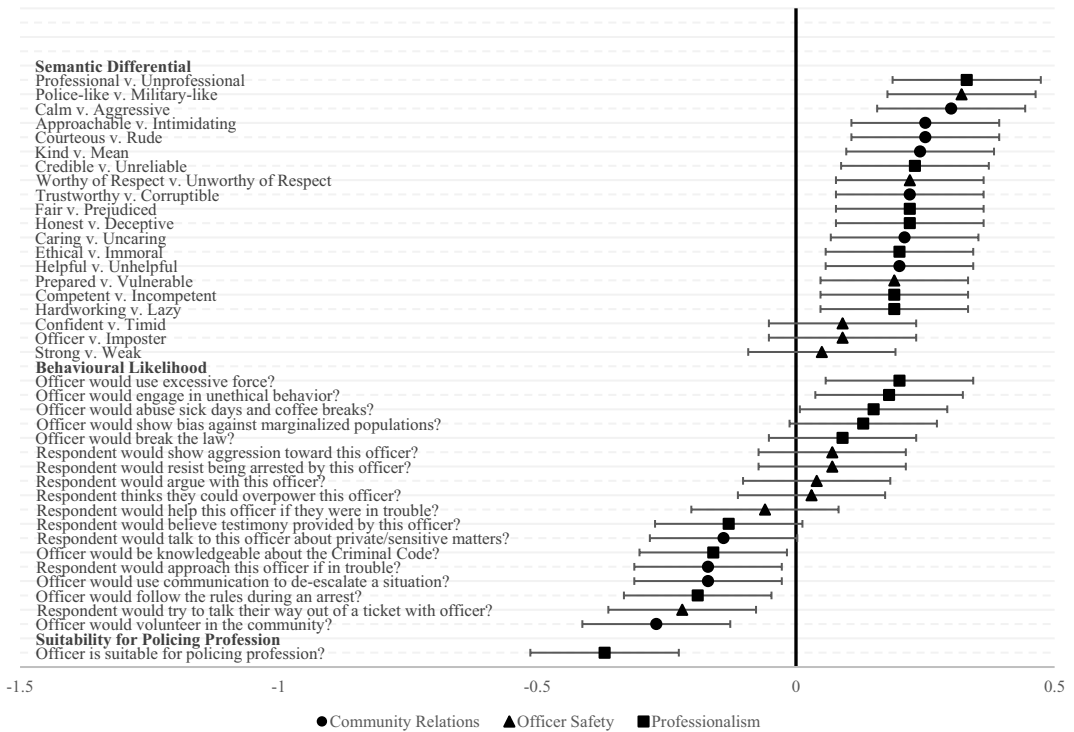
**Figure 13.** Differences in perceptions of a male officer wearing an internal carrier compared to a male officer wearing an external carrier. \*Note that the effect sizes represent Cohen's  $d$  values and bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

use excessive force. Especially in today's volatile climate where many members of the public have real concerns about excessive use of force by the police, and concerns about the police response to public protests surrounding use of force incidents, these results should be concerning to police services that utilize paramilitary units. Indeed, amid calls to de-fund and de-militarize the police, these types of findings – if replicated – need to be attended to.

While many people likely see the need for militarized SWAT/ERT officers, especially for intervening in high-risk incidents that are likely too dangerous for regular patrol officers (Moule et al., 2019), our findings also suggest that police services should think carefully about embracing police militarization more fully (e.g., using specialized teams for more 'routine' policing tasks that will bring them into contact with the public more regularly). Based on our results, and consistent with the work of others (e.g., Mummolo, 2018), the Canadian public clearly sees militarized police officers as generally less suitable for the policing profession, so broad exposure to these officers outside of clearly defined tasks and roles will likely have a negative impact on perceptions of police legitimacy. This could potentially damage police-community relations; something we will return to below.

### Findings relevant to officer safety

The findings showed that the public perceived the officer in SWAT/ERT gear carrying a carbine rifle more positively on many of the items related to officer safety. Such findings are not necessarily surprising, given that SWAT/ERT attire is ultimately designed to protect officers entering high-risk incidents (Salter, 2014). The results suggest that citizens may recognize that officers in specialized equipment (i.e., SWAT/ERT gear) are ready for potential conflict, and consequently, expect that they would be less likely to behave in an oppositional manner towards them.



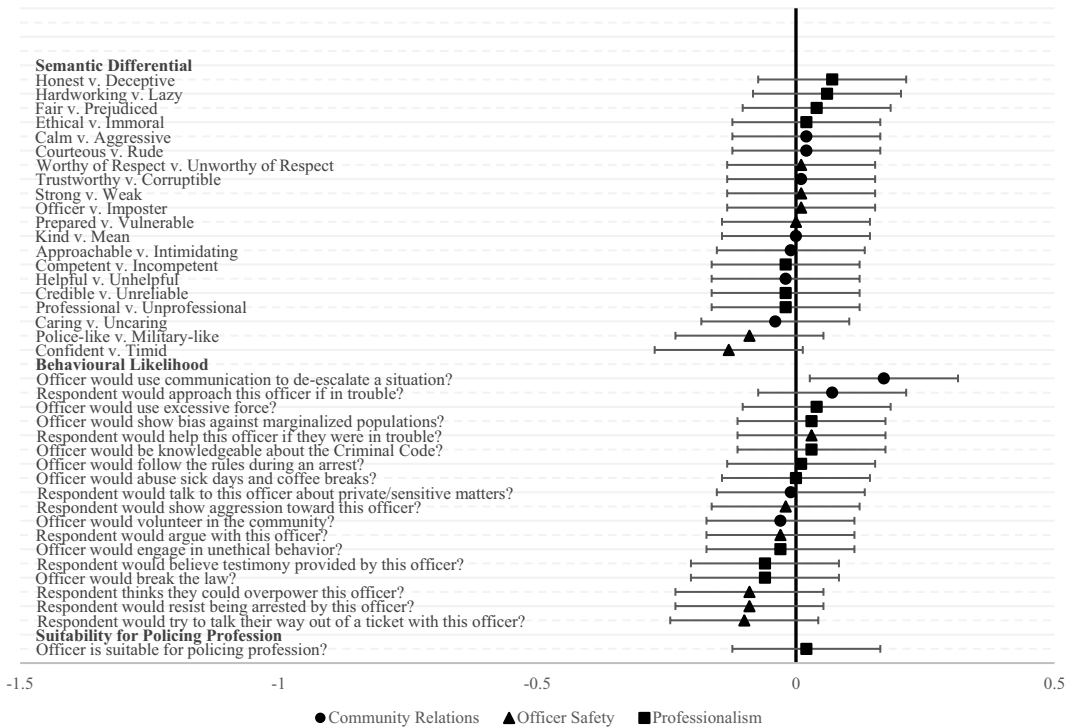
**Figure 14.** Differences in perceptions of the Special Duty uniform compared to the patrol uniform. \*Note that the effect sizes represent Cohen's *d* values and bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

The larger weaponry carried by the SWAT/ERT officer may have had the most pointed impact on perceptions of officer safety. Participants rated both the male and female officers appearing in patrol attire carrying carbine rifles significantly more prepared and stronger, relative to when the same officers were presented carrying a holstered pistol on their duty belt.<sup>9</sup> It appears that the carbine rifle may have incited greater confidence in the public's perception of these officers' ability to protect themselves, which resulted in higher ratings on items related to officer safety.

Interestingly however, the SWAT/ERT officer carrying a carbine rifle was rated significantly higher on items related to officer safety even when compared to the same officer in patrol attire, also donning a carbine rifle. It seems that over and above the carbine rifle, the SWAT/ERT uniform (consisting of the army green tactical gear and helmet in the current study) affected perceptions of officer safety. In other words, while equipment (i.e., carbines) influenced perceptions of strength and preparedness from members of the public, the other features of the SWAT/ERT uniform (its coloration, head gear, etc.) was enough to invoke significant differences in perceptions of officer safety for the officer depicted.

On the other hand, several of the items that are objectively related to officer safety were not perceived in this way, such as magazine pouches and the external (versus internal) carrier. The absence of any significant findings for the magazine pouches may be explained by their lack of salience on the special duty uniform. Alternatively, participants may not know what the pouches are used for. Relatedly, the external carrier may not have cued a significant reaction from participants given it is relatively standard protective equipment for the police in Canada.





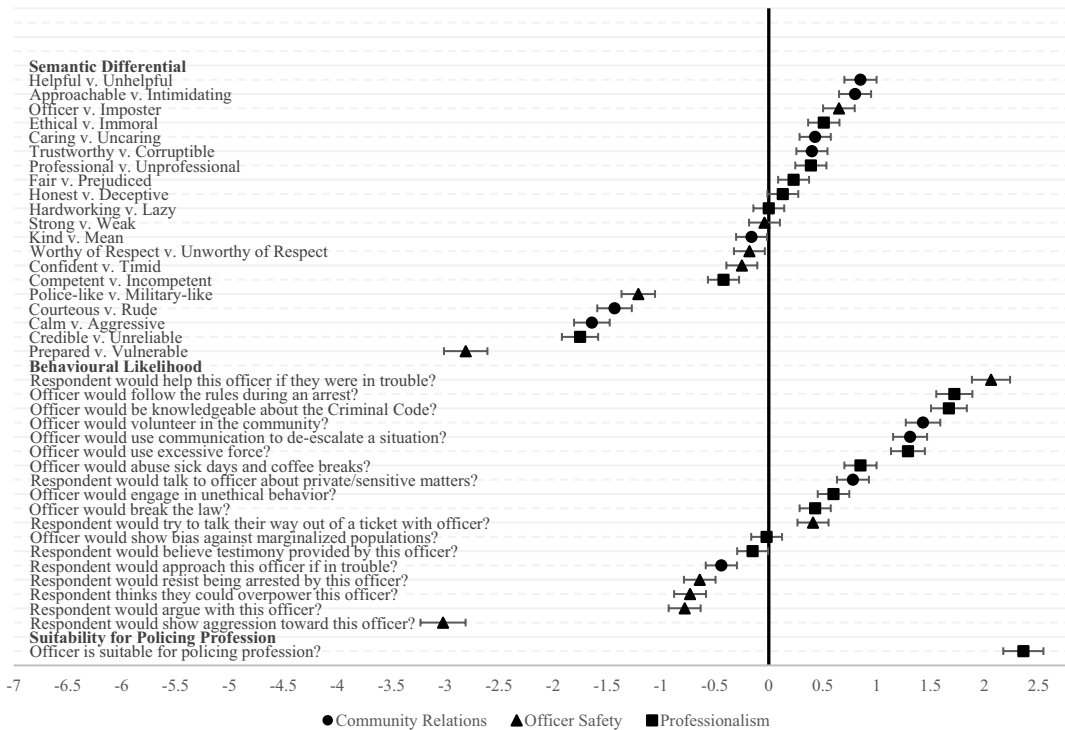
**Figure 15.** Differences in perceptions of a male officer wearing a vest with magazine cartridge pouches compared to a male officer without pouches. \*Note that the effect sizes represent Cohen's *d* values and bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

### Findings relevant to community relations

The findings from the current study also suggested that militarization may negatively affect the relationship the police have with the community. A commonly cited core tenant of community policing relates to the increased accessibility of police officers to the public; whether through altering their transportation (e.g., via foot and bike patrols) so they can be more present, or by increasing their engagement in community initiatives to enhance visibility, decrease public fear, and better understand the communities they serve (Rosenbaum & Lurigio, 1994). Perceiving an officer as intimidating (or aggressive, or mean) may be concerning if the police are hoping to develop more amicable relations with the public.

Additionally, unfavourable perceptions of law enforcement can negatively affect the public's willingness to assist or cooperate with the police (Jackson et al., 2012). As highlighted in our literature review, trust in the police, and seeing them as a legitimate source of authority, enhances the public's willingness to obey police and cooperate with them (Tyler & Fagan, 2008). Consistent with other literature (e.g., Perry et al., 2017), the findings from the present study demonstrate that militarization might erode these qualities. Lack of trust, and decreased perceptions of legitimacy, will likely limit the shared social bond between the police and the public. Without this, the police cannot effectively function (Jackson & Bradford, 2010).

It may be argued that when officers are in SWAT/ERT gear, they tend to be performing duties where community engagement is a low priority (i.e., they are trained to respond to particularly high-risk incidents) and visibility is not necessarily desirable. However, new research suggests that specialized teams in Canada may be being used for more 'routine' activities including warrant executions, traffic enforcement, community policing, mental health crises, and domestic disturbances (Roziere & Walby, 2017; however, see Jenkins et al., 2020 for an alternative view). Related work indicates low levels of public support for



**Figure 16.** Differences in perceptions of a male officer wearing camouflage compared to a male officer wearing the Special Duty uniform. \*Note that the effect sizes represent Cohen's  $d$  values and bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

the use of specialized teams for these sorts of calls (Moule et al., 2018) meaning that, had it been suggested that the militarized-appearing officers in the current study were attending a routine call for service, participants may have rated them even more negatively.

These findings must be qualified however, given that several items relevant to community relations were significantly more positive for the officer wearing a patrol uniform and carrying a carbine rifle compared to the same officer in full SWAT/ERT gear carrying a carbine. While carbines may elicit greater fear in the public, the patrol uniform could have some sort of a buffering effect, thereby mitigating negative reactions. Such findings are important considerations for police agencies equipping officers for peaceful protests and/or large-scale public celebrations. While officers may require the use of carbine rifles to ensure public safety in these situations, appearing in a patrol uniform as opposed to more tactical apparel (SWAT/ERT) might help ensure officers are still perceived to be approachable.

Participants rated the officer in the special duty uniform (without a carbine) significantly lower on several items that are arguably relevant to police-public relations. For example, they perceived the special duty officer as ruder, meaner, and less apt to volunteer in the community or use communication to de-escalate situations, compared to that same officer in patrol attire. These findings are, in some ways, consistent with what is known about the impact of colour on perception. Recall that historically, dark colours have been associated with aggression, death, and evil (Johnson, 2005). It is important to note, however, that it may be the pattern of colouring, rather than the colour itself. Johnson (2005) found that a light blue shirt and navy pants produced the most positive impression on citizens, even more than a full khaki coloured uniform.

### **Limitations and future directions**

There are several limitations to the study that may explain some of the results found. First, in regard to the stimuli used, the photos in the current study showed officers in the same, non-confrontational position. When Mummolo (2018) measured public perceptions of police militarization, participants were shown photos captured by the media of officers in varying group formations and positioned in different ways (e.g., with their hands on their gun, holding batons, riding armoured tanks). The standardization of the photos in the current experiment aimed to eliminate confounds, clarifying what effect specific militarized features have on public perceptions. However, the controlled stimuli also limit the generalizability of the research.

Another factor that may have impacted the current findings was the sample itself. Much of the research on police militarization has been conducted in the US, whereas the current study was conducted with Canadians. Researchers argue that, like the US, there has been a steady increase in militarization within Canadian police departments (e.g., Roziere & Walby, 2017). However, differences also exist between Canada and the US with respect to police militarization (e.g., longer and broader use of militarized police, weapons, and equipment in the US) and culture more generally (e.g., gun control laws). Thus, while facets representative of police militarization may be more likely to elicit negative sentiments in US samples (e.g., should they associate police militarization with racial tensions, violent protests, and aggression), Canadians may not be as predisposed to the same initial impressions.

Additionally, because the same officer was not used across all conditions, ceiling and/or floor effects may be present for some ratings. The use of different officers across conditions contributes to a lack of control. However, participants were only ever exposed to the experimental or control photo of any particular officer; ideally, limiting any ceiling and/or floor effects. Presenting officers of different genders and ages enhances the external validity of the study, whereas using a single officer across all conditions could have presented its own issues (e.g., limiting the generalizability of the study to the public's opinion of white male officers only). Nevertheless, the findings should be replicated using only the accoutrements (unattached to any particular individual; like Simpson, 2018; O'Neill et al., 2017 did), or showing each accoutrement on individuals of varying genders and races.

Lastly, the findings are limited in generalizability given the study design. Because participants are not physically interacting with the officers photographed, it is unclear the extent to which their behavioural intentions would persist in real life or how their assessment of an officer's personal qualities would change following an interaction. Moreover, because participants were not provided any context before being shown each photo, their ratings were based exclusively on their first visual impression of the officer. This methodology is similar to other relevant research (e.g., Simpson, 2018), and informed by the nonverbal literature, which has shown that assessments based on available, albeit limited information, are often persistent and can predict post-interaction evaluations (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). This suggests that the type of assessments made in the current study might be important in terms of their ability to predict one's long-term views. Nevertheless, this design precludes us from understanding how perceptions may change when contextual information is provided.

### **Conclusion**

The public has been more exposed to police militarization in recent years, resulting in widespread concern (Salter, 2014). However, the specific features of militarization that contribute to such concerns have received little empirical examination. An improved understanding of public perceptions of militarization and the potential impact of these perceptions on citizen behaviour is important and will assist in balancing potential benefits and consequences of using militarized uniforms and equipment. The present study examined

eight uniform and/or equipment features that have traditionally been associated with a militarized style of policing, in an attempt to add to the limited literature. The findings suggest that various appearance cues in law enforcement have the potential to elicit strong reactions about the personality characteristics and behaviour of the wearer and may even guide one's own subsequent behaviour.

The findings are potentially important, not only as a means to better understand the impact of visual appearance on first impressions, but also more practically for the policing community. Overall, across the conditions that revealed significant differences in opinion, the more militarized appearing officers were perceived to be personally safer, but also more threatening. This indicates that the public can simultaneously hold positive and negative perceptions of militarized officers. On the one hand, given the type of incidents SWAT/ERT officers typically attend, being seen as more intimidating is not necessarily a problem. Considering that such perceptions appear to have implications on citizen behaviour (i.e., citizens indicate they would be less likely to cause trouble for such officers), the mere presence of a militarized appearance may diffuse volatile incidents. On the other hand, the appearance of militarized officers seems to increase the relational distance between those officers and citizens; because citizens are more fearful of them, they will be less apt to trust, and approach the officers for help.

The findings suggest that certain militarized accoutrements may detract from the benefits gleaned from a community-oriented style of policing. Thus, for law enforcement agencies that are considering the development and/or deployment of certain specialized units, or the adoption of militarized uniforms and/or equipment, the current research indicates they may want to consider reserving them for high-risk incidents when possible. This will avoid unnecessary proliferation and an expansion of the scope of such paramilitary units, which is often criticized and can erode relations with the public. Proper communications strategies may also be required to educate the public, since many aspects of militarization result from a bonified operational need due to gaps in police firearm capabilities and the increased frequency of active shooting incidents (MacNeil, 2015). In sum, law enforcement agencies should carefully consider officer safety and community relations when adopting and deploying SWAT/ERT officers and militarized accoutrements.

## Notes

1. 'Soft' body armour is designed to prevent bullets from penetrating an officer's torso, whereas 'hard' body armour will shatter rounds that strike it (Workman, 2019).
2. Note that the sample of the current study is a sub-sample of a larger dataset totalling 6223. The 2617 participants making up the current sample were those individuals that were randomly assigned to at least one condition relevant to the research questions of this particular article. The individuals who did not view any conditions associated with police militarization were excluded.
3. A large Canadian law enforcement agency helped us obtain and manipulate the models that were required for all of the conditions.
4. Some photos included more than one possible feature that could represent militarization. For example, an officer in a full SWAT/ERT uniform, complete with a helmet and carrying a carbine, is depicted in one photo. Most SWAT/ERT officers would appear with this constellation of features (albeit with agency-specific differences; Salter, 2014). The authors acknowledge that this does not allow us, across certain conditions, to ascertain the extent to which each individual feature impacts public perceptions of militarization. However, similar to Mummolo's (2018) photographic stimuli, this was done to enhance the external validity of the study. While isolating each feature may provide more control, it makes little practical sense to compare features that would not appear in real life (e.g., comparing an SWAT/ERT officer without a helmet to one with a helmet). In other words, the stimuli chosen were those that the general public could be privy to, and this is what we were interested in.
5. In all instances where the officer was depicted carrying a pistol, it was shown holstered. The carbine, on the other hand, was carried by the officer in a depressed-ready position (e.g., see Figure 1). Subject matter experts indicated that the depressed-ready position was a standard way for officers to hold a carbine in Canada. Considering that the carbine can only be held in the depressed-ready position and not holstered, this position is arguably equivalent to a holstered pistol. However, depicting the carbine being carried in this way may have

some implications on the results (i.e., potentially increasing its salience and/or perceived level of aggressiveness relative to the holstered pistol).

6. The current study includes a sub-sample drawn from a larger data collection containing a total of 29 conditions. The eight conditions of interest are strictly related to determining perceptions of police militarization. Any individual who viewed at least one of the conditions relevant to police militarization were included; changing the  $N$  of each condition presented.
7. Consistent with other research (e.g., Simpson, 2018), and to avoid the loss of information, the dependent variables were not aggregated. A series of independent samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to determine whether significant differences existed between the public's perception of officers in the control conditions compared to those in the experimental militarized conditions for each item. The method employed to control for Type I error is discussed in greater detail in a supplementary document on the Open Science Framework, which can be found at: <https://osf.io/6rcy2/>. Readers can also find tables for each condition in this supplementary document, which include  $t$ -tests and specific  $p$ -values for each item. For ease of interpretation, only effect sizes associated with significant  $t$ -tests are discussed herein (these effect sizes can also be found in the supplementary document).
8. We tested assumptions as necessary for each condition, assessing normality visually and via the Shapiro-Wilk test. Although we observed violations, given how robust the independent samples  $t$ -test is (Allen & Bennett, 2008), as well as the relatively large and equal sample sizes in each group, analyses proceeded as usual. We used Levene's test of equality of variances to determine whether there was homogeneity of variance across groups. Equal variances were not assumed whenever Levene's indicated an apparent violation ( $p < .05$ ).
9. It is important to note that differences were accentuated with the male officer carrying the carbine, suggesting that gendered stereotypes (that males are stronger, more aggressive, etc.) persist.

## Disclosure statement

Three of the authors are employees of the law enforcement agency that provided funding and in-kind contributions to facilitate this research. However, the opinions and findings are in no way representative of that agency.

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## Ethical statement

**Funding:** The participating law enforcement agency funded the cost of the community panel and facilitated obtaining models for the study.

**Conflict of Interest:** Three of the authors are employees of the law enforcement agency that provided funding and in-kind contributions to facilitate this research.

**Ethical Approval:** The protocol was approved by the Carleton University Ethics Committee for Psychological Research (REB #106546 16-115).

**Informed Consent:** Obtained.

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