

Dressing the part: The influence of police attire on outcomes in a simulated traffic violation case

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psm**Quintan Crough** 

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Abstract

Consistently outlined in juror decision-making research is that seemingly irrelevant variables (e.g., the appearance of defendants or plaintiffs) can impact judicial proceedings. Although police officers frequently appear in courtrooms, limited literature exists that assesses the impact of officer attire in this setting. The current study exposed participants to a mock-trial transcript outlining a traffic violation case in which officer gender and attire were manipulated. Participants then rendered a verdict, before providing ratings of officer credibility and police legitimacy, using the Police Legitimacy Scale (PLS). The female officer was viewed as significantly more credible than the male officer and participants' PLS scores predicted their verdicts. Although no attire differences were found, findings might have implications for uniform policies.

Keywords

Police, police uniforms, gender, credibility, verdict

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In the case of *Estelle v. Williams* (1976), Williams was on trial for attempted murder and was found guilty. However, Williams appealed his conviction on the grounds that his constitutional right to a fair trial was infringed upon because he was required to wear a prison jumpsuit during the trial. This claim was based on the belief that the orange jumpsuit caused the jury to perceive him as already guilty. The Court of Appeals ruled that Williams did not have to stand trial in prison wear and that this violated Williams' right to due process; as a result, Williams' conviction was overturned. Eventually, the Supreme Court reversed this decision and reinstated the conviction on 21 June 1976. Interestingly, the view that a defendant's attire might influence how others see them is consistent with jury research on the topic (Lown, 1977; Schafer, 2009). It appears that to be accepted, at least in the academic community, attire can be associated

with preconceived notions on the part of jurors, which could potentially result in an unfair trial.

It is reasonable to assume that the power of attire to potentially bias people is not limited to just the orange jumpsuit of a prison inmate. The current study sought to examine how this situation might play out on the other end of the spectrum; specifically, we attempted to determine whether different forms of attire worn by a police officer in court impacts perceptions of officer credibility and case verdicts. We could find very little previous research assessing this issue, and what information we could gather (e.g., from internal documents and discussions with officers) suggests

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that courtroom attire for officers is typically based on agency policy that lacks any evidence-based foundation, or it is based on the personal preferences of officers themselves. As such, this study sought to add to the nascent literature on police attire and extend that literature by examining how individual differences in perceptions of police legitimacy might impact findings on this topic.

The influence of extralegal factors in the courtroom

The influence of extralegal factors on criminal court proceedings has received considerable attention from researchers. This research often concerns factors such as attractiveness (Downs and Lyons, 1991) and race (Maeder et al., 2015). General trends in the literature suggest that these types of legally irrelevant factors can significantly influence verdicts, as well as the perceptions of individuals taking part in courtroom proceedings (e.g., with respect to their perceived credibility and authority), although various factors (e.g., crime type) often moderate their effects (Mazzella and Feingold, 1994).

Gender is another extralegal factor, which we explore in the current study. Extensive research has shown that gender can impact various courtroom decisions (e.g., pre-trial hearings, bail decisions, guilt determinations, sentencing hearings) and influence the perceptions of various actors within the courtroom setting, including victims, defendants, and expert witnesses (McKimmie and Masser, 2010). To some extent, the impact of gender in the courtroom can be attributed to the gender stereotypes that people endorse, such as the view that women are more nurturing than men, and less likely to exhibit aggressive tendencies (Kite et al., 2008). But the influence of gender stereotypes is complex; such stereotypes can lead to more favorable treatment of women relative to men, or less favorable treatment, depending on a wide range of factors (McKimmie and Masser, 2010).

Stereotype congruency is one important factor (i.e., the degree of fit between some aspect of a case, such as defendant characteristics or the nature of one's testimony, and gender stereotypes). For example, Strub and McKimmie (2016) presented mock jurors with a murder case involving either a male or female defendant who was described as having either masculine or feminine traits. They found that when the female defendant was portrayed as having masculine traits the defense's evidence was evaluated more negatively in comparison with when she was portrayed as having feminine traits. Such (in)congruencies did not matter for the male defendant. In a somewhat similar study, McKimmie et al. (2004) found that mock jurors tended to view an expert witness more favorably in

a case involving price-fixing when the domain about which the expert was testifying was congruent with his or her gender (i.e., when the male expert was testifying about the automobile industry and the female expert was testifying about the cosmetics industry).

The influence of attire

Attire has been shown to affect perceptions of professionalism, competence, sociability and approachability (Bixler and Scherrer, 2000; Furnham et al., 2013; Morris et al., 1996). It has been argued that one is judged on credibility, competence and confidence within the first 12 seconds upon meeting someone and it has been suggested by researchers that this judgment is at least in part influenced by attire (Bixler and Scherrer, 2000; Furnham et al., 2013; Kerr and Dell, 1976; LaSala and Nelson, 2005). For example, in a study conducted by Furnham et al. (2013), they examined the influence of different types of attire worn by a dentist and a lawyer for both a male and a female. Results from this study indicated that participants showed significant preference for "profession appropriate" attire (i.e., participants showed a preference for a dark suit for a lawyer and a white medical coat for a dentist). Participants perceived the individuals in the appropriate professional attire to be more capable, suitable to the profession, easier to talk to, and friendlier.

Different types of uniforms also elicit varying rates of compliance and perceptions of legitimacy. For example, in a study conducted by Bickman (1974), he compared participant compliance to requests (e.g., pick up a paper bag, give a stranger a dime) made by an individual dressed as a milkman, a civilian or a guard. Participants were significantly more likely to comply when the individual making the request was dressed as a guard. In a follow-up experiment, Bickman found that compliance with the guard's requests was not affected by surveillance (i.e., subjects were equally likely to comply in the absence or presence of the guard), suggesting that the guard's influence was likely due to increased perceptions of legitimacy.

The police uniform

The police uniform serves as a critical aspect of policing, as it symbolizes power and authority, as well as enhances police visibility within a community (Cooke, 2005). Like the white coats traditionally worn by doctors, the police uniform is arguably one of the most recognizable uniforms within society and can often elicit strong feelings from the public. These feelings can vary greatly from person to person (Bell, 1982). Regardless of their feelings towards police, Bell (1982) suggests individuals will often change their behavior when a uniformed officer is within view.

Furthermore, independent of law-abiding tendencies, most citizens are more cognizant of their behavior when a police officer is within sight. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that a person in a police uniform is perceived differently from a person in other forms of attire.

Although the police uniform serves as a form of legitimacy and tends to evoke certain feelings from the public, these feelings appear to vary as result of uniform manipulations. In one of the first studies to examine how police uniform changes can influence public perceptions, Mauro (1984) explored how perceptions of traditional uniforms compared with blazer-style outfits. Officers in traditional uniforms were rated as significantly more competent, helpful and honest. However, no significant differences were observed with respect to ratings of friendliness and warmth. A more recent, but similar study conducted by Simpson (2017) found that public perceptions of officers also vary as a function of uniform manipulations. Specifically, officers were viewed as more aggressive when presented in uniform compared with civilian clothing. Interestingly, however, officers in uniform were viewed more favorably in terms of approachability, respectfulness and accountability than those in civilian clothing. Thus, increased perceptions of aggression did not appear to come at the cost of other more favorable characteristics.

Uniform color has also been studied. In one investigation, Nickels (2008) manipulated photos of officers to create four uniform conditions (i.e., all navy, white shirt and navy pants, medium-blue shirt and navy pants, and all black) and had participants rated one of the possible conditions using semantic-differential scales (e.g., warm vs cold). The uniform manipulations for the Caucasian officer revealed that darker uniforms (e.g., navy blue or black) were associated with more positive evaluations. Interestingly, more recent research by Jenkins et al. (2021) suggested the opposite. In their study, officers in dark uniforms were perceived more negatively (e.g., the officers were deemed more likely to use excessive force) than officers in lighter uniforms.

The influence of militarized gear has also been examined. In perhaps the first study of this issue, Cooke (2004) found that participants in the United Kingdom viewed high-visibility weaponry on an officer as more threatening, intimidating, and aggressive, although the same officer maintained positive ratings of professionalism, respect, and authority. In their 2018 study, O'Neill and his colleagues exposed participants to images of external vests in different configurations (e.g., vests with fabric attachment loops with an increasing number of attachments [radio, firearm magazines, handcuffs]). They found that vests with more attachments were rated as significantly less approachable and more intimidating. In the most recent and comprehensive study of militarized uniforms,

Blaskovits et al. (2021) found that the public perceived officers in militarized (vs non-militarized) attire negatively with respect to approachability, trust, and morality, among other qualities, but they also perceived them as stronger, more confident, and more prepared for dangerous situations.

Individual differences and perceptions of the police

Perceptions of the police can vary greatly between individuals, and this may influence how people judge officer testimony, which may, in turn, influence case outcomes. For instance, Chow (2012) demonstrated that higher socioeconomic status (SES), greater feelings of personal safety, and greater positive contact with the police were all associated with positive ratings of the police. However, more experience with police harassment or mistreatment and criminal victimization leads to more negative ratings of police (Chow, 2012). Thus, one might expect that, if a trier of fact (e.g., a juror) belongs to a high SES group or has had many positive interactions with the police, this person may view an officer appearing in court favorably, and potentially put undue weight on the officer's testimony. The opposite might be expected for a trier of fact whose interactions with the police have been more negative.

Another relevant variable to consider is views regarding police legitimacy. Indeed, whether one views the police as a legitimate source of authority appears to be a consistent predictor of how people engage with the police (Hinds and Murphy, 2007; Tankebe, 2013). For example, increased perceptions of police legitimacy, as measured by the Police Legitimacy Scale (PLS), were associated with greater levels of cooperation with police during encounters (Tankebe, 2013). In addition, more positive views of police legitimacy often correspond with an increased willingness to accept the decisions of the police regardless of circumstance (Tyler and Fagan, 2008). These findings were echoed in a recent meta-analysis assessing perceptions of police legitimacy (Bolger and Walters, 2019). Specifically, it was found that those possessing favorable views of police legitimacy were likely to cooperate with the police and comply with their requests.

Given the influence that perceptions of police legitimacy can have on various decisions and behaviors, it is possible that such perceptions could have a profound impact in court cases where police officers are involved. Indeed, the impact of such views may even eclipse the potential impact that extralegal variables like officer gender and police attire might have, leading triers of fact to put more (or less) weight on an officer's actions or testimony depending on their pre-existing views of police legitimacy.

The current study

The police uniform is strongly associated with certain perceptions and was therefore considered an ideal starting point to begin researching the influence of attire within the courtroom. As discussed, police uniform manipulations may influence the strength of feelings elicited from observers and the believability of testimony given by an officer. This was addressed in the current study by manipulating the attire worn by an officer in traffic court (i.e., a police uniform with body armor, a police uniform without body armor, casual clothes, or formal attire). Both a female and a male officer were used for each condition to assess officer gender as an extralegal factor.

Given the dearth of literature examining attire within a courtroom setting, directional hypotheses were not proposed. Instead, the following research questions were examined:

1. How will officer attire in court influence ratings of officer credibility?
2. How will officer gender influence ratings of officer credibility?
3. How will officer attire influence ratings of defendant guilt?
4. How will officer gender influence ratings of defendant guilt?
5. How will the weight put on officer testimony relate to ratings of defendant guilt?
6. How will scores on the Police Legitimacy Scale influence ratings of guilt, and are views regarding police legitimacy more powerful (e.g., in terms of predicting court outcomes) than factors such as officer gender and attire?

Method

Participants

The current research adopted an approach that is similar to mock juror studies conducted in the past (Maeder et al., 2015), with the exception that our data was collected exclusively online. An online recruitment program (SONA) was used to recruit participants for the study. There were three data collection sites: Carleton University, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, and Humber College. All participants were compensated in the form of a credit towards an introductory psychology course at their respective university/college. In total, 659 participants were involved in the study, but analyses were only conducted on $N=395$. Participants were omitted if they skipped any of the sections on questionnaires, did not answer correctly at least two of three attention check questions, or completed the survey in under 5 minutes. Demographic information collected from participants indicated that 31% ($n=122$) were male and

68% ($n=268$) were female. The age range of participants was from 18 to 71 years old ($M=21.6$, $SD=4.7$).

Materials

Trial transcript. The trial transcript shown to participants was based on a fictional traffic violation case that was constructed with the assistance of a law enforcement officer with a great deal of experience in these scenarios. An individual was charged with violating the law by not wearing a seatbelt. In the transcript, an officer outlines the events on the day of the incident and states why he or she pulled the defendant over. The accused then states that he was in fact wearing his seatbelt on the day of the offense and that the officer was mistaken in believing he was not. The trial proceedings outlined in the transcript follow that of a real court case involving a traffic violation, including: (a) the clerk outlines the case number, date, accused's ID, and the offense; (b) an opportunity is given for the accused to make his plea; (c) paging of the involved constable takes place and the constable provides his or her statement; and (d) an opportunity is given for the accused to make his statement.

As part of the transcript, participants were exposed to a photo of the defendant involved in the case (always the same individual; Figure 1) and the officer involved in the case (Figure 2). This photo of the officer represents the independent variable of interest in the current study. As illustrated in the figures, participants were exposed to one of eight variations of the photo: a male or female officer was shown wearing either: (a) formal clothing, (b) casual clothing, (c) a police uniform, or (d) a police uniform with body armor. All other aspects of the transcript were identical.

Attention checks. Attention check questions were completed by participants after they read the trial transcript (e.g., What

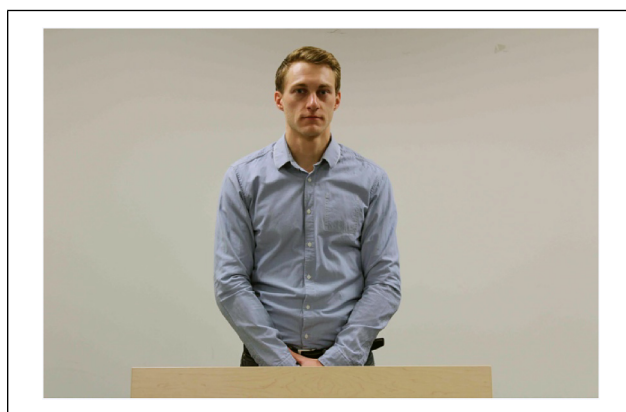


Figure 1. A photograph of the male defendant that was included in the trial transcript.

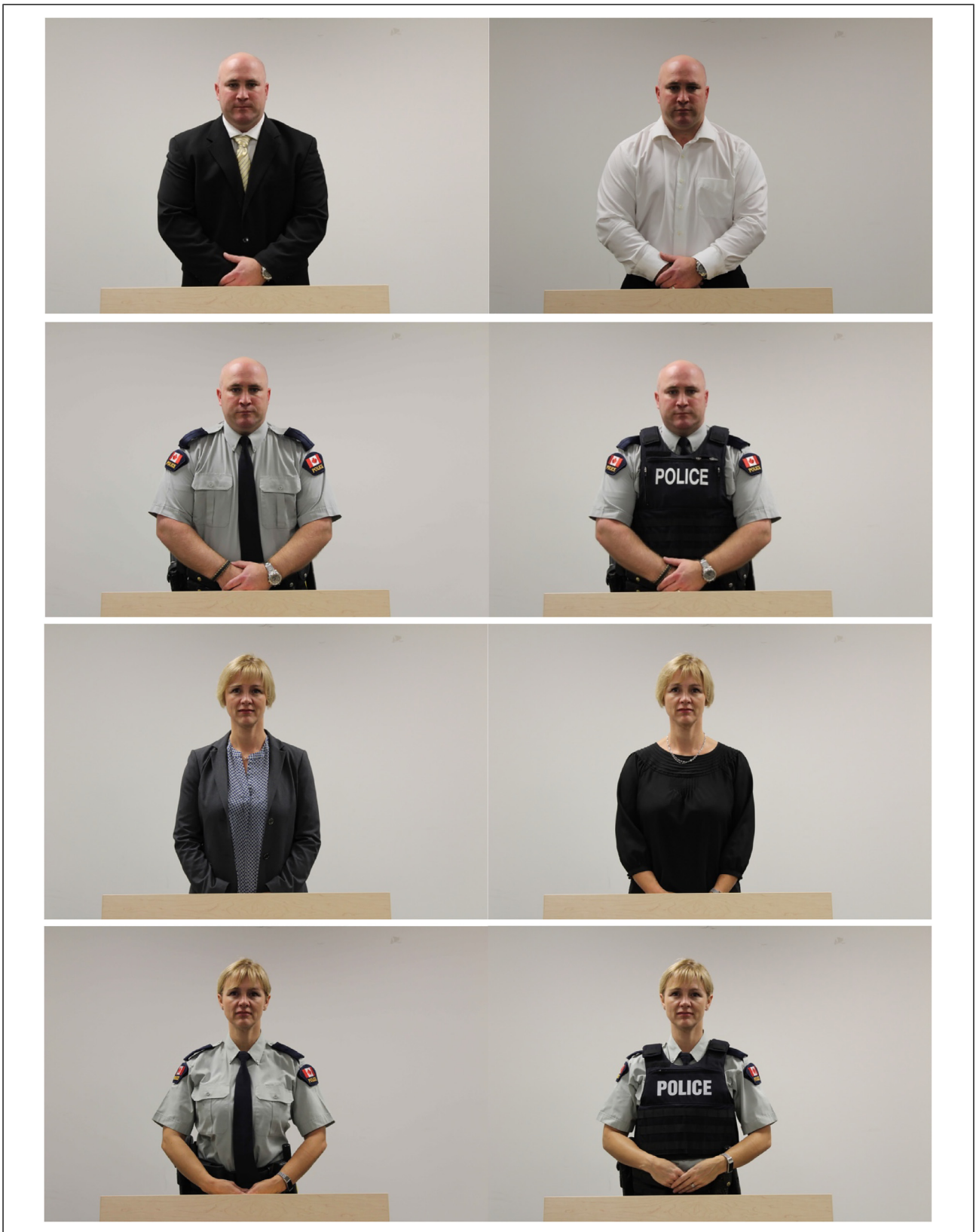


Figure 2. Photographs of the male and female police officers that were included in the trial transcript.

color was the car driven by the defendant?). As mentioned, though there were three attention check questions in total, participants were only removed if they did not answer correctly two of the questions.

Verdict questionnaire. After completing the attention checks, participants were asked to render a verdict for the accused on the verdict questionnaire. The verdict options were listed as guilty or not guilty. After rendering a verdict, participants were asked to briefly describe in a textbox their reasoning for their verdict. Participants were then asked how confident they were in their verdict on a scale, ranging from 0 (*not at all confident*) to 10 (*very confident*). Finally, participants were asked two separate questions, one regarding the weight they put on the officer's testimony and another regarding the weight they put on the defendant's testimony. Both these questions were answered on scales ranging from 0 (*no weight at all*) to 10 (*a lot of weight*).

Credibility questionnaire. Following the verdict questionnaire, all participants were either shown the photograph of the accused or the officer and asked questions about these individuals (presentation was randomized). The photo of the accused was followed by questions that asked the participant to rate the accused on the following characteristics: credibility, respectfulness, and believability (randomized to control for order effects; none was found). Responses provided by participants were recorded on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very*). The photo of the officer was followed by questions that asked the participant to rate the officer on the following characteristics: credibility, respectfulness, believability, professionalism, competency, confidence, and knowledgeability. Again, responses provided by participants were recorded on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very*).

Police Legitimacy Scale. Participants were then asked to complete the PLS (Tankebe & Meško, 2015). This scale was designed so that participants view a statement and then rate their agreement with that statement, with scores ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). Higher scores on the PLS correspond to more negative assessments of policing. The scale has been shown to have high internal consistency in Ghana and the United States (Tankebe & Meško, 2015), and more recently has been validated in Canada (Ewanation et al., 2019).

Procedure

After first providing consent, participants were then assigned to one of the eight conditions and exposed to the court transcript. The transcript presented the trial in the following order: clerk provides a description of the case, the

defendant pleads not guilty, a photograph of the officer is shown and the officer provides his/her version of incident, and lastly a photograph of the defendant is shown and the defendant provides his side of the incident. After completing the survey, participants completed the attention checks, verdict questionnaire, credibility questionnaire, the PLS, and a brief demographics questionnaire. Finally, the participants viewed a debriefing form, which provided information regarding the purpose of the study.

Results

Credibility

Participants were asked to rate the presented officers on characteristics such as credibility, trustworthiness, and respect, among others. In total there were 12 scales regarding the officer, each ranging from 0 to 10. Given the similarity of the characteristics on which officers were rated, an analysis was conducted to determine whether all individual scale scores should be combined to create one aggregate variable. Inter-correlations and Cronbach's alpha were calculated for the 12 scales. The inter-correlations between scales ranged from .487 to .782 (all p values $< .01$). In addition, the Cronbach's alpha equaled .891. Given this, the decision was made to combine the separate variables into one variable called "overall credibility".

To examine research questions 1 and 2, which focus on how officer attire and gender impacted ratings of officer credibility, a 2 (officer gender: male vs. female) \times 4 (officer attire: uniform vs. uniform + body armor vs casual vs formal) between-subjects factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The results indicated that there was no main effect of attire on overall officer credibility ratings ($F(3, 382) = 0.726, p = .537$), but there was a main effect related to gender. Specifically, the female officer ($M = 9.371, SD = 1.51$) was perceived as significantly more credible than the male officer ($M = 9.046, SD = 1.37; F(1, 382) = 6.304, p = .012; d = .23$). No two-way interaction between gender and attire was found ($F(3, 382) = 0.620, p = .603$).

Verdict

In the current study, participants rendered a guilty or innocent verdict for the defendant, thus providing a dichotomous variable. Participants also provided their level of confidence in their verdict. Consistent with other jury decision-making research (Maeder et al., 2015) the verdict and verdict confidence variables were multiplied together to form one continuous variable. This was done by assigning a value of 1 to guilty verdicts and -1 to innocent verdicts and multiplying this value by the participants'

verdict confidence scores; final values for the continuous variable ranged from -10 to 10 .

Research questions 3 and 4 related to how officer attire and gender will impact verdicts in court. A 2 (officer gender) \times 4 (officer attire) between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted using the continuous verdict as the dependent variable. The results indicated that there was no significant main effect for attire ($F(3, 385) = 0.966, p = .409$), nor was there a significant main effect for gender ($F(1, 385) = 0.423, p = .516$). Finally, there was no significant two-way interaction for attire by gender ($F(3, 385) = 1.204, p = .308$).

Testimony weight

After rendering a verdict, and rating their confidence, participants were asked how much weight they put on the testimony of the defendant, as well as the testimony of the officer. Research question 5 asked what the relationship is between these weightings and the participants' verdicts. As previously mentioned, two variables are available for verdict: one dichotomous variable related solely to verdict and one continuous variable created by multiplying verdict confidence by verdict. Separate analyses were conducted on the respective variables.

In addressing the dichotomous verdict variable, correlational results indicated that increased weight placed on the officer's testimony was in fact associated with more guilty verdicts ($r_{pb}(392) = .300, p < .01$). Further, a significant negative correlation was found between the weight placed on the defendant's testimony and innocent verdicts ($r_{pb}(393) = -.319, p < .01$). Similarly, for the continuous verdict variable, results indicated that the weight placed on the officer's testimony, and the weight placed on the defendant's testimony, correlated with the verdict in the direction that would be expected ($r(392) = .270, p < .01$; $r(393) = -.348, p < .01$ respectively).

PLS scores

Prior to completing the study, participants were asked to complete the PLS. As was done with the credibility ratings for the officers and the defendant, analyses were conducted to determine whether a singular variable (combining the 16 separate PLS items) was appropriate. Results revealed a Cronbach's alpha of .920 for the PLS, therefore a singular aggregate variable was considered appropriate. Results indicated that higher scores on the PLS (which indicate that a participant perceives the police as being less legitimate) were related to fewer guilty verdicts ($r_{pb}(377) = -.221, p < .001$). This makes complete sense, given that such perceptions would result in participants viewing the police officer providing testimony in court as less credible

(a correlation between PLS scores and views of officer credibility support this argument; $r(379) = -.208, p < .001$).

Discussion

This research sought to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of police attire inside the courtroom, while secondarily examining officer gender within the same setting. The first research question focused on the relationship between officer attire and ratings of credibility. No significant differences were found with respect to attire. These findings contrast with existing literature, which suggests people perceive professionals as more credible when they are wearing the attire most suitable to that profession (e.g., in medicine and law; Furnham et al., 2013). If this were true, one might expect that an officer in traditional uniform would be perceived as more credible in court. Of course, different findings might emerge in court proceedings relating to other types of criminal acts (e.g., theft, sexual assault, murder), but for now we will attempt to explain the current findings.

This result may not have been obtained because participants knew the person presented in the photograph was in fact an officer, and therefore what he or she was wearing did not matter (i.e., the perception that an officer is testifying outweighs any impact that clothing has on perception of credibility). Unlike in professions such as medicine or law, perhaps in policing the title of the profession has greater bearing on perceived credibility than does the presented attire. Relatedly, it is also possible given that the public are likely aware that many roles within policing (e.g., detective work) require officers to wear plain or professional clothing (rather than a traditional uniform). Thus, when it is made clear that the individual testifying is a police officer, these various forms of attire are perceived as equally credible.

The second research question focused on the relationship between officer gender and credibility. Results indicated that the female officer was perceived as significantly more credible than the male officer. This seemingly contradicts findings of Memon and Shuman (1998), which suggested that male (compared with female) expert witnesses are more often chosen based on the assumption that males are perceived as more credible, and it also seems to contradict McKimmie et al.'s (2004) study cited earlier, which found that experts are given more weight if they are testifying about matters from gender congruent domains (policing is still largely a male-dominated profession in Canada; Brief, 2014). However, current findings are congruent with other literature, which suggests there may be a significant bias in favor of females in some contexts (Ahola et al., 2009; Staffensmeier et al., 1998). Given that only one female and one male officer were used in the study,

a cautionary view must be taken when interpreting these results; it is of course premature to generalize the findings beyond these officers. It is possible that had two other officers been used, different results may have emerged.

The third research question focused on the impact of officer attire on verdicts; however, no significant differences in verdict rendered were detected across conditions. These findings contrast with existing literature. For example, Johnson (2001) found that participants ranked a person in a police uniform (compared with other uniforms) as being the highest in terms of reliability, intelligence, helpfulness, and competence. Given these results, one might have expected more guilty verdicts in the conditions where the officers were wearing their traditional uniforms. In other research, Bell (1982) found that militarized uniforms often elicited poorer reactions from the public, and O'Neill et al.'s (2018) study of external police vests highlighted similar concerns. However, in terms of verdicts rendered in the current study, testimony provided by officers in body armor did not result in more innocent verdicts. It is possible of course that the results of previous studies only apply to the contexts within which the stimuli were presented in those studies; the results may not generalize to other contexts, such as the courtroom setting examined in the current study (e.g., where casual or formal attire on an officer might be deemed more appropriate than if it were being worn on the street).

The fourth research question related to the potential impact of officer gender on verdicts. Again, there were no differences in rendered verdicts across the two genders. Given that Furnham and colleagues (2013) found that participants show a significant bias in favor of males compared with females in terms of perceived capability and suitability to the profession, this finding is unexpected. It is not entirely clear why no gender differences were found with respect to verdicts. Perhaps officer gender does not impact verdicts, or perhaps the result is due to the previous cautionary note, that only one female and one male officer were examined in this study, and if a broader range of officers of both genders were examined in future research, gender differences may emerge.

It is also worth mentioning that verdict results in this study highlighted an overall trend towards innocent verdicts. This may suggest that participants were generally identifying with the defendant. Considering the characteristics of the defendant—he is clean-cut, around the same age as most of those who completed the survey, and it was stated that he is a university student—this seems likely. If participants did in fact identify with the defendant, this provides a plausible explanation for why participants were reluctant to render a guilty verdict. Furthermore, given that other extralegal variables (e.g., attractiveness and race) have been demonstrated to have an influence on

verdicts and defendant characteristic ratings (Beety, 2013; Jacobson, 1981; Maeder et al., 2015; Schvey et al., 2013), we cannot rule out the possibility that verdicts were impacted by these factors as well. Finally, because of the rather trivial nature of the assessed transgression (i.e., a traffic violation), it is also possible that the feelings evoked in participants as pertaining to the defendant's guilt may have been minimal (compared with, say, what would happen in a murder case).

Unrelated to officer attire, the fifth research question related to the weighting that participants assigned to officer testimony, and the testimony of the defendant. As expected, those who placed greater weight on the officer's testimony were more likely to render a guilty verdict. Similarly, it was revealed that those who placed greater emphasis on the defendant's testimony were more likely to render innocent verdicts. Therefore, it appears that the verdict rendered by participants corresponded appropriately to the testimony in which the greatest weight was placed.

Finally, we examined the relationship between participants' PLS scores and verdicts. As expected, participants who scored higher on the PLS (indicating that they perceive the police as less legitimate) were more likely to render an innocent verdict. Also unsurprisingly, high PLS scores were related to lower ratings of officer credibility in court. Ratings on the PLS were found to be more predictive of the continuous verdict than officer gender or attire. This suggests that views of police legitimacy are quite powerful, and the influence of these pre-existing perceptions of policing may outweigh other factors related to court cases where officers must present testimony.

Limitations and future research

While considering the limitations of the current research, future directions will also be discussed. As stressed above, the current study relied on only two officers and given the unique qualities of these officers in terms of potentially influential characteristics (e.g., perceived attractiveness), findings cannot be generalized beyond the two officers used. That said, this does not undermine the study in that important conclusions can still be drawn. Future research should address these concerns by using more than two officers, allowing for potentially confounding factors (e.g., attractiveness) to be controlled for.

In addition, although a manipulation to the uniform was made in the current study by adding body armor, only one uniform (that was identical for both conditions) was used, which might also limit generalizability. Given that different colors of police uniforms can impact perceptions and feelings about police officers among the public (Jenkins et al., 2021), further research should examine the influence of different colors of police uniform in a courtroom setting

to see if this can affect verdicts. In addition, greater variance between the regular uniform and militarized uniforms should also be considered (beyond just adding body armor). Possible manipulations could include the use of a more militaristic color, as well as providing additional gear on the officer's uniform in this condition.

Given that the current study only concerned a minor traffic violation case, it is also important to stress that results should not be extended to other settings. For example, it may be that very different results emerge in future studies where different types of court cases are tested (e.g., serious sexual assault cases). Future research should examine other types of cases to shed light on whether officer gender and attire vary depending on the nature of the case.

Conclusion

The current study sought to examine whether officer attire influenced ratings of officer credibility and verdict decisions in a traffic court case. The goal was to provide evidence that police agencies can use when making decisions regarding the best policy to put in place for the attire worn by officers during such court appearances. Results did not support the view that attire influences these variables. Despite this, there are still takeaways that can be useful for police policy on attire. Based on current findings, regardless of what police officers wear during court appearances (so long as it matches the examined study conditions) their credibility is not likely to be negatively impacted, nor are verdicts likely to be influenced. Accordingly, so long as officers appear in court in one of the attire types examined, they will have equal opportunity to be perceived as credible and verdicts will be unaffected. Perhaps more important than attire is working over the long-term towards building up public confidence and trust in policing. The results reported in this study suggest that perceptions of police legitimacy are likely to be more important than attire in terms of the impact on officer credibility and verdicts in traffic court cases.


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