

Police Riot Gear: Dressing for Violence

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May 4, 2021

The continuous killing of unarmed, racialized people at the hands of police is one of the most heinous realities in North America. The murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a now-former Minneapolis police officer provoked an upsurge in protests and activism against police brutality and violence against racialized communities (Andrew, 2020). With heavy media and social media coverage, photographs and video footage from protests captured the stark differences in the clothing of protesters and police. For my project, I wanted to explore the use of riot gear by police at protests and the embedded meanings of such a defensive uniform. Further, I wanted to consider what alternative measures for public safety, specifically at protests, could look like. I chose to do this through the popular Instagram carousel format that has been a pivotal component of much social activism and social justice movements.

In order to explore the implications of the use of riot gear, one must first understand what this gear entails. According to Haven Gear, a riot gear retail company in the U.S., riot gear is “protective crowd control gear” and is designed to “appear imposing for a good reason” (Haven Gear, 2020). The typical components of a fully equipped riot gear uniform include the following: a riot suit designed to protect against blunt force trauma; riot helmets with transparent face shields; a riot baton that may be used to strike or block impact; riot shields that are strapped to the arm and can be used to restrict crowd movement or block impact; and, occasionally, police carry additional weapons such as guns (Haven Gear, 2020). This gear is specifically designed to protect officers by creating physical barriers between officers and crowds, with components such as the riot shield, baton, and face shield being made out of polycarbonate (Haven Gear, 2020). This protection is supposedly required during “dangerous incidents” (Haven Gear, 2020). Thus, when police approach crowds with riot gear and suits, one may assume violence has already occurred or that such gear is a preventative approach to violence.

When looking at pictures from protests, the dark military-style uniforms of the police clash with the the casual streetwear worn by protestors. This contrast may lead one to question why police are equipped in full riot gear at seemingly peaceful protests. In exploring the culture and politics of uniforms, Craik (2015) states: “Uniforms are all about control, not only of the social self but also of the inner self and its formation” (p. 128). Additionally, Joseph and Alex (1972) assert that one of the central functions of uniforms is to suppress individuality, which certifies legitimacy (p. 719). The media photos of police lined and armed with riot gear, indistinguishable from one another, exemplifies this suppression and creates an army of violence-ready officers. The military-style riot uniform is also believed to cause the wearer to act more violently as their face is concealed and they are able to disconnect from their identity, including their past or future (Segran, 2020). The military-style riot uniform is accompanied by scenes that are reminiscent of war, which is not surprising, considering riot gear has been given to police forces in the U.S. due to a surplus of military equipment (Segran, 2020).

During protests, the use of riot gear can have psychological effects on police, creating dangerous implications for the public. The theory of encllothed cognition focuses on the psychological effects on the wearer of clothing, as it suggests that the “experience of putting on clothing with symbolic meaning can activate its associated concept to influence psychological processes and behavior tendencies” (Mendoza & Parks-Stamm, 2020, p. 2356). As part of a socially dominant role, police officers’ uniforms contribute largely to the authority associated with policing, as they project a symbol of power (ibid). In their study on the effect of wearing a police uniform on shooting task performance, Mendoza and Parks-Stamm (2020) found that participants wearing police uniforms had a lower shooting threshold, meaning they were more apt to shoot targets. These findings lend support to the theory of encllothed cognition. Considering the prevalence of violence and police brutality, this study demonstrates that police uniforms wield significant power in that they contribute to the psychological processes of their wearers.

Knowing the power that police uniforms hold, one can imagine the kind of escalation riot gear would provoke. The police uniform influences the interpersonal interaction between the citizen and the police officer, as it functions as “both a symbol and a defensive device” (Bell, 1982, p. 46). The riot gear, both symbolically and physically, serves as a defensive device. The presence of police in uniform signifies that there is a fear of crime or an occurrence of crime, which can cause the public to infer conclusions about the intentions of police officers (Simpson, 2018). Additionally, visual characteristics may influence these inferences (ibid). Simpson (2018, p. 244) highlights that the public may perceive officers dressed for combat as aligned with militaristic values, whereas officers dressed without “overt force equipment” may be associated with service values. Opting to equip police officers with combat gear, such as riot gear, is problematic, as Simpson (2018) found that accessories such as batons, black gloves, and/or sunglasses signal more predatory and deceptive intentions. For the public, riot gear may incite fear or perhaps encourage aggression against the perceived intentions of the police. Certainly, the records of police brutality shape such perceptions and the actions that may follow.

It is evident that police participate in, and in many ways instigate, violence and disorder at protests through appearing in their uniformed riot gear. If crime deterrence and public safety are truly the intentions of police, why use riot gear as the primary way to achieve this? In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, and many other activist protests, there was a rise in the demands to defund the police. Thus, rather than trying to reimagine the uniform of police, or how they should approach protests, I argue that police presence is entirely unnecessary. There has been significant support for the move to replace law enforcement with mental health workers, social workers, victim advocates, and other community members (Andrew, 2020). Even the police presenting themselves as a "disinterested third party," showing up to these events to merely keep the peace, seems problematic (Graham, 2020).

Given that many recent protests have been in response to the violence and murder police have committed, it seems inappropriate and irresponsible to have a police presence in their everyday uniforms, let alone riot gear. In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, what initially began as a non-violent protest escalated to violence as police in riot gear arrived (Fernandez, 2020). People reported police officers in full riot gear shooting pepper spray on non-violent protestors and ultimately escalating the situation among the crowd (Fernandez, 2020). In the U.S., a riot is legally considered "a public disturbance involving...an act or acts of violence by one or more persons part of an assemblage of three or more persons, which act or acts shall constitute a clear and present danger of, or shall result in, damage or injury to the property of any other person or to the person of any other individual" (Duignan, n.d.). A protest, unlike a riot, is basically a non-violent assembly of demonstrators sharing or communicating their message (Duignan, n.d.). With these understandings of what constitutes riots versus protests, one may question why riot gear is deployed as if the two are synonymous.

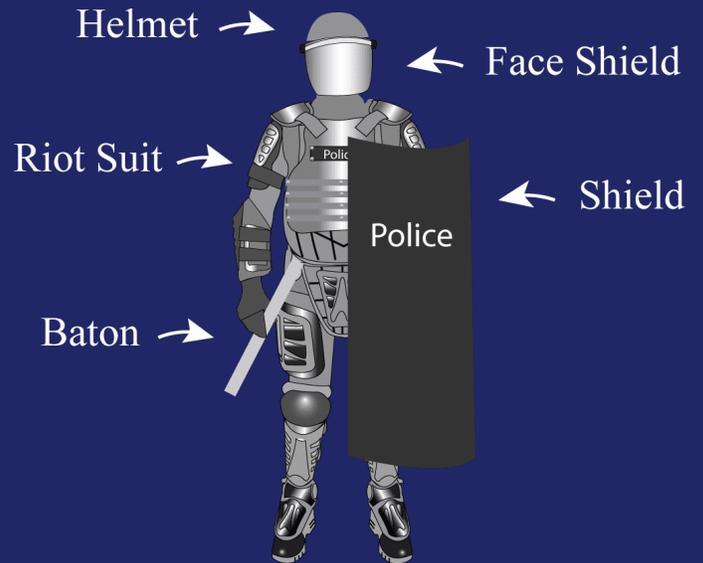
It is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy when police appear fully equipped in riot gear to control crowds, which ultimately leads to riots. The quick fix to the issue, in my opinion, would be for police to stop using riot gear when engaging with the public. However, I acknowledge that this is only a mere band-aid over the much larger issues of systemic racism, abuse of power, toxic masculinity, and police brutality, to name a few. Perhaps reimagining public safety is what needs to be done, which is no small task. This re-imagination of public safety, for example, is materializing through the UNSTOPPABLE art project that was inspired by Black Lives Matter (Cárdenas, 2015). UNSTOPPABLE involves DIY bulletproof clothing made to protect Black people from violence, police brutality, and murder (Cárdenas, 2015). Materials such as recycled tires are used to create DIY armor, generating a conversation surrounding public safety. When police officers are inciting violence and dressing as if they are going to war, how can the public keep themselves safe from those who are supposed to do just that? Although riot gear may serve as a symbol of excess power, control, and violence, removing it from protests does not remove the power and intent of the wearer.

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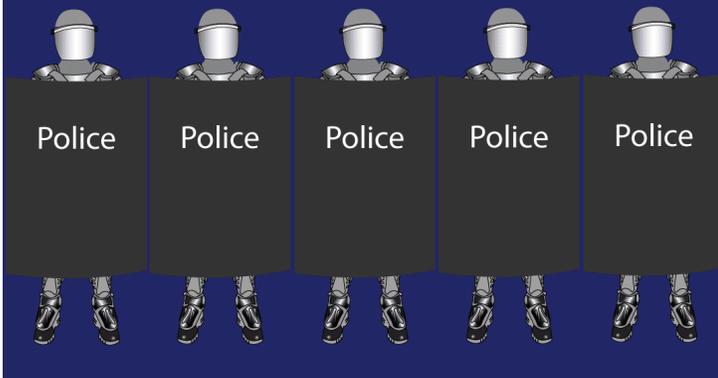
The Riot Gear Uniform



“Uniforms are all about control”

(Craik, 2015, p. 128)

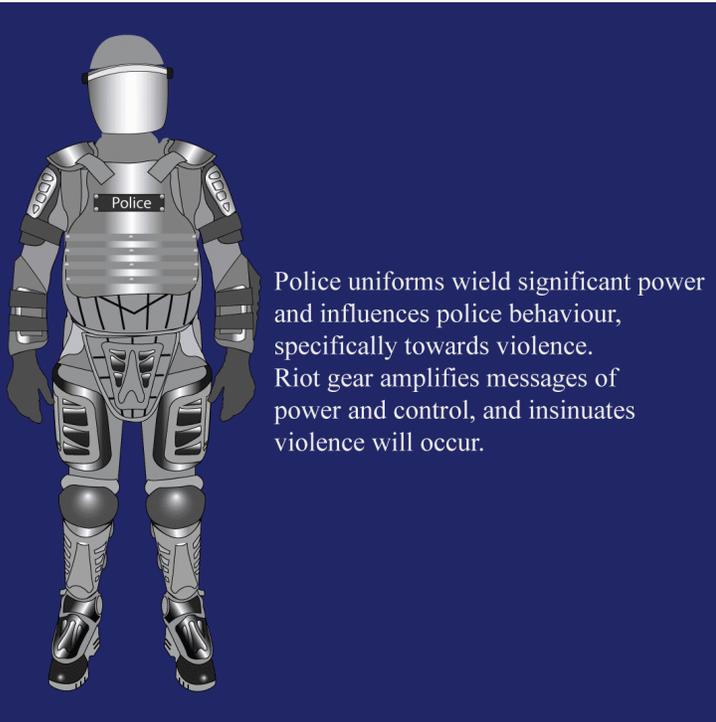
The uniform surpasses individuality and renders police officers as indistinguishable among one another. This army-like, violence-ready presence has effects on both the officers and the public.



Theory of Enclothed Cognition:

wearing clothing with symbolic meaning can activate its associated concept, influencing psychological processes and behaviour.





Police uniforms wield significant power and influences police behaviour, specifically towards violence. Riot gear amplifies messages of power and control, and insinuates violence will occur.

Appearance characteristics of police can alter the public's perception of the police's intentions. Riot gear may incite aggression or cause the police to be perceived as holding militaristic values. The track-record of police violence and brutality solidifies such perceptions.



If police uniforms, especially with riot gear, have negative effects on the police's behaviour and attitudes, and the public's perceptions of police and safety, why is it still being used?

Removing riot gear won't remove the systemic racism, toxic masculinity, abuse of power, and excessive use of force that the wearer embodies.

Systematic issues need systemic change.