

The salience of the uniform in young children's perception of police status

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Purpose. Children's understanding of the role and powers of legal personnel is fundamental to their comprehension of legal processes. This study investigates the possibility that young children's understanding of police authority to arrest may be dominated by visual cues, namely the presence of a police uniform.

Method. Children aged 5, 7 and 9 years were presented with illustrated scenarios in which they were requested to identify who could carry out an arrest. Response alternatives were: a policeman out of uniform; a man who is not a policeman but is wearing a police uniform; and a third man who is not a policeman but wears a different uniform.

Results. Correct performance on the task increased with age. Errors consisted mainly of choices of the non-policeman in police uniform.

Conclusions. The findings indicate that children's initial perceptions of police status are dominated by superficial aspects of appearance which are more directly accessible than matters of societally conferred status. This has implications for theory and practice concerning children and the law.

A fundamental aspect of learning about the law and legal processes involves understanding the basic roles and actions that key participants play. For example, to begin to comprehend descriptions of legal events, the child needs to know what is a police officer, a judge, a lawyer, a defendant, a juror and a witness, and what it means to make an arrest, swear an oath, give a warning, and so on.

Over the last decade, a growing body of research has revealed that development in this domain is gradual, with some concepts and terms acquired early but others associated with uncertainty or confusion for several years of primary schooling (Flin & Spencer, 1995; Flin, Stevenson, & Davies, 1989; Peterson-Badali, Abramovitch, & Duda, 1997; Saywitz, 1989; Saywitz, Jaenicke, & Camparo, 1990; Warren-Luebecker, Tate, Hinton, & Ozbeck, 1989). Failures to understand common roles, labels or procedures are potential sources of serious communication breakdowns in practical dealings with children in legal contexts (Abramovitch, Higgins-Biss, & Biss, 1993; Flin & Spencer, 1995; Saywitz, 1989).

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The present study is concerned with children's understanding of what entitles a person to carry out a basic police duty, namely the arrest. Specifically, the study was conducted in order to investigate the possibility that young children may perceive the authority to carry out an arrest as deriving from the wearing of a police uniform. That is, young children may associate the role and powers of the police with external (visible) attributes rather than societally instituted authority.

There are several reasons to expect this to be the case. First, children have more ready access to information concerning the police apparel than they do to the underlying societal privileges and constraints upon police powers; the former is concrete information, the latter is abstract. Children as young as 6 years of age have been found to exploit visual cues to adults' occupations (Jahoda, 1959), and the police uniform is an especially strong cue. Most theories of child development acknowledge that there are gradual shifts from early childhood to adolescence in terms of increasing ability to grasp and use abstract information, and that young children are oriented predominantly around the concrete. Saywitz (1989) has demonstrated that children's understanding of the legal system progresses from an initially 'characteristic' orientation (concerned with relatively superficial and visible features) to a 'defining' (role or function-related) orientation during middle childhood and early adolescence.

Secondly, police officers are among occupations that children encounter early in their literature and television experiences (Low & Durkin, 1997), and their presentations in these contexts are normally highly stylized with uniforms given prominence. Children may of course come across police officers not in uniform (e.g. in programmes intended for older viewers or in occasional real world encounters) but, *a priori*, there is no reason for assuming that they recognize that non-uniformed persons *are* police.

Thirdly, children are most likely to be aware of police officers in public places when those officers are in uniform (Jenkins, Seydlitz, Osofsky, & Fick, 1997). Fourthly, young children are sometimes encouraged to regard police as sources of assistance and protection (Jenkins *et al.*, 1997), and it is likely that parents and teachers communicating such messages would emphasize uniforms as salient means of identifying these resources.

There is evidence to indicate that children do perceive the uniform as integral to the police officer's status. Furth (1980) describes children in the early stages of societal understanding (aged around 5–6 years old) as regarding adult roles in terms of their own experiences of people in those roles. In accounting for their experiences and inferences, children focus often on the visible features of the adult. Thus, one of Furth's interviewees, aged 5 years, explained that policemen wear uniforms 'so's policeman around . . . it gets in trouble . . . If somebody goes too fast, they put them in prison'. She knew about things like this because 'I see people doing them' (Furth, 1980, p. 117). A 6-year-old, when asked: 'How do you know someone's a policeman?' replied: 'Because he's got special clothes, with a hat, and a gold bit on it.' (Interviewer: 'Yes. Can anyone do what a policeman does?') 'No.' ('I mean could I catch a robber?') 'You could, but it wouldn't be, you couldn't arrest him, could you?' ('I don't know, why couldn't I?') 'Because you haven't got

a prison to put him . . .’ (p. 131). Another 6-year-old commented on the police: ‘Yes, they wear uniforms. ’Cos they go in a police office’ (pp. 132–133). A 7-year-old explained a policeman without his uniform: ‘He’d just be an ordinary man.’ (‘Would he still be a policeman?’) ‘I don’t think so, because he hadn’t got his uniform on’ (p. 140).

In sum, Furth’s young interviewees indicated that they perceived a strong association between a policeman and his uniform; in the absence of his uniform, they doubt that he is still a policeman. Even older children found it difficult to conceive of this transformation. One 9-year-old with a particular interest in the police was asked if an officer could still be a policeman without his uniform, and responded: ‘Yes, he has a kind of blue shirt with a black tie’ (p. 159).

Furth’s findings were reported as part of a larger study of children’s societal understanding, and it was not necessary for his purposes to quantify responses with respect to the salience of the police uniform. While clinical interview data generate valuable insights into children’s reasoning, they do not confirm the primacy or generality of particular conceptualizations. The present study was intended to provide a more focused test of children’s perceptions of the importance of wearing a uniform to carrying out the basic police duty of conducting an arrest.

Children appear to grasp at an early age that a principal function of the police is to apprehend bad people (Furth, 1980; Low & Durkin, 1997). Police officers are highly regarded by children (Clifford, Gunter, & McAleer, 1995; Furth, 1980; Wright *et al.*, 1995; Wroblewski & Huston, 1987). Furthermore, the uniform appears to enhance children’s perceptions of police officers: for example, Singer and Singer (1985) found that adolescents rated officers in uniform more favourably on measures of competence, intelligence and helpfulness than when they were in plain clothes. Hence, young children can comprehend the activity of arresting a bad person, and they regard the police positively. However, tentative evidence from Furth (1980) indicates that they understand the police officer’s authority as closely identified with wearing a uniform.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether children distinguish between having the professional status of police officer and wearing police clothing. In real life, these attributes are typically highly correlated, but it is possible to conjecture plausible contexts in which they are separated. Children were presented with short illustrated scenarios which juxtaposed three men who were attributed different statuses: an out-of-uniform policeman, a man who is not a policeman but is dressed in a police uniform, and a man who is not a policeman and is not in police uniform. The child’s task was to identify which man could carry out an arrest. It was expected that children would find the dissociation of policeman and uniform confusing, and that their errors would demonstrate a bias towards assuming that the man who did wear the police uniform could perform the arrest. Although age-related improvements in correct answers were anticipated, the age at which children should be able to deal with the task correctly was uncertain, given the fact that even 8- and 9-year-olds in Furth’s study saw the uniform as critical.

Method

Participants

Seventy-six children attending state primary school and kindergartens in upper-working to middle-class suburbs of a large Australian city participated in the study. Children from three age levels (5, 7 and 9 years) participated, with approximately equal numbers of males and females at each level. There were 26 children in the youngest group, and 25 in each of the others. Mean age (and age ranges) in months were: 65 (61–67), 88 (84–90) and 112 (109–114), respectively.

Stimulus materials

The stimulus materials consisted of cartoon pictures prepared for this study. There were four sets of experimental material, and three introductory/filler sets.

The experimental sets each consisted of four pictures. Each picture was presented on a separate card, 5 × 8 in (12.5 × 20.5 cms), covered in clear protective film. All of the drawings were in black and white. In three of the drawings a single man was depicted in his working clothes. Beside the man was another set of clothes, and it was explained that he would be getting changed into these. In the fourth picture, all three men were presented side by side, now wearing their second set of garments. They witnessed a crime (also illustrated in the picture) being committed by another party or parties. An example of one of the picture sets is presented in the Appendix.

The accompanying script (presented verbally by the experimenter) read:

‘This is John and he’s a policeman. But it’s time to go home now. So, John is going to get changed into his ordinary clothes.

This is Curly, he’s a shop assistant. Curly has found an old police uniform, and he’s decided to try it on to see if it fits him.

This is Mike, he’s a salesman. Mike trains in the Army sometimes. He’s going to put on his Army clothes today.

Curly, Mike and John are walking down the street when they see a big man attack someone. Who is allowed to arrest the big man? Curly, Mike or John?’

The stories accompanying the other card sets were varied, but all involved the same theme of a policeman for some reason changing out of his uniform and another man putting on a police uniform. The third man put on a different uniform (army, fireman, parking inspector). The reasons the men changed clothes were varied across stories, and included going to a fancy dress party, playing sport, and taking part in a play. The faces of the men were drawn so as to emphasize their distinctiveness. *Policemen* were selected as the focus for two reasons. First, the well-established bias in children’s media to present male figures made it reasonable to suppose that children’s experiences of fictional police officers would be predominantly of men rather than women. Secondly, to mix the gender of the officers would introduce an irrelevant and possibly confusing variable (e.g. a participant might reason that only a man could intervene in a male–male fight).

The introductory/filler pictures were intended to ensure that the child understood the practicalities of the procedure and to vary the task. The first card presented to all participants showed three figures: one was a sick child in bed, and the others were a doctor and a milkman. The accompanying script (presented verbally by the experimenter) said: ‘Angie is not feeling very well today. Who would come to make her feel better, the doctor or the milkman?’ The two filler cards contained similarly simple choices based around figures or themes presumed familiar to young children.

Procedure

Each child was tested individually. The sets of experimental materials were shuffled before each new participant was tested. The introductory set was placed first, and then the filler sets inserted so that

they occurred third and sixth in the series presented to the child. The female experimenter sat beside the participant and explained the task as a game in which the child would be shown some pictures and told a story, and would then be asked to pick someone in one of the pictures.

Each experimental set was presented picture by picture, with the experimenter providing the appropriate verbal description (see above) before proceeding to the next picture. The pictures were laid left to right in front of the participant, and remained before him or her throughout the trial. In this way, it was aimed to minimize memory demands upon the child: the information that a particular figure was originally dressed as a policeman was visible continuously.

When the final card was placed in front of the child, he or she was encouraged to show his or her selection by pointing to the relevant figure. Children were told that if they were not sure, they should make their best guess.

All children grasped the practical requirements of the procedure readily, and appeared to enjoy the task. All children answered all of the introductory and filler items correctly. The task took between 5 and 10 min to administer per participant.

Each instance in which a child identified the man shown initially to be a policeman as the person allowed to carry out the arrest was scored as correct. The total possible number of correct choices for each child was thus four. There were two main possible types of error: Police uniform-based (i.e. choice of the non-policeman wearing the police uniform), or Other uniform-based (e.g. selection of man in a fireman's uniform). Other possible errors included 'Don't know' or idiosyncratic responses, but in fact these proved negligible. Also recorded were any spontaneous comments or justifications offered by the children.

Table 1. Mean correct identifications of policemen as empowered to arrest by age group (standard deviations in parentheses)

Age group	Correct scores
5 years	1.46 (1.63)
7 years	2.68 (1.89)
9 years	2.96 (1.59)

Note: Maximum possible score = 4.

Results

The mean numbers of correct choices by age group are presented in Table 1.

Correct responses increased with age. A one-way analysis of variance confirmed that the differences among groups were significant ($F(2,73) = 5.58, p < .01$). *Post hoc* pairwise comparisons, by the Newman–Keuls procedure ($\alpha = .05$) showed that the 5-year-olds' scores were significantly lower than each of the older groups, but the difference between the latter was not significant.

Error analysis was straightforward: some 94% of the errors were Police uniform-based (that is, the children selected the non-policeman who happened to be wearing the police uniform). Informal justifications volunteered by the children included 'Cos he's got the police uniform', 'He's wearing police clothes' and 'He's the policeman'. Almost all of the few remaining errors (6% = 8 errors) were Other uniform-based. These were not associated with age group. There

were no 'Don't know' responses, and only one child (a 5-year-old) provided a couple of responses which could not be coded. Spontaneous comments indicated that the children providing Other uniform-based errors associated the presence of weapons or uniforms with the authority to arrest; for example, a 5-year-old who chose a fireman explained 'Because he's got a sword' (referring to the man's axe).

Discussion

Children aged 5, 7 and 9 years were tested on their ability to determine who was empowered to conduct an arrest: a policeman who had changed from his uniform to civilian clothes, a man with a different occupation who had donned a police uniform temporarily for reasons unconnected with police work, and a man in the uniform of another occupation. With age, children were significantly more likely to choose correctly the man who had been described as a policeman. Importantly, children's errors were predominantly in favour of selecting the man currently wearing the police uniform. In fact, the younger children were more likely to select a non-policeman in police uniform as allowed to carry out an arrest than they were to select a policeman out of his uniform. The frequency of this error declined with age, but even some of the oldest participants provided some responses of this kind. It appears that children do perceive a strong association between the uniform and police status, and that when this is disrupted, they will attach greater weight to the presence of a uniform than to initial information concerning individuals' actual occupations.

Because the task involved transformation of three men's appearances, it could be objected that it places too great a strain on the memory capacities of the younger participants. However, in each trial, all four pictures remained in front of the child, making relevant visual information available. Further, if the children had forgotten the initial occupations of the men, their final selections were clearly not random, but based almost invariably upon the presence of the uniform. In fact, somewhat to the experimenters' surprise, children often *named* correctly the man whom they saw as allowed to conduct the arrest (i.e. they mentioned the personal name that he had been given), indicating that they could retain and recall information from the introductory presentations. Note that this information was presented only verbally, while information about occupation was presented both visually and verbally and should therefore have been easier for children to retain.

These findings support the inference from qualitative data (Furth, 1980) that young children perceive the uniform as integral to the police officer's status. This is of both theoretical and practical interest. Theoretically, as we build richer accounts of what children know about the law and where the gaps in their knowledge are, it is important to bear in mind the principal sources from which children obtain their information and the conceptual frameworks that they have available in which to assimilate it. The evidence here supports Furth's view that 5-6-year-olds' thinking about societal roles tends to be undifferentiated (confusing

personal and societal roles), ahistorical (focused on the present and disregarding information concerning prior events), superficial (identifying the surface aspects of particular circumstances) and ego-typical (taking personal experience as the main criterion of understanding). Exactly how children develop their thinking about the police officer/uniform relationship is not tested here, but the present findings, Furth's interviews, and accounts of changes in understanding the legal system (Flin & Spencer, 1995; Saywitz, 1989; Warren-Luebecker *et al.*, 1989), do suggest that it may be a protracted development.

It should not be inferred from the present data that young children are incapable of distinguishing between a person's occupation and his or her clothing. It is possible that other modes of testing could enhance performance. For example, lengthier preambles or presentation in a more dynamic medium (such as videotape) might serve to establish the relevant individuals' professional status more firmly. However, elaborate contextual and narrative information of these kinds is not regularly available to children in most of their direct experiences of the police: in contrast, the presence or absence of a uniform is a basic element, and the present methodology indicates that it is very salient to children.

The practical implications of these findings are that, if young children do find it difficult to differentiate between police personnel and their uniforms, then they may find dealing with some police confusing. It is quite common for police officers working with children to conduct interviews out of uniform in attempts to make young interviewees feel more comfortable and less intimidated. Although the strategy appears well motivated, these findings suggest that unintended outcomes are possible. It is conceivable that many 5-year-olds may not understand that officers not in uniform *are* police; it is plausible that children whose prior experiences of police may have been indirect (e.g. media-based) may find it perplexing and stressful to meet persons in real life who claim to be police but do not conform to their expectations concerning uniforms. Some older children may also be uncertain. Further, if a child who holds strong expectations that police wear certain types of clothing can be persuaded otherwise, then it may follow that he or she will find it difficult to determine, in police stations and courts, who are police and who are not. Saywitz (1989) reports that many children aged 4–7 years do experience difficulties in differentiating among police, judges and other aspects of the court process. Children's perceptions of legal roles may be based initially on criteria that adults would consider superficial or symbolic, and conflicts between their perceptions and adults' may not always be readily apparent.

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Appendix
Example of pictures illustrating one of the stories

Note: The pictures were placed one at a time, left to right in front of the child.

