

Authority by Uniform

When you wear a uniform to play a certain role, that uniform wields power over others. People create impressions or even illusions of power simply with what they wear. When you wear the right clothes for the situation, you can persuade without even speaking. Think of what a police uniform says. Now imagine a police officer trying to clear an urban riot in street clothes. The officer in uniform will get immediate attention because we respond and respect uniforms. Even clergy who wear their robes command more respect and are able to persuade and influence with higher efficiency than they can when sporting street clothes. We see a doctor in a white coat and we automatically assume he is a medical professional who knows exactly what to prescribe. When a businessperson shows up in a \$1,500 suit and polished shoes, we automatically assume he is in charge or is the decision maker. We know that people treat us differently based on how we dress.

In one experiment, a man was told to stop pedestrians in New York City. Once halted, the experimenter either had them pick up paper bags, move from where they were standing or give money to a perfect stranger. The experimenter would point to another man nearly fifty feet away, telling them the man had over-parked and didn't have any change to pay the meter. He would then tell them to go give the man the necessary change. Researchers watched the experiment to see how many people complied when the experimenter was dressed in normal street clothes versus when he was dressed as a security guard. After giving the command, the experimenter would turn a corner so he was out of the pedestrians' sight. Incredibly, almost all of the pedestrians obeyed when he was dressed in uniform, even after he was gone! When he was dressed in street clothes, however, less than half of the pedestrians complied with his request.

In another study, Lawrence and Watson found that individuals asking for contributions to law enforcement and healthcare campaigns gathered more donations when they were wearing sheriffs' and nurses' uniforms than when they were just dressed normally.