

WHAT U WEAR

SPIFFY UNIFORMS



by Jerome Ryckborst

Your mother wears army boots! Ooo-boy, are you insulted? Maybe, maybe not. But what's behind this affront? My mother wears boots, but *not* army boots. The insult lies in the fact that the boots in question are army issue and part of a uniform.

Uniforms themselves are extremely useful, though their use is not always popular. Uniforms are great for impression management. *What does this mean?*

For starters, it makes aggression acceptable. Every acceptable form of violence today is perpetrated by people in uniforms. At first thought it seems only representatives of the state fall into this category. It's true — the police and the armed forces have a legal monopoly on the use of physical force. But we can't forget sports, where violence is the

name of the game (*or is it hockey?*).

The advantages of uniforms are numerous. Uniforms identify members of a group and are usually mandatory dress. This allows a homogenous appearance, which is both de-individualizing and de-humanizing. The aim is to strip the group members of their self-identify/individuality and enforce group identity. Though this sounds scary, it's exactly what the state wants in its military and its police.

Certain behaviour, like aggression, is generally seen as socially unacceptable. Since we all live in the same society, we all learn the same rules of normal behaviour. But the wearing of uniforms allows people to divorce socialized, anti-violence attitudes and espouse more aggressive behaviour with which the state enforces law and

order. So when a cop roughs someone up, nobody blinks.

Uniforms are also symbols. The public can immediately identify the role and predict the behaviour of someone in uniform. Actually, *all* clothing tells us about the person wearing them. In only a few seconds we unconsciously evaluate the appearance of people we see and decide who's nice or safe and who's not. We can all recognize weirdos at a glance — and we give them their space. This whole evaluative process is called impression formation.

Impression formation is biased because each one of us draws a personal meaning from a certain clothing assembly. Uniforms neatly side-step this problem by removing all doubt as to the message. This is an extreme example of impression management, or controlling how

you are perceived socially.

There are people who envy the power and authority which military or police uniforms exude. Security officers like our own *Campus Cowboys* wear uniforms in an attempt to imitate this image. A more obscure example are the people who wear Rambo-style combat fatigues.

But the authority which uniforms represents isn't universally accepted. Some people question the absolute authority which uniforms express. That's what motivates expressions like the proverbial army boots that your mother wears.

Oops, sorry.

The book review of *The Devil Is Loose* was run without a byline. Peter Cole was the writer.



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