

Are You for Real? Police and Other Impersonators

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In our fantasy play my 4-year-old grandson often asks me, "Are you for real?" His inquiry is more profound than he perhaps realizes. As daily events remind us, his question touches many facets of contemporary American society in which often, as Gilbert and Sullivan wrote, "things are seldom what they seem."

Consider, for example, how prudent it is to be initially skeptical, or at least to question, news media accounts, drug company claims, age and gender appearances, pledges of fidelity and marital status, proof of professional license and expertise (whether involving medicine or home remodels), a low odometer reading on an older used car, or the identity of an Internet communicator or credit card user.

The realness of even a police officer was an issue in the murder of James Gottlieb, a Long Island banker, who was gunned down recently during a struggle after being pulled over in his car and stopped by a police impersonator. In pulling over as requested, the banker acknowledged the presumed authority of the state as expressed by the car with its siren and flashing lights behind his. But the "authority" turned out to rest on nothing more than the deceptive appropriation of easily obtained symbols.

That familiar sinking feeling when the vehicle behind yours suddenly turns on its siren and you see its flashing lights in your rear-view mirror is an experience known to most of us. It is a moment fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty about what we may have done and what the officer knows, or can legally or illegally discover. We worry about whether we will be respectfully treated with due process, and without errors or false accusations.

An additional concern that seems more common in recent years (or at least is receiving increased media attention) is wondering whether the officer is who he or she claims to be, rather than a badge-growing clone who has purchased official looking police paraphernalia on the internet or at a costume store and seen too many tv cop shows. When pulled over, citizens may experience some of the same anxiety of walking into the unknown traditionally felt by officers in pulling cars over.

Impersonation represents a kind of temporary identity theft that can hurt not only the duped, but society more broadly. Unlike the current crime of identity theft, impersonating an agent of the state is the theft or appropriation of a social identity. The ramifications for the social order and trust in authority are perhaps more profound than in case of individual identity theft.

Ironically, the increased use of undercover policing in the United States since the death of J. Edgar Hoover has likely contributed to the spread of impersonation. Real stings and mass media dramas involving the undercover theme have accustomed citizens and perpetrators alike to the presence of non-uniformed police. This has likely eroded the threshold for skepticism.

This can also lead to a reverse version of the "who are you really?" question for those who are part of a genuine covert operation. Real police (undercover, plainclothes or off-duty) are occasionally perceived to be imposters. In New York and elsewhere a number of police officers (disproportionately members of minority groups) out of uniform have been killed or injured by fellow officers who perceived them as criminals.

Establishing police authenticity can also be an issue, given the multiplicity of specialized, non-uniformed agencies and units (national intelligence, drug and customs, as well as state, county, and city) with low visibility operations in the same area. For security reasons their true role may not be known to others, with results that are often unpublicized but make for compelling stories varying between Keystone cops and tragedy.

Given incompatible or faulty communications systems, supposed impersonators may also turn out to be real. Thus county or city police officers, unaware that their counterparts in unmarked cars have made stops, may respond to citizen complaints about supposed police impersonators who in fact are authentic.

Occasionally "real" impersonators also make faulty assumptions. Consider a Michigan case in which a police chief, driving home from work in his private car, was pulled over by teenagers in a black Dodge that followed him and flashed blue and white strobe lights. Imagine their surprise. In other cases police impersonators are arrested when uniformed officers, seeing a "police" stop in progress, pull over to help.

A variety of types of impersonation can be noted such as the serious crimes of the 1929 Chicago Valentine's Day

Massacre, the Brinks Robbery, the 2005 Belfast \$50 million bank robbery, the activities of Carl Chessman (the California red-light bandit of the 1950s). Crimes against drug dealers by other dealers, or criminals pretending to be police and carrying out interrogations to learn what other criminals know or are doing can be observed, as can efforts to test the waters to see what can be gotten away with. Consider also the garden variety teenage pranksters and police aficionados playing as authorities and individuals acting in what they perceive as high-mindedness in carrying out vigilante justice.

There are also sizeable gray areas with respect to what constitutes impersonation with respect to categories such as bail bondsmen, bounty hunters and private security workers.

Questions of "who are you?" become even more complicated when we consider individuals whose formal affiliation with a police agency is genuine, but whose behavior is that of a criminal. With respect to traffic stops women seem more likely to be victimized and are certainly much less likely to impersonate police (other than as part of confidence schemes), than is the case for males. Consider cases of "driving while female" involving alleged harassment and coerced sex on the part of rogue male police. Beyond facing the trappings of official legal and lethal power, the women pulled over may be additionally vulnerable as a result of traffic or other offenses.

Illegal immigrants, fearing deportation, also seem more likely to be victimized. As with criminals as victims, they are less likely to report the incident. Large urban areas are more likely settings than smaller towns and rural areas.

Given the factors that seem conducive to impersonation and getting away with it, a good question is, why isn't there much more? On the other hand we don't have a clear idea of how much there is. There are no national statistics on the behavior and it is likely among the most unreported of violations, partly because those subject to impersonators may not realize it, may feel no great harm is done (e.g., a common pattern is simply being warned by the imposter). Drug dealers may not want to volunteer information about their activities to police. Beyond the embarrassment of being taken in, that is also the case for victims of confidence schemes. There may also be no victim in the conventional sense, as when imposters interview those at a crime scene or private police act as if they had the authority of public police in directing citizen behavior.

The causes and consequences of the traditional forms of impersonation vary significantly. For many the ploy is strategic offering a means to gain access --whether for theft, assault or information, or to hide identity and/or to cast aspersions on authorities (e.g., in guerilla and civil war contexts opponents wearing the uniforms of their enemies). For some (often on the fringe of the criminal justice world) impersonation can involve some deep psychological need to assert authority, while for others it can be just a form of play. Yet all represent a tiny strand in a much broader tapestry of authenticity, identity, trust and deception in the modern world.

Police impersonation, like many other forms of deception is encouraged by the characteristics of contemporary American life. We live in a society where face-to-face interaction has been vastly augmented by distance-mediated interaction. This mass society is made up mostly of strangers where in place of reputation, we must rely on signs (uniforms, badges, identification cards, licenses easily obtained by almost anyone on the Internet or through catalogs) to verify someone's authenticity. We know that security screens such as passwords and keys can be mimicked. The symbols can be genuine (e.g., a stolen police badge or car) even as their possessor is not entitled to use them.

Traditionally the market in police goods was less developed and accessible and purchasers relied on local sources. This may have introduced a degree of accountability.

We also live in a society that encourages role-playing, make-overs and becoming who you want to be (regardless of whether this is who you are entitled to be).

A hypothesis to explore is that police impersonation is more common in countries with an Anglo police tradition in which the line between citizens and the state was not as sharply drawn as on the Continent. Sir Robert Peel, the founder of the modern British police, argued for a democratic police who were to be local. In his conception all citizens had a responsibility to help maintain order. Traditions of private police are also more strongly developed in countries with an Anglo tradition.

The vast expansion of private police with uniforms and weapons seen in recent decades is also conducive to impersonation, whether to better perform the private police role or because of the temptation to assert authority offered by the trappings of the role.

The encounter with a presumed police officer on the street occurs against the same backdrop of the need for verification of the identity/qualifications of a doctor or a roof repairperson. But unlike in those situations, we don't have the luxury of time to ask a friend's recommendation, to see examples of their work or to check with the Better Business Bureau or a state agency to see if the person is appropriately licensed and/or bonded. Because of the need for immediate action, some social situations will always be messier than others with respect to the documentation of identity. Law enforcement is one of them.

The historically evolved, broad societal characteristics and the nature of police stop situations necessitating split second decisions limit the impact any policy can have. However some small steps might lessen impersonation problems. Police advise those pulled over who are in doubt to carefully inspect police ids, when available to use a cell phone to call 911 for verification of an officer's identity or request a uniformed officer, or to drive slowly with blinkers on to a well-lit public area or police station. Penalties beyond the moderate misdemeanor level characterizing many local jurisdictions might make a modest difference. Policies requiring harder-to-replicate lights in the front grill of police cars, using only marked police vehicles for traffic stops and mandating that a uniformed officer always be present, or summoned, when a routine traffic stop occurs also seem wise.

However, under varying circumstances, police will always need either to reveal or conceal their identification and citizens need to be both cooperative and skeptical of authority. The negotiation of these tensions in a democratic society is and ought to be eternally problematic.

A related paper, [Fraudulent Identity and Biography](#), is available on this site.

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