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## Dress Like Me: An Exploration of Rural Graduate Social Work Attire

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## Dress Like Me: An Exploration of Rural Graduate Social Work Attire

### Cover Page Footnote

"Imitation is not just the sincerest form of flattery - it's the sincerest form of learning." — George Bernard Shaw

## An Exploration of Graduate Social Work Intern Attire

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**Abstract.** During graduate school internship training, some students wear more formal attire and others casual attire. This study's purpose was to explore rural areas clients' preference for graduate social work interns' attire. Clients from internship sites located in a rural southern location were asked their attire preferences based on comfort and confidence levels, degree of warmth, returning appointments, and during a crisis. One hundred and twenty-six subjects participated in the study and responded that casual dress was preferred in terms of specific impressions. The results of the study were to build rapport; graduate social work interns should consider their clientele when deciding on attire.

**Keywords:** rural attire, therapeutic alliance, graduate internships

The client-psychotherapist relationship in Social Work is a critical aspect of successful treatment, particularly for the so-called therapeutic alliance. That term, coined in Client-Centered Therapy in the 1950s, is defined as clinical warmth, empathy, and genuineness (Bozarth, 2012). It has become an important aspect of the evidenced-based approach to psychotherapy practice (Schwartz et al., 2017). Social work education has embraced therapeutic alliance as evidenced by the frequency of publications related to this concept (Gair, 2011).

Many factors influence the development of the therapeutic alliance. Something as unassuming as attire may have a strong connection with it (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003). No formal research exists on social work intern attire and few on clinical social work attire. However, Long, Morton, and Taylor (2017) identified that psychiatric resident attire influences the therapeutic relationship. Social work graduate interns need to learn to be most effective as well as understand clients' possible negative reactions to certain aspects of their experience.

During the personal growth phase of mental health in the 1970s and 80s, psychotherapists forsook more formal attire in favor of more casual attire (Anthony et al., 2003; Long et al., 2017). Other professionals followed this trend. Clergy adopted more casual attire with contemporary services, and businesses enacted Casual Friday for employees. However, as the

social work field shifted from an art toward evidenced-based skill training approaches, the dress of therapists trended towards more formal attire (Nihalani et al., 2006). The challenge for psychotherapy, and social work as well, is not only to make patients feel at ease in treatment environment but conduct the therapeutic exchange effectively and efficiently manner.

The therapist's attire is a factor in a client's first impressions of the intern (Scholar et al., 2014; Summers & Barber, 2003). This is a complicated dimension of psychotherapy with rapport influenced by many factors, including age, race, hygiene, eye contact, body language, and tone of voice (Summers & Barber, 2003). Attire may have especially potent effects as it can be symbolic of a perceived power differential. Social workers need to be sensitive to this because they often provide support and resources for potentially vulnerable, oppressed, and traumatized individuals.

This study focuses on one specific client population, rural clients. Rural clients are more likely to suffer from low incomes and poverty and expect more personalized relationships. They tend to see urban approaches as unpleasant, depersonalizing and rude. A social work intern who is viewed as too formalistic may decrease the client's motivation to cooperate. When clients see their social worker overdressed or underdressed, this may cause a psychological divide (Daley, 2015). In particular, the study looks at the last year of graduate school internship training when intern attire is diverse. This study did not assess the personal attire or profession of the respondents.

The study specifically addresses whether a particular mode of attire was preferred by rural clients who were receiving social work intern services. Identifying appropriate attire that matches the client's preference could make a difference with the interns' efforts with clients to be successful or not. An extensive search of the research literature found no studies conducted to explore clients' preference for their social work intern attire at social work graduate school internship placements.

## **Methods**

Data for this investigation were collected using a convenience sample of social work clients seen by social work interns at various rural outpatient social work mental health agencies in Northeast Arkansas surrounding the city of Jonesboro. These agencies included both public and private agencies, as well as for-profit and non-profit agencies. Outpatient mental health agencies participated and provided data for the study. Data were collected from small town graduate internship sites surrounding Jonesboro since students were from these areas. These included the following areas in Arkansas: Bay, Brookland, Lake City, Paragould, Marked Tree, Trumann, and Walnut Ridge. These areas had an average population of less than 7,000 according to the Rural Health Information Hub (2019).

The rural greater Jonesboro area has a low socioeconomic status with a median income of \$37,378. The data collection sites and settings were located near the university. Field instructors at ten mental health agencies agreed to participate. IRB approval was obtained to begin the study. Participants who were not mentally competent or overtly not oriented or psychotic were excluded from the study.

When participants kept their appointment with the social work intern, they were asked to complete a 5- to 10-minute survey to evaluate their views concerning social work intern attire. If the client agreed to complete the survey, the administrative assistant administered the survey. Since the social work intern did not administer the survey instrument, this reduced social desirability bias and acquiescence bias of clients trying to please their social work intern with overly agreeable answers. Clients who were asked to fill out a survey, 75 % completed a survey.

The survey instrument included questions about client preferences regarding comfort, confidence, first session, psychological crisis, and importance of social work attire. The questionnaire included demographic information and assessed clients' first choice for graduate social work intern attire. The survey questions are listed in Table 1. Two researchers familiar with survey development and clinical research assessed the questionnaire's face validity based on their experience with research surveys.

Surveys were collected during 2018 to 2019. The lead author was present at each agency site to ensure data collection protocols. The participation was voluntary and confidentially was secured. No identifying information was collected. Some of the social work agencies had dress code policies for professional staff. However, most policies were either not strictly enforced or were not clearly defined.

Three pictures of female and male social work interns wearing different types of attire were presented with the survey. In the photographs, the models were dressed professionally, business casual dress and casual dress. An African American male and a Caucasian female were pictured to ensure diversity in gender and race (Figure 1). The photographs were color, full figure with plain background, and neutral facial expression. The photographs accompanied the surveys when the clients were asked to complete the survey questions.

The photographs included labels of the different attire and dress. The professional dress pictures depicted a more sophisticated attire consisting of dark suits or dress pants with sports jacket with a button-up shirt and ties. Female professional dress includes business suits, dark colors (black, navy blue, or grey) and high or low heels. Business casual attire consisted of dress slacks and a button-up shirt but lacks a blazer or coat and tie. Female business casual attire included dress slacks, fashionable top, and moderate jewelry. Casual attire included tee-shirt, jeans, and sneakers; this applies to both male and female social work interns.

Once the survey data were completed, demographic descriptive statistics and client attire question preferences were analyzed using SPSS. Open-ended question results were tabulated for the most common comments.

**Table 1**

*Intern Study Survey Questionnaire*

**1) Please list the Following:**

_____ Age	_____ Race
_____ Gender	_____ Education Level
_____ Marital Status	_____ How Long have you seen your intern

Income \_\_\_ Under \$25,000 or \_\_\_ Over \$25,000

**2) Would you prefer your Intern to dress?**

_____ Professional Dress	_____ Casual Dress
_____ Business Casual	_____ Do not care

**3) Is it more comforting and supportive to talk when your Intern is wearing:**

_____ Professional Dress	_____ Casual Dress
_____ Business Casual	_____ Do not care

**4) Does it provide more confidence with your Intern is wearing:**

_____ Professional Dress	_____ Casual Dress
_____ Business Casual	_____ Do not care

**5) When first seeing your Intern, do you prefer your Intern to wear:**

_____ Professional Dress	_____ Casual Dress
_____ Business Casual	_____ Do not care

**6) If you are in a psychological crisis, would your Intern to wear:**

_____ Professional Dress	_____ Casual Dress
_____ Business Casual	_____ Do not care

**7) Which Intern attire is most competent or able to meet your needs:**

_____ Professional Dress	_____ Casual Dress
_____ Business Casual	_____ Do not care

**8) How important is intern attire to you?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Not at all important      \_\_\_\_\_ Somewhat important      \_\_\_\_\_ Very Important

**9) Please list the specific reasons for intern attire preferences**

**Figure 1**

***Model Photographs***

**Male Professional Dress**



- Dark suit or;
- Dress pants with sports jacket
- Button down shirt and tie

**Male Business Casual**



- Dress slacks
- Button down shirt
- Slacks blazer and tie

**Male Casual Dress**



- T-Shirt
- Jeans
- Sneakers

**Female Professional Dress**



- Business suit
- Dark colors
- High or low heels

**Female Business Casual**



- Dress slacks
- Fashionable top
- Moderate jewelry

**Female Casual Dress**



- T-Shirt
- Jeans
- Sneakers



## Results

One hundred and twenty-six subjects participated in the study. Their data were analyzed using SPSS. Table 2 reflects the demographic make-up of the participating subjects. Cross-tabulations of reported demographic variables to survey questions related to dress preferences were performed. Additionally, Chi-square analysis was included in determining whether any significant associations existed between demographic factors and preferences for dress. The subjects who responded to this survey generally preferred the social work intern to dress casually (65.9%). Another 19.8% did not have any preference for the intern's attire. Only 11.1% preferred the intern dress business casual and just 2.4% preferred a professional attire.

When the subjects were asked whether dress mattered in terms of specific impressions or situations, casual attire continued to be preferred. Sixty-six percent of the respondents felt casual attire was more comforting and supportive. The respondents also reported that their confidence in the intern was enhanced by casual dress (62.7%). At the first meeting, 47.6% preferred a casual attire, 22.6 preferred business casual, 16.2 did not care, and 13.6 preferred professional. The social work intern was viewed as more competent when dressed casually. When the client was in crisis, he or she did not express a particular preference for attire (32.5% - casual, 28.6% - do not care, 26.2% - business casual, 12.7% - professional). For the total pool of subjects, 64.3% reported that social work intern attire was quite important or somewhat important, and 35.7% reported attire was not at all important.

The next step in the data analysis included cross-tabulations of demographic factors against each of the dress preferences items in the study survey (See Table 1). A Chi-square analysis was performed in each case to determine whether any particular demographic sub-group had a unique preference for social work attire in terms of a concept or situation. Generally, the cross-tabulations continued to demonstrate that casual attire was preferred and unless individually noted below, no significant association between demographic factor and concepts and situations related to dress as probed with the survey tool. However, there were some notable findings.

The age group did significantly associate with a preference for attire at the first client meeting and social work intern ( $p = 0.002$ ). Persons aged 30 - 39 years demonstrated a preference for business casual attire at the first meeting, while persons 50 – 59 had no attire preference at the first meeting. Persons over 60 years of age strongly preferred casual attire (83.3%). When asked about how the client preferred the social work intern to be dressed when the client was in crisis, respondents generally had no specific preference. This non-preference was the case for all but one age group. Older respondents (>60 years) strongly preferred casual dress in this situation as well ( $p = 0.004$ ). When age was cross-tabulated against how attire influenced the client's perception of the intern's competence, a significant association was noted ( $p = 0.048$ ), persons aged 50 – 59 years reported that they did not think mode of dress had any effect on their perception of intern competency. Finally, regarding age group considerations, respondents were asked, how important is intern attire to you. Those aged 50 – 59 years felt attire was very important. Those over 60 years saw attire as not being at all important. There was a significant association between age groups and how strongly one felt about attire ( $p = 0.026$ ).

**Table 2*****Subject Demographic Data***

Category		Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	71	(56.3%)
	Male	54	(42.9%)
	Unspecified	1	(0.8%)
Age	Mean	40.67 years (SD – 16.87)	
	Median	37 years	
Race	White	101	(80.2%)
	African American	21	(16.6%)
	Asian	2	(1.6%)
	Unspecified	2	(1.6%)
Educational attainment	Less High School	44	(34.9%)
	High School	14	(11.0%)
	Some College	42	(33.3%)
	Bachelor's Degree	13	(10.3%)
	Graduate Degree	12	(9.50%)
	Doctorate Degree	1	(0.08)
Marital Status	Single	55	(43.7%)
	Married	38	(30.2%)
	Divorced	19	(15.1%)
	Separated	7	(5.5%)
	Widowed	7	(5.5%)
Income	< \$25,000	76	(60.3%)
	> \$25,000	30	(23.8%)
	No Response	20	(15.9%)

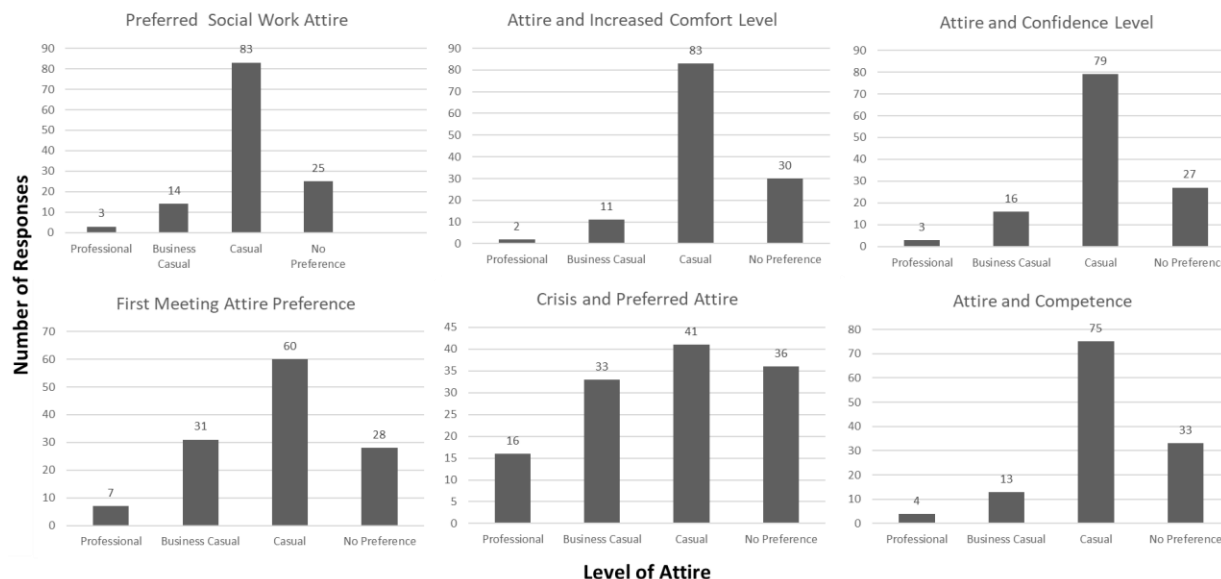
Cross-tabulations that included educational attainment yielded some significant associations. When asked overall how important was dress, a significant association was demonstrated ( $p = 0.030$ ). Participants with some college had a preference for business casual when asked overall how important dress was. Those with low levels of education (high school or less) and those with high levels of education (college degree or more) did not see attire as being important overall.

Income level cross-tabulations produced the greatest number of significant associations. The respondents were grouped by those making less than \$25,000 annually and those making

more than \$25,000 annually. Those in the higher income group were more likely to prefer business casual than were those making less than \$25,000 ( $p = 0.001$ ). When asked which mode of dress made the client feel comfortable and supported, those with lower incomes significantly preferred casual attire ( $p = 0.045$ ). Income cross-tabulated against which dress facilitated a feeling of confidence in the intern, lower income respondents significantly preferred casual attire ( $p = 0.012$ ). At the first meeting between intern and client, clients whose income was less than \$25,000 preferred the intern to dress casually. Those earning more than \$25,000 preferred the intern to dress in a business casual mode ( $p = 0.001$ ). Clients with lower incomes had the impression that the intern was competent when the intern dressed casually ( $p = 0.042$ ). Finally, when asked overall how important is dress, those with higher incomes care more about dress, those with lower incomes reported that dress was not really important ( $p = 0.005$ ) as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

### *Attire Preferences*



The last survey question, please list the specific reasons for intern attire preferences, yielded 58 responses, most of which were concise. One comment trend was that the professional relationship was more important than intern dress. Some of the more common statements made by the participants were:

1. They are there to talk with me as a person;
2. It doesn't matter to me what she wears, as long as I get help;
3. They need to understand and know what help I need; and
4. My therapist needs to be supportive and encouraging; not all dressed up.

## Discussion

This study explored how rural agency social work graduate intern attire impacts the potential for the development of therapeutic alliance. Our study found that the majority (70%) of participants prefer a graduate social work intern to dress casually, with only 13% preferring professional dress. Overall, participants preferred a social work graduate intern to dress casually regardless of client situation in the rural community.

Respondents generally preferred casual attire across all situations probed. Several significant results were found between preferences of dress and respondents' age, education, and income. It was discovered that clients in the middle-aged category (30-39) preferred business casual, while those over the age of 60 consistently preferred casual dress. If one compared these results with those obtained by Rishel, Hartnett, and Davis (2016), one could argue that the expectations of clients receiving rural social work services may be different from the expectations associated with urban social work care. Another significant result revealed that those age 50-59 responded that attire did not affect the perceived competence of the social work graduate intern.

Education level was a significant demographic factor in the study. It was ultimately discovered that attire was less important for those with high and low educational status and somewhat important for those with moderate levels of education. Interestingly, participants with moderate education levels were the only group of respondents to find attire important. Lastly, income was a significant factor in preference of dress; those with higher income cared more about the dress of the graduate social work intern and preferred business casual dress. Those with lower incomes cared less about dress and preferred casual attire. This result strengthens the idea that rural community social work clients want providers to dress casually and focus on therapeutic alliance. The importance of attire was supported by 87% of our sample, which is strong evidence that this is something which should be discussed in social work education.

A few limitations existed within our study. First, the study consisted of a convenience sample in a rural area of the Northeast Arkansas at outpatient mental health agencies. Therefore, our findings may only be relevant for interns at these settings. Data were not collected randomly, and readers should be careful in generalizing results to other groups. Although our findings were significant for agency participants used in our analysis, these results may not be relevant for other agencies such as hospital settings where participants are typically in a medical or psychological crisis and may be seeking more professional attire implying formal expertise.

Another limitation was the potential threat of internal validity related to use of questionnaires. When a participant responds to a questionnaire, this may not truly reflect their behavior or real life situations. It is possible, for example, that participants who responded that practitioner's attire will not impact how they are viewed may respond differently to practitioners wearing different types of attire.

Racial diversity was a limitation because this study was conducted in rural communities lacking in racial diversity and may be an avenue for further exploration. One other limitation was the majority of the participants were low-income persons, which is typical of rural cultures

(Daley, 2015). In addition, a self-developed attire assessment scale was used. No other scale could be located. This scale has not been tested for reliability. The dress pictures were taken at different places, different backgrounds, and different angles. When using a visual aid as a survey tool, this could be a potential complication.

The central theme of our findings is that rural social work clients, even though they did not think the correct attire is the most important quality their social workers should possess, prefer their social work graduate intern to be casually dressed. These results suggest that rural graduate social work interns must consider their clientele when deciding on attire. Adhering to client preferences for attire is one factor that could have a positive influence on forming a professional alliance and rapport.

Dress can be particularly challenging for social workers and interns who often go straight from a courtroom or a meeting to a home visit. Still, it can be crucial for helping clients to be able to be vulnerable and receive the help they need. To avoid power differentials when working with clients and provide the best service, graduate social work interns must pay careful attention to therapeutic factors including their attire and ultimately dress like their clients.

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