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“Their Image of Me”: A Phenomenological Study of Professional Dress Choices of Female Professors

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Winner Top Paper Award - Undergraduate student

In recent years, scholarly attention to professional dress as a form of nonverbal communication has faded into the background. However, I believe professional dress is an important area of study, considering the changing conditions in the world of work. Therefore, I decided to conduct this phenomenological study of the dress choices of female professors at a small, liberal arts college to discover what professional dress did for them internally and professionally. The analysis of the data suggests that these women try to use dress to represent themselves as who they are internally, without losing sight of their image as a professor, academic, and cultural member. Dress, for them, is a means of controlling and shaping who they view themselves to be into an appropriate external image of who they must be.

“I feel like I should be able to look however, but I know that part of their image of me is me, put together.”- Dr. Robinson²

Introduction

Over the years, scholars have explored some of the issues regarding dress, including professional dress. Within the phenomenon of dressing professionally, some have chosen to focus on how women feel about, use, or communicate with their manner of dress. However, in recent years, scholarly attention to professional dress as a form of nonverbal communication has faded into the background. It is surprising that scholars have pushed this issue aside, considering the changing conditions in the labor force within the United States during the recent economic depression (2008 to present). Furthermore, the growing numbers of women in the workplace (making up forty-nine percent of the overall workforce, as of 2010) as well as their changing positions within organizations merits a fresh look at how people, but especially women, are adjusting to these new conditions (“Even with progress,” 2011; Toossi, 2004).

The changing working environment in the United States is not limited to “Corporate America,” but touches all professions in some way. This study

addresses the issues of women's professional dress specifically within the realm of academia. Contemporary academics of any gender negotiate a rather complex working environment, addressing multiple audiences and taking on varied roles, including educator, mentor, researcher, colleague, and employee. For women, there is the added complexity of their cultural roles as women and, also possibly, wives and mothers, which can be considered in conflict with many of the other aforementioned roles. In the United States, women, on average, account for forty-two percent of full-time faculty, which shows that full-time academic positions are still mostly held by men, despite any gains women have made in attaining higher education (Curtis, 2011). To learn more about these women, working in a traditionally masculine profession and negotiating varied roles within that profession, one can look to how and what they may be communicating through their manner of dress.

Review of the Literature

There is a great deal of literature regarding women's dress, often focusing specifically on professional dress. Also, there is often a focus on outsiders' impressions of the person wearing professional dress (O'Neal & Lapitsky, 1991). There is also research that explores women's personal relationships with their clothing wardrobes (Guy & Banim, 2000). Rarely are the two combined however; there is very little research into women's relationships with their professional clothing and the perceived functions of that clothing. Additionally, the field lacks current information regarding professional female dress, especially as a form of nonverbal communication. Much of the research is at least ten years old, which is problematic since the attitude towards professional dress is constantly changing, as anyone could gather from a quick look through contemporary fashion magazines.

To better understand what is already known about women's dress, I turned to the existing literature on the nature of the female body and its ascribed meanings, and perceptions of women's dress, including issues of power and credibility.

The Female Body

Bordo (2003) explains that the female body is conceptualized very differently than the male body. The female body is often rooted in earthliness, a material body, whereas the male body is in the realm of ideas (also, Tyner & Ogle, 2009). Furthermore, a female body is never silent. Because of all the meanings that have been ascribed to 'femaleness' and the female body, it will always appear to be speaking, regardless of the woman's intentions. This has ramifications for women who attempt to dress professionally and desire to display more than their gender. As Bordo says, "When female bodies do not efface their femaleness, they may be seen as inviting, 'flaunting'" (p. 6). Wolf (1991) also stresses that no matter what

a woman wears to work, any "perceived sexuality" can negate her other skills and characteristics (p. 44).

Because of these concerns, women are encouraged, in a wide variety of ways, to "control" their fleshy bodies (Bordo, 2003). An extreme example of this would be the way an anorectic woman views her breasts. Bordo describes a young woman who "despises, in particular, all those parts of her body that continue to mark her as female" and even indicates that she would be willing to cut off her own breasts to demonstrate the purity of her self-control or mastery of her body (p. 178). Bordo also provides a less extreme example: the popularity of shaping brasseries that alter women's natural breast shape (p. 20). In both instances, women are taking elements of their perceived "out of control" feminine bodies and controlling them by any means available.

While both of these works are scholarly essays, not experimental reports, they are widely known and are referenced throughout the literature that focuses on female appearance. Furthermore, the authors provide some information regarding the cultural climate with regards to the conceptualization of the female body. The female body, as a sexual and uncontrolled body, is an essential point of reference for this study, as I will discuss later.

Perceptions of Women's Dress

Past research indicates that clothing does in fact work to communicate something to those surrounding an individual. Guy and Banim (2000) found that clothing conscious women use their wardrobe as a means of constructing and managing their identities. An older study indicates that dress has an influence on the perception of one's status (Harris et al. 1983). A decade later, another set of researchers found that, in the realm of academics, dress can influence how students perceive instructors and, possibly, how well they learn from their instructor (Scott, O'Neal, & Cheatham, 1994).

To get an overview of dressing trends, a few studies have turned to magazines directed towards women. Of those, the most salient were Ogle and Damhorst's study of various mainstream magazines and Tyner and Ogle's analysis of *Ms.* magazine (1999, 2007). Neither analysis can be assumed to be completely true of the population since there are many people that do not see these magazines or dress according to their suggestions if they do see them. In both sets of magazines, there was often contradictory advice with regard to dress. For example, the Ogle and Damhorst study found that women were told to look attractive and feminine, yet powerful and competent, which are styles that tend to be at odds (p. 95).

Power and credibility

Within the relevant literature, there is a focus on power and how dress is used to obtain and then manage the power that women receive. According to Rudd and Lennon (1999), women search for indirect influence or “hedonic power” which comes from displays of charm or attractiveness. The inverse, direct or “agonic power,” is considered traditionally masculine and requires aggression or displays that indicate that one is worthy for the position. In their study, they found that women worked with their appearance and their wardrobes, as well as the resulting attention they received, to gain influence over others.

The idea of hedonic power, while not directly stated, is carried through many of the other studies regarding women’s management of their dress. Rafaeli et al. (1997) focused on female administrative employees at a business school within a university. According to their findings, these employees used their professional dress to indicate their role within an organization and went to great efforts to make sure they were doing so appropriately. Also, the researchers found that the women used their dress to manage the tension that arose from their conflicting roles as a woman and as a person in the workforce with some measure of power.

Rucker, Anderson, and Kangas (1999) focused on the professional dress of people who are generally marginalized (e.g., ethnic minorities and women) and found that those that tended to be marginalized were more sensitive to the variations of dressing for power than the others. Conversely, an earlier study, focused on the effect of gender on how one perceives their “occupational attributes” like honesty and reliability, suggested that while women placed a greater emphasis on dressing appropriately, they were less inclined to believe that dress affected their perceived occupational attributes (Kwon, 1994).

Along with power comes concerns about one’s credibility. In a study from Green (2001) of female professors who had attained the highest rank possible in academia in the U.K., she found that these professors were very concerned with displaying their status within the college or university, as well as their position as an academic. They expressed the need to look like a professor to have others respect the authority of their position. This idea of ‘dressing the part’ is also found in O’Neal and Lapitsky (1991). They found that if a person is dressed appropriately for the situation, outsiders will consider him/her a more credible source than a person dressed inappropriately. Furthermore, Kaiser, Chandler, and Joan (2001) added that female professors also move within varied contexts and the women they spoke with strategically used their dress as a means to negotiate those varied contexts.

Throughout the literature, there is a dearth of contemporary information regarding dress. Moreover, there have been very few studies that have looked into the

perspectives of the average female professor in the United States. One study (Kaiser et al, 2001) looks into those perspectives, but was situated at a large research university, more than a decade ago. In order to update and extend the knowledge of women's dress within the field of nonverbal communication research, this phenomenological study is intended to help one understand the way female professors at a small, private, liberal arts college use dress to convey their relationships to others in the college community.

Procedures

I used a phenomenological framework to guide my research (Creswell, 2013). The issue in question, "professional dress," worked well as a phenomenological study, because its meaning is derived from lived experiences, the focus of phenomenology. Through analyzing the shared experiences of professional dress among female professors, I seek to gain a more complete understanding of what professional dress truly means to the informants.

Role of the researcher

To best conduct this phenomenological study, I, as the researcher, have bracketed my assumptions regarding both professional dress and my experiences of the faculty members with whom I spoke. As a student, I have very little experience with professional dress myself, but it is a growing concern, since I will soon enter the workforce. Regarding this phenomenon, I am only an observer and not truly a participant. Additionally, as a student, I have developed a number of perceptions of the professors who became my informants from taking their classes and developing relationships with them in co-curricular activities. To the best of my ability, I have worked to set aside my personal preconceived notions about professional dress as well as my preconceived perceptions of the women that participated in this study.

The Site

I conducted this study at a small, private, liberal-arts college in the Mid-Atlantic region. The college has an enrollment of fewer than two thousand undergraduate students. According to the most recent Federal 2011-2012 IPEDS Human Resources Survey, females represented fifty-one percent of the full-time faculty at the college.¹ This site was selected because there are no faculty dress codes and therefore, a great deal of latitude in dress choices for the faculty. Additionally, my familiarity with the culture of the college aided my interpretation of the data.

¹ This information was provided by the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment (B. Ault, personal communication, April 23, 2012).

The Informants

To select informants, I used a combination of criterion and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2013). I determined that all of the informants should identify as women and that they should be full-time faculty members at the college. Then, I selected professors with whom I have a relationship or that were recommended to me for their openness or interest in the phenomenon in question. All informants were initially contacted via email with a brief summary of the study and a request for an interview. Both in this initial inquiry and at the time of the interview their anonymity was guaranteed.² Of those contacted, eight female professors agreed to take part in this study.

The eight women who became my informants are between the ages of thirty-four and fifty-eight. The majority of the women are Caucasian. All of the informants hold the highest degrees in their fields. Half of the women are tenured at this college. Three of the women had held other jobs prior to coming to academia. For at least five, this college gave them their first full-time teaching position and they have been at this college between five and seventeen years. They teach in the disciplines of arts and humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and professional studies.

Data Collection

To study this phenomenon, I used an in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol. First, I defined dress as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” including styling one’s hair, wearing make-up and perfumes, garments, and accessories, to provide the informant some parameters concerning what was being considered during the interview (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, 1). The protocol used primarily open-ended questions. Some of the questions I used were found in a previous study, which focused on the same phenomenon but with women in administrative positions (Rafaeli et al., 1997).

A semi-structured interview format was used for two primary reasons: to gather a wealth of illuminating information on the phenomenon in question and to be able to tailor each interview to best suit the information that emerges from the interview itself. I was able to glean better quality and more valuable data from the open-ended nature of the interview protocol, which allowed for probing questions for further explanation and more depth into issues about which the informant felt particularly strongly (Rafaeli et al., 1997).

One-on-one interviews, lasting between thirty minutes and ninety minutes, took place in the informants’ offices. Seven of the eight interviews were recorded and

² To provide anonymity, the names of the participants have been changed to common last names and I will not refer to the particular department in which they work.

transcribed into text. During one interview the recording device malfunctioned, so I took detailed notes to record her responses. If there were any questions that arose during the data analysis or in other interviews that emerged as salient to the phenomenon, I sent follow-up e-mails to the professors.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I used the constant comparison method throughout the collection process and modeled that process from the phenomenological data analysis process as described in Creswell (2013, p. 82, 193-195). As I conducted the interviews, I noted any initial emerging themes that were salient to my research question. After transcribing the data, I read through the transcriptions numerous times and began to horizontalize the data. That is, I highlighted significant quotes that worked to elucidate the informant's experiences of professional dress, keeping in mind the initial open codes that I formed during the collection process. From the significant data, themes emerged into which the data could be sorted and resorted. From those themes, I was able to describe how and what the informants experienced with regard to professional dress and develop a fuller understanding of the essence of their experiences.

Analysis

After sorting and resorting the data, several themes emerged. I found overarching themes of External Clues (including the campus culture, other women as role models, and reinforcement from others); Internal States (which includes feeling comfortable in one's own skin, feminist ideology, and the desire to be a role model); and an attempt to Define a Dress Code for Female Academics.

External Cues

The women I interviewed were often concerned, at least to some degree, about how others perceived them as an academic and as an authority within the classroom or when on a committee and often this concern was related to the fact that they are women:

I would say males have much less pressure. They have to think about [what they wear] much less because they have inherent credibility. I've noticed it on this campus. I've noticed that, I myself, will cut a man a lot more slack. I mean if you're good, you're good. What you wear doesn't really matter. But if you're a woman, and you just wear whatever ... don't give people the opportunity to put you down. Women have to be very conscious of it. (Dr. Lee)

Essentially, Dr. Lee and the other women that echoed this idea said that women in academia or in any position of authority must keep in mind the fact that people

are judging her as having less credibility or authority simply because she is a woman and possibly even less if she is also young. As Dr. Robinson said:

I know that when colleagues or students see me, there's a series of thoughts that goes through their heads that they don't necessarily apply to everyone else. Part of that is just being a woman, but part of it is being young...It's frustrating because they should just see me for my skill set, so, if I'm on a committee, it should be about what I bring to the committee. And yet, I know that unless I'm wearing a burlap sack, they are making judgments on the basis of my clothes.

The perceptions of their credibility and authority from others were remarked upon again and again as influences on how they choose to dress. The most emphasized external cues were: the campus culture, other women as role models, feminist ideology, and reinforcement from others (both positive and negative).

Campus culture. While it is clear that each informant put some of her personal tastes into her dress code (e.g., those that liked more casual clothes, emphasized that casual was acceptable here), there are outside influences on what the informants feel they are allowed to wear. All of the informants indicated that their campus is notably casual and so there were a few informants who felt this casual quality gave them the opportunity to dress more casually. Also, a few of the informants noted that the atmosphere of the surrounding town is very conservative and that has influenced the campus to a point. As Dr. Johnson noted, "It's about the corporate culture or climate." All of them, to some degree, indicated that the external climate of the workplace did have some influence on their dress.

Role models. I have found that this is a common sentiment: the informants are looking at other women for role models to verify that what they are doing with regard to dress is acceptable. For example:

The chair of our department, she's always been the chair: she's the one like me. She's casual. ... If I'd come into a department where most people dressed up, I would have dressed up, but I blended in with what was normal in my department, particularly with my chair. (Dr. Lee)

Dr. Lee looked to the chair of her department. For some of the other informants, they had to look to other prominent women at the college, namely the former female president of the college. One said:

[The former president] definitely had a sense of style. ... There's a woman doing professional fundraising around very rich people. That kind of dress tends to be a suit, frequently with a skirt, but she could easily dress it up

with the jewelry and make it fun for herself. I think it gave one a sense of parameters.[It's] not like we're trying to copy [her] style, because I don't think I'd look good in exactly the same kind of things that [she] did. The fact that she felt free to wear funky jewelry sometimes, pieces that were obviously fun to her kind of made you realize, "Hey, it's okay to have some fun with the dress and have a sense of personal style, even while maintaining a very professional look. (Dr. Roberts)

The other women who talked about the former president, Dr. Robinson and Dr. Smith, referred to her "classy" style and her tendency to wear suits with skirts. When discussing this woman, they often made connections to how they chose to dress. For instance, Dr. Roberts, who emphasized the former president's style, spoke about her desire to express her personality through her clothing. Dr. Smith, as a woman who said she felt far more comfortable in skirts and dresses, was focused on how the former president dressed in a feminine manner.

Reinforcement from others. As one might expect, positive reinforcement in the form of compliments from others encourages the informants to adhere to a certain standard of dress. Even though a few of the informants did not place much importance on clothing, they all appreciated the good feelings associated with dressing appropriately. As Dr. Roberts explained:

People go like, "That's a nice top! Is it new?" When you're getting that kind of feedback on something, that always makes you feel good about what you're wearing. The guy from IT, who helped set up my computer one time, was like, "That shirt is just fabulous"... That just makes you feel good that someone noticed what you were wearing; that you're not just sort of fading blandly into the background.

Many of the informants felt similarly: they enjoyed it when someone else would unexpectedly compliment what they were wearing. Also, Dr. Jones found herself influenced by the advice of others who would encourage her to wear things that they think will be flattering on her. Sometimes though, it was more intentional. While no one said they dressed to please anyone specific, some said they enjoyed swapping compliments with one another. One woman, Dr. Sullivan said, "I will say one day, I was coming in and I knew I was going to see [another female professor], so I wore some really cute shoes, because I knew she'd appreciate that." Intentionally earned or not, the professors do appreciate the compliments received and value the good feelings that are elicited from the compliment.

While there is a narrow range of things that will garner compliments from others, there was a general agreement that professors have a great deal of freedom with what they wear and they appreciate that fact. A few indicated that they are very grateful that they do not have, as one termed it, "a uniform." As Dr. Roberts said

of what is unacceptable to wear while teaching: “What else would really raise an eyebrow? I mean, I guess this is to the credit [of the campus, that] there are very few things that if you wore them on campus, people would be deeply scandalized.”

Even if they felt “scandalized,” it seems that the informants would not say anything openly to that effect. In fact, many of the informants indicated they are hesitant to comment on a poor dress choice, even if they do recognize dress choices as “bad” or “inappropriate.” They mentioned discomfort with overstepping boundaries: “I don’t think I could tell another faculty member, ‘Boy! That was a bad choice on your part’ . . . It’s not my job to tell people how to dress” (Dr. Jones). For others, like Dr. Robinson, it seemed like a fear of what others might say: “I would never dress like some of those people, but I respect that that’s what they do and I just hope that they respect the way that I dress.” In either case, the informants said they are uncomfortable with making negative remarks about anyone else’s clothing choices.

Another concern that the informants noted was that their dress could appear to be too sexual and they were uncomfortable about what others might think. More often than not, the women did not receive any negative reinforcement from others; rather, they feared what negative reinforcement they might receive. They indicated that, as a professor at a college, they should not be wearing anything “too low-cut,” “too fitted,” “too revealing,” or anything transparent. While there were some additional items on each of their lists, like stiletto heels or exposed straps from their brassiere, these aforementioned guidelines were the most consistently described. One of the women told me a story about two instances in which she received a negatively interpreted comment from a colleague:

Once I was wearing a wrap dress—it didn’t seem too low cut to me, but I am kind of curvy. I remember one of my colleagues just going, “Whoa!” So I thought maybe I won’t wear this again, or I’ll wear a camisole. I mean, they didn’t say anything negative really, but it was just their reaction. (Dr. Smith)

Dr. Smith went on to describe another time when her husband said something about her looking “curvy” before she had even left her house. Dr. Robinson said, “I will almost always not take the risk. I will just change.” For some, they were worried about looking “too good” in general. Dr. Lee and Dr. Roberts said they had no interest in looking sexy or attractive to students. Dr. Lee said she would be “mortified” if she ever discovered that a student made a comment about her looks.

This issue of looking too “curvy” also extended to some of the women who had been pregnant during a period when they were teaching. Dr. Smith noted that she was extremely uncomfortable during the beginning of her first pregnancy because

“everyone was watching and noticing and feels comfortable commenting on your body’s changes.” Although the end of her first pregnancy fell after the spring semester, so she “didn’t have to be seen” and was thus more comfortable, not having to field any external comments from her colleagues, Dr. Smith had more issues following her return after the birth of her second child. Because her body changed, she indicated that she felt that she had to work with her body’s new shape so that she could be comfortable and confident in her professional clothing.

Dr. Roberts had the last two months of her pregnancy during the beginning of the fall semester. She tried to avoid maternity clothing because she found it uncomfortable and also noted how maternity clothing drew attention to itself, which she did not like. Dr. Roberts said:

I was able to find some basic black leggings from Gap and a couple other places that you could wear with a top, and maybe a blazer and still wind up looking like, “I’m a professional person on my way to work,” rather than, “I am a pregnant body on my way to work.”

She indicated that she did not want to look unusual; she wanted to be comfortable.

Internal states

All of the informants indicated that the act of wearing their version of professional clothing helped them in some way emotionally. The external influences and the internal states that the women experience are linked. For example, receiving a compliment will increase confidence in one’s outfit. However, the informants indicated they need to feel comfortable (emotionally) with what they are wearing to experience any real confidence; what other people think is irrelevant to some degree. The informants talked about the need to achieve the internal states of feeling comfortable in your own skin, their internalized beliefs regarding feminist ideology and fulfilling the desire to set an example for their students.

Feeling comfortable in your own skin. Many of the informants indicated that feeling good about what they were wearing was extremely important. Dr. Smith was especially vocal about the benefits of dressing properly. She felt that dressing in an appropriate manner prepared her for her day, giving her a great deal of confidence, because she felt attractive and in control. Dr. Johnson summed up the general consensus on dress and confidence best. She said, “I generally like what I wear. If you don’t, you don’t feel confident. It reflects in your performance.” Generally the informants agree with that sentiment and recognize that even dressing up a little makes them feel better. Some of them, like Dr. Turner and Dr. Robinson, found getting dressed a pleasurable experience in general. They found comfort in wearing things which they found beautiful.

The reverse is also true for some of the informants. Dr. Turner, for instance, was dressed in a manner that she deemed very casual because she was only in her office that day to get some work done. When asked how she felt in her outfit, she said, “It’s fine, but I feel better in my dress clothes” and she reiterated that same discomfort regarding her dress that day a few more times. Additionally, some women included stories about how dressing in a manner which they thought was inappropriate bothered them, whether or not others noticed. Dr. Sullivan talked about a day where she wore something she perceived to be more revealing than she was comfortable with:

One time I had this—and I loved it too and I had just gotten it at this outlet center or something. It was this brown suit and it had a skirt. It had this slit. I wore brown tights. It was dark brown. And it had this slit here [on the thigh], so it was really comfortable to walk in and I had these brown tights so I didn’t feel like it was revealing at all. I stand most of the day anyway, but when I sat down, this slit goes so far up. It made me really uncomfortable...And I had an evening event, so I was in it all day. And I had to go to the president’s office or house...I didn’t realize that when I sat down that it came up higher than I thought and I remember being so self-conscious in it all day. And I never wore it again...I’m sure people didn’t even really notice, but that made me very uncomfortable.

What other people saw or noticed was irrelevant to Dr. Sullivan’s internal state; she was remarkably uncomfortable without knowing anything about what someone else had thought about her clothing.

Feminist ideology. In addition to being comfortable, many of the informants look to their internally held ideological stances for some guidelines on dress, though they may not follow through with those guidelines. Dr. Jones, Dr. Roberts, Dr. Sullivan, and Dr. Robinson all indicated that, to some degree, their dress choices are influenced by some generally accepted tenets of feminism that they have internalized. Specifically, they take feminist stances on shaving one’s legs and underarms, wearing brassieres, wearing make-up, and the right to wear what makes them comfortable. They are divided by how they handle that stance, with the latter two informants noting hesitance to act on their stances more than the former two. For Dr. Roberts, as an example, that means that she feels that she does not have to “wear make-up to look put-together any more than a man would.” Dr. Jones, who does not wear a brassiere or shave, indicated that what she does with her dress is “a choice [she] has made and it should be an okay choice.” (She did note that she has concerns about broadcasting that she does not shave or wear a brassiere, but she never actively hid it.) Dr. Robinson, on the other hand, feels less free to do as she chooses with regard to her feminist stance:

...I feel like I should be able to wear what I want. My male colleagues clearly wear whatever they want, so I feel like that is my right, but then also, my awareness of the double standards that apply to women: sometimes that's what makes me change my clothes. So I can advocate for full rights, but I'm not Pollyannaish. I recognize that choosing to exercise that right in a certain way may come back to bite me or someone else. So that awareness makes me more hesitant.

Dr. Sullivan expressed a similar idea, adding that the nature of the campus (as previously mentioned) is rather conservative. She stated that students may not be as receptive to someone who would openly defy norms like shaving one's legs. Feminism influenced all four of these women, but two of them feel that this college is not a place where they can express this influence completely without losing their credibility.

Desire to set an example. Another idea that emerged was the desire to be a role model for their students and in Dr. Robinson's case, for the young women she sees. Dr. Robinson said:

I definitely think about the message I'm sending to women on our campus. I want them to realize that they can express their aesthetic point of view without necessarily undermining their credibility. I also want them to see that there are other ways of being attractive than just being half-naked or squeezed into some skin-tight clothes.

Dr. Lee echoed this idea, adding that she recognizes the fact that, in the workplace, young women who dress inappropriately could "pay a price." The other informants indicated that they recognized the importance of being well-dressed for interviews, presentations, and other professional situations, and wanted to convey that to their students, along with some guidelines from their manner of dress.

Defining a Dress Code of Female Academics

Now that many of the influences noted during interviews have been outlined, it is possible to talk about what the tacitly accepted dress code may be for the informants and how they find their dress to fit with this code. There were extremely varied definitions of "professional dress" that ranged from simply not wearing clothes that are dirty or torn, to strictly suits. As Dr. Lee said, "...it's kind of hard to say, but I know it when I see it." Many of the women felt they could not properly describe professional dress for a female academic, and instead turned to specific articles of clothing, like blazers, or trousers. Another common description was the cut of the clothes: they stressed the need for fitted or structured clothing.

Some of the responses about defining professional dress were contradictory with the responses of the other informants. For example, a few stressed the importance of make-up for looking “put together,” and a few others felt that make-up was not part of the academic “look.” In another instance of contradictory responses, Dr. Johnson told me that suits and only suits qualify as professional dress.

Conversely, Dr. Lee said:

Suits are really too formal. Most places I’ve worked, suits are for special occasions. In fact, people are like, “Where are you going?” when you’re wearing a suit. For the most part...the regular faculty, we don’t dress that way.

These contradictions indicate how poorly defined professional dress is for academics in general. As female academics specifically, the informants rarely were able to define a specific “look” for that role. Seven of the eight informants feel they generally follow a standard of “business casual,” but as I noted, there is no agreement on what that means. Instead, they noted specific rules they followed to make their dress choices.

The rules they constructed varied with their audience for that workday. For example, all of the informants said they dressed the most professional when teaching and the least professional when they were strictly in their office, grading or doing research. For many, they indicated that this was because, while teaching, they had to maintain some distance from their students. Nearly all of them, especially the youngest women, expressed concerns about looking too much like students. Dr. Sullivan noted, “I really don’t want students to perceive me as their friend, so it’s important for me to have some distinction in terms of the way I dress, like having business casual pants or wearing a dress and tights.” By dressing up, Dr. Sullivan and the others explained, they were able to reflect their position as being different from their students. However, some of the informants said during their personal time, they feel freer to wear things they would never wear to work, like skinny-cut jeans or shorter skirts. The older informants, like Dr. Lee, Dr. Jones, and Dr. Roberts, felt that because they had age to add to their authority now, they were far less concerned about dressing more casually. Regardless of age, nearly all of the informants said they had to be different enough from their students, but remain approachable for them at the same time.

The dress code had some flexibility regarding who should follow these rules and how they should be followed. The informants have constructed their rules as a tiered system with some guidelines for everyone and some rules that are limited to the people who care to follow such specifications. For example, only the overarching idea that one should not wear torn or dirty clothing was to be applied to everyone, including male professors. If the informants provided particular examples, like defining dark wash jeans as professional and light wash jeans as

non-professional, they were quick to indicate that such specifics were limited to them; others were not expected to follow that specific rule.

It is important to note that many of the informants said they did not feel as though the entire male faculty, particularly the younger men, followed a dress code like the female faculty tend to. Some indicated that there were men they felt dressed more formally than they, but there were many that dressed far less formally. They also felt that the younger men were the most likely to wear jeans, shorts, T-shirts, sandals, and other items they indicated were far too casual for them. However, those that noted this distinction pointed out that they feel that the male faculty "can get away with it more" (Dr. Sullivan). The informants felt that men have more pre-existing credibility and authority, so they had more freedom with regard to their dress.

Discussion

This analysis of the data suggests that these women try to use dress to represent themselves as who they are internally, without losing sight of their image as a professor, academic, and cultural member. Dress, for them, is a means of controlling and shaping who they view themselves to be into an appropriate external image of who they must be. It is that external image that indicates their role at the college and therefore, their relationships with others on campus. This appears to be achieved through a series of compromises between the woman's internal state and the external cues she receives.

In the data, this was expressed as concerns about two primary things: how they feel when they are dressed and how others will interpret that manner of dress. One example of this is in the discussion of feminism as an influence on dress. The four women who identified their feminism as having an influence on their dress expressed that to different extents. The two older women, Drs. Roberts and Jones, related more to expressions of feminism that were popular in the 1970s. That is, they were comfortable with a more natural, make-up free look³ and they were generally comfortable doing that on this campus. Possibly, they felt they did not have to compromise on this particular issue because they were risking less with regard to credibility; their age garnered enough respect from their students. Dr. Jones did compromise a bit, since she felt that the campus was too conservative for her to be open with all of her dress choices. The two younger women, Drs. Sullivan and Robinson, were more hesitant about outwardly expressing their feminism. They were afraid of not being taken as seriously in their role as professor; they did not have the signals, such as age to establish their credibility. They were compelled to compromise more of their internal views of themselves to make a more credible external presentation.

³ As described in Tyner and Ogle (2007).

This issue of credibility and external presentation also comes into play when discussing dressing to create professional distance. As I noted, the women have no concerns about wearing things that might make them look younger when they are not at work; when they are at work and in a position of authority, however, they make sure they are differentiated from their students, yet still approachable. While their expertise and personalities will shine through over time, they have to get their students and colleagues to listen first. Because these women lack other physical indicators that they are in charge (like size or for some, age), they are using their dress as an initial method for gathering respect and attention. This all suggests that they are leaning on the acquisition of hedonic power to get the attention of others.

The female professors do not have to convince only students of their credibility; they also have colleagues and supervisory faculty whom they must convince of their intellectual capabilities; that is, that they are qualified to be in the positions they occupy. This leads to another compromise that the women make with their professional dress. Women have to reconcile who their bodies indicate they are, physically and mentally, with who they must be at work. In any workplace, one must be in control and furthermore, in a workplace that is built on intellectual activity, one must show that they can focus higher pursuits. Bordo's characterization of the female body as fleshy, earthly, and uncontrollable obviously does not fit well with the stereotypical characterization of an academic. This is further complicated when the academic also happens to be pregnant, the epitome of the sexualized female body.

To maintain their credibility despite their female bodies, the women used certain types of clothing and techniques of dressing to mold their bodies into what they needed them to represent. First and foremost, there was nearly unanimous agreement that female professors should not dress provocatively. Second, many of the women emphasized the importance of structured clothing. Third, the informants worked with the role models they found on campus and the reinforcement they received to edit their manner of dress. While there was very little talk of negative reinforcement, the hesitance to say anything negative about others suggests that they fear others may say negative things about them. Also, sometimes they likened themselves to role models for their students, to show students what is appropriate in the working world. These tactics make perfect sense if one is trying to lessen their perceived problematic femaleness. This is not to say that wearing feminine clothing, e.g., skirts, is necessarily problematic. The emphasis here is on the flesh, the curves, and the shapes that traditionally define a woman's body. All of these dress choices work to minimize the potentially negative impact of their bodies on their credibility and authority, by controlling or visually reshaping what they are most concerned about. By strategically using

their mode of dress they are able to fine-tune their external representations of themselves.

With all of that in mind, it does begin to seem as if women comprise who they are because they are so pre-occupied with who might see them. However, as I mentioned, these women have developed this system, this tacit dress code, so they do not have to do that. They make compromises on both sides. In the data, much was said about the importance of feeling confident and attractive and being comfortable with one's self. The informants even stressed the importance of modeling that to students. Part of that comfort did come from external cues that indicated what they were doing was appropriate, but that was not the only source. These women took pride in who they are internally and sometimes enjoyed the process of dressing themselves. They acknowledged the fact that their working environment is not currently open enough to accept a raw representation; they have to refine their images, making compromises with certain external cues to make sure they, themselves, are comfortable and confident with their representations of their internal and external selves.

The limitations of this research were primarily related to my position as a student-researcher at the college where my study took place. While I am familiar with a few of the informants, on a professional level, there were a few that I had never met prior to this study. In both instances, existing professional distance may have lead to some reticence on the part of the informants, especially for the women I had not previously known. For future research, I would recommend working with interviewers who would be less likely to experience the same distance from the people they are interviewing.

With limited scholarly attention being paid to professional dress, as previously discussed, there is a great deal of information that could be updated about academic dressing norms, including research on women in other traditionally masculine professions. To expand upon this current study, future research could look to how people of color or men use dress to work within their organization. Also, further research could be done focusing on those that have ascended through the ranks of academia and how their use of dress has changed. Future research could also look into the uses of professional dress by people of color, gender non-conforming individuals, or other marginalized populations.

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