

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF DRESS

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Bibliographical guide

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What Is the Social Psychology of Dress?

In response to the question of what is the social psychology of dress, one first needs to address two related questions: what is dress and what is social psychology? The term dress has been defined by dress scholars Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Eicher (1992) as the total arrangement of outwardly detectable body modifications and all material objects added to it in the form of body supplements. Body modifications are transformations made directly to the body and include making changes of color (e.g., using cosmetics, suntanning, tattooing), shape (e.g., dieting, exercising, cosmetic surgery), altering texture (e.g., using lotion to make the skin smooth), and smell (e.g., use of perfumes, deodorants). Body supplements are additions to the body such as jewelry, clothing, hearing aids, iPods, and a wide range of accessories. These modifications and supplements can be permanent (e.g., teeth straightening) or temporary (e.g., deodorant). Body modifications and body supplements can affect one, several, or all of the human senses. Thus, dress can change how the body looks, tastes, feels, smells, and sounds. Dress is also a universal human behavior in that there are no societies wherein individuals do not engage in dress.

In defining dress in this manner, Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne Eicher (1992) noted that dress provides two basic functions for humans: as a modifier of body processes and as a medium for communication. (Some researchers use the term fashion to indicate modifications made to the body or supplements added to the body). When thinking about dress serving as a modifier of body processes, the focus is on body supplements and body modifications that serve as interfaces between the body and the larger physical and social environments in which humans live. Dress is an interface when it protects the human body from the impact of the physical environment. Examples of using dress for the purposes of physical protection include wearing gloves to protect hands from the cold, applying lotion to protect skin from the damaging effects of the sun, or wearing polish to prevent finger nails from chipping and peeling. Dress can also protect the wearer from psychological harm. Individuals may wear charms, amulets, or other lucky dress items to ward off evil spirits or to bring about good fortune. This latter type of interface is between the individual and the larger socio-cultural environment and implies that dress can be instilled with some type of social power.

For dress to function as a means of communication, individuals need to assign meaning to dress. What meanings are tied to what aspects of dress are learned over a lifetime, are tied to place and time, and are constantly undergoing change. What is important is that people do assign meaning to items of dress such that what is done to the body in the form of body modifications and supplements is used as a basis for making inferences about the dressed individual.

Social psychology is the study of individuals within a social context. According to psychologist Gordon Allport (1985), the interests of social psychology are centered on answering questions about why people think, feel, and act the way that they do as shaped by the actual, implied, or imaged presence of others. Combining these definitions of dress and social psychology along with the scope of topics addressed in social psychology, the social psychology of dress is concerned with answering questions about how an individual's dress-related beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors are shaped by the influence of others. It is concerned with how an individual's dress affects the behavior of self as well as the behavior of others. Individuals working in the area of the social psychology of dress are answering research questions such as:

- What meanings do individuals link to dress?
- How do people learn to dress their bodies?
- How does an individual's dress influence other's perceptions and behaviors?
- How does one's dress impact self-perceptions and behaviors?
- How is dress impacted by interaction with others? What factors account for individual differences in dress?
- How does dress function within groups?

Why Study the Social Psychology of Dress?

The social psychology of dress uncovers how dress is used by humans to shape their behavior with others on a daily basis. In complex societies, there is an array of others with whom we must successfully interact. These others reflect a range of social positions (e.g., mother, teacher, neighbor, doctor, police officer) and each of these social positions requires a different level of communication. One may interact formally with relative strangers and informally with intimates. Each social position also has expectations for behaviors. Part of these behaviors includes expectations for dress. Because dress items and behaviors are linked to social positions as well as to meanings, dress is used to infer information about others. This information can serve as the basis for interaction. Thus, dress often sets the stage for successful social interaction because we can use dress to identify others in terms of their social position, as well as other possible identities and group memberships they may indicate using their dress, and shape our interaction with them accordingly.

The reverse is also true. Because dress is used to make inferences about others, dress can be consciously selected to manage the inferences drawn about one individual by other individuals or put another way, to manage social perceptions of self. Thus, studying the social psychology of dress is one of the means that is used to uncover how to effectively use dress to achieve the goals individuals have for themselves within everyday life.

Dress affects one's ideas about the self (e.g., attitudes, values, beliefs) as well as self-directed behaviors. For example, according to researchers Nancy Rudd and Sharron Lennon (2000) as well as Jaeha Lee and Kim K. P. Johnson (2009), believing that one's body is in anyway unacceptable to others can motivate individuals to engage in risky body modification behaviors in an attempt to achieve an acceptable body shape or size. Dress researcher Sally Francis (1992) found in her research that believing that one does not own the appropriate items of dress or that chosen body modifications are somehow unacceptable to others can prevent individuals from participating in some events and interacting with others. Studying the social psychology of dress assists in uncovering the role of dress in shaping self-directed attitudes and behaviors as well as the attitudes and behaviors of others towards individuals so that the prediction of possible future consequences (e.g., prejudice, body esteem) stemming from our choices concerning dress is possible.

What Are the Primary Areas of Research in the Area of the Social Psychology of Dress?

Although there are many examples of dress providing both physical protection (e.g., suits of armor) and psychological protection (e.g., good luck charms), many researchers studying dress from a social psychological perspective have focused their efforts on understanding dress as a form of communication and answering questions about the content of the information communicated by dress as well as identifying the aspects of dress that are used to signal that content.

How Does Dress Influence the Impressions of Others?

Researchers interested in the social psychology of dress have spent a considerable amount of effort on investigations of the effect of dress on impression formation (also referred to as person perception or social perception) and identifying the content of information that people link to dress. Their focus has been on dress as a stimulus that affects impressions of others. In 1990 researcher [Mary Lynn Damhorst](#), in studying dress, conducted an analysis of 109 impression formation studies to determine the kind of information that was communicated by dress; she found that in the majority of the studies (81%), the content of the information communicated by dress was competence, power, or intelligence and in nearly 67% the messages were about character, sociability, and mood.

A typical example of this type of research is a study conducted by Dorothy Behling, a dress scholar and Elizabeth Williams, a high school teacher ([1991](#)). These researchers investigated impressions of intelligence and scholastic ability among high school students and teachers. They presented their participants with photographs of male and female students that were unknown to the participants. The clothing styles of the students were varied so that half of the time the students were wearing cutoff jeans and t-shirts and the other half they were wearing a suit. For both students and teachers, the clothing style worn affected the impressions formed. When wearing the cutoff jeans and a t-shirt students were rated lower in intelligence and scholastic ability than when wearing a suit.

What Specific Aspects of Dress are Cues to the Content?

To analyze the effects of dress on impression formation, it is helpful to identify what specific dress cues to use in research. Hence another focus of researchers has been to identify what characteristics of dress affect impressions. Researchers were interested in determining whether it was the style of the dress, the color, the way the item was worn that was a link to information. In this body of research, the style, the fashionability, and the attractiveness of clothing have all been found to affect impressions. In addition, specific aspects of dress such as baldness, body type, beardedness, cosmetics, eyeglasses, facial jewelry, fragrance, and tattoos also have been found to affect impressions.

Clothing style, in particular, was used by several dress scholars during the 1980s to investigate the effects of dress on perceptions of the workplace competencies of women. Scholar Sandra Forsythe found that impressions of managerial traits were affected when women wore masculine clothing ([1987](#)) and researcher Mary Lynn Damhorst ([1990](#)) found similar impressions were affected when women wore formal clothing. A typical example is research by Kim K. P. Johnson and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins ([1987](#)). These researchers surveyed college recruiters. Each recruiter received a photo of a hypothetical female job applicant, a short bibliography of the applicant, and a description of the job for which she had applied. The clothing worn by the applicant was varied such that some of the recruiters viewed a photograph wherein the applicant was appropriately dressed for an interview (i.e., wore a suit) and other recruiters viewed a photograph wherein the applicant was wearing clothing that was less appropriate for an interview. The recruiters were asked to indicate their impressions of the job applicant using scales supplied by the researchers. The results indicated the appropriateness of the interview dress did affect recruiter's impressions of the competence, independence, and creativity of the job applicant.

What Effect Does Dress Have on Other's Behavior?

As an extension of the research addressing the impact of dress on impressions of others is research that examines the behavioral consequences of social perception/impressions. A team of researchers and Academics; Kim K. P. Johnson, Jeong-Ju Yoo, Minjeong Kim, and Sharron J. Lennon (2008), content analyzed ninety three research studies published from 1955 to 2004 wherein the researchers investigated the effect of dress on other's behavior. In their analysis, most (over 85%) of the research on dress and behavior demonstrated that dress significantly affected the behavior of observers. Behaviors so affected included helping behavior, obedience, invasion of interaction territory, disclosure, and aggression. For example, dress researcher Sharron Lennon and her research colleagues Leslie Davis and Minjeong Kim (1989) found in two separate studies that the way customers dress in retail stores affects how quickly they are served by salespersons.

How Does Dress Affect Our Self-perceptions and Behavior?

Researchers have documented that dress influences our views of ourselves. Two social psychologists, Bettina Hannover and Ulrich Kühnen (2002), studied whether what people wear influences how they think about themselves. They reasoned that clothing styles would influence self-descriptions because certain clothing styles might be related to specific trait categories. They found that participants described themselves in a way that was consistent with how they were dressed. Thus, the clothing worn by these individuals influenced their thoughts about themselves.

Researchers have also demonstrated that our self-perceptions (e.g., old, unattractive, fat) affect behaviors we undertake to modify our bodies. Considerable research shows that when people are dissatisfied with their bodies, they engage in various appearance management behaviors such as dieting, cosmetic surgeries or other types of makeovers, and exercising. For example, two psychologists Linda Smolek and Michael P. Levine (1994) found that body dissatisfaction was related to early dieting, while Eric Stice, Erika Schupak-Neuberg, and Richard Stein (psychologists) joined with Heather Shaw (a sociologist) (1994) and documented that body dissatisfaction was related to disordered eating. In 2008 researchers Laura Hurd Clarke, a sociologist, and Meridith Griffin, a scholar of aging studies, found that older women who considered aging to be unattractive and undesirable were more likely to endorse altering their appearances.

In addition to research that documents how our dress impacts self-perceptions, dress has also been shown to exert an influence on one's own behavior. For example, a team of social psychologists Barbara Fredrickson, Tomi-Ann Roberts, Stephanie Noll, Diane Quinn, and Jean Twenge (1998) found that when women put on a swimsuit as part of a research project, they performed more poorly on a subsequent math test than other women who put on a sweater. Social psychologists Mark Frank and Thomas Gilovich (1988) found that male football players and male ice hockey players who wore black uniforms played more aggressively (as evidenced by the number of penalties awarded) than players wearing white jerseys. In a related study these researchers had participants wear either black jerseys or white ones and asked participants to indicate the type of games they wanted to play. As compared to participants wearing white jerseys, those wearing black jerseys selected more aggressive games to play. Subsequently, two social psychologists Hajo Adam and Adam Golinsky (2012) found that when clothing is worn that has symbolic meaning for the wearer, it also has behavioral consequences. Specifically, these researchers did a pretest in which they found that a laboratory coat was a cue often used to infer that an individual was attentive and careful. Consequently, they reasoned that if individuals wore lab coats they would perform better on attention-related tasks than individuals not wearing lab coats and their data supported their reasoning.

Influences on What People Wear

In western societies it is frequently assumed that people freely choose what they wear but in fact participation in groups and other formal and informal organizations can exert constraints on what people wear. Schools and workplaces often restrain individual's dress by implementing formal as well as informal dress codes. Organizations often develop dress regulations. For example, dress scholar Linda Arthur (1999) documented that sororities often have unwritten dress codes that are quickly learned and followed by members.

Undergoing traumatic life experiences can also exert constraints on dress. A research team, Kim K. P. Johnson, Jane Hegland, and Nancy Schofield (1999), interviewed 41 survivors of sexual assaults about their beliefs concerning how their dress functioned in the context of their assaults. All participants commented on the communicative function of dress indicating that what they wore was not a means to communicate consent to sexual intercourse. A little over half of the participants indicated that they changed their dress as a result of their experience. Reasons provided for changing their dress focused on the interface function of dress. Survivors' responses emphasized the goal of self-protection including changing their dress to shield themselves from future assaults as well as from the comments of others. Informants indicated they desired to dress their bodies so that they would not draw the attention of anyone. Their desire to not be noticed was an attempt to protect them from unwanted sexual attention. Other survivors changed their dress to convey that they were powerful beings who could "squash men."

In addition to external influences, there are also internal influences on how people elect to dress such as personality characteristics and salient identities. For example, a team of social psychologists, Simine Vazire, Laura Naumann, Peter Rentfrow, and Samuel Gosling (2008) found the personality trait of narcissism was associated with an appearance that is attractive, that requires grooming effort, and that includes expensive and stylish clothing.

How Is Research Conducted on the Social Psychology of Dress?

To study dress from a social psychological perspective, researchers have conducted experiments, survey research, fieldwork, or non-reactive research. Dress researchers Sharron Lennon, Kim K. P. Johnson, and Ji-Hye Park (2001) completed an analysis of the social psychology of dress literature and found that the use of survey research surpasses the use of experiments. Non-reactive research such as content analysis is used infrequently. Fieldwork conducted from a social psychological perspective is uncommon, but it does exist.

Typically when dress has been studied from a social psychological perspective, the goal has been to explain relationships. Relationships are frequently investigated using survey methodology. When this approach is used, participants typically complete a self-administered questionnaire that contains measures of the concepts under investigation. A common relationship investigated is whether a change (i.e., increase or decrease) in one variable is linked to a change in another variable. For example two dress scholars, Jaeha Lee and Kim K. P. Johnson (2009), investigated the relationship between self-objectification (the social psychological variable) and participation in risky appearance management behaviors (the dress variable).

Unlike survey methodology, in experiments researchers can determine if changes in one variable causes a change in a second variable. For example in a typical experiment researchers Kim K. P. Johnson, Christy Crutsinger, and Jane Workman (1994) studied the effect of dress on impression formation. College women viewed a photo of a woman, formed their first impressions (the social psychological variable), and indicated their impressions on a series of scale items. Whether the woman wore a scarf, a tie like a man's tie, or nothing around her neck (the dress variable) affected impressions formed by the college women.

If held in real-life settings, experiments are called field experiments. Scholars Sharron J. Lennon and Leslie Davis (1989), conducted a field experiment in two department stores to see if

salespeople provided faster service to shoppers wearing high status clothing. In that study two women wearing either high or low status clothing posed as shoppers and speed of service was measured using a hidden stopwatch.

Non-reactive research differs from the other research strategies in that people are not the source of the data. Researchers conducting non-reactive research from a social psychological perspective tend to study how dress is represented in various media. For example, dress scholar Sharron J. Lennon (1999) content analyzed the television series *Star Trek, the Next Generation* by viewing episodes and coding the character's dress, sex, behaviors, and incidents of social power. Through several analyses, social power in the series was found to be related to dress.

What Are the Important Works to Read and Why?

Important works in the area of the social psychology of dress are located in both books and journal articles. The work that has been identified provides the reader with a summary of research findings relative to an area of the social psychology of dress or an important theoretical perspective that is frequently used by researchers working in this area. Two early books that we recommend to provide historical context to the social psychology of dress are Mary Shaw Ryan's *Clothing: A Study in Human Behavior* published in 1966 and Mary Lou Rosencranz's *Clothing Concepts: A Social Psychological Approach* published in 1972. Ryan's book is divided into three parts. The first has a focus on the psychology of dress addressing topics that remain of interest such as why do we wear clothing, what roles does clothing play in our perception of others, and how does clothing exert an influence on the wearer. The second part centers on answering questions related to consumption such as identifying motivations underlying dress choices and variables related to satisfaction with dress. The final section centers on age differences in the use of clothing. Ryan provides numerous research examples and practical details on research methods applied to the study of dress.

Rosencranz also divided her book into three broad sections. The first section focuses on the concept of clothing awareness as a clue to understanding behaviors related to dress. The second section provides an overview of dress as a symbol outlining the kind of information communicated via dress (e.g., status, gender). The last section provides the reader with a detailed discussion of clothing and social roles. Rosencranz also provides guidance on how to conduct research supplying examples of measures used to gather data and techniques for analyses. Her view is also cross-cultural as she draws examples from around the world.

Susan Kaiser's book, *The Social Psychology of Dress: Symbolic Appearances in Context* published in 1996 provides an introduction to the social psychology of dress. She outlines how this area of study emerged, providing some of the history of this area of dress study, and outlining perspectives used in conducting research. The book provides readers with comprehensive coverage of the research published investigating the role of dress in person perception, how individuals use dress in interaction with others, and how dress shapes self-perceptions. Kaiser also covers how individual differences can impact the interpretation of dress cues and the role of dress in social organizations. Kaiser identifies the key concepts used in the social psychology of dress and the book provides the reader with references for much of the research conducted in the area prior to its publication.

Dress and Society published in 2009 and authored by Jane Workman and Beth Freeburg provides extensive coverage of the concept of social control as it relates to dress. The authors combine a presentation of key concepts with empirical research to document how participants representing a wide range of social and cultural groups use the process of social control (i.e., establishment of norms, violation of norms, reporting of norm violations, sanctions) to shape the dress of their members.

Since many individuals working in the area of the social psychology of dress are interested in the communication function of dress and particularly interested in how identities are established and maintained using dress, Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher's seminal article, *Dress and Identity*, provides readers with a compelling argument for the use of the term dress as a comprehensive term to describe the collection of body modifications made and supplements added to a human body. The authors outline a classification system that is useful

for categorizing items of dress in a non-evaluative manner that provides for subtypes of body modifications and supplements and allows for comparisons across time and cultures. In addition, the authors provide a concise introductory discussion of the primary functions of dress: as a modifier of body processes and medium for communication. Their presentation suggests a range of possible information that could be communicated using dress and an in-depth discussion of how identities can be established and maintained using dress.

Finally, the *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* is recommended to readers, scholars, and students of the social psychology of dress. Much of the research in the social psychology of dress from the last 30 years is published therein and hence it serves as a good starting point for interested readers.

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