

Current Comments

Are You What You Wear?

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Recently, I stayed at the Park Lane Hotel in New York City. One morning I wore typical academic garb—an Icelandic wool pullover sweater and slacks. As I strolled into the dining room for breakfast, the headwaiter informed me that I had to wear a jacket to be seated. I was quite surprised, because in my many years of international travel, I had never been questioned about my attire for breakfast.

I encountered similar problems a few years ago in London. I was not seated at Simpson's Restaurant because I arrived without a necktie. The maitre d' offered to loan me one of the ties he kept on hand for such occasions, but they were so dirty I almost lost my appetite. Since I had promised to take my friend to Simpson's, I walked down the street and quickly bought a tie for \$10.00. I've never worn it since.

I wonder: if I had arrived at Simpson's in a suit and tie—but covered with mud—would I have been served anyway? Or what if I were a celebrity? Many restaurants will gladly overlook their own stringent dress codes to have a celebrity seated at a conspicuous table. And restaurants are anything but consistent about their dress codes. At the

Brown Palace Hotel in Denver (which I recommend highly), you probably could have breakfast half-naked and no one would object. But a sweater or ski jacket is strictly *verboten* in the dining room in the evening. (Oddly enough, while you must have a jacket for breakfast at the Park Lane, you don't need a tie for dinner.)

I don't dress the way I do as a form of protest. It is not my desire to make other people uncomfortable. So if I am invited somewhere, I usually ask about the dress code in advance or try to wear what I think will be appropriate. But even my attempts at "proper attire" have caused problems.

A friend invited me to an "in" restaurant in London for high tea. Assuming they had a dress code at San Lorenzo's, I wore my best velvet suit and only tie. I even wore a vest. When I arrived, everyone else was wearing blue jeans. I couldn't have been more conspicuous. While I waited for a table, someone did ask me if I could seat a party of six!

On the other hand, my nonconformist dress helped me make a good impression on at least one occasion. When I was attending a

meeting in Amsterdam, we were all invited to the Rijksmuseum for a reception. Our royal hosts were especially pleasant to me, and the director of IBM in the Netherlands later remarked to me that I had "made a big hit." As my friends know, I have a predilection for the color orange. That day I had worn an orange sweater vest under my suit jacket. I could not have prepared myself better for an introduction to the members of the Dutch Royal House of Orange.

Knowing my attitude towards clothing, a friend gave me a copy of John T. Molloy's *Dress for Success* shortly after it was published.¹ In the book, Molloy does not hand down dicta on "good" or "bad" taste in clothing. His purpose is to reveal what clothing is *effective*, i.e., what attire makes people view you as successful, powerful, or attractive and respond to you accordingly. The clothes that best help men climb the corporate ladder, according to Molloy, are conservative suits, shirts, and ties. He interviewed over 15,000 executives, he says, to find out that, "In matters of clothing, conservative, class-conscious conformity is absolutely essential to the individual success of the American business and professional man."

More recently, Molloy has published *The Woman's Dress for Success Book* in which he advises women that a gray or navy wool skirt and jacket with a modestly cut blouse is the best outfit to wear if

they want to get ahead.² He even advocates that businesswomen use this outfit as a conformist uniform to be worn on the job just as male executives use their gray suits and conservative tie as occupational uniforms.

Molloy's books make me shudder. I could never have adhered to the conformist dress style he advocates. When I am wearing a tie it literally chokes off my breath and my imagination. Maybe that's why I went into business for myself.

At least at ISI[®] no one has to "dress for success" to win promotions. Out of sympathy for others (like me) who are not interested in using clothes for business or other purposes, I ruled several years ago that ISI would be one company without a dress code. We've found that we can function quite well without one. We want our employees to be comfortable. And we don't want to force them to spend large amounts of money on an expensive wardrobe.

Many of us who abhor dress codes have managed to achieve success in our work despite our nonconformist clothes. Perhaps it is because we work with academics and scientists who are probably less conformist in their dress than the general population. As a result they do not find informal attire threatening or shocking.

Outside of academia and ISI, most people are not so fortunate. If they wear clothing that is markedly different from that of the people

around them, they often pay a price.

Several studies have shown that people are much more helpful and co-operative to people who are dressed like themselves. Thus, "conventionally" dressed people helped other conventionally clothed people more than those in "hippie" attire.^{3,4} On the other hand, people clothed in hippie regalia co-operated more readily with others in similar garb.⁵

However, one study produced unexpected results. In 1977, H. W. Kroll and D. K. Morren tested the hypothesis that librarians would provide faster and friendlier service to a conventionally dressed female student (jeans, plain shirt, jacket, no make-up) than they would to a "deviant" (navy leotard, cut-off jeans, red hosiery, lipstick, high heels).⁶ But no significant differences in service were found. Deviants received service that was just as prompt, helpful, and friendly as that given to conventionally dressed persons. "One explanation may be that the role requirements of a librarian do not allow her to discriminate among requests for assistance," the researchers speculate. Apparently you do not have to dress conventionally to get service everywhere.

If assessments of people by their clothing were only a part of society's comedy of manners, the subject would not require further discussion. But disturbing findings by Leonard Bickman indicate that

what a person wears also affects moral judgments.

In 1971, Bickman used clothing as the indication of social status to investigate the effects of perceived wealth on the honesty of others.⁷ Three male or female students dressed in high or low status clothing. High-status men wore business suits; low-status men wore work clothes and carried lunch-pails, flashlights, or other items that identified them as blue-collar workers. High-status women wore neat dresses and coats; low-status women wore inexpensive skirts and blouses.

The experimenters went to Grand Central Station and Kennedy Airport in New York City. An experimenter would enter a telephone booth, place a dime on the shelf in front of the phone, leave, and wait for a passerby to go into the booth to use the phone. Then the experimenter would tap on the booth's door and say, "Excuse me, Sir (or Miss), I think I might've left a dime in this phone booth a few minutes ago. Did you find it?"

Bickman made a surprising finding. Seventy-seven percent of the well-dressed experimenters got their money back. But only 38% of the low-status experimenters had their dimes returned. Bickman comments: "What was unexpected to us was that the low-status persons should be treated more dishonestly in a situation involving money. A thin dime is not much, to

be sure, but it certainly should mean more to a person who appears to be poor than to one who appears to be wealthy.”⁸

One may hope that the great variety in clothing today may help prevent future discrimination against those who choose not to conform to the prevalent idea of high status clothes. Today people in jeans may be seen driving expensive sports cars. They may appear at posh cocktail parties in T-shirts. A sign in a Washington, D.C. jazz club and restaurant announces “proper attire discouraged.” In New York one famous disco selects customers who are dressed in the *most* bizarre fashion. Its policy undoubtedly characterizes the late 1970s.

But diversity hasn't brought com-

plete freedom. People still conform sartorially on some occasions. Most of us would not wear the same outfit to a rock concert as to a formal dance. Most discos turn away prospective patrons who are deemed unsuitably dressed.

And, of course, many restaurants and clubs still demand that men wear jackets and neckties. This is changing, however. A *New York Times* survey of restaurant dress codes reports that many restaurants are slowly (and sometimes reluctantly) giving up the necktie rule.⁹ For those of us who find ties uncomfortable, it's nice to know that some things apparently won't last forever. As the author of a recent *Time* essay concluded, “A man's clothes should not throttle him.”¹⁰

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