Conclusions

Data on the social context of adolescent dress led to students' descriptions of distinctly different social types based on appearance and behavior. Various social types, including the modal or “average” type, where the casual, comfortable, unisex look dominated, were identified. Within this complex system, there was a hierarchical aspect of fluctuating dress categories. Categories seemed to serve as temporary anchors or reference points for the average or “mainstream” adolescent in developing identity. Extreme forms of dress associated with the categories of “punk” and “freak” provided significant, provocative contrasts to the more modal ones. Other types of dress represented almost unattainable social categories, such as supernormal jocks, jockettes, and “elegant prom queen cheerleaders,” or completely undesirable categories, such as nerds.

This loose hierarchy was suggested by analysis of respondents' comments. All categories outside the modal or normal ones stimulated respondents' thoughts on who they were and who they were not. Some respondents indicated that they might want to appear in one of the extreme forms of dress or as a jock or preppie. For example, one student indicated a yearning to deviate from the normal when he said that he would like to be a “punker,” but his family — his parents and older brothers — would not approve. However, none of the respondents indicated a desire to dress like a nerd.

Collecting qualitative data provided us with the subtle distinctions and variations in students' perceptions of a particular world of dress, relating primarily to the public self at one specific high school. As in phase one of this project, students were extremely cooperative and willing to serve as research collaborators. However, as a result of phase two, we concluded that exploring more fully the private self, and especially the secret self, requires more prolonged and intensive contact with informants than was afforded in this research. Nevertheless, there were certain similarities between the two phases of research. Males and females, whether in psychiatric care or not, were conscious of their own dress and that of others, and distinguished groups by their dress.

A clearer understanding of the relevance of dress categories for adolescents, including the meaning of dress within the context of a given school, has implications for teachers and others working with adolescents in youth agencies and clinical settings. Caution must be exercised when one hears about the existence of certain social types. Their numbers may be small and the boundaries between categories not always clear. In spite of the furor created by the more extreme dress forms of certain social types, we suggest that these extremes play an important role in the development of “normal” adolescents — as a reference point against which they symbolically assess and make decisions about themselves.

References


Factual Questions

1. This article is titled “Adolescent Dress, Part II...” With what type of adolescents did “Adolescent Dress, Part I...” deal?
(18) Nine of the eleven commented on the category “freaks.” Black and leather clothing and T-shirts associated with music groups, especially “heavy metal” groups, appeared frequently in descriptions: “They wear black—everything. Leather boots and coats.” Another respondent commented:

They wear black leather. Jackets of black leather, black ripped up jeans. They wear hanging-cross earrings. They’re a totally separate group.

When hair was mentioned, it was identified as long for boys, teased or unkempt for girls. A characteristic that distinguished punks from freaks seemed to be the coloring and shaping of hair among the punks.

(19) Preppie seemed to be a category in transition, with contradictions in informants’ observations. Some informants described preppies as wearing “expensive, nice clothes”: “The boys wear ... brands like Guess, Genera, and Girbaud jeans. Some Esprit.” In contrast, another said that male preppies “don’t wear name brands; they’re not fashionable.” Another student described preppies as “well-ironed.” As in the case of nerds, respondents mentioned neither leather nor black clothing in association with preppies. Makeup and hair-styles produced few remarks.

(20) Highly visible social types like the nerds, punks, and freaks appeared with very low frequency at the school if we judge by (1) observations in a variety of classrooms, lunchrooms, and hallways over a six-month period, and (2) review of the school yearbook. Based on observations in the general school population, dress was unisex and homogeneous: loose tops and jeans or pants for males and females. This casual look was seen by one teacher as pointing to the school’s emphasis on and reputation for athletes. Some differentiation in hairdos distinguished males from females more than did apparel. However, hair length alone did not differentiate, except for the very longest on females or the very shortest on males. Footwear was mostly athletic shoes, with a few students in flats or other leather shoes such as short boots. Jewelry was not used extensively, except occasionally earrings. Students dressing in this homogeneous manner can be categorized as modal or “average.”

(21) Visual analysis of head and shoulder portraits in the yearbook for tenth through twelfth graders supports the observations of homogeneity of appearance: shirts, blouses, or sweaters for the upper garment, and carefully managed hairdos for both males and females. The absence of forms of dress that would be characteristic of extreme social types may have several explanations. First, few students wear extreme forms of dress on a daily basis. Second, even those students who wear extreme forms may elect to conform to modal forms of dress for school pictures—voluntarily or under parental or school authorities’ pressure. A third explanation may be that extreme social types choose not to have their photograph taken for the yearbook.

(22) Subsequent interview data corroborated observations and expanded our understanding of modal dress. Highly visible social types seemed to represent extremes, against which what students termed “average,” “regular,” or “ordinary” persons were contrasted. This latter type was most often the way the informant saw his or her own dress. “They dress the way I do ... what’s in, what they like, casual.” Another respondent called them “in-betweens”: “Not a jock, not a nerd. They wear what they want.”

(23) We hypothesized that the jocks were a hyper-normal social type, and were frequently referred to when students described the popular kids at their school. For example:

The smart ones ... they’re the dream dates. You can’t feel neutral about a jock. Some girls really want to date them. Punk girls usually hate them.

Another girl described what she termed the “elegant prom queen cheerleader,” a kind of female analog to the “superjock.”

(24) Students emphasized the potential to change membership, indicating that both forms of dress and dress categories were ephemeral and capable of flux. This potential was dramatically illustrated by one informant, who coined the term “frock” — between a freak and a jock — to describe another social type, a category into which he put himself.

(25) Questions in phase two, as in phase one, were designed to assess dress and the secret self. Most significantly, when queried about body marking and tattoos, the students in our sample, in contrast to the clinical population in phase one, seemed surprised and even embarrassed by the question and gave few responses. Thus the two populations were distinguished by this index of the secret self.
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jocks.) If so, what are the different groups? What is their appearance like? "Are you part of any of these groups?" "Were you ever a member of another of these groups?" "Would you want to be a member of a different group than you are now?"

Results

(10) Observations and interviews indicated that the three dimensions of self were evident, with the secret self less prominent (at least in a one-session interview). For the adolescents in our sample, the public self featured most prominently in their responses. The school is an arena of high social intensity characterized by both formal and informal relationships. In apparent contrast to the adult world, the differentiation between public and private self does not seem as marked. Consequently, school clothing that we observed and that the students reported wearing was said to be worn for most social occasions in and out of school. Thus, public and private self do not generally seem to be distinguished by dress in this student population. Since the students' select dress for public use, our discussion centers on dress for the public self.

(11) Shared meaning systems relating to the public self were revealed most clearly in student classifications of the dress of social types at school. Twenty descriptive categories were used, some serving as synonyms for broader categories. There was variation in the number of social types mentioned by each student, ranging between four and seven. Although social types were distinct from one another, the adolescents in our sample did not always agree on the criteria for membership in the categories. "Jocks," "freaks," "preppies," "nerds," and " punks" were mentioned most frequently.

(12) Jocks were mentioned by all eleven students, and there was a greater core of similarity in descriptions of them as compared to other social types. Jocks encompassed both genders in this school, where athletics plays such a prominent role. Descriptions of male and female jocks typically included athletic clothing, such as letter jackets and jerseys, and casual items of dress. One informant called male jocks "mesh men," a reference to the fabric from which athletic jerseys are made. A male described jock dress as "nice jeans like Guess, gym shoes, and nice sweaters with brand names." One female respondent used the term "jockette" to refer to the female counterpart to the jock, emphasizing their expensive clothes. Another emphasized "pretty makeup, hair spray." Short haircuts were commonly mentioned for male jocks.

(13) Consensus existed about nerds, a contrasting social type. The emphasis was on out-of-style clothes:

- Flood pants that come up too high, totally out of style.
- Ugly sweaters that look like their parents' choice, or hand-me-downs.

(14) One student commented: "They're in a different world. Like striped shirts that don't match." Descriptions omitted reference to features common to other groups, such as black clothing, name brands, and athletic attire. Unkempt hair was another characteristic of nerds:

- They have messy hair.
- They don't comb their hair.
- Their hair looks like they don't care.

(15) There was similarity in the descriptions of dress worn by punks and freaks, probably because both represent a visibly extreme social type that appears to be associated with rebellion. In addition, each category stimulated extensive responses from the students, including some spontaneous remarks about drug and alcohol use.

(16) Punks were mentioned by ten of the eleven informants. Some descriptions focused on distinctive makeup and hairstyles:

- Their hair is all different. They have different-colored dyed hair.
- They wear strange makeup. One takes other people's hair and ties it to her hair. Another has shaved eyebrows, then draws zig-zag eyebrows. They look very pale.

(17) Other respondents noted male and female differences: "The boys wear their hair shaved on one side and spiked up." Female punks "wear eye shadow out into points." In terms of dress, black clothing and leather items figured prominently. One student described punk boys as wearing "black leather with things hanging off, T-shirts with beer advertisements, black army boots, jeans with holes." Another student spoke of punks' "shredded clothes." Still another noted: "They wear black; also high boots with silver chains, T-shirts with peace signs on them, different symbols, too."
(3) Eicher's (1981) typology of dress and the public, private, and secret self also was utilized. The public self pertains to an individual's formal social roles, the private self to relationships with close friends or family in informal settings, and the secret self to secluded or intimate settings and fantasy. This study is based on the premise that these aspects of self are socially developed, governed by cultural systems of meaning shared by participants. Further, insight into these cultural systems of meaning will lead to greater understanding of how an individual uses dress in the development of the self and in communicating identity.

(4) The ideas of Stone and Eicher were translated into questions posed to the adolescent psychiatric patients in phase one, and the high school students in phase two. In phase one, both male and female outpatients and inpatients shared information, even intimate details, about dress and body markings relating to the private and secret self in the course of clinical treatment (Michelman & Michelman, 1986; Michelman, Eicher, & Michelman, 1991). Because the clinical research highlighted the need for comparative data on the dress of adolescents not under psychiatric treatment, phase two was devised (1) to explore more fully the social context of adolescent dress from the perspective of the adolescent, and (2) to relate these findings to the three domains of dress and the self.

Method

(5) The research site was the only public high school serving a small city of 42,000 people on the edge of a large metropolitan area in the upper midwest, the same location as Michelman et al.'s clinical study. It is one of the largest public high schools in the state, well-known for its athletic programs.

(6) Past studies of adolescent dress have largely used survey research methods. Of these, many have focused on social variables, such as acceptance, participation, popularity, leadership, and conformity in relation to dress. Others have focused on personality variables or on the adolescent as consumer, studying selection, acquisition, care, and use of clothing. In general, such studies used conceptual models developed by researchers to study relatively large numbers of individuals, and focused on dress and what we term the public self. (An exception is a study by Hethorn (1987) that included quantitative responses to presentation of visual images, supplemented by observation and interviews with a selected number of students.)

(7) Survey methods did not seem appropriate for generating data relevant to dress and the public, private, and secret self. Instead, qualitative research methods consisting of observation and in-depth interviews were selected. Preliminary observations were conducted over a period of two months in 10th-grade classes, and interviews were conducted with teachers. From two required English classes, a nonrandom sample of students was selected by the researcher in consultation with the teachers. Students were approached as research collaborators during classroom descriptions of the project. A list of twenty students who had potential for being productive informants — representing a range of observed appearance types — yielded eleven informants. In order to allow a more informal exchange (analogous to the clinical setting of the child psychiatrist), and in a setting not associated with school, interviews were conducted in the students' homes. To reinforce the notion of the student as informant, the interviewer sat adjacent to the student so that both could read the research instrument as the interviewer recorded the student's responses. As in Michelman et al.’s clinical study, students were extremely cooperative and willing to serve as research collaborators. Interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two hours.

(8) The interview schedule contained both structured and open-ended questions. Structured questions about shopping patterns and financing of clothing purchases provided an opportunity to establish rapport with the teenagers prior to open-ended questions. Examples were: “Where do your clothes come from?” and “How do you decide what to wear?” Each had a checklist of choices provided.

(9) Of the less structured questions, many derived from Michelman et al.’s clinical study. Examples were: “Do you dress to emphasize something about yourself?” and “Do you dress to hide something about yourself?” Others included: “Is there anyone whose clothes and appearance you admire (such as another kid at school or a celebrity)?” “Some people say that people communicate through the way they dress. Do you think that you try to communicate messages to others with your clothes?” “If you are trying to communicate through your dress, how well do others understand the message of your clothes?” “Do you have any clothes that you wear only in private or secret?” “Do you have any tattoos? Do you ever make designs or marks on your skin?” Additional, less structured questions were devised especially for this project: “In your school, how do the most popular kids dress?” “In your school, are there different groups of kids that have names? (Some students have used descriptions like druggies, preppies,
Adolescent Dress, Part II: 
A Qualitative Study 
of Suburban High School Students

Joanne B. Eicher  
Suzanne Baizerman  
John Michelman

Through observation and interviews of high school students, the role of dress in a nonpsychiatric population was explored in order to provide data complementary to the first phase of a larger research project. Adolescent dress was examined in relation to three dimensions of the self: the public, private, and secret self. Due to the age of subjects and the length of contact with the interviewer, results provided most information about the public self, particularly descriptions of social types—categories based on appearance and behavior. These types included a modal, or "average," type and more extreme types including "punks," "freaks" and "nerds." Extreme social types appeared to offer valuable reference points for "average" adolescents in the development of their individual identities.

(1) This paper reports findings on the second phase of a larger study of adolescent dress. The first phase studied dress and body markings of adolescent psychiatric patients (Michelman, Eicher, & Michelman, 1991). In the second phase, the goal was to place these findings in a broader context and generate comparative data on adolescents in the general population, not in psychiatric treatment. To assess adolescents' perceptions, a qualitative study of dress, including body markings, utilized participant observation and interviews with a nonrandom sample of eleven students.

(2) As with the work in phase one, Stone's (1962) symbolic interaction approach to appearance and the self guided the theoretical orientation. In Stone's framework, appearance is a critical dimension of communication, almost always preceding verbal transactions. In addition, Stone proposed that appearance is important in formulating the self, especially in early development. Appearance establishes identity when an individual projects his or her "program" (loosely interpreted as one's social roles of gender, age, and occupation) to others. In turn, the self is validated or challenged when the program is "reviewed" by others.

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Suzanne Baizerman, Ph.D., and John Michelman, M.D., University of Minnesota.
Reprint requests to Joanne B. Eicher, Ph.D., Professor, Design, Housing, and Apparel, University of Minnesota, 240 McNear Hall, 1985 Buford Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota 55108.