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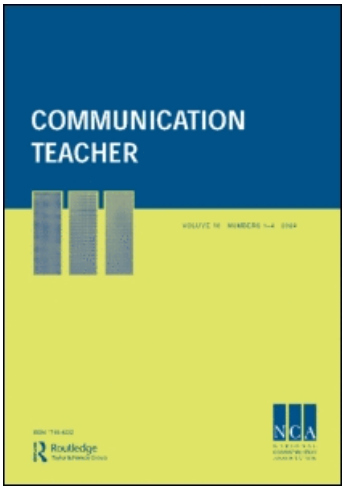

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Clothes Make the Person? Performing Gender Through Fashion

Brett Lunceford

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Objectives: *Students will: (1) think critically about how they perform gender through clothing choices and (2) recognize how different cultures define masculinity and femininity*
Courses: *Communication Theory, Gender and Communication, Popular Communication, Rhetorical Theory, Visual Rhetoric*

Introduction and Rationale

Although we wear clothing every day, we often do so as if by autopilot and exhibit a remarkable uniformity in our choices. Men and women tend to wear specific styles, colors, fabrics, and articles of clothing. These choices are not based on essential requirements for our bodies, but rather on socially constructed norms of gender. We take these ideas for granted because, as Butler (1990) observes, "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (p. 140). For some scholars, sex is a biological indicator while gender is socially constructed (e.g., Laner, 2000, 2003; Wood, 2008). Despite its seemingly clear distinction, sex transcends the generally held binary of male/female, as evidenced by the research surrounding intersexed and transsexual persons (e.g., Feder & Karkazis, 2008; Gough, Weyman, Alderson, Butler, & Stoner, 2008; Jeffreys, 2008; Lang & Kuhnle, 2008; Mackie, 2008; Melby, 2008; Wood, 2008). Moreover, some scholars note that sex itself is not simply biologically, but also socially constructed (e.g., Bem, 1995; Butler, 1993; Young, 2005).

The term "sex," then, is not entirely unproblematic. For the purposes of my course, I subscribe to the notion that sex is determined by biological, physical markers such as genitalia and secondary sex characteristics. Gender, on the other hand, is the social construction of how one of a particular sex should behave, which may differ based on culture or subculture (Hirschfeld, 1935). Sex and gender are not necessarily equivalent. To clarify, one can be sexed as male, but can be gendered feminine, or female and gendered masculine. Moreover, while sex is generally static and determined by genetics,

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falling into male or female categories (with some exceptions), the construction of gender is subject to social influences and flows along a continuum.

Students sometimes struggle with the idea that gender is socially constructed because it is difficult to break out of commonly held notions of what gender *is* and how it should be performed. Many of my students had not previously considered the idea that gender and sex can be two separate things. Butler (1993) suggests:

> Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. . . . This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (p. 95)

One continually performs gender, and the norms by which he or she performs gender are continually reinforced through such institutions and practices as education (Greenblatt, 2008; Youdell, 2005), law (Greenblatt, 2008), and gender stereotypes in clothing and toys (Martin & Little, 1990; Szkrybalo & Ruble, 1999).

One way to help students critically reflect on how they perform gender every day is to have them examine how they dress. Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggest that "the canons of proper dress for different social occasions... are taken for granted in everyday life" (p. 148). The goal of this assignment is to remove the sense of clothing choices as taken for granted by rendering the process of clothing oneself more transparent. Farren and Hutchison (2004) contend, for example, that "fashion is not about the capacity to directly affect or observe the physical world, but about the visual communicative ability of garments," (p. 473). This activity helps students recognize how they communicate socially constructed performances of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny through their fashion choices.

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The Activity

First, explain to the class well in advance that on the day of the activity they should come to class dressed as feminine as possible if they identify themselves as feminine, as masculine as possible if they identify themselves as masculine, and as androgynous as possible if they identify themselves as androgynous. This allows the instructor to reinforce the idea that gender identity and sex type are not necessarily the same. For example, some female students strongly identify themselves as masculine, and a number of male and female students identify themselves as androgynous. Clothing should come from their own closet; they should not buy anything new for the assignment. There should be no other guidelines on how they should dress, but explain that they will have to make a full accounting for why they chose each article of clothing. For best results, incorporate this with a journal assignment in which they write their explanation and consider what the other half of the class will wear. On the day before the activity, remind them of the journal entry and reinforce the idea that they should choose their clothing carefully.

Second, on the day of the activity, ask each student to come to the front of the class and explain why he or she selected each article of clothing. Sometimes students have difficulty identifying why they chose specific articles of clothing. When this occurs, ask the class to help the student articulate why that article of clothing fits with the rest of the outfit. Then, ask the class to rank the masculinity, femininity, or androgyny of the student's outfit on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being completely masculine, feminine, or androgynous. If there is disagreement among students regarding the masculinity, femininity, or androgyny of a student's outfit, allow those who disagree to explain their reasons. Once everyone has had an opportunity to explain their clothing choices, ask students if the rest of the class had dressed as they expected and discuss similarities and differences among those who displayed similar gender identification.

Although the ranking system may seem to punish those who transgress norms, this allows the other students in the class to argue from other viewpoints concerning what constitutes gender performance. For example, different races or subcultures may have alternate views concerning what constitutes masculine and feminine dress. There is no "winner" in this activity and no sanctions for student opinions. The instructor merely asks each student to explain why he or she chose each article of clothing. I use this activity later in the term because students are generally more comfortable with each other by then. Moreover, I remind students to be respectful of their fellow students. I have not had any student express discomfort with this assignment nor have I had problems with any student acting disrespectfully toward another.

As each student comes to the front of the class, be sure to discuss differences and similarities in dress. The instructor will also want to point out differences based on geographic region, subculture, race, and class. At my university in the South, some of the clothing norms are considerably different from where I lived on the West coast. For example, several of my students have worn a string of pearls, describing them as a Southern tradition for femininity.

The instructor should dress in a way that challenges clothing norms. For example, on the day of the activity, I wear a white button down shirt, a tie, black socks, sandals, and a formal lava-lava. The students generally find this amusing because I appear to be a man wearing a skirt, but I explain to them that this is what I would wear if I lived in Samoa. This provides an opportunity to explain that our conceptions of what constitutes masculine and feminine clothing are heavily influenced by the culture in which we live. Moreover, as is often demonstrated in the activity, various subcultures have their own conceptions of masculine and feminine dress.

Debriefing

Students tend to embrace the assignment, and thus dress in ways that are obviously gendered. People who identify as feminine tend to wear dresses, jewelry, high heels, and clothing that subtly accentuate their cleavage or buttocks. Their classmates often universally declare these women as completely feminine. For masculinity, however, there is often a range that is somewhat delineated by race or culture. On one occasion, for instance, an African-American student dressed as a "thug," wearing a hat,

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sunglasses, black tank top, sagging black jeans, a silver chain with a large cross, and visible boxers. In the same class, an Anglo-American man wore a blue polo shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. They looked strikingly different, yet both were ranked as highly masculine. I brought them both to the front of the room and asked the class if they would have the same assessment of masculinity if the two were to change clothing. The class replied that the two would seem quite out of place in each other's clothing, providing me with an opportunity to reinforce how culture and subculture shapes our views of masculinity and femininity. Another example of subcultural norms was demonstrated by a student who chose to dress as androgynous, adopting clothing from the gothic subculture, wearing baggy pants, a concert T-shirt, black leather jacket, black boots, and purple dye in her hair.

In general, women tend to dress in ways their classmates expected, but women often state that they expected the men to just dress as typically gendered. In one class, some women expressed surprise that none of the men dressed in a suit or wore a tie. Men often state that they found it difficult to find something that stood out as ultra-masculine. They observe that women have a greater latitude of choices concerning what they could wear, especially in the range of colors and fabrics while still being considered highly feminine.

One question that often generates considerable discussion concerns how clothing constrains our actions, influencing how we sit, walk, and move. Women often note that few of them wear skirts or dresses on a normal day, preferring the freedom of motion that pants allow. It is useful to describe how clothing serves functional, aesthetic, and performance purposes. Functionally, a cloth draped over oneself would cover nakedness and keep the person protected from the elements. Yet students often explain their clothing choices in terms of aesthetics or performance (e.g., they chose a specific article of clothing because of how it makes them feel or because it downplays what they consider to be unattractive aspects of their bodies while accentuating their best features).

This activity also allows for discussion of norms surrounding sexuality. For example, in one class, a male wore a yellow shirt. Because of the style of the shirt, he considered it masculine, but because of the color, many in the class considered it feminine. Some said that certain colors called into question one's heterosexuality. Such occasions allow the instructor to discuss the idea of heterosexuality as the norm (see Rich, 2003) and the concern for making sure that one's sex is congruent with heterosexual norms, or at least "passes" for heterosexual. Moreover, it underscores the idea that there is an accepted way to dress if one wishes to display oneself as homosexual, yet such constructions may deny the possibility that one may simply identify as more masculine or feminine while maintaining a heterosexual orientation.

Appraisal

For the most part, students take the assignment very seriously and carefully consider what constitutes masculine, feminine, and androgynous dress. As such, they often gain a greater understanding of how something as seemingly mundane as clothing is a

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performance of gender. In their journal entries, many students express how difficult it is to choose a quintessentially masculine, feminine, or androgynous outfit, sometimes even seeking assistance from others. But in the discussion after the activity, students begin to see the arbitrary nature of clothing while recognizing its symbolic power. When I employ an activity, I ask students if I should keep it or if there was some way to improve it. Students have emphatically stated that this activity is useful and provides them with a greater appreciation of how we define and perform gender.

Perhaps one reason this assignment succeeds is because students seem to take great care in choosing their outfits, knowing they will have to make a full accounting for their choices in their journal entry. Of course, some students forget about the activity. Even so, I ask them to make an accounting of the clothing they are wearing that day and explain why it is masculine, feminine, or androgynous. This activity provides a concrete way to explore how each of us constantly performs gender.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) observe that "the reality of everyday life maintains itself by being embodied in routines" (p. 149), and few things are more routine than getting dressed every day. When we put on clothes, we choose to display a particular presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). Butler (1990) suggests that gender performance is a kind of drag performance, and that "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitatitve structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (p. 137) but later clarifies that "I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman" (Butler, 1993, p. 231). However, in a practical sense, the costume is an important part of the performance that constrains and colors the roles that can be played by the performer.

By inviting students to think critically about the clothing they wear, they can begin to question how gender norms come into place. When students begin to reconsider taken for granted norms of society, it opens the door for questioning other norms. Clothing is an excellent place to begin, especially in light of the following observation from Wolf (1991):

> Costumes and disguises will be lighthearted and fun when women are granted rock-solid identities. Clothing that highlights women's sexuality will be casual wear when women's sexuality is under our own control. When female sexuality is fully affirmed as a legitimate passion that arises from within, to be directed without stigma to the chosen object of our desire, the sexually expressive clothes or manner we may assume can no longer be used to shame us, blame us, or target us for beauty myth harassment. (p. 273)

Clothing is far more than simply garments that cover one's body. Rather, clothing has social and political implications. This activity provides an opportunity to consider how the clothes that students choose to wear reinforce or challenge gender norms.

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