

Disadvantaged Women Dress for Success: A Study in Empowerment and Censure

Susan S. Gilpin, Ph.D.

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Dress for Success (DFS), an international non-profit organization, helps promote economic independence of disadvantaged women by providing career development services that include fashion advice and clothing resources. Drawing on the author's service learning experience and adopting a feminist critical perspective, the paper explores the conflicting messages of empowerment and censure imbedded in the fashion aspect of the DFS project. Additionally, the paper takes up the notion of "clothing semiotics" and the visually communicative and political aspects of the "clothing resources." Finally, the paper presents some ethical challenges to the project and calls for further communication scholarship in this area.

Susan S. Gilpin, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Marshall University. Correspondence to: One John Marshall Drive, Huntington, WV 25755. Email: gilpin2@marshall.edu. Paper presented at the National Communication Association Annual Conference, Chicago, IL, November 16, 2007. Panel Title: "Lives in Progress" as Sites of Struggle: Style as a Cultural Phenomenon with Social and Political Implications.

In a highly mobile society, where first impressions are important and where selling oneself is the most highly cultivated “skill,” the construction of appearances becomes more and more imperative.

([Ewen](#), 1988, 85).

This essay explores popular culture issues in a service learning project supporting a local affiliate of [Dress for Success](#) (DFS), an organization dedicated to empowering disadvantaged women to achieve economic self-sufficiency.



Kimberly Branch, right, helps Carla Ward, a participant in the Dress for Success program, select a business suit. (© AP Images) [Monsen \(2007\)](#)



[Dress for Success](#)

I'll begin with a story from a recent issue of [Black Enterprise](#) that captures the essence of this organization:

Like most professional women, Zoe Sheppard, a counselor with [PHOENIX House Foundation](#), a national drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, has a treasure trove of work-life anecdotes about navigating her career path. Yet unlike many of her contemporaries, Sheppard's journey has been anything but a typical trip up the corporate ladder. She recalls picking out her first interview

suit: a classic green two-piece – the same color as the prison uniform she'd been wearing for months prior to that day. She selected the Jones New York suit not from a boutique but at Dress for Success Worldwide (DFS), an international organization that provides professional attire and support services for women re-entering the workforce. . . . [With assistance from Dress for Success] she was able to not only obtain employment after prison but regain her dignity and become a source of inspiration for others. . . . [DFS] has helped more than 350,000 women around the globe get on the road to self-sufficiency. . . . [And it began as] a charity that primarily helped low-income women acquire suits for job interviews. . . . ([Chambers 2007, 124](#))

In 2006-2007, I was the instructor of an [advanced public speaking class](#) and one of five faculty members directing their students in a coordinated, year-long interdisciplinary [service learning](#) project. Our goal was to support the newly formed DFS [River Cities](#) local affiliate. My colleagues were from English, Family and Consumer Science, Journalism, and Women's Studies. Our university service learning director, who also is the founding director of the local DFS affiliate, framed the project as way for our classes to understand and intervene in the cyclical nature of poverty in our region, especially among disadvantaged women and children. Our common reading was "Pyramids of Inequality" from Sharon Hays's (2003) [Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform](#). Following her analysis of the failures of the Personal Responsibility Act and its resulting demonization of welfare mothers, Hays asserts

the welfare mothers I have and will describe are not the causes of the rise in single parenting or the rising number of women and children living in poverty. They are its *consequences*. . . . If we approach . . . social problems only by attempting to "fix" all the individual women currently using welfare, our efforts will fail. The social system that created their plight will simply spawn a whole new generation to take their place" (137).

In addition to unsettling most of our individual views on welfare and the plight of single women and their children, Hays prompted a number of ethical challenges to the DFS project for my service learning students, who posed questions such as these:

Aren't we (DFS) doing what Hays suggests is the wrong thing to do? Shouldn't we be intervening in something else instead?

My (mother/aunt/sister/family) is just like Hays described. Welfare isn't bad, but some people are. Shouldn't we just be going after the welfare cheats and let welfare work for those who need it?

Isn't the suit the "uniform" of the system that benefits from maintaining the cycle of women and children in poverty?

Will the women really have the kind of jobs that require a suit for an interview and for work? Do they want those kinds of jobs? Are they qualified for them?

I'd be embarrassed to be getting clothes from someone else. If they can do their jobs, why can't women wear clothes that they have or that they can afford?

We wrestled with these questions in our face-to-face classes and in online interdisciplinary discussion groups. Some students claimed expertise in this area, as their mothers had been – or still were – among the disadvantaged target population for DFS services. Other students struggled with deeply held prejudices about welfare recipients in general and single mothers in particular. Together, over time, we all became more aware of the problems that potential DFS clients in our region face, such as access to affordable health care, child care, and elder care; time management, stress management, and financial management; transportation issues in an area with limited public transportation; discrimination; and more. And I became increasingly interested in students' questions about the meaning of the clothing we collected and distributed and in the phenomenon of women's suits as cultural [sign](#). In an era when dress appears to be growing less formal than more in the social settings I observe, what is a suit's [signification](#) (Chandler)? Why does a disadvantaged woman's journey to self-sufficiency begin with a hand-me-down suit? And not just any suit. DFS affiliate web sites in the United States often specify donations similar to those listed by [River Cities](#) (Huntington, WV area) Dress for Success in spring 2008:

- gently used business suits
- gently used suiting separates (skirts, blouses, dress pants)
- coats
- blazers
- handbags and briefcases
- new, unopened panty hose
- new, unopened makeup
- gently used closed-toe dress shoes (pumps, slingbacks and flats)
- conservative jewelry

In other words, to the extent that it is possible, for their interviews and possibly beyond, women are coached to adopt the traditionally male business [uniform](#) that masks and suppresses the gender, ethnicity, and class of the wearer. But, as my students suggested, are white collar dress codes even relevant? Since beginning this project eighteen months ago, I have been regularly scanning area [employment ads](#) in [our regional paper](#) (Herald) with potential DFS clients in mind. Most of the entry level jobs I find available in our region will require employees to wear the appropriate service industry uniform, or costume¹. Some DFS affiliates even ask for donations of such clothing. For example, I noted on the [Pittsburgh Dress for Success](#) web page in fall 2007 this posting, which suggests a particular DFS client profile:

¹ By 'costume,' I mean to reference character dress, as treated by Barnard (2002), Crane (2001), Lurie (2000) and others.

SUITING PROGRAM WISH LIST

Thanks to your generosity, we are not accepting suits or business separates (dresses, blazers, skirts) at this time.

HOWEVER... We do still need:

- * Leather business appropriate shoes (sizes 7 and larger) in black, navy and beige/taupe
- * Business appropriate purses and shoulder bags in black, navy & beige/taupe
- * Closed toe low heel shoes with non skid soles in all sizes
- * Black and Khaki everyday business pants (i.e. Dockers) in all sizes
- * White collared shirts in all sizes
- * Medical worker smocks and scrubs in all sizes
- * Maternity clothing for office settings in all sizes

The site's most recent recommendations for donations are similar:

- * Medical scrubs
- * Non skid shoes and "Crocs" (larger sizes & wide widths a plus)
- * Black and khaki casual pants
- * White collared shirts
- * Plain colored ladies t's and long sleeve shirts
- * New Black socks and knee-hi's
- * New Undergarments (Bras and panties)
- * Steel toe boots
- * Maternity clothing for work

In my region, entry level jobs appear to require, at most, a wardrobe that is popularly termed "business casual," a style widely treated in popular and professional publications aimed at upwardly mobile young professionals in workplaces where "the golden rule of dress for success has started to slip" (Compton 2007, 12). [Heathfield](#) illustrates a style she believes projects a desirable professional ethos:



Heathfield advises, “Clothing that reveals too much cleavage, your back, your chest, your feet, your stomach or your underwear is not appropriate for a place of business, even in a business casual setting.” (See also Monster’s [Andre](#), “Cracking the Business Casual Dress Code”)

For young adults, especially, interpretations of “business casual” codes are confusing, if not contested, as this *USA Today* article, “Business Casual’ Causes Confusion,” suggests ([Armour](#) 2007):



Unacceptable



Acceptable

Both images by Linda Johnson for USA TODAY
(See also [Martin](#), “Casual or Casual?”)

Even though American white collar workplaces appear to be moving away from expectations for formal dress and adopting a business casual dress code, in my review of scholarly and popular literature on the subject I was surprised to learn how important “dressing the part” continues to be, especially for women, in corporate America.² My students’ concerns about the appropriateness of clients’ material transformation during what DFS staff members term a “suiting” seem justified. However, in this essay, I set aside questions related to the types of jobs in my region for which DFS clients might typically qualify and the clothing they would need to perform these jobs. Instead, I step back and ask, with my students, why an international organization with a philosophy such as that of DFS makes a difference to disadvantaged women who have the skills necessary to pursue jobs outside the service industries. I begin with an overview of the normative function of fashion in professional workplaces in what [Rubenstein](#) terms *clothing semiotics* (2001, 7), and from a feminist perspective I describe some ways I have

² For a useful example of the scholarly treatment of organizational dress, see Rafaeli, A. and M. J. Pratt (1993).

discovered that professional dress has acquired meaning across traditional dimensions of gender, race and ethnicity, and class. I argue that dress for success rhetoric, broadly construed, both empowers and censures working women.

The Normative Function of Fashion

In many professional workplaces, women must communicate both maleness and femaleness, but not too much of either, in their speech, interpersonal interaction, and dress. Regarding dress, image consultant [John T. Molloy](#) (1996), author of the best selling “Dress for Success” books for men and women, describes “the traditional ‘dress for success’ suit.”³ It imitates the colors and basic design of a man’s suit” (50). The few alternatives he suggests to the traditional style are the “aggressive feminine” suit (50), the “stylish professional” (51), and the “soft feminine” (51). Molloy cautions “[h]owever, most of the suits with feminine detailing are too ‘cute’ to be effective” (51). Molloy’s final suit category, the “conservative feminine suit,” is preferred by the most powerful women (52):

It has a conservative cut and color, but the color is one that would be found only in a woman’s suit – for example, mahogany, dark plum, deep maroon, and the like. These suits send the message that most women want to send: that they are feminine and powerful. If they are rich looking, and most of them are, they work with the most powerful men and women. . . . If you own only one suit, it should be medium gray, but if you have two, the second should be a conservative feminine suit (52).

Molloy further assists puzzled or insecure women identify colors and styles that are inappropriately feminine or not sufficiently conservative.

These conservatively tailored suits in black, tan, and navy from [Brooks Brothers](#) Summer 2008 Collection are modeled after the traditional man’s suit.



³ [Susan Faludi](#) (1992) provides a detailed account of Molloy’s influence on the fashion industry and the industry’s resistance to his advice as women’s more trendy clothing sales declined.

The following suits from [Ann Taylor](#) “Suits that Work” collection are examples of the stylish professional office attire Malloy describes.



The Tahari suit on the left below reflects an appropriate feminine conservative style, while the Jones New York suit on the right probably does not. Both are from [Macy's](#).



Drawing on [Saussure](#)'s definition of language as a system of signs and symbols existing prior to and outside individual users, Rubenstein (2001, 8) explains meaning systems such as Malloy describes above. According to Rubenstein, a sociologist, clothing signs 1) are task-oriented or instrumental, 2) have one primary meaning, and 3) are commonly recognized as a sign by its wearer (9) (The latter assumes that the wearer has accurately assimilated the relevant code). Thus, she writes, “clothing signs make visible the structure and organization of interaction within a specific social context” (9).

By this reasoning, the clothing signs Molloy describes signify structure and organization as prescribed by or modeled after male dominated workplaces.

This structural and organizational model is not without cost or consequence to female employees. For example, in their recent research with MBA students, Peluchette, Karl, and Rust found that women were more sensitive than men to the way their professional attire affects workplace outcomes, and they “were more interested in clothing and devoted significantly more resources (physical, mental, and financial) to their work wardrobe” (2006, 59) than men. The authors term these combined resources “appearance labor” (50). The meaning systems of professional dress disadvantage women who find acquiring the clothing signs more costly across these multiple dimensions than do their male counterparts. Moreover, they face a double standard in corporate offices that have adopted business-casual days: women who participate in casual dress days may be unfairly stereotyped and evaluated as less hard-working and professional than their male co-workers (Compton 2007). And while many women find powerfully dressed men sexy, men evaluate women whose appearance they find sexy as less professional, powerful, and intelligent (Compton). In addition to other challenges to equality that women face in the workplace, they must also expend the extra appearance labor to maintain an equal footing with their male counterparts. Oddly, in our beauty- and sex-obsessed culture, this appearance labor is sometimes required to make a woman appear less feminine or attractive but not masculine, either. Deviating from the norm in either direction can diminish a woman’s chances of getting ahead (Molloy, 1996, 176 – 184).

Other aspects of a woman’s appearance affect her success in professional workplaces as well. To begin, there is a woman’s weight. As if popular media would allow us to do so, let’s not forget weight. For instance, [Lisa Scherrer \(now Dugan\)](#), a consultant from Atlanta, advises women against wearing short jackets to interviews: “Short jackets . . . sometimes accentuate the figure or figure flaws too much” (Ballard 1999, 68), suggesting that a woman’s figure is what her recruiter will evaluate. Similarly, Molloy counsels his women readers:

Women who are more than 15 percent overweight are less likely to be hired, be promoted, or move into management. It makes no difference what industry you are in or who your boss is, you are less likely to succeed. If you are overweight and work for a woman, particularly if she is into fitness, your chances of getting ahead are almost nil” (1996, 188).

Furthermore, according to most sources, a successful woman’s hair must also be carefully managed. The style can neither accentuate her femininity nor “send a masculine message” (Malloy 193). Finally, and not surprisingly, women experience ageism to a greater degree than men. If a female employee’s hair is gray, “the news is all bad” (198). Unlike their male coworkers, whose gray hair may signal maturity and reliability, women with gray hair are “seen as old and over the hill by the majority of

business-people” (198-199).⁴ Similarly, according to Molloy, “women who begin to look old are not taken seriously. . . . [P]lastic surgery has become so common for executive and professional women in their fifties or early sixties that it seems to be almost a requirement. In addition, it works” (205).

Women of color have additional concerns, as they have to mask not only their sex and age, but also their race or ethnicity. To illustrate, I offer a few of the many examples from publications for racial and ethnic minorities. Managing editor of *Ebony* magazine, Lynn Norment, describes for *Ebony* readers how Afrocentric attire and accessories may be worn by “upscale men and women [who] are making a bold statement” (2000, 67). Bold statement? Regarding their standard business look, an African American Harlem (NY) museum director advises “young Sisters” to “[k]eep it simple. Too much of a good thing is too much and begins to work against you” (Norment 2000, 67). An article in *The Black Collegian* entitled “Dress for Success” (Ballard 1999) contains interview and workplace advice that echoes many other articles addressed to aspiring young professionals of all races and genders: the white male business suit and conservative grooming is still the standard. An experience Ballard reports for her African American student readers is worth noting. According to Ballard, the story was shared by the director of the Career Planning and Placement Services at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

About five years ago, I had a young lady who was an awesome individual. She had about a 3.89 grade point average and was a great student. She happened to wear her hair in braids. During the interview process, she did quite well, but received no callbacks and no offers for plant visits. She could not understand what was wrong. I suggested to her that we do a little experiment. I asked her to buy a nice wig to cover her braids and let’s see if there is any difference. The results were amazing! She suddenly began getting callbacks and invitations for plant visits! Is it right? No. Is it corporate America? Yes. And we try to teach them that they need to dress like the people who interview them. . . . They need to wear the uniform of the team they want to be a part of. (Ballard 1999, 68) (See also [Ballard](#))

Examples from popular literature for Hispanic professional women are more limited, but professional dress concerns there are similar to those noted earlier, including the code for business casual ([Pliagas 2001](#)). One *Hispanic* article (Business 2006, 14) urged conformity in workplace attire (“Excessively sexy looks are not fashionable at the office”), but readers could express their individuality and “complete the business look . . . with accessories, such as briefcases, pens and cellphones.” Pictured was a collection of \$335 pens, \$275 shoes, and a \$695 briefbag. Also addressing *Hispanic* readers, Linda Pliagas quotes a personal appearance consultant as saying women’s business dress “is a factor influencing all other behaviors: *manners, morals, and productivity* [emphasis added]” (2004, 80). This statement distinguishes itself dramatically from the sound

⁴ Women (and men) have faced this discrimination for at least a century. See “[GRAY HAIR A HANDICAP](#); In Pedagogy as Well as Business It Is Policy to Cultivate the Appearance of Youth” in the May 15, 1904 Magazine Section of [The New York Times](#).

cautions I found in non-Hispanic publications linking business dress with achieving dominance, authority, and advancement.

Advice regarding class uniformly advises imitating the dress and mannerisms of the top management in one's workplace and one's social betters. In a chapter titled "Looking Good," Molloy (1996) rates virtually every aspect of a woman's presentation, including her "verbal patterns" (189) as high class or low class, and he provides guidance for avoiding or ridding oneself of low class "flaws" (190).

Conclusion

Positioned against gender, race, and class, the dress for success suit and its semiotic entailments index both empowerment and censure for working women. For the newly employed, entering the workforce from welfare rolls and lower classes, perhaps the DFS suiting is a symbol of achievement, a confidence builder, a perceived admission ticket to a better life. From the feminist perspective of this analysis, however, the suit indexes the discrimination and limitations women still face in professional workplaces.

When I began the DFS service learning project, my students' questions and challenges to Hay's (2003) characterization of welfare mothers and the DFS project sometimes struck me as dismally selfish, unenlightened, or defeatist. However, when I teach the class again, their questions will be the starting point for an inquiry into the rhetoric of clothing that also will inform our work. I share Douglas Bradley Smith's question and conclusion in his *Quarterly Journal of Speech* review of Molloy's first edition of *Dress for Success*.

Why has no communication scholar bothered to decode the specific meanings of the American wardrobe? While total absorption in such details might reduce us to public relations consultants, to ignore such details is to deny the global nature of human interaction. Clothing persuades. (1977, 215).

Thirty years later, the issue remains largely unaddressed by communication scholars. The workplace inequalities legitimated by contemporary dress for success rhetoric still requires scholarly investigation and critique.

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