

THE EFFECTS OF CLOTHING STYLE UPON THE REACTIONS OF A STRANGER

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Our reactions to a stranger can often be influenced by the clothes he/she wears. In this study a male experimenter, whilst posing as a market researcher, dressed either smartly or untidily. Style of dress was found to have a significant influence upon the number of agreements from both older and younger women to answer the interviewer's questions. Dress did not have a significant influence upon men and older individuals were more influenced by clothing than were the younger ones. The results of this study are believed to have implications for many kinds of interview settings.

Keywords: clothing style, influences, reactions of strangers, age, interview settings.

Immediate reactions to a stranger are based on the first impressions he creates. The clothes worn are a major element in appearance and therefore they can be thought of as playing a significant role in impression formation. They can be clearly distinguished at a distance whereas facial features and tone of voice require closer inspection. In a society in which brief social contacts are numerous, clothing has become an important index to behavior and status. The clothes worn can have effects upon the behavior of others (e.g., Lefkowitz et al., 1955). Judgments of others by the clothes they wear are so much a part of our social experience that we tend to overlook their significance in the analysis of social behavior. First impressions may not be all that valid as assessments of a person. But they are often resistant to change.

Both Douty (1963) and Hamid (1968, 1969) have found that consistent stereotypes originate from the apparel worn and Gibbins (1969) found consensus among observers as to the message which particular clothes convey. However, studies such as these have been undertaken typically not in real-life settings but in the laboratory. We would like to know whether such stereotypes are held by a cross-section of the general public in a real-life setting.

In 1972 Lambert, whilst posing as a market researcher, dressed either smartly or untidily. She asked individuals whether they would answer a few survey questions concerning advertising. The numbers of agreements and refusals were noted and it was found that neither dress of

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interviewer nor sex nor age of interviewee had an overall significant effect upon refusal rate. However, when the data were analyzed by age it was found that older people were significantly influenced by dress whereas younger ones were not.

The present experiment involves a similar attempt to examine the influence of type of clothing upon a cross-section of the general population in a real-life setting. This time, however, the interviewer was male.

METHOD

Individuals leaving an exit of a railway station were approached singly by a male experimenter posing as a market researcher. A railway station was chosen as a likely spot to encounter a cross-section of the general population. The experimenter would approach an individual and say, "Good evening. I'm conducting a survey on advertising. Would you be willing to answer some questions?" If the individual agreed, two questions were asked and the experimenter appeared to record the answers. Men and women were approached alternately and an attempt was also made to alternately vary apparent age (over or under 35 years as judged by the experimenter). The selection of individuals in this way reduced the possibility of experimenter bias. After each individual had been approached agreement or refusal was noted.

This procedure was undertaken at the same time of day on two successive midweek evenings. On the first evening the experimenter was dressed smartly and on the second he wore untidy clothes. Other variables such as hair style and tone of voice remained the same for both conditions. On both occasions a total of 150 individuals were approached. A different exit from the station was used on the second evening to avoid recognition and the approaching of participants from the previous day.

RESULTS

The data were analyzed by a number of 2 x 2 contingency tables. Overall, dress had a significant influence ($p < .001$) in that more agreements were forthcoming when the interviewer was smartly dressed. This effect was primarily due to the reactions both of the older ($p < .05$) and of the younger women ($p < .05$) since dress did not have a significant effect on men.

TABLE 1
NUMBERS OF RESPONSES TO THE TWO CONDITIONS OF DRESS

	<i>Older Women</i>	<i>Younger Women</i>	<i>Older Men</i>	<i>Younger Men</i>
Smart:				
Agreed	20	23	12	30
Refused	18	15	24	8
Untidy:				
Agreed	2	15	11	22
Refused	21	27	41	5

Young men tended to agree and older men refuse whatever the type of clothing. Dress had a significant influence on older participants (male and female combined, $p < .025$), who were more inclined to refuse anyway ($p < .01$). Thus the group most influenced by the variable of dress comprised older women, followed closely by younger women.

DISCUSSION

Type of clothing had a stronger influence upon older individuals than it did upon younger ones. This was also the case in Lambert's study. In both studies the experimenter was young and this effect might therefore be due to the age of the interviewer. However, whereas in Lambert's study no other effect of dress was observed, in the present study younger women were also significantly influenced by the clothing of a male interviewer.

Lambert asked whether the marked negative reaction she received from older women when she was dressed untidily was a general reaction to dress or to a young member of the same sex. The present experiment shows that older women were strongly influenced by the variable of dress alone. However, it was found that the use of a male interviewer did result in a marked negative reaction from older individuals of the same sex irrespective of the clothes worn.

Many of the reasons given for refusal were interesting. One of the most common coming from the older men leaving the railway station was that they had a train to catch!

The results of this study are thought to have implications for survey work such as market research and for interviewing generally.

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