Navigating by attire: The use of dress by female administrative employees
Anat Rafaeli; Jane Dutton; Celia V Harquail; Stephanie Mackie-Lewis
Academy of Management Journal; Feb 1997; 40, 1; ABI/INFORM Global
pg. 9

NAVIGATING BY ATTIRE: THE USE OF DRESS BY FEMALE ADMINISTRATIVE EMPLOYEES

ANAT RAFAELI
Hebrew University of Jerusalem

JANE DUTTON
University of Michigan

CELIA V. HARQUAIL
University of Virginia

STEPHANIE MACKIE-LEWIS
University of Michigan

We conducted an inductive study of the everyday decisions about dress at work of female administrative employees in a university business school. Our findings reveal that dress is an attribute embedded in a variety of cognitive schemata that govern individuals’ comprehension of and behavior at work. In acquiring and executing these schemata, employees make efforts that enhance their emotional preparedness for jobs and improve interpersonal relations. The study offers implications for theory and research on organizational symbolism, role taking, and the current practical trend toward relaxed dress.

Mom, change those clothes. I hate it when you wear a suit at home. It’s like you’re not really here.

A six-year-old child to his mother

In the daily process of choosing the clothes that they wear to work, many people may forget that the choice and wearing of business dress is a performance in the sense suggested by Goffman (1959): a behavior that individuals purposefully use to convey information about themselves to others, enabling them to engage in social interactions and place themselves in social systems. In this article, we explore individuals’ use of dress as part of their role performance. Following the performance metaphor, we take a backstage look at the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of female administrative employees in an academic organization as they relate to dress. Our specific focus is on dress at the individual level of analysis, that is, on dress as a symbol that individuals actively use to facilitate their performance of organizational roles (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993; Trice & Beyer, 1993).

Portions of this study were completed when Anat Rafaeli was a visiting faculty member with the University of Michigan. We wish to thank all the participants in the study who gave so generously of their time. We also thank Susan Ashford, Arthur Brief, William Foraker, Michael Pratt, Julie Younglove, and three anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Roles are the sets of expectations and activities that guide and govern individual behavior both in and out of organizations (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Role performance involves both fulfilling the expectations of others and shaping others’ expectations (Graen & Scandura, 1987). According to role theory, roles structure the work of an organization (Graen, 1976; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Myers, 1994). Individuals are said to “take” roles by performing the necessary activities and accepting the relevant expectations that are “sent” by others. Hence, the process of role taking involves reading cues from others and reacting to the expectations these cues signal.

Relatively little research has explored how individuals accomplish role taking. Our study focused on how individuals engage symbols in the process of role taking. Symbols, which can be defined as “concrete indicators of abstract values” (Firth, 1973: 54), are a part of cognitive frameworks, or templates, known as schemata. Schemata are sets of cognitions about people, roles, or events that govern social behavior (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Our basic assertion is that individuals use dress as a symbol to engage and execute their role schemata in organizations. Because symbols are typically concrete and visible, they are accessible to employees seeking to manage their role behavior. Our study will show that individuals include knowledge about symbols such as dress in the schemata they apply to their organizations, their roles in organizations, and specific events within these roles. Individuals’ knowledge of dress as a role symbol is elaborate and structured; this dress knowledge is useful in role taking. We found that study participants used dress as an informative role symbol for engaging their work roles, executing role activities, calling up role feelings, and affecting how they as role performers related to others.

Researchers investigating symbols in organizations have paid only limited attention to individuals’ use of symbols in role performance. Instead, research has primarily focused either on symbols as tools that managers use to create or “enact” an organizational reality (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981) or on symbols as indicators of various organizational meanings (cf. Gagliardi, 1992; Schultz, 1994; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Neither interpretation greatly aids understanding of how employees use symbols in their everyday activities. Yet symbols provide individuals with a means of communicating with others in an organization, because they connote important organizational and social values.

Dress as a symbol has received extensive popular attention, as exemplified by the “dress for success” books (e.g., Molloy, 1977), as well as some limited attention in the organizational literature (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). To date, organizational scholars have looked at the dress behaviors of employees from two perspectives. One perspective focuses on dress as a meaningful, expressive symbol associated with an individual’s occupational or organizational identity (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Research in this stream construes dress as a cultural form that signifies meanings for a particular social group. In this
view, nurses and doctors wear white or scrubs to communicate to themselves and to others the values and capabilities of the medical profession (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1994).

A second treatment of dress in organizations examines the patterns and significance of dress as a macro, organization-level variable. For example, Rafaeli and Pratt (1993) explored how organizational dress patterns relate to aspects of organizational effectiveness. They argued that extraorganizational factors (such as societal and institutional influences) and intraorganizational factors (such as organizational values and structure) shape the content, homogeneity, and conspicuousness of employees’ dress. They also suggested that these collective dress attributes affect both individual-level outcomes (e.g., compliance and legitimization) and organization-level outcomes (e.g., organizational image and human resource utilization). Neither of these perspectives grants the individual much autonomy in dress choice or embraces individuals’ own perceptions of the dress they wear. Hence, in this study we balanced the existing macro view on dress and symbols in organizations with a microexamination of how individuals used dress in an organizational setting. We did so by studying the dress behaviors of women in administrative or support staff positions in a business school.

STUDYING FEMALE ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT STAFF

The organizational literature has paid only scant attention to support staff, yet in most organizational settings, this group is essential to the ongoing functioning and success of an organization (Kanter, 1977; O’Leary & Ickovics, 1990). Some scholars have argued that ignorance of this segment of organizational life is related to the facts that it is typically occupied by women (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1990) and that it is a relatively powerless segment (Kanter, 1977).

Theoretically, this population serves important functions. These employees fulfill boundary-spanning and service roles in organizations; these roles are particularly important for organizations, such as university business schools, that experience demands from two often conflicting environments: education and business. Although scholars have explored the process by which organizations deal with environments marked by conflicting demands from different groups (D’Aunno, Sutton, & Price, 1991; Meyer, Scott, & Strang, 1987; Powell, 1987), there is little work on how this type of context influences individuals’ everyday behaviors. When an organizational context comprises competing or conflicting demands, the demands faced by individual employees in boundary-spanning positions are also likely to be complex. Many of these boundary-spanning employees are likely to deal with different sets of clients (in the business school setting, students, faculty, and business executives), and they are likely to operate in two normative contexts (the university and the business community). The extent of such con-
flicts may vary among different employees, but the general sense of competing environmental demands is likely to be evident to all organizational members.

Our study sheds light on how employees embedded in such a work context navigate among the various and multiple demands that their roles embody. In particular, we focused on how individuals integrate everyday symbols, such as dress, into the multiple cognitive frameworks, or schemata, they employ for the effective execution of their roles. We suggest that understanding how individuals creatively use simple symbols, such as dress, to navigate the complexity of their work demands can contribute to understanding the process of effective role execution. Specifically, we show how dress is woven into important schemata (namely, membership, function, hierarchy, and event schemata) that govern individual behavior at work.

Dress as a symbol may have been particularly important to the employees in our study because of gender differences in attitudes toward dress. The participants in our study were primarily women. Women are argued to be more sensitive to issues of dress and appearance and to have a more elaborate dress code than men (cf. Davis, 1992; Malandro, Barker, & Barker, 1989; Shim & Bickle, 1994; Wolf, 1991). Scholars studying women in organizations have typically argued that dress and appearance are more important to women than to men (Kanter, 1977; Sheppard, 1992), in part because women in male-dominated organizations have a greater need for the legitimacy, credibility, acceptance, and self-confidence that dress can convey.

Wolf (1991: 27) described how women’s efforts to participate in the world of work are governed by what she called “professional beauty requirements.” Wolf contended that women who want to be successful in organizations must look attractive to gain visibility in a male-dominated business culture, but must also not appear too feminine because then they may be perceived as sexual objects instead of as professionals. Thus, Wolf argued, working women must be very sensitive to issues of appearance. Similarly, Sheppard (1992) asserted that women in organizations struggle with reconciling contradictory societal demands to “be feminine” with organizational demands to “be business-like.” Neither of these scholars examined how individual women determine their appearance on a daily basis or explored the dynamics that accompany this seemingly mundane microlevel behavior.

Our study therefore examined the recurring dress decisions made by a group of individuals for whom this decision was particularly salient. We intentionally set out to study the dress behaviors of employees who were not constrained by a formal organizational dress code. Our assumption was that these employees would teach us about how dress discretion can be used to express individuality. Our research was exploratory and therefore employed qualitative and inductive methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ragin, 1994). In conducting our inquiry, we first endeavored to uncover patterns in employees’ perceptions of their dressing behavior. These patterns were then used as the foundation for a more informed conceptual understanding of what drives individuals’ uses of the dress symbol.
METHODS

The Organizational Context

We conducted this study at a school of business administration in a large midwestern university. The business school offers undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs, maintaining an enrollment of approximately 2,500 students. It employs 138 faculty members and 137 support staff. At the time of the study, approximately 16 percent of the full-time faculty members were women, as were 94 percent of the staff and 30 percent of the master's of business administration (M.B.A.) students. The school maintains active relations with both other parts of the university and the business community at large, the latter primarily through student placement and executive education programs.

The Research Team

The research team consisted of four women: a professor and a doctoral student from the business school and a professor and a doctoral student from the psychology department of the same university. This mix was intentional; it was guided by the assumption that a combination of insiders, outsiders, superiors, and subordinates would help unravel the unique dynamics of individual dress in the context on which we focused (Louis & Bartunek, 1992). We sought a research team that would offer easy and immediate access to the members of the organization but have the benefit of an outsider position (Louis & Bartunek, 1992: 105). All team members participated in conceptualizing the project and in collecting and analyzing the data.

Our focus on a small, “purposive” sample of women (Stewart, 1990) who were employed in an organization with which we had personal experience provided our qualitative exploratory study with two advantages. First, we were committed to developing and maintaining a relationship of trust that encouraged mutual sharing of information between participants and researchers. Second, our familiarity with the organizational context helped us interpret the meaning of participants’ descriptions.

Data Collection and Sample

We collected data during the spring and winter of 1991. We operated in two parallel modes: (1) Through interviews, we collected in-depth data about the perceptions of everyday dress of a sample of administrative employees and (2) through unobtrusive observations, we collected data about the dress behaviors of organization members, including but not limited to participants. To gain insight into employees’ dress, we collected data both on how individuals thought and felt about dress in the organization and on how they actually dressed.

First, we identified a stratified random sample of 20 people from the population of full-time, permanent administrative employees in the organ-
ization. We stratified the sample by functional unit and level.\textsuperscript{1} Participants held positions ranging from nonmanagerial jobs (e.g., 11 held clerical jobs) to managerial jobs (there were 3 directors and 6 professional administrators, a total of 9 managerial participants). They came from a wide range of departments, including the library (2 individuals), the dean’s office and business relations (2), faculty support (5), student admissions and services (4), placement services (1), computing services (1), document processing (2), and executive education (3). Participants’ tenure ranged from 1 to 24 years, with an average of 9 years. Average tenure in the present position was 4 years, ranging from three months to 11 years. Eighteen of the 20 participants were white, reflecting the racial composition of the staff, 90 percent of whose members were white. We established our initial sample size using a criterion of interviewing at least 2 administrative or clerical employees in each of the functional areas identified above and at least 3 of the 11 managerial employees. We evaluated our data after completing interviews with the 20 individuals selected and concluded that, because we had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), no additional interviews were necessary.

**Semistructured interviews.** We conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with 20 female and 3 male administrators.\textsuperscript{2} To generate rapport between us and participants, the head administrator notified all the administrative employees in the school that we were conducting a study. We personally contacted the selected employees and asked for their consent to be interviewed. Everyone we contacted agreed to participate. Interviews took place in participants’ offices or in a school lounge and lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. We recorded and transcribed all but two interviews; 1 participant refused to be taped, and the tape recorder malfunctioned during another interview. For interviews not taped, we recorded detailed notes. We assured all participants that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous and hired an outside contractor to transcribe the interviews.

The interview focused on how individuals conceptualized and understood the clothing they wore to work. The interview process started by our familiarizing participants with the questions we would ask. The Appendix gives all interview questions. Our goal at the beginning of the study was to acquire a broad understanding of individual dress behavior. We did not set out to study a link between dress and cognitive schemata, although this link emerged from our data. Hence, we asked participants to describe and explain the clothing they chose to wear to work, to discuss when and why they felt

\textsuperscript{1} The original sample included 20 women and 3 men, a distribution that matched the high proportion of women in the school’s administrative support staff (94 percent female). Because the number of men was so small, we decided to focus the data analysis only on the women; hence, the interviews with male participants were dropped. This homogeneity of the sample with respect to gender constrains the generalizability of our findings. However, this homogeneity is consistent with our goal of advancing theoretical knowledge of administrative support staffs, which tend to be mostly women (O’Leary & Ickovics, 1990).

\textsuperscript{2} As noted, interviews with the 3 men were dropped from the present analysis.
comfortable or uncomfortable about their dress at work, what they thought their dress communicated about them, and to consider how their experiences in the business school influenced their dress choices. As the participants answered these questions, we probed for elaboration and clarification of the answers.

We chose to gather data though semistructured interviews for two important reasons. First, this open-ended format could generate broad, rich information about how participants thought about a process (dressing for work) that is rarely discussed. Second, this format offered us an opportunity to pursue novel responses, to probe for greater depth, and to confirm our understanding of a participant’s point of view. In other words, the format was assumed to be a useful vehicle for theory development. This open-ended data collection strategy generated rich data about individual participants’ “dress knowledge.”

**Unstructured observations.** We also collected three types of observational data about dress behavior and dress context. First, we took detailed notes that described the dress and appearance of our participants, their co-workers, their workstations, and the interview location. The following is an excerpt from these notes:

She is somewhat short and slim. She has straight blond hair pulled back with a red barrette into a ponytail. She is wearing red plastic eyeglasses. She is wearing a three-piece outfit in a silky material, probably rayon. Although the pieces coordinate, they are not a suit. Her blouse is black, her skirt is red knit, and her long-sleeved jacket is red-and-black flowered print. She is wearing large black earrings, dark hose, and shiny black shoes.

Second, during the course of the study, we attended various events we thought might help us appreciate the dress context in which these employees operated. The events included (1) an annual administrative staff luncheon hosted by the dean, (2) two talks given by visitors to the school that were planned and managed by administrative staffs, and (3) two workshops arranged by the school. One workshop was planned to assist students preparing for job interviews; another workshop was intended to help the staff provide effective internal service.

Detailed notes were recorded immediately after each event. The descriptions addressed various aspects of these events, including but not limited to the general appearance and behavior of the event’s participants, the appearance of the context (e.g., room decoration, light, sound and noise levels, etc.), and the content communicated. The focus of the observations was on an

---

3 Had we begun this research with the explicit intent of evaluating the place of dress knowledge in participants’ schemata, we might have used more focused techniques, such as the repertory grid (e.g., Reger, 1990), to uncover the structure and content of participants’ schemata. However, open-ended interviews appear to have been effective for generating descriptive information about cognitive schemata and the content of these schemata (cf. Isabella, 1990; Luri-gio & Carroll, 1985; Walsh, 1995).
event as a whole, rather than on any one individual. For example, at the
dean's luncheon we noted this:

One staff member in a two-piece flowered dress was wearing a
real flower in her hair, tucked behind her ear . . . Another staff
member was wearing a tight black dress with frills and lace at
the top, and high heels. In general, people appeared more
dressed up than usual.

At these events we were incognito participant observers, in the sense that we
acted like the other attendants. The group was always large enough so that
no one knew everyone present; hence, our presence was not surprising or
disturbing.

Third, we took detailed notes on the physical attributes and layout of the
school. Each member of the research team was assigned a distinct part of the
school. She then visited the location and took notes about what she saw.
These notes detailed the physical context (walls, floors, windows, arrange-
ment of furniture, and the furniture itself).\textsuperscript{4} Descriptions of people and the
manner in which they were dressed were included since the people were a
part of the context. An excerpt from these notes illustrates the types of
details that were noted:

All of the wood on the doors and edges is natural, with a simple
light coating of varnish. The ceiling is made of steel or chrome-
looking gray and shiny bars (the ceiling strikes me as very male
and military-like). They bestow the place with an official, effi-
cient but cold feeling. The adornments on the walls are pictures
of the various graduating classes from 1926 to 1945. The pictures
are somber, serious and in black and white, noticeably domi-
nated by men.

Documents. We acquired and scanned documents we thought might
prove relevant to the dress or cognitions of the administrative staff members,
including formal school policies, training manuals, and internal newspaper
articles pertaining to dress in the business school.

Analysis of the Data

We followed the suggestions of Glaser and Strauss (1967), Miles (1984),
and Strauss and Corbin (1990) by analyzing the data in three distinct, though
tightly interrelated, phases.

Phase 1: Searching for themes. First, we scanned all the data and
searched for dominant themes. Potential themes were discussed during
weekly meetings. We identified approximately 40 themes, which ranged
from what appeared to be intuitive assertions (e.g., dress is used to form a
first impression and dress is influenced by weather) to more intriguing,

\textsuperscript{4} This information was collected because we thought that it would help us understand the
dress perceptions and behavior of our participants. In the process of data analysis these data
proved to be useful mostly in helping us understand the texture of the place, rather than in
providing conceptual insights. However, this texture was important background for our em-
pirical findings.
unanticipated themes (e.g., individuals identify differences in dress in different parts of the organization, and dress is used to convey trust and knowledge to clients and vendors).

**Phase 2: Developing a coherent conceptual framework.** Next, we searched for a conceptual structure that would integrate these themes in a coherent manner. Our goal was to articulate a parsimonious framework that would help us understand and describe some of the dynamics associated with our sample. We were not concerned with fitting all the themes into one framework, because we assumed that dress is associated with a multiplicity of issues. Rather, we sought a framework that would aptly represent many themes and would offer new insights.

Three questions guided our assessment of alternative conceptual frameworks: (1) Does the framework capture a large number of themes? (2) Is the framework a cohesive and parsimonious summary of the themes? and (3) Does the framework offer new conceptual insights about organizational dress or administrative employees? We concluded that for the group we studied, organizational dress is an effortful engagement of a symbol that is guided by dress attributes that are part of several organizational schemata.

**Phase 3: Coding data into themes.** Using our conceptual framework, we systematically coded and categorized the data according to the themes retained in phase 2. Our coding followed Holsti’s (1969) and Rosengren’s (1981) recommendations for content analyses. The remainder of this article draws from this database and describes our conceptual framework.

**FINDINGS**

Three sets of findings capture the process by which our participants used dress to facilitate the execution of their roles. First, they acquired complex knowledge about dress in the organization. Dress appeared to be a component of the schemata that organized participants’ ideas about performing various organizational roles—schemata for organizational membership, functional area membership, and hierarchical level membership, and for participation in organizational events. This knowledge influenced individuals’ behavior by guiding them to dress appropriately for work, as is summarized in Table 1.

Second, dressing in accordance with these schemata was a means for enhancing competent role execution. Dressing in accordance with the dress attributes that were a part of these organizational schemata helped participants feel right for their roles and helped them maintain effective interactions necessary for their role execution. Appropriate dress cues enhanced role execution, and inappropriate dress cues were construed as role discrepant and as hampering role performance.

Third, dressing in accordance with these schemata involved a surprising amount of work. Work was involved both in learning the dress attributes of membership, hierarchical level, functional area, and event schemata, and in acting them out. Acting out the schemata involved planning and acquiring.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schema Type</th>
<th>Dress Attributes</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotes from the Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational membership</td>
<td>Professional:</td>
<td>I have two totally different sets of clothes—work and home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business-like dress components</td>
<td>I can’t wear my Laura Ashley dresses to work. People don’t recognize that look as an eclectic taste. I’d feel too silly. It just doesn’t fit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matched dress components</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No feminine or sexually provocative dress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No jeans, shorts, or dirty clothes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational hierarchical level</td>
<td>Top levels (management):</td>
<td>I have to tell people no sometimes. I have to act my authority. Dressing up is part of my job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More professional components</td>
<td>If I were a manager I’d probably wear suits. It’s just not necessary at my level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower levels (clerical):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less professional components</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional area</td>
<td>Executive education, public relations:</td>
<td>They dress up much more over in executive education. We don’t need to do that here in document processing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most conservative dress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dean’s office, placement, library office:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderately conservative dress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty support:</td>
<td>As a faculty secretary I don’t really have to dress up like they do in the dean’s office or student placement center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less conservative dress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Document processing:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Least conservative dress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role events</td>
<td>Special events (conferences, meetings):</td>
<td>I write down in my calendar if there’s a special meeting in the office, and then I try to dress up more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most conservative dress</td>
<td>I had a big meeting today. That’s why I’m dressed up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Routine work (typing, phone answering):</td>
<td>If I’m just coming in to answer the phone and do the usual, I don’t worry as much.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Least conservative dress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
dress consistent with the schemata and developing the skills and knowledge necessary for executing the schemata. Individuals reported that they invested significant effort in trying to “dress appropriately” (see Table 2). We elaborate these findings in the remainder of the article.

**Dress Knowledge as Part of a Schema**

The dress knowledge displayed in the interview responses was rich and complex. As participants talked about their dress at work and about when they felt comfortable and uncomfortable in their dress, they also talked about what they thought their dress communicated about them. Coupled with the detailed descriptions were explanations and rationales for the dress choices. It is these attributions and explanations that we term participants’ “dress knowledge.” We argue that this rich and complex set of responses is part of the participants’ broader organizational knowledge.

Descriptions of dress typically included both attributes (e.g., “blue,” or “plaid”) and various relationships among these attributes (e.g., “color-matched” or “a conservative look”). For example, one participant, an admissions counselor, described her outfit as follows:

> I’m wearing a rather conservative, tailored suit that is a slightly subdued plaid pattern, in grayish tones with a tan silk blouse that pulls out one of the colors in the plaid, and my gold brooch or lapel pin, which I like because it is so elegant and unique. It is a more business look, all color coordinated. My hose is a smoky-gray, and I’m wearing gray calf-skin pumps.

In addition to knowledge about their own dress, participants conveyed knowledge about the dress of others within and outside the organization. This knowledge was important for defining their own dress choices and rationales. Consider these comments from a receptionist:

> The other two people in my position who sit out front here, we all pretty much dress similarly—a bit more than casual but not quite business attire. The three [admissions] counselors always dress in suits and that’s just because they are more or less at the supervisory level . . . . I think that if I dress casually, people get the idea that they should feel comfortable to come into the office. Whereas, people up in the placement office, even the receptionists, always wear suits. But up there they deal more with the corporate world than we do.

As participants described and explained their own dress, they regularly referred to the dress of other organization members and nonmembers and contrasted the attributes of their own dress to those of the others. They also related their descriptions of their dress to their roles, functions, and clients. To illustrate, while explaining why she chose to dress as she did, a receptionist in the admissions and student services office offered:

> I’m in a skirt and a short-sleeved sweater. In my position, I don’t want to dress too nice because students will come in wearing their slacks and jeans and I don’t ever want to give them the impression that I am superior over them. I want to look like I am
## TABLE 2
Dress and Role Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptual Category</th>
<th>Conceptual Assertion</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotes from the Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate dress and shedding</td>
<td>Dress helps people enter the role of employee and distinguish it from other,</td>
<td>If I plan to go out with friends after work, I bring along a special set of clothes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nonorganizational roles</td>
<td>nonorganizational roles.</td>
<td>As soon as I get home I change into something more comfortable. Like jeans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate dress and emotional states</td>
<td>Employees select dress that helps them feel right for the role, which involves</td>
<td>It’s all so related. ... how I dress and how I feel about my work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress and psychological comfort</td>
<td>... feeling comfortable</td>
<td>I have to dress so that I am comfortable, so that I can forget about it and not think about it all day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress and social confidence</td>
<td>... feeling self-confident.</td>
<td>If I’m wearing something new, and people tell me how nice I look, I feel so much better, like I can go out and do it!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate dress and relationships</td>
<td>Employees select dress that helps them relate to others by either</td>
<td>I want my dress to signal that I am someone with authority, so that my “no” is a “no!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress and employees’ status in relationship</td>
<td>... asserting their status with respect to others or</td>
<td>[I dress so that] the impression I give to somebody who didn’t know me is that ... I’m going to care about them and that they can trust me to do something for them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td>... establishing rapport with others.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress and employees’ rapport with others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
kind of at their own level, so they aren't intimidated and so they will use our office as a resource. If I sat behind my desk in a suit and a shirt with a bow tie or scarf around my neck, I think that would intimidate some of the students so that they wouldn't feel comfortable to come in.

Thus, participants' dress knowledge encompassed not only their own dress but the dress of various groups of others. And dress knowledge included implied relationships between dress and appearance and differences in organizational membership, organizational role, and organizational level. Dress appeared to be a symbol used by participants to define their organizational categories as well as the categories of others.

In short, the dress descriptions and explanations that participants contributed during our interviews seemed to reflect the notion of cognitive schemata. Dress appeared to be a part of various schemata inherent in our informants' understanding of their work. A schema is a "cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among those attributes" (Fiske & Taylor, 1984: 140). A schema is a type of knowledge structure or mental template that individuals impose on an information environment to give it form and meaning (Walsh, 1995: 281). Dress attributes and relationships among these attributes appeared to be part of a larger structure of organizational knowledge, or schemata.

**Importance and Content of Dress Knowledge**

Previous scholars have argued that schemata are important to organizational functioning (e.g., Gioia, 1986; Weick, 1979). Weick (1979: 50) argued that a schema is an abridged, generalized, corrifiable organization of experience that serves as an initial frame of reference for action and perception. Schemata about appropriate dress were particularly important to individuals in this organization, because this business school lacked a formal dress code. The only dress code available to organizational employees was the following broad, university-wide one:

> Each employee is responsible for presenting a personal appearance which recognizes the need for good grooming and neatness in order to avoid distracting others and to comply with safety standards.

All participants were aware of the broad dress code, and almost everyone stated that their dress was not constrained by organizational dress policies. The absence of a formal dress code meant that employees experienced their dress decisions as discretionary. Given considerable discretion over what to wear at work, employees acquired knowledge about how to dress appropriately for their particular roles. They had to organize and incorporate complex knowledge of dress into cognitive schemata related to their organizational roles.

We describe below the dress knowledge that was embedded in four schemata respectively organizing employees' perceptions of membership in
the organization, in its hierarchical levels, and in its functional areas, and perceptions of role-relevant events. Each of these four schemata included knowledge of specific dress attributes as well as relationships among these attributes. We propose that the dress attributes in each of these schemata acted as markers or cues that helped individuals navigate the organization and their roles within it. The set of these dress markers (embedded within the set of schemata) composed employees’ dress knowledge.

**Dress and Schema of Organizational Membership**

Two particular dress attributes were important for membership in the business school, and all of our participants mentioned them. First, the attribute of “professional dress” distinguished an organization member from a nonmember. As one participant explained, “There is an unspoken, very unspoken norm of dressing professionally.” Professional dress, according to our participants, meant conventional, conservative, unornamented clothing, in subdued or placid colors (cf. Lurie, 1981; Molloy, 1977). Professional dress involved an intricate combination of additional attributes, which included wearing the right components of clothing, coordinating them appropriately, and carrying oneself in a professional way. One participant told us:

> I think they [the business school] expect professionalism mostly the way that you carry yourself. I don’t think they want us going around looking really tacky or sleazy. I think whatever you wear, you can wear it appropriately.

Professional dress also included components that, in the aggregate, approximated business attire. The women in our sample noted a wide variety of possible dress choices: suits, dresses, shirts, jackets, sweaters, skirts, and a variety of accessories. However, a common denominator was that all these clothing components should be “conservative” or “professional” in style.

The relationships among the parts of an outfit created a whole that could then be interpreted as appropriate, or fitting with the organizational membership schema. During interviews, participants frequently mentioned “coordinating” or “matching” the pieces of their outfits. If the various parts of the outfit matched in participants’ minds, then the outfit was considered “appropriate” for an organization member. If the parts did not match, the outfit was considered not appropriate. Matching also involved the color or the style of various components of the outfit. To fit the organizational membership schema, dress parts should be of the same style or of the same or complementary colors. Overall, clothing that fit the organizational membership schema displayed the dress attributes of being professional, business-like, and coordinated.

Second, dress attributes included in the organizational membership schema were defined by the absence of particular elements: dirty clothes, jeans or shorts, and distinctly feminine or sexually provocative clothing. As one participant explained:

> Clothing should be pressed—or at least look like it was pressed.
when you put it on. And no blue jeans. No shorts. No miniskirts. Probably nothing like real low-cut blouses.

Participants had distinct perceptions of feminine dress that were seen as not appropriate or as not fitting the organizational membership schema. Feminine dress was dress that included brightly colored pieces made of stereotypically feminine colors such as red and pink, frilly and elaborate styles, tight, revealing, and "sexy" styles, and elaborate or excessive jewelry. The attributes that constituted feminine attire for participants are consistent with those identified by various authors (cf. Lurie, 1981; Molloy, 1977; Wolf, 1991). Our participants consistently noted that such attire was inappropriate for organization members. In other words, such dress was viewed as inconsistent with the organization member schema (Fiske & Taylor, 1984).

Participants’ designation of “dress outliers” reinforced the dress attributes included in the organizational membership schema. Individuals who dressed either too informally or in a style that was too feminine were singled out. One participant noted:

There are some people—especially some of the younger people—who wear their jeans a little too tight. It’s kind of unprofessional. You know, maybe the miniskirts—there are comments about that—it’s not too professional. Those are things that people, I think, speak out about. Things that really kind of stand out, not the norm.

Participants’ knowledge of what dress was appropriate and inappropriate was thus part of the cognitive structure of attributes and relationships that composed a schema of organizational membership.

**Dress and Hierarchical Level Schemata**

Within the organizational membership schema, different dress attributes distinguished members at different levels in the organizational hierarchy. One clear difference was apparent between the schema for employees at the managerial level and the schema for employees at the clerical level. Appropriate dress for women at management levels required skirts and jackets, or suits. In contrast, the schema for women at clerical levels allowed for more casual skirts, pants, sweaters, blouses, and jumpsuits. One woman noted, “If I were in management, I wouldn’t wear it [a jumpsuit].” Another explained that suits were not appropriate for a person in her position as a word processor, because in her office (the placement center), “Counselors always dress in suits because they are more or less at the supervisory level.”

**Dress and Functional Area Schemata**

Furthermore, slightly different dress attributes distinguished among different functional areas of the school. Functional areas varied in the extent to which conservative dress was included as an attribute of members’ schemata. All participants agreed that the schema for executive education included the most conservative and formal dress attributes; the schemata for employees in the dean’s office and placement office included less conser-
ative and more casual dress styles; and the schema for employees in
document processing included the most casual attire. Participants were
aware of the multiplicity of functions fulfilled by employees in different
parts of the school and associated these functions with different schemata.
To illustrate, a participant from executive education stated:

We have corporate clients here. They pay a lot to come here. We
should treat them accordingly, and dress accordingly. Much
more formal and nice maybe than in other parts, like maybe a
faculty secretary or document processing [where they see only
students or faculty].

Dress and Schemata of Role-Relevant Events

The data further suggest that dress is a component of employees’ schemata
for events associated with their organizational roles. These event schemata are
the knowledge structures that describe the sequence of occurrences
or relationships among attributes in well-known situations or events (Fiske
& Taylor, 1984: 167). Participants in our sample held different event schemata
for the special tasks and occasions that were part of their organizational
roles. Dress was an attribute of the schemata that employees used to distin-
guish these events (such as presentations, workshops, and staff luncheons)
from the typical workday. For example, one participant described how staff
members dressed up for the dean’s luncheon:

Last Friday the dean gave a luncheon for the staff, and I noticed
that everybody dressed a little bit special—maybe in a nicer
dress that they don’t wear all the time, or a nicer skirt and
blouse, or they wore heels that day. For special events people
will dress up.

Our informal observation of the dean’s staff luncheon corroborated partici-
pants’ perceptions that staffers dressed in a more festive manner for special
events. At the dean’s luncheon, we noted that staff members wore clothing
in floral patterns or in lacy and fancy styles more than they would on a
typical work day, and they wore jewelry that was larger and more festive.

Membership, hierarchical level, functional area, and event schemata did
not fully prescribe individuals’ dress knowledge. Rather, some variation in
dress behavior was perceived as acceptable even if it did not fit a schema,
particularly if one’s task included unusual physical requirements. To illus-
trate, all participants commented how wearing jeans or other such dress was
“okay” if your job required messy tasks, even though the informal dress
contradicted the organizational membership schema.5

---

5 Our data suggested that downward adjustments in dress to accommodate “unusually
dirty” tasks or events bore implications for employees’ sense of personal worth and integrity.
Such deviations from organizationally appropriate dress in favor of task-appropriate dress were
frequently associated with self-accusations and deprecations. Participants who wore sneakers
or jeans talked of themselves as “klutzes” or “clumsy” because they could not lift boxes in
high-heeled shoes, or could not answer phones when wearing a fancy necklace or dressy
earrings.
Thus, participants had a fairly complex and comprehensive map for appropriate dress. This map was composed of a set of schemata in which dress was a recurring theme. Dress in this organization displayed diluted stratified homogeneity, defined as “variance in the dress among subgroups of the organization, but homogeneity within each of the subgroups” (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993: 43). We use “diluted” here because the differences among subgroups were not as extreme as those in the contexts observed by Rafaeli and Pratt, which included hospitals and restaurants. However, employees in all parts of the school appeared aware of the differences that did exist.\(^6\)

The consistent appearance of dress as an attribute of member, hierarchical level, functional area, and event schemata helped us to understand how our sample study group made dress decisions. In the very broadest terms, they sought to dress appropriately for membership in the organization. More specifically, they identified dress attributes appropriate to particular hierarchical levels and functional areas in the organization and to the particular events occurring on a given day. They then selected and wore dress that was consistent with these attributes. But how did our participants learn about the dress attributes that fit within membership, level, area, and event schemata? Our data offer initial insights into this question.

**Learning about Appropriate Dress**

Our findings clearly confirm that employees’ dress in this organization was not a result of organizational fiat. Rather, it appears that employees expended considerable informal effort to learn about appropriate dress. Participants were articulate about the effort. To illustrate, one participant, in response to a question about whether she felt uncomfortable talking about her dress, explained:

> I don’t feel weird about discussing dress [with you], because, you see, I’ve studied it. I’ve looked at these articles about clothing for a long time. I’ve learned some strategies, I had to.

Women in clerical roles differed from those in management roles in terms of how they learned what constituted level-appropriate dress. Managers reported transferring notions of appropriate dress from their prior corporate work experience; several also noted that spouses who worked in corporate settings influenced their assumptions about dress. Some women

\(^6\)In spite of the differences among the various areas, our data also suggest that business school dress was distinct from dress in other parts of the university. Although we did not collect systematic data about other parts of the university, two data points support these differences. First, the notes of the researchers from the psychology department indicated their own dress was significantly less formal than what they encountered at the business school. Second, almost all our participants noted that they observed a difference between the dress standards in the school and in other parts of the university. The dress of business school students also differed from that of students in other parts of the university. For example, one participant noted: “I came here from another part of the university. People here tend to dress a little more spiffy. Even the students dress a little more spiffy than in other colleges.”
in management also reported learning vicariously. They read articles on professional women’s clothing and fashion in business magazines such as *Working Woman* and *Savvy*. These women transferred conceptions of appropriate dress from corporate environments to the business school setting (Bettenhausen & Murnigham, 1991; Feldman, 1984; Gersick & Hackman, 1990).

Clerical employees, on the other hand, reported acquiring dress knowledge through a process of social learning, that is, by observing what others within their units wore for particular roles and events. One woman noted, "When I first took this job I quickly realized that I did not have the appropriate dress. I just observed." Such observations provided a frame of reference that was engaged during employees' shopping, as another participant reported:

I would go into stores, look around, and sort of match up my [clothes] with what I saw. Then I started to shop according to those guidelines that I had.

Observing the dress of their supervisors or managers was especially important for clerical employees. One woman reported that she learned what was appropriate "by observing the higher-ups. I think they're acting the way they want everyone else to act, so you just need to be aware, be smart and use common sense." Management-level women were aware of their influence on the dress of others in the organization. As one supervisor remarked: "I think I affect the way they [the women in the office] dress, but I don't think they affect me."

Learning the schemata appears to involve an evolving interaction between behavior, feedback on this behavior (reception of information), and an emergent change in the corresponding cognitive schemata. The process our participants described is consistent with bottom-up theories of schema development (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1984), wherein small incidents and acts serve as benchmarks, and pieces of information surrounding these incidents accumulate into a larger and more refined schema. The process is evolutionary and reciprocal: feedback received about one's behavior leads to adjustments in the schema. The adjusted schema then influences further behaviors. A quote serves to illustrate:

They sell these nice suits with shorts now, you know. I thought they looked nice enough. So I wore one to work once. I felt really strange. My supervisor didn’t tell me to change, but she said, "I don’t think they allow shorts. Do they?" I don’t think I’ll do it again.

This investment of thought and cognitive effort in learning about dress was not viewed as a useless practice; rather, participants construed it as a part of a learning process that could enhance their role performance. In particular, as elaborated below, cognitive investment in dress put our participants in an appropriate mind-set for their organizational roles and helped them establish the best interactions with the people they were expected to
serve, such as students and corporate representatives, whom we subsequently refer to as “clients.”

**DRESS AND ROLE EXECUTION**

Our data suggest three primary ways in which participants saw appropriate dress as facilitating effective role execution. First, knowing and putting into action appropriate dress helps individuals enter the role of employee while shedding other (nonorganizational) roles, such as parent or friend. Second, appropriate dress enables organization members to establish a comfortable emotional state that facilitates their role performance. Third, appropriate dress enables organization members to relate effectively to others.

**Appropriate Dress and Shedding Nonorganizational Roles**

Individuals saw the wearing of dress that fit their organizational membership schema as one important signal (to themselves) that they were now acting out their “work selves” and temporarily making other selves less salient. In this way, dress facilitated the process of identity compartmentalization (Turner, 1987). Organizational dress closed off some identities while opening up another. By opening up the role of organization member or employee, dress made that social identity salient.

The construct of social identification as developed in social identity theory focuses on the cognitive aspects of connection with a collectivity (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Ashforth and Mael defined social identification as the “perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate” (1989: 21). Dutton and colleagues defined organizational identification as “the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization” (1994: 239). Dressing in a manner prescribed by the organization member schema helps to convey that a member is associated with the values or characteristics of an organization. Donning appropriate attire makes salient the identity of member at the same time it makes less salient other plausible social identities (such as parent or volunteer).

Goffman (1967) described a similar process but focused on communication to others rather than communication to self. In Goffman’s analysis, individuals use symbols to communicate to others who they are and what role they are playing. “Face” is the social value a person effectively claims for him- or herself in interactions with others (Goffman, 1967: 5). Seen through a Goffman lens, the dress worn to work serves as an external symbol that enables an employee to create an organizational face, a face consistent with an organizational role.

Several participants described thinking about and owning totally different sets of clothes that paralleled their different social identities, or social faces. The most frequently mentioned face change involved using dress to don the identity of organizational member. A typical comment was: “I have
this set of clothes I can wear to work. I just pull an outfit from that group.” A similar sentiment was evident in comments such as:

We wear work attire. Not something that you wear when you go out on a date or go out with your friends.

I have my work clothes and my home clothes. The moment I get home I have to change into my home clothes, like sweats.

These dynamics are similar to those described by Rafaeli, who argued that “in wearing attire that was designated as organizational, individuals temporarily shed other, nonorganizational roles and adopt the role of employee” (1989: 387). Dress seems to help with role shifting by serving as a means of autocommunication; dress is used as both a means of cueing oneself to behave in a certain way (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983) and a means of shutting off alternative modes of behavior. One participant captured the latter function of organizational dress, saying: “There’s a whole part of my personality that isn’t expressed when I’m dressed for work.” Interestingly, however, Rafaeli’s (1989) proposition is based on pieces of attire that were formally associated with the organization, such as a smock or a name tag. The present data extend this proposition to informally emergent knowledge about appropriate organizational dress.

Appropriate dress not only helped women enter roles, but also enhanced how they executed the duties associated with their roles. The process through which such enhancement occurred was built on the inherent ability of dress to evoke certain feelings in both role occupants and target persons. Thus, donning appropriate organizational dress induced our participants both to embrace appropriate feelings for their roles and to evoke certain feeling states for target persons.

**Appropriate Dress and Role Feelings**

First, all of our participants linked the way they dressed with the way they felt on the job, and all of our participants referred to how their attire made them feel when they were asked to describe what they were wearing. Our analysis suggests an association between organizationally appropriate dress and various feeling states, including psychological comfort and social self-confidence.

**Dress and psychological comfort.** Participants consistently associated appropriate dress with a sense of psychological comfort. In Goffman’s (1967: 8) terms, being dressed appropriately can signal to a person that he or she is “in face,” so that he or she “typically responds with feelings of confidence and assurance.” Personal discomfort was associated with inappropriate dress, because, in Goffman’s analysis, inappropriate dress is a signal that a person is “out of face.” Participants’ discomfort with inappropriate dress follows some of the theoretical work on self-discrepancy and cognitive dissonance. As Higgins (1985) noted, people have ideas about who they are (the “actual self”) and who they ought to be (the “ought self”). In this context the ought self is prescribed by the various schemata and therefore includes dressing in a manner consistent with one’s organizational membership.
level, and area, as well as with the events of the day. When the actual self and ought self are discrepant, the person is predicted to become uncomfortable and anxious (McCann & Higgins, 1988), which were precisely the feelings that study participants described as resulting from a sense of wearing inappropriate dress.

The idea of appropriate dress implies that there is a meaningful distinction between organizational comfort and personal comfort. Organizationally comfortable dress was dress that was organizationally appropriate (i.e., fit with the membership schema), but not necessarily physically comfortable. This complexity was difficult for participants to communicate. One woman stated, “What is comfortable (to me) is not necessarily appropriate.” When asked to describe the way she was dressed, another participant noted:

I feel more comfortable in it. Personally, it’s not me. OK? But I feel more comfortable in it than when I dress “how is me.” Does that make sense? Because of the perceptions, opinions, looks, what not, if you do not dress this way. And then I start feeling really uncomfortable and I find I’m making excuses as to why I am dressed that way.

Participants described inappropriate dress as uncomfortable because it was distracting to others or to self. Inappropriate attire distracted others by allowing them to think of the individual in some way other than as an organization member, thus diminishing effective role performance. A strong theme in our data was that attire that was too feminine, too tight, too revealing, or in some way sexually provocative was inappropriate. Consistent with Wolf’s (1990) and Sheppard’s (1992) theses, our data revealed that inappropriate attire made people feel uncomfortable because participants thought this kind of dress would invite sexual attention from onlookers, producing discomfort. In short, emotional comfort was associated with organizationally appropriate attire: professional, and not too feminine.

**Dress and social confidence.** Dress also elicited a sense of social self-confidence for members who wore what they perceived to be appropriate attire. According to Goffman, when a person is in face, he or she is able “to hold his head up and openly present himself to others” (1967: 8). Consistent with Goffman’s analysis, our data revealed recurring mentions of an association between being dressed professionally (i.e., in a manner consistent with the organizational membership schema) and feeling competent and confident:

When I’m dressed up then I feel like I can work faster and stuff.
I guess, I don’t know, but I guess I present a more confident appearance when I’m dressed up.
I guess when you dress up, you feel better about yourself. You know you’ve got to go in and get something done so it helps out [to be well dressed].

In contrast, the negative effects of wearing inappropriate attire on feelings of self-confidence were discussed:

I’m in a middle management position; [therefore I must dress up,
Because when I’m sitting at a meeting with people that are all at higher levels than I, only if I’m dressed right, then I don't feel so intimidated or out of place.

Thus, dress provided a type of emotional wrapping that members saw as facilitating self-confidence. Dress that fit the organization, the area, the level, and the event was appropriate and enhanced self-confidence. Members’ use of appropriate clothing to generate comfort and confidence was somewhat surprising to us. Recipes for dressing for success in organizations (e.g., Molloy, 1977) and talk of the political credits gained by dressing successfully (e.g., Wolf, 1991) are abundant. But these prescriptions offer little insight into the emotional lift that accompanies donning appropriate attire in organizations. In our data, dress appeared to be a tool that helped role occupants evoke the emotional states that they believed would facilitate their own role execution. Being able to accomplish this emotional life depended on learning the appropriate dress.

**Appropriate Dress and Establishing Relationships**

Individuals also used appropriate dress for establishing relationships important to accomplishing their work. More specifically, members construed appropriate dress as a means of enhancing relationships with people they had to interact with during a role performance. This finding is consistent with the relational aspects of role theory. Role theory depicts each individual’s behavior as entwined with others’ expectations and behavior (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Our study suggests that employees saw dress attributes as a means of managing relationships with others, thus facilitating the relational aspect of role taking. Thus, the dress attributes included in the various cognitive schemata were not arbitrary, but seen as important aspects of maintaining the type of relationships that organizational roles required. Interestingly, the dress attributes viewed as enhancing role relationships were all within the boundaries of “appropriate dress” for organization members. Thus, subtle changes in dress choices according to anticipated interactions were seen as accomplishing different relational goals.

The two aspects of a relationship most influenced by dress were the status of a role occupant and her authority over a target person, and the rapport between the role occupant and target person. Participants saw dress both as a way of rising in status relative to others and as a means of connecting with others. First, study participants viewed subtle variations in the use of “formal business-like” dress and dress that was not overly feminine as attributes that enhanced status and respect. Describing her business-like formal dress, one participant explained, “I use dress to put me as someone to treat with respect. Someone that they will trust and respect and listen to.” Another noted that she dressed in this way because it helped her appear “commanding.” A third described her preference for outfits that she felt exhibited the “power look.” One participant described how she used dress to position herself as an authority to a group of visiting executives:
When I stand up there on Monday mornings and introduce myself to the participants, the easiest thing in the world would be for them to think of me as a secretary or a gopher. So I try to signal in what I say to them that I am more than that. I try to do that with my dress, which is why I tend to be more conservative [in my dress] on Mondays.

By using professional dress to signal her administrative role, this participant tried to manage the expectations of her target audience.

Interestingly, our data did not suggest that participants used dress to enhance their individual career mobility, to move up in the organization. Instead, they used dress to enhance status relative to role-related targets by appearing competent and effective in their current positions. For instance, in the last example, the woman did not dress to advance in the hierarchy but rather, to communicate her place in it, and thus to signal to target people how they should view her and her role.

Second, participants saw dress attributes as a means of enhancing rapport with target people. Employees' assumptions about their targets' expectations and reactions to various dress styles guided dress selections. Employees assumed that providing the best service to their clients involved letting appropriate dress be defined in part by them. Hence, our participants integrated assumptions about clients' expectations regarding dress into their idea of how to deliver quality service, which they assumed was a key organizational value. One secretary noted, "My clients are faculty and students, so I can dress more casually." In contrast, participants who worked in the executive education center felt that because they interacted with corporate executives, they should dress in corporate business styles. One participant explained:

We have clients, executives. [So] most of the people here dress well. They should. Anytime one is around participants, they should be more dressed up than if only seeing students. We deal with TOP executives of TOP corporations. We take BIG prices. The way employees appear is a part of what these corporate clients get.

Establishing Relationships in an Environment with Multiple Clients

Tailoring dress to clients was complicated by the fact that the organization was simultaneously serving multiple sets of clients. The business school environment includes both the university and corporations, and the corresponding clients for the administrative staff are students and corporate representatives. Areas in the school varied in the extent to which the two groups

---

7 The importance of service was constantly communicated to the administrative staff in different ways. To illustrate, in his speech at the dean's lunch, the dean emphasized: "We're all in the service business—OK? All of us are in the service business. I'm asking all of you to begin the process of setting new standards for the school—our school image is one of quality, helpfulness, courtesy, and service, because it's part of our total image."
of clients were encountered, and individuals varied in the extent to which their roles included interactions with each of the two groups.

Participants assumed that the two client groups expected distinct dress styles. All participants assumed corporate representatives expected professional business dress and students expected a less formal appearance. Yet, consistent with variations in individual roles, participants varied in the extent to which they integrated these expectations into their own dress behavior. Participants were sensitive to the differing expectations of their clients and attempted to navigate between both groups.

Dressing to deal with multiple clients was complicated because these employees did not always know whom they would encounter throughout the day. Consequently, they employed various strategies to balance the expectations of the two client sets. One strategy was for an employee to prioritize one client group over another, either by determining some hierarchy of clients or by determining which client group she served more frequently when determining which schema to put into action. For example, the following participant (in the public relations office) noted how her assumption that she should never be dressed too informally for her corporate clients governed her dress decisions:

Corporations do a lot of college relations business [here]. You never know who’s dropping into my office, so I’d never want to be totally relaxed [in my dress]. I’d never come to work in slacks. Even summer outfits seem too informal.

Similarly, employees in the student placement center explained that they dressed in a corporate fashion at all times except on Fridays and during summer vacation, because they assumed that corporate recruiters or representatives might come in at any other time. The unstated assumption was that on Fridays and during the summer only students were likely to come by, and it was okay to dress more casually for students.

Another strategy was to establish which client group was more demanding and to attempt to satisfy that group. As one participant explained: “I feel like we get higher standards and higher expectations from the corporate sector.” Yet another strategy was to treat encounters with a special set of clients as a “special event.” For example, a secretary in the dean’s office explained how twice a semester she met with the presidents of the student clubs and on those occasions wore something more “professional” than she normally would. In addition, we noted that at talks given by corporate representatives, the dress of the administrative staff members coordinating the events was significantly more corporate and business-like than it was on other days. These talks appeared to elicit a special event schema, which included assumptions about appropriate dress.

It seemed that employees who expected to be around corporate representatives, either regularly or for a special event, significantly upgraded the formality of their attire. We observed that participants tended to view the perceived expectations of clients such as executives or corporate representatives as more important than the expectations of clients such as students,
although it was unclear whether this tendency reflected an assumed organizational hierarchy with respect to clients or some other decision rule.

THE WORK OF DRESSING APPROPRIATELY

The administrative staff members in our study cared a great deal about achieving appropriate dress. Their concern was quite apparent, especially when participants described the stress they experienced when they wore inappropriate dress. The women made a considerable emotional investment in worrying not only about inappropriate dress, but also about possible dress crises and mishaps. Mentions of dress crises in our data reveal considerable anxiety that such crises might occur. One participant summarized:

Everybody has their off days, or maybe they might have slept in. Or, you are trying to drink a cup of coffee on your way to work and spill some down the front. That’s my biggest fear. Oh, my God, I’m going to have to go around all day sitting at my desk with this terrific stain on the front of my blouse.

Participants worried especially about violating the dress attributes of the organization member schema. Most notably, they were concerned about dressing in attire that was either too revealing or too casual. A fear of disapproval and even of reprimands from supervisors if they came to work wearing miniskirts, tight pants, sweat pants, shorts, or jeans was described. Interestingly, our data included few mentions of actual reprimands; reports of the emotional distress from fear that reprimands might occur were much more frequent.

The enjoyment and relief that participants associated with dress-down days (times when more-informal-than-usual dress was the norm) also supported the emotional costs of the work of executing appropriate dress. As noted, Fridays and summertime offered tacit relief from the pressure of wearing appropriate attire, and people felt free to wear jeans and other casual attire considered inappropriate at other times.

Avoiding the discomfort of inappropriate dress, however, also required a significant amount of effort. This effort appears to be a part of the “hidden work” that goes on behind the scenes of organizations. The data suggest two distinct types of effort involved in dressing appropriately: (1) the physical effort invested in acquiring dress and artifacts that allowed the maintenance of appropriate attire and (2) the cognitive effort invested in planning appropriate dress according to anticipated events or clients. In practice, the two were often commingled, but for the sake of analytic clarity we will treat each separately.

---

8 Our probing about the history of this tradition confirmed it had emerged informally. All the supervisors we asked noted that they did not know of a formal policy allowing more informal dress on Friday, but all noted that they were familiar with this norm and that they neither supported nor denounced it.
Finding and Wearing Appropriate Attire

Our data reveal that appropriate dress demanded using significant physical energy, both for shopping for appropriate clothes and for wearing them appropriately. Participants described the efforts expended in finding clothing or accessories to help make their dress appropriate. Consider the following descriptions:

When I came to this job, it was indicated to me that I should not wear slacks. I should expect to wear skirts, and something dressier. It was hard because I had to go and buy clothes in order to conform to what they really wanted.

A few weeks ago, I bought this bright orange silk top and skirt and wore it to work with a neutral nylon—like a beige nylon—and white shoes and I just knew that outfit wasn’t complete. And I looked and looked. Since I had the outfit on, I walked around at lunch, and luckily found a pair of shoes—the perfect orange—matched the dress and I changed the color nylon. I found a pair of earrings that coordinated with the shoes and the outfit.

Both these participants invested personal time and effort to make their appearance consistent with appropriate dress for their organizational roles.9

Maintaining appropriate attire required work both on and off the job. Participants talked about the on-the-job work involved in not getting “rumpled,” keeping their legs crossed, and avoiding accidental stains. Off-the-job physical work involved maintaining their work clothes, trying on outfits, and practicing wearing new clothes, jewelry, and accessories. One participant explained:

I was sitting on the bedroom floor reading directions on how to tie scarves, trying to figure it out. I got it, went up to the mirror, and it all fell apart. No, it’s horrible. And then I watch people, and they do wonderful things with scarves and it looks fine on them. It’s not me, but I wear them. And this stupid thing [the scarf] is driving me nuts.

Participants also expended physical energy in making corrections to an outfit after it had been selected. There was work involved in rectifying inappropriate attire. Consider the following:

I made a mistake one time. I came in wearing a particular jumpsuit. An outfit. And I actually decided that I should go home and change. It was too casual. And frankly, it would show off a woman’s figure too much and be too distracting. It might have come off as being too provocative. My supervisor commented that she wasn’t sure they allowed jumpsuits, but she didn’t tell me to go home and change. I decided to do it, so I drove back home and changed.

9 It could be argued that our participants invested effort in buying clothes because they enjoyed shopping, and the professional nature of the workplace gave them an excuse to exercise this passion. Nonetheless, the point is that there was an expenditure of personal time and money on organizational role requirements, whether or not it was enjoyable.
Our data included many similar cases in which employees' miscalculating the appropriateness of a particular outfit prompted corrective actions. Participants explained that they had gone home to change, had gone to a local store to acquire a piece of clothing, or borrowed something from a friend or co-worker. These small failures to execute the appropriate dress helped participants learn the dress attributes of organizational schemata in more detail and to execute them more effectively.

**Dress Planning**

Calculations of appropriate attire involved actively planning what to wear to work. This involved attempts to coordinate different elements (e.g., dresses, shoes, jewelry) and dressing to fit the day's plans, tasks, clients, and special events. The recurring goal apparently was to maintain appropriate dress. One participant stated:

I plan the night before because the morning goes fast. So, I am usually in bed. A couple of thoughts will go and I'll take a quick look in my closet and I go "this or that tomorrow?" I'll pick out my dress and then I'll go to my jewelry.

Another participant described how she used her calendar as a means of planning her dress:

I always look before I leave the office about what's going on the next day. Do I have anything special? or maybe my boss is meeting with a high executive. Then I usually try to dress nice.

To summarize, assumptions about appropriate attire guided participants' dress choices. These choices were based on dress attributes that composed their schemata for organizational membership, hierarchical level, functional area, and role-related events. Learning and employing these schemata required physical, cognitive, and emotional work.

**DISCUSSION**

Our point of departure for this study was theoretical work on organizational dress as an important symbol in organizations. Previous researchers have considered dress either as a symbol that leads to various dynamics at the organizational level of analysis (cf. Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993) or as a symbol associated with an individual's occupational or organizational identity (cf. Trice & Beyer, 1987). Our focus in this study was on the dynamics that govern individual employees' everyday dress behaviors. Our findings suggest that dress can be an important component of individual role taking and role performance and that individual female employees recognize and engage this versatility of dress. Our findings further unravel three broad themes about individual navigation by attire: (1) employees informally share and maintain an elaborate structure of dress knowledge, (2) dress relates to role execution in four different ways, and (3) achieving appropriate dress involves considerable work. Together, these themes both extend available knowledge about organizational dress and suggest observations pertinent to
organizational policies that increase or decrease employees' discretion over dress. These observations are especially important given current dress-down trends in organizations in the United States.

**Dress Knowledge**

Dress knowledge included a sense of clothing components (e.g., suits, jackets, skirts) that were appropriate to the role of organization member and of the appropriate way of presenting oneself while wearing these components. Dress knowledge also pertained to the dress attributes that were part of hierarchy, function, and event schemata. This type of dress knowledge helped individuals compose appropriate dress. None of this knowledge was formally stated or enforced, yet almost all of it was shared by all our participants and was incorporated into various cognitive schemata.

Our thesis suggests that employees view dress as a component of the schemata of organizational membership, organizational (hierarchical) level, organizational functional area or work type, and organizational events. Together, these schemata are useful to employees' understanding and performing their roles in organizations. Knowledge of dress is therefore shown here to be integral to employees' making sense of the organizational reality (Louis, 1990; Weick, 1995). The existence of shared dress knowledge as a part of these schemata enhances the processes of sense making and role taking. To illustrate, a part of taking upon oneself the role of a receptionist involves learning the schema of organization member as well as the schemata of the hierarchical and functional level of receptionists within the organization. Role taking involves acquiring, internalizing, and acting out knowledge about dress attributes contained in each schema. Once an employee mastered the knowledge of dress, she was closer to acquiring the complete schema.

The elaborateness of dress knowledge needed to accomplish organizational dress was striking; it is particularly noteworthy given the scant amount of attention paid in previous theory and research to organizational dress. It appears that dress knowledge may be an integral part of role execution. More importantly, it appears that dress should be examined more closely in the context of individual behavior, complementing previous focuses on the organizational or occupational level of analysis (cf. Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993; Trice & Beyer, 1987).

**Dress and Role Execution**

Participants viewed dress as a way of shedding nonorganizational roles. In this vein, donning appropriate dress is a tool for reducing the strain of role conflict (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, & Snoek, 1981). Wearing appropriate attire was one way participants reduced the stressful intrusion of potentially conflicting roles. Our participants explicitly noted that they felt better when dressed "right for the role," even though the right attire was not always the most physically comfortable. Our results suggest that being dressed for a role helps avoid the psychological discomfort of role conflict.
Dress facilitated role execution by helping participants orient themselves toward particular interactions, functions, and events that their roles demanded. That dress is a part of various cognitive schemata suggests that dressing appropriately may actually enhance employees’ role execution. To illustrate, an employee who plans her dress in accordance with the clients that she will meet during the day may also be likely to plan other aspects of her encounters with these clients. Noting one’s function and selecting one’s dress accordingly may be a small but important step toward acting out the broad schema of this function and avoiding behaviors that are inconsistent with the schema.

However, dress may also have negative implications for role execution that were not uncovered in this study. For example, some employees might choose style over substance and not prepare further for their work role once having dressed appropriately.\(^{10}\) Similarly, established dress standards may conflict with changing fashions or environmental conditions. Adaptation may be necessary (but not recognized) when an organization undergoes a physical or cultural change. Failing to adopt new standards of dress may lead to dress hampering role execution. To illustrate, U.S. companies establishing offices in Israel have found that assumptions about appropriate dress could not be transferred overseas because of local standards of behavior and dress.\(^{11}\) These dilemmas should be examined in future research.

Dress appears to enhance role execution through its capacity to influence relational activities (Fletcher, 1995). Our participants viewed dress as helpful in shaping relationships with others. They used dress to establish both status and rapport with others. We believe the aggregate effects of the relational aspects of dress work have significant effects on individual clients and on an organization as a whole. For example, dress may be a way to improve service encounters by leading employees to relate more effectively with clients (Czepiel, Solomon, & Surprenant, 1985; Rafaeli, 1989). When employees dress in ways that signal their organizational roles, they reflect in their dress the organization’s values and identity, which may signal a willingness to serve clients’ needs (cf. Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

The Work of Dress

Our detailed look at dress choices makes visible efforts that otherwise remain unrecognized and undervalued by both academics and practitioners. Employees’ efforts at dressing to enhance their role performance might be construed as a part of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987, 1989). We use the term emotional labor in a way that is consistent with Ashforth and Humphrey’s (1993) discussion of such labor in service work. Thus, we see individuals as using dress to feel and display the emotions

\(^{10}\) We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this idea.

\(^{11}\) This observation comes from personal communications to the second author from individuals working in these companies.
appropriate for particular situations. Interestingly, participants willingly expended this effort, without the external fiat described in previous research on displayed emotions. This voluntary investment may be a result of the socialized tendency of women to attend to their dress and appearance (Wolf, 1991). But it may also be due to the importance of dress as a signal of social identification, embraced by individuals seeking to place themselves in social situations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Applications to the Move toward Relaxed Dress

Business organizations today are moving away from reliance on formal dress codes and toward allowing employees greater discretion about their dress at work (e.g., Bragg, 1994). Our study implies a rich set of ideas about the influence of such changes on individuals and organizations. First, with a decrease in prescriptions about what to wear to work, individuals have to invest more effort in making dress decisions. Our findings suggest that this freedom will be associated with variety in both individual's mood states and patterns of interactions. More opportunities will exist for both the emotional uplift provided by appropriately selected dress and the emotional strain associated with dress. Social interactions within organizations are more likely to be influenced by individually selected attire than by dress that is constrained by organizational rules.

The influence of relaxed dress standards is likely to be strongest for organization members who have more dress discretion at the societal level (in the United States, women as opposed to men), and for individuals who are in jobs that require diverse types of interrelating. We predict, for example, that women in customer service roles will be more affected by relaxed dress codes than men in back-office, data entry jobs, because the role of the latter is inherently less relational and more constrained.

But our findings also suggest that relaxing dress standards will place additional burdens on employees. Specifically, as dress standards become less formal and less prescriptive, individuals will need to expend more effort in learning and acting out appropriate dress. Effort will be invested in acquiring dress knowledge, planning dress, and executing appropriate dress for work. Greater emotional concern can also be anticipated in preparing and recovering from the distress of inappropriate dress. More physical effort will be required for finding, coordinating, and wearing appropriate dress.

Again, we would expect these costs to be higher for organization members who, in the absence of strong dress standards, have more dress choices (e.g., women rather than men), and for members who experience more variance in their daily activities. Formal dress requirements relieve employees of much of the need to invest time and effort in learning, planning, and executing appropriate dress.

As noted, an increasingly common practice in American business is the dress-down day, which temporarily removes some of the pressure associated with appropriate dress. Adler (1995) reported in Business Week that although the phrase "dress-down day" first appeared in print only five years
ago, this practice now affects nearly half of all U.S. office workers. In some organizations, such days are viewed as a reward for employees. That such days are a relief is confirmed by our participants’ reactions to the more relaxed dress norms in the summer and on Fridays. Dress-down days imply a change in the various cognitive schemata that govern employees’ behavior at work. Employees must master new knowledge for executing the same role, including executing new definitions of appropriate dress. Accordingly, such changes to casual days may increase the individuals’ struggle to maintain effective role execution in spite of required changes in dress knowledge. Thus, what may be intended as a move toward granting greater freedom to employees may inadvertently lead to an increased workload.

From an organizational perspective, however, relaxed dress standards may trigger a broader change in the various schemata in which dress is an attribute. For example, if dress stops facilitating the distinction between “me as a member” and “me as a nonmember,” organization members’ sense of differences between who they are at work and who they are outside of work may disappear, increasing their feelings of authenticity and integrity while at work. However, where the distinction between “me as a member” and “me as a nonmember” has helped employees manage competing and conflicting role demands, relaxed dress standards may increase role conflict and stress. Relaxed dress standards may also influence organizational commitment. If efforts to dress appropriately enhance such commitment (cf. Salancik, 1977), it might decrease as organizational dress becomes less distinct from nonorganizational dress.

Lessons from Studying Female Administrative Employees

This study offers a focused and deep look at a unique and previously understudied sample—women employed in administrative roles in a professional organization. This unique focus offers several novel vantage points for organizational scholars, although it also implies that the generalizability of our findings is limited. First, the study offers some insights into women’s experiences in a male-dominated institution. One strong theme involved participants’ concerns about the tension between their gender role and their organizational role. Appropriate dress was one vehicle for managing this tension. For example, appearing too feminine or sexually attractive was construed to be inappropriate, uncomfortable, and undercutting to one’s status. It appears, as Sheppard noted, that “while men’s gender and organizational roles are coterminous, ... women experience a contradiction of being both ‘feminine’ and ‘business-like’ (1992: 155).

Conceptually, this discrepancy could be argued to be a symbolic representation of a felt inconsistency between being female and being employed in this organization. This discrepancy begins to explain an often-stated, but not well-documented, argument that women expend extra effort to fit in and achieve the status of organization member in many settings. Our study suggests that women may make an extra effort to eliminate feminine cues from
their appearance, over and above the effort required to maintain appropriate behavior for a given area, level, or event.

Our focus on women in administrative positions sheds new light on employees who are marginal in many organizational systems. Because of their marginal status, such employees may need to engage subtle means, such as dress, to navigate their way through the organizational setting. This marginality may have contributed to the emphasis on finding and wearing appropriate dress that was prevalent in our data. All but two of our participants were white women. Although this study offers little direct insight into dress use by employees who are members of racial or ethnic minorities, it is likely that individuals who are organizationally marginal because of their race or ethnicity may also use dress to navigate their way through their organizational settings. Contrary to our expectations that individuals might use dress to express their individuality, we did not find much evidence of dress as a form of self-expression. Moreover, contrary to literature on “dressing for success” (e.g., Molloy, 1977), we did not find extensive evidence that our participants used dress as a means of standing out or of individuating themselves in the organization. Perhaps the relative absence of such motives was due to relatively limited advancement opportunities for the marginal members of this organization. Additional research is necessary to explore how generalizable these findings are to employees who are marginalized for reasons other than gender, and to employees who are more central and more powerful.

Women face a wide range of available dress choices. They are presented with a large variety of colors, styles, fabrics, and ornaments, and they must therefore expend energy to coordinate their attire. Our data suggest that energy is spent both in minimizing the probability of dress errors and in correcting dress errors if or when they occur. This set of dynamics regarding organizational dress may not be applicable to male employees, if men are not as sensitive to dress and appearance, or if they have fewer dress options available.

This study of organizational dress contributes to thought about the use of symbols in organizations. In particular, the study emphasizes two ideas that have not been given adequate attention: (1) that symbols can be individual-level variables and (2) that symbols can influence role occupants as well as target individuals. We found that our participants were highly sensitive to the role that dress symbols could play in their organizational participation. Our study suggests that individuals actively work at manipulating these symbols, both to communicate to others and to communicate to themselves. Again, additional research is necessary to explore whether these findings are unique to women in organizations. More broadly, quantitative research is necessary to test the generalizability of our findings beyond this setting and this sample. Field and lab studies can test our assertions that particular dress influences one’s status, physical or social comfort, and the nature of the rapport that develops with other people. Future studies can also investigate how employees use dress to manage competing or conflict-
ing organizational role demands, such as demands to establish rapport with dramatically different client groups.

Dress is a versatile symbol actively engaged by role occupants interested in effectively executing their roles. But learning to use this symbol and applying this acquired knowledge requires efforts that organizations do not formally prescribe or reward. The women in our study had deep dress knowledge that they used to identify with the social group of organization members to affect their emotional states of self-confidence and level of social comfort, and to affect their relationships with others. They were less concerned with the political implications of appropriate and inappropriate dress, and more with how this symbol influenced their own behavior at work. Our findings only begin to unravel the merit of analyzing dress at the individual level. This study introduces a number of questions that suggest a rich agenda for further theoretical, empirical, and managerial investigation.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

**Interview Protocol**

The interviewer made the following introductory statement: “Hello, I am writing an article for a professional magazine on what people wear when they work... Can I talk with you for a few minutes?” She then explained the types of questions she would ask. Specific questions were as follows:

1. Describe your role in the business school. How long have you worked here?
2. Can you tell me about your work path? What jobs did you have to get to this point?
3. Describe the way you are dressed today.
4. Why are you wearing this?
5. How do you feel being dressed this way? (Probe: Do you feel comfortable? Do you feel like yourself?)
6. Do the people you work with affect your dress? How?
7. Tell me about situations or times in the business school when you have felt uncomfortable about the way you dressed. (a) What was the situation? (b) Why did you feel uncomfortable?
8. Tell me about the situations or times in the business school when you felt really good about the way you were dressed.
9. Do you recall how you felt when you first had to dress for work? (a) Did your feelings change over time? How? (b) How long did that take?
10. What does the way you are dressed tell me about you?
11. What would you add or change about the way you are dressed to tell me more about you?
12. What do you think the business school expects of you in terms of what you wear?
13. How did you learn about what is expected of you at this business school?
14. Have you changed the way you dress since working at the business school? How? Why?

**Anat Rafaeli** is the chair of the Organizational Behavior Program at the School of Business Administration of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She received her Ph.D. degree in industrial and organizational psychology from the Ohio State University. Her research interests include the causes and consequences of emotions displayed by role occupants as a part of role performance and the dynamics of organizational dress. Her current research examines the behavioral and symbolic dynamics surrounding individual crossing of organizational boundaries.

**Jane Dutton** is the William Russell Kelly Professor of Business Administration and chair of the Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management Department at the University of Michigan School of Business Administration. She received her Ph.D. degree from Northwestern University. Her current research interests focus on relational work in organizations and its importance for organizations and individuals. She is studying people who do cleaning in a variety of organizational settings, looking at how relationships revalue devalued work.
Celia V. Harquail is an assistant professor of business administration at the Darden Graduate School of Business, University of Virginia, where she teaches organizational behavior. She received her Ph.D. degree in organizational behavior from the University of Michigan School of Business Administration. Her current research interests include organizational identification and identity, social identity and diversity in organizations, group advocacy, and microprocesses of organizational change.

Stephanie A. Mackie-Lewis is a doctoral candidate in organizational psychology at the University of Michigan. Her current research interests include organizational innovation, social networks, and distributed work groups.