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Disability, Identity, Sameness & Differentness: First Impressions of Clothing

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Introduction: Individuals with disabilities have aspirations to work and foster their independence like everyone else. Enduring images of disability as tragic, pitiful, negative and helpless promoted for charitable fund raising purposes (Taylor, 2008: 33) have made it challenging for people with disabilities to represent themselves as positive and able. This paper explores, through interviews and observations of people who are paraplegic/quadruplegic using wheelchairs and websites of specialized clothing, how the material culture of clothing is a barrier encountered by those who use wheelchairs relates to their success in the job interview process. Additionally, it considers the availability and access to aesthetically appropriate, functional clothing for those with a disability, i.e., adaptive clothing that allows people to achieve an aesthetically normative professional style of dress while still incorporating functional elements that facilitate independence in the workplace. Three different roles that clothing plays in the competitive job interview process are revealed.

Identity, Sameness & Differentness: The first role that clothing plays is the creation and expression of people's social identity. Clothing and fashion can be used to fulfill the psychological needs for social integration and differentiation (Davis, 1992: 4). People are aware that the choices made about what to wear carries meaning about who they are including their lifestyle choices. At times, the signals (clothing choice) made by signifiers (people) are sent directly through what is described as the semiotic 'clothing code' (ibid: 5). The reliability of semiotics of clothing is often considered low due to continually evolving cultural meanings and miscommunication occurs resulting in profound consequences. In short, in modern society, clothes possess a great deal of power in what is being communicated about wearer. Sameness, as the second role that clothing plays, is a means of achieving social integration or conformity. There has been an emerging emphasis on recognizing the full capabilities of individuals with disabilities, and Devlieger, Rusch, and Pfeiffer explain that in order to "shape a new understanding of sameness" (2003: 9) this is done through "the theory of normalization" (ibid). Normalization means that there is a better appreciation of people with disabilities as being the same as those without disabilities. In the case of employment sameness, social integration or conformity is often viewed as highly desirable for the majority of job candidates. Here, a person with a disability can dress to 'fit in' which creates a shift away from disability leading to a focus on ability instead. The third role that disability plays is that of differentness. Differentness focuses on disability as an asset (ibid), which is about valuing the unique trials an individual with a disability encounters. Valuing the experiences individuals with disability deal with, acknowledges disability as something that is part of all people's lives. Difference, therefore becomes normalized and society is better able to acknowledge 'people first'. The focus on

difference effectively highlights the person with a disability in terms of their unique abilities such as problem solving skills, assets that are clearly useful in the workplace.

Implications: It is commonly acknowledged in society today that clothing is more than a basic need, meaning that clothing is not just about protecting oneself from the elements. Geraldine Ray clarifies that even in the case of the individual with disability, “dress had a highly significant effect on the decision to hire” and that “dress did indeed affect ratings made by persons in managerial positions on personal characteristics” (1986, 18). In the 26 years since Ray’s work was published, some progress has been made in understanding the importance of clothing specifically designed for people with a disability. Designers such as Izzy Camilleri, produce clothes that meet specific needs yet are still fashionable. However, it is still apparent that there simply are not enough options and opportunities for individuals with disabilities to access professional clothes. That is, “...the choice of suitable ‘professional’ apparel for working women with disabilities is even smaller than that of casual clothing. Many of the retailers selling ‘adaptive’ clothing are focused on providing functional options for people with disabilities that tend toward the casual rather than the professional.” (Carroll & Gross, 2010: 4). The importance of this is significant for people with disabilities if they are going to be successful in securing employment. Professional work attire is a necessity in many work places. Even though casual clothes are allowed today in some office environments, it still does not convey the same message as professional attire.

Conclusion: People with disabilities want clothing that allows them to blend in and appear the ‘same’ in order to represent themselves as capable while at the same time marking ‘differences’ in experiences they have triumphed over. Clothing variety and access to choice is key to accomplishing this. Unfortunately, too little choice and access to professional work clothing exists today for those who use a wheelchair. However, by grouping together similar needs across disabilities, maximizing the use of modern technology and working in a market where more individuals with disabilities are successfully entering the working environment as other barriers are reduced, the need and ability to produce professional clothing for those with a disability can improve. This paper calls to designers to consider creating more fashion-forward garments for specialized audiences as a means to promoting independence and abilities not disability.

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