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Essay #3: Dress Codes and Foucault

When the world is viewed through a Foucauldian lens, everything starts to make sense in terms of surveillance, punishment, and discipline. These modes of control, where disciplinary techniques are used "for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities" (Foucault, 1975), are applied on us everyday. Dress codes, something present everywhere and often disproportionately affecting women, is an experience that can be analyzed through a Foucauldian lens as well. From young girls with school dress codes to adult women with expectations of professional dress, applying Foucault's ideas can reveal much about how women's appearances are controlled.

From a young age, I learned that people around me were constantly watching what I wore. Not only did teachers, parents, and peers care about and comment on what I was wearing, institutions such as schools created rules about what I can and cannot clothe myself with. Dress codes in the schools I attended ranged from not being allowed to wear clothes with logos or words, to having restrictions on the width of my tank-top straps, to minimum lengths of skirts and shorts.

While the analogy is not exact, since I could see what my peers were wearing, unlike prisoners in separate cells, this state of constantly being watched by others operated like a Panopticon. The Panopticon is a prison architectural strategy designed by Jeremy Bentham, "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1975). In the classroom, however, even the fact that students could see each other was rendered meaningless, as under the gaze of the teacher who stands in front of the class room, each student became an individual separate from the crowd and subject to the gaze and supervision of the teacher. This Panopticon is "arranged so that an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different individuals" (Foucault),

like the teacher could from the front of the classroom. While Foucault has written about the role of discipline in the classroom as a means to create an environment conducive to learning, it can also operate as a means of controlling female bodies. The nature of these dress codes also makes them easier to enforce, as appearance is inherently visible from the outside.

The fact that most schools don't have a specific method of enforcing these rules - such as everyday mandatory checks at the school gates - means that the punishment for not following these dress codes is administered at random. The vague language of dress codes builds on this problem. One does not know when punishment might come and it depends on what mood a teacher is in and whether or not they spot you and feel like punishing you. This adds to the Panoptic effect of dress codes, as one is overcome with the feeling of constantly being seen, without ever knowing if one is explicitly being seen in any moment (Foucault, 1975).

While dress codes became more lax in school as I grew up, this set of rules and expectations surrounding dress was transferred to the workplace. Office dress codes dictated what was and was not appropriate to do work in. While my workplaces have not usually resembled a classroom, I still felt the Panopticon-like gaze from bosses and coworkers starting from the day I was informed of the dress codes. It was a nonchalant comment or a joke about the appropriateness of clothing. An office cubicle I once occupied acted like a prison cell in a Panopticon; while the three walls shielded me from direct observation from most angles, I never knew when my supervisor or a coworker would walk past the open side at my back.

Not only did these rules and dress codes exist, they were also enforced by punishment. When I was younger, humiliation was the common form of punishment for transgressing these expectations. A middle teacher insisted on measuring the straps of my tank top himself, laying his pointer and middle finger on my shoulder to determine whether the straps were too thin. A high school teacher commented on my t-shirt in public and told me it was inappropriate because it revealed my chest too much. Stories of girls being sent home for skirts that were too short or shirts that were too "revealing" are commonplace. (See Baker, 2012 and Hussey and Santora, 2015.) If they are not sent home, students are forced to take off their

clothes and wear something more "appropriate" that the school provides. At my high school, this meant wearing old, dirty gym clothes that the school kept in a closet for such cases. From a Foucauldian perspective, this is an inefficient form of punishment, comparable to older forms of punishment such as hanging and torture, because unlike the Panopticon that controls many with few, individual interactions take more labor (Foucault, 1975).

As women get older, these rules of appearance are usually enforced not through humiliation or force, but rather through economic punishment. If you come into an interview dressed in a way deemed "unprofessional," it's possible you will not get the job. If you do not appear dedicated to your job because of the "inappropriate" way you are dressed, you may lose your job. Maintaining an "appropriate" wardrobe and appearance itself can cost time, money, and energy.

However, punishment in the form of humiliation does follow women into adult life, as women of all ages are harassed on the street for what they wear and how they look. Catcalling can be seen as control by an outside force – the patriarchy – or as self-surveillance, as even in the absence of formal rules or dress codes, citizens surveil each other on their appearances and keep each other in check through public shaming.

These forms of outside control – punishment and surveillance – "increase both the docility and the utility of all the elements of the system" (Foucault, 1975), in this case, women. However, the real power lies in thee self-surveillance that is instilled in individual women both from the punishment and the Panoptic effects of institutions that dictates what women should wear. The Panopticon is an efficient form of control because of its continuous effects even after the actions of direct surveillance have ceased (Foucault, 1975). Even when there are no parents or teachers to reprimand them, girls will self-surveil and surveil each other. The structure of the Panopticon creates a power relationship independent of the initial holder of power, where the "inmates" themselves become the enforcer of rules (Foucault, 1975). School girls will call each other sluts if the clothes are deemed too revealing, a prude if the clothes cover "too much" of the body. In order to avoid humiliation, they will follow the rules.

Even when I don't have anybody telling me exactly what I should wear to work, I will wear a bra because I know nipples are "inappropriate" and need to be hidden. I know that if I want to make a good first impression at work, or if I want to be taken seriously, I should wear small jewelry, a long hem, and cover my shoulders. As my behavior exemplifies, the disciplinary mechanisms I grew up with "have a certain tendency to become 'de-institutionalized,' to emerge from the closed fortresses in which they once functioned and to circulate in a 'free' state" (Foucault, 1975). Even when I enjoy a little more freedom of dress at Antioch College, whenever I'm away for co-op, I practice self-surveillance in the name of safety and freedom from sexual harassment, or just to be accepted in a community.

What starts out as a parent innocently worrying about what their daughter wears, quickly leads to a Panopticon of surveillance, from dress codes at school to office dress codes. Surveillance and punishment create docile bodies out of women who learn to bend to formal rules and cultural expectations of appearance. While dress codes are but one example of the millions of ways women's appearances are controlled and manipulated – from unrealistic representations of women's bodies in TV and movies to advertisements that target women's insecurities – examining this issue from a Foucauldian perspective can reveal the subtle ways these power structures work. Throughout my life, my experience with dress codes and rules of appearance have controlled what I wear, how I move through the world, and weather I am accepted in a community. Foucault's ideas show that these power relations are intricate and the disciplinary mechanisms must be scrutinized in order to fully understand one's actions.

Citations:

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