
Harriet McLeod, Iowa State University
Mary Lynn Darnhorst, Iowa State University

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African-American Male Executive Dress:
Issues of Aesthetics, Conformity and Ethnic Identity

Harriet McLeod, Iowa State University
Mary Lynn Damhorst, Iowa State University

Only a few scholars have studied business men's clothing; moreover, no study has looked at the relationship of African-American executives and their dress in organizational business culture. This study used a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to capture a holistic understanding of African-American male executives' acquisition and use of business dress and the meanings it has for their organizational roles.

As newcomers to executive positions in U.S. businesses, African-American men as well as other minorities must learn the written and unwritten rules that govern business cultures. New employees in an organization are chosen for their expertise and their ability to fit into the prevailing culture. Kanter's (1977:48) case study revealed that employers tend to seek employees who are "the right sort of person" or "their kind" to ensure loyalty, acceptance of authority, and conformity to a prescribed pattern of behavior. One measure of employee conformity is adherence to the dress code of the organization. Dress for success and management development seminars strongly urge new executives to monitor their appearance so that they reflect the culture of their organization (Cameron 1989; Lesly 1993; Russell 1992). African-American males are urged by many veteran African-American executives and career development specialists to conform to the dress codes of their organization; their appearance as well as other behaviors are "held to a higher level of scrutiny than [that of] their white counterparts" (Russell 1992:78). Mindful of their still limited presence in executive ranks, African-American men may choose to adopt the standard dress code of their company if they desire to fit into and adapt to the prevailing business culture.

While assimilation into business culture has been the expectation and norm for new executives, African-American males' physical traits (skin tone, hair and facial features) may differentiate them from the majority business executive (white males) to the point that total assimilation is impeded or prevented. Moreover, total assimilation may "compromise [the African-American male executive's] integrity and credibility among [his] peers, fellow ethnic group members and ultimately [himself]" (Baskerville 1992:129). Also, African-American male executives may prefer an aesthetic that is different from the white male executive dress code.

The present study was designed to explore how African-American men deal with these potential conflicts. A purposive sampling method was used to identify 15 African-American male executives employed in executive/middle management positions in a mid-western city. Long interviews...
containing open-ended questions were conducted and analyzed by the investigator using techniques suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Several themes emerged from these interviews. All of the men regarded their mid-western business environment as conservative; they dressed according to what they thought mid-western customers and employers expected. None of the men wanted to dress in a manner that made them "stand out"; however, a number of men did incorporate specific items that gave them a small degree of distinction, such as monograms on their shirt cuffs. The majority of men shopped for their business attire alone. Only one man shopped with his wife for his clothing. One man's wife bought his clothing; however, he was dissatisfied with her choices.

When the men were asked how important they thought it was for them to dress in traditional business attire while they were at work, a number responded that they felt that they may be judged more critically than their white counterparts and thus were careful of their dress. Additionally, because the men were in a predominately white environment, they sensed that they were easily recognized by their customers and wanted to be well groomed for chance meetings. Lastly, a number of the men expressed a deep responsibility to appear as role models for younger African-Americans and therefore always wanted to be appropriately dressed when they were in their professional positions.

The findings were compared to results of interviews with 24 white business women in the same community (Kimle and Damhorst 1995). Although the white women were also a minority in their organization, their level of dress conformity was less than that of the African-American men. For the white women, total conformity was viewed as a threat to individuality, whereas for the men, conformity was viewed as instrumental for job role efficacy. In this community, gender was a more powerful differentiator of business dress than was ethnicity. The African-American men demonstrated greater assimilation into the dominant white business community than did the female executives (Gans 1962; Hirschman 1985). The differences in responses illuminate characteristics of gender roles in relation to dress. Processes of hegemony (Gramsci 1971) and bicultural identity (de Anda 1984; Valentine 1971) are also addressed in analyses.

REFERENCES


