

## **Culture Manifested through Dress Codes: A Reflection On My Research**

### **Project**

To start off, I want to emphasize that it is not my research project that reflects the concept of culture per se nor did I consciously try to incorporate a cultural perspective while completing the project; rather, my research project can be seen as a conduit through which culture is manifested. Besides, in addition to the various interesting concepts regarding culture that I learned from this course, I have also been able to view culture in a much deeper manner through the research process.

My motive behind the research project, the impacts of dress code on school climate, mainly stems from me having to put up with the dress code of my elementary and secondary schools in China. To me, my choice of clothing is part of who I am, my identity, and the cultural group I identify with. I have always had my clothing preferences, but they were left to be practiced on weekends because of the dress code. For lack of better words, I thought of school officials as rigid and boring. Later on, as I started immersing myself into more pro-democratic narratives, individualistic cultures, and especially this course, I attributed the dress code to ethnocentrism.

Behind the dress code are the school officials' desire to manage, the wanting for a homogeneous group, the promotion of a sense of belonging, and probably most of all, the eradication of class differences shown by clothing. By requiring students to wear uniforms distributed by school, schools partly eliminate individual differences composed of clothing choices and many other behaviors. Dressed in No. 5 Middle School uniform, you are now a 'No.5 Middle School student', a 'No.5 person', a

person who is supposed to act and behave like a No.5 person based on the No. 5 principles (motto of the school). Coming to school without wearing the uniform results in punishment and judgment. Therefore, schools requiring dress codes are essentially imposing their culture on students. This is just a made-up example, but it is essentially how the dress code operates in the Chinese education system. This course helped me identify dress codes using the term ethnocentrism. Moreover, having students pay for falling victim to ethnocentrism is just ethnocentrism at its finest, further proving how much more wrong you can be when you are already on the wrong side of assimilation.

Now, ethnocentrism is not necessarily a bad thing but a mere reflection of the level of cultural diversity and the degree of average cultural competence, or instead, whether cultural competence is valued, within a particular society. The whole dress code thing suits Chinese society, for Chinese culture is collectivistic, often prioritizing conformity over individuality and defiance. Despite the racial diversity in China, pretty much every Chinese national identifies as Chinese instead of Tibetan Chinese or things alike, so to speak, which is contrary to what you see in countries like the U.S. Such a practice probably would not be compatible with societies that have greater levels of cultural diversity in which certain cultural groups go great lengths acknowledging and affirming their identities.

Also, I would like to point out that the tenet of the dress code reflects class blindness. Akin to colorblindness, the blindness in this case is directed toward class wherein schools aim to eradicate differences in appearance in order to reduce

showing-off behaviors among students, which in turn would supposedly weaken the materialistic mindset and lessen inferiority among students. I guess by intentionally controlling for clothing choice, schools are controlling one of the variables contributing to the varying intersectional circumstances among students. However, it serves to perpetuate implicit bias and may not be ideal for students who are less better off given that their perceptions are distorted in a way that disincentivizes them to attain upward social mobility.

Further relating to the course material, the dress code to some extent is countering the gender stereotypes seen in nearly every culture. In schools with dress codes, you are no longer reproducing and reinforcing gender stereotypes by wearing 'pink dresses' or 'black t-shirts'. Future research may focus on the effects of dress codes on gender expression. I think it is to be a longitudinal study that recruits participants with experience of dress code, but it may not be feasible in China since the freedom of gender expression is largely stifled by shame and fear of being stigmatized due to one's gender identity.

I want to end this reflection by discussing how much I revamped my understanding of culture and reality. I was so used to my own sociocultural norms that I took everything for what they are according to what I have been told. More specifically, I applied everything I imbued to measure and judge everything I see outside my own culture. I was fixated on a single reality, a reality so vivid yet so narrow that a slight deviation made me uncomfortable. It was not until I took this course that I realized even concepts like gender can be socially constructed in a way

that produces deleterious outcomes for people's well-being. In addition, just like data analysis in every research, there are always outliers defying stereotypes of a certain population, whether it be the quintessential deficit model-leaning narrative of African American students being slow and prone to violent behaviors or Asian students excelling in math. We have to take everything with a grain of thought, even when it is something that is entrenched in our sociocultural norms that challenging it means being pitted against criticisms from society at large.

The statement from one of the lectures that goes, "people often react to arguments against their beliefs as if attacked" echoes and resonates powerfully. In certain cultures, we have been taught to maintain the status quo. It almost became a defense mechanism and second nature for us to protect our socially and artificially constructed beliefs, even if it is done at the cost of stifling beneficial progress. To me, the underlying causes are still unknown, but I want to draw from my limited experience, concluding that homogeneous, collectivistic cultures tend to suppress reflexivity in some way while it is the other way around in heterogeneous, individualistic cultures. While the difference itself does not carry positive or negative connotations, it is left for future research to figure out the underlying causes of ethnocentrism and stubborn beliefs and utilize the findings to allow for a more compassionate and inclusive world for us all.