

# FASHION IN THE CLASSROOM: EFFECTS OF ATTIRE ON STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF INSTRUCTORS IN COLLEGE CLASSES

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*This study was conducted to investigate contemporary effects of instructor attire (specifically, graduate teaching assistant attire) on students' perceptions of college teachers in a live lecture context. Effects of three dress conditions, formal professional, casual professional, and casual, were tested under tightly controlled experimental conditions. Results indicated that more formal dress (business suits, dress shoes) was associated with increased ratings of instructor competence, particularly for female students rating female instructors. However, contrary to common assumptions, the most positive influences of instructor dress were found in the highly casual condition (faded jeans, T-shirt, flannel shirt). Perceptions of homophily accounted for a small amount of variance in instructor ratings, but there was no significant effect of dress condition on ratings of homophily. Overall findings suggest that caution be used in drawing conclusions regarding potential payoffs of professional classroom dress based upon literature not specifically concerned with the classroom context.*

According to human behaviorist Desmond Morris (1977) "It is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals. Every costume tells a story, often a very subtle one, about its wearer" (p. 213). Gordon, Tengler, and Infante (1982) summarize the symbolism of clothing: (a) It is instrumental in perpetuating traditions; (b) It is used for self-beautification, real or imagined; (c) Dress codes foster cultural values regarding sexual identity; (d) Authority and roles are differentiated through dress; and (e) Clothing is used in the display of and acquisition of status.

Aiken (1963), Morris (1977), and others have suggested that, while clothing provides comfort, protection, and modesty, its primary function is to display or decorate. Comfort, protection, and modesty concerns might well be overridden by a desire to look good, "fit in," or acquire status or authority. While the extent of one's wardrobe and availability of clothing in one's size might be recognized as having some influence on clothing selection, dress is largely interpreted as a function of personal choice.

Beyond providing protection from environmental conditions and following cultural norms for modesty, many people believe that what instructors choose to wear in the classroom does influence the perceptions of their students. However, although anecdotal evidence exists of supervisors advising teachers (especially beginning teachers) about appropriate dress, few studies have empirically examined the effects of instructor dress in the classroom. Furthermore, most studies of effects of clothing

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on person perceptions in any context were conducted over a decade ago, and most used responses to photographs rather than actual people interacting in context. Our purpose in this study was to explore the contemporary effects of instructor attire (specifically, graduate teaching assistant attire) on students' perceptions of college teachers in a live lecture context.

As with other nonverbal cues, clothing messages can be *intentionally* or *unintentionally* (consciously or unconsciously) communicated by the wearer, as well as *intentionally* or *unintentionally* (consciously or unconsciously) interpreted by the observer. Molloy (1975, 1977) suggests that the ultimate use of knowledge about the communicative power of dress is one's ability to intentionally manipulate clothing cues without the receiver being consciously aware of the manipulation to which they are responding. Clothing, according to Molloy, is a primary impression management tool. Hickson and Stacks (1993) concur that nonverbal cues selected with intent to communicate are communicative even when observers do not perceive them as intentional. They further note that observer perception of some form of intent, even in the absence of actual source intent, also makes a nonverbal behavior communicative. Thus, even if an instructor's dress is not selected with intent to communicate, its interpretation as a function of personal choice and its decoding as having meaning give it communicative relevance.

Goffman (1959) contends that individuals can and do consciously conduct themselves in ways that affect their influence and impact on others. Leathers (1992) defines this process of impression management as "an individual's conscious attempt to exercise conscious control over selected communicative behaviors and cues—particularly nonverbal cues—for purposes of making a desired impression" (p. 204). Edinger and Patterson (1983) maintain that "impression management may be seen as an actor's behavioral strategy designed to create some beneficial image of presentation for the individual" (p. 43). Efforts to exercise power or control over others, to give them feedback, to deceive them, and to persuade them all involve impression management. Patterson (1987) further suggests that there is an affect management function of impression management.

Goffman (1959) considers clothing an important aspect of what he calls *personal front*, one of the forms of expressive equipment that assist a performer in defining the expectancies of an audience. Thourlby (1978) describes ten decisions people make about each other based on clothing alone: economic level, educational level, trustworthiness, social position, level of sophistication, economic background, social background, educational background, level of success, and moral character. Molloy (1988), Raiscot (1986), and others suggest that clothing especially affects four kinds of judgements: credibility, likability, interpersonal attractiveness, and dominance. Of these, credibility and likability have been considered the two most important image dimensions in impression management (DeMeuse, 1987; Schlenker, 1980, 1985; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985).

So what clothing choices should teachers make to effectively manage their impression in the classroom? Several studies of effects of dress on observer perceptions have concluded that formal or professional dress is the most positively perceived choice of attire. For example, Harris et al. (1983) studied five styles of clothing worn by the same woman, rated by male and female subjects. The styles were: (a) formal suit or skirt, blouse, and jacket suitable for professional wear; (b) formal pantsuit with blouse and jacket; (c) casual skirt and blouse with sweater

and casual footwear; (d) casual pants with blouse, sweater and casual footwear; and (e) blue jeans and T-shirt. Subjects were asked to imagine seeing the woman walking down a street at 5:30 p.m. on a Friday and to rate her on eight dimensions. Results indicated she was perceived as most happy, successful, feminine, interesting, attractive, intelligent, and desirable as a friend when she wore a formal suit, and least so in blue jeans and a T-shirt. The formal pants outfit ranked second highest, and the casual skirt outfit second most negative. Similarly, Bassett (1979) reported higher ratings of perceived competence for both males and females photographed in high-status versus low-status clothing. Lefkowitz, Blake, and Mouton's classic (1955) study of modeling behavior and dress showed that pedestrians were more likely to violate instructions given by a traffic light if a person dressed in high-status clothing was observed violating the directions first. Bickman (1974) found greater compliance with out-of-role requests made by individuals dressed in a high-authority uniform over requests made by other individuals dressed in a low-authority uniform or wearing conventional dress. Finally, numerous studies have concluded that requests for personal aid, political support, and charitable donations are affected by wearer dress, with perceived status and authority as the mediating factor (Miller & Rowold, 1980).

However, the same formal clothing that serves to increase perceptions of credibility, intelligence, and competence, and to increase compliance, has been reported to have the effect of decreasing perceptions of likability or approachability (Leathers, 1992; Raiscot, 1983; Smith and Malandro, 1985). Rollman (1980) reported results of a study in which 50 students were shown three photographs of the same male teacher and the same female teacher in casual (jeans, sport skirt, sneakers), moderately formal (casual slacks/skirt, turtleneck, jacket), and formal (classic business attire) dress. Photos were rated using ten adjectives (fair, sympathetic, knowledgeable, enthusiastic, friendly, flexible, clear, organized, stimulating, and well-prepared). Teachers dressed formally were seen as more organized, knowledgeable, and better prepared; those dressed informally were seen as more friendly, flexible, sympathetic, fair, and enthusiastic than the other modes of dress. Males were rated as most stimulating in moderately formal attire, and both males and females scored highest on perceived clarity in the moderately formal condition.

Effects of dress have been shown to be more pronounced for female subjects (Miller and Rowold, 1980), who are more acutely aware of the impression management potential of clothing choice (Kuehne & Creekmore, 1971, Solomon & Schopler, 1982). Thus, across this body of literature there are three key themes relevant to classroom perceptions of teachers: (a) clothing does affect observer perceptions, especially "cool" perceptions such as wearer knowledge, preparation or poise, and competence; (b) clothing which enhances "cool" perceptions may decrease "warm" judgements such as sociability, likability, or enthusiasm; and (c) females appear to be more responsive to clothing cues than males. Following these themes, the study was designed to address the following research questions:

- RQ*<sub>1</sub>: Are selected student perceptions of college instructors (graduate teaching assistants) influenced by differences in instructor attire?
- RQ*<sub>2</sub>: Do effects of attire on student perceptions of college instructors (graduate teaching assistants) differ depending on the instructors' gender?
- RQ*<sub>3</sub>: Do effects of attire on student perceptions of college instructors (graduate teaching assistants) differ depending on the students' gender?

Homophily, the degree to which two people perceive themselves as similar to one another, is an additional variable which arose in discussions within the research team, particularly in light of the study's use of graduate teaching assistants, who were similar in age to undergraduate students in college classes, as experimental confederates.<sup>1</sup> "Optimal homophily" for classroom or persuasive contexts has been defined as receivers' perceptions that a communicator is very similar to them in most ways, but somewhat more competent on the topic in question (McCroskey, Hamilton, & Weinver, 1974). Hensley (1981) applied a "similarity hypothesis" in interpreting results of a study in which well-dressed female homophily confederates were more successful in receiving aid (a dime for a telephone call) in an airport, among similarly dressed travelers, while poorly dressed female confederates were more successful at the same task in a bus station, also among similarly dressed travelers. Two exploratory research questions were posed to investigate the contribution of student perceptions of homophily to other instructor perceptions, and to explore the contribution of instructor attire to perceptions of homophily:

*RQ*<sub>4</sub>: Is there a relationship between student perceptions of instructor homophily and previously tested perceptions of instructors?

*RQ*<sub>5</sub>: Do differences in instructor attire influence differences in perceptions of instructor homophily?

## METHOD

The subjects for this study were students enrolled in multiple lecture sections of an introductory psychology course at West Virginia University. This course was selected because its multiple sections would accommodate the experimental manipulation, while its highly prescriptive TA training minimized the potential for extraneous variables related to organization of content across sections. A common component of the instructional design of this course is the use of guest lecturers at various points throughout the term. Requests for student evaluations of guest lecturers is also a common component of the course. Thus, it was expected that neither the presence of an experimental confederate as lecturer nor the request that students provide data regarding their perceptions of that lecturer would cue them to the presence of an experimental manipulation.

Four graduate students (two males and two females, each with an average physical build, similar level of physical attractiveness, of traditional, mid-20s teaching assistant age, and in their first year of teaching the course) were trained as experimental confederates. Each presented guest lectures in three sections of the course, on the same day. Lectures were presented following the highly prescriptive departmental content outline, with care to minimize differences in presentational aspects including vocal expressiveness, movement around the classroom, eye contact, and other behaviors identified in previous research as immediacy cues. However, attire was systematically manipulated across the three lectures, with one presentation made by each of the four confederates in each of the three attire conditions. Since the effect of clothing manipulations has been shown to be affected by subjects' knowing research confederates prior to an experimental manipulation (Hoult, 1954), an important element of the study's design was the lack of familiarity between subjects and confederates.

Perceptions of attire options were tested prior to beginning the experiment. Undergraduate students enrolled in a class not involved in the experiment were asked to sort 34 photographs (17 of males and 17 of females) into four categories of

teacher dress. The first three categories—formal professional, casual professional, and casual—were similar to those used in previous research (Rollman, 1980); the fourth category, “inappropriate teacher dress,” was used to identify dress variables which should be avoided while conducting the experiment. Photos were taken from magazines and selected by the researchers to represent a cross-section of the various conditions as defined in previous studies. To minimize effects of extraneous variables, photos were of models with approximately the same body types and did not include heads. After examining the choices made by the students about dress variables in the photographs, the attire conditions employed in the experimental manipulation were divided in the following way:

*Formal Professional (FP)*

Males: dark business suits, white shirts with dark ties, dress shoes

Females: tan/black skirted business suits, sheer hose, high-heeled pumps

*Casual Professional (CP)*

Males: light colored, tan casual slacks, dark sport shirts (button-front, button-down collars) in a muted plaid, no tie, brown leather casual shoes

Females: skirt and sweater, primarily in tan/black colors, dress pumps

*Casual (C)*

Males & Females: faded, worn blue jeans, light-colored T-shirt, plaid flannel shirt (worn open), sport/athletic shoes

Prior to presenting lectures in each condition, photographs were taken of each confederate to document the dress condition. Following each lecture, students completed a brief “lecture evaluation form” on which they indicated their gender and rated the instructor using the measures described below. To minimize potential confounding effects of subjects’ awareness of the experimental manipulation, the same “lecture evaluation form” was also used at other times in the course when a guest lecturer not involved in the attire manipulation was on the schedule.

Perceptions of the instructor were measured using an approach initially developed by McCroskey, Jensen, & Valencia (1973; see also McCroskey, Hamilton, & Weiner, 1974; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971) and subsequently revised by McCroskey to the format used here. Five dimensions which have been related to source perception were measured, each using three sets of five-point bipolar descriptors: *competence* (expert/inexpert, reliable/unreliable, qualified/unqualified); *character* (unselfish/selfish, kind/cruel, sympathetic/unsympathetic); *sociability* (sociable/unsociable, cheerful/gloomy, good-natured/irritable); *composure* (poised/nervous, relaxed/tense, clam/anxious); and *extroversion* (aggressive/meeek, verbal/quiet, bold/timid). These five dimensions were originally characterized as components of source credibility; however, subsequent research has identified competence and character as two critical components of credibility (McCroskey & Young, 1981) while sociability, composure, and extroversion are separate but similarly important perceptions of teachers (McCroskey, 1992). Alpha reliabilities for the present study were .85 for competence, .86 for character, .76 for sociability, .91 for composure, and .80 for extroversion.

Two single-item measures related to overall instructor perceptions were also included, each using a five-point scale with 1 low and 5 high: *Did the instructor seem to be well informed?* and *Did the instructor present the material in an interesting way?* These items were included because they are the source perception items used on the instructor evaluation forms regularly collected for inclusion in teaching assistant

files. Our interest here was in exploring the effects of instructor dress on ratings of the kind which commonly become a part of faculty personnel evaluations.

A final five-point measure, with the highest factor loading on McCroskey, Hamilton, and Winer's (1974) source homophily dimension, was used to measure the degree to which students perceived instructor *homophily* (a lot like me/not like me).<sup>2</sup>

As a manipulation check, differences across conditions in presentational aspects including vocal expressiveness, movement around the classroom, eye contact, and other behaviors identified in previous research as immediacy cues were assessed. Students were asked to rate instructor use of nine nonverbal behaviors identified in previous studies (e.g., Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987) as central to perceptions of cognitive learning and affective orientations in college classrooms. Use of each behavior was rated on a 0-4 scale (0 = never, 4 = very often). The nine items were: *gestures while talking to class*, *looks at class while talking*, *smiles at class while talking*, *moves around the classroom while teaching*, *smiles at individual students in the class*, *uses a variety of vocal expressions when talking*, *uses a monotone/dull voice when talking to class*, *has a very tense body position*, and *looks at the board or notes when talking to class*. The last three items are presumed to be nonimmediate behaviors and were reflected in scoring.

The statistical design for data analyses was a between groups model ANOVA with dress (three levels), rater gender (two levels), instructor gender (two levels), and instructor (four levels) nested within instructor gender. Significant effects were followed up using LSD post-hoc tests. The  $\eta^2$  statistic (Cohen, 1977) was calculated to estimate the proportion of total variance accounted for by any given design effect. It is equivalent to the use of the squared multiple correlation coefficient to denote the variance in a dependent variable shared with one or more independent variables.

## RESULTS

A total of 401 students participated in the study; 125 were exposed to the formal professional dress condition (FP), 144 to the casual professional dress condition (CP), and 132 to the casual condition (C). Two hundred and fifteen subjects were female (54%) and 186 (46%) were male. A summary of the distribution of subjects by dress condition, rater gender, and instructor gender is provided in Table 1. The percentage of students in attendance in all classes was typical (approximately 60%) on the day of the manipulation.

None of the nonverbal immediacy variables yielded significant *F*s due to dress conditions. We were thus confident that potential effects of unintentional variations in lecture delivery had been controlled. Mean ratings on all of the immediacy variables were above the scale midpoint of 2 (on a 0-4 scale): gestures while talking

TABLE 1  
DISTRIBUTION OF SUBJECTS BY DRESS CONDITION, RATER GENDER, AND INSTRUCTOR GENDER

Dress Condition	Rater Gender/Instructor Gender			
	Male/Male	Male/Female	Female/Female	Female/Male
Formal Professional	<i>n</i> = 36	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 37	<i>n</i> = 26
Casual Professional	<i>n</i> = 33	<i>n</i> = 32	<i>n</i> = 51	<i>n</i> = 28
Casual	<i>n</i> = 32	<i>n</i> = 27	<i>n</i> = 43	<i>n</i> = 30

to class ( $M = 2.46$ ), moves around the classroom while teaching ( $M = 2.65$ ), uses a variety of vocal expressions when talking ( $M = 2.65$ ), does not look at the board or notes when talking to class ( $M = 2.83$ ), smiles at class while talking ( $M = 2.98$ ), smiles at individual students in the class ( $M = 2.98$ ), does not have a very tense body position ( $M = 3.10$ ), does not use a monotone/dull voice when talking to class ( $M = 3.17$ ), and looks at class while talking ( $M = 3.67$ ).

Across conditions, the female instructors were significantly more immediate than the male instructors in terms of: looking at the class while talking,  $F(2, 372) = 3.11$ ,  $p < .03$ ; moving around the room while teaching,  $F(2, 372) = 3.26$ ,  $p < .04$ ; smiling at the class,  $F(2, 372) = 3.11$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and not speaking in a monotone/dull voice,  $F(2, 372) = 5.50$ ,  $p < .004$ .

The first research question was concerned with the effect of attire condition on the various instructor perception variables. Statistically significant differences were found for the main effect of attire condition on the following variables: competence,  $F(2, 356) = 2.95$ ,  $p < .05$ ; extroversion,  $F(2, 356) = 8.19$ ,  $p < .0001$ ; sociability,  $F(2, 356) = 3.73$ ,  $p < .03$ ; and interesting presentation of material,  $F(2, 356) = 3.17$ ,  $p < .04$ . Means for each measure, by condition, are presented in Table 2. For perceptions of extroversion and interesting presentation, means for the casual (C) condition differed significantly ( $p < .05$ ) from means for both formal professional (FP) and casual professional (CP) conditions; however, means for FP and CP conditions did not differ significantly from one another. For perceptions of sociability, means for the formal professional (FP) condition differed significantly ( $p < .05$ ) from means for both casual professional (CP) and casual (C) conditions; however, means for CP and C conditions did not differ significantly from one another. Thus, across the study, perceptions of competence decreased as attire became more casual. When instructors dressed in jeans and T-shirts they were perceived as significantly more extroverted and interesting than when they wore either formal business attire or typical TA attire; when instructors dressed in either jeans and T-shirts or typical TA attire they were perceived as significantly more sociable than when they wore formal business attire. Perceptions of character, composure, and the degree to which the instructor was well informed did not vary with attire.

The second and third research questions were concerned with examining differences in effects of attire conditions on instructor perception variables by instructor and respondent gender. A statistically significant difference was found for the interaction of attire with instructor gender on perception of interesting presentation of material,  $F(2, 356) = 6.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .025$ . A trend toward significance was also found for perception of sociability,  $F(2, 356) = 2.89$ ,  $p = .057$ ,  $\eta^2 = .011$ . Means for these variables, by condition and instructor gender, are presented in Table 3.

For sociability, the male instructor mean of 4.18 in the formal professional condition differed significantly ( $p < .05$ ) from all other sociability means for male and female instructors across attire conditions. When male instructors wore formal business attire they were perceived as significantly less sociable than when they wore either typical TA attire or jeans and T-shirts, and also judged as significantly less sociable than female instructors in any choice of attire. Formal business attire was not related to similarly diminished sociability for female instructors.

For interesting presentation, mean ratings for female instructors wearing casual attire (4.41) differed significantly from those of female instructors in both formal professional (3.90) and casual professional (3.76) attire, and from male instructors

TABLE 2  
MEANS OF INSTRUCTOR PERCEPTION VARIABLES BY DRESS CONDITIONS

Instructor Perception	Dress Conditions			$\eta^2$
	Formal Professional	Casual Professional	Casual	
Competence <sup>a</sup>	4.29 (.55, 125) <sup>b</sup>	4.24 (.60, 144)	4.11 (.62, 132)	.011
Character	4.31 (.63, 122)	4.45 (.64, 141)	4.37 (.63, 131)	.001
Extroversion <sup>a</sup>	3.56 (.82, 125)	3.53 (.88, 144)	3.96 (.74, 132)	.028
Sociability <sup>a</sup>	4.34 (.65, 125)	4.50 (.60, 144)	4.55 (.53, 132)	.014
Composure	3.83 (1.14, 125)	4.12 (.92, 144)	4.17 (.96, 132)	.000
Well Informed	4.70 (.54, 125)	4.66 (.69, 144)	4.82 (.44, 132)	.010
Interesting Presentation <sup>a</sup>	3.90 (1.08, 125)	3.92 (.98, 143)	4.30 (.89, 132)	.012

<sup>a</sup>statistically significant difference for main effect of dress

<sup>b</sup>mean (standard deviation, cases)

wearing formal professional attire (3.89). There was also a significant difference between male (4.15) and female (3.76) instructor ratings in the casual professional condition, and between male instructor (4.18) ratings in the casual condition and female instructor (3.76) ratings in the casual professional condition. When female instructors wore jeans and T-shirts, ratings of how interesting their presentation was were significantly higher than their ratings in either of the other attire conditions, and also significantly higher than ratings for male instructors dressed in formal business attire. Male instructors were more positively perceived than were females when wearing typical TA attire and similarly rated in both typical TA attire and jeans and a T-shirt; for female instructors, typical TA attire was associated with the lowest ratings on interesting presentation across all conditions.

No significant differences were found for the interaction of dress with rater gender. However, when data were separately analyzed within four instructor-student gender combinations (i.e., female students rating female instructors, female students rating male instructors, male students rating male instructors, male students rating female instructors) some statistically significant differences were found due to dress.

For female students rating female instructors, dress condition influenced perceptions of extroversion,  $F(2, 127) = 11.81, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .154$  ( $M$  for FP = 3.69,  $M$  for CP = 3.63,  $M$  for C = 4.32; means for FP and CP differ significantly from C, but not from one another) and interesting presentation of material,  $F(2, 127) = 7.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = .102$  ( $M$  for FP = 4.49,  $M$  for CP = 3.67,  $M$  for C = 4.05; means for FP, CP, and C all differ significantly from one another).

TABLE 3  
MEANS OF INSTRUCTOR PERCEPTION VARIABLES BY DRESS CONDITION AND TEACHER GENDER

Instructor Perception	Dress Conditions		
	Formal Professional	Casual Professional	Casual
Sociability			
Male Instructor	4.18 (.66, 62) <sup>a</sup>	4.54 (.53, 61)	4.44 (.56, 62)
Female Instructor	4.50 (.62, 63)	4.48 (.65, 83)	4.65 (.48, 70)
Interesting Presentation			
Male Instructor	3.89 (.93, 62)	4.15 (.83, 61)	4.18 (.93, 62)
Female Instructor	3.90 (1.23, 63)	3.76 (1.05, 82)	4.41 (.84, 70)

<sup>a</sup>mean (standard deviation, cases)

For female students rating male instructors, dress condition influenced perceptions of extroversion  $F(2, 76) = 3.44, p < .04, \eta^2 = .076$  ( $M$  for FP = 3.52,  $M$  for CP = 3.23,  $M$  for C = 3.76; means for CP and C differ significantly), composure  $F(2, 76) = 3.01, p < .05, \eta^2 = .072$  ( $M$  for FP = 3.56,  $M$  for CP = 3.92,  $M$  for C = 4.24; means for FP and C differ significantly), and interesting presentation of material  $F(2, 76) = 4.29, p < .02, \eta^2 = .091$  ( $M$  for FP = 3.73,  $M$  for CP = 4.25,  $M$  for C = 4.37; mean for FP differs significantly from means for CP and C).

Thus, when female instructors wore jeans and a T-shirt, female students rated them as significantly more extroverted than in either typical TA attire or formal business attire. When male instructors wore jeans and a T-shirt, female students rated them as more extroverted than in typical TA attire, but not as significantly more extroverted than when they wore formal business attire. In both cases, casual attire was associated with female students' highest ratings and typical TA attire with the lowest ratings. Female instructors got female students' best ratings for interesting presentation when dressed formally, the second best when dressed in jeans and a T-shirt (both deviations from the norm), and the lowest when wearing typical TA attire. In contrast, male instructors got female students' *worst* ratings for interesting presentation as well as composure when dressed in formal business attire.

For male students rating male instructors, dress condition influenced perceptions of sociability  $F(2, 97) = 4.96, p < .01, \eta^2 = .092$  ( $M$  for FP = 4.09,  $M$  for CP = 4.56,  $M$  for C = 4.36; mean for FP differs significantly from means for CP and C). Male instructors who wore either typical TA attire or jeans and a T-shirt were both rated by male students as significantly more sociable than they were when wearing formal business attire, with the typical casual professional TA attire rated most favorably. For male students rating female instructors, there was no statistically significant impact of dress on any of the instructor perceptions. Thus, except for perceiving formally dressed male teachers as less sociable, male students' perceptions of instructors were not particularly influenced by instructor attire.

The fourth and fifth research questions were concerned with effects of homophily on instructor ratings, and effects of dress conditions on perceptions of instructor homophily. A multiple regression was performed predicting the homophily ratings from the instructors' source perception ratings. A statistically significant, though small, R-square was found:  $R^2 = .029, F(2, 394) = 5.95, p < .003$ . In addition, two of the predictors had statistically significant regression weights: composure,  $t(394) = 3.13, p < .002$ ; and interesting presentation of material,  $t(394) = -2.32, p < .02$ . There was, however, no significant effect of dress condition on ratings of homophily.

## DISCUSSION

Existing literature related to the effects of dress on observer perceptions suggests that "cool" perceptions (competence, composure, knowledge) are affected most by dress, with more formal dress resulting in the most positive perceptions. The results of this study are partially in line with this pattern. Perceptions of instructor competence were highest in the formal professional attire condition (FP), with casual professional attire (CP) a close second, and lowest ratings for the casual attire condition (C). However, across these data neither perceptions of composure nor perceptions of the instructor's being well informed were influenced by dress condition. When analyzed by instructor/rater gender, male instructors' composure in formal dress was rated significantly *lower* than in casual dress by female students. Effects of formal dress on

observers' perceptions of competence were particularly evident in judgements of female instructors made by female students.

Existing literature also suggests that clothing which enhances "cool" perceptions may decrease "warm" judgements such as sociability, extroversion, character (kindness, empathy), and perceptions of instructors being interesting in their presentation. The results of this study support this pattern. Ratings of instructor sociability were most positive in the casual dress condition, lower in the casual professional condition, and even lower in the formal professional conditions ( $C \approx CP > FP$ ). Ratings of instructor extroversion were most positive in the casual dress condition, and similarly lower in the other two conditions ( $C > FP \approx CP$ ). Ratings of interesting presentation of material were also highest in the casual condition and similarly lower in the other two conditions ( $C > CP \approx FP$ ). These differences emerged despite the uniformly high ratings and possible ceiling effects on the scales across all instructors.

Instructor gender did not appear to have a marked interaction with dress condition on instructor perceptions, though male instructors were somewhat more positively perceived than female instructors in the casual professional or "typical TA attire" condition. Male instructors' ratings for both sociability and interesting presentation were similar in both the casual professional and casual conditions, and lower in the formal professional condition ( $CP \approx C > FP$ ). In contrast, female instructors' ratings for interesting presentation were highest for casual dress, followed by formal business attire, and lowest for typical TA attire ( $C > FP > CP$ ) and for sociability highest for casual dress, with formal business attire and typical TA attire similarly lower ( $C > FP \approx P$ ).

Rater (student) gender did not interact significantly with dress in influencing teacher perceptions across the sample. However, when the four rater gender-instructor gender combinations were analyzed separately, females were found to be somewhat more responsive to casual dress for male instructors and to formal dress for female instructors. Female students' ratings of male instructor composure and interesting presentation were highest in the casual jeans and a T-shirt condition, followed closely by casual professional attire, and lowest in formal business attire ( $C \approx CP > FP$ ); their ratings of extroversion were highest for male instructors wearing jeans and a T-shirt, followed by formal business attire and typical TA attire ( $C > FP > CP$ ). Female students' ratings of female instructor extroversion were also highest in the casual dress condition, followed by similar ratings of formal business attire and typical TA attire ( $C > FP \approx CP$ ). However, female students' ratings of female instructor interesting presentation were highest when female instructors wore formal business attire, followed by jeans and a T-shirt, then typical TA attire ( $FP > C > CP$ ).

Instructor attire had a significant effect only on male students' ratings of male instructor sociability, with formal business attire perceived as the least sociable ( $CP \approx C > FP$ ). Dress had no apparent impact on male students' ratings of female instructors.

While we were not surprised that less formal dress was associated with more positive ratings on "warm" judgements such as sociability, extroversion, and interesting presentation, we were somewhat surprised by the relative ratings for the casual professional and casual dress conditions. Within this study, the casual dress condition was operationalized as *very* casual dress. Our observations of student dress in the

classes involved in the study indicated that our definition of "casual" was in some cases more "grunge"-like than typical student dress (although student dress was universally casual, as opposed to casual professional or formal professional). Few instructors (professors or graduate teaching assistants) at our institution dress quite this casually when teaching class. And, while more professors wear formal professional attire, teaching assistants most commonly choose casual professional dress.

Leathers (1992) notes that communicators who dress in such a manner as to meet the expectations of those with whom they interact will be judged as more competent and be better liked. Mauro (1984, cited in Bridgewater, 1985) and Singer and Singer (1985) both found that police officers dressed in the "expected" traditional navy uniform were rated more positively (more competent, helpful, honest, fast, and active, and as having better judgement) than those dressed in an "unexpected" navy blazer/grey slacks outfit. However, insofar as "typical" teaching assistant dress should be perceived as "expected" dress, these expectancy effects did not hold true in the present study.

Leathers (1992) further notes that there are three primary principles of attribution that affect impression formation: (a) impression formers are influenced the most by cues that are the most obvious, (b) impression formers put more weight on negative cues than on positive cues, and (c) impression formers tend to make judgements based on the assumption that others are like them. Physical appearance, including dress, is a very obvious cue, with dress more than other attributes of physical appearance perceived as largely a matter of personal choice. The findings of this study strongly suggest that dress that is much more casual than that usually worn by instructors in the classroom is not perceived as a negative cue by students. Thus, we are left to consider the issue of homophily: whether casual dress by teaching assistants was associated with positive teacher judgements because it was perceived by students to be more "like them."

Our data show that perceptions of homophily did account for a small amount of variance in instructor ratings. However, there was no significant effect of dress condition on ratings of homophily. These findings suggest that perceptions of homophily do contribute to impressions of teachers that are formed by students in college classes, but that teacher dress is not central to those perceptions. We acknowledge the exploratory nature of these findings, which are based on a single item assessment of perceived homophily, but take them as an indication that simply looking like a student is not the key to enhancing either perceived homophily or instructor ratings.

In interpreting these results, we also note that instructor ratings for both "warm" and "cool" perception variables were quite high across all conditions. In particular, the experimental confederates' being "well informed" was rated over 4.5 (on a five-point scale) across all conditions, with low standard deviations. Use of individual immediacy behaviors was also consistently reported as moderately high to high. Thus, it appears that, dress aside, each of the experimental confederates was in command of lecture material and immediate in presenting it. In this experiment, those aspects may have overridden dress as the most obvious cues affecting at least some areas of impression formation. It is possible that perceptions of less competent and immediate instructors might vary more due to dress, a question which merits further study.

Because teaching assistants have greater demographic similarity to undergraduate

students than do most professors, it is likely that homophily and expectancy effects would contribute differently to effects of dress on teacher perceptions for other instructors. We would thus be cautious in generalizing these findings beyond their context. We also note that this is a limited study which, as is inherent in experimental design, sacrificed ability to explore potentially important "real world" interactions in the interest of maximizing control of variables not central to the intended manipulation.

On the whole, the similarities between these findings and those from previous studies of dress effects suggest that the experimental manipulation did not present a completely atypical situation. Judgements of "cool" attributes were at least somewhat related to formal dress, judgements of "warm" attributes were associated with casual dress, and females were somewhat more sensitive to clothing cues than were males. However, we would suggest that the pattern of findings reported here supports a conclusion that one should be cautious in making recommendations regarding instructor dress based upon literature not specifically concerned with the classroom context. We would also suggest that responses to photo manipulations might not capture variables that affect responses when actual people interact in context, and consider a particular strength of this study's contribution to the literature to be its in-context manipulation. Finally, although there may be many reasons why supervisors of teaching assistants would like their charges to dress professionally in the classroom, and we are hesitant to recommend without reservation that faded jeans and flannel shirts should be the recommended TA uniform, these findings indicate that casual dress is not in itself a detriment to perceptions of instructor effectiveness.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The concept of homophily is based upon a basic interpersonal communication principle: The more source and receiver are similar (homophilous) the more communication attempts increase and the more likely communication will be effective (McCroskey & Richmond, 1979). Early research (see Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971) generally treated homophily as an observed variable (e.g., two people engaged in the same work or from the same town are homophilous) or requested subjects to complete various scales concerning themselves (Byrne, 1961) or themselves and other persons (Alpert & Anderson, 1973) so that the investigator could rate the degree of actual similarity. However, Rogers and Bhowmik (1971) suggested that subjective perceptions of homophily are probably more central to communicative effectiveness than "objective" homophily. McCroskey and his colleagues (e.g., McCroskey, Hamilton, and Weiner, 1974; McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly, 1975) developed their approach to measuring homophily from this person perception perspective.

<sup>2</sup>McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly (1975) characterized homophily as being comprised of attitude, background, morality, and appearance dimensions. Of these, appearance (*looks similar to me, same size as I am, appearance like mine, resembles me*) was not a meaningful discriminator between opinion leaders and other target persons and is not included in more recent conceptualizations of homophily measures (e.g., McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). The scale for the morality dimension, also not included in McCroskey and Richmond's (1996) most recent homophily measure, was in McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly's research composed of two items (*morals like mine* and *sexual attitudes like mine*; two other proposed "value homophily" items, *shares my values* and *treats people like I do*, loaded on the attitude factor). These items were judged to be generally extraneous to classroom interaction. The background dimension (*from social class similar to mine, economic situation like mine, status like mine, and background similar to mine*; in the most recent version of the scale the background item has been replaced with *culturally similar*) is, according to McCroskey and Richmond (1996), "more actual than it is perceived" (p. 112).

The *like me* descriptor used in this study reflects the attitude dimension of perceived homophily. In McCroskey, Hamilton, and Weiner's (1974) study, which did not differentiate among various dimensions of homophily, this item had the highest factor loading on the homophily dimension. One of the other two perceived attitudinal homophily items in that study, *shares my attitudes*, is not used in the most current homophily measure (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). The final item, *thinks like me*, had the lowest loading on McCroskey, Hamilton, and Weiner's single homophily factor, the lowest factor loading on the attitude dimension in McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly's (1975) study, and was judged to present the potential complication of being influenced by perceptions of instructor knowledge in the context of the present study.

Our inclusion of the homophily variable in the present study was exploratory. While cognizant of the limitations of

using a single-item measure, the use of this particular item was judged to be a straightforward means of exploring in general terms whether the degree to which students perceived themselves as similar to instructors was influenced by instructor attire.

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