



## Negotiation of Czech Ethnic Identity through Folk Costume in the Midwest

Erin French and Kelly L. Reddy-Best, Iowa State University

Dress plays a significant role in how identities are constructed, communicated, and negotiated (Kaiser, 2012). Individuals have multiple identities, some of which are established and defined through an association with particular groups (Jenkins, 2014). Like all other types of dress, folk costumes operate as a language to communicate distinctive group and individual identities such as ethnic identity (Bogatyrev, 1971). Previous researchers found that Czech ethnic identity in the United States is celebrated through language, food, dancing, music, and event attendance (Chadima, 1990; Dutkova-Cope, 2003; Hannan, 2005; Zeitler, 2009). In Dutkova-Cope's (2003) research where dress was a small portion of the topic under study, the author reported members of Texas Czech communities expressed their ethnic identities and preserved their heritage by wearing folk costumes. Beyond Dutkova-Cope's (2003) research, no other known work examines the in-depth meanings and present-day usage of Czech folk costumes. Therefore, we aimed to expand Dutkova-Cope's (2003) study to explore the lived experiences of individuals in the Midwest, where approximately 45% of all Americans who claim Czech ancestry currently live (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). We explored what role folk costume plays in the negotiation of Czech ethnic identity and how meaning is constructed and communicated through Czech folk costumes. Through this work we contribute to the preservation of the history and cultural traditions associated with folk costumes and document expressions of ethnic identity through dress in a previously unexplored Czech population of the Midwest.

In order to disentangle meanings associated with Czech folk costumes and to analyze how the development of Czech ethnic identity is negotiated through social interactions, we used symbolic interactionism as our theoretical framework. Symbolic interactionism is built on three premises that are focused on meaning: (a) the way individuals act toward objects, other people, or ideas is based on the meaning each of those things holds for them; (b) meanings are constructed through interactions with other people; and (c) meanings are also constructed through an internal interpretive process (Blumer, 1969). Identity is a process in which symbolic meaning is negotiated through social interaction, it is performative in the sense that it is actively accomplished, and it is pragmatic through its tangible expression as action (Scott, 2015). We used this framework to develop our interview schedule and research purpose and to interpret our data.

A qualitative approach with in-depth, semi-structured interviews was utilized to achieve our purpose. During the interview, participants shared photos of themselves wearing a Czech folk costume. After IRB approval was obtained, we recruited participants through purposive and snowball strategies (Creswell, 2014). The sample included 11 women and one man who lived in the Midwest, had Czech ancestors who immigrated to the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or early 20<sup>th</sup> century during the major waves of European immigration, and had participated in activities wearing a Czech folk costume at least once. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 76 (mean age = 58.8 years). Our interview schedule contained 27 questions about participants'

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Czech heritage, activities in the Czech community, Czech folk costumes, experiences with Czech costumes, meaning of the costumes, and how costumes connected participants to their ethnic identity. Interviews lasted from 66 to 156 minutes (mean = 102 minutes). We completed a verbatim transcription of the audio recordings and assigned pseudonyms to participants after transcription. Then the transcripts and photographs were analyzed with the aid of NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program. We used open, axial, and selective coding methods to identify three broader themes and numerous subthemes (Creswell, 2014). A codebook with code definitions was developed and referenced throughout the cyclical data analysis process. We also checked intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2014), which resulted in 98% agreement, and all disagreements were reconciled during the agreement check.

After analysis of our data, we found that Czech folk costumes play a significant role in how our participants negotiated their Czech ethnic identities. Some participants owned up to 15 Czech folk costumes and wore them on multiple occasions throughout the year. In addition, participants said their folk costumes held considerable meaning because of the costumes' connections to their family history and ethnic origins.

Wearing folk costumes created *feelings of connectedness* to participants' ethnic identities. They felt more connected overall when wearing their folk costumes, and they felt more comfortable during specific activities such as singing Czech songs or dancing to Czech music. Participants also noted they felt more connected to family members when creating the costumes with others. For example, Radmila said, "Well, probably the skirt that my mom and I worked on and my sister was working on hers, too. That [activity] probably makes me most feel connected to my family." Two subthemes were identified including a *sense of community*, which was developed through wearing folk costumes to Czech cultural events such as festivals, pageants, and dinners and by interacting with others in costume. Participants also felt a *sense of well-being* when wearing or teaching others about their Czech folk costumes because it made them feel good, happy, and/or elegant.

Nearly all participants expressed a strong *sense of pride* about their Czech heritage, ancestors, and/or culture, particularly when wearing their Czech folk costumes. For example, Katerina said, "I think it's like wearing the flag, so you're representing a culture, the country in your background and you just feel very proud to do that." Some participants stressed that they felt a responsibility to represent their heritage, and wearing their costume was one way in which they could honor their ancestors who came to the United States to start a new life. Many said they owned parts of costumes or entire costumes that had been passed down through their families, and items that had been owned by family members were the most meaningful.

In terms of the costumes themselves, several participants mentioned the *importance of being authentic*. This theme included two subthemes of *wearing costumes authentically* and *wearing authentic costumes*. To wear a costume authentically, some participants researched their family history and wore costume styles from only their area(s) of family origin in the present-day Czech Republic. For example, Adriana said, "I wanted [to be] very detailed and authentic to the specific area where my ancestors come from and I feel like I'm representing my family as well as my group of dancers when I'm out in public wearing it." Others defined authentic costumes as

those sourced directly from the Czech Republic. Numerous costume examples, details, and style variations from participants will be shared to demonstrate Midwestern style interpretations.

Our results are consistent with past work that found some individuals with Czech ancestry use folk costumes to negotiate their ethnic identities (Dutkova-Cope, 2003). Our participants negotiated meanings for the costumes, themselves, and their communities (Blumer, 1969) by wearing their costumes or by engaging in activities with them such as researching, sewing, dancing, or sharing cultural knowledge. Overall, we found members of Midwestern Czech communities use their folk costumes as a way to feel connected, proud, and authentic, and these feelings and experiences were shaped and informed through interactions (Scott, 2015) inside and outside of their Czech communities. Through our work, we contribute to the historical and cultural preservation and documentation of modern-day Czech traditions.

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