



Developing theoretical thinking skills in dress scholarship:
An exercise in relational statement identification and analysis

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Pedersen (2008-2009) began a discussion of theory development in interpretive dress history scholarship and explained “that there [are] multiple ways to develop and apply theory” and one such way is to identify and analyze relational statements (RSs) (Pedersen, Buckland, & Bates, 2008-2009, p. 73). RSs, Pedersen argued, are important in developing an understanding of the formation of theory at a micro-level. Thinking theoretically is an important skill, but one that should be actively practiced and applied if it is going to aid in professional development and advance scholarship. The objective of this research was to continue the theory development discussion started by Pedersen (2008-2009) and practice/interact with the identification and analysis of RSs to further develop the theory development discourse in dress scholarship.

Method. In order to achieve this objective, I read and analyzed a selection of research articles that pertained to a similar subject for RSs. The data for this research included peer-reviewed research articles from *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* and *Dress*. Gender and dress/dress behavior were chosen as the common theoretical concept among all articles. Three articles from the sample that were analyzed in depth are discussed: Brautbar (2006), Gordon (2003), and Huun and Kaiser (2001). I created a three-step process for identifying RSs: (1) I read each article once, without making notations regarding RSs, (2) I read each article again and underlined any statements that exemplified what a RS would look like (by in large, according to the guidelines of Pedersen [2008-2009] and Walker and Avant [2005]) with linkages between gender and dress, and (3) I created a compilation of the RSs that I had underlined and continued analysis to finalize which statements would be classified as RSs. Following this process I simplified, classified, and synthesized the final list of RSs.

Relational statement findings. The following list contains an example of a RS from each article:

- “While women historically have used existing gender norms as tolls for such transformative work as suffrage and abolition, they also used notions about beauty and womanhood in subtler ways in their everyday lives that nevertheless allowed them to carve out a larger space in the public sphere” (Brautbar, 2006, p. 82, para. 2).
- “Although colonial impersonations were popular for close to one hundred years, men and women related to them differently, and the contexts in which they appeared changed considerably over time. The costumes portrayed a consistently gendered vision and were always disproportionately female-identified” (Gordon, p. 16, para. 6).
- “The introduction of this style to girls’ wardrobes demonstrated a new awareness that they, like their male counterparts, had basic needs for playwear” (Huun & Kaiser, 2001, p. 109, para. 3).

The following list represents a sample of simplified RSs:

- **Relational statement:** “Along the way in this re-negotiation of gender and age boundaries, interim clothing styles helped to ease the transition in the context of mixed cultural sentiments (Huun & Kaiser, 2001, p. 117, para. 1).
 - **Simplified statements:** (1) The evolutionary development of children’s wear caused a re-negotiation of gender and age boundaries and (2) Interim clothing styles reduced the possible negative outcomes associated with the transition in the context of mixed cultural messages.

Next, I synthesized the identified RSs. For example, the following statements represent a grouping of RSs that contain a focal concept of male-female polarity related to dress:

- The consumption of children’s wear from popular retail outlets promoted a male-female polarity in dress code.
- Boys had restricted sartorial possibility and girls had expansive sartorial possibility.

Reflections on the process. The identification and analysis of RSs is a viable theory development method, especially for scholars who are timid about theory or only feel comfortable working with mini-theories. A beneficial endeavor would be to practice this process with graduate students who plan to conduct scholarship in the clothing and textiles field. Upon narrowing my initial list it felt like I had chosen too many RSs. It is not clear if there can be too many RSs in an article. I encountered two issues in this process related to statement complexity: (1) when identifying statements it felt important to include a surrounding sentence for context and (2) multiple theoretical concepts were often integrated into one statement. It did not seem appropriate to separate the sentences so theoretical concepts beyond gender and dress/behavior had to be considered.

I conclude that RSs have the ability to guide applied practice in the field, especially in the field of interpretive dress research in a historical and cultural context. However, it may be difficult to expand beyond RSs in this particular field because historical data sources can be limited and further theory development would have to include a larger sample. Also, RSs have been discussed in the literature as being easily identified with linkage terms (e.g., causes, leads to, is related to, etc.) and while these terms make logical sense to use as identification cues, the process became confusing when these cues were absent. Further discourse about RS identification should address other cues that could be sought when RSs are not explicit.

Brautbar, S. (2006). Fashioning gender and Jewishness: Hadassah, fashion shows, and beauty culture in the post-world-war-II era. *Dress*, 33, 79-95.

Gordon, B. (2003). Costumed representations of early America: A gendered portrayal, 1850-1940. *Dress*, 30, 3-20.

Huun, K., & Kaiser, S.B. (2001). The emergence of modern infant wear, 1896-1962: Traditional white dresses succumb to fashion’s gender obsession. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 19(3), 103-119.

Pedersen, E.L., Buckland, S.S., & Bates, C. (2008-2009). Theory and dress scholarship: A discussion on developing and applying theory. *Dress*, 35, 71-85.

Walker, L.O., & Avant, K.C. (2005). *Strategies for theory construction in nursing* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.