Dress, Body, and Experiences of Victimization

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Appearance refers to the way someone looks and includes the body as well as dress. People use appearance to infer other's attitudes and identities among other personal attributes and they often believe that their inferences are accurate (Johnson, Schofield, & Yurchisin, 2002). Person perception theory (e.g., Lively & Bromley, 1973) as well as the Stimulus-Organism-Response model (S-O-R; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) posit that appearance cues can form the basis of inferences that subsequently shape individuals' actions toward those others. Researchers have documented dress influences both positive (e.g., helping others) and negative (e.g., aggression) actions of others (Johnson, Yoo, Kim, & Lennon, 2008).

Clothing and textile researchers interested in relationships between dress and victimization have conducted focused research efforts on specific topics including sexual harassment, sexual assault and teasing. In research with survivors of sexual assaults, Johnson, Hegland, and Schofield (1999) reported that even though participants stated their appearance was unrelated to their victimization, the majority changed some aspect of their appearance after their experience. Yoo and Johnson (2007) reported adolescent girls tied experiences with negative teasing to several aspects of their body and/or dress and that they frequently changed their appearance after this experience. Thus, there is research evidence that dress may be an antecedent to some forms of victimization and may be modified in response to forms of victimization.

Applying a broad interpretation of the terms hate crime and hate speech, our research purpose was to uncover relationships between appearance (i.e., body, dress) and experiences with either form of victimization. Our specific research questions were twofold: What connection, if any, do survivors draw between their appearance and their victimization experience? What appearance changes, if any, did survivors make after their victimization experience?

Method

The methodology was guided using a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Straus, 1967) in order to gather data surrounding the central question of experiences of victimization due to appearance. Purposive sampling methods were used to recruit participants and data were collected through in-depth interviews. Questions related to appearance, victimization, and consequences. Interviews ranged in length from 20-60 minutes. Data were analyzed using components of phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2007) where significant statements, sentences, or quotes were highlighted and were grouped into themes, with quotations illustrating each of the themes extracted and documented. In addition, transcripts were reviewed for themes across questions to discover concepts that were not addressed by existing questions. Six women and three men of diverse ethnic heritages, age 25-52, were interviewed.

Findings

Incidents of victimization included disapproving looks, shunning, bullying, unwanted touching, and physical assault. All of the participants tied experiences of victimization to aspects of their appearance including both body-related features (e.g., baldness, skin color, attractiveness, height) and dress (e.g., tattoos, wearing indigenous clothing, wearing Goth clothing). Incidents that occurred at a young age often occurred when confronted by a group rather than a specific individual. In general, participants noted there was something about their appearance that made them standout from what they perceived as the norm. With few exceptions, participants made a change in how they presented themselves as a result of their experience. One participant shared her experience was so negative that she not only stopped wearing her traditional dress but also changed the church she attended.

Conclusion

Participants believe appearance placed a significant role in victimization and resulted in negative personal consequences (e.g., lowered self-esteem) as well as positive consequences (e.g., wanting to help others who have been victimized), and ripple effects on the community at large. In-group/out-group victimization was based on (perceived) ethnicity or cultural affiliation and men experienced victimization but did not talk about it with others. Future research is discussed.

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