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Ethnography of Parkland Students: How Do Students Judge Others Based on their Apparel?

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**Ethnography of Parkland Students:
How Do Students Judge Others Based on their Apparel?**

It comes as no surprise to hear that we, as humans, judge one another. Without even knowing a person we can look at them and decide right then and there if we trust them or not; if we like them or not. Clothing is a huge factor on how we judge a person. Subconsciously we add labels to persons because of how they dress. In this brief ethnographic study, I argue that Parkland students are guilty of passing judgement on others solely based on first appearances and impressions.

My main method of data collection was a survey created to discover the opinions and judgements of Parkland students by providing four pictures, two each for both men and women, and asking the student to answer the question; "What is your first impression of this man/woman?" I built my argument on a past ethnography done by former Parkland students Hayley Arends, Todd Banbury, and Kenna Mae Reiss (2014) who used similar pictures and questions. Like them, I was interested in "set[ting] out to understand what clothing or appearance choices would prompt negative responses or judgments from others"(Reiss 3). I also wanted to inquire and analyze a bit deeper on possible responses and made the purpose of this ethnography to explore the judgements passed on women from both men and women, and the judgements passed on men from both men and women by providing a box on the survey to mark your gender.

As "material objects of socialization," (Swedlund and Urla 122) it is common for studies to look at the judgements passed on women from other men or women, but it is uncommon to

look at the opposite, opinions of men on other men or the opinions of women on men. My role as data collector in this ethnography allowed me to engage in participant observation and reflect on the reactions of students as I asked them to partake in the survey. For the most part, many, if not all, of the students were very intrigued and willing to participate. Unfortunately, as a part-time student with classes only twice a week, I was limited to when and how many individuals I could collect data from. The upside to being a part-time student in this case was that I knew very few people at Parkland, meaning I could easily avoid reflecting my own judgements passed on the individuals I surveyed if the participants were friends or acquaintances.

As a woman, I can say for myself that it is much easier for me to pass judgement on other women. I can reflect that I find I am more likely to judge a woman over a man. The opinions of other Parkland students were found to be similar to mine. For my survey I ended up having 8 male participants, 12 female participants, and 3 participants who identified as “other,” who agreed to look at the pictures and answer my questions. Out of those 23 students that I surveyed, 19 out of the total 46 responses resulted as negative responses. That is, the respondents thought negatively of the men and women shown in the pictures. Where the data gets interesting is when you look at the different genders and their responses. Only one male had a negative opinion of the other males in the selected photos. Six surveyed males had negative opinions of the selected female photos. Three surveyed females had negative opinions of the selected male photos, whereas 8 surveyed females had negative opinions of the selected female photos. This gives an impressive realization that both men and women, like me, are more likely to judge women negatively. Turning around and looking at the other end of the spectrum, for males judging other males, there were 6 responses that were positive opinions towards the male subjects. Only 2 males had positive responses towards the female subjects. The exact same results were seen for

the women as for the men. Six females had positive responses for the males, and 2 had positive responses for the females. All of this data gathered can be related to the concept of gendered perceptions of masculinity and femininity, and how feminine and masculine ideals of beauty are an integral part of every society. Many studies have shown that in our society men and perceptions of masculinity are generally more positive than those of women, something that is reflected in this ethnography (Swedlund and Urla 122). Parkland students, like other members of our culture, grow and develop our judgements based on social norms that tell us how we should perceive other society members based on first appearances. In this case, we are socialized to judge and perceive males more positively than females.

If I had the chance to conduct a larger study and more in depth exploration of this ethnographic topic, I would go about revising my data collection process and changing the survey. After collecting all my data, I had realized that I had very slight discrepancies between the chosen photos of the females versus the males. The photos selected for the females had one woman provocatively dressed while the other was more sloppily or casually dressed, seemed to show a greater contrast than the male photos. The males, even though I tried to provide the same impression of more provocative and more casual, weren't quite as dramatic in the differences. All of these observations are my own stated opinion, but I do believe it may have affected what kind of outcome was received for my data. I also added some qualifiers in my wording of my question that the surveyor could choose from when answering the surveyed question which I believe only helped to skew the data further.

Aside from these minor methodological issues, this ethnographic study showed that Parkland students are in fact accustomed to passing judgements and making first impressions based on only the assessment of clothing choice. Originally, looking at the results of the previous

Parkland student ethnography project (Arends, Banbury and Reiss, 2014), I believed that it would be predicted that Parkland students didn't care or had no opinion of other students, but as seen by the data I collected, that is not true. Whether positive or negative, the judgements of Parkland students contributed to the topic of first impressions and how apparel helps to prompt our responses. Future anthropological studies may want to consider these outcomes when conducting other similar ethnographies related to self-worth and self-esteem. It is possible there is an underlying knowledge of what apparel will be judged and which will not. A question that may want to be asked for future research is how the opinions of race and apparel combined affect our judgements of others. An excellent focus question for an ethnography to further explore would be the nature of why women are more likely to be judged. I personally would like to to greater understand why it is so common for women and men to both judge other women. The question "how do students judge others based on their apparel?" was answered by a portion of the Parkland student population and showed that we do tend to pass negative judgement on others, whether we think this is just or not.

Works Cited

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