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Abigail Brooks
Parkland College

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Abby Brooks
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Prof. Scarborough

The Clothing Culture of Parkland College

Observing students at Parkland College, there is one major thing in common. Everyone is wearing clothes. There are many different styles and types but everyone is wearing clothes. There is a common denominator of the most likely clothes of the students. But there is diversity among the population. People relate to each other through clothes. They congregate based on their choices. Some people may say that they do not hang out with people that wear the same type of clothing. But through observation this has been contradicted. There are similarities and patterns to the clothing choices of Parkland students.

I am a student at Parkland. I have had a fascination with clothing choices for a while now. It is always interesting to me to see how different people dress when going out into public, especially school. I wanted to get a little more in depth than observation, so I did ask around about their choices. I was hoping to be surprised, honestly. I did not want to think people cared so little about how they appeared, to go to school. My thoughts were that most people just rolled out of bed, picked something up off the floor that kind of smelled clean and put it on. Many people that I talked to, took my survey and observed, proved my thoughts to be correct. One observation made in an ethnography written last semester about grooming, is that it has to do with status or consumerism and if they have a high opinion of school or not (Koch, 2). So the people that actually do dress nicer do it because they want other people to see that they are not like the rest of the population at Parkland. They either care more or want to flaunt their wealth. I

did see this in my interviews when I asked people about the observations they make about other people based on their clothes.

As I said before, I am a Parkland student and apparently one of the few who care about how I present myself. My clothing choices are more about convenience than purposefully looking nice, I believe. Every day after class I have to work or go to volunteering at the hospital. So almost every day I wore black pants or skirts with nice shirts. I feel like I do get some weird looks, like why do I dress so nicely just to come to Parkland. I did have those off days, where I did the stereotypical college thing, and rolled out of bed and put on some sweatpants and a sweatshirt. And again, I received weird looks because I did something out of the ordinary for myself. I do care about my appearance, I am not sure if it is more for myself or because I do care what my teachers think of me. I really do not care what the student population thinks of me, in relation to my clothing. I make the choice to look presentable because it makes me feel good about myself and gives other people a better first impression of me.

I had 3 hours of down time on Tuesdays and Thursdays, this semester. I used that time to observe and interact with the population of Parkland. I observed students in the hallways and in my own classes. I watched the way that people interacted with their peers, their friends and staff. The meetings between each social group seemed to have different rules and the groups themselves made observations about the people they were interacting with. I got the sense that they felt uneasy with me at first when I went over to talk to them. They may have thought I was a teacher at first. After introducing myself and what I was doing, most people still were not too keen on sharing their stories. They told me about how they choose their daily outfits and maybe a reason or two behind their choices. I also asked about how clothing changes their perception of

people. Most people were very forthcoming with answers for me, a few were not, which confused me as to why they would not have just said no to being interviewed.

Most of the answers were the same throughout the groups: roll out of bed, pick up something clean off the floor or out of the hamper. One group of Latina ladies informed me that they usually dress up more on Fridays or when they are going out later. They usually did not wear sweatpants but jeans a lot. They were best friends, I believe, and they kind of coordinated their outfits. The day that I spoke with them, it was a Friday, and they did look nice, more dressed up than the norm of Parkland. I spoke to several other groups; three groups of African American ladies really stick out in my mind. I received the stereotypical answer mostly, but again there are days when they did want to look nice. They said a major factor was their mood, to choosing the clothes for the day. Weather and time was also a factor. They were super adamant (all three groups) that the girls they hang out with wore a diverse range of clothing and the boys did not. The only issue with that statement was that they all did dress alike. From the outside, they did look varied but from an analytical standpoint, they were all wearing the same type of clothes. One may have had a blingy necklace and everyone else did not. But they were all wearing the same type of clothes. There was one group of Caucasian males who said tired was a factor in their clothing choices. All in all, Parkland students pretty much wear whatever is on top and clean, which usually translates to sweat pants and a t-shirt or hoodie.

One question got a diverse range of responses, though. I asked the groups if they believed people made observations about the way people dress and what some of those observations might be about themselves. There was a general consensus that yes people do make observations or judgments, based on clothing choices. Some of the most interesting answers, again, came from the three groups of African American ladies. They had a different perspective

that I had never really thought about. They seemed to be a little more critical and notice different aspects of clothing. They said that you can tell when a girl is from Chicago by the way that they dress. One also made the comment that many from Chicago wear leggings with crosses on them. I had never thought about the aspect of location based on clothes. These girls seemed to be really good at deciphering where a person was from as well as the effort put into their look. One of the other groups of African American ladies made the observation that sometimes they think other people do not know how to dress. Or if they do not dress well, they are not well off in the money department. They also used the word ratchet, which I was unaware of the definition of this word (in reference to clothing or appearance), so I looked it up in the dictionary. Since the common dictionary only had it defined as a tool, I decided to look it up on urbandictionary.com. According to urbandictionary.com, it is a mix of nasty, annoying and rude. These girls could apparently tell these things from the outfits of other people. Another interesting observation about oneself that a Caucasian male made was an “average white kid or nerd”. I found this intriguing because I was unaware that there was a clothing genre for an average white kid. I also found it interesting because then he said nerd. To me, a stereotypical average white kid would be a football or basketball player. I guess I never thought about it in clothing terms.

One of my theories as to why students dress in sweats when they come to Parkland is because it is a community college. I feel like people just do not care because it is just a stopping place. They are here to get their two years of general education out of the way and then be on their way to a university. They think they will dress nicer when they go to an actual university. They do not see a reason to care because some people just do not want to be there. Some people do not even know the school mascot, which is a part of caring about the school. My assertion is

that students see Parkland as a stepping stone not an actual stop on the map, so they can wear whatever they want to because it does not matter.

I also performed a survey in all four of my classes, ANT 103, PSY 201, THE 101, and PSY 209. I was very pleased that so many people actually took the survey. I was afraid not many would be interested enough, or care enough to help me out. There were patterns that were present in the surveys. Most people answered that they wear jeans and t-shirts to school on most days. I did have two interesting responses that were add ons to my choices. One was fashionable and the other hipster. Most people answered that they hang out with people that wear the same type of clothes as them, which did hold true during observations. The most favored store and/or brands were Forever 21, Kohl's, American Eagle, Goodwill and Nike. Through my observations these brands and stores do hold true, when people chose to not wear sweat pants. Through the survey I learned that most people buy clothes because they are worn, not really any other reasons. And the last question that I asked was if they wore clothes that expressed their views or beliefs. The answers were very close in amount. There were 28 yes and 19 no. I believe this number is not quite accurate from observations. Most people while wearing their sweat pants have insignias on the pants themselves or on the t-shirts and sweatshirts they are wearing. I noticed that many of the people that play sports at Parkland like to wear sweat pants and sweatshirts that have a cobra on them or the Parkland name. I am not sure if they are required to do this to promote their sport or if they do it of their own volition. Based on observation I feel like the survey went quite well, and gave me more insight on specific stores people shop at. And concrete data from the source about how they like to dress.

From observation, I had seen the differences in clothing choices at Parkland. But referring back to an article we read in class, "Measuring up to Barbie: Ideals of the Feminine

Body in Popular Culture” the ideal woman and her clothing seems to be exceptionally different from what we see at Parkland. Most of us used to play with Barbie dolls as little girls. I always wanted to have all of the clothes that Barbie had, I never really thought about her body shape. Barbie always had the most fashionable clothes, never really jeans and a t-shirt. If they are jeans, they are usually designer. In the article they talk about her body shape and how that affects the confidence and self-worth of a girl. I do not know about all the women out there but in my opinion I stopped caring about Barbie a long time ago, and she has no bearing what I wear or how I look today. Even though “her hyper-slender, big-chested body has remained fundamentally unchanged over the years (Urla 1995: 125)” I do not think college students strive for that. Most girls if they are looking to be skinny, they are looking to be skinny all over. They are not going to be big chested and skinny. And that is what I have seen throughout Parkland, there are either skinny, medium, or big people, there are not too many mixes. And certainly no one is trying to look like Barbie. I think times have changed from looking up to fashionable Barbie, to being an individual.

Everyone wants to be an individual, even if they are an individual within a group. Most people wear the same type of clothes that their friends wear, whether they like them too or they are just fitting in, I’m not sure. A majority of students wear sweatpants more than half of the week. Of course throughout my observations and interviews, there were people who did not fit into my findings. But a majority of Parkland students do. Obviously not everyone does because I am one of those that do not fit into my findings. They might chose to wear what they wear because they do not care about where they are at. All in all it was an interesting experience to observe what people wear and how what they wear effects what is going on around them.

1. Koch, Meredith. "Clothes' Call: How We Get Ready." (Spring 2013).
2. Urla, Jacqueline and Swedlund, Alan C. 2013. "Measuring Up to Barbie: Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture" in *Applying Cultural Anthropology: An Introductory Reader*, Aaron Podolefsky, Peter Brown Scott Lacy, editors. New York: McGraw Hill.