

The Impact of Imprisonment on the Relationship Between Clothing and Identity of Incarcerated People Lonny Carter and Kate Annett-Hitchcock, North Carolina State University

As clothing is a physical extension of the self, it has the power to communicate many things about a person (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988). Clothing is often a non-verbal, symbolic tool for communication and its meaning depends on the wearer or viewer's perception of identity (Davis, 1992; Stone, 1962). Roach-Higgins (1995) stated "we learn to depend upon dress to declare our identity to ourselves and others, to pave a way for interaction with others, and to maintain positive feelings of personal identity" (p. 99). This suggests that individuals use clothing as a way to define and display their identity to the world around them. However, in some circumstances, such as incarceration, people are prevented from choosing clothing that best represents their identity. Currently, there are an estimated 2.3 million people incarcerated in the US (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). While a person is incarcerated, they are physically separated from their personal property, have no access to privacy, and all of their daily activities become routinized (Clemmer, 1958; Goffman, 1961a, 1961b; Sykes, 1958). Once a person is incarcerated, they must surrender all of their personal property to the institution. An incarcerated person's personal clothing is exchanged for government-issued clothing used to distinguish them from corrections officers, guards, civilians, visitors, and other incarcerated people. This type of clothing serves both functional and symbolic purposes and removes any identity associated with the outside world (Ash, 2010).

Previous research on clothing used in correctional facilities remains limited. Current research in corrections focuses on notions of law and order, and few existing studies have investigated experiences of current and formerly incarcerated people. There is existing literature on the relationship between uniforms and control, but with little focus on institutional uniforms (Craik, 2003; Joseph, 1986). No studies have been found that explore the impact of institutional clothing on identity before, during, and after incarceration. The concept of identity can be broadly understood as the sense of self, which are the values, beliefs, traits, roles, and experiences that create a person's place in the world (Schwartz et al., 2015; Syed & McLean, 2016). The dynamic and flexible nature of the self (Hannover, 1997; Markus & Wurf, 1987) leads individuals to use clothing as an important symbol to define their social identity. Institutional uniforms urge a denial of personal identity (Ash, 2010). Uniforms worn while imprisoned are typically imprinted to identify an incarcerated person as government property (Smiley & Middlemass, 2016), communicating what society thinks about them. There have been a few studies that investigate the correctional environment. The Stanford Prison Experiment is perhaps one of the most notable prison experiments ever conducted. In 1971, psychologist Philip Zimbardo and his associates conducted an experiment in a mock prison manufactured in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford University (Haney et al., 1973). Results indicated that the prison experience dominated the day-to-day existence of incarcerated people and caused a momentarily weakened sense of self. Smiley and Middlemass (2012) conducted a study about how clothing impacts performance and social practice among incarcerated males who are transitioning from incarceration into society. It was found that clothing can be used to tangibly separate a person's body from the confines of an incarcerated person's uniform, thus allowing them to operate as a free citizen. The term "enclothed cognition" was introduced which involves the co-occurrence of two independent factors: "the symbolic meaning of the clothes and

the physical experience of wearing the clothes” (Adam & Galinsky, 2012, p. 219). The concept of enclothed cognition led to a shift in the appearance of women’s uniforms in the Utah Department of Corrections (Nielson, 2016).

The current study incorporated a qualitative, phenomenological research design to examine the impact of imprisonment on the relationship between clothing and identity of incarcerated people and to investigate whether clothing impacts their identity. Semi structured exploratory recall interviews were conducted between July and September 2021. A total of 15 formerly incarcerated people participated in this study, 12 men and 3 women. Participants were selected through non-profit organizations, email, or direct messaging on various social media platforms. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions and were audio recorded through Zoom. No in person interviews were conducted. This research method was used to address the following research question: How does incarceration change a person’s relationship with their clothing?

The results of the study revealed three preliminary themes were identified: provides a vehicle for re-humanization after release, exposes the importance of comfort, and marks a shift in level of material satisfaction. First, it was found that formerly incarcerated people use clothing as a vehicle for re-humanization after release. Simply removing prison issued clothing and replacing it with clothing worn by free society caused participants to feel like different people. Other participants mentioned their ability to re-claim themselves and their identity through clothing after release. Clothing worn after release provided the opportunity for participants to shed their criminal image to better fit in with society. Next, participants gravitated towards comfortable clothing after release instead of dressing to impress others as they did prior to incarceration. The ill-fitting and uncomfortable clothing worn while incarcerated led participants to choose clothing based on fit and texture after release. Finally, participants noticed a shift in their level of material satisfaction after release. Participants’ clothing choices after release were largely determined by financial stability instead of individual expression. After years of a limited prison clothing wardrobe, participants had a newfound appreciation for what they have instead of focusing on what they do not have.

This study has a few limitations. As mentioned previously, participants were recruited through non-profit organizations, through email, or various social media platforms. This recruitment method limits the participant sample to formerly incarcerated people with access to various technologies. The participant sample used in this study may not be generalizable to experiences shared by all incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in the criminal justice system. Finally, due to research limitations with currently incarcerated people, it is expected that certain details may be lost through the recall of experiences of formerly incarcerated participants.

Results from this study may contribute to important discussions about the future direction of institutional clothing. This study may also encourage future corrections research concerning social conditions and rehabilitation, including institutional clothing. Furthermore, this study will help bring awareness to how institutional clothing impacts a person’s identity, not only while incarcerated but also upon release. In early 2021, the Biden administration issued an executive order on reforming the US incarceration system (The White House, 2021). The idea of prioritizing rehabilitation in correctional facilities is a key focus of this reform. This executive order provides the opportunity for a close look at aspects of the understudied topic of institutional clothing. A study highlighting the impact of institutional clothing on incarcerated people may aid in the development of best practices that will help this population fully integrate back into their communities upon future release.

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