

## Duty to Sacrifice and Fight Against All Odds: Moral Duty in the Adaptive Apparel Movement

Kerri McBee-Black University of Missouri

Keywords: moral duty, duty orientation theory, adaptive apparel, people with disabilities

**Introduction.** Adaptive apparel became a mainstream option for people with disabilities (PWD) in 2016 when Mindy Scheier (Scheier) collaborated with Tommy Hilfiger® (TH) to launch the first mainstream fashion-forward adaptive apparel line for children with disabilities (McBee-Black, 2021). Adaptive apparel is defined as clothing designed for PWD and impairments who face difficulty dressing but also follows the same trends and styles of clothing designed for people without disabilities (McBee-Black and Ha-Brookshire, 2021).

Scheier, founder of the non-profit Runway of Dreams (RoD), former apparel designer, and mother of a son with a rare form of muscular dystrophy, became an advocate for adaptive apparel when she faced the reality that PWD lacked access to fashionable and functional clothing to accommodate their needs and wants (McBee-Black, 2021). Scheier's dedication to addressing the apparel challenges facing all PWD and not just her son suggests a moral obligation or duty to PWD. Thus, this research study examined the moral duty that motivated Scheier to develop the adaptive apparel innovations that led to her collaboration with TH to launch the first mainstream adaptive apparel line for children.

**Literature Review.** Moral duty and duty orientation theory underpin the theoretical framework of this study. Gigerenzer (2010) suggests that moral behavior functions within the mind and the environment. They posit that one may have more impact on their moral behavior if they change environment instead of beliefs. Scheier's dedication to solving the apparel challenge facing all PWD and not just her son suggests she felt a moral duty for all PWD.

DO theory is one's "volitional orientation to loyally serve and faithfully support other members of the group, to strive and sacrifice to accomplish the tasks and missions of the group and to honor its codes and principles" (Hannah et al., p. 1). The three dimensions of DO theory, (a) duty to members, (b) duty to the mission, and (c) the duty to codes (Hannah et al., pp. 1-2), seemingly align with Scheier's realization that PWD lacked access to appropriate apparel to fit their needs and wants and that she felt obligated and duty-bound to solve the apparel challenges facing PWD.

**Method.** To answer the research question – "What motivated Scheier to develop the adaptive apparel innovations leading to her collaboration with TH to launch the first mainstream fashion-forward adaptive apparel line for children" - a case study method was utilized to investigate "a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in-depth and holistically, within its real-world context" (Yin, 2014, p. 16). Data sources included semi-structured in-depth interviews, direct observation, and archival records. Overall, 191 pages of documents, 88 images, 65 pages of field notes, and 149 pages of published articles were reviewed, coded, and analyzed. Coding was conducted in three phases, with constant comparison to the research questions and

theoretical frameworks guiding the study. The research also deployed seven protocol stages to support the study's trustworthiness, including member checks, field notes, and thick descriptions. The data results revealed a key theme, Duty to Sacrifice and Fight Against All.

**Results.** Scheier's motivation to solve the apparel challenges facing PWD moved beyond a foundational moral obligation to do the right thing. Scheier was willing to sacrifice and fight against all odds to ensure mainstream fashion addressed the apparel challenges facing PWD. Further, the data supports three areas of sacrifice, 1) sacrificing career, 2) sacrificing income, and 3) sacrificing dignity.

**Sacrificing Career.** Scheier approached nearly a dozen apparel brands, believing that the industry leaders she spoke with would embrace the opportunity to enter the adaptive apparel market. However, Scheier was rejected and was told that while they were not interested due to the risk of an unknown market, she "should do this [start your adaptive apparel line], why are you giving your ideas away and all your hard work?" While Scheier had always dreamed of starting an apparel brand, she explained feeling conflicted and stated that

I could have been the first, but it wouldn't have been to the benefit of everybody. I felt that I would have let them down, and I would've let my son down. And, there was no way I was doing that. I made a commitment that I was going mainstream.

**Sacrificing Income.** By sharing her adaptive design innovations with mainstream apparel brands, Scheier was sacrificing potential income. She stated that she knew adaptive apparel was "a business, and I knew from all the research [I had done, that] this was a huge business." She described that she was not willing to give up and "that maybe it was because of my journey or maybe because I had nothing to lose, and I had put so much time and effort into it, that I was absolutely not stopping there."

**Sacrificing Dignity.** Scheier described an internal struggle with how the apparel industry viewed PWD vs. how she wanted PWD to be considered. She stated that apparel brands used terms like "a good cause." For Scheier, the term "good cause" was a "thorn in my side." She stated,

Good, bad, indifferent, people talk to you when they think that [it] is for a good cause. Even though...and I definitely want to underscore this, I never wanted [my son] to feel like he was a good cause, or [that someone] feels sorry for him or feels sorry for us. But it [dignity] was also a personal sacrifice that I needed to make to show that this market existed.

The case study produced results that demonstrated Scheier sacrificed in career, income, and dignity to ensure her goal was reached. All themes were explained using the duty orientation theory (DO) and aligned with the three dimensions of DO theory: 1) duty to members, 2) the duty to the mission, and 3) duty to codes (Hannah *et al.*, 2014).

**Implications and Future Research.** Engaging advocates to educate apparel brands on the apparel needs and challenges facing underrepresented consumer populations may provide new market segments. For apparel and fashion educators, incorporating underrepresented and marginalized consumer populations into their classrooms and assessments will ensure that the next generation of apparel industry leaders is prepared to address marginalized consumers'

apparel needs and challenges. For apparel scholars, the study's findings suggest that using advocates as research subjects can inform one's research in a more contextualized manner.

Future research could investigate the impact of moral duty on other apparel brand product launches serving marginalized populations. Further, future research should be conducted that engages the PWD consumer to understand their perception of moral duty on the growth of the adaptive apparel movement.

Limitations of this research include using a single case study instead of a multiple case study and the contextualized nature of this case study. As adaptive apparel rose in popularity in the mid-2010s, it gained market significance in 2020 and 2021. The social constructs evident at the time of this study should be considered when reviewing the findings.

### References

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