*Journal of Educational Enquiry, Vol 12, No 1, 1-14*

# "What the Blazers?" The effect of cultural symbols on class identity and learning outcomes

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**Abstract**
This paper examines the relationship between school clothing and learning identity. The paper, part of a wider, qualitative, narrative investigation into the learning experiences of white, working-class baby-boomer males, argues that an individual's preference for types of school clothing contributes to the construction of his/her cultural and social identity. It is suggested that items of school clothing influence an individual's either solidarity with, or distance from, school practices and peers. Cultural capital, habitus, cultural evolution and meme theory are used to understand the effects of school uniforms on individuals' identity construction and learning outcomes. It is suggested that embodied performance not only has the potential to reflect a male student's masculine competence (Connell, 2009) but it can also symbolize the individual's understanding of physical attractiveness and intelligence.

## Introduction

This paper describes the significance of clothing in the construction of certain working-class identities and how those constructed identities may have influenced individuals' educational decision making. Research into the sociological effects of clothing is not new. Veblen's (1899) study into the relationship between clothing and social distance points to clothing as an embodiment of social-class identity. Dussel (2001) writes that the way students understand themselves and others at school is often a consequence of the seemingly unimportant things to which students devote most of their daily school lives. This particular study suggests that clothing, in particular school clothing, is one of many means by which the male participant sample understood not only its own class identity but also the class identities of others. Symes and Meadmore (1996) acknowledged the effect school clothing, especially school uniforms, has in marginalization within the culture of schools. This investigation reveals that school clothing created not only social distance but also cultural solidarity within and among the student populations in which the study participants were part.

## Methodology

The interpretive paradigm underpinned the way in which the data in the study were collected and defined. A hypothesis was not formulated and there was no intention to either prove or disprove a proposition. Data were collected and synthesized inductively to develop generalizations about the working-class phenomenon being investigated (McMillan, 2004). Criteria for participation in the research were that each individual was: male, white, a baby-boomer with at least a minimum level of secondary education and at some point in his life identified himself as working class. The data were third-person narratives constructed from text-based interview transcripts. The transcripts were taken from unstructured interviews made from the digital audio recordings of three separate focus groups and a number of follow-up individual interviews: the latter given by selected participants. The unstructured responses of the fifteen white, working-class, baby-boomer men who participated, were organized into a series of individual biographies which were read and interpreted using a thematic approach (Lovett, 2010).

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***Baby boomers***

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) identifies baby boomers as the generation born between 1946 and 1965. This group's historical genesis is located in the rapid economic expansion or boom that occurred after WWII in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. The boom was also accompanied by both a rise in living standards and labor shortages. To sustain economic growth there was a need for countries to increase the size of their populations. As a generation baby boomers have been identified as idealist, individualist, self-absorbed and self-reliant. As a cohort they face a process of perpetual relearning in an effort to accommodate their changing roles within an equally changing society (Palazesi and Bower, 2006).

***Participant Biographies***

Hardy was born in Adelaide. He is fifty-eight years old and the principal of a specialist secondary school located in the CBD of Adelaide. His highest level of education is a Master of Science awarded by Adelaide University in 1994. Hardy's mum was a shop assistant and his dad was a motor mechanic. Hardy is married with two children and says that although his health is satisfactory it should be better.

Jack is fifty-three and was born in Sydney. He is divorced and lives alone in a one-bedroom rented house on three acres near Sydney's rural fringe. Jack's mother worked as a typist for Woolworths and his father was a book salesman. Jack has four children: three daughters and a son. Jack's oldest daughter and son are from his marriage and his two younger daughters are from a subsequent failed *de facto* relationship. Jack attained the HSC at a state high school in western Sydney. He presently works as a Grade Three Administration Services Officer with the Department of Defence, a position he has held for thirty years. Jack's health is good although he says that he suffers from psychological and emotional problems for which he takes prescribed medication.

Ox is a fifty-one year old ex-Telstra employee who classifies himself as retired. He is married with three children and lives on a small acreage on the outskirts of Sydney. Ox is from a family of eight children: five boys and three girls. Ox's family migrated to Australia from England when Ox was three. His mother was a housewife and his father was a bricklayer. Ox's health is good. Ox went to an outer-Sydney western suburbs high school where he completed half of Third Year. He was expelled from school at the age of fourteen.

**Theoretical approaches and background literature**

The relationship between class identity and learning is affected by a range of complex social and cultural factors. The study of identity is pivotal in contemporary sociological discourse, and debate around the merits of individual and collective theories regarding the construction of the self is ongoing (Cerulo, 1997). Bourdieu's (1993) concepts of cultural capital and habitus, as well as Dawkins' (1976) theories of cultural evolution and memes, were approaches used in this study to help understand the effects of class on the participants' identity construction and learning outcomes.

Habitus is the means by which the past and present shape one's perceptions of what is acceptable and achievable within society. The habitus is affected by social positioning which also influences an individual's social conduct. Bourdieu's (1993) analogy of habitus relates to not only knowing 'the game' but also being able to play it. The suggestion is that the social and cultural worlds of the middle class are allied with the practices of formal institutions such as schools and therefore the middle-class's knowledge of 'the game' gives it an advantage

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over other groups whose habitus makes them less familiar with the game's rules (Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall, 2007, Niro, 2002; Reay, 2002). According to Bourdieu's thesis the conduct of individuals is neither the product of systematic predetermination nor completely contingent upon the agency of the individual. The habitus facilitates an individual's process of decision making by mediating the conscious and subconscious (Niro, 2002).

The analysis adopted in this study was similar to an approach used by Archer et al. (2007) and framed participants' perceptions of particular types of school clothing within the contexts of habitus, of which social and cultural constructs of masculinity are part. The analysis considered how the participants' working-class identities were performed through their preferences for and responses to certain types of school clothing. The implications of these preferences in shaping the learning experiences of the men were also considered as were the ways in which the individual working-class participants went about constructing a self identity that was not only valued by themselves but also by others.

This study was concerned with the many ways in which individuals construct a sense of the self. The concept of cultural evolution was also relevant to understanding the participants' preferences for specific types of school clothing. It is suggested that the individuals' inclination for a school blazer, for example, contributed to the construction and understanding, of who the men believed they were. It is argued that the cultural and social survival of participants was ameliorated through what those individuals wore or did not wear at school. Clothing preferences according to Dawkins (1976) depict an evolutionary process because they reflect people's capacity to advance their self interests. The decisions made by participants in this study to acquire culturally privileged clothing, such as blazers, were self serving. Dress is a unit of cultural transmission or meme (unit of imitation). Dawkins' theory of memes refers to the process by which concepts, in the same way as genes, propagate themselves. The esteem with which an idea is held by people allows that idea to replicate itself. It is suggested that when certain participants recognized the potential social advantage of a particular mode of dress they adopted and perpetuated it. The individuals in other words culturally adapted.

Sanderson (2001) like Dawkins has compared evolutionism and individual competition in order to understand human conduct. Conflict theory suggests the structure of society is the product of competition among individuals to survive and attain success. Class stratification and class mobility according to Sanderson are a consequence of one's motivation to acquire status and resources (Salter, 2002). This study challenges certain aspects of structural theory by arguing that some of the working-class participants' predilection for certain modes of school dress was driven by a need to satisfy their self interests within a competitive school system.

Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) contend that clothing is an effective medium of communication which influences the way people construct their own identities and the identities of others. The construction of self identity is dependent on both conferred and achieved positions within social structures; particularly those organized around cultural, political and economic practices. The researchers add that socially-defined standards of dress also contribute to the way identities are communicated through clothing. Changes in historical, cultural and social contexts influence the properties that are communicated through the clothes people wear.

Clothing provides students with a tangible way of recognizing the sameness and difference that exists within their peer group. Students' clothing is symbolic of social identification and associated with students' perceptions of empowerment and academic achievement (Behling,

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1994 & 1995; Behling & Williams, 1991; Swain, 2002). How an individual is positioned socially, helps to shape that person's understanding of not only what it is they wear but also their understanding of what others wear. This study asserts that items of clothing such as the school blazer, had the potential to either reduce a person's feeling of difference by removing socially-constructed stigmas, create perceptions of potential for academic achievement and advantage or develop feelings of antipathy among students.

Gross and Crofton (1977) suggest that physical appearance plays an important role in the characteristics individuals confer on themselves as well as others. Perceptions relating to personality and character have been attributed to a person's physical appearance. People's perceptions however are not only formed from physical characteristics. What someone wears is by itself enough to shape others' understanding of that individual. Clothing is also associated with perceptions of a person's ability to perform certain tasks (Behling, 1994 & 1995).

Morganosky and Creekmore (1981) found that particular types of clothing influenced high school students' perceptions of their peers' abilities. What individuals wore affected males' more so than females' perceptions of their peers' leadership potential. Behling and Williams (1991) revealed that students' impressions of their peers' academic ability and chances for school success were based on what students wore. There is an apparent halo effect that associates physical appearance with certain personal characteristics (Behling, 1994 & 1995, Piacentini & Mailer, 2004).

Positive academic perceptions are created when a student adopts particular culturally accepted modes of dress. According to Allen and Eicher (1973), Creekmore (1980), and Hendricks, Kelly and Eicher (1968), adolescents want to conform with cultural norms, however when a student's clothing varies significantly from that of their peers, problems for the individual can develop. One of the findings from this study was that financial constraints brought about by an individual's social circumstances restricted that person's capacity to wear specific school clothing which in turn contributed to his feeling of detachment even social alienation.

**Gender and power**

Although the influence of gender is fundamental in the analysis of students' learning, its correlation with class should not be underestimated (Connell, 2005). At any one time a multiplicity of social and cultural discourses exists from which an individual can construct not only a self identity but also an understanding of others' identities. Schooling, according to Connell (1996) is a gendered process that contributes to the maintenance of masculine identity. What students wear, how they talk and the sport they play are often a consequence of a pervading hegemonic masculine discourse (Thornton, 1997). Hegemonic masculinity, a form of masculinity that acquires social dominance over other forms of masculinity, helps shape the conduct of individuals (Connell, 1996, 2000 & 2005). The presiding masculine discourse, or the form that defines the thoughts and actions of individuals, is context specific and associated with power (Connell, 2009). How masculinity is lived depends on the discursive contexts in which individuals are located. The potential detrimental effects of hegemonic masculinity are often experienced within working-class communities (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001). The historically-positioned masculine identities of the men in this study however, did not reflect a single conception of a socially dominant masculinity but rather demonstrated a duality of masculinities that competed for ascendency during the fifties, sixties and seventies in Australia. One was aligned with an elitist intellectual discourse while the other favored the physical or practical (MacLeod, 1987). The dominant intellectual

ISSN: 1444-5530

discourse of a given historical period according to Marx and Engels (1965) is associated with the ideas and thinking of the ruling material force. Therefore the social class that presides over the means of economic production has control over mental production. The most socially privileged group is the one that determines what society as a whole accepts as knowledge (Marx & Engels, 1965).

Connell (2009) identifies Australia during the fifties and sixties as a *Man's Country* with a social and cultural identity subordinated by the country's masculine leadership. The figure of the politically conservative Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, armored in a double-breasted suit, according to Connell, is symbolic of the disproportional location of power that dominated most facets of social life during the post-war period. Political figures affirm their political identities and therefore their right to power through their mode of dress (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

Behling (1995) indicates that the power and success symbolized by the traditional Western business man's suit has significance even among high schools students. Behling's study showed that females as well as males are looked upon more favorably academically and behaviorally when they wear suits. The symbolism attached to the Prime Minister's suit was also reflected among the preferences certain men in this study had for school clothing: a number indicating the significance of a quality school uniform; particularly blazers, to not only their own identities but also to the way in which they identified other students. Synott and Symes (1995) liken the wearing of school uniforms to signifying practices that provide meanings about the self and difference. Uniforms are not merely external guises but are a part of 'the technologies of power' that shape an individual's internal and external characteristics. How individuals position themselves against others in a diversity of contexts enables those individuals to see their difference and feel their inequality (Skeggs, 1997).

**Participant Stories**

*The participant Chris used to live in a small town and went to Gawler High before going on to Ellen High to do his senior schooling. One of his friends didn't go to Gawler High, he went to a private school. Chris had no idea what a private school was. His friend had a fantastic uniform and looked quite different. Chris didn't have any real understanding of the importance of this one person in the whole town who went to a private school* (Chris: Adelaide, 2008).

Another participant *Hardy recalled that there were no uniforms in primary school as such and everybody just "bloody" wore what they could. Hardy remembers seeing a mob that went to Prince's and they actually had a uniform. Those kids must have been gods to have a uniform and a cap and hop on the train to go to Adelaide to go to school. It was unheard of. When Hardy went to secondary school he had a blazer that he used to wear everywhere. He was so proud of having something that was a school uniform. It was the first time he'd ever had a uniform. Going into Year 8 he wore that uniform with absolute pride. He thought it was the bee's knees that he had a blue blazer it was unreal* (Hardy: Adelaide, 2008).

Discourses of masculinity affecting the conduct of students within schools occur at different cultural levels: a formal policy level and an informal or student-centered level (Connell, 2005). Each of these two levels is subject to its own hierarchical structure and rules of conduct. Attitudes adopted by the men in this study, towards their own and others' school clothing, demonstrate influences from both school cultures: official and peer.

Schools at an official level have expectations concerning codes of student dress and similarly peers exert influence over each others' style of clothing (Swain, 2002). This study indicates

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that in spite of the different cultural influences it was an individual's specific personal circumstances that usually determined his ability to conform to the expectations of others. The accounts provided by the men in this research revealed that there was often a sense of marginalization or subordination when an individual could not fulfill, because of his social circumstances, the cultural demands made on him by his peers and or formal social institutions such as schools (Archer et al. 2007).

The participant Jack's disadvantage at school for example *was mostly felt when he compared himself to other students. Unlike many other students, he never wore a school blazer. His parents couldn't afford to buy him one. Other students, those who were usually in higher classes than Jack, were better dressed than he was. Their general presentation was superior to Jack's. Those particular students were the pretty girls and the strapping athletic boys* (Jack: Sydney, 2008).

Hegemonic masculinity is gendered performance and can be manifested through the clothes individuals wear (Butler, 1990). Wearing the right clothes also demonstrates one's masculine competence (Connell, 2009). Jack was very conscious of what he and his peers wore at school. The school blazer was representative of a presiding masculine discourse from which Jack's understanding and interpretation of clothing were constructed. For Jack the blazer symbolized not only masculinity, *strapping athletic boys*, but also connoted characteristics such as physical attractiveness, *the pretty girls*, and intelligence, *those who were usually in higher classes ....were better dressed than he was*. Family financial constraints made it difficult for Jack to replicate the accepted dress of both his peers and the official culture. Jack as a consequence felt disempowered which contributed to his perception of social and academic disadvantage. Bourdieu (1984) identifies clothing as a form of cultural classification. Discrimination and social acceptance can be consequences of what individuals wear.

Social judgments are based on people's interpretations of a system of social and cultural symbols. Tastes and styles for example are symbolic forms of cultural capital that can affect an individual's position within the social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1984). Types of school clothing, the blazer in both Jack and Hardy's case, were assigned a certain social and cultural status by the men. Jack measured his disadvantage in relation to others' clothing. Jack identified the academic success of his peers from the clothes they wore. A cynic might reason that Jack's academic poor performance would have benefitted merely from him owning a school blazer.

**Identity and identity capital**

An individual identifies not only himself through his personal decisions but how he is identified by others is also subject to the decisions he makes (Bourdieu, 1984). One's own self identity is shaped through his preferences in clothing (Finkelstein, 1996). For some men, in this study, choices for certain types of school clothing were central to how the men defined themselves and others. Wearing a school blazer was a means by which the participant Hardy, for example, felt he would be noticed. Participants' preferences for particular clothing signified their own self worth and the regard they had for their peers. The men's preferences in school clothing, in a similar way to the respondents in Archer et al.'s study (2007) demonstrated how they actually wanted to represent themselves to others even if personal social circumstances (as in Jack's case) prevented them from realizing their first choice of clothing. A plea for respect is often the response of the working-classes to their inferior characterization by privileged others (Reay, 2001; Skeggs, 2009).

Jack and Hardy believed that wearing the 'right clothing' would give them access to a more

privileged culture (Dawkins, 1976). Wearing a blazer was also a means of developing their self concept. Cultural exclusion at both the official and peer level was a consequence of not wearing a blazer (Archer et al. 2007). Unlike Jack, Hardy's school life turned around after starting high school: his blazer brought him into a world inhabited by the *gods* from *Prince's* (Prince Albert College).

Students who dress smartly reflect that they accept official school practices. Conforming to school dress codes is also associated with a positive work ethic (Swain, 2002). By endorsing the cultural symbolism attached to the blazer both Jack and Hardy demonstrated a willingness to accept the official culture. Working-class students like Jack and Hardy had few material options in which to express themselves in terms of the official culture other than through having a blazer (Archer et al. 2007). Wearing the blazer legitimized Hardy's notion of himself as a hardworking successful student. He accepted the dominant liberal values of professionalism and service on which the education system was constructed (Connell, 1993; Morton & Watson, 1973). Jack's ambition to wear a blazer, on the other hand, was unrealized. The school blazer was a powerful symbolic marker of identity. For Hardy it represented achievement for Jack however, it was identified with unfulfilled aspirations.

Skeggs (2004) notes that with the passing of time certain decisions people make become institutionalized and once established these decisions help to define the practices of social exclusion and inclusion: a concept not dissimilar to Dawkins' (1976) theory of memes. Social groups use these practices to shape and sustain difference. Social discrimination occurs, and is known through, the embodied decisions of individuals and groups (Archer et al. 2007). The decisions people make in relation to style can be very specific (Skeggs, 2004).

**Clothing and class identity**

Particular articles of clothing, such as the blazer in the case of Hardy and Jack, signified class differentiation. Jack, and Hardy's awareness of social positioning and identification was determined by the symbolic value they and others had attached to the blazer. The men identified themselves through the personal decisions they made regarding what they wore. They actively although unwittingly participated in the construction and maintenance of class distinctions through their preferences for items of school uniform such as the blazer (Archer et al. 2007; Bilton et al. 1988).

Jack and Hardy's inclination to own and wear blazers can be interpreted as their struggle for social acknowledgment (Skeggs, 2004). Both Hardy and Jack believed that what individuals wore at school engendered cultural capital. The blazer was seen by the men as a form of identity capital that in their opinion had the potential to raise their personal standing in the eyes of others and assist their aspirations for social mobility (Archer et al. 2007; Bilton et al. 1988; Dawkins, 1976; Sanderson, 2001). Characteristics that accent the importance of personal gain reinforce Connell's (1978) assertion that baby-boomer adolescents were driven by self interest and ambitions of private fulfillment. The blazer symbolized the middle-class existence to which Jack and Hardy aspired and continued the orientation of working-class individuals towards embourgeoisement that Marx had identified as early as 1858 (Worsley, 1982).

Jack and Hardy both associated clothing performance (wearing the blazer) with an opportunity to improve their personal wellbeing. Their decisions were motivated by self interest. The blazer symbolized both educational and personal survival (Dawkins, 1976). Hardy unlike Jack generated cultural and personal value because he actually got to wear a blazer. Discourses concerning clothing quality, style and social class are associated with the

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quality self (Archer et al. 2007). According to Savage (2000) individuals understand who they are by comparing themselves to others on the social hierarchy. An individual's understanding of himself is shaped by his understanding of other social groups.

Jack and Hardy's sense of subordination was a consequence of their social location. It could be assumed that coveting the blazer was a response to their sense of inferiority. According to Reay and Lucey (2000) an individual's academic failure at school is often linked to similar histories within the family. Electing to wear a blazer can be interpreted as an agentic attempt by both Jack and Hardy to negotiate themselves out of their disadvantaged working-class position (Archer et al. 2007; Sanderson, 2001). Jack's decision, however, was not liberating because by playing into oppressive social relations he contributed to sustaining his marginalized social position (Archer et al. 2007; Bilton et al. 1988).

Hardy was symbolically legitimated whereas Jack was not. Archer et al's (2007) study of working-class performances of embodied identities, suggests that the economic worth and style-value individuals attach to items of clothing is also a marker of moral worth. As a consequence of not being able to afford a blazer Jack felt subordinated and something of a non-achiever. Barbalet (1998) says that individuals' reactions to class are often characterized by resentment. *Jack believed his working-class background disadvantaged him academically because it contributed to his poor attitude toward school. According to Jack his problems at school were a consequence of his father's lack of income and other family difficulties* (Jack: Sydney, 2008).

There was general agreement among the participants in this study that an individual's social positioning was related in part to his material possessions. Participants saw materialism as one way of identifying the hierarchical boundaries between themselves and others. Not wearing a blazer represented an inferior identity location. A detractive subordinated identity was something Jack and Hardy were trying to avoid. They were motivated by the need to not have others, who the men perceived to be better dressed and therefore socially positioned, look down on them. Skeggs (2009) revealed how white working-class women felt when they were subjected to the negative value judgments of privileged others. Like the women in Skeggs' study, Jack and Hardy were aware their visual appearance lacked the cultural value that was recognized by individuals from a 'superior' social group. Acquiring a blazer was a means by which the men could deflect the scrutiny of those whom the men perceived to be better socially positioned, and gain some cultural and social respect.

Jack and Hardy's attempts to distance themselves from a subordinate working-class identity however were dependent on them culturally minimizing the working-class position (Bilton et al. 1988; Connell, 1978). Paradoxically the participants' aspirations of a bourgeois lifestyle helped to perpetuate the capitalist model that had contributed to the men's social disadvantage (Bilton et al. 1988). In essence Jack and Hardy were reproducing discriminatory social practices by perpetuating a dual hegemonic discourse that aligned both the power of masculinity and material resources with personal value. Jack and Hardy implicated themselves in what appeared to be an unavoidable culture of competitive consumption (Archer et al. 2007) that provided opportunities for the men to be valued. Not to participate whether voluntarily or otherwise, as Jack discovered, resulted in social marginalization.

**Anti-elitist masculinity**

Analysis of participant responses up to this point suggests that individuals' clothing performance reflects compliance with dominant institutional and peer-culture discourses. However despite the similarities in the working-class male participant sample there was inconsistency among the respondents' attitudes to the symbolism attached to clothing such as

blazers. For example the cultural significance that Jack and Hardy attributed to items of school clothing was not recognized by the participant Ox. Particular school uniforms represented that from which Ox wanted to distance himself. According to Ox *all the kids who went to Kings and wore the flash outfit and turned up at school with a 100 dollars hanging out their pockets every morning to buy their morning tea, and all that crap didn't mean that they were any better than him. They were perceived to be better than Ox because they went to that school. Their parents dropped them off in a Mercedes Benz whereas Ox was used to riding a push bike with a flat tyre to school if he was lucky. It was just a perception that those people were better but they weren't, not in Ox's mind anyway. Ox knew this type of thinking affected people, it definitely affected the way people thought about things and the way they saw things. Because people saw something they automatically thought that must be the way it is but it was not. Ox tended to look beyond that, through all the pomp and ceremony, the "bullshit" and the bells and whistles that go with things. According to Ox that was all "bullshit", just a façade. Ox looked at the reality of what really made something work* (Ox: Sydney 2008).

Ox identified the cultural and social privilege symbolized by certain school clothing, with a discriminatory discourse. Unlike Jack and Hardy, Ox viewed those who wore *the flash outfit* negatively. Ox expressed his individual agency by rejecting the cultural symbolism that Jack and Hardy attached to elite school clothing. Contrary to Ox, Jack and Hardy perceived acquiring 'the right clothing' as a way of accumulating the cultural capital necessary to avoid social marginalization. Although their decisions were agentic those decisions, in contrast to Ox's, were more affected by an elitist hegemonic discourse concerning modes of school dress (Archer et al. 2007).

The symbolic value each man attached to clothing reflected a distinctive understanding of his own working-class position. For Jack and Hardy elite school clothing represented economic, cultural and academic competence. By wearing a blazer Hardy embodied the cultural capital he believed was needed to create opportunities for his acceptance into a perceived superior social group. Ox on the other hand identified the same clothing with cultural oppression. Ox thinks *your roots have a hell of a lot to do with someone wanting to stay who they are or whether they should turn their back on everything that they've been brought up to be. People who turn their back and say, "No I don't want people to see me as working class I'm better than that." These people are living a "bullshit" life. You are what you are. You're no better than anybody else. These people need to get over it and accept things as they are* (Ox Sydney: 2008).

All of the participants were able to demonstrate individual agency albeit to varying degrees regarding their preferences for school clothing. Each was capable of making an individual decision as to what it was he wanted to wear. For Jack, Hardy and Ox the symbolic value they attached to certain school clothing was not only generated from their interaction with wider historical, social and cultural contexts but it was also developed within more immediate contexts such as the family (Archer et al. 2007). Each man's individual home life may explain his reactions to clothing performance at school. Jack for example described his father as a pseudo intellectual, Hardy depicted his dad as someone who made an effort to better formally educate himself while Ox's father saw little relationship between what schools did and the work he performed as a bricklayer.

The attitudinal difference to clothing between Jack, Hardy, and Ox demonstrates not only the sameness but also the diversity that existed among the working-class experiences of each man. The men's understandings of their own and others' clothing performance at school were

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a consequence of a working-class location even though all of the men's perspectives vary. The family, school and community context of every individual was unique. Jack's working-class identity was different from Hardy's whose was different from Ox's. Jack and Hardy's responses to school clothing indicate a predictable correlation between conformity to school-sanctioned practices and academic success which is consistent with an organic or normative social perspective. Alternatively students like Ox who have a history of poor academic achievement characterize what might typically be expected of individuals who reflect the interpersonal conflict perspective (Musgrave, 1988).

School clothing not only creates perceptions of cultural and educational achievement it is also recognized as a symbol of cultural elitism and social oppression. As alluded to already, particular school clothing and what it represented was that from which the participant Ox wanted to distance himself. Ox refused to substitute the accepted practices of his own culture for those of the dominant institutionalized culture. The notion that students like Ox should abandon aspects of themselves and assume identities expected by privileged others denies, as Cross (1975) suggests, respect for the cultural difference that exists among groups.

Ox's antipathy for those who wore the symbolically privileged clothing is congruent with the oppositional identities constructed by the working-class adolescents in Willis' (1977) seminal sociological study *Learning to Labour.* Willis' lads rejected the discourse of success and academic achievement promoted within schools. Willis' study challenges the concept of structural determinism by arguing that the oppositional choices of the adolescents, which reinforce the lads' working-class position, were agentic.

This study similarly acknowledges the capacity of individuals to determine their own learning trajectories (Dawkins, 1976) but disagrees with Willis' assertion that working-class culture is oppressive and something from which all working-class individuals need to escape. Delamont (2000) agrees that anti-school conduct is not common to all working-class male students but is one of individual choice. Unlike Jack and Hardy, Ox did not covet the capitalist ideals symbolized by elitist modes of school dress. Ox believes *there are so many things in which one has to have degrees. There is an assumption that a person has to be 'bloody' educated in all sorts of stuff. One supposedly must go through the process and there is a belief that someone is never any good unless he's done it academically. That's absolute "bullshit"* (Ox Sydney: 2008). Ox, in the same way as Willis' lads, did not accept the academic pathway that schools promote as necessary for higher level occupations. Ox preferred a practical approach rather than the 'softer' more theoretical option (Bilton et al. 1988; Willis, 1977).

By rebuking the symbolism associated with the King's uniform Ox rejected the masculine discourse associated with a Robert Menzies' style of clothing. He adopted a counter-hegemonic discourse of masculinity (MacLeod, 1987) that affirmed his preferred working-class position. The bifurcation of subjects according to Connell (1996) relates the feminine with the academic and the masculine with the practical. For Ox, wearing elite school clothing represented an acceptance of middle-class values. The same symbolic masculinity to which Hardy and Jack aspired, Ox interpreted as emasculating. Conduct similar to that of Ox's, according to MacLeod (2000), Martino (1997), Pollack (1998), Sexton (1969) and Willis (1977) suggests that the oppositional conduct at school of young, white, working-class males is a reaction to what they perceive as attacks on their masculine competence.

An applied approach to learning is something Ox has maintained throughout his life. *There's been a percentage of what he has done in his work that has involved trial and error. Ox looks at things in a practical way and uses a bit of common sense. He recognizes how he can take something and transform it. He understands how to turn one thing into something else. As*

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*much as a challenge as it is doing things in the primitive way Ox has become a lot better at solving technical issues because he has a lot more equipment to help him out and that makes his life easier. Ox has tended to teach himself* (Ox Sydney: 2008).

It is also important to note that Ox's language use within the focus group, and follow-up individual interview, demonstrated his continued anti-elitist masculinity. Holmes (2001) suggests that working-class men resist adjusting their language particularly if others are perceived to be of a different class or status. Although the other focus group participants identified themselves as working class they nonetheless all achieved a higher level of schooling than Ox. Ox's use of the vernacular reflected not only his preferred masculinity but also his enduring anti-establishment attitude to anything vaguely representative of middle-class culture.

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the clothing performance of the individuals who participated in the study reflected not only compliance with but also resistance to the dominant institutional and peer-culture discourses. While some participants ascribed school blazers with a relatively high cultural value another identified similar school dress with a discriminatory cultural discourse. For certain individuals, blazers denoted power, advantage and social success. Wearing the culturally assigned 'right clothing' instilled these men with a feeling of cultural belonging and self confidence. The blazer was a powerful symbolic marker of identity. Choosing to wear a blazer was an agentic attempt by these participants to negotiate themselves out of their disadvantaged social position. A participant's attempts to distance himself from a subordinate working-class identity were paradoxically dependent on the individual culturally minimizing his working-class position (Archer et al. 2007; Bilton et al. 1988).

Cultural evolution was relevant to understanding participants' preferences for specific modes of school dress. It was suggested that an individual's decision to wear or not to wear a school blazer contributed to the construction and understanding of his self identity. One's cultural, social and academic survival therefore was mediated through his preferences in school clothing. Future research in this area might consider some of the possible ways in which the deterministic effect of uniforms might be ameliorated to the advantage of all students rather than just a selected few.

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