Dress for success: Research examines male influences on 'looking' middle class

August 18 2014

They might be called a chip off the old block, but when it comes to upward social mobility, they might call Dad a lesson in what not to wear. University of Cincinnati research takes a new approach to examining the socialization of male children into the middle class. The research by Erynn Masi de Casanova, a University of Cincinnati assistant professor of sociology, was presented at the 109th Meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco.

Based on interviews with 71 male, white-collar workers in three major metropolitan cities, Casanova explores how adult men perceive the relationship between representing family, identity and culture through appearance. "Their accounts show how parents, particularly fathers, explicitly or implicitly socialized them into standards of dress and appearance that can best be described as respectable and professional in relation to work dress and the middle class," says Casanova.

"Many of these men remembered receiving from an early age the message that being presentable and dressing appropriately was important and expected in locations such as school, church and work," Casanova says. The paper includes one German immigrant's recollections of his father – a handyman who dressed blue collar during the week and wore a Sunday suit and tie to church. Other accounts described fathers wearing their very best at all times, among them a father who wore a tie even when he was gardening.

On the other hand, many men linked less formal dress with their father's

blue-collar social status, while others felt disdain or embarrassment toward fathers who tended to wear flashier fashions. "This predominant middle-class orientation toward dress – that is, the devaluation of lower-class or 'street style,' and the simultaneous shunning of overly luxurious clothing – held true even for families that were wealthier or poorer than the average U.S. family," writes Casanova.

Casanova says in some cases, the men mentioned their father's ethnicity or nationality to either distance themselves from, or identify with, their father's culture, such as mentioning "Italian glamour" in reference to fashion style, or in the case of a son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants citing a family motto, "Think Yiddish and dress British."

"Nearly all of the black men I interviewed – some of whom were children of black immigrants – referred to the distinctiveness of black style and the importance of dress and fashion in their communities," Casanova reveals in the paper, adding that in some cases, men kept their business and non-work clothing separate, believing that fashion worn during their off-hours was inappropriate for the white-collar business world.

Casanova says that some of the men, feeling that their fathers were fashion challenged, would buy their fathers clothes to influence their sense of style. Several of the men interviewed reported that their mothers selected what their fathers should wear.

Casanova says around 15 of the men felt their father's manner of dress was something to be avoided, and she says one-third of that group were from blue-collar backgrounds.

In conversations that included stories of handing down a patriarch's watch, Casanova says the interviewees would often cite fashion in connecting three generations of men in their family, from their

grandfathers to the study participants, or from the participants' fathers to their own sons. She concludes, "Learning about dress is part of learning to be a man in a particular place and time, but these lessons varied depending on class status and family background. Some of the men in this study were raised to expect to don the white collar, whereas others came to corporate workplaces through a different path of upward mobility, and had to learn how to fly."

The interviews were conducted with male, white-collar workers in New York, San Francisco and Cincinnati. The median age of the participants was 40, and interviewees ranged in age from 24 to 71. The majority of the participants (76 percent) were born in the U.S. Seventy-two percent of the participants were white; 8 percent identified as Asian; 7 percent identified as black; 3 percent Latino/Hispanic; 3 percent Indian; and 7 percent identified as "other" race/ethnicity (including Eurasian, Brazilian, Ukrainian.) The majority of the respondents, 61 percent, had achieved a bachelor's degree while 34 percent had achieved a master's degree. Fourteen percent identified as gay. Fifty-six percent of the participants did not have children.

Provided by University of Cincinnati