Elizabeth Hayman

University of Technology, SYDNEY, Australia

DRESSING MADE TANGIBLE: DISABILITY PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

This paper aims to offer some initial insight into the type of knowledge dress

scholarship has to gain from drawing upon another academic field of study.

Disability studies has emerged and become established as a scholarly

discipline in the last three decades with academic departments in many

western universities, most notably San Francisco State University's Institute

on Disability and the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Leeds,

UK. My doctoral research is exploring the fertile, yet little explored, hybrid

area that lies between disability studies and dress scholarship. Whilst

'disability' is used to describe a wide range of human life-states, including the

psychological and the sensory, my work concentrates on the physical aspects

understood and defined as 'disabled'. Valuable work has emerged within our

field establishing the importance of approaching the dressed body as a

'fleshy', 'situated bodily practice' (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001; Entwistle 2000)

advancing theoretical engagement in this area and providing secure ground

from which to extend exploration of the embodiment of dress. To this end, this

paper intends to introduce some of the benefits of focusing on the very

process that creates the dressed body: the act of dressing. This is a familiar, yet overlooked, arena in which to explore fundamental assumptions about what we believe dressed bodies to be. Processes of dressing and undressing remain under-theorised in our field and deserve our critical attention from perspectives usefully informed by knowledge of disability.

Dress scholarship is a field based in a range of intersecting materialities spanning textiles, bodies and geographies. The body continues to be a much-explored 'reified object of analysis', to paraphrase Bryan Turner (1996: xiii) with a range of disciplines now recognising bodies as contested, complex, cultural sites (see Blackman 2008 for a comprehensive review of approaches). Gaps exist in our stated knowledge between how we believe bodies manifest, interact and relate to dress, and how bodies actually do in fact undertake the series of complexities we commonly refer to as 'dressing'. In order to explore this, this paper will draw upon the ethnographic work I began in London in 2004 when I interviewed eight disabled people who had been independently selected for my research by a local branch of the disabled-run British Council of Disabled People. Interviewees spoke about their relationships with dress, with a surprisingly wide range of responses and issues. This initial fieldwork is being revisited in order to refine the focus of the interviews planned for later this year (2009) in Sydney.

Valuable knowledge hidden within the everyday

Directing focus upon everyday acts of dressing and undressing can help to question how we have constructed what we believe bodies to entail, what we believe they consist of and what they have been made to mean. Much happens in the midst of this highly material interaction between physicality and cloth. The act of dressing and the act of undressing are both so habitual that, for most of us, they often disappear from conscious perception. There is much to learn by deliberately adjusting our focus to register what actually happens during dressing. By doing this, we render something so ubiquitous, so known, so guided by body memory and embedded by constant repetition into a phenomenon made usefully unfamiliar. This suspension of preconception allows space in which to examine what bodies actually do, moment-by-moment, during dressing and undressing and how these processes are affected and determined by social forces, both external and internal, within intimate settings.

Dressing is a consumption process complicated at every step by its constituent elements, which overlap, influence, impact and determine how the process proceeds. It consists of a multiplicity of decisions, choices and physical actions, both flowing and individually distinct, spliced with material, financial and cultural possibilities and determinants. Involving two materialities of very different substance, in constant juxtaposition, body and cloth can be thought to continue on with the dressing process each of us consciously put into place; finding their own pitch in crease, wrinkle and seam, re-negotiating

the material confines of a tight waistband or a strap pulled too tight for comfort.

Dressing differences

Already complicated and complex, these dressing issues are brought into sharp perspective when they also involve disability. Our collective mindset, honed by longstanding social conditioning, has consistently rendered disability as a negativity. For most of us, disability remains an under-negotiated site of abjection and difficulty. Notwithstanding very real physical, psychological or emotional adversities (which are increasingly being re-acknowledged within disability studies), there are nonetheless, other ways of framing this. Disability presents us with inherently complex, highly diverse, yet surprisingly common, life experiences with which to provoke creative, questioning possibilities. Bodies, psychologies, senses and behaviour characteristics which exist outside our notions of 'the typical range' inherently challenge with their very difference. When faced with this difference, underlying assumptions about what we might conceive dressing to be - which feel fundamental to how we have constructed lived experience - can quickly lose relevance and become inadequate to the experience at hand.

Dress scholarship has much to gain by witnessing how dressing decisions, dressing strategies, routines and negotiations are undertaken during disability.

There has been a limited and sometimes difficult history of dress-based knowledge having been used to 'solve' aspects of disability. I would like, instead, to clearly approach dress from the direction of disability. We need to develop ways to observe how disability can usefully defamiliarise what we think we know dressing to be. Instances where dressing happens differently, to account for, say, physical difference or different cognitive understanding of one type or another, can reveal deeply-seated cultural expectations around how dressing is expected to manifest. By suspending these cultural expectations we can allow ourselves to witness the phenomenological realities of these unique and equally valid engagements with our material world and thereby reveal deeper structures at play. This has the potential to establish some new and challenging viewpoints on this human practice, which, in turn, can foster fresh research approaches which my on-going work intends to develop.

Recognising users experiences of dressing

Much can be learned by turning to those who live with physical differences whose daily experience of dressing can be complicated by the ways in which clothing is constructed, provisioned, accessed and assumed. The following material is gleaned from the previously mentioned sound-recorded oral history interviews, conducted in a variety of public and private London locations. Though all eight interviewees had much to say about their experiences of clothing – even those claiming disinterest in dress or fashion – it has been the

finer, more understated micro-observations that have often carried the most significance. The following three examples illustrate how apparently small details are worth great attention in extracting the true impact of how disability can inform what we learn from witnessing dressing processes.

Case Study 1: The political work of challenging typical dressing expectations

When I met one of my interviewees, back in 2004, at his workplace in one of London's newly opened statement buildings, I noticed his suit jacket was slung over the back of his powered chair. This turned out to be a deliberate strategy, he revealed during our subsequent interview; a dressing tactic devised in response to some fairly testy debate with his employers about professionally acceptable physical appearance. Some time before our interview he had been confronted about his - he admitted - disheveled appearance in his workplace in light of his highly public position. It was clear, from the tone with which he spoke about it that, at some level, he had welcomed this debate. After all, it was a debate containing disability politics of great subtlety.

From a disability perspective, employer and public expectations of what status appropriate dress consists of – in this case suit, silk tie and lace-up shoes - are tempered with little sense of what may be physically possible. My

interviewee does not occupy a body which could easily interact with or operate wearing all of these standardised, recognised and required pieces of attire. Having discarded 'useless' (Interview 04/05, 26 March 04) shoes entirely but adopting, instead, fine silk socks, dress shirts and ties, my interviewee further refined his politically-savvy adaptive approach (see Snyder and Mitchell 2006: 197) with the apparently casual slinging of an obviously expensive piece of jacket tailoring over his power-chair's back-rest. Overall, it seemed resolution had appeared to have been achieved within a unique tension: clothing of appropriate status for his very public position was, indeed, being 'worn' by what amounted to an essential extension of his body. He could, in theory, at any minute, have exploited this publicly-visible potentiality by directing his twenty-four-hour personal assistance - constantly accompanying and tending to him – to dress him in that jacket. But he had no intention of ever doing something as, for him, uncomfortable as this. Instead the un-worn, yet very much used, jacket formed one of the many subtle solutions he employed to deal with this particular wrestle between pressing social and personal sartorial expectations.

As any online search for 'adaptive' clothing will demonstrate, there are various types of publicly available replacement or alternative clothing design aimed at disabled people. This is a deceptively complex arena which raises a range of reactions from those it is aimed towards. Adaptive clothing design, with its emphasis on function, seemingly creates, just as it solves, discomforts for many who live with social difference. Significantly, this interviewee chooses not to use adaptive clothing designs. Instead, his sophisticated engagement

with his clothing demonstrates the creative potential that creative individual re-negotiations make possible even within narrow genres of commercially-available dress. Good-fit, poor-fit or even the 'non-fit' of the power-chair 'worn' jacket: the point of his clothing choices is that all his clothing components could be interchangeable with another, just as capable, occupant of a similar social status of occupation. To be seen to wear alternative, 'adaptive' clothing would invite inappropriate attention to the body that the established 'grammar of male clothing' (Breward 1999: 24) works so efficiently to disengage from. His personal and professional political work on this level is all the more powerful for the subtle level at which it works.

Case Study 2: Dress complicating dressing

'…oppression is not just about being on the receiving end of a tyrannical power. It is also effected through apparently liberal and 'humane' practices, including medicine, education, bureaucracy, leisure and consumer goods' (Foucault, 1977 in Barnes and Mercer, 2003: 21)

The standardised clothing production that we are all familiar with can form complications and, at worse, oppression for those who cannot interact with dressing as it is typically conceived. For many of us, dressing consists of sets of relatively fleeting, contained actions, learnt whilst young and thereafter largely overlooked. Practiced and refined by perpetual use, dressing emerges as an on-going, living archive of unacknowledged knowledge. These highly

specialised physical performances contain wealths of localised, specialised, cultural and personal information. Though owned by each of us, this corporeal and cultural knowledge is too private to have developed much in the way of spoken descriptive vocabulary. Intimate movements, secret ordering of clothing, first this then that, are hidden in a wordless void whilst language has formed around the culture that we sanction to be made public.

Effecting effective assistance around dressing can be difficult to achieve as many societies frame it in such private, intimate terms. Dressing is typically conceived as being a lone practice, performed upon the self by the self, confined within private or intimate settings. Clothing made to assumed configurations and sizes for remote consumption can create individual and private problems that are difficult to address without outside support. So much of our manufactured materiality impacts negatively upon people who cannot get along with its often standardised format, producing additional disability not necessarily innate to the original situation.

One of my interviewees told me about the time she spent the night encased in the coat she had forgotten to ask her supportive, but already busy, daughter to take off before leaving earlier that day. Her situation was more than simply down to the wrong size of garment or the wrong type of fastenings, as so much of the small body of existing self-help literature appears concerned with. It was a significant moment for her, registered in the thoughtful pause in the

sound recording. Clothing she had been familiar with before now no longer served her or supported her. In fact, it actively hindered what she wanted to achieve. Divorced from the dressing know-how she would have developed up until her accident and the dressing independence she had been so used to, this frustration seemed to be one of many failed dressing occasions that had contributed to her depression in the wake of the altered physical circumstances she was now living with.

Much of our daily dressing is underscored by skilled knowledge of how to repeatedly adapt to the pre-existing, widely-available standardised clothing that most of us are confronted with in shops, catalogues and online. The implications are profound for those of us who find that mainsteam clothing does not fit or operate in ways they do for other people. If visual identity cannot be created from the same routes and resources as everyone else, what does that say for their deeper involvement and relevance within that society? The disability studies community has begun to explore how deep acceptance of disability within society and the rightful assumption of equal citizenship for disabled people can be compromised by underlying social and commercial structures that disrupt full and meaningful social belonging (Erevelles 2002; Goggin and Newell 2005; Snyder and Mitchell 2006; Titchkosky 2007). Elizabeth Wilson describes fashion as 'one among many forms of aesthetic creativity which make possible the exploration of alternatives' (Wilson 2003: 245). Though the consequences of dressing may

be intentionally public, challenging the ways in which dressing processes can impact is all the more difficult to achieve as it is framed so privately.

Case Study 3: Creative resistance to imposed dressing regimes

Another issue that arises out of dressing having been conceived of as a private or intimate practice is well-illustrated by my third example drawn from the eight London interviews. We have seen with the last example how disability can re-frame what is typically conceived as a lone, self-administered experience into one that involves another(s). This shift from private to more open involvement from outside, from lone to assisted, is often marked by the medicalisation that has historically characterized western understanding of disability.

A man of distinct panache, my third interviewee's frequent recourse to couture to maintain the extensive, flamboyant and diminutive-scale wardrobe he is so proud of stands in stark contrast to the medicalised, routine-bound way in which he is forced to create his dressed self. The way in which he dresses is largely determined by rushed local authority-provided home-care timetabling. Though incredibly gracious about it, he never quite knows when this assistance is coming to his home. In common with most others in the same position, he is not always sure, either, who exactly will be turning up to perform this intimate service. Any dressing requirements that fall outside the

carer's visit are achieved with ingenuity, as well as a tolerance of the cold –
he takes his specially tailored cape with him in his car to the local greengrocer
who dresses him before he continues on with his day.

Disrupting dressing assumptions

There is much we can extrapolate from just these three dressing case studies.
Dressing processes that occur in unique ways highlight how cultures tend to
frame dressing as having usual ways of occurring. Dressing is a material
chaos we have tamed to the point that it has been 'naturalized' and made to
appear inherent to civilised behaviour. To play around with any of its
established parameters is immediately odd - though extremely insightful. The
humour contained in stories of how, say, children learn to dress themselves is
dependant upon these very fractures. Acknowledging and then questioning
assumptions that dressing occurs according to 'usual' patterns, in 'usual'
locations, according to 'typical' timings, orders, conditions, etc. opens this
fascinating process up to examination.

We could describe each of these instances as moments of disrupted dressing:
the jacket strategically poised on the wheelchair, to be read for its potential to
subscribe to conforming dressing actions; the unwieldy burden of a coat that
crushes someone's sense of independence; and the cape that inadvertently
fosters local community connections. These breaching moments expose the

points at which generalised expectations of what dressing should be run out, become hazy, become problematised and begin to hint at other meanings.

Each of these instances exist both in relation to and aside from the three different methods of assisted dressing provision each of the interviewees depends upon: professional round the clock assistance publicly demonstrates an autonomous potentiality; reliance on a family member proves emotionally difficult to negotiate; the local authority provided drop-in homecare service is too time-bound to be sufficient. Disability can demonstrate to those of us who do not have knowledge of disability that it is possible for dressing to be practiced in different ways. The myriad ways in which dressing can be disrupted or altered can spontaneously bracket or suspend what we might assume or envisage occurring during dressing, with potential to raise fundamental questions that go to the heart of what we look at in dress scholarship.

The significance of locating dressing within privacy

The three examples of dressing given above all draw upon dressing with outerwear, yet we are all aware that the public result of dressing originates within privacy. We typically locate our various interactions with clothing within varying degrees of seclusion. Our use of clothing to control how we selectively conceal, reveal and create self is deeply embedded within western cultures.

Desire for privacy has come to determine the architecture of our living spaces, determine the way we conduct fundamental human states such as sleep, how we organise financial resources, belongings and information about how we are to be known. Privacy is reflected within the margins where our language about dressing runs thin, finding minimal status within a public discourse more prepared to discuss privacy in terms of legal human rights. Dressing can be a privacy re-negotiated into intimacy, it can be something precious, to be violated or preserved. Bound up with issues of 'respect for individual autonomy and dignity' (Solove 2008: 86), issues of privacy form the third aspect in this paper, alongside disability and processes of dressing, that has also largely escaped attention within dress scholarship.

Dressing, it seems, involves multiple layers of privacy. Solove (2008: 52) sites the body as 'being at the core of privacy', determined and regulated by issues of concealment, selective secrecy, touching and contact, 'individual control and dominion over decisions regarding one's body' (Solove 2008: 53). This sense of corporeal privacy is deepened by dressing's usual cultural location within the home, and other temporary domestic equivalents. These private geographies offer a haven and a space where contemplation and creation of the self is made possible away from the gaze and surveillance of others.

Assisted dressing, beyond childhood, breaches these expectations. The presence of another within this private sphere can have profound impact on

this already complex area. Transgressions of privacy may be granted

voluntarily for numerous reasons involving strategic sacrifice for specific gain.

Whilst this might be more typically thought of in terms of fostering intimacy or

permitting sexual encounter, these strategically-given moments of

vulnerability mark out negotiations between disability and dressing support;

activity overlooked, yet escaping concealment. Outerwear to underwear, it is

clear that dressing is framed by grades of differing privacy requirements; all of

which are at risk during assisted dressing.

Private moments marked out by another's timings and agendas raise

implications around dependency and independence, issues which go to the

core of how we construct our notions of citizenship. As Ingun Grimstad Klepp

so aptly states, 'clothes studies can contribute to clarifying the unwritten

norms that regulate our lives and contribute towards showing which ideologies

and power structures form the bases of these norms' (2007: 271). Maintaining

a politicised view on what happens during assisted dressing processes allows

for some profound underlying structures to be deeply questioned. 'Othering'

processes, which continue to frame disability in western societies, retain their

persistent, eugenic legacy with its roots in the Enlightenment turn to the

scientific. Sweeping assumptions determining contemporary notions of civic

fitness are still evident within what has been reported as the 'infantilising'

(interview 04/10, Golders Green, 26 Jun 04) and overly-functional aspects

that have been associated with the type of dress imposed upon this sector of

'Overlooked Consumers' (Women With Disabilities Australia 2007: 10).

Privacy plays a fragile, yet vital role in providing the means by which identities may be formed, compromised or violated. There is much that greater understanding of this aspect of identity formation can contribute to on-going disabled citizenship advocacy.

My work is located beyond any assumption of what 'bodies' may be. By rejecting simplified, standardised conceptualisations of how human beings manifest, I am finding rich and chaotic challenge for dress scholarship. This paper has deliberately exposed the inherent complexity of the seemingly everyday, habitual process of dressing by viewing it through disability and 'crip' (McRuer 2006) perspectives. These disability/crip outsider insights have the ability to expose a number of strategically concealed social knowledges, beliefs and values which have evolved around accepted dressing practices. Vital for both dress scholarship and disability studies in subtly profound ways, this paper demonstrates a number of issues raised by dressing differences which powerfully question core assumptions and deserve further research. These include: developing understandings of how deeply held assumptions around privacy as the ideal location of dressing can disrupt or support identity formation and fully-recognised citizenship; and, exploration of how clothing production can be implicated as an oppressive practice, simply by its reliance upon assumed standardised shaping, configuration and sizing. We need to find ways in which to witness the powerful nuances proposed by the live, thinking materiality of bodies continually 'being reconstituted in each moment of engagement' (Ahmed, 2004: 297) and their material interactions with

clothing. A broader understanding of the mutual impact and inter-play between material, time-bound corporeality and the potential that dress offers is needed to deepen our understanding of what dressing - this process of enacting appearance - means. Deeply set and socially comfortable parameters hold and contain much of our understandings of how corporeality presents and is made tangible, how it affects and is affected. It is only by disturbing these parameters to our understandings of what bodies are can dress scholarship be usefully expanded to encompass the differences that have been framed as 'disability'.

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