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“In those shoes?” Exploring women’s identities through footwear

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Identity and shoes

Many social scientists are in agreement that, at least in contemporary industrialised societies, the construction and expression of personal identity is becoming more dependent upon material goods and possessions. In regard to clothing, we are accustomed to the idea that the things we wear express the kind of person we are, or would like to be seen as, and the notion that many women are fascinated by shoes has entered popular consciousness.

While such things may be regarded by many people as interesting but trivial, for the social scientist they assume greater importance. In this presentation, I will report on a pilot study in which three women were interviewed about the personal identity meanings that a range of shoes held for them.

In the beginning

Twenty years ago, a colleague and I shared a passion for shoes and discussed their personal meanings. Half jokingly suggested we should do a piece of research- never came to pass.

A few months ago and many pairs of shoes later, at lunch with Nigel and some female members of staff, we were discussing some shoes that another staff member had just returned from the shops with. The discussion was intense and passionate- not just about a love (or not) for shoes, but these women were eager to explain what it was about the shoes that did or did not appeal- what they felt was signalled by those shoes.

Nigel and I thought there was a serious point here and decided to do the research. The women’s comments suggested shoes held complex and elaborate meanings for them, meanings connected to their sense of self and to their public persona. The idea of exploring women’s identities through footwear emerged. The evident enjoyment and

engagement we witnessed suggested that the topic was a route into identity that women would find meaningful, interesting and enjoyable. We were surrounded by women offering to be our participants!

The pilot sample

We decided to begin with a small pilot study, involving four women between the ages of approx 30 and 45. We're not quite there yet- 3 done but one still in packing cases and not written up. So today I am reporting on two of these interviews- some may see this as inadequate, but the depth and richness of material that has come out of just these two is, to me, very validating.

We aimed to interview both women who were self-confessed and well known shoe aficionados as well as those who described their interest in shoes as no more than a practical necessity. The two interviews I will talk about today are from women I will call Margaret and Bridget. Both women readily agreed to take part and in fact Bridget responded –“I've waited all my life for this!”

The method

Having a background in Personal Construct Psychology, it seemed to us that this would be an ideal approach to take. As a constructivist approach, it acknowledges that personal identity is always a construction, and that personal constructions take place within a broader social context of shared ideas. So that while constructs are always to some extent idiosyncratic, we can expect some similarities in construing between people who share a common culture. So PCP would allow us to attend to both shared construing and individual differences. It also has a range of very flexible qualitative research methods designed to explore exactly the kinds of personal constructions we were interested in and we aimed to explore these using the Role Repertory Test. The general idea was to ask our participants to compare images of various shoes and to talk about the similarities and differences that they perceived.

The shoes

We selected between 30 and 40 images of shoes and other footwear, trying to include as wide a range as possible- high heeled, flat, shoes, and sandals, ankle boots, knee length boots and thigh boots, plain ones, decorative ones. **Show examples.**

Procedure

The interviews were audio recorded. Each interview lasted about an hour and a half in total.

We first asked the participant to choose between 12 and 15 images to work with- including shoes they liked, disliked and some in between. We then proceeded to present her with a selection of three of these images at a time, each time asking in what way any two are similar and different from the third- Kelly's operational definition of a construct. We did this six or seven times, using a different combination of images each time, and made notes of the similarities and contrasts that she reported. We then went back over our notes with the participant, checking and clarifying with her the nature of the constructs that had emerged and agreeing verbal labels. Most importantly, the words and phrases the women had used were explored for their opposite or contrast term.

Findings

Show the lists of constructs and briefly talk about them. Both use young/older, practical/comfortable, classic(al) but the meanings are often different. For Margaret, classical/not classical is separate from fashionable/not fashionable. For Bridget, trendy/contemporary and classic are contrast terms. For Margaret there was a contrast between shoes that were 'everyday wear' and those that were 'dressy', for Bridget this was a slightly different contrast between shoes that could be worn any time and an 'occasion shoe'.

There's a lot that came out of these interviews that I could talk about- v rich data, a number of interesting things around youthfulness, fashion, trendiness but will focus on some examples that illustrate interesting similarities and differences between the women

Sexiness

Interestingly, sexiness was an issue that both women raised in the very first triad of shoes they compared. But neither Margaret nor Bridget's construing around sexiness could be defined straightforwardly in terms of shoes that are sexy v those that are not sexy.

For Margaret, the dimension was about whether the wearer was attempting to look sexy (and maybe getting it wrong). She said the pink fluffy shoes remind her of old black and

white comedy films, women wearing pink negligés etc “I imagine an older person wearing the pink one (8)...only a certain kind of woman I imagine would wear that” (probe) “somebody who dresses for a kind of reaction I think, or maybe a women who dresses to look, maybe she looks sexy.”. So the construct around sexiness was clarified as meaning wearing the shoes to look sexy, but actually getting it wrong in modern day terms. When the contrast pole of this construct was later explored with Margaret she gave me “not worn to look sexy”. This construct is not self-referential- Margaret makes the contrast between shoes that a woman may wear to try to look sexy (and maybe get it wrong) as opposed to shoes worn without this purpose in mind.

This is quite different from Bridget’s use of a number of constructs around sexiness.

Bridget too raised the issue of sexiness in the first two triads she compared. In the first, (12,9,22) she had made a similar remark to Margaret that a shoe was ‘supposed to be sexy’ but actually was rather laughable.. When we later explored how to label this construct, Bridget said the contrast was between whether the shoe was sexy or ‘a parody of sexiness’.

Bridget referred to sexiness and sexuality in relation to different shoes throughout the interview, but it became clear that she was not using these terms in quite the same way each time. When 18, 15 and 5 were compared she came up with a dimension of ‘girliness’ vs dominatrix, fancy dress’. Of no 5 she said “It shouts dominatrix”. Bridget said girliness had sexual orientation overtones “a girly shoe with a heel and the rest of it sends that message that that’s a straight woman, whereas other shoes send other messages. That shoe (no 5) I think BDSM stuff and poly stuff.”

But flat boots and shoes, it emerged, can also be sexy in a different way- “they can be sexy in other spaces”- gay or bi spaces. The high heeled boot is ‘out on the town, and heterosexual, it would have a different message in the gay/bi space: “people would interact with you differently and would make assumptions about you because of the heel”. So sexy in this context was also about sexual orientation.

An construct important to her that emerged during Bridget’s interview, and one that was connected to being sexy, was whether a shoe gave her leg and body a pleasing shape or

made her look dumpy, and this was mainly about the height of the heel. She said no 32 (animal print boot) was a difficult one. The heel is “nowhere near high enough for me for it to look like a sexy boot- it’s in between- it’s not making enough of a statement”.. One that did flatter was sexy, and she contrasted this with shoes that were ‘old fashioned, ugly, do nothing for my leg’.

Signifying Personal Identity

Bridget’s interview revealed a strong concern with what shoes say about her and other people.

28 is “an awful shoe, awful”. “I can imagine somebody who wears a shoe like that...someone who’s not bothered... Asked what ‘someone who’s not bothered’ means, she said “I see people wearing shoes like that and kind of the whole outfit is like that, plain, kind of blank, not really...not somebody who’s wanting to tell anybody anything about themselves...just a blank...and I know that wearing those shoes they’d think it tells something about them but there’s nothing there that I’m interested in (laughs)”.

When further probed about the issue of the black flat shoe (28) that signalled someone who was ‘blank’ she said “For me it’s about someone who’s giving me everything straight away as opposed to someone who’s going to be hard work...to get information, to talk to.” Bridget felt this was captured by the label ‘extravert vs introvert”.

By contrast, 18: “this is somebody who is into shoes and likes unusual looking shoes and has probably got a few more! This is someone who would probably take more risks in their dress generally and probably open-minded”. “It would tell you more about the person who’s wearing the shoe, and I like that, that’s someone who’s not frightened of colour, not frightened of being probably the only person in a room of a lot of people to wear that shoe, it’s an unusual looking shoe...”

She used her shoes to project the kind of person she wanted to be seen as- young, sexy, extravert, contemporary, funky and trendy with a concern for design quality, though she also used her shoes to vary the persona she wanted to project depending on her mood. Likewise, her response to other people is influenced by what they ‘say’ and are prepared to say about themselves through their shoes (and clothes). Interesting shoes equal interesting people.

Bridget has bought shoes that she knew she would never wear, just because of their associations of childhood, girls shoes. Shoes bought that remind her of her mum because she used to wear them when Bridget was a child but doesn't wear them. "I just like to have them- I never wear them, never wear them- because they're not practical, they're too old-fashioned." So shoes have huge meaning for Bridget. They can evoke memories- she doesn't throw shoes away because of this- they can remind her of "the person I was when I used to wear those shoes."

In summary, Bridget was clear that her choice of shoes on any day was very much an identity issue, about who she wanted to be that day, and particular pairs of her own shoes carried personal meanings beyond this. Shoes are "massively important, massively important- what I wear often is, the first decision is what shoes am I wearing and then I'll build an outfit around the shoe."

Margaret was quite different on this point. Like Bridget, she made fine discriminations between shoes and in fact didn't especially like any of the shoes we had included in the sample- she was keen to show me her own shoes though, pointing out what she liked, and she certainly had views about the kinds of shoes that would or wouldn't look good on her. So her construing of shoes was possibly almost as rich as Bridget's. But Margaret was not very comfortable with the general idea of the constructs she used for shoes signalling things about her personal identity- she saw these as perhaps inadequate or only partially informative, saying they are "a starting point- there's much more"- and the possibility of her own shoes (and clothes) saying things about her personality was not one she could elaborate on very much. Her comments seemed to refer more to other people than to herself: for example "that shoe would either be worn by a young person or somebody who's more conscious of their appearance and wanted it to go with a certain outfit. The other one would be worn by someone who wants to feel and look younger than they are." The most self-referential statements she made were for example "they're not my style- I don't wear high heels", "I couldn't wear them- I haven't got anything that would go with that kind of stuff and "they've got a strap you'd wrap around your leg. I definitely wouldn't do that- I haven't got the right shaped legs to do that."

She talked about a cardigan she had bought- others had said 'it's just you'- but when pressed about what this meant to her she could only say that the style and colour suited

her. So there was an absence of concern with the personal identity issues that were so prominent in Bridget's interview.

But Margaret's interview raised an issue that turned out to reveal something about her core values

10 (Converse boot), 32 (animal print boot) and 29 (flat black with stitching)

When shown these, she immediately said "the odd one out is obviously the animal print boot". The others were comfortable, everyday wear but the boot had a high heel and would be harder to walk in. At first the difference seemed to be only about comfort. I asked if she tried on the animal print boot and it was actually very comfortable would she wear it. She said not- it's because of the animal print. Don't like the animal print (32)- bad taste- has connotations of people in the past doing real things (to animals).

The animal print issue was explored and Margaret elaborated, saying she hadn't really thought about it before and found it hard to articulate. "I suppose it's a bit like all the issues surrounding wearing, you know, they used to wear foxes, fox stoles around the neck. It's not killing animals because you need them to, for the leather or something or to eat it's, erm...I'll have to think about it, it's not something I can really just sort of reel off...." I then probed as to whether it's about the use of animals for fashion (rather than practical necessity "It's like not giving a damn. It's more than that. It's not giving a damn for the lives of creatures." The opposite is not using leather, canvas or other alternatives. We called the contrast pole 'not using leather' but this was the 'extreme' case and stood for the ideological opposite of 'not giving a damn'.

Summary

For Bridget, the interview revealed a wealth of information about her personal identity, around sexiness and sexual orientation, youthfulness, fashionability and trendiness, about being extrovert and unafraid to make identity statements about your self, and about her use of shoes as important markers of times and people in her life. For Margaret, some of these issues were present but she seemed to relate them more to other people than to herself. However the interview did reveal important values in relation to the use of animals; the interview helped her to spell this out in through comparing the animal print boot to other shoes and revealed that it was not simply about using or not using animal skin to manufacture footwear.

We think the PCP interview is very promising. Using shoes or anything else will not reveal everything there is to be said about a person (and nor would any interview), but it helps them spell out complex issues by focussing on concrete examples.

Where next?

Laddering- enables researcher to further explore the implications of a construct for the person's sense of self by asking which pole of the construct they would rather be at and then asking 'why?' or 'why is that important to you?'

For example, the following ladder comes from a US consumer research study by Reynolds and Gutman (1988). This ladder is from a single subject in a salty-snack study. Looking at how people make distinctions between types of snack chips (crisps).

self-esteem

^

better figure

^

don't get fat

^

eat less

^

strong taste

^

flavored chip