

We announce our identities to the world through the way we craft our everyday personal appearance. With the resources at hand, we “curate” ourselves according to our image of ourselves, our aspirations, and our ideas of what is appropriate dress.

Our dress and adornment reflect our values, our beliefs—our notions of what makes us look beautiful, powerful, respectable, and connected to others. They visually connect us to the heritage, ideas, social status, or faith with which we identify. They can also reflect resistance to or rebellion against social and cultural ideas that we reject.

We learn from others—or sometimes create—the meanings attached to what we wear as part of groupings as small as our immediate family or as large as a nation, faith, gender orientation, or ethnic group extending across continents.

--The Will to Adorn,
Smithsonian Institution

FIELDWORK OBSERVATION SHEET

We are surrounded by dress just as a fish is surrounded by water—often we just take it for granted, sometimes we notice it. Let’s take time to really look and think about how people express their identities through their dress and adornment (clothes, shoes, jewelry, tattoos, and hair styles). Observe how people dress as they go through their normal routines—at school, the mall, in the community, or wherever you happen to go.

Use these questions to help you look and record what you see.

Where are you? (place, event)

Date: _____

Who are you observing? (individual or group, gender, approximate age)

What are they wearing? (Be as specific and descriptive as possible)

What statements are the wearers making about themselves through their clothes? What clues do their clothes/adornment give you about:

- A specific group they are a member of:
- Their ethnic heritage:
- Their social status:
- Their faith:
- Their ideas/beliefs:
- Their politics:

Add more details on the back if you need room.