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Clothes, the body and well-being
what does it mean to *feel* well dressed?

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<p>I intervjuer om klær og klesvask har kvinner ofte forklart sine valg med utgangspunkt i det som føles riktig og dermed gir en følelse av velvære. Artikkelen stiller spørsmålet: Hvorfor er velvære så viktig i beskrivelser av og begrunnelser for klesvaner? Det bygger på intervjuer og spørrelister om klær, klesvaner og vaskevaner, på lærebøker og skikk og bruk bøker.</p> <p>Dette er et omarbeidet paper som ble resenteret på konferansen <i>The Dressing Rooms</i>, HiO, Oslo, 14. mai 2007. En rusisk versjon av paperet er trykket i <i>Teoria Modi: Odejda, Telo, Kultura</i> (Теория моды: Одежда, Тело, Культура). <i>Fashion Theory: Dress, Body, Culture</i> (Russian edition) 2007 (6) Side: 163–188. Det er også planlagt å gi ut artikkelen på norsk i en svensk bok om klær med Magdalena Petersson og Lizette Gradén som redaktører.</p>		
Summary		
<p>In interviews and other statements on clothes and laundry habits people often explain their choices in terms of what feels right and therefore provides a sense of well-being. This article takes a closer look at what this means and raises the question: Why is a feeling of well-being so important in the descriptions of and reasons for people's clothes habits? The paper is based on interviews and answers to questionnaires on clothes and laundry habits, and on written material such as textbooks and books on etiquette. The material sheds light on how Norwegian women and to some extent men use words to describe their clothes and laundry habits, and also on the arguments for clothes and laundry norms in Norway.</p>		
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Clothes, the body and well-being

What does it mean to *feel* well dressed?

In interviews and other statements on clothes and laundry habits choices are explained in terms of what feels right and therefore gives a feeling of well-being. In this article I will explore what this implies. My focus will not be the rules for suitable dress per se, but how the feeling of well-being affects the will to obey those rules. In other words I want to examine how clothes norms are connected with the feeling of well-being. And I raise the question: **Why is a feeling of well-being so important in descriptions of and reasons for people's clothes habits?**

The paper is based on interviews and answers to questionnaires on clothes and laundry habits, as well as on written material such as textbooks and books on etiquette, mainly from Norway in the period after 1950. Thus I have information about how laymen and scholars, women and men, express themselves with regard to clothes and laundry habits¹. This material does not provide explicit information about how the individual experiences clean or dirty clothes, but rather on how they choose to express their experiences orally or in writing. Furthermore, the material provides information about the arguments used to explain clothes norms.

Comfort; well-being

Like so many other concepts the English term *comfort* has changed meaning. In the 18th century it got the meaning that we know best; well-being, physical ease or comfortable. It is a concept that emphasises the relationship between the body and the body's immediate environment (Crowley 2000). Before this it had signified something internal, a sense of *strength*, *consolation* or *encouragement*. Thus the word went from describing a condition in itself to including factors that contributed to attaining this condition. The historian John Crowley has described this transformation. He shows how different Anglo-American intellectual movements sought to describe and evaluate the relationship between the body and the environment, the self and the material culture through the concept of comfort. They instilled the con-

¹ 24 Norwegian women, aged around 40, were interviewed by the author in 1999. The women are different with regard to place of residence, income and clothing interest. In 2003, one girl and one boy, and also two women and three men interviewed by Anne Sofie Hjemdahl about laundering and laundry habits. The article is also build upon material from a 2001 NEG-survey (The Norwegian Ethnological Survey nr. 190) "Laundry and dirty linen" where 79 women and 19 men responded. A more thorough presentation of the material is to be found in (Klepp 2001, Klepp 2006).

cept with a new, more physical meaning, and they designed new material environments and encouraged the learning of new behaviour in accordance with the concept. (Crowley 2000). Crowley (ibid.) argues that this led to the naturalisation of the concept of comfort and associated phenomena. It legitimised new forms of consumption safely positioned between the necessary and the luxurious. (Crowley 2000). This resulted in new standards for what was considered ordinary and normal and what people felt they were entitled to. What earlier had been a luxury now became a necessity. What was described as comfortable became something self-explanatory, positive and important.

In the book *Culture and Comfort. Parlor making and middle-class identity, 1850-1930* historian Katherine C. Grier (1988) has shown how in this period comfort not only describes a pleasant physical state or a material culture that led to this state. The concept was also associated with home and family, what we in Norwegian would describe with the term *koselig* (cosy) (Grier 1988, Rolness 1995). In this period there was an increased focus on how the physical environment, space and personal belongings influenced the development of the personality. The correct consumption not only ensured that others got the right impression, but it was important in the formation of the individual's character (Grier 1988). The comfortable home, in the sense pleasant and cosy, was understood as a crucial factor in the family's quality of life and the individual's personal development. Creating and maintaining this comfortable home atmosphere, and thus securing the family's well-being, became a new and important task for women in this period, a task in which women still invest a lot of work.

The emergence of consumption as a way to secure a comfortable life is most evident in home decoration. Among other things Crowley's (2000) analysis deals with lighting, heating and decoration. The historian Galen Cranz has used the term in connection with the development of sitting furniture. He shows how the padded armchair, which originally was developed for people who suffered from specific diseases, became an ordinary piece of furniture. Cranz (1998) points out that people responded more to what they perceived as comfort than to the physical experience itself. This shows that in addition to the new emphasis on the physical; man's body and the body's senses, it also has to do with attributing meaning to something as "comfortable".

Today comfort is an important concept in the marketing of a number of goods². Most things can be sold with the argument that they are comfortable, but it is particularly used about hotels and travels, bathrooms and body care, furniture and interior articles and last but not least cars. The trick is to make the boundaries between the body and the environment as blurry and unnoticeable as possible. Comfort is a quality that is recognized through the body. It is centred on the individual and its inner state. The products are close to the body or

² I have used Google image search with the words comfort (comfort in Norwegian) and comfort. They gave 107 000 and 129 000 hits respectively. The pictures were mainly advertising.

adapted to the body in various ways. Comfort is central in situations where this body is alone or together with few others; in the bathroom, in the car and in the favourite chair. Comfort is the experience of the individual body's encounter with its immediate environment.

My interest in comfort originates in the anthropologist Elizabeth Shove's book from 2003 *Comfort, cleanliness & convenience* (Shove 2003). Her analysis of comfort deals with the emergence of a standardized stable room temperature in the industrialised world. This is one change that has been introduced in the name of comfort and has had a great impact on things ranging from clothes habits to the organisation of work hours particularly in warm countries.

Despite the fact that many studies of the emergence of comfort have mentioned personal belongings and products that are close to the body such as for instance clothes as important in this re-orientation, comfort has not been a major topic in clothing research. On the contrary, it seems as if many writers have not distinguished between the cultural construction of concepts like pleasant, comfortable, practical or convenient and the physical qualities of clothes. In recent literature there is a greater focus on the relationship between form, meaning, use and functions (Linton 1936).³ The form is what we observe, while the meaning is all associations that is connected to the object in a society. The use is simply how the object is utilised, while the functions place the object in a larger system and include the object's purposeful use. The fact that the different aspects are not kept apart is not so surprising – as we will see later, it is characteristic that they cannot be separated, but are closely interrelated. When we sink down in a bottomless easy chair with a sigh of pleasure it is not easy to separate the physical feeling from the idea of relaxation, time-out or luxury (Cranz 1998). Not only our interpretation of the chair but also our interpretation of the physical sensations of sitting in it is subject to interpretation. This is obviously also true for clothes. Nowadays, corsets are portrayed as instruments of torture, but they were not necessarily perceived as such – on the contrary, doing without a corset could be seen as lacking the necessary support that the body needed.

For me it is obvious that comfort must be an important concept in the study of clothes habits. The history of the concept shows that we should be careful about interpreting feelings as natural and therefore above culture. The fact that comfort opened up for a new emphasis on the material environment and the connection between the material and the individual makes it a useful concept in clothing research. After all, clothes are the part of our material environment that we carry closest to our body. Furthermore, it is interesting that comfort made consumption right and necessary, and not least the concept made people more aware of

³ I use Ralph Linton's concepts *form*, *meaning*, *function* and *use*. These were the concepts I learnt when I studied ethnology in Oslo in the middle of the 1980s. Later the awareness of material culture has increased, but I still think that Linton's concepts maintain important aspects of the material culture in an easily understood manner.

how they feel and turned this individual feeling into something that we should be concerned about. It therefore presents an opportunity in the effort to make clothing research both more material and more sensuous (Miller 2005).

Lived garments, the body and material clothing

Even though comfort has not – to my knowledge – been the subject of any broad debate within clothing research, many recent studies of clothes are relevant to such a discussion. This literature was undoubtedly an important reason why I noticed this particular mode of expression at all and became interested in studying it more closely.

Words like feel, experience and also comfort are found in studies of clothes habits that emphasise clothes as material culture and as “lived garments” (Miller 2005:1). One who has addressed this relationship in the discourse is the anthropologist Janet Andrewes (2005). She argues that clothes have the ability to transform the body. In this way individuals gain access to ideas that are connected with the shape of the clothes. Clothes “constantly prompt, mould and shape the body's movements and position it into the conventional stance, allowing the wearer to experience and understand in a special way the ideas and notions which belong within the convention” (Andrewes 2005:60).

One problem with much of the thinking connected with “lived garments” is that they are difficult to study. After all, we do not have access to other people's experiences of clothes, just the way that they verbally express them. In a book about weddings the ethnologist Eva Knuts has tried to bypass this source problem by using her own experiences of wedding dresses as material for analysis. She writes that she will not only interview *about* dresses, but also get to know the dresses on her body “the encounter of ideas and the artefact, a lived materiality where concept and mental impressions meet” (Knuts 2006:72, *my translation*).

Descriptions of well-being when well dressed

In 2001 I carried out a study of clothes disposal. In that connection I interviewed 24 women about their clothing habits. Together with the informants I went through the 157 garments that they for some reason no longer used (Klepp 2001). The women's interest in clothes and their ability to express what they liked varied considerably. It was certainly not true – as is often claimed – that all women love to shop and try on clothes. On the contrary, I found great insecurity. The thing that many of the women struggled with was not finding the prettiest thing they could imagine – but rather finding something they dared to wear, something that was not wrong. First and foremost they wanted clothes that did not attract unwanted attention. Similar findings from Great Britain were presented in the article ‘Fashion and Anxiety’, where Daniel Miller and Alison Clarke (2002) argued that the fear of making a fool of one-

self is a decisive element in women's choice of clothes. This inspired me to write the article 'Farlige farger' [*Dangerous Colours*] (Klepp 2004). In this article I studied specifically what makes colours dangerous, not because colours are the only "dangerous" aspect of clothes, but in order to dig deeper into a clothes norm and the uneasiness that is connected with breaking it. However, in that article I did not systematically study how the women used sensuous descriptions in this context.

I have now gone through the material again to find out more about how they describe their physical experiences of their closest material environment. What factors make the adaptation between the body and these materials frictionless, unnoticeable, and therefore pleasant? I am interested in the comfortable as a phenomenon rather than as a concept. It is the very attention to the body's experience of the adaptation to the clothes that is in focus. Why is this feeling of the comfortable not only important, but also right? In order to approach this issue I have searched the material for the words *feel* and *well-being*. These are words that appear in all the interviews. In particular the women often talk about feeling good in clothes, which I have interpreted to mean that clothes give them a sense of well-being. But most frequently they talk about all the times that the clothes do not give them a sense of well-being at all. By looking at the expressions used in the descriptions of clothes habits we can find some of the reasons why such descriptions are so important when the women talk about their choice of clothes.

Silent knowledge: The body as a key

"You feel that you have nothing to wear" (IGKk54)⁴ says one of the women, despite the fact that closets and drawers are loaded. The women have problems finding the right words when describing what is wrong with an item of clothing. "It's... I simply feel insignificant in it" (IGKk63). Similarly another woman speaks with greater confidence about the feeling of wearing the wrong clothes than about actually wearing the wrong clothes. "You know I've been to places where I've felt overdressed. Whether I have been, I don't know of course" (IGKk61). They trust their body's signals more than they trust what they know or can say about the clothes or specific clothes norms. Thus it is through observing what they use and feel good in that they can find out both what they like and what is suitable on different occasions.

The same is true when it comes to buying clothes. I have asked what the

⁴ The interviews referred to here were conducted in 1999-2000 by the author (IGK), all were with women. The last numbers refer to the women's year of birth.

women consider when they think about buying an item of clothing or not. The question was difficult because much of this takes place without any conscious awareness of what they are thinking. Again they emphasise the feeling that the clothes give them. They buy what feels right.

In the study of fashion buyers in a department store in London, the sociologist Joanne Entwistle uses the expression “embodied knowledge” to characterise the special skill the buyers have (Entwistle 2000b). A more common term to describe the same phenomenon is “silent knowledge”, an expression used by the ethnologist Marie Riegels Melchior in her description of the design process in a Danish clothes company (Melchior 2007). Much revolves around touching, feeling and studying different combinations of fabric, sketches and pictures and then noticing the associations and feelings they induce.

My material shows that not only professionals in the clothes industry, but also regular clothes consumers possess more knowledge than they can verbalise. This is one of the reasons why such a large portion of clothes consumption is formulated with reference to how the dressed body feels. The women do not know in advance whether they will be happy with clothes until they have used or at least tried them on. This is apparent in the following discussion about a pair of bell bottom jazz pants. At the gym where the informant works out everybody has such pants, but she has not bought one, “I said I would never buy one of those” but “I’m influenced, too (...) Now, I haven’t tried them on either, so I’m not sure I’m going to buy one after all, ‘cause I may feel completely ridiculous in them, and then I certainly won’t”. (IGKk63). What is it that can make her feel completely ridiculous? What is it that she gets access to through her body’s experience of the clothes that she cannot predict until she has tried them on? I do not have the material to answer these questions with regard to this specific woman and this pair of jazz pants, but it is obvious that it has to do with some sort of violation of a clothes norm.

The body is very important in the assessment of the technical quality of textiles. Shopping for clothes – or fabrics – has at least as much to do with walking and feeling as with seeing and thinking. The woman quoted below has good knowledge of clothes and fabrics, has training as a seamstress and works in the clothes industry.

I have to feel it, and if you try it on you always get a certain sense of what it's like to wear and what kind

of quality it is, you know. Zippers and buttons and ... when you try the clothes on you get an impression of whether wearing them is a good total experience or not. I think its subconscious. (IGKk64)

The body's experience of the garment says more about the quality than she is able to say by examining the different details of the garment more consciously.

The women's statements testify to this type of silent knowledge, both with regard to technical quality and – as the example of the jazz pants showed – about clothes norms. In the following we will look at a number of clothes norms and at how the women describe their feeling of well-being in connection with following or breaking them.

Clothes + body do not equal 2, and well-being is not (just) a question of comfortable clothes

In some cases feeling good quite simply refers to the fact that the clothes are not too tight or in other ways an obstacle to activity. But “you don't feel so good in a jogging suit” (IGKk60) after using it a lot. Very comfortable clothes, understood on the basis of their shape, are certainly not always clothes that the women feel good in. How uncomfortable the clothes can be in terms of shape and still provide a sense of well-being depends on a number of factors, not least context; what is the purpose of the expression created by the body and the clothes together.

Based on our interviews it is not easy to know why the woman quoted above does not feel good in her jogging suit after a while. In the interview she lets the reason remain implicit, she assumes that I understand what she means and does not elaborate. In the book about weddings, however, Knuts (2006) tries to use her own experiences to express how the physically unpleasant nevertheless can give the body the right sense of well-being. She describes the shapes of the wedding dresses as uncomfortable, there are stays and hooks, pearls and weight that cling, scrape and hinder the movements of the body. Nevertheless she felt “that the dresses that I liked did something positive to my body, they lifted me” (Knuts 2006:74, *my translation*).

These dresses make the body perceptible by holding in and pushing up. You cannot walk and move in them as you like. It is a different way of moving than in everyday clothes. The body is therefore filled with a feeling of exclusivity (Knuts 2006):74, *my translation*).

Knuts describes how the woman and the dress together become a bride. In this transformation the uncomfortable shape of the dress is part of what makes the dress something that she as a bride can feel good in. The clothes not only change the look of the body, but also the mental state: “Something changes inside the body as well”

(Andrewes 2005:32).⁵ Through the experience of the dress Knuts gains access to more knowledge about the idea of bride as it appears in our culture, because the wedding dress is a materialisation of this idea.

The jogging suit does not have iron stays and a long train, but nevertheless it is uncomfortable. The uncomfortable is not the shape, but the expression that the jogging suit and the body together create. I do not have the necessary material to describe exactly what this is. Perhaps it is the way the body, like the material in the suit, hangs and drags around with a bent back and devoid of elegance?

We are not like paper dolls whose clothes are put on a ready made naked body. The body does something to the clothes, and the clothes do something to the body. Together they form a whole. Analyses that capture this aspect have long been missing in clothes research (Wilson 1989), but gradually empirical studies have appeared that try to capture this (Entwistle 2000a; 2000b; Banerjee and Miller 2003; Woodward 2005; Knuts 2006). An important theoretical inspiration, on which Knuts and others draw, is Latour's actor-network theory, frequently abbreviated ANT, in which not only human beings, but also inanimate objects such as for instance clothes have the status of actors (Latour 1998).

Of course well-being has to do with the shape of the clothes and to what degree they let you breathe, eat, laugh or move. But the body and the clothes together also form a whole, and this whole does not only have a form, but also a meaning. The feeling of well-being is connected both to this form and this meaning. Trying the clothes on is therefore a way to get access to knowledge about what the clothes do to the body and what the body does to the clothes. The clothes provide opportunities to get into the spirit of different culturally defined roles and get to know them through the body's reactions.

Well-being through following unwritten rules

In the introduction I quoted a woman who had felt uncomfortable because she felt that she was overdressed. The unwritten rule that she possibly broke at the time was one that says that you should be dressed suitably for the occasion. As we saw, this is something that indeed is felt. We will look at a couple of other examples of how the women use bodily experiences as a way to find clothes that fit the occasion.

In a discussion of whether she will change if she expects a guest one of the women explains: "That depends a little on who's coming and how I look. But of course I take a look in the mirror and check if like... Yeah, do I feel good now, right?" So she looks in the mirror

⁵ A number of researchers have laid the theoretical foundation for this perspective. They have not discussed clothes to any extent, but have opened up for seeing the body as something more than an object, and have thus contributed to breaking down the distinction between nature and culture (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Goffman 1966; Foucault 1979; Isherwood and Douglas 1979; Mauss 1979; Bourdieu 1984).

to see if she should change. But she does not ask whether the clothes are suitable for receiving this guest. Instead she looks in the mirror and asks “do I feel good now”, implicitly *now that I expect a guest*. She uses the mirror not only to see herself, but as a way to imagine herself in the situation of the visit and whether she will feel good with the clothes in this situation.

One of the women uses a uniform at work. Therefore she does not think so much about what she puts on when she hurries off in the morning. But sometimes “I have to run a little errand up to town again, and when I look around then I feel that my clothes are really out of date” (IGKk65). Notice that it is when she looks around that she feels that the clothes are out of date. Her feeling is related to a context. It is not the clothes in themselves, but the clothes in relation to walking around town together with others who have dressed for this occasion.

An important clothes norm for women is the requirement to wear **becoming** clothes. That is clothes that emphasise those aspects of the body that are most in line with current beauty ideals (Storm-Mathisen & Klepp 2006). Also when it comes to this clothes norm the women use well-being as a guide. “Those are colours that I feel better in” (IGKk54) says one. She is not sure whether these are colours that suit her, “because I haven’t gone to any kind of analysis or things like that”. Thus she cannot be sure that these are the colours that actually suit her, but because she feels good in them, she thinks they suit her. Becomingness has to do with both colours and shape. The women try to find clothes that will make their bodies appear slim and with proportions in line with current beauty ideals. “Sure I can wear it (wide legs), but I don’t feel good in it” (IGKk63). This feeling is caused by the fact that she believes that she has short legs that will be emphasised by wide legs. In this case she is fully aware of what is wrong with the clothes, but that is certainly not always the case.

The body can be sensitive toward expectations of **age-adequate** dress, which is another important clothes norm for women.

There are many things that I used to love, but that I don’t feel good in anymore”. It is not just because they are no longer “a good fit (...) but I suppose I am a little bit influenced by what my surroundings demand or expect. I suppose I am”. (IGKk62)

It is evident that what she feels good in depends on the environment, what they demand or expect, as she puts it. Dressing less sexually challenging as a mother and a wife of 40 than she did when she was young is one such expectation (Storm-Mathisen & Klepp 2005). This woman would like to dress youthfully, but feels that her surroundings demand something else.

It is therefore not surprising that **other people’s comments** on the way you dress can affect your feeling of being well-dressed. One woman with a very conservative “blue” style

and an even more conservative husband wanted to “be a little crazy and buy something red once, and then when I wear it, my husband says: well, don't you look nice! Oh, thank you, I say, and after that I don't feel so good” (IGKk64). A short, well-placed ironic comment changes her experience as well as the sweater, which is redefined into a garden sweater. She uses it there both to save other clothes and to practice wearing red. She tries to extend the boundaries of the style she wears. But it is not easy for her, and it does not get any easier when her husband does not seem to like her attempts to change.

The clothes norm that she breaks is the one that says that you should dress as yourself, have your own *style*. This is a norm that is quite problematic, because it often conflicts with another norm that says that you should dress like everybody else. This can create problems. One woman had a group of friends that she used to spend a lot of time with. The last couple of years she had changed her style, but they had not. She was insecure about how she should dress on the occasions when she met them. One strategy was to dress conservatively like them “But then I don't feel so good, you know. It is better to be yourself or the ... of course you feel good in the clothes you have chosen to wear” (IGKk65). She thinks that she will not feel good in other styles than the one she has currently chosen, not even the one she used to have a short time ago. But dressing differently from her friends was also problematic.

The feeling of discomfort associated with the balance between dressing the way you want and dressing like the people around you is a topic that the women mention most frequently in relation to work life. One woman works in a part of the private sector where there is little latitude with regard to the dress code: “You're supposed to wear a blazer that's like this and that and a nice pair of pants, and then you're supposed to have a white blouse underneath. And I feel that a lot of that's not me.” She tries to find clothes that follow the rules, but still “in a way that I feel good in them, you do that to a certain degree, too. But you get kind of tired of always dressing so properly”. She does not feel good because she does not feel that her clothes match the way she wants to be dressed. One woman with a rather different clothes style, who moves in intellectual circles where clothes and looks are strongly toned down, expresses something similar with the word *integrity*.

It is certainly not important to be just like the others, but it is not important per se to stand out either. It is important to be... (short pause) important to feel like an integrity in a way, to be myself so that I feel good in what I'm wearing (IGKk62)

Again we see that feeling good is the measure of whether the outfit is successful or not. In a different context she explains that the clothes should “be connected with the way that I am”. (IGKk62)

Earlier I quoted a woman with extensive knowledge of textiles. She works as a store manager and has to wear nice clothes to work, preferably clothes from the store. “Yes, I feel it. Personally I feel much more comfortable in it too”. She never knows what may happen “who may come in” or “when I have to go to some meeting, and then I like to be confident that I am suitably dressed for any occasion.” (IGKk64) She talks about dressing nice for work and the confidence it gives her as “wellbeing”. At home and on private occasions outside of the home she wears other clothes. She does not talk about this adaptation to the environment as something problematic, but as we have seen rather something that inspires confidence and well-being. But another place she says “I don't care what others say, it's more to do with my feeling good in what I'm wearing” (IGKk64). Here she is eager to present herself as independent in her choice of clothes. She wears what she feels good in. The fact that she has described in detail how feeling good is connected with other people's (managers, customers, co-workers) expectations of her in her role as a store manager does not change this. Despite the fact that she cannot choose brand or style or how often she varies between different clothes, she says that she chooses what she feels good in and does not care what everybody else says.

We have seen that *feeling good* is used as a measure of whether the outfit is right in relation to a number of different clothes norms and in relation to clothes for very different occasions. The women are less concerned with – or able to – explaining why things are wrong, or what it is about the clothes that makes them feel good. But well-being is also used where the women actually know what is right and what is wrong.

Well-being as excuse

One obvious interpretation of well-being in relation to clothes is that it is primarily an expression and therefore has more to do with what women want to say about their use of clothes than with how they actually relate to clothes. But saying something is also an act, and not *just words*. Therefore, regardless of what kind of experiences lie behind the words it may be interesting to discuss why this expression is used and not a different one.

Dressing according to fashion, or at least not using clothes that are out of fashion, is the one clothes norm that most of the women not only know and adhere to, but also have a verbal relation to. Nevertheless several of the women do not state directly that they follow this norm. Instead, as in relation to the other clothes norms, they point to their experience of the clothes. When they stop using something (which is out of fashion) it is “not because it is out of fashion, but I don't feel comfortable in it because the shoulders are so broad” (IGKk56). This woman does not look to fashion in order to follow it. She does not wear the jacket because she does not feel comfortable in it, since it has broad shoulders, which is too much out of fashion.

Whether unfashionable clothes are experienced as uncomfortable depends on the setting: "I probably would not go to work with very wide trousers. I don't think I would. (...) I don't feel entirely comfortable in completely wrong trousers. Totally wrong jeans." The wide trousers may be used for walks in the woods, but not worn to work. Working life is an arena where fashion is more important than in the woods, and the trousers are therefore experienced as uncomfortable there. This woman does not say that she does not use the clothes because they are unfashionable, but the argument she uses about not feeling comfortable is unproblematic.

Many of the women emphasise that their choice of clothes is independent and in accordance with *who they are*. In this respect the 40-year-old woman stands out clearly from young teenagers who to a much larger extent talk openly about trying to dress like people who are important to them and about following fashion (Storm-Mathisen & Klepp 2005). For adult women saying that they choose what makes them feel comfortable is a far less problematic argument than saying that they will follow what is in fashion, dress the way their workplace requires or the way the husband wishes. The comfortable, the easy, the body's frictionless adaptation to the physical environment is an unconditional good for the modern individual. Living up to this standard is not something the women have to defend or give reasons for. It is a self-evident value which does not conflict with the idea of the independent, autonomous individual. On the contrary, being one with one's own body, here specified as feeling well in it, is a sign of integrity. As we have seen, the rise of the idea of comfort is closely related to the rise of the self-confident and sensitive individual.

However, this is not to say that it is all a manner of speaking. Instead one can see *well-being* as an efficient way of implementing norms in ways that do not appear to conflict with the idea of the individual. If this is the case the body must have learnt to feel discomfort when norms are broken at the same time as the norms themselves have become invisible. Both clothes and words can be interpreted as forms of communication. In clothing research similarities and differences between clothes and language have long been discussed (Lurie 1981, Andrewes 2005). The semiotic studies of clothes are today less influential and attention is directed at the differences between language and messages communicated through material culture. While words can be used to formulate constantly new messages, the material culture is limited to communicating already existing packages of meaning (Andrewes 2005). And while words are random in relation to meaning, form is a carrier of content in the material culture, often so that several meanings can be present simultaneously. Meanings can be internally contradictory and they can be more or less conscious. "The more hidden the association is the more durable it is likely to be" (Andrewes 2005:26). In this context it is important that clothes are not only carriers of meaning, but they also instruct. We learn what it means to be a woman or a man, young or old, rich or poor within a specific culture by wearing the kind of

clothes that are appropriate to wear in the different contexts, just as we saw Knuts learnt the idea of bride by trying on wedding dresses.

Modes of expression are interesting in themselves and there are good reasons for choosing to rewrite external, superficial norms as internal, independent feelings. At the same time there is good reason to believe that the feeling of well-being is more than just a mode of expression. I have not yet given any examples of violations of a central clothes norm; the one that dictates that we should have clean clothes and avoid the smell of what is referred to as odour. In the discussion of well-being associated with following this norm I will look specifically at how we have learnt to feel this well-being.

Learning the right emotions: clean well-being

In the cultural history of dirty clothes there are some themes that are more laden with sensory descriptions than others. On such theme is the feeling of clean textiles on the body. According to NEG's informants⁶ it is "wonderful to lie down in a bed with clean sheets" (NEG190k52a) or "lovely" (NEG190k30b) as another puts it. Clean clothes, too, give pleasure. "It's nice to put on clean clothes, feel that one smells good" (NEG190k30b) and "comfortable to have clean clothes, smell good, look neat" (NEG190k33). Consequently, clothes are not washed to make them clean (e.g. understood as the absence of bacteria) (Klepp 2006, 2007), but to achieve well-being through having clean clothes. One area in particular that is described as a sensory pleasure is a clean body, but also the activities of showering and bathing in themselves.

The first time I noticed this phenomenon was when gathering material about trekkers and landscape experiences. The guest book at *Østerbø*, a tourist cabin high up in *Aurlandsdalen* valley, contained numerous instances of praise for the cabin's shower. This was a typical example "Blessed food breaks under rock slabs in gale-force winds and beating rain, but we made it here in the end to a warm shower and sauna." (Guest book *Østerbø*). Some women even wrote that "Loveliest of all was the shower", after they had stayed a couple of weeks on a mountain farm nearby. I still regard these messages as an insult to the lush mountain nature of Western Norway, the dramatic views and to *Østerbø* as a place of accommodation. Back then I spent a lot of time thinking about this and I wrote that "Messages revolve to a large extent around this shift between inside and outside, warm and cold, hungry and full etc., and

⁶ The Norwegian Ethnological Survey (NEG) is a tradition archive which was founded in 1946 with the aim of conducting national documentation of aspects of historical working life. From the 1970s the documentation has been concerned with contemporary culture and everyday life. The documentation is gathered from questionnaires to a network of informants. The informants answer the questionnaires in writing. References are made to the number of the list from which the quote is obtained, then the letter m for male and k for female, and finally the last two numbers of the informant's birth year.

thereby thematises some of the main points of the trip” (Klepp 1998:151). After having worked more with questions concerning bodily cleanliness in connection with laundry and washing of the body I am more inclined to take the messages at face value. The hikers probably enjoyed the shower thoroughly, not only as a contrast to the hiking, or as an aim or a reward, but in itself. In this respect the washing of the body differs markedly from laundry. While laundry is a means to an end (the enjoyment of clean clothes), the shower is no longer a means but (to many people) a joy in its own right. But this experience is no more natural than to experience the mountain as beautiful or animals as cute.

Much has been written about how the population was taught a new and cleaner lifestyle. A lot of this research is inspired by Norbert Elias, Mary Douglas and Michel Foucault and focuses on cleanliness and dirt as cultural ideas and the disciplinary aspect of the battle against disorder (Foucault & Gordon 1980, Elias 1982, Douglas 1984). The ethnologists Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren’s book “Den kultiverade människan” [The Cultured Man] (Frykman & Löfgren 1979) describe this as a class struggle, not a fight over money, but over the right to define what are good and bad manners and behaviours. Cleanliness has been seen as a means of raising both the economic and the moral standard. A lot of different means were applied in order to teach the population cleanliness and to provide conditions under which this cleanliness could be practised. Most of the research on the teaching of cleanliness deals with the period up until the Second World War. In the period after this the arguments are more unobtrusive, while the change in practice, on the other hand, has accelerated. I have looked at these arguments in order to see if they can be seen as teaching people to experience cleanliness as well-being rather than advocating more frequent washing in itself. We will first look at the arguments concerning bodily cleanliness and then at the arguments for washing clothes more often. Finally, I will present an example that illustrates the gender difference with regard to learning the experience of well-being through following clothes norms.

Learning the proper experience of bodily cleanliness

An important aim of what has been referred to as the “hygienic truth regime (Schmidt & Kristensen 1986) was to improve public health by controlling the big epidemic diseases. However an essential argument for raising the standard of bodily cleanliness was not health in itself, but that one thereby would achieve better hygiene in other areas, too. Because “bodily cleanliness will bring with it cleanliness in other areas. One is not happy in dirty clothes and unhygienic surroundings when one’s body is clean” (Berner 1938:82). The introduction of a weekly bath would thus contribute to the teaching of this particular kind of well-being, which one believed would have far-reaching consequences.

In the 1950s and 1960s personal hygiene was a big topic in textbooks as well as etiquette literature. The attention was particularly directed at body odours. In its natural state, it was argued, the body was without odours, but a lack of washing would lead to odours, which in turn would lead to social exclusion.

When one is done with one's morning toilette, the armpits are powdered with talcum. It gives a feeling of well-being, which one's surroundings will benefit from, too. (Golbæk 1952:31, my translation)

Cleanliness as a means of achieving beauty, well-being and social success is the topic of this guide for teenagers. Talcum is presented as necessary in order to experience well-being. The retail industry was the most important mouthpiece for this argument. A range of commercials from this period onwards shows how both men and women could achieve social success through the use of products that remove body odours. The most famous example in Norway is the commercials for *Sterilan* produced by Lilleborg.

Compared to the 1960s textbooks from the 1970s onwards are less detailed and normative with regard to bodily cleanliness. One interpretation of this fact may be that it was no longer seen as necessary to urge people to wash more often or to emphasise that the newly washed body should give a sense of well-being. But there are exceptions. In a textbook for 13- to 15-year olds we can read the following:

You should shower every day or in other ways wash your whole body. The skin excretes moisture, and to this moisture dirt and dust will stick. This can create an unpleasant smell. (...) The places that require washing the most are the hands, feet, neck, face, armpits and genitalia. (Levanto 1987:255, my translation)

Soap, deodorant and face wash are mentioned specifically as *suitable aids*. The industry gets a lot of help in legitimising body products and in reinforcing the connection between these products and the feeling of well-being. What is required in order to "feel proper" is a daily shower, soap with a little perfume, deodorant and hair wash at least a couple of times a week" it says in a textbook from 1999 (Giil & Dromnes 1999:88).

The strategy was a success. In the NEG material and in the interviews there are many descriptions of the feeling of well-being associated with cleanliness. And not only the general public, but also the health service accepted and promoted well-being as the aim of cleanliness.

Personal cleanliness has an aesthetic value which e.g. plays a big role in the social interaction with other people. It is important for bodily functions as well as for our bodily and mental well-being. (Natvig 1975:281, my translation)

Professor of hygiene at the University of Oslo Haakon Natvig then goes on to write about how the skin excretes waste which will smell unpleasantly and be offensive to yourself and others, in addition to being a direct health hazard (Natvig 1975).

Several researchers have studied the changes in the arguments for cleanliness and body wash. In the USA Bushman & Bushman (1988) describe how cleanliness changes from a sign of status to a situation where frequent body wash is necessary for social acceptance. Hence, the products are no longer luxury items, but first and foremost produced for a mass market. The bath tub has inconspicuously gone from a weapon against illness to an instrument of relaxation and contemplation, writes Shove with reference to surveys conducted in the USA and the UK (Shove 2003). As we have seen, both Norwegian industry and authors of textbooks and etiquette books participated in this teaching, not only about cleanliness in itself, but also the idea that both the activities and their results should be perceived as well-being.

Health was a central reason for increased cleanliness throughout the 19th century and up until the middle of the 20th century. But in later years the focus has also turned to the fact that this frequent washing of the body is unhealthy. This negative aspect must be weighed against both the feeling of well-being that bathing and showering now produce and the desire to be newly washed when meeting other people. There are many detailed descriptions of how the informants balance the wish to bathe and shower often with what they perceive as good for their health. “So that is a kind of project I have not to wash too much”, as a male journalist from Oslo, born 1971, puts it. These “projects” include only using soap every other shower, or not washing the hair as often as the rest of the body. The relationship between the aim and the means of bathing or showering is reversed, and health has become the main argument for less frequent washing. But the experience of well-being – once a means to make people wash more often – has become an end in itself.

Learning well-being through clean clothes

The appeal to wash clothes more frequently was repeated in most of the texts concerning laundry from the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century. The arguments for this concerned hygiene, the possibility of getting the clothes clean and economic considerations. More frequent laundering would constitute less wear and tear on the clothes.

In textbooks and etiquette literature from the 1950s onwards it is argued that underwear should be changed more often than once a week, but primarily because of the sense of well-being this would give.

Underwear should be rinsed in water every night, at least the items You wear closest to the body. Putting on clean odourless clothes after Your morning shower is a luxury that You may well allow Yourself. (Anderson 1961:183, my translation)

I have not found anyone who argues for clean underwear for reasons of hygiene. Instead it was seen, as in the example above, as a *luxury* one could and should indulge in. The arguments concern the well-being of the individual, which in turn is related to the society around the individual. We change “the clothes we wear closest to our body” every day because (...) “these items of clothing soon start to smell” (Giil & Dromnes 1999:89). “It makes no sense to put on dirty underwear when we have had our daily wash of the lower parts. We want, after all, to get rid of the bad smell, hence we put on clean underwear” (Holby 1964:129). This luxury thus becomes an obligation to the surroundings. As we saw in the analysis of *Comfort* turning luxury into proper, normal and necessary consumption was one of the most important results of this concept. In this way luxury lost its negative connotations and opened the road to a massive growth in consumption in areas that could be defined as comfort.

This strategy was a success, too. The informants explain how they wash to be sure that they smell good. “You should feel a sense of well-being when you're wearing your clothes” (NEG190k52a). More frequent changes of clothes are presented as a luxury that one can indulge in because it gives a sense of well-being. “Nothing compares to putting on clean clothes” (NEG190k26a). This is true for younger as well as older people and for both men and women: “Laundering gives more well-being and we don't do anything to limit this” (NEG190m56a).

In order to make this form of well-being into a social obligation the significance of odour had to be increased. It is worth noting that the experience of bad odours in many ways emerges precisely in the 1950/60s. The following quote illustrates the point clearly. “I changed underwear every week until around 1960. Then I started noticing the smell, so then my cleanliness improved several notches” (NEG169k35). What changed was probably not the smell, but how she experienced it. The threshold for perceiving smells today is very low. “I sometimes sniff the clothes a little to check if they need a refreshing wash” (NEG190k51d). Some older people have a totally different sense of what it means for clothes to smell. “You can see if the clothes are dirty or unclean. We never let it go so far that it smells. Yuck!” (NEG190m26b). As for the woman quoted above, her clothes will look completely clean when she “sniffs” them and finds that the smell is unacceptable.

Emotions or rules, a question of gender

I have only interviewed women about their clothing habits and only have their experiences of how to feel well dressed. Unfortunately, I do not have enough material on how men describe their clothes habits to say anything about whether this difference can be traced there. But as long as all the fields that I have touched on so far: consumption, luxury, cleanliness, clothes and not least emotions to such a degree are associated with the idea of the feminine, such a difference can be expected. A comparison of clothing guidance for men and women indicate that this form of government is more applied among women than men, and more today than in the 1960s.

Etiquette has to be learnt, it says in Cappelen's *Skikk og bruk* [*Etiquette*] (Brøgger 1960, p.58). The sections on the body, clothes, language and manners are full of demands and rules. There are four basic rules about personal hygiene (p. 87), and 12 absolute demands (p. 88) as well as six rules for proper dress (p. 91). The pictures clearly show what is right and wrong. And the text is characterised by the words *should* and *shall*, and of errors that are often made.

In 2005 Cappelen published a new book called *Skikk og bruk* (Lundesgaard 2005). In the chapter on men's clothes little has changed. The text is still characterised by *is* and *should*, or even more by expressions with *is*, which states a fact and leaves no room for variation, as in the sentence "The full evening dress is black" (p. 31). The next sentence indirectly shows that this is not always the case. In the chapter on women's clothes such sentences and *should* and *shall* are virtually absent⁷, while sentences with *may* abound. This is stated directly in the text. "The relationship between women and clothing is characterised by anarchy – there are no rules" (Lundesgaard 2005:40, my translation). This absence of rules is said to make "women's outfits more difficult to compose" (ibid.). This is self-contradictory. It is not the absence of rules that creates the difficulties, but rather the plethora of rules, at times conflicting and not least difficult for anyone to get an overview of (Klepp 2004, Clarke & Miller 2002). The new book *Skikk og bruk* does not provide any help. It is not very enlightening to say that it is the totality and consistency in dress that make women well-dressed when it says nothing about what kind of totality is in question or how consistency in dress is achieved. The pictures do not provide any help either. The author has given up conveying the rules that govern women's dress, while the rules for men's dress are at least apparently the same as they were in 1960.

The development towards less open norms and direct demands provides greater scope for emotions. This is a tendency that is evident in the material as a whole. But why do we see

⁷ There are two cases of sentences with "shall", as far as I can see; in connection with the rule that women shall not dress provocatively at work and to point out that long dresses are required for galas.

this gender difference? One possible way to explain this is that rules for men's clothing to a smaller extent conflict with the clothes norms. I have already mentioned that young people speak more openly about the desire to dress like everyone else. This is mirrored in practical behaviour. Children who are dressed exactly the same are seen as cute and funny. Young people do not want to be dressed completely alike, but only small details are required to create a difference that is large enough. For adult women, however, wearing the same clothes as someone else, for instance at a party, will be seen as a problem. This age division in clothes norms does not apply to men. The man in a dark suit and a white shirt will not be less well-dressed even if other men wear the same, quite the contrary (Pettersen 2004). Generally, there are fewer demands for variation between men and for the individual man on different occasions. The demand for clothes that accentuate the body's beauty and suit the individual's personality is a demand that to a much larger extent applies to women. Therefore, clothes norms in the form of rules will be more problematic for women, because we have to find *our own style* and *what looks good on us...*

Foucault uses dominance to describe a relationship where there is no doubt who is master and what is required (Foucault & Neumann 2002, Neumann & Sending 2003). Today's clothes norms are to a very limited extent regulated by laws, and even in a book on etiquette they remain implicit. But they are still adhered to. The peculiarity of laws that are followed and enforced within the same group is captured in Foucault's conceptualisation of *governmentality* (*gouvernementalité*). The focus is on how the individual governs himself. Thus power must be understood as something internal to the individual.

From rules to well-being as guiding mechanism

In the introduction I asked the question: Why is the experience of well-being so important in the description and justification of one's clothes habits?

One answer is that we experience this well-being because we have been taught to experience it. The teaching of norms associated with appearing clean and odourless shows that great emphasis has been put on teaching the individual to experience precisely well-being. In this way the adherence to norms is something each individual does for his or her own sake. It is a luxury one allows oneself and a commitment to the surroundings; a luxury one should allow oneself. This has been so well internalised in the population that the means has become an end in itself. We wear clean clothes and shower all the time because it gives us a sense of well-being, not because we have learnt it. Therefore it is difficult to contravene the norm. It is both invisible and unnecessary and not least most people would experience a violation of the norm as uncomfortable.

The sense of well-being in the dressed body depends on more than newly washed and comfortable clothes. We are not paper dolls whose body and clothes are like two layers without any inner connection. For living human beings body and clothes constitute a unity. When this unity as a form corresponds to the desired meaning it gives a feeling of well-being. This well-being thus depends on what the body does with the clothes, and what the clothes do to the body, and not least how this relates to the environment or the situation for which the body is dressed.

The women in the data material use the experience of wearing the clothes as the key that tells them if they like the clothes and if they are appropriate to the situation, their age, etc. It appears that the women through their bodies register violations of rules that they only to a limited extent are consciously aware of. It also seems as if the feelings that the clothes give (when they put them on) are used as a means to judge the technical quality, becomingness and suitability for various occasions. It is possible that the body and a more intuitive sense of comfort/discomfort are better suited to pass judgement in an area where there are so many and partly contradictory norms as dressing customs for women today. The term silent knowledge captures this and shows that we know more than we are able to put into words or understand intellectually.

But it is also evident that by referring to how they experience their own body in the clothes they wear the women also place their statements beyond dispute. First of all, no-one can deny that they feel what they say that they feel. Whether you actually were overdressed at a party, or if red becomes you or you can only wear tight pants are questions that people may very well disagree on. Second, such statements contribute to presenting the women as individuals and thus competent clothes consumers. They avoid appearing as dependent marionettes who dress as fashion dictates, the employers expect or the husband demands. This aspect is particularly prominent in relation to fashion. The comparison of the two etiquette books shows that in connection with clothes consumption this demand particularly applies to women. But in society as a whole it may seem as if we are moving towards a development where power is covered up and hidden, for instance in emotions. Clarke and Miller (2002) connected the insecurity associated with the choice of clothes with the difficulties in interpreting these in a time characterised by freedom and norm dissolution in clothes conventions. With reference to Habermas they argue that we add to our own burden when we try to create our own norms at a time when the importance of society's norm setters is weakened. One interpretation of this is that the norms per se have not become easier to break, but that they have become less accessible. The discussion of women's clothes in *Skikk og bruk* (Lundsgaard 2005) at least suggests that this may be the case. Power has by become something internal to the individual, to use Foucault's conception. We follow rules in which we only know of when experiencing the physical aversion we feel when breaking them.

The rise of *comfort* as an indisputable value that is experienced when the body is enveloped frictionless by its physical environment enabled extensive consumption. It made luxury right and necessary. At the same time it enabled a new control mechanism. As soon as the population had learnt to experience clean clothes and a newly washed body as well-being, people would do anything to achieve it. Rules and regulations became not only unnecessary, but unnecessary to the extent that the reasons once enlisted for introducing the rules can be forgotten.

In the well-being of being well-dressed the body glides frictionless not only into its immediate physical surroundings, but also into a space of norms and expectations. Comfort provided the retail industry with an irrevocable argument. This also applies to well-being in the social space. It creates, so to speak, an insatiable “need”. Because the women who speak with greater assurance about how they experience being dressed than about how their clothes in fact are thereby lose the power to define precisely that. They know what they feel, but often not why or what it takes to achieve well-being. If authors of etiquette literature are unwilling to help clarify, the clothes industry with associated branches on glossy paper is more than willing. They go on tirelessly about how you will feel good and well-dressed if you only buy the newest clothes. As we all know this may be true, but it is a truth with an exceptionally short lifespan. Whether the aim is to follow or break norms one needs to know *what* is required in order to feel good.

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