

Editor in chief: Laura Cadiz
Editorial Editors: Bret Jacobson, Laura Lucas
Newsroom: (541) 346-5511
Room 300, Erb Memorial Union
P.O. Box 3159, Eugene, OR 97403
E-mail: ode@oregon.uoregon.edu

Perspectives

Fashionable discrimination

The way people look can be deceptive; judging them by their appearance doesn't often get you anywhere

"Are you all right?"
"No ... I'm not all right. I'm hurt. I'm pissed. Gotta find a new job."

In my favorite movie, "Grosse Pointe Blank," a John Doe convenience store employee is upset when assassins blow up his place of employment.

This spring, I got rejected from medical school, which is the pre-med equivalent of detonating a bomb in a 7-11 microwave. Not as dangerous, but nearly as devastating. Man, now I have to find a job. That means resumés, thank-you notes and interviews. I think I can expect to wear a tie more often this summer than in the rest of my life combined.

Which is actually OK. I like dressing "nice." What does it mean, though, that people are judged by their appearance so strongly? Living in Eugene, as college students, it is easy to think that most people are more accepting of all kinds of dress. But few of us have escaped dress-stereotyping entirely.



Jonathan Gruber

For example, I got lucky at the senior send-off last week. They erroneously sent me an invitation last year; I never got one for this year. But I talked my way in, basically no problem. That was really surprising, though, because my old neighbor from the residence halls had just told me that without an invitation, they would not let him in.

I'm sure that image was not the only determinant in the way we were treated differently. But the fact remains that I was dressed in my nice uniform for my hospital volunteer shift, and as I recall he was dressed pretty average for a college student — "ventilated" jeans, T-shirt, a few old stains here and there.

In some situations, people who are dressed nice (or in other ways portray wealth, power or "respectability") do get special treatment. But when people dress "down" from the societal average, I do worry that we (myself included) are too apt to form negative opinions about people who don't meet an artificial expectation.

The lab I work in is basically isolated from the outside world. There's no reason for strangers to pass through the fourth floor of Onyx Bridge, believe me, and at least once before, a major theft occurred because we didn't take enough notice when a stranger walked around up there.

In other words, if we don't know you, you are automatically "suspicious."

So when someone was poking around Thursday, my co-workers were worried. By their accounts (I didn't arrive until he was already in handcuffs), his actions were suspicious and downright illegal, and I think it was the right thing to do to call the Office of Public Safety. Imagine, though, if he had been exactly the same person with the same intent to do whatever it was he intended to do, but he had dressed in shirt and tie. It would have been a lot easier to not question this person if he looked like a lost professor or guest.

Is this a problem? Sure it is. As far as I know, the crimes committed in this society are largely unrelated to the act of dressing and grooming. Even if everybody gets over the barriers of sexual orientation, race, accent and age, we'll still have these appearance perceptions to deal with.

The root of the problem, and one possible solution, is to modify the training of our children. Because kids are inexperienced in judging character, we tell them that in an emergency, someone in uniform is the best place to turn. The unfortunate flip-side to this is that people in uniform can get away with things that anyone else can't. You would never see a herd of kids pointing and yelling "stranger" to anyone in a police costume, regardless of the person's authenticity.

Children also grow up with the deep-rooted inclination to view certain personas as trustworthy and others as suspicious. Unfortunately, once we grow up, this becomes an unnecessary process that simply perpetuates the divisions between people.

As many of us make the transition into the "real world," we are faced with a particular challenge. Even if we have lessened our tendencies to judge appearances in college, many of us will be entering a world in which such criteria



Bryan Dixon Emerald

are the norm. It will be very difficult to simultaneously honor our college ideals and avoid ruffling the feathers of people who can influence our futures.

Where's the balance? It will vary from person to person, but perhaps the common theme should be one of reflection. Every time you make a judgment of someone, step back and ask yourself what you got out of it. As long as you maintain some self-surveillance, you'll never wake up one day and wonder what happened to the young idealist who graduated way back in 2000.

Jonathan Gruber is a columnist for the Oregon Daily Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald. He can be reached via e-mail at jgruber@gladstone.uoregon.edu.

CORRECTION

The story "Political wrangling heats up in City Council" (ODE May 26) reported that Bonnie Bettman beat Mike Sherlock in the Ward 2 race during the May 16 primary election. In fact, Bettman beat Tracy Olsen in Ward 3 and Betty Taylor beat Sherlock in Ward 2.

In the same story, an incorrect photograph ran to identify City Councilor Taylor.

The Emerald regrets these errors.