

Clothing as Cure: Dress as Moral Treatment in Psychiatry

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Abstract : In the psychiatric interview, the mental status exam begins with an assessment of the patient's appearance, noting aspects such as grooming and hygiene. However, it is not well established whether further examination of a patient's attire can provide further useful information. The popular assumption is that those who are mentally unwell will manifest this in unusual clothing. In the moral treatment of the 19th century, proper clothing was also seen as a pivotal therapeutic concern. This project examines assumptions about clothing, both as a reflection of and treatment for psychopathology. The methodology considers the opinions expressed in 19th century art and journals, as well as asylum rules, in comparison to contemporary psychiatric practice and research evidence. Per moral treatment in the 19th century, self-discipline and a proper environment would cure insanity. Madness was evident in the opposite of these ideals—such as ragged or ‘improper’ clothing—and rules about attire delineated the most correct (i.e. sane) ways to dress. These rules applied not only for the patients but also for staff. Despite these ideals, accusations were made that asylums, in fact, dressed patients to look more mentally unwell and further removed patients’ agency. Current practice in psychiatric hospitals retains remnants of moral treatment. Patients are expected to dress ‘appropriately’ while retaining some choice to build self-esteem, with arguments about safety being used to justify the removal of choice. Meanwhile, staff is expected to dress professionally and as role models, based on the assumption that conservative dress is least pathological. Research on this subject is limited, and there is little evidence that discrete psychiatric diagnoses manifest in the particular dress, nor that conservative dress would result in a reduction in pathology. Dressing unusually has become a privilege granted only to those without association with mental illness.

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