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The Actor–Observer Effect As It Pertains to the Brigham Young University Honor Code

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Since researchers first documented the actor–observer effect in 1972, surprisingly little research has been done on the relationship between this effect and personal codes of morality. This study sought to explore this potential relationship by testing the strength of the actor–observer effect as it pertains to the Brigham Young University Honor Code, a set of strict moral guidelines which all BYU students agree to observe. Students in this study were questioned as to why they might violate the Honor Code or why they thought others might. It was discovered that the actor–observer effect was only partially supported. Students attributed reasons for possible personal violations to situational variables but did not significantly attribute the violations of others to dispositional causes. Possible reasons for these findings are discussed.

People give different reasons as to why certain behaviors are performed when looking at their own behavior and when looking at the behavior of others. This phenomena is known as the actor–observer effect (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). The actor–observer effect states that the actor (the person carrying out the action) will attribute behaviors to situational reasons (e.g., “I threw my trash on the ground because the university doesn’t provide enough trash cans”) and that the observer (the person observing someone else performing an action) will attribute another’s behavior to dispositional reasons (e.g., “They threw their trash on the ground because they don’t care about the environment”). Research has shown that the actor–observer effect is most likely to occur when the behaviors being performed are perceived as negative (Green, Lightfoot, Bandy, & Buchanan, 1985).

Since the time that the actor–observer effect was first documented there has been some controversy concerning this phenomenon. Some studies have found no evidence of the actor–observer

effect at all (Monson, Tanke, & Lund, 1980; Lewis, 1995), while other studies have supported the presence of the effect (Mitchell & Wood, 1980). Although there have been arguments over the past 30 years, the actor–observer effect is still used to explain differences regarding people’s attributions for behavior in certain situations. Studies have shown that in socially undesirable situations observers will attribute behavior to situational factors, which have been shown to be related to the observer’s attitude toward the actor (Anderson, 1985; Cadinu, Arcuri, & Kodilja, 1993). According to Jones and Nisbett (1972), when the actor is looking outward and the observer is focused on the actor’s behavior, the stage is set to study the actor–observer effect. Many of the studies regarding the actor–observer effect were done in a laboratory setting involving hypothetical situations (West, Gunn, & Chernicky, 1975; Miller, Jones, & Hinkle, 1981; Malle, 1999). Those done in the field often involved ordinary behavior such as the choice of a college major or the choice of a girlfriend (Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecet, 1973). To test the effect, behaviors will be observed in real-world

situations in which the behavior is socially unacceptable. Few studies have addressed this phenomenon in relation to morality and honesty, and no studies have addressed this topic in relation to the BYU Honor Code (see Appendix D).

This study will examine the actor–observer effect as it pertains to BYU students and the Honor Code, while adding to the research started by Jones and Nisbett (1972). The Honor Code is a set of standards, morals, ethics, and behaviors expected of Brigham Young University students. All students at BYU must read and sign the Honor Code prior to their acceptance to the university. Failure to comply with the Honor Code may elicit disciplinary action and can result in termination from the university.

This study will test the actor–observer effect and record the different reasons people attribute to breaking the BYU Honor Code. Under the assumption that rule-breaking is socially unacceptable, we hypothesize that subjects, as actors, will distance themselves from the situation by stating situational reasons for their own rule-breaking (e.g., “I cheated on my test because the teacher didn’t give us enough time to study”). This hypothesis will be tested by questioning the subjects regarding real-life situations in which they could be involved and then allowing them to assign either situational or dispositional reasons to the behavior. Additionally, subjects will also be questioned about the behavior of others and will be allowed to attribute the behavior to either situational or dispositional reasons. We hypothesize that, as an observer, the subject will attribute another’s behavior to dispositional reasons (e.g., “That person cheated on the test because he’s dishonest”).

Method

Participants

There were 73 university students participating in this study. Participants were between the ages of 18–50 with 17 males and 56 females. The students who participated were recruited from various psychology courses on campus.

Materials

Consent Form. A consent form was created and handed out separately from the surveys in order to keep the identity of participants anonymous. The consent form included the following information: the identities of the principal investigators conducting the survey, the approximate time required for completion of the survey, the number of questions on the survey, the benefits and risks associated with participation, the assurance of anonymity, and contact information.

Actor survey. Two separate surveys were prepared for this study. The actor survey asked participants to suppose that they themselves had violated various aspects of the Honor Code and then consider the reason why they think they would have done this. One question for each aspect of the Honor Code was listed for a total of 15 questions, each addressing a different possible violation of the Honor Code. An example of an actual question from the actor survey follows: “Suppose you have cheated on an assignment, quiz, or test. What reason would you cite for doing this?” Participants were free to answer any way they wished. The purpose of the actor survey was to determine if the participant would attribute his/her own behavior to either dispositional or situational reasons (see Appendix A).

Observer survey. The observer survey asked participants if they have ever observed or known about somebody else violating the Honor Code and the reasoning behind the violation. The observer survey used the same procedure as the actor survey by creating a question referring to each aspect of the Honor Code. An example from the observer survey follows: “Have you ever observed or known about someone plagiarizing a paper or assignment? If yes, why do you think they did this?” Participants were free to answer as they wished. The purpose of the observer survey was to determine if the participant would attribute somebody else’s perceived deviant behavior to either dispositional or situational reasons (see Appendix B).

The qualitative answers obtained from the completed surveys were analyzed by research team members and coded either “situational” or “dispositional.”

Procedures

Participants were recruited from various psychology classes at Brigham Young University. The surveys were administered in the classrooms immediately after instruction ended. Test administrators consisted of members of the research team: three males and three females (ages ranging from 18–26). The consent forms were handed out and subsequently collected by researchers previous to administering the surveys to participants. This was done in order to ensure total anonymity. The two different forms of the surveys were randomly assigned to participants. Participants were not aware that there were two separate surveys being administered at the same time. After participants completed their respective survey, surveys were collected and participants were dismissed.

Results

The following data were recorded: participants' responses for all open-ended questions on both the actor survey and the observer survey. Because the data was qualitative, the research group had to interpret the responses. In order to do this, the group met together to read through all the surveys and discuss all responses for each survey question and develop themes that best represented the responses. Collectively, it was decided which themes fit under which category.

Two categories were designated: "situational" and "dispositional." For example, one question on the actor survey asks: "Suppose while on campus you have worn shorts or a skirt that violates the appropriate length standard as described in the Honor Code. What reason would you cite for doing this?" Examples of responses that were coded under the situational category were: "I had nothing else to wear" or "to play sports." These responses fit under the situational category because each response places blame on external causes (something else or someone else besides the person [actor] doing it). Examples of responses that were coded under the dispositional category were: "It almost fit the

requirements" or "because it is cute." These responses fit under the dispositional category because each response indicates internal causes (i.e., the person is taking responsibility for her/his actions), meaning that the actor was fully aware of the Honor Code but violated the rule simply because she/he wanted to, attributing the blame to her/his self. A parallel question was posed on the observer survey: "Have you ever seen anyone else at any time while on campus wearing shorts or a skirt that violates the appropriate length standard as described in the Honor Code?" Persons that answered yes explained why they thought others did this. Examples of responses that were coded under the situational category were: "Perhaps they were hot" or "they didn't know." These responses are both situational because the observer places blame on external causes. Responses that fit under the dispositional category were: "They wanted to be fashionable" or "they didn't care." These responses are dispositional because the observer indicates that the actor chose to do these things and is internally to blame (internal causes).

This study had one independent variable with two levels: "actor" and "observer." Participants who responded to the actor survey were asked to imagine themselves in a situation in which they were breaking the Honor Code and to decide why they would do this. Participants who responded to the observer survey were asked to give reasons why they thought others would violate rules in the Honor Code. Responses to questions were collapsed into two categories: situational and dispositional, with the total number of situational responses and the total number of dispositional responses recorded. There were two dependent variables present: situational and dispositional. A multivariate analysis of variance submitting the two surveys (actor and observer) as independent variables and the frequencies of situational and dispositional attributions as dependent variables was performed: multivariate $F(1,71) = 113.33, p < .0001$. These results indicated that there was a significant difference between responses that were situational and dispositional. The univariate analysis of variance was examined to see where these differences occurred. When participants were in either condition, actor or observer, and responses were dispositional these were the results: $F(1, 71) = 2.24, p > .138, M=2.52,$

SD=1.79, indicating there were no significant differences in the number of dispositional attributions made between actor attributions or observer attributions. When participants were in either condition, actor or observer, and responses were situational, these were the results: $F(1,71) = 206.29$, $p < .0001$, $M=9.75$, $SD=2.4$. This indicates significance between situational attributions made between the two conditions.

When participants were in the actor condition and responses were situational, the results were $M=9.75$, $SD=2.4$. When participants were in the observer condition and responses were situational, the results were $M=2.52$, $SD=1.79$. These findings indicate that when participants were in the actor condition and imagined themselves breaking the Honor Code, their attributions were situational; or they placed the blame on external causes when explaining their own deviant behavior. However, when asked to explain the non-compliant behavior of others, participants were far less likely to place the blame on external causes. This finding supports the actor–observer effect, which says when an individual is placed in the actor condition she/he will give situational reasons for doing the act.

When participants were in the actor condition and responses were dispositional, the results were $M=5.45$, $SD=3.19$. When participants were in the observer condition and responses were dispositional, the results were $M=6.58$, $SD=3.19$. This data does not clearly support the other half of the actor–observer effect (i.e., that an individual will make more dispositional attributions for the deviant behavior of others); nevertheless, the means for the two groups are in the appropriate directions.

Discussion

A very interesting development occurred upon analysis of the data. The proposed hypothesis was only partially supported, allowing much speculation as to the cause. The hypothesis was strongly supported when it stated that BYU students would attribute their own Honor Code violations to situational reasons ($p < .0001$), but was not supported when it stated that they would attribute the Honor Code violations of

other BYU students to dispositional reasons ($p > .138$). Simply put, the participants significantly attributed both their own behavior and the behavior of others to situational reasons (in other words, they cited reasons that diverted the blame of the action away from themselves and others instead of citing personal shortcomings that could be responsible for the action). The hypothesis predicted that this would be the case only when examining their own behavior, but not when examining the behavior of others. Although analysis of the data showed non-significance in the case of dispositional attributions, the dispositional means are supportive of the hypothesis in the sense that they are skewed in the appropriate direction (albeit non-significantly). There is a higher mean where the hypothesis would predict it to be: more dispositional attributions given on the observer survey ($M = 6.576$) than on the actor survey ($M = 5.450$). This was anticipated, but a far stronger degree was expected.

This study is unique in the sense that the participants were of a subcultural group (namely, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [LDS]) and therefore perhaps the results cannot be fully generalized to the average population. This study, quite simply, cannot compare to previous work done on the subject because of the unique nature of the circumstances. However, it can lend support to Jones and Nisbett's original discovery of the actor–observer effect. Because this study found partial significance of this effect as it pertains to a moral code of behavior, this not only uncovers new questions to be asked about the actor–observer effect, but perhaps strengthens the validity of this effect by demonstrating that evidence can be found in more specific settings than has been explored in the past. As stated earlier, surprisingly little research has been done on this effect as it pertains to morality. The only previous literature that was found relating to this topic was an article exploring cheating on tests and dishonesty (Mitchell, 2001). This BYU Honor Code study not only asked about cheating on tests and assignments, but also proceeded to explore more extensive moral issues. For this reason, this study is set apart from previous research that has been

done. Although it incorporates what has been done before, it goes in a new direction that has not yet been explored.

As previously stated, the findings of this research would be hard to generalize to the average population because of the abnormal pool of participants. This is an obvious limitation of this study. Apart from lending support to the original actor-observer effect, this study can serve as a very helpful starting point for additional research to be done on the relationship between adherence to a strict moral code and a person's perception of others. A strong limitation to this study is that it is not able to say that the actor-observer effect can be applied to issues of morality solely from the results of this study. All that the results of this study indicate is that the actor-observer effect has been shown to be partially applicable to issues of morality within the confines of BYU. To make the hypothesis more encompassing, research that takes into account other religions and people away from religious settings would have to be conducted concerning issues of morality. This study would be useful to serve as a tool of comparison.

A potential confounding variable to this study was that all of the participants were recruited from psychology courses. Even though not all of the participants were psychology majors, the fact that all of the participants shared this in common might have had a biasing effect on the results. Perhaps the students were familiar with the actor-observer effect and it biased their answers. Also, the fact the surveys were taken in class, or right after the psychology class ended, could play a role in the results. Perhaps participants felt as if they were rushed and therefore did not spend enough time to thoroughly complete the survey. Or maybe there were distractions present that might have taken their focus off the survey.

Another factor that should be discussed is the way that participants' answers were designated situational or dispositional. There were many common answers that the surveys shared which were easily categorized as one of the two attributions. For example, there were many instances in which people would answer, "I don't like this rule,"

"I wanted to be comfortable," or "It's a habit." These were easily categorized as dispositional because the participant attributed the action to personal choices or characteristics. On the other hand, if participants responded, "There wasn't enough time," "It was a hot day," or "My roommates invited them over," these were easily categorized as situational because the participant blamed the deviant behavior on outside circumstances or situations. However, some common answers were debated among the members of the research team as to how they should be categorized. Many responses said something similar to "Because everyone else was doing it" or "Peer pressure." This was initially debated because the person's attributions could be looked at in two different ways. Perhaps they were saying that the action was being performed because the situation demanded it, or perhaps they saying that the action was being performed because the person him/herself was personally desirous to do what others were doing. Another debatable response was in regards to the cheating on a test or assignment question. A common response to this was "To get good grades." Again, this could be looked at in two different ways. Perhaps they are saying that the situation of the test or the assignment being too demanding caused the dishonesty, or perhaps that a personal determination to "get good grades" warranted the action. Eventually both of these situations were deemed situational responses upon agreement by the members of the research team and the faculty mentor. However, it is important to note this because in a different setting with different researchers, a different conclusion could have been reached with just as much validity as this one, possibly changing the outcome of the study.

Another severe limit that should also be recognized is that the actor survey was only able to ask the participant to "suppose" they had broken the Honor Code and not if they had actually done so. Stronger results would have been achieved if the survey had been allowed to ask about actual Honor Code infractions because the "why" part of the question would have been more accurate.

The implications of this research are extremely interesting and unexpected. Upon analysis of the data and the discovery that the hypothesis was only partially supported, several different aspects can be explored.

Having previously clarified that this data is primarily suitable to be applied to the population of BYU, the implications must adhere to these same limitations. The most unexpected result of this research was that actors and observers alike significantly attributed behaviors to situational causes, rather than observers significantly attributing behaviors to dispositional reasons. If this is applied to the participant-group, it could be said that students at BYU were less likely to blame morally deviant behaviors on personal characteristics and instead were more likely to excuse the person by citing outside circumstances or forces. Arguments could be made that this is due to the intensely religious atmosphere that BYU students are exposed to and that students are unwilling to deviate from the strict Christian code they are taught. Christian doctrine teaches that judging others is not acceptable and that God is the only one who can judge. In the Bible (which is a primary scriptural text in the LDS religion) it states in St. Matthew chapter seven, verse one: "Judge not, that ye be not judged." It appears that cultural factors may have contributed to the lower than expected frequency of situational attributions made by observers.

Another argument could be made that this attitude towards others could be related to the observer's familiarity with the person carrying out the deviant behavior. As previously stated, studies have shown that in socially undesirable situations observers will make situational attributions, although this has been shown to be related to the observer's attitude toward the actor (Anderson, 1985; Cadinu, Arcuri, & Kodilja, 1993). The participants may have felt a certain camaraderie with those about whom they were referring when they filled out the survey because of the community-like environment that a strict religious school may create, or they may have personally known the person. Everyone must sign the Honor Code before enrolling, so essentially everyone is in the same boat. Since the Honor Code is considered strict, deviations from it may not be uncommon and may be looked at as trivial.

An interesting way to look at the results is by examining them question by question. It was found that there were certain questions that elicited an overwhelming number of either situational or dispositional answers. For example, "Have you ever observed someone else taking their shoes off on campus?"

elicited mostly situational reasons for both the actor survey and observer survey. An analysis of each question is included in Table 1-A (Appendix C) (see Appendix A and Appendix B for exact survey questions).

As stated previously, the implications of this research are somewhat limited to the population of BYU (and perhaps, one might argue, the population of the LDS Church). Because of these limitations, there is a plethora of additional research than can be done relating to morality and the actor-observer effect. The question of "Does the actor-observer effect apply to religious groups?" could be asked. To truly test this, new studies would have to operate on a more encompassing scale, including various religious groups and asking questions relating to morality. After this question is asked, another question such as "Why (or why not)?" could be addressed. This could lead to several new insights into the effects of religiosity or abiding to a strict moral code on people's perceptions of others. The actor-observer effect has been shown to be at least partially applicable to BYU (therefore LDS) students, and to find out if this has universal implications for all religions and moral adherence would be valuable in the sense that it might reinforce the value that morality plays in someone's life, especially in how they perceive others.

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Appendix A

Actor survey

Please provide the following information. Write in or circle the appropriate response:

Age _____ Gender: M F

Year in school: Fr So Jr Sr

Marital Status: Single Married

Religious Affiliation: LDS Non-LDS

Major/Minor _____

Please answer the following questions AS YOU THINK THEY WOULD APPLY TO YOU AND YOUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. If you have had an experience pertaining to any of the outlined rules, you may use your experience to answer the question, but it is not required. Please DO NOT refer to the experience of anyone else but yourself. If you have not had an experience pertaining to any of the outlined rules, please imagine yourself in that situation and answer how you think you would act in that situation.

1a. Suppose you had a member of the opposite sex in your apartment after hours in violation of the Honor Code. What reason would you cite for doing this?

1b. Suppose you have been in the apartment of a member of the opposite sex after hours in violation of the Honor Code. What reason would you cite for doing this?

2. Suppose you have cheated on an assignment, quiz, or test. What reason would you cite for doing this?

3. Suppose you have been guilty of plagiarism. What reason would you cite for doing this?

4. Suppose while on campus you have worn shorts or a skirt that violates the appropriate length standard as described in the Honor Code. What reason would you cite for doing this?

5. Suppose you removed your shoes for any reason

while at any public area of campus. What reason would you cite for doing this?

6. Suppose you have worn an article of clothing deemed inappropriate by the Honor Code (sleeveless, strapless, backless, form fitting, or revealing) while at BYU. What reason would you cite for doing this?

7a. Suppose as a visitor you have been in the bedroom of a member of the opposite sex in violation of the honor code. What reason would you cite for doing this?

7b. Suppose you have allowed a visiting member of the opposite sex into your room in violation of the Honor Code. What reason would you cite for doing this?

8. Suppose you have possessed, served, or consumed alcoholic beverages, tobacco, tea, coffee, or harmful drugs while at BYU. What reason would you cite for doing this?

9. Suppose while at BYU you have been involved in gambling. What reason would you cite for doing this?

10. Suppose you have had involvement with pornographic, erotic, or indecent material while at BYU. What reason would you cite for doing this?

11. If male, suppose you have come to school without adhering to the "clean shaven" requirement specified in the Honor Code. What reason would you cite for doing this?

12. If female, suppose while at BYU you have worn more than one set of earrings. What reason would you cite for doing this?

13. Suppose you have used "unclean language" (profanity, obscene jokes or stories, etc.) while at BYU. What reason would you cite for doing this?

14. Suppose there has been a time when you were not actively attending church while at BYU. What reason would you cite for doing this?

15. Are you familiar with the rules and standards as outlined in the Honor Code?

Appendix B

Observer survey

Please provide the following information. Write in or circle the appropriate response:

Age _____ Gender: M F

Year in school: Fr So Jr Sr

Marital Status: Single Married

Religious Affiliation: LDS Non-LDS

Major/Minor _____

Please answer the following questions AS THEY APPLY TO OTHERS AND YOUR OBSERVATIONS OF THEIR ACTIONS. Please DO NOT refer to your personal actions. For the first part of each question, please circle YES or NO. For the second part of each question, please write complete answers that address what is being asked.

1. Have you ever observed someone else having a member of the opposite sex in their apartment after hours in violation of the honor code (if they were single)?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

2. Have you ever observed or known about someone else cheating on an assignment, quiz, or test?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

3. Have you ever observed or known about someone plagiarizing a paper or assignment?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

4. Have you seen anyone else at any time while on campus wearing shorts or a skirt that violates the appropriate length standard as described in the honor code?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

5. Have you ever observed or known about anyone else removing their shoes for any reason in public?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

6. Have you ever seen someone else wearing an article of clothing deemed inappropriate by the honor code (sleeveless, strapless, backless, form fitting, or revealing) while at BYU?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

7. Have you ever observed or known about someone else letting a visiting member of the opposite sex into their room?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

8. Have you ever observed or known about someone else possessing, serving, or consuming alcoholic beverages, tobacco, tea, coffee, or harmful drugs while at BYU?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

9. Have you ever observed or known about someone else being involved in gambling while a student at BYU?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

10. Have you ever observed or known about someone else being involved with pornographic, erotic, or indecent material as a student at BYU?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

11. Have you ever observed or known about a male coming to school without adhering to the "clean shaven" requirement specified in the Honor Code?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

12. Have you ever observed or known about a female wearing more than one set of earrings while a student at BYU?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

13. Have you ever observed or known about anyone else using "unclean language" (profanity, obscene jokes or stories, etc.) while a student at BYU?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

14. Have you ever observed or known about someone not actively attending church while a student at BYU?

YES NO

If yes, why do you think they did this?

15. Do you think the general population of BYU is familiar with the Honor Code?

YES NO

Appendix C

Data

Tables 1 and 2 give the raw amounts of situational and dispositional answers received for each question asked on both the actor survey and observer survey. (See the surveys included as Appendix A [actor survey] and Appendix B [observer survey] for exact questions).

Question	Situational	Dispositional
1a	36	7
1b	35	7
2	23	19
3	25	15
4	30	12
5	33	11
6	23	20
7a	33	7
7b	35	6
8	16	20
9	15	23
10	19	16
11	8	4
12	15	15
13	19	21
14	25	15

Question	Situational	Dispositional
1	10	21
2	8	13
3	3	5
4	5	24
5	15	12
6	3	25
7	13	15
8	0	11
9	1	13
10	2	7
11	11	22
12	5	11
13	2	23
14	5	19

Appendix D

BYU Honor Code statement

We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things. (Thirteenth Article of Faith) As a matter of personal commitment, the faculty, administration, staff, and students of Brigham Young University, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, BYU–I, and LDS Business College seek to demonstrate in daily living on and off-campus those moral virtues encompassed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and will:

- Be honest
- Live a chaste and virtuous life
- Obey the law and all campus policies
- Use clean language
- Respect others
- Abstain from alcoholic beverages, tobacco, tea, coffee, and substance abuse
- Participate regularly in church services
- Observe Dress and Grooming Standards
- Encourage others in their commitment to comply with the Honor Code.

Specific policies embodied in the Honor Code include (1) the Academic Honesty Policy, (2) the Dress and Grooming Standards, (3) the Residential Living Standards, and (4) the Continuing Student Ecclesiastical Endorsement Requirement. (Refer to institutional policies for more detailed information.)

Men

A clean and well cared for appearance should be maintained. Hairstyles should be clean and neat, avoiding extreme styles or colors and trimmed above the collar leaving the ear uncovered. Sideburns should not extend below the earlobe or onto the cheek. If worn, mustaches should be neatly trimmed and may not extend beyond or below the corners of the mouth. Men are expected to be clean-shaven; beards are not acceptable. Earrings and other body piercing are not acceptable. Shoes should be worn in all public campus areas.

Women

A clean and well-cared-for appearance should be maintained. Clothing is inappropriate when it is sleeveless, strapless, backless, or revealing; has slits above the knee; or is form fitting. Dresses and skirts must be knee length or longer. Hairstyles should be clean and neat, avoiding extreme styles and colors. Excessive ear piercing (more than one per ear) and all other body piercing are not acceptable. Shoes should be worn in all public campus areas.

