

Appearances at the Office

After graduating from college, Maria had a hard time landing her first job. Eventually, her perseverance paid off. After months of searching, and countless applications, she managed to find a full-time, entry-level position in a company she likes. After a couple of months on the job, though, Maria is convinced that her boss does not like her. It seems as if he often doesn't recognize her abilities or accomplishments. Additionally, she feels that several of her co-workers share a similarly unfavorable opinion of her.

When discussing her professional concerns with her parents, their response surprised her. They argued that she should start by trying to look more professional—if she dressed nicer and wore some make-up, maybe she would be taken more seriously. They also advised her to spend more money on cutting and styling her hair, and buying more expensive shoes. Maria's parents argued that immigrants like them often need to put in extra effort to look polished and professional in order to be seen as professional.

Maria finds this advice frustrating. She has little money to spend on expensive clothes, shoes, make-up, and haircuts. She has even less interest in these things. She believes that she should be judged by her work performance, not by how she looks. She also resents the gender roles that govern the way women dress and look. She often hears disparaging comments about how her female co-workers dress, no matter how much effort they put in; yet, two of her male co-workers who wear the same shabby clothes every day, and who don't regularly cut (or even wash) their hair, have reputations as geniuses. Their style (or lack thereof) seems to work in their favor by reinforcing the perception that they are too smart and too focused on their work to be concerned about appearances. Just thinking about this double standard makes Maria annoyed. She has no desire to follow unfair gender norms, put effort into challenging people's stereotypes about immigrants, "look like a grown up" (as her parents put it), or spend a significant amount of her salary (which would be better spent paying down her student loans) on her appearance.

At the same time, Maria secretly agrees with her parents. She thinks that if she followed their advice, her boss and co-workers probably would take her more seriously. If she wants to increase her chances of receiving a promotion or of getting a strong reference, maybe she should just do these things, even if she doesn't think she should need to.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) To what extent (if any) is it legitimate to consider personal style and grooming when evaluating an employee? Does it matter what the job is? For example, does it make a difference if the employee works in an office or if they work with the public?
- (2) How far is it appropriate for an individual to go when modifying their behavior to follow norms that they consider unjust or otherwise objectionable?
- (3) Should Maria follow her parents' advice?