A SOCIOLOGY OF ATTRACTIVENESS

Sylvia Holla*

INTRODUCTION

PEOPLE CAN BE attracted to a lot of things: a nice car, interesting conversation, large, or small breasts. Even though everybody seems to have their own personal preferences when it comes to finding other people attractive, there are certain regularities in these tastes to be found. For instance, in a fairly recent discussion it has been stated that female attractiveness is generally defined by looks and sexual extravagance, instead of personality or 'substance':

"We want to break with the idea that femininity is defined solely by beauty. Normal has to become normal again; the extreme cannot be the norm. Sexual freedom is not an equivalent to complete extravagance and sexual banality." ([www.beperkthoudbaar.info/manifest;](www.beperkthoudbaar.info/manifest) translated by author).

In the fall of 2007 this statement got through in parliament discussion. Minister Plasterk of Education, Culture and Science introduced his new 'emancipation nota', in which he warned for the 'sexualisation of Dutch society', in which women and girls would be more and more defined by their sex and would therefore be seen as an object of lust (OCW 2007).

FOLLOWING THIS DISCUSSION, I became fascinated by the moral objections that were posed against what other people find attractive or not. Consequently, I stumbled upon the following questions, which later

* Sylvia Holla is a student in the Research Master Social Sciences at the University of Amsterdam. She is a researcher in the function of Academy Assistant, funded by the Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her main research subjects are male and female beauty and sexuality. She is currently researching sexual meaning-construction amongst teenagers in the Netherlands.

became the foundation for my research: firstly: what do people find attractive in one another, and secondly: how is it that these ideas about attractiveness in some cases show major regularities and in other cases very much collide?

THIS PAPER PRESENTS a study of *the social organisation of human attractiveness* for different groups within Dutch society. It builds on fieldwork that was conducted in 2008 as part of my BA in sociology.[i] I have looked into the ideas on attractiveness, within the framework of selecting a partner (i.e. a love relationship), and the extent to which these ideas are related to the specific social contexts of people. In doing so, I merely placed focus on the underlying classification schemas of class and gender, supposing that these features have a profound influence on classifications of attractiveness.[ii]

IN THE FIRST paragraph of this paper I will introduce the theoretical framework from which attractiveness is understood in this paper. Subsequently, I will describe the research population and research method that has been used to conduct the study in paragraph two. Paragraph three represents the main body of this paper: here it will become apparent to what extent the classifications of attractiveness are related to the classification schemas related to social class and gender. In the fourth paragraph I will present my conclusions, and with that formulate an answer to the main question posed in this paper.

ATTRACTIVENESS AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

ATTRACTIVENESS IS A very broad concept and should not be confused with sole 'beauty' or 'sexual attraction'. Attractiveness between people is made up out of several features of the human (bodily) personality; a complete classification of attractiveness is given on behalf of various aspects. These aspects taken together, in their highest subjective valuation, can be defined as an *attractiveness ideal*. Attractiveness ideals represent a shared meaning of (a group of) people about what is attractive in a person. Within such an ideal the emphasis can be placed on different qualities like possessions, intellect, appearance, sexual tastes or social skills. However, what people define as attractive qualities differs over time and place. Because the ideals are very much related to their context, they exist in many types and are of all eras. The substantial meaning of ideals is never resolute and a specific meaning of what is or is not attractive is never generally accepted by all people. In short, people have different ideas about what is or is not attractive and there always exists a struggle about these different meanings of attractiveness.

IN MY RESEARCH then, human attractiveness is understood as being shaped by historical, cultural and social contexts: as society changes, ideas on 'what is attractive' change, and although human attractiveness is partially explained by biological factors and is subject to psychosocial organisation, it is important to recognise that attractiveness attains meaning only within a certain culture and at a specific time-period. Individual ideas and classifications regarding attractiveness are the result of a constant negotiation between human possibilities

Ideas about what is or is not attractive are expressions of someone's cultural taste

and cultural opportunities. Thus, through this social constructionist approach, I have attempted to understand the processes through which social and individual meanings and practices are shaped and negotiated, in various social environments.

IN ORDER TO give this constructionist approach practical use, the so-called field-approach of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has offered helpful concepts for the study of the contextuality of attractiveness. His distinction theory lends itself perfectly for the study of the social organisation of attractiveness based on social class. Bourdieu called himself a constructionist as well as a structuralist: he views the social world as being made up by a variety of social fields, in which certain structures (forms of capital) come into play when it comes to the shaping of relations between people within these fields. Bourdieu elaborates on the way in which different classes are related to one another, by studying the differences in lifestyles and cultural tastes. Someone's cultural taste is not simply a matter of personal preference, but more than that it is an expression of the group he or she belongs to (Bourdieu 1979). He used the concept of capital to illustrate that people are positioned and position themselves according to the qualities and quantities of capital that are available to them. The class structure is depicted by Bourdieu in a 'social space', in which not only the quantities of capital that people possess play a structuring role, but also the composition of the various forms of capital.

WHAT PEOPLE DEFINE as an attractive person, thus what they classify as attractive qualities in themselves and others, can be translated into a certain preference or valuation of the different forms of capital Bourdieu writes about. Bourdieu speaks of mainly three forms of capital: cultural, social and economic capital. In short, cultural capital concerns the cultural competencies, thus the knowledge, skills and education a person has gained during the course of his life (Bourdieu 1984: 53). Social capital

consists of the social relations, i.e. the social network of a person, and the social competencies and skills that are necessary to gain and maintain these social relations (1984: 114). Economic capital entails the tangible economic resources a person has available to him, such as money and possessions (1984: 114-115).[iii] These forms of capital all play a certain role when people are being classified (and classify themselves) as more or less attractive. However, during my research I found that Bourdieu's conception of capital is not fully sufficient for constructing a complete depiction of the human personality. In a more general sense, Bourdieu pays a lot of attention to symbols, ideas, interests and cultural practices, but less attention to bodily, i.e. sexual, practices and the underlying power structures that influence the way that the body is being dealt with. During my interviews, the physical and sexual aspects of people appeared to be highly important features of social classifications, especially when one is talking about human attraction. Therefore, two other forms of capital are added to the three Bourdieudian forms: physical and sexual capital. According to Adam Green (2008), people also possess a certain amount of *erotic capital,* or in other words: sexual capital.[iv] Sexual capital concerns the sexual ways of behaving and the sexual ideas and preferences a person has (Green 2008). Physical capital entails the physical traits of a person (Paulle 2005: 13). These two forms, sexual and physical capital, are being used in addition to the three types of Bourdieu, in order to gain a more complete depiction of human attractiveness.

THE WAY IN which the various forms of capital are shaped and expressed is for a great deal determined by the specific 'dispositions' of a person, which are part of the habitus (Bourdieu 1984; Green 2008). Bourdieu describes the habitus as certain repertoires in feelings, behaviours and tastes (dispositions), by which the interactions between people gain a certain predictability. This collection of dispositions is learned through upbringing and education (Bourdieu 1984: 28). On many of these styles and thoughts people do not have to reflect in their daily lives; they have become part of their 'second nature' (Bourdieu 1984). Therefore, there is a certain obviousness about how people perceive themselves and the world around them. However, more than it is a matter of personal preference, tastes and behaviours are socially constructed within a socio-cultural structure, have become part of the structure and endorse this structure (Weeks 2006; James 2006; Green 2008; Bourdieu 1984). These socially constructed tastes, embedded within the habitus, can therefore be seen as embodied social structures (Bourdieu 1984: 467).

iii Bourdieu discusses a few other, more specific forms of capital, such as symbolic capital (1984: 291) and educational capital (1984: 63).

iv Where Green speaks of erotic capital, I would like to speak of sexual capital, for erotic capital is in my view too specific a term. For instance: a certain opinion on or attitude towards sex is seen to be sexual (in nature, or merely in the sense that the topic is sex), but not necessarily erotic, since the term 'erotic' implies that it elicits a sexual response from others; the term 'sexual' can also be an individual opinion, feeling or taste, which does not have to lead to eroticised contacts or relations.

10

THERE IS A certain regularity in the dispositions that are attached to different classes (Bourdieu 1984: 53). The 'dominant' class has an aesthetic disposition, with which this class distinguishes itself from lower classes. In this legitimate culture of the dominant class, emphasis is put on the *form* of observed objects, instead of the more obvious, *substantial* meanings, where lower classes put their emphasis on (Bourdieu 1984: 54). The working class characterises itself by the popular aesthetic, which fits to lower class culture (1984: 32). The taste of the middle class is projected by the 'middle-brow culture' (*culture moyenne*). This culture lies between legitimate culture and popular mass culture (1984: 327). Dispositions are then class bounded perceptions or valuations according to objects, such a human bodies and personalities, and make for a different way of looking, interpreting and taxing of objects. These 'ways of viewing objects' and the determining of the symbolic and cultural value of those objects are therefore socially constituted (Bourdieu 1984: 16).

ATTRACTIVENESS CAN BE seen as a means to attract a good partner (in sex, or love, as is researched in this paper), but it can also be helpful in gaining other things, such as a good job or a lot of self-confidence. However, in different settings and situations, what is seen as attractive can differ profoundly. For instance, when one is applying for a job at university, it is to be expected that cultural, i.e. educational, capital plays a more important role than for instance physical capital. However, when a person is going out in a club and looking for a one-night-stand, a low-cut t-shirt and sexy attitude are probably more effective for attaining quick sex than making an intellectual statement on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. Hence, the value that is attached to a certain form of capital is very much dependent on the space, situation or 'field' a person finds him- or herself in. According to Bourdieu, a field is a certain 'social space' or arena, in which a struggle is being fought over the scarce goods that are at stake in the field (Bourdieu 1984: 175). The power in such fields increases in proportion to the extent to which someone is being classified as more attractive. The way in which the different forms of capital are valued is determined by the specific logic of the field (Pels 1989: 12). This logic of the field determines the 'rules of the game', and therefore defines which strategies are or are not successful in playing the game. The positions of persons or 'players' in a social field are interdependent and form a linked up 'game' in which people participate. This means that the value of someone's position in a field, the positive and negative effects that it entails, is dependent on all the other positions in the field (Bourdieu 1984: 245). This also means that within a field, there are dominant positions which have al lot of value, and dominated positions, which have

lower or even negative value. People with different positions within the field use different strategies to gain power and enhance their position in the field (retracting from these rules is not an option: no strategy is also a strategy). The ways in which actors shape their conduct is therefore only understandable in relation to the logic of the field, together with the position a person has within this field.

METHOD AND CASE

THE METHOD USED in this study of attractiveness is called Q methodology. Within this (fairly new) way of researching social phenomena, a combination was made between qualitative and quantitative research (for a more extensive explanation of this method, see Van Exel and De Graaf 2005). By using Q methodology, I gained insight in *what* people find attractive in one another and *why* they have this particular opinion or taste. I asked 24 respondents to rank a collection of separate statements that dealt with various aspects of attractiveness. After this ranking, I asked the respondents to explain why they ranked the statements as they did, by which I assessed the subjective meanings behind the valuations of statements. Furthermore, the respondents were asked to do a second ranking, but this time they had to rank pictures of Dutch television personalities (Chris Zegers, Katja Schuurman, and Chantal Janzen). By using statements as well as pictures to assess meanings of attractiveness, I gained insight into the effect of images on opinions as opposed to texts. For the implementation of the research I had to make a choice between various groups in Dutch society that I could interview. In this study I looked at (1) what men find attractive with regard to women and (2) what women find attractive with regard to men, within the context of searching and selecting a suitable partner for a love-relationship.[v] Besides that, I demarcated the research population to a certain age category, in order to be able to study ideas about attractiveness within one particular generation. For the practical reason of keeping my research doable within the given timeframe, I chose to only interview people from age 18 to 23 and to conduct the research within the urban area of Amsterdam. The people I interviewed have different educational levels, respectively university level (WO) and secondary vocational level (MBO) level. I did this in order to be able to check for a relation between educational level and specific cultural tastes, that are expressed when people define what is or is not attractive. In this way, I was able to discover a possible relation between socio-economic class, for which educational level is a fairly effective indicator (Collins 1979; Van De Werfhorst 2005), and ideas about

[v] As becomes apparent from this formulation, I have presumed mutual attraction between men and women. Accordingly, I have only researched a heterosexual population. I am conscious of the fact that I have left out a substantive part of society, by not considering homosexual men and women and their ideas on attractiveness. Unfortunately, the thesis would have become too big if I would have integrated this population in my sample.

attractiveness. Because the research also dealt with the relation between gender stratification and ideas on attractiveness, I interviewed as many men as women. In total I conducted 24 interviews, with 12 women and 12 men, divided equally over both levels of education. The qualitative research data were used for supplementing and explaining the quantitative data. The quantitative data were processed through factor analysis. The factors that came out of the analysis can be understood as certain regularities, or a pattern of underlying ideologies regarding the topic that is being studied (Fielding and Gilbert 2004: 296) and since this topic was attractiveness, the factors that came out can be seen as attractiveness ideals. These attractiveness ideals represent a shared ideology or meaning of a group of people about what is attractive in a person and lie at the base of this study. It should be noted here that this sample is not large and diverse enough to generalise the results to a larger population than the one studied here. However, the data give indications regarding the topic of attractiveness.

THE LOGIC OF EQUALITY: SEARCHING FOR A PARTNER 'WITHIN YOUR OWN WORLD'

AS INDICATED BEFORE, what people described during the interviews as attractive qualities in others, can be translated into five different forms of capital: cultural, social, economic, physical and sexual capital, respectively. The attractiveness ideals that were found during the analysis could be attached to four distinctive groups that were part of my research population: men and women on the one hand, and the academic and vocational educational level on the other hand. Within those ideals emphasis was put on different 'qualities' of the human personality. Thus, through the workings of the classification schemas of educational level, which can be linked to class (Collins 1979; Van De Werfhorst 2005) and gender, ideas about attractiveness varied per group and this made for different valuations of the same forms of capital. Ideas on attractiveness are thus socially constructed: what people find attractive in one another is to some extent determined by the social context in which these ideas have been formed.

RESULTS SHOW THAT ideas about what is or is not attractive, are expressions of someone's cultural taste and, with that, are a reflection of someone's social class. The people that were interviewed valued various aspects of the human (bodily) personality in different ways, according to their socio-economic status (SES). I found two ideals that represent the taste of the higher educated, respectively the socio-cultural and high-cultural ideal. These are the dominant attractiveness ideals and project

the legitimate culture. For instance, the higher educated group found that, besides social skills, intelligence is very attractive: an academic level of education is valued particularly positive. In a broader sense, intellectuality is seen as an important feature of a partner. It is perceived to be very attractive when people are culturally engaged and well articulated. Furthermore, a passion for reading is seen as a plus.

"People who are good at debating and discussions, that kind of people I find interesting. Then you know if someone is intelligent enough, and that you can have a good conversation with that person. (…) I find it very important if someone is intelligent. It annoys me when people are actually really stupid. Yeah, I'm sorry, but I can't deal with that." (Respondent 11, male, high SES)

Consequently, the higher educated give a much higher valuation to cultural capital, as well in relation to the other forms of capital, as in relation to the lower educated respondents, which have more appreciation for physical capital and actually depict too much cultural capital as unattractive.

"I don't find intelligence very attractive... no not so much actually. If someone has this whole story about something, about whatever, and I don't get anything of it... No thanks, I don't want that. I guess it's nice if you're smart, but no... it won't attract me." (Respondent 8, female, low SES)

"Looks are the first thing that you look at, really. If you don't think someone is pretty in the first place, then I don't think I will make contact with such a person. And I also think that appearance is something that stays important all along." (Respondent 5, male, low SES)

Many people are looking for a 'social equivalent' of themselves

From these expressions of taste we can deduce that different classes do not only have different ideas about what is or is not attractive, but that people are also looking for a partner within their own social class. The fact that many people are looking for a 'social equivalent' of themselves, is clearly illustrated by the used rhetoric when they explained their preferences to me during the interview. By these explanations it became apparent that people referred back to themselves and their own cultural characteristics a lot of the time (30 times to be exact). Not only highly educated people, but all respondents, were selecting a partner 'within their own realm'. For example:

"I myself am raised with ehm... you know, discussions and debating about practically everything. People who are not used to that, people who don't know how to argument their statements, I find that very annoying. When you just cannot have a useful discussion. So it's important that that's all right between us." (Respondent 10, male, high SES)

"Yes, a broad cultural engagement, that's very nice. It's fun, you know, when you go to Barcelona together and you go out looking at the buildings together for instance. Not that I am a specialist on architecture, but I like to look things up in those books and then learn something abut a city. I like it when a boy has [interest in] this too." (Respondent 7, female, high SES)

Bourdieu has found this same mechanism in his study on cultural taste, and he called it 'class solidarity' (Bourdieu 1984: 384). He states that people within a certain class tend to emphasise their own form of cultural capital, with which they demarcate their own position within the field. With that they can distinguish themselves from other classes. In that way, they show solidarity within their own class.

"Although working-class practices seem to be deduced directly from their economic conditions, they stem from a choice of the necessary, the 'practical' (...) and of what is imposed by an economic and social necessity condemning 'simple', 'modest' people to 'simple', 'modest' tastes." (Bourdieu 1984: 379).

The demarcating of the position and with that the distinguishing from the higher classes becomes very clear in conversations with respondents from the lower level of education. Now and then they express themselves in a defensive manner, when it comes to intelligence or political engagement:

"Intelligence is not so attractive, because then you yourself feel kind of stupid... when you don't have such a high level... At least, that's with me... Then people go around acting all interesting, like 'yeah I have a high education.'" (Respondent 4, male, low SES)

This class solidarity explains why people are looking for people with the same amounts of cultural capital, but not why people also show solidarity regarding other aspects of attractiveness, for instance when it comes to social or physical capital. After all, also when these forms of capital were discussed, every now and then people stated to feel attracted to the same aspects which they attribute to themselves.

"I myself am not one of the thinnest people… so I don't mind when a guy is I bit bigger. Those skinny boys, that's nothing for me." (Respondent 3, female, high SES)

The fact that people are also looking for a 'social or physical equivalent' of themselves, does not especially have anything to do with showing solidarity towards a certain group or class (although class can certainly play a role in the valuation of physical capital, this is discussed later in this paper), but rather, it is related to the searching of equality within relationships. This equality is realised through the levelling of partner's positions within the overall field. This is required to keep the power relations within the relationship balanced. After all, when partners have very different positions within the overall field (whether this is due to their economic, cultural, social, physical or sexual resources), thus when there are major differences in quantities and quality of a certain type of capital, there will also be power differences within the relationship. Such power differences are experienced as very unfavourable, which is to be expected when one looks at the contemporary relationship ideal, which is strongly characterised by the striving towards equality and harmony between partners (Wouters 2005: 267). Solidarity, or better said equality, based on any form of capital whatsoever, has a stabilising or even strengthening effect on relationships between people, and with that brings a higher level of security and comfortableness to the persons who are part of the relationship:

"He doesn't have to be a model… No, that actually makes me insecure, if he can get anyone he wants. Why did he pick me, I would wonder all the time, if he can get so much more good-looking people?" (Respondent 6, female, low SES)

This striving for equality explains, next to class solidarity, why people are looking for partners with the same amounts and quality of capital as they ascribe to themselves. This logic of attractiveness, makes for the more general classifications based on appearance, class and social status, to play an important role in classifications of attractiveness.

A DOUBLE–LAYERED REALITY

THUS, WHEN IT comes to searching and selecting an attractive partner, people are looking for equality in the possession of capital, in order to be 'solidary within their own class' and to keep the power differences within a relationship in check. However, when the respondents were asked to rate pictures of Dutch television personalities, it seemed that the respondents also had an ideal that to a certain extent rose above themselves. It became

apparent that respondents were almost unanimous on which television personality they perceived attractive. 75 Percent of the female respondents ranked Chris Zegers as attractive. The other 25 percent had him in second place. 50 Percent of the male respondents ranked Chantal Janzen as being attractive, and 33 percent chose Katja Schuurman.

THIS RANKING DID not only entail a classification based on appearance: the reason for using 'famous people' was to give the personalities some 'depth'. During the ranking, other traits than only appearance were taken into account, such as verbal skills, intelligence, sexiness, economic status etcetera. In most cases the interviewees did not have the same levels of capital as Chris Zegers, Chantal Jansen en Katja Schuurman. Nonetheless, they did rank these people as being attractive, but this time, they did not refer back to the qualities they, the respondents, assigned to themselves. The question that comes to mind is, how can it be that the logic of equality, 'searching for a partner within your own world', is no longer valid when the research method is converted from statements to pictures, thus from language to images.

DURING THE RANKING of the statements, the respondents were asked to 'think of their ideal relationship partner'. By this, a concrete, real-life situation was elicited. With this situation in mind, the respondents formed their opinions on attractiveness, and within this context of selecting the ideal, suitable partner, the logic of equality, the searching and selecting of someone with more or less the same position within the field, became visible.

HOWEVER, BY CHANGING from statements to photo's, a new frame of reference arose for the respondents. From the real-life situation of selecting the ideal partner, a transition was made to the 'reality of the image', which is detached from everyday life. The reality of the image is formed within the media system and is therefore an 'objectified reality' (Baudrillard 1995). By this change of reference, the classifications of attractiveness got detached from daily reality: the logic of equality lost its power when attractiveness was no longer linked to concrete daily practices, such as dating and looking for a partner. Therefore, people did not classify 'the others' in relation to themselves or within the context of daily practice, but with regard to an objective image culture, which is unattached from daily life and from themselves. This brings forward an objectified attractiveness ideal, in this research embodied by Katja Schuurman, Chantal Janzen and Chris Zegers.

THIS OBJECTIVE IDEAL of attractiveness it not seriously taken into account during the actual selection of a partner in everyday life practices: in real life, people are mainly looking for a social equivalent of themselves, and not necessarily for someone who looks like Katja, Chantal or Chris. This double layered reality explains the strong 'differences in tastes' when on the one hand everyday reality is taken into account and on the other hand when respondents regard an objectified reality.

THE CULTURAL VALUATION OF PHYSICAL CAPITAL

IN THIS PRACTICE of daily life, physical capital plays an obvious role in the classifications of attractiveness, especially when it comes to female attractiveness. As mentioned before, physical capital entails the physical traits of a person. To a degree, physical capital is a static form of capital, because the appearance is to some extent biologically fixed. However, the quality of physical capital is strongly connected with the social-economic background of a person. This background has a significant influence on one's bodily health, which in turn has a profound effect on one's appearance.

"Sociological studies have shown how peoples' general beliefs about health, and the degree to which they feel they have control over their daily lives, are shaped by their position within the broader social structure (Illsley 1980). For example, Blaxter and Patterson (1982) have shown how 'low' norms regarding health are adopted by those living in poor socio-economic circumstances (...) The bodily forms of the working class constitute a form of physical capital which, operative in the social fields that together make up society, has less exchange value than that developed by the dominant classes." (Williams 1995: 589)

Thus, physical capital is valued in a qualitative manner, in the sense that someone cannot have a lot or little physical capital: it is valued by content. However, according to Williams (1995) the substantial meaning of valuable physical capital differs per social class, which means that the valuation of physical capital is a cultural valuation, or better said: a *expression of cultural taste*. Williams gives the following example of the various valuations of the 'muscular body':

"Muscular bodies tend to be 'devalued' in the eyes of the dominant classes as 'vulgar'. Moreover, fields are structured in ways which provide only limited opportunities for the bestowing of value (i.e. social and cultural legitimacy) upon working class bodies." (Williams 1995: 590)

It is to be expected that the different cultural tastes or dispositions that are attached to the different classes, are expressed through the qualitative valuation of physical capital. However, an actual difference between the two educational groups in valuating physical traits is hard to find. Although there is a profound difference in the 'relative value' that is bestowed on physical capital (as an entity, without substantial specifications), physical capital is depicted as more important by working class people in comparison to the other forms of capital, which are classified as less important for attractiveness. Working class people also classify physical traits as much more important for someone's attractiveness in comparison to the dominant class.

HOWEVER, THERE IS a rather strong consensus between classes on the substantive valuation of physical capital. For example, respondents from both classes agreed on the fact that alternative clothing is unattractive. Bodily hair is also seen as unattractive and a bit of bodily fat is better than a body that is skinny or completely trained and muscular. Furthermore, respondents were almost unanimous on which television personality they perceived as being physically attractive. Most female respondents ranked Chris Zegers as good looking and the rankings of male respondents were divided over Katja Schuurman and Chantal Janzen.

OBVIOUSLY HERE, MY findings show that Bourdieu's distinction theory does not apply when it comes to the substantive valuations of physical traits. However, Van Eijck en Van Oosterhout (2005) do provide a sufficient explanation for this uniform taste on physicality. According to these sociologists, 'high' cultural capital, especially in the form of a higher level of education, does no longer lead to actual participation on the 'legitimate culture' in the postmodern era. The postmodern consumer characterises himself by an attitude of *anything goes*.

"It seems as if the members of higher status groups, with cultural as well as economic resources, are focusing more [than before] on popular culture, and less on legitimate culture." (Van Eijck and Van Oosterhout 2005: 443-444, translated by author)

> The higher classes seem to have incorporated the popular aesthetic of the working class

The higher classes seem to have incorporated the popular aesthetic of the working class, whereby a 'process of uniformation' of cultural tastes has taken place. The different cultural genres that were depicted by Bourdieu,

(i.e. legitimate culture, popular culture and *culture moyenne*) are being loosely combined by cultural consumers from different classes.

"The postmodern consumer can be described as 'cultural omnivore' (Peterson and Simhus 1992). This group does no longer distinguish itself from others by exclusively choosing legitimate culture, but rather moves through a wide cultural spectrum." (Van Eijck and Van Oosterhout 2005: 445, translation by author)

When it comes to the substantial valuation of physical capital, tastes have become more uniform among the different classes. People are omnivore with regard to certain physical traits; they share their dispositions and value physical capital accordingly. However, this cultural omnivorism cannot be traced when it comes to the valuation of cultural capital. As mentioned above, the dominant class still distinguishes itself rather strongly with regard to cultural preferences. On this matter, this class obviously does not choose for the 'popular taste' of the working class. The differences in taste mostly fade when physical capital is being discussed. Therefore, the research population cannot be depicted as completely culturally omnivore, but rather as 'physically omnivore'.

THE LOGIC OF AUTHENTICITY

ALTHOUGH RESEARCH SHOWS that there are many different tastes and opinions regarding attractiveness, men, women, higher and lower educated, all studies agree unanimously on one aspect: unnaturalness, especially with regard to the body, is perceived unattractive. This became particularly obvious when I asked the respondents what they thought of the looks of porn stars. Objectively, the respondents found that on average, porn stars have very well shaped, attractive bodies. However, they still classified such bodies as unattractive, merely because they associated porn stars with fakeness: therefore they all spoke of an 'artificial' body, which was seen as very unfavourable.

"A porn star, that's all a bit pompous. And then I really mean pompous! (...) That they think like, ehm... that's what people like, so that's what I will look like. And then they have their breast enlarged and then I think, well, you better keep it natural." (Respondent 15, male, low SES)

ACCORDING TO THE sociologists Aupers and colleagues (2003: 203) this norm of authenticity, i.e. the high valuation of everything that is 'real', has become more and more dominant over the last decennia within

the entire Western culture. Within this ethic of authenticity (Taylor 1992) 'obeying the Self' is seen as the highest good. Conduct is only depicted as just and meaningful when it gives expression to the natural urges of the individual. Behavioural norms that are projected too obviously from external sources (institutions, peer groups) are experienced as illegitimate, and behaviour that is shaped by such norms in too obvious of a way, is being viewed upon as insincere and fake (Aupers et al. 2003: 204). Physical capital can also be viewed in this way: when the appearance is not a reflection of the 'naturalness' of an individual but is obviously distorted, is looses its meaning as valuable capital, purely because of the artificial nature of it.

THUS, NATURALNESS WINS over fakeness - how beautiful a body might be. Yet, according to Davis (1995) the ethic of authenticity is more about the *facade* of naturalness than a real authenticity of the body. She states that the Western beauty system poses very high norms on (female) bodies, but that on the other hand, the idea prevails that people should be able to live up to these demands 'naturally', without making too much effort (Davis 1995: 53). Because of this, most beauty practices take place behind closed doors, to keep up the idea of naturalness.

"Women (...) are compelled to conform with standards of feminine beauty which are not only impossible to meet, but have to be met, paradoxically, 'naturally'- that is, without effort or artifice." (Davis 1995: 53)

IT HAS BECOME common practice to 'interchange' forms of capital in order to enhance appearance. Shilling (1993) denotes that people have the ability to adjust or enhance their physical capital, for example, by working out. However, this enhancing of physical capital certainly has its limitations, especially in the ways in which it can be transformed into other forms of capital, such as cultural and social capital (1993: 137). Baumann also argues that these physical adjustments are limited, by saying that our modern obsession with health and beauty is *"an attempt to belie the ultimate limits of the body"* (Baumann 1992: 16). But in the end this limit holds: people cannot all look like supermodels or bodybuilders and furthermore, Baumann argues, 'in the end we all die'.

DESPITE THESE LIMITATIONS, it has become increasingly easy over the years to adjust and shape the physical appearance, by exchanging economic capital into physical capital (Davis 1995). This can happen in a relatively modest way, by the use of make-up or the wearing of certain clothing that complements the body. However, especially in the past de-

cennia, people make use of more thorough and expensive alterations, by undergoing cosmetic surgery (Davis 1995). Women with sufficient economic resources can have their body adjusted in order to enhance their physical capital.

WITHIN THE RESEARCH on attractiveness, women were judged in the first place by their physical appearance; physical capital is the most defining form by which women are classified as more or less attractive, when compared to the other forms of capital. When taking the substantial demands respondents posed to the physical capital into account, it seems unlikely that anyone can live up to these demands without any efforts or adjustments. For example, during the research many times it was stated that bodily hair (on armpits, legs and in the genital area) is unattractive, while a hairless body is not something that comes natural for most people. Although, there was one person who actually fell for it: *"Bodily hair, ehm...but women don't have that anyhow, right?"* (Respondent 18, male, WO).

WITHIN VARIOUS FEMINIST theories, classification systems of attractiveness, especially the Western beauty system, are perceived as being suppressive for women (Chapkis 1986; Bordo 1989, 1993). Women are merely seen as victims of dominant ideologies regarding female inferiority, which sustain practices of female bodily adjustment. By attaching the beauty practices of women to the structural restraints of the cultural beauty system, it is argued that beauty is the main ingredient for social suppression of women (Davis 1995: 50).

WHETHER OR NOT the emphasis on physical capital within the female attractiveness ideal is actually suppressive for the women within my research population is hard to say: this entails a whole different study on female experiences with regard to their bodies and the cultural meanings that are attached to them. However, it can be assumed that the high emphasis on physical capital puts women in a peculiar position: having a 'high form' of physical capital is important to be found attractive, but the substantive demands on this physical capital, such as having a hairless body, cannot be met 'naturally'. Furthermore, the enhancing of physical capital in order to make it more valuable has certain limitations and, in addition to that, it has to be done in such a way that the appearance still comes of as 'real' and 'authentic'. At least, this paradox places women in a rather uncomfortable situation.

CONCLUSION

IDEAS ABOUT ATTRACTIVENESS are socially constructed: what people find attractive in others is determined by the social context in which these ideas have been formed. In this paper I have shown that classification systems concerning gender and class have a profound influence on ideas about what is and is not attractive.

FOR THE HIGHER educated, cultural capital is above all the most important form of capital when defining someone's attractiveness. Besides this, social capital also plays a crucial role, as well as (to a lesser extent) physical capital. By the lower educated, physical capital is valued as most defining for someone's attractiveness. As opposed to the dominant class, cultural capital is classified as not so attractive. The substantive differences between these ideals are characteristic of the differences in taste between the two possible social classes that have been studied. Cultural capital is the most distinguishing form of capital between the two classes. On the other hand, no distinction can be made between classes when one looks at the *substantive* valuation of physical capital: this is valued more or less the same by the different classes. This uniform taste with respect to physical appearance can be perceived as 'physical omnivorism'.

WHAT HAS BECOME very clear in this paper is that women are predominantly being classified as more or less attractive by means of their physical capital. Intelligence is also valued rather high. When it comes to sexual capital, sexual dissoluteness and sexual exhibitionism are very much disapproved of by men. Men are predominantly being judged by their social capital. Other than this, it appeared that men are found more attractive when they possess certain 'female' characteristics. Women are looking for a kind and caring man, one who is sweet and friendly, who takes the feelings of (significant) others into account and above all: a man who keeps his sexual needs and longings to himself, out of respect for his partner.

BESIDES THE CONSTRAINTS of these two stratification schemas of class and gender, there are also a few more general 'rules of the game' that all players have to play by. These rules are defined by two *logics of attractiveness*: 'the logic of authenticity' and 'the logic of equality'.

THE FIRST LOGIC states that people have to *make it look* like they are expressing their 'real self'. They have to make others believe that they are genuine in how they behave and especially in how they look. For women

this is made particularly difficult, since there are quite high demands concerning physical capital, while at the same time features of appearance have to 'come naturally' to a person. This causes a paradox: women have to 'naturally' look a certain way, but this way of appearing cannot be achieved without effort or artifice.

People have to make it look like they are expressing their 'real self'

THE SECOND LOGIC states that, when a person is looking for a partner, he or she is actually looking for an equivalent of him or herself. People do not want the smartest, prettiest or richest partner, but one who has more or less the same amount and quality of capital as they have. This logic is inspired by the modern relation ideal of equality, but also by the idea of class solidarity.

HOWEVER, THIS LOGIC of equality loses its power when classifications of attractiveness are no longer being linked to concrete daily practices, such as dating and looking for a partner. When attractiveness is being discussed in a more general sense, by referring to photos instead of real life situations, the classifications of attractiveness get detached from daily reality: people do not classify others in relation to themselves or within the context of daily practice, but with regard to an objective image culture, which is unattached from daily life and from themselves. This brings forward an objectified attractiveness ideal.

FROM THIS IT can be derived that social fields have two layers of reality: one concerning daily practice and one regarding a detached 'objectified reality'. The 'objective ideal' that people have with regard to attractiveness does not influence daily practice: it does not interfere with the process of classifying people as more or less attractive within the context of selecting a partner.

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