

Tilburg University

How heterogeneity in cultural tastes is captured by psychological factors

Stokmans, M.J.W.

Published in:

Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Literature, the Media and the Arts

Publication date:

2003

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Stokmans, M. J. W. (2003). How heterogeneity in cultural tastes is captured by psychological factors: A study of reading fiction. *Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Literature, the Media and the Arts*, 31(5-6), 423-439.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**HOW HETEROGENEITY IN CULTURAL TASTES IS CAPTURED BY
PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS: A STUDY OF READING FICTION.**

Mia J.W. Stokmans*

Tilburg University

Faculty of Arts

P.O.Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands

E-mail: m.j.w.stokmans@uvt.nl

* The author wishes to thank the guest-editors of this issue for their constructive advice.

Abstract

In Bourdieu's (1984) view, the habitus coordinates cultural tastes within each social class and leads to a homogeneity of preferences. In this paper it is argued that besides socioeconomic characteristics, psychological variables, i.e., attitudes, motivations, and ability, affect cultural tastes to a substantial degree. The question this paper addresses is whether in explaining preferences for reading material of varying complexity, the use of psychological variables increases the variance explained by the model and negatively affects the explanatory power of social class (operationalized as educational level). The results of an empirical study (N = 170) indicated that reading attitude, motivation to read, and ability to read had an effect on the tendency to read complex fiction independently of the effect of social class. The explanatory power of social class decreased when variables measuring the motivation to read or ability to read were added to the model.

Introduction

Bourdieu (1984) propounds that the socioeconomic factors that determine social inequality also account for differences in cultural tastes and in cultural participation. He holds that members in a given social group acquire a habitus, i.e., a set of schemes of perception, appreciation, and action. The effect of these schemes, Bourdieu (1984: 172f.) says, is that “all the practices and products of a given agent are objectively harmonized among themselves, without any deliberate pursuit of coherence, and objectively orchestrated, without any conscious concentration, with those of all members of the same class.” In this view, the habitus coordinates tastes within each social class and leads to a homogeneity of preferences. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1984: 230) claims that there is a 'homology' between the field of cultural production and that of consumption. This thesis implies that rankings in the social hierarchy and rankings in hierarchies of cultural values, in particular that of cultural legitimacy, mirror each other at the level of products and their consumers.

To us, these stances seem to be problematic. As to the correspondence that is claimed to exist between the social hierarchy and that of cultural legitimacy, we may concede that social hierarchy can be assessed in a rather straightforward way - in terms of variables measuring level of education, income, profession, social background, etc. However, no categories or procedures are available for ranking cultural products according to their degree of cultural legitimacy. Consequently, it is not clear how the two hierarchies might be mapped onto each other.

Ganzeboom (1984, 1989) approaches the problem of how cultural products may be ranked from a different angle. He proposes to rank cultural products according to their informational complexity. Although it is hard to conceive how the complexity of architecture and of

paintings is to be measured, we hold that, as far as reading material is concerned, complexity can be defined and assessed in a clear and reliable way.

According to Ganzeboom, differences in the complexity of cultural goods social agents acquire, can be explained from an information processing perspective. Ganzeboom relies heavily on Berlyne's (psychological) theory according to which subjects try to match the complexity of cultural products with their power of processing information of a certain degree of complexity. He holds that in choosing cultural products, consumers favor those which match their powers of processing information (cf. also Kraaykamp 1993). This assumption is psychological in nature, in that it pertains to the cognitive capacities of social agents as well as to psychological mechanisms that ensure the match between a product's complexity and agents' cognitive powers. However, in Ganzeboom's theory, these psychological characteristics are operationalized in terms of the socioeconomic variables that account for social inequality, i.e., level of education, family background and the (early) stage of life at which cultural participation started (Ganzeboom 1989: 46ff.). Therefore, members of the same social group, sharing specific socioeconomic characteristics, are supposed to share also the same ability of processing complex information.

This raises the question of whether the theories proposed by Bourdieu and Ganzeboom are not designed in such a way that the chance is maximized to obtain evidence for the thesis that tastes are group-specific in nature. Even if one holds that a theory of the habitus can do without a theory of (rational) choice and without a theory of preference formation, it should be envisaged that psychological factors pertaining to attitudes, motivations and gratifications sought by social agents are highly relevant to an analysis of cultural participation and may strongly vary between individual agents, even when these belong to the same social class.

The question this paper addresses is whether in explaining preferences for reading material of varying complexity, the use of variables capturing individual differences in attitudes, motivations, and aims pursued in participating in culture, will negatively affect the explanatory power of socioeconomic variables that are also included in the model. To us, it seems that this question must be answered in the affirmative. Psychological variables allow a more refined and direct measurement of the ways in which cognitive tasks are dealt with than socioeconomic variables do. Not only are they measured on sophisticated scales, they also capture to a much greater extent the variance in cognitive demands a social agent is willing to meet at a given point of time. Under the assumption that meeting such demands supposes a more or less continuous learning process, preferences for complex or less complex reading material are more adequately explained by psychological than by socioeconomic variables.

When the types of psychological variables mentioned above are included in a model explaining cultural participation, we expect that they will lead to a stronger differentiation among social agents than models with socioeconomic variables only. The more variables a model contains, the greater its power of capturing differential aspect of cultural participation within a social class.

Complexity of fiction books

Complexity of fiction books is a construct of which many different definitions have been formulated in literary as well as in sociological studies. In this paper, the complexity of fiction is defined in accordance with the information processing perspective used by Ganzeboom (1989), since his theory offers a procedure to rank cultural products. Ganzeboom proposes to analyze complexity by readability formulas, measuring the length of the paragraphs, sentences and words a text contains. However, Kraaykamp (1993), a student of Ganzeboom, found that

these formulas do not account for semantic complexity. “Semantic complexity refers to connected systems of social, cognitive and aesthetic codes” (Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999: 208). What these codes comprise, however, remains vague.

In Ganzeboom’s theory, cultural participation is viewed as a form of information processing. Information processing relates to the level of arousal of the organism. It is proposed that a monotonously increasing relation exists between the complexity of the cultural information and the level of arousal. This implies that the way in which readers attribute meanings to linguistic expressions exemplifies complexity. These reading processes exert a strong impact on subjects’ level of arousal (Kahneman, 1973; Nell, 1988). From this, it follows that the theory of Ganzeboom considers language as a ‘process’ and not as a ‘product’ (c.f. Noordman & Maes, 1993)¹. It is then less appropriate to regard complexity as an (‘objective’) characteristic of texts. Instead, complexity should be viewed in light of the reading process which affects the extent to which a text is comprehended. Therefore, we view complexity as a perceived property of texts. Indicators of the perceived complexity of fiction books are related to the extent in which a given book will be comprehended by a reader with average reading skills². On the basis of these indicators fiction books can be ranked according to perceived complexity.

This study will make use of the ranking of perceived complexity of reading material which has been proposed by Kraaykamp (1993; Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999). Experts were asked to score sub-genres (such as war and resistance novels, science fiction, travel novels, thrillers, family and regional novels, and folk novels) as well as a large set of literary books on three semantic contrasts pertaining to perceived complexity, namely: ‘difficult’ - ‘easy’, ‘undemanding’ - ‘demanding’ and ‘prior knowledge necessary’ - ‘directly accessible’. In this study we will only distinguish three main genres: literature, mystery, and romance, since these

categories are institutionally bounded (DiMaggio, 1987) and commonly used in research about differences in book reading in the Netherlands (the geographic area in which this study was conducted). Furthermore, for the purpose of this study this aggregation level of book categories is supposed to be suitable, since Kraaykamp's research indicated that these three genres exhibit substantial differences in perceived complexity. According to Kraaykamp (1993; Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999), romance novels are judged to be less complex than mysteries; in their turn, mysteries are perceived as being less complex than literary novels. This position does not imply that we regard each genre as entirely homogeneous as to its perceived complexity.

Characteristics affecting the tendency to read complex fiction books

Two kinds of variables are relevant to our research, one type is related to social class, the other type encompasses psychological characteristics, such as motivation, ability, and the aims pursued in reading fiction. Next, these variables will be discussed and integrated into a theoretical framework which will be used to predict the tendency to read complex fiction books.

According to Bourdieu (1984), the social position of individuals is determined by the amount and composition of various kinds of capital; on the basis of which a social class is able to maintain, defend or enhance its position. Three kinds of capital are particularly important. First, economic capital, epitomized by income, and occupation. Second, cultural capital, indicated by educational level. Third, social capital, exemplified by social relations acquired through one's family background. Research on reading behavior indicates that differences in cultural capital, in particular in educational level, are paramount in explaining

differences in reading behavior (Kraaykamp, 1993; Bakker 1992). Therefore, in this study, educational level will be regarded as the major and sole indicator of social class.

The second type of variables is psychological in nature. Here, reading attitude is of special interest. Reading attitude can be regarded as a conceptualization of acquired dispositions towards reading, since an attitude is a residual of experiences, by which further activities are influenced (Oskamp, 1991; Stokmans, 1999a). As will be seen, our use of Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991) involves a strong emphasis on the concept of attitude. This concept will be related to beliefs about how reading fiction may be beneficial (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1996). According to the theory of planned behavior, three factors affect the intention to read fiction: reading attitude, subjective norms about reading, and perceived behavioral control. Subjective norms about reading held by relevant others are not included in this study. Recent studies (Van Schooten & De Glopper, 2002; Miesen 2003) indicate that subjective norms about reading held in general, or by the peer-group in particular, have only a minor effect on reading behavior if reading attitude is already included in the model. With regard to perceived behavior control, only the ability to read strongly affects reading intention (Miesen 2003). The ability to read was investigated in our study.

Attitudes are often operationalized by means of the beliefs about the gratifications or benefits of the behavior it is held to induce (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1996). These beliefs affect the behavioral intention to read. However, this intention is only a first step to actual reading behavior; other variables may be important too. According to a cognitive-psychological information processing perspective (see, for example, Bettman, 1979; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989; Boekaerts, 1996), information processing, and consequently the tendency to read complex fiction, is affected by the

motivation and the ability to process information. As will be seen, the operationalization of 'ability to read complex fiction' strongly differs from Ganzebooms notion of cultural competence. 'Cultural competence' may be seen to denote cognitive (psychological) capacities, however, the way in which Ganzeboom operationalizes this concept makes it a sociological concept.

Given our focus on more direct measures of cognitive capacities and gratifications that are relevant to reading complex fiction, it is hypothesized that:

H₁: There is a positive relation between educational level (taken as the indicator of social class) and the tendency to read complex fiction, reading attitude, motivation, and the ability to read complex fiction.

Now we will go into the relation between the psychological variables mentioned above and the tendency to read complex fiction. The first variable to be discussed is reading attitude. In a recent study of reading attitude (Stokmans, 1999a), three important types of beliefs about the gratifications of reading fiction in one's spare time were identified; these will be used to assess differences in the degree to which individuals manifest a tendency to read complex fiction:

1. *Self-development*: these beliefs relate to the value placed on reading fiction for attaining educational or vocational success, for managing one's life, or for gaining insight into oneself, others, and/or life in general.
2. *Enjoyment*: these beliefs refer to the pleasure derived from reading fiction by entering another world and vicariously experiencing an adventure.
3. *Escape*: in these beliefs, reading fiction is regarded as a distraction or as a means of relaxing and forgetting personal worries.

An important question is to what extent these beliefs or combinations thereof are associated with reading different genres that vary as to their complexity; i.e., literature, romance, and mysteries. On the basis of intuition, it is suggested here that an over-representation of self-development beliefs and an under-representation of enjoyment beliefs are associated with the tendency to read the most complex genre (i.e., literature). This does not imply that reading complex fiction is not pleasing. However, the pleasure felt in reading complex fiction will probably be derived to a lesser extent from entering another world or experiencing an adventure (Nell, 1988). Furthermore, it is suggested that an over-representation of escape beliefs are associated with reading romance novels, the least complex genre. Based on this intuition, it is hypothesized that:

H₂: The tendency to read complex fiction books is positively affected by the reading attitude component 'self-development' and negatively affected by 'enjoyment' and 'escape', independently of differences in educational level.

The second psychological construct that affects the tendency to read complex fiction books is the motivation to read. In cognitive information processing theories, it is commonly assumed that people differ in their levels of motivation to process complex information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). In general, it is assumed that one is motivated in a specific situation to do something, i.e., to read fiction. Motivation to read, a process variable, may result from the activation of cognitive and affective beliefs about reading fiction by appropriate external stimuli. The activated beliefs are part of reading attitude and affect the extent to which reading is viewed favorably or unfavorably in a particular situation; in this way they influence reading behavior (Fazio, 1990; Stokmans, 1999b). Whether or not a particular situation may activate beliefs about reading fiction depends on an individual's disposition to recognize those

opportunities. The more opportunities are recognized as relevant to reading, the more frequently beliefs about reading are activated.

We wish to suggest that the disposition to recognize opportunities to activate the desire to read can be viewed as an indirect indicator of the motivation to read. Petty & Cacioppo (1981) propose that 'involvement' and 'need for cognition' affect motivation. However, they don't explain how these characteristics affect the motivation to read complex texts. Below, it will be argued that 'involvement' and 'need for cognition' have differential effects on the motivation to read complex texts.

In this paper, 'involvement' is defined as the perceived personal relevance of a particular kind of stimuli (i.e., reading works of fiction) to an individual in terms of his or her basic values, goals, and self-concept (Zaichkowsky, 1984; Peter & Olson, 1987). This is in accordance with the cognitively based approach of Laaksonen (1994). 'Involvement' is an aspect of the knowledge structure or belief system of an individual (see, for example, Peter & Olson, 1987) and is related to the centrality³ of the beliefs about a particular object (here: reading fiction). Beliefs about oneself, one's existence, and one's identity are regarded as having the highest degree of centrality (Rokeach, 1968; Oskamp, 1991). 'Involvement', defined as perceived personal relevance, can be conceptualized as the relatedness of beliefs about the object (which are part of reading attitude) to beliefs about oneself (Ohanian, 1989).

Among the numerous beliefs a person holds, those perceived as personally relevant have a larger probability of being activated (e.g. Howard-Pitney et al, 1986; Lavine et al, 1996). This indicates that the beliefs about reading held an individual who has a high involvement with reading fiction, are more frequently activated. Consequently, involvement has an impact on the frequency with which people read, but not necessarily on the kind of reading material they select, since, as we hypothesized, this choice depends on the kind of beliefs activated.

The other determinant of motivation, need for cognition, supposedly has a different effect on motivation to read than involvement. Need for cognition is not related to the activation of beliefs about reading, but denotes a general tendency to engage in and to enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). People who score high on need for cognition are generally more motivated to process effortful or complex tasks (Cacioppo et al, 1996) and therefore, will prefer complex fiction.

We propose the following hypotheses regarding motivation:

H_{3a} : Involvement with reading is not related to the tendency to read complex fiction books.

H_{3b} : Need for cognition is positively related to the tendency to read complex fiction books, independently of differences in educational level.

The last variable that will be explored in this study is the ability to process complex information. According to information processing theories as well as Ganzeboom's theory, readers strive to match the (perceived) complexity of the book and individual's their ability to read. If the book is perceived as too simple (the perceived complexity is no match for the reader's ability), the reader becomes bored. If, on the other hand, the book is too complex (the perceived complexity exceeds the reader's ability), the reader becomes frustrated. The match between the (perceived) complexity of a book and an individual's ability optimizes the arousal level that results from the processing of cultural information (reading of fiction). In this case, the reader gets neither bored nor frustrated, but will experience an optimal degree of appreciation and pleasure (Ganzeboom, 1984).

In studies of psychological information processing, ability is defined as: The skill or proficiency in interpreting written texts (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). Lack of ability implies

that the knowledge structures necessary to perform more complex operations leading to a proper representation of the text either do not exist or cannot be accessed.

In Ganzeboom's theory of cultural participation (1984, 1989), an apparently similar construct, namely 'cultural competence', is proposed to explain differences in reading behavior. Cultural competence is defined as the amount of experience with reading and of knowledge about fiction books. However, Ganzeboom (1984) suggests two components of cultural competence: General intellectual capacities, which affect the cognitive capacity to process information, and acquired knowledge and skills regarding reading and reading materials. Respondents' general intellectual capacities are operationalized in terms of educational level. As argued, however, we regard this variable as a sociological concept, in that it indicates membership of a specific class. In order to measure knowledge and skills pertaining to reading and reading material, the (psychological) concept of ability is suggested here to be more appropriate.

H₄: Ability is positively related to the tendency to read complex fiction books, independently of differences in educational level.

Research method

Respondents

Respondents were approached in a shopping center in Tilburg, a city in the south of the Netherlands and were asked to participate in a survey of reading behavior. During all store opening hours (including Saturdays and evenings) respondents were approached to fill out the questionnaire. This study made use of a quota sampling (N=170) to approximate a sample that is representative as to age (average of 39.3, s.d. = 14.41) and sex (48% male) of the Dutch population of 18 years and older who have read at least one fiction book in the previous year.

Design and procedure

During the data collection period, passers-by were stopped by pollsters. If respondents met the above requirements and agreed to participate, they were taken to a lunchroom where they were offered a cup of coffee or tea. There the questionnaire was filled out without interference by the pollster. The questionnaire included items on the extent to which complex books were read, educational level, aspects of reading attitude, motivation to read, and ability to read. Each variable will be discussed below.

Tendency to read complex fiction books

The tendency to read complex fiction was assessed on the basis of the proportion of books belonging to one of the three genres read in the previous year. Respondents were asked to divide 100 points between literature, romance novels, and mysteries so in this way the extent to which they had read books in each genre during the previous year was assessed (a constant sum method; Churchill, 1983:266). The tendency to read complex fiction was calculated by weighting the proportion read of a specific genre by the perceived complexity index of that genre then these weighted proportions were totaled across the three genres. The perceived complexity indices were taken from Kraaykamp (1993) i.e., 3 for literature, 2 for mysteries, and 1 for romance novels. The following example illustrates how the score for the tendency to read complex fiction was calculated. Suppose a subject reads two times as much literature as mysteries and reads no other fiction books. He/she assigned 66 out of 100 points to literature and 34 points to mysteries. The respective proportions of literature and mysteries are 0.66 and 0.34. Since the perceived complexity index for literature is 3 and for mysteries 2, the tendency to read complex fiction becomes: $(0.66 * 3) + (0.34 * 2) = 2.66$.

The tendency to read complex fiction has a minimum value of 1 (when a subject reads only romance novels) and a maximum value of 3 (when a subject reads only literature). In the sample, this variable has a mean of 2.17 and a standard deviation of 0.55.

Educational level

In this study, educational level is regarded as the sole indicator of social class. Respondents were asked to indicate the highest level of education they had completed (on a seven-point scale). Educational level has a mean of 4.94, which is rather high, and a standard deviation of 1.66.

Aspects of reading attitude

As stated, reading attitude comprises three important aims of reading fiction: self-development, enjoyment, and escape. These concepts were operationalized by means of 21 Likert-items (each measured by a five-point scale with a separate 'don't know' response category). This scale is based on the reading attitude scale reported on in Stokmans (1999a). Examples of statements measuring self-development, enjoyment, and escape are, respectively: 'Book reading helps me to form an opinion about different issues'; 'When reading a book, I enjoy identifying with a character in the book'; 'By reading a book, I can briefly escape from the greyness of daily routine'. Table 1 indicates that the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of each aspect of reading attitude was good (Nunnally, 1978).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Motivation to read

Two components of motivation to read are involvement with reading and need for cognition. Involvement was operationalized using statements reflecting the extent to which reading fiction helped individuals to express themselves, to show who they were, or what they believed they were like. These topics were measured using 15 items; respondents had to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each item (measured on a five-point Likert-scale with a separate 'don't know' response category). The items were partially based on the symbolic value component of Laurent & Kapferer's (1985) involvement scale. Examples of involvement statements are: 'Reading books means a lot to me'; 'The books I read suit me well'; 'The books I read say who I am'. The Cronbach's alpha of this scale was 0.94 (see also Table 1).

Need for cognition was operationalized using the Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo et al., 1996). A full description of this scale is given in Cacioppo et al., 1996. Examples of items included in this scale are: 'I prefer complex to simple problems'; 'The idea of relying on thought to make my way to the top appeals to me'; 'The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me'. The Dutch translation (Pieters et al., 1987) of the scale was used. In this study, the reliability of this scale was 0.87 (Cronbach's alpha) (see also Table 1).

Ability

Ability is best measured by means of a vocabulary checklist or a comprehensive reading test. However, these tests are less suited for a survey about differences in reading behavior, since they are very labor-intensive, in addition, most are developed for children in order to measure their progression in reading skills in an educational setting. In studies of Ganzeboom, acquired knowledge and skills pertaining to reading fiction is operationalized by means of a test that taps knowledge about cultural events and persons (cf. Kraaykamp, 1993). In our

view, this test is strongly biased toward high culture. However, a suggestion about tests by which the ability to read complex fiction can be measured, is provided by a study conducted by West, Stanovich & Mitchell (1993). The results indicate (West, Stanovich & Mitchell, 1993: 40) that the scores on a vocabulary checklist have the highest correlation with a cultural literacy test ($r = 0.71$) that was designed to tap familiarity with important events and individuals within the cultural domain, and an author recognition test ($r = 0.62$). The correlation between the cultural literacy test and the author recognition test is 0.72. However, the correlation between the cultural literacy test and the magazine recognition test is 0.60; its correlation with the newspaper recognition test is 0.52 (both media that can account for knowledge one has about culture although one rarely participates), while the author recognition test correlates 0.49 with the magazine recognition test and 0.45 with the newspaper recognition test.

Finally, we looked at the correlation each indicator has with educational level. As stated, we regard educational level as an indicator of social class; therefore, indicators of the acquired skills and knowledge should be correlated as less as possible with educational level. The correlation of educational level with the cultural literacy test is 0.48 and with the authors recognition test it is 0.33. On the basis of these correlations we consider knowledge about authors' names a better indicator of ability to read complex fiction.

In this study, we used an author recall test (and not a recognition test) to avoid the problem of submitting names of authors that can be classified as belonging to a particular genre. By not submitting authors' names, respondents who read particular genres are not privileged. On average the respondents remembered five or six names of authors (mean: 5.77, standard deviation: 4.12)

Results

In the introduction, it was hypothesized that educational level, as the sole variable measuring membership of a specific social class, correlates with the tendency to read complex fiction, reading attitude, motivation to read, and the ability to read complex fiction. This hypothesis was tested by calculating Pearson's correlations between educational level and the variables that were just mentioned (see also Table 2). These correlations indicated that educational level was positively related to the tendency to read complex fiction ($r = 0.30, p < 0.05$). However, educational level was also related to the psychological variables reading attitude (fun: $r = 0.18, p < 0.05$, and escape: $r = -0.18, p < 0.05$), motivation to read (need for cognition: $r = 0.28, p < 0.05$), and ability to read ($r = 0.26, p < 0.05$). These correlations indicate that variations in educational level go together with variations in the psychological variables concerned.

However, are social classes homogeneous in terms of these psychological constructs? The second row in Table 2 indicates that this is not the case. The second row shows the partial correlations between the tendency to read complex fiction and the psychological constructs, controlling for educational level. These partial correlations indicate that, even when differences in educational level are kept constant, reading attitude (self-development $r = 0.13, p = 0.09$; fun: $r = -0.17, p < 0.05$; and escape: $r = -0.19, p < 0.05$), motivation to read (need for cognition: $r = 0.29, p < 0.05$) and, ability to read ($r = 0.41, p < 0.05$) correlate significantly with the tendency to read complex fiction.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

These results indicate that social classes are not as homogeneous in terms of the psychological variables as Bourdieu's theory of the habitus predicts. Furthermore, variations in the psychological constructs within a social class covaried with variations in the tendency to read complex fiction within a social class. In order to examine the explanatory power of these psychological constructs in comparison with that of educational level, nested regression analyses were conducted.

Since research indicates that the tendency to read complex fiction is stronger for men than for women ((Kraaykamp, 1993; Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999), sex was included in the base model together with educational level. The base model resulted in a R^2 of 0.175 (R^2 - adj. = 0.164). In this model, the effect of sex and educational level are both significant and the signs have the expected direction (see also Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

First we examine the explanatory power of reading attitude. Contrary to our hypothesis (H_2), Table 2 indicates that self-development shows no significant partial correlation (controlling for educational level) with the tendency to read complex fiction ($r = 0.13$, $p = 0.09$). However, the partial correlations between the tendency to read complex fiction and, respectively, escape and fun are as expected (fun: $r = -0.19$, $p < 0.05$; escape: $r = -0.20$, $p < 0.05$). The observation that the partial correlation between self-development and the tendency to read complex fiction is not significant may be attributed to the positive correlation between self-development and enjoyment ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$) combined with the expected reverse

effect of those two variables on the tendency to read complex fiction. In a regression analysis this reverse effect can be accounted for.

In model I, the three components of reading attitude were added to the base model. This resulted in a significant improvement of the model (F-Change: 5.90, $p < 0.05$) and a R^2 of 0.261 (R^2 - adj. = 0.236). Table 3 shows that the effect of self-development and escape together with educational level are all significant as hypothesized (H_2). The effect of the fun component of reading attitude was not significant. This can be attributed to the positive correlation between the fun component and involvement ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$) as is illustrated in the overall analysis (see Table 4). Table 3 also indicates that the explanatory power of educational level and sex doesn't decrease when reading attitude is added; the unstandardized regression coefficients of educational level and sex have almost the same values in the base model and model I.

In model II, the motivational variables involvement and need for cognition were added to the base model. This resulted again in a significant improvement of the model (F-Change: 9.608, $p < 0.05$) and a R^2 of 0.267 (R^2 - adj. = 0.248). Table 3 shows that the effects of involvement and need for cognition are both significant. The unexpected positive effect of involvement on the tendency to read complex fiction can be attributed to the positive correlation between involvement and, respectively, utility ($r = 0.462$, $p < 0.05$), and ability ($r = 0.467$, $p < 0.05$) as is assessed by the overall analysis (see Table 4). Table 3 also shows that the explanatory power of educational level decreases (by about 35%) when the motivational components are added to the base model. The explanatory power of sex however, doesn't decrease.

In model III, ability to read was added to the base model. This improved the model significantly (F-Change: 60.196, $p < 0.05$) and resulted in a R^2 of 0.403 (R^2 - adj. = 0.392).

Table 3 shows that the effect of ability is significant and positive, as hypothesized (H_4). Table 3 also shows that the explanatory power of educational level does decrease (by about 50%) when ability is added to the base model and that the explanatory power of sex increases (by about 25%).

In the last analysis, all variables were included in the regression analysis. This regression analysis resulted in a R^2 of 0.490 (R^2 -adj. = 0.463). The VIF statistics indicates that collinearity is not a problem. Table 4 shows that all variables, except the attitude component 'escape', have the effects as that were hypothesized. It also shows that the explanatory power of educational level decreases (by about 55%) when all psychological variables are included in the analysis. The explanatory power of sex is almost the same as in the base model.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Discussion and conclusion

We focused on Bourdieu's view that cultural tastes are group-specific in nature and that rankings in the social hierarchy and rankings in hierarchies of cultural value, in particular that of cultural legitimacy, mirror each other. We pointed out that this presumed homology can be investigated only if procedures are available for ranking cultural products according to their degree of cultural legitimacy. As yet, these procedures are not available. We followed Ganzeboom in taking complexity as an important indicator of differences in cultural value of three categories of fiction books; i.e., literature, mysteries, and romance novels. The ranking of the three genres according to their complexity reported by Kraaykamp (1993) was

employed here. We followed Kraaykamp in holding that, as far as reading material is concerned, complexity can be defined and operationalized in a clear and reliable way by using expert judgements. Although we feel that complexity is a useful dimension for differentiating between genres of fiction, it does not coincide with cultural legitimacy. Fiction books, and cultural products in general, can be differentiated along various dimensions and it would be an error to assume that all differences that are perceived between fiction genres can be captured by one single dimension.

Our emphasis was put on the thesis that tastes are group-specific in nature. The results of this study indicate that reading attitude, motivation to read, and ability to read complex fiction vary within social classes (operationalized in terms of educational level) and affect the tendency to read complex fiction, even if the effect of social class is controlled for. This means that these psychological variables allow a more refined measurement of the ways in which cognitive tasks are dealt with than socioeconomic variables do and account for differences in reading behavior.

From a psychological viewpoint, motivation to read deserves some attention, since the effects reported in this study do not entirely correspond to what should be expected from a psychological information processing perspective. Our results indicate that one of the indicators of motivation, the need for cognition, positively affects the tendency to read complex books, while the other indicator, involvement, has no effect on this tendency. These results were as hypothesized, but contrary to what would be expected on the basis of the information processing perspective of Petty & Cacioppo (1981) on which the theoretical relationship we established between reading complex fiction and motivation was partly based. In the Petty and Cacioppo model, involvement and need for cognition have a similar effect on the motivation to process complex information. In our analysis of the relationship between

motivation to read complex fiction, it was suggested that involvement has an impact on the frequency with which beliefs about reading are activated (and affects the frequency with which books are read), but not on the sets of beliefs that are activated (which affects the choice of reading materials). Need for cognition, on the other hand, has no effect on the frequency with which beliefs about reading are activated, but on the kind of activated beliefs. This result is supported by a recent study (Stokmans, 1999b) on reading frequency, where it was found that involvement had a significant positive effect on amount of reading, whereas need for cognition had no effect.

The main question addressed in this paper was whether in explaining preferences for reading material of varying complexity, psychological variables capturing individual differences in the ways in which cognitive tasks are dealt with have a negative effect on the explanatory power of 'social class'. Social class was operationalized by educational level only. This may be viewed as a minimalistic operationalization. However, among all indicators of social class, educational level is regarded as the most important factor for explaining differences in reading behavior (Kraaykamp, 1993). Our study provides some evidence for the thesis that psychological variables have a negative effect on the explanatory power variable measuring membership in a specific social class. It is important to note that the effect of sex is almost constant; irrespective of the psychological variables added to the model, the tendency of men to read complex fiction was 0.3 times larger than of women. This study indicates that this difference in preference for complex fiction can not be attributed to the gratifications sought in reading, the motivation to read complex fiction, or the ability to read complex fiction. This difference may be attributed to a psychological or socio-cultural variable that, as yet, is unknown, or it may reflect a specific gender effect.

References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 50, 179-211.
- Ajzen, I. (1996). The social psychology of decision making. In: E.T. Higgins & A.W. Kruglanski (eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles*. New York: The Guilford Press (pp. 297-325).
- Ajzen, I. & M. Fishbein (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Allport, F.H. (1935). Attitudes. In: C. Murchison (Ed.), *A handbook of social psychology* (pp. 798-844). Worcester, MA: Clark University Press.
- Bakker, B.F.M. (1992). *Sociale afstand, sociale status: De sociale status van werkenden, niet werkenden en vrouwen*. Dissertatie Amsterdam. Nijmegen: Instituut voor toegepaste taalwetenschappen
- Bettman, J.R. (1979). *An information processing theory of consumer choice*. London: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Boekearts, M. (1996). Personality and the psychology of learning. *European Journal of Personality*, 10 (5), 377-404
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.
- Cacioppo, J.T. & R.E. Petty (1982). The need for cognition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, 116-131.

- Cacioppo, J.T., R.E. Petty, J.A. Feinstein, W. Blair & G. Jarvia (1996). Dispositional differences in cognitive motivation: The life and times of individuals varying in need for cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119 (2), 197-253.
- Chall, J.S., Bissex, G.L. & Conrad, S.S. (1996). *Qualitative assessment of text difficulty: A practical guide for teachers and writers*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Bookline books.
- Churchill, G.A. Jr. (1983). *Marketing Research: Methodological Foundations* (Third Edition). Chicago: Holt-Saunders International Editions.
- DiMaggio, P. (1987). Classification in art. *American Sociological Review*, 52, 440-455.
- Dorfman, M.H. (1996). Evaluating the interpretive community: Evidence from expert and novice readers. *Poetics*, 23, 453-470.
- Fazio, R.H. (1990). Multiple processes by which attitudes guide behavior: The MODE model as an integrative framework (Vol. 23, pp. 75-109). In: *Advances in Experimental Psychology*,
- Fishbein, M. & I. Ajzen (1975). *Beliefs, attitudes, intention, and behavior: An introduction to theory and research*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Freebody, P. & R.C. Anderson (1983). Effects of vocabulary difficulty, text cohesion, and schema availability on reading comprehension. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 18, 277-294.
- Ganzeboom, H.B.G. (1984). *Cultuur en informatieverwerking*, Utrecht (dissertatie).
- Ganzeboom, H.B.G. (1989). *Cultuurdeelname in Nederland*. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Gelda, L. & Pillar, A. (1983). *For dreams, wishes, and magic bean buyers only: Encouraging children's responses to literature*. In: *Children's choices: Teaching with books children like*. Newmark: International Reading Association.
- Howard-Pitney, B., E. Borgida, & A.M. Omoto (1986). Personal involvement: An examination of processing differences. *Social Cognition*, 4, 39-57.

- Kahneman, D. (1973). *Attention and effort*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Kintsch, W. (1994). Text comprehension, memory, and learning. *American Psychologist*, 49 (4), 294-303.
- Kraaykamp, G. (1993). *Over lezen gesproken: Een studie naar sociale differentiatie in leesgedrag*. Amsterdam: Thesis Publishers.
- Kraaykamp, G. & K. Dijkstra (1999). Preferences in leisure time book reading: A study on the social differentiation in book reading for the Netherlands, *Poetics* 26 (4), 203-234.
- Laaksonen, P. (1994). *Consumer involvement: Concepts and research*. New York: Routledge.
- Lavine, H., J.L. Sullivan, Borgida & C.J. Thomson (1996). The relationship of national and personal issue salience to attitude accessibility on foreign and domestic policy issues. *Political Psychology*, 17, 293-316.
- Laurent, G. & J. Kapferer (1985). Measuring consumer involvement profiles. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 22, 41-53.
- MacInnis, D.J., & Jaworski, B.J. (1989). Information processing from advertisements: Toward an integrative framework. *Journal of Marketing*, 53, 1-23.
- Miesen, H.W.J.M. (2003). Predicting and explaining literary reading: an application of the theory of planned behavior. *Poetics*, 31 189-212.
- Nell, V. (1988). *Lost in a book: The psychology of reading for pleasure*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Noordman, L.G.M. & A.A.Maes (1993). Tekststructuur en tekstbegrip. In A. Braet & J. van de Gein (red.), *Taalbeheersing als tekstwetenschap*. Dordrecht: ICG, 23-56.
- Nunnally, J.C. (1978). *Psychometric theory* (Second Edition). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ohanian, R. (1989). Ego centrality as an indicator of enduring product involvement, *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 4 (4), 443-455.

- Oskamp, S. (1991). *Attitudes and opinions* (Second Edition). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Peter, J.P. & J.C. Olson (1993). *Consumer Behavior: Marketing Strategy Perspectives*. Homewood: Irwin.
- Petty, R.E & Cacioppo, J.T. (1981). *Attitudes and persuasion: Classic and contemporary approaches*. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.
- Pieters, R.G.M., Verplancken B. & Modde J.M. (1987). Neiging tot nadenken: Samenhang met beredeneerd gedrag. *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor de Psychologie*, 42, 461- 489.
- Rokeach, M. (1968). *Beliefs, attitudes, and values: A theory of organization and change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schooten, E, van & K. De Glopper, (2002). The relation between attitude towards reading adolescent literature and literary reading behavior. *Poetics*, 30, 169-194.
- Simons, W. (1993). *De regulering van inferenties door de kennis van lezers*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Nijmegen University.
- Stokmans, M.J.W. (1999a). Reading attitude and its effect on leisure time reading. *Poetics*, 26, 245-261.
- Stokmans, M.J.W. (1999b). Variables affecting the reading attitude-behavior relationship. The XXIV International Colloquium of Economic Psychology (vol. 2, pp. 770-780), Belgirate.
- West, R.F., K.E. Stanovich & H.R. Mitchell, (1993). Reading in the real world and its correlates. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 28, 35-50.
- Zaichkowsky, J.L. (1984). Measuring the involvement construct. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12, 341-352.

Endnotes:

1. In the language as a product approach, language is described as a structured sequence of units, such as vowel sounds, words, and sentences. In the language as a process approach, language is viewed as behaviour: the processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Noordman & Maes, 1993).
2. Research about the comprehensibility of fragments of texts suggests that the comprehensibility of works of fiction may largely be determined by the amount and type of knowledge a reader needs in order to derive a meaning from a work of fiction (Freebody & Anderson, 1983; Simons, 1993; Kintsch, 1994). Regarding fiction, one can distinguish at least four types of knowledge (Gelda & Pillar, 1983; Chall et al., 1996): knowledge of the language, knowledge acquired while reading the story, world knowledge and skills in literary analysis.
3. Centrality of a belief refers to its importance in the person's belief system and may be defined in terms of its degree of connectedness with other beliefs; the number of implications and consequences it has for other beliefs (Rokeach, 1968; Oskamp, 1991). Beliefs about oneself, one's existence, and one's identity are most central.

Table 1: Internal consistency and univariate statistics of the aspects of reading attitude and motivation to read.

	Number of items	alpha	mean	s.d.
Reading attitude				
Self-development	10	0.79	3.90	0.61
fun	7	0.77	4.05	0.65
escape	4	0.81	2.31	1.07
Motivation to read				
involvement	15	0.94	3.41	0.88
need for cognition	18	0.87	3.55	0.64

Table 2: Correlations between educational level and the tendency to read complex fiction, and the psychological variables (reading attitude, motivation, and ability to read fiction) and the partial correlations between the tendency to read complex fiction and the psychological variables controlling for educational level.

	reading complex fiction	reading attitude			motivation to read		ability to read
		self-development	fun	escape	involvement	need for cognition	
educational level	0.30**	0.005	0.18*	-0.20*	0.13	0.29**	0.27**
Partial correlation		0.13	-0.19*	-0.20**	-0.08	0.31**	0.45**

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

Table 3: The effects of the psychological constructs next to sex and educational level.

model	variable	unstandardized coefficients	standardized coefficients	t-value	p-value
base	sex	0.321	0.293	3.999	< 0.05
	educational level	0.088	0.268	3.651	< 0.05
I	sex	0.342	0.312	4.016	< 0.05
	educational level	0.08	0.244	3.27	< 0.05
	fun	-0.094	-0.112	-1.377	> 0.05
	self-development	0.15	0.168	2.206	< 0.05
	escape	-0.107	-0.208	-2.78	< 0.05
II	sex	0.342	0.312	4.296	< 0.05
	educational level	0.056	0.17	2.3191	< 0.05
	involvement	0.094	0.151	2.078	< 0.05
	need for cognition	0.227	2.68	3682	< 0.05
III	sex	0.406	0.371	5.904	< 0.05
	educational level	0.042	0.126	1.956	= 0.052
	ability to read	0.067	0.502	7.759	< 0.05

Table 4: The extent to which the independent variables affected the tendency to read complex fiction books.

model	variable	unstandardized coefficient	standardized coefficient	t-value	p-value
IV	sex	0.333	0.304	4.614	< 0.05
	educational level	0.0389	0.118	1.816	= 0.071
	fun	-0.166	-1.98	-2.681	< 0.05
	self-development	0.138	0.153	2.209	< 0.05
	escape	-0.033	-0.065	-0.982	= 0.328
	involvement	-0.031	-0.049	-0.617	= 0.538
	need for cognition	0.131	0.154	2.366	< 0.05
	cultural competence	0.067	0.503	7.164	< 0.05