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Holla, S.; Kuipers, G.

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Aesthetic capital

Sylvia Holla and Giselinde Kuipers¹

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Beauty comes with benefits. There are the obvious perks, such as sexual attractiveness and a desire on the part of others to seek out the company of good-looking people. But people are also inclined to associate ‘good looks’ with other positive qualities, from moral goodness to economic success. Social psychologists call this the ‘halo effect’: the assumption that persons with visible desirable traits also have other, maybe less visible, positive qualities (Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Kaplan 1978). The belief that beautiful people are better than others can be found around the world and in all eras. In present-day societies, research has shown that people who are deemed more attractive tend to have higher wages, more durable relationships, higher grades and better assessments (Andreoni and Petrie 2008). Thus, physical attractiveness comes with many rewards, also in fields that at first glance have nothing to do with physical appearance.

Sociologists have increasingly identified looks² as yet another form of capital: a convertible social resource that is unevenly divided across people which leads to advantages in many domains, also outside the direct field of appearance and sexuality (Anderson *et al.* 2010; Hakim 2010). Following Anderson *et al.* we refer to this as

'aesthetic capital'. Related concepts like 'erotic capital' (Hakim 2010) and 'sexual capital' (Martin and George 2006) point to similar mechanisms.

Compared with psychologists and economists, sociologists have been slow to take up this field of study. The societal impact of appearance may have become more evident in today's media-saturated culture, with its abundant showcasing of images of attractive people. Also, looks are becoming an increasingly important asset in post-industrial societies, where many people work in service jobs that require a representative appearance. The increasing multiplication of 'forms of capital' in sociological theorizing reflects the increasing fluidity and fragmentation of stratification systems in contemporary societies and could make this question of beauty and looks structurally quite complicated. There are indeed many sources of status and inequality, which interact with each other in increasingly complex ways (Bennett *et al.* 2009; Róbert 2010; Savage *et al.* 2013; Bellavance this volume).

This chapter gives an overview of sociological theory and research regarding 'good looks' as a convertible social resource in contemporary Western {-} mainly European {-} societies. It has a twofold aim. First, it presents three main theoretical perspectives in sociological thought, which highlight the meanings and importance of physical appearance in social life around the turn of the twenty-first century. Second, we present three case studies of the workings of aesthetic capital, which ground as well as contest (parts) of these theoretical frameworks. The first case is the rise of 'aesthetic labour' (Warhurst *et al.* 2000), which sheds light on the pivotal role of physical appearance for people's working selves, as various sectors of the labour market

increasingly demand employees to look good on the job. The other two cases are based on our own research. They discuss, respectively, work in a field that is entirely organized around physical beauty, the modelling world and the diversity of beauty standards of 'average' people in four European countries.

Approaches to aesthetic capital

We distinguish three research traditions that explore the social benefits of good looks. The first sees 'aesthetic capital as human capital'. The second approach focuses on 'aesthetic capital as cultural capital'. The third perspective is interested in the 'aesthetization of economy and society'.

Aesthetic capital as human capital

As many studies in psychology, economy and (to a lesser extent) sociology have shown, people found attractive are significantly more successful socially and economically than people with average or unattractive looks (cf. Hamermesh and Abrevaya 2013; Kwan and Trautner 2009; van Leeuwen and Maccrae 2004; Mobius and Rosenblat 2006). Sometimes, this is the result of the direct contribution of looks. In jobs like modelling and entertainment, being attractive is an intrinsic part of one's work, but in many other domains, the process is more indirect. The 'halo effect' is essentially a cognitive bias: it leads people to believe that desirable qualities often co-occur. Thus, most people - including teachers, HR personnel, employers and other people whose decisions have lasting and important consequences - are biased towards beauty. This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: success breeds success.

An attractive appearance functions as 'human capital' (cf. Coleman 1988): it is part of each individual's package of skills, competencies and qualities that leads to benefits both in the economic marketplace and in everyday life. However, whereas typical forms of human capital, such as education, are rather meritocratic, in the sense that they concern qualities that can be invested in and accumulated, with aesthetic capital this is less the case. People are mostly born with a certain appearance, but they can perform aesthetic labour {-} practices that are geared at attaining or shaping specific corporeal dispositions {-} to accumulate parts of it.

A recent comprehensive review by Anderson *et al.* (2010) gives an overview of studies of the 'perks and penalties' of an attractive appearance, asking 'what sorts of value research has found to be associated with beauty and what forms of individual wealth it returns' (2010: 565). Out of a total of 196 studies, 88 studies reported benefits for beautiful people, while 18 reported penalties for unattractive persons. These 'perks' covered multiple areas: health, employment opportunities and outcomes, as well as status and self-esteem.

Interestingly, no less than 51 studies found penalties for attractiveness. However, these negative effects tend to be more psychological {-} low self-esteem, low self-acceptance {-} whereas the perks are usually more tangible. Moreover, a key distinction lies in *having* versus *pursuing* beauty: trying to increase aesthetic capital is likely to lower self-esteem, while being judged as attractive by others is often associated with increased self-esteem (2010: 571).

These studies often show gender effects. In an early study, Kaplan (1978) found that the ‘beauty effect’ worked for women, but not for men. Later studies as well, generally show that women benefit more from looking good than men do (cf. Anderson *et al.* 2010; Hakim 2010). However, this is context-dependent. A widely publicized Israeli study (Ruffle and Shtudiner 2014) sending in CVs with and without picture to recruiters found that attractive men received significantly more call-backs than men with no picture or plain looking men. Interestingly, attractive women did not enjoy such a ‘beauty premium’. The authors speculate that this gender bias is the result of envy among the HR personnel responsible for the first screening, 90 per cent of which is female (2014: 14). The contrasting results show not only that the workings of aesthetic capital are moderated by gender, but also that shifting gender relations and contextual factors affect how possessing ample aesthetic capital works out in practice. In some cases, beauty can work against you {-} especially when you are female.

Recently, Hakim (2010, 2011) developed the concept of ‘erotic capital’, which is a considerable refinement of the ‘beauty premium’ perspective. She stresses how erotic capital can be used strategically, especially by women, but that they are prevented to do so by conventional morality.

In the ‘human capital’ perspective, attractiveness is a resource with clear profits and unequal distribution that may also have downsides. Beauty standards are usually taken as given, or at least shared within a particular context. Most studies use ratings of attractiveness (usually by students) to establish which of their stimulus images can

be deemed attractive, assuming a considerable consensus on what attractiveness entails. Other studies discuss levels of beauty or attractiveness in the light of evolutionary psychology, which hold that beauty standards are universal and linked with outward signs of fertility, health and sexual fitness (cf. Eteoff 2000). Thus, while this approach has been very successful in showing the *effects* of good looks, it has bypassed the question what good looks are, and how standards of beauty and attractiveness come into being. The next perspective is centrally concerned with this issue.

Aesthetic capital as cultural capital

The second perspective starts from the assumption that standards for attractiveness are socially constructed. Therefore, they are variable within and across societies. Moreover, they are shaped by power relations and therefore not neutral. While beauty certainly ‘pays off’, beauty standards also benefit those who are most effective in establishing them.

This perspective sees variations on both sides of the ‘beauty equation’: there is variation across individuals (and groups) in aesthetic capital, but also considerable diversity in what people consider beautiful. These standards function as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1986). Beauty standards of working and lower-middle classes often diverge considerably from dominant middle-upper class styles (Bourdieu 1984; Crane 2000; Tyler 2008; Vandebroek 2012). In *Distinction* (1984) for example, Bourdieu shows that the highbrow ‘aesthetic disposition’ allows for the appreciation of a photograph portraying an old woman’s gnarled hands. People with lower class

background and less cultured tastes typically disliked this image and saw beauty in more conventional images of pretty young women.

For Bourdieu, aesthetic evaluations {-} also bodily ones {-} mark social divides, most importantly class divides. In addition, Bourdieu discusses the different bodily styles of higher and lower social classes, which reflect divergent understandings of how to make *oneself* look good³. Like all aesthetic judgments, evaluating looks is an embodied process: a sensorial experience that happens almost automatically. But importantly, beauty standards are not only applied to ‘external objects’, such as paintings, but also to one’s own face and body. The evaluation of appearance, therefore, is characterized by what we call a ‘double embodiment’: the appreciation of is an embodied taste that people aim to express also in one’s own body.

In the extensive literature building on Bourdieu’s work, little attention has been paid to either the evaluation of physical appearance, or the way cultural capital affects bodily styles. A notable exception is the recent Flemish study by Vandebroek (2012), showing that people of different class backgrounds by and large have the same norms for body size: they like thin bodies. However, people with higher status more often meet these standards: they are on average thinner and taller. Lower class people accept hegemonic standards for body size, but are less able to meet them. Being overweight, moreover, is increasingly stigmatized (Saguy 2013), implying that societal beauty standards do indeed privilege high-status groups.

The Bourdieusian approach highlights how aesthetic standards maintain the cultural dominance of higher classes. Like other forms of cultural capital, the appreciation of beauty requires cultural knowledge that is distributed unevenly across society.

Standards of influential people and institutions have a wide social impact and can function as cultural capital in society as a whole, whereas the cultural standards of others are marginalized, limited to specific settings, or even discredited. However, although 'lowbrow' bodily styles may be penalized in society as a whole, they carry social worth in specific surroundings. Moreover, some modes of adornment entail a wilful denial of mainstream beauty standards and are designed to be liked by few people only. Think of subcultural styles like punk or gothic, but also the sometimes arcane styles of trendsetting 'fashion forwards', which have yet to become fashionable.

British researchers in cultural studies have shown how the physical styles cultivated in subcultures also challenge societal hierarchies. This approach calls into question the Bourdieusian opposition of highbrow dominance and lowbrow domination, presenting instead a more fragmented system in which aesthetics {-} including appearance {-} function as identity markers for groups with various social positions. Hebdige (1979), for example, analysed the aesthetics of youth culture, notably punk, conceptualizing these subcultural styles as 'counter-aesthetics' with their own logic. While these alternative aesthetics started out as a reversal (e.g. punk) or exaggeration (e.g. mod) of conventional styles, some elements eventually became part of 'legitimate' styles. This approach, now grown into a full-fledged field of subcultural studies (Gelder 2005), not only shows the possibility of diversity in aesthetic

standards and styles, but also shifts the attention away from bodily beauty as a given, towards bodily grooming and styling as active, constructive body practice.

The most radical position in this perspective is based in feminist theory. Scholars like Bordo (2003) and Wolf (1990) have argued that beauty standards predominantly serve to uphold gender inequalities. Beauty standards are produced in a patriarchal society, and mainly applied to women who have traditionally had limited influence on them. While beauty may have benefits for individual women (and possibly men), in society as a whole the pursuit of beauty suppresses women. Feminists argue these standards privilege a 'male gaze' and lead to objectification of women, blocking their chances of success in other domains. Moreover, the 'beauty myth' is a disciplining instrument: women spend considerable time and energy trying to meet standards that, for most of them, are impossible to attain (Bartky 1990). Ultimately, female beauty standards are beneficial to men in maintaining their dominant position in society. Importantly, it is not just men who impose oppressive beauty standards: women also do this to each other.

These feminist and gender scholars believe in beauty as capital, but they are sceptical about the value of aesthetic capital for women in general. They argue that individual perks of beauty do not defeat the disadvantages related to 'beauty myths' that women collectively experience.

With their shared focus on the social construction of beauty standards, the studies discussed show that aesthetic capital indeed supports existing power dynamics,

leading to the marginalization of, for instance, lower classes, women or ethnic minorities. This perspective highlights that beauty {-} and therefore aesthetic capital {-} is not simply a matter of appearance. It results from a combination of given traits, styling and grooming in accordance with one's (group-specific) taste and the resources available given one's social position that may facilitate or hamper the achievement of a certain look. Moreover, appearance can be used for the marking of symbolic boundaries {-} to confirm, but also oppose social hierarchies.

The aesthetization of economy and society

The third perspective holds that aesthetic capital has become increasingly important in contemporary society. Since the early 1990s, various social theorists signalled the 'aesthetization of everyday life' (Featherstone 1991) in the wake of a new era variously referred to as late, high, reflexive or postmodernity (Giddens 1991; Lash and Urry 1993; Beck 1994; Featherstone 2007). This new phase is characterized by the erosion of traditional institutions and identities as a result of increasing individualization and globalization. Consequently, identities become more fluid and changeable, and meaning making becomes gradually detached from traditions. Instead, people organise their selves around lifestyles, often anchored in consumption and aesthetic preferences.

As a result, looks and appearance have gained both importance and meaning as a 'performance of self'. Clothing, grooming and styling no longer are reflections of one's social standing, or other traditional sources of identity. Instead they are supposed to show one's authentic self (cf. Veenstra and Kuipers 2013). This insight

has spawned a whole new field of fashion and wardrobe studies that analyse how people select clothes that match their lifestyle and identity (Entwistle 2000; Woodward 2007; for a critique see Van der Laan and Velthuis 2013).

Aesthetic capital in this perspective, therefore, results from a balance between individuality and conformity to dominant tastes. Compared with the other two perspectives, the focus lies on appearance as it is actively achieved through practices of styling and adornment. The pay-off for engaging in bodywork is large: through one's aesthetic self-presentation, everyone can and *should* show who they are.

Another group of scholars has also signalled the increasing importance of appearance due to a fundamental societal shift towards a post-industrial service economy (Sassen 2001; Lloyd 2006). Increasing segments of the workforce are employed in the service or 'aesthetic economy' (Entwistle 2002; Hakim 2010), setting higher standards for self-representation as a professional requirement. This is particularly important in jobs that directly involve consumer contact or selling aesthetic goods, but other sectors are also affected by the demand to look good on the job (even university lecturers now wear designer clothes). Beauty standards emerge here not only as an expression of self: in post-industrial economies, aesthetic capital is not only a personal asset, but a job qualification: an essential competence required to function in the labour market.

This final perspective adds a third element to the beauty equation: apart from the individual appearance and socially constructed beauty standards, the meaning and effect of aesthetic capital are shaped by the importance allotted to beauty and

appearance in a given society. While the general claim that ‘looking good’ has become more important in contemporary Western societies sounds plausible enough, it is not easy to prove empirically. However, the observations that appearance has become very important for people in specific *professional contexts*, has given rise to a fertile area of empirical research: the study of aesthetic labour.

Aesthetic capital in contemporary societies: Three case studies

Aesthetic capital thus refers to bodily styles, traits, preferences and tastes. It comes with certain (dis)advantages and can function as human capital, but also marks social differences as it reflects different levels of cultural capital. Moreover, it is historically and culturally contingent. In the following cases, we discuss the mechanisms and aesthetic labour practices that lead to the shaping of aesthetic capital (case one and two), and how it is evaluated (case three), both inside and outside the field of fashion modelling.

Aesthetic labour: Looks as a resource at work

Aesthetic capital can be acquired through engaging in aesthetic labour (Anderson *et al.* 2010). According to Warhurst and Nickson (2001), who coined the term, aesthetic labour refers to particular ‘embodied capacities and attributes’ that enable employees to ‘look good and sound right’ for a certain job. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these aesthetic capacities and attributes, such as language, dress codes, manner, style, shape and size of the body, can be called ‘dispositions’ (Bourdieu 1984). Whereas aesthetic capital refers particularly to bodily styles and appearances as outcomes of

certain cultural taste patterns, aesthetic labour refers particularly to the practices that are geared towards attaining or shaping specific corporeal dispositions in people.

In most studies, aesthetic labour refers to jobs for which appearance is an important asset to produce value. However, aesthetic labour can also be used to refer to the effort people make to work on their own appearance. These two ways of aesthetic labour tend to co-occur: people who work on their appearance are more likely to get hired and be successful in jobs that involve aesthetic labour. However, as mentioned in the discussion of aesthetic capital as human capital, aesthetic capital is to a considerable extent fixed and can only be altered partly through aesthetic labour practices. Hence, by no means it guarantees to result in an appearance desired by organizations involving aesthetic labour.

The theory of aesthetic labour originated from empirical observations of the 'style' labour market of designer retailers, boutique hotels, style bars, cafes and restaurants in the 'new' Glasgow economy (Warhurst *et al.* 2000). They demonstrated how the emergence of this style labour market has changed the nature of the qualities employers are looking for when hiring labourers. Due to the gradual shift from manufacturing to service industries, aesthetic labour has become increasingly importance in comparison with, for example, workers' technical skills. Especially in service providing sectors such as hospitality and retail, potential employees are increasingly demanded to be 'outgoing', 'attractive', 'trendy', 'well-spoken and of smart appearance' (Warhurst and Nickson 2001: 17).

Organizations can choose to appeal to any of the senses to improve customer experience. For example, while fashion retailers are concerned with the physical appearance of shop floor workers, call centre operatives are predominantly preoccupied with customers' aural experience, like the accent and vocal intonation of the call centre operatives (Warhurst *et al.* 2000: 7). Employers strategically commodify and mobilize people's aesthetic attributes to their advantage when competing with other organizations. These attributes are often trained and developed once an employee has been hired in a variety of ways: through extensive grooming, deportment training, encompassing haircuts, styling, 'acceptable' make-up, posture and more (Karlsson 2012: 54).

Studies of aesthetic labour show that the value of aesthetic capital can vary greatly, as it is often defined along the lines of 'corporate standards' within specific industries and organizations. Because aesthetic attributes resulting from aesthetic labour are likely to be differently appreciated from one organization or field to the next, the conversion of people's 'aesthetic efforts' into valued aesthetic capital is context-dependent.

Moreover, corporate aesthetic standards tend to intersect with cultural norms regarding gender, race, class and age. For example, in her research on the aesthetic labour of black models in New York (2012), Wissinger showed how the 'white gaze' and the 'corporate gaze' intersect in this field. Black models have to adhere to a narrower set of aesthetic standards than other models, and consequently experience their race ambivalently: as both an asset and a liability (2012: 140). In another study

of fashion models, Mears (2010) showed how professional requirements for models intersect with classed beauty standards. The slender physique that is the basis of selection at the gate of the modelling field, and which models are expected to maintain through diets and exercise, signals economic status, self-restraint, middle and upper-class background, while overweight bodies signal lower class (2010: 24). Thus, via the standard of slenderness the category of class influences what is valued as aesthetic capital within the field of fashion modelling and beyond.

Aesthetic capital therefore marks clear symbolic boundaries. People are excluded from certain professions, regardless of the amount and form of aesthetic labour they engage in. Some physical attributes, such as skin colour, are unalterable, just as some personal capacities are impossible to (un)learn. In addition, people can fail in carrying out aesthetic labour: it can have unintended outcomes. The discriminatory effects of aesthetic capital and aesthetic labour are referred to by theorists as 'lookism' (Warhurst *et al.* 2012).

Research on aesthetic labour has provided valuable insights on the importance of appearance as a professional asset. However, viewing aesthetic labour as a form of work that only occurs within delineated organizations fails to take into consideration the increasing 'aesthetization' of late-modern service societies (Featherstone 1991; Welsh 1996). Moreover, even in a professional context, aesthetic labour is carried out not only in the context of organizations, but increasingly by freelance workers (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). In the absence of a clear corporate aesthetic, these

freelancers have to adapt to different clients, trends and more vaguely defined 'floating norms' existing in broader professional fields (Mears 2008).

Consequently, Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) have pleaded for more emphasis on the interlinking of emotional and aesthetic labour (cf. Hochschild 2003), and the relation between identity and the embodiment practices involved in aesthetic labour. Especially in the case of freelance work, aesthetic labour is not carried out solely on the work floor. The enduring nature of aesthetic labour requires workers to 'always be on' and to adapt their whole lifestyle {-} their entire embodied self {-} to professional aesthetic imperatives (2006: 783). They argue that aesthetic labour usually entails much more than superficial work on the body's surface: it involves people's entire body/self, as constantly keeping up appearances requires serious emotional effort (2006: 774). The following section on fashion modelling illustrates this.

Fashion modelling: Working in a field organized around aesthetic capital

In a society focused increasingly on appearance and aesthetics, the profession of fashion modelling is culturally prominent (Mears 2011). Although models are holders of aesthetic capital *par excellence* and generally appreciated as symbolic carriers of beauty ideals (Brenner and Cunningham 1992), they are also publicly critiqued for their work. In various media, models are simultaneously attributed positive and negative characteristics, such as natural, artificial, effortless, obsessed, beautiful, unhealthy, glamorous or superficial. Existing research on the aesthetic labour of fashion models focused on its disciplining and arduous nature. Within the fashion industry, models are predominantly looked upon as a 'physical surfaces' to be

improved and made into 'looks'. In her work on plus-size models, Czerniawski (2012) documented how they are intensively managed through self-surveillance and corporeal discipline. Likewise, Mears (2008) has shown how models are subjected to intense surveillance, uncertain judging criteria and a persistent norm of 'infantile femininity' (2008: 444). Finally, Mears and Finlay (2005) have demonstrated how aesthetic labour challenges models to engage in specific forms of emotional management, as their work is irregular, physical demands are great and competition is fierce. Correspondingly, our own ethnographic research on fashion models in Amsterdam, Paris and Warsaw (carried out from March 2011 until March 2013) shows that, although fashion modelling is generally depicted as glamorous and 'fabulous', it presupposes a great deal of commitment (Holla forthcoming). The modelling industry is a typical 'greedy institution' that seeks 'exclusive and undivided loyalty' of its workers (Cosser 1974: 4).

Fashion is about constantly changing styles, causing models' guidelines to be in constant flux (Entwistle 2002; Mears 2011). Therefore, a strong claim is made on models to be 'fresh', flexible and able to adapt to changing trends, symbols and technologies to get new jobs and survive in the industry (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin 2005: 326-327). This demand for flexibility and full engagement forces models to function as 'chameleons', able to change into whatever the fashion of the moment happens to be (Soley-Beltran 2006: 34). At the same time, this malleability requires models to maintain their bodies as a neutral basis upon which other professionals from the industry can project their envisaged image. At castings especially, models experience pressure to present themselves as a 'clean state'. During an interview fashion model Chantal explained to us:

You have to be pretty natural, you cannot show up at a casting wearing thick eyeliner and red lipstick, because then you are already too much of a character. You must always give the impression of a clean slate. That they can form you the way they want to. ... Their lack of imagination is really unbelievable! Chantal, 22, Amsterdam).

The average model is young, tall, slim and white. However, this overall aesthetic exists in varying forms, due to a 'high-low divide' existing in fashion modelling (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin 2005; Mears 2011). Whereas high-end modelling generates prestige, commercial fashion modelling is less 'legitimate' but more profitable. It uses idealized but still 'recognizable' notions of beauty that consumers can identify with, because this leads them to buy the products. In high-end fashion modelling, the process of aesthetic production is more autonomous and lacks an explicit commercial logic (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin 2005: 323; Bourdieu 1996:142). High-end fashion modelling is concerned with status, is primarily intended for field insiders instead of mass-consumption, is more experimental and takes aesthetic standards more to the extreme. Thus, there are high and lower forms of aesthetic capital produced in fashion modelling, analogous to high and lower forms of art that call for different levels of cultural capital to be able to appreciate and understand them.

This high-low divide is intersected by gender, sexuality and age: in commercial modelling, the value of aesthetic capital is largely based on heteronormative male and

female attractiveness, while in high-end fashion, male and female aesthetic standards converge to a considerable extent, which challenges sexual stereotypes.

This intersection results in different outlooks (as well as in variable interpretations of them by consumers, as demonstrated in the third case study discussed hereafter). Female commercial models are generally more 'curvy' and male models relatively more muscular than high-end or editorial models, who in turn are usually thinner and taller. There are seemingly fewer differences between male and female high-end aesthetic standards; all high-end models are tall, skinny, straight and 'dried out' {-} no fat, no curves. Many of them describe themselves or are characterized by others as somewhat androgynous. And finally, while youthfulness plays an important role in the overall aesthetic of fashion modelling, especially in high-end modelling, the value of models' aesthetic capital regresses as they age (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin 2005: 326).

However, despite these variations, the 'aesthetic basis' of slenderness, whiteness, youthfulness and tallness strongly inspires all models' body-work. The bodily attainment of these standards is everything but an effortless endeavour. To keep up with the demands, models continuously carry out aesthetic labour, such as yoga, dieting, practicing poses and more. Models carry out most of their aesthetic labour 'off the job'. They are never 'not models' because their entire embodied self *is* the product (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006: 791).

The case of fashion modelling is an extreme form of aesthetic labour. Requiring intense forms of emotional and physical involvement and being continuous in nature, their aesthetic labour has strong repercussions for how models live their lives. Because their private lives are so strongly guided by professional imperatives, maintaining a coherent sense of self is challenging to many models. Although in many modern-day professions, the boundary between work and leisure has become increasingly porous (Maguire 2008), this issue is particularly important for fashion models. In our research we have found that models draw moral boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' ways of being a model, through which they attempt to justify the professional 'colonization' of their body/selves, towards themselves and others. This means that other than merely a new form of work, aesthetic labour is a potential source of identity construction: it determines to a considerable extent how people relate to their selves.

Diverse beauty standards and cultural capital in a globalizing world

Besides the creation of beauty standards within the field of modelling, our research also analyses how beauty standards vary across social groups in relation to shifting inequalities. As we saw, the 'aesthetic capital as cultural capital' makes many claims about the relation between social inequalities and beauty standards, but so far has produced little empirical research. In our current research project we investigate how people in four European countries {-} Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the UK {-} evaluate physical beauty of men and women.

Given the shift in stratification systems and the ‘multiplication of symbolic boundaries’ in contemporary Western societies, we look at cultural capital and gender, as well as other social dividing lines: age, urbanity and engagement with global culture (cf. Prieur and Savage 2013; Savage *et al.* 2013). We analyse people’s beauty standards and their implications in social life. How do people apply beauty standards to themselves and others? How are they related to social background? How do people attempt to produce and influence their own ‘aesthetic capital’?

For this study we use Q methodology, a research method designed to combine the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research (Brown 1993). It uses a combination of semi-structured interviews and a sorting assignment*. In all four countries, we created a stratified sample structured by gender, educational level, age group and metropolitanism, interviewing a total of 106 persons. Respondents were asked to sort four sets of images of male and female faces and bodies according to beauty in a pre-set grid; and to comment on the images while sorting. The images were selected to be as diverse as possible, with people of different physical types, different styles of photography and a wide variety in grooming and styling. We used factor analysis to find underlying aesthetic standards or ‘logics’, and the interview materials to interpret these factors. In addition, we combined factors with information on informants’ personal beauty practices, life history and social position, and the degree to which they draw symbolic boundaries on the basis of beauty. Finally, we used regression analysis to gauge whether the factors extracted from the Q analysis were related to social background.

We found that evaluations of facial images show the clearest relation with symbolic boundaries. There are clear ‘repertoires of evaluation’ (Lamont and Thévenot 2000)

reflecting different aesthetic logics. These repertoires differ greatly within countries, and are related to specific social backgrounds. The Q-sorts for bodies showed considerably less variation {-} that is, greater consensus {-} within each country. Thus, standards for bodily beauty are more standardized and probably more hegemonic (thus confirming Vandebroeck's 2012 findings). In contrast with the standards for facial beauty, the evaluation of bodies appears to be more nationally specific and less influenced by international or global styles and standards.

The Q sorts of facial beauty show considerable variations in beauty standards. These vary systematically across social groups, suggesting that they are linked to the demarcation of symbolic boundaries. Moreover, we find considerable differences in evaluatory logics applied to male and female faces.

The judgments of female faces follow a 'Bourdiesian' logic akin to the evaluation of other aesthetic products. Across all the countries surveyed, less educated, older and non-metropolitan informants look for pleasing, appealing faces, whereas more educated, younger, metropolitan informants prefer a beauty that is 'interesting' or 'original', reflecting a Bourdiesian 'aesthetic disposition'. We found no significant differences between countries. This divide is more complex than the traditional highbrow/lowbrow division as it points to an intersection of education, age and urbanity within each of the four countries. This reflects a divide between cosmopolitan urban youth, in ample position of 'emerging cultural capital', and older, less cosmopolitan people who may be more oriented towards local culture.

Both the highbrow and the lowbrow repertoires come in ‘subjectified’ and ‘objectified’ versions. The objectifying gaze uses formal, standardisable or stylistic features to distinguish the beautiful from the less beautiful. In gender theory, this gaze is associated with the traditional objectification of female appearance (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). In the subjectifying view, the (perceived) personality of the models strongly impacts their attractiveness. Informants tend to speculate about the person, or imagine themselves interacting with them. Women and older people are more likely to take this subjectifying stance. This finding on the subjectifying gaze somewhat opposes the third theoretical perspective on ‘the aestheticization of society’, which holds that looks and appearance have gained importance and meaning as a reflection of identity. The subjective gaze reminds us that people also look beyond the surface of appearance, searching for clues about the character and personality of people portrayed.

Beauty ‘logics’, moreover, differ on gender normativity. In general the highbrow styles are less gender-normative: people with this taste prefer androgynous fashion models, or faces with unusual styling and make-up (reflecting the relatively gender-neutral highbrow standards within the modelling field). Less gender-normative faces are also liked better by the educated, younger metropolitans. Again, this repertoire of evaluation is not related to either gender or country of origin.

Male facial beauty is judged according to a less aestheticized, more gender-normative logic. In line with findings from gender studies, evaluations of men are less objectified and less easily measured by a strictly aesthetic yardstick. Instead, these

evaluations are strongly informed by variations in gender norms and ideologies, leading to considerable cross-national variations. The appreciation of male looks is therefore less globalized than the judgment of female beauty and more shaped by nationally specific styles and gender relations.

The presence of distinct tastes based in social divides suggests that human appearance and beauty standards serve as a means of distinction: what people find beautiful provides information {-} consciously or unconsciously {-} about their social position. In the case of appearance, this information is quite literally embodied, for instance in styles of dress and grooming. However, we find that the politics of distinction are more complicated than a straightforward highbrow-lowbrow divide. The judgments of beauty intersect with other social background factors. Especially in the case of female beauty, standards are increasingly globalized, probably as a result of the growing impact of transnational visual culture. Moreover, we find that valuations of beauty are strongly gendered: both male and female respondents are more inclined to objectify and aestheticize women, reflecting an age-old tradition of viewing women as aesthetic objects. Male beauty, on the other hand, is less affected by global media culture or an aesthetic gaze. Instead, when people are explicitly requested to judge how beautiful a man is {-} something many informants found remarkably difficult {-} they were more likely to speculate what sort of person they were and how well they lived up to conventional standards of masculinity. Thus, they shied away from seeing male faces as purely aesthetic objects.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the meanings and importance of 'good looks'. We presented three main (cultural) sociological perspectives on the role of appearance in advanced Western societies around the turn of the twenty-first century. The first perspective, 'aesthetic capital as human capital', deals with the social advantages and drawbacks of being attractive. The second approach, 'aesthetic capital as cultural capital' sheds light on the variability of what is regarded as beautiful by whom, and shows how social and cultural constructions of aesthetic capital allows for new inequalities to arise. Finally, the third perspective depicts the overall importance of appearance in present-day societies {-} at work, but also in society at large, as a marker of identity. We empirically grounded and contested (parts) of these theoretical frameworks by presenting three case studies on the workings of aesthetic capital. The first case on 'aesthetic labour' demonstrates an increasing demand for good looks in various sectors of the labour market. The second case shows how the aesthetic labour of fashion models has considerable consequences for how models live their lives and relate to their selves. The third case about evaluations of facial images by broader publics in Europe, highlights that the politics of distinction are more complicated than a straightforward highbrow-lowbrow divide: both cultural constructions and appreciations of beauty intersect with a multitude of social background factors, such as gender, sexuality, age and metropolitanism.

The involvement of these intersecting variables is, at least partly, explained by the presence of a 'double embodiment'. While all tastes involve a sensorial experience in response to specific objects or persons, the judgment of physical appearance is dually embodied: beauty standards also apply to the self and to one's own face and body. Consequently, embodied attributes like gender, sexuality and age are particularly

significant in shaping and evaluating aesthetic capital, compared to, for example, judgments of paintings or books.

Our analyses especially underscores the importance of gender for cultural sociologists, who have often been content to leave gender to feminist and gender theorists, preferring to focus on national differences and class-related dispositions instead. This chapter shows that gender plays a pivotal role in understanding constructions and valuations of appearance. It probably does for explaining other cultural processes of meaning making as well.

Finally, we argue for an intersectional and relational approach to aesthetic capital. 'Looking good', and appreciating looks of others respectively, can only be sufficiently understood by analysing how multiple variables intersect and by considering the social and cultural contexts within which peoples' aesthetic practices and tastes are shaped and expressed.

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¹ University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

² The terms 'looks' and 'appearance' are used interchangeably throughout this chapter. 'Looks' is an expression that is often used within our field of study, the fashion modeling industry, to denote the appearance of, for example, fashion models.

³ This understanding of aesthetic capital as cultural capital mostly refers to consumption: to being able to recognize and talk about beauty in the right ways. Moreover, cultural capital is grounded in a relational framework that recognizes the contingency and power dynamics of the production of beauty norms. As such, it significantly differs from aesthetic capital as human capital - a term derived from economics rather than sociology - which looks at the productive effects of aesthetic capital and tends to assume that standards for beauty are stable and shared. However, in the Bourdieusian tradition as well, aesthetic capital can bring advantage and is convertible into other forms of capital. Thus, the distinction with human capital is strong in some respects, but also overlaps to an extent.

⁴ To illustrate, this is just a small selection of headlines from the web: *Skinny models 'send unhealthy message'*, available online at www.theguardian.com (31 May 2000, accessed 29 August 2014); *Smile and say 'No Photoshop'*, available online at www.nytimes.com (27 May 2009, accessed 29 August 2014); *Fashion week embraces grey hair and the rise of natural chic*, available online at www.theobserver.com (18 September 2011, accessed 29 August 2014); *Models' cotton balls diet: Bria Murphy describes unhealthy model habit*, available online at www.huffingtonpost.com (11 June 2013, accessed 29 August 2014).

° We use educational level as a proxy for cultural capital, because occupational and class structures differ considerably across countries. Existing operationalizations of class position often fail to capture this. Therefore, cross-national comparative studies often employ educational level as an indicator of cultural capital. Across European countries, completion of tertiary education is a good predictor of job status and income levels (Eurostat 2012): it generally functions as a qualification for higher white-collar or middle-class jobs. Moreover, higher education is fairly comparable because of long-standing international connections and recent formal standardization (the Bologna treaty).

° Q method studies usually combine semi-structured interviews with cards with statements that interviewees are asked to sort. Our study used images. The cards serve a several functions. First, they are used for elicitation. Second, they structure the interview. Third, and most importantly, they allow for quantification. Because all images are sorted along a pre-structured bell-shaped grid, all cards can be assigned a score from most to least beautiful. These scores can then be used as basis for a factor and a regression analysis. The interview material is then employed to interpret these factors. Thus, Q method allows for the ‘measurement of subjectivity’.