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Chapter 3 Standardizing slimness: how body weight quantified beauty in the Netherlands, 1870–1940

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When anthropologist Rebecca Popenoe volunteered in a Nigerien clinic in the 1980s, she noticed that local nurses put on additional clothing before stepping on to the scales in order to increase their body weight. Popenoe (2005) uses the anecdote in a piece on living in a culture with an ideal of beauty opposite to her own. Whereas Nigerien women wanted to be fat, Popenoe, an American woman, wanted to be slim.[1] Yet, although their desired weights differed, both Popenoe and the Nigerien women used scales to determine their level of beauty. Body weight is a powerful beauty standard for women in communities around the world – and increasingly for men as well.

But as beauty standards go body weight is not a particularly visible one. We can see the shape of someone's nose, the colour of someone's skin, the style of someone's hair, but our eyes cannot establish someone's exact weight; for that, we require a set of scales. Yet, when we as scholars analyse weight as a beauty standard, we often focus on the visual: we understand the desire to lose or gain weight as a desire to change our appearance and as something propagated by visual representations of the body in magazines, movies or music videos. Susan Bordo, for example, in her new 2003 preface to the classic *Unbearable Weight*, situates western ideals of both weight loss and slenderness in the late modern 'empire of images' (Bordo 2003, xiii–xxxvi) – but what visual imagery presents as 'unbearable' is fatness, not weight. And although fatness, slimness and weight have come to be closely connected in many contemporary cultures, they are not the same. Stepping on to the scales may tell us something about our body size, but by no means does it reveal everything: it does not tell us whether the weight consists of muscles or of fat, nor whether it is located on our hips or on our belly. Nonetheless, weight has become a powerful standard for body size; and the link between body size and weight, between slimness and the scales, seems natural to many of us.

Like other strongly established standards (for example, blood pressure as a standard for health), weight as a standard for body size may seem inevitable. But historians and sociologists of science, technology and medicine have shown time and again that standards are neither natural nor neutral (Lampland and Star 2009; Timmermans and Epstein 2010). Establishing them takes time and effort, and once established, they change the things they measure. Researchers in the emerging field of fat studies (or, as some of them prefer, critical weight studies) build on such historical and sociological work to challenge the use of body weight as a measurement for health, as do fat activists and the Health at Every Size movement (Lupton 2013, 18–31; Cooper 2010; Rothblum and Solovay 2009; Bacon 2010). Fat studies scholars have shown that the current dominance of the body mass index (which is based on body weight) as a health indicator is not the inevitable result of biomedical research but instead the contingent outcome of social and historical processes (Dawes 2014; Fletcher 2012, 2014; Gard and Wright 2005; Jutel 2005, 2006; Lupton 2013; Saguy 2013) – or even, some argue, a profitable lie nurtured by big pharma (Campos 2004; Oliver 2006).

In this article, I show that, in addition to not being a self-evident standard for health, weight is also not a self-evident standard for body size. As fat studies scholars have noted before, fatness and slimness do not have to be measured in kilos or pounds; instead, they can be expressed in for example inches, dress size or the number of compliments or insults received. I believe that separating slimness, fatness and weight is important because doing so would enable us to address urgent questions about body weight as a beauty standard. For example: how can a bodily quality that is at best visible only indirectly be such a powerful beauty standard? Why do so many of us expect to be admired for something other people cannot see? We cannot address these questions as long as we conflate body size (which is visible) and body weight (which is not visible). Unfortunately, scholars working on beauty and the body do not always carefully distinguish between the two. Bordo's link between

desired weight loss and visual imagery is one example; another one can be found in a chapter of the *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies*, which lists 'increased body weight' as one of the 'visible effects of aging' (Dumas 2012, 380) – but what our eyes see when looking at 'old' people is not increased body weight but fatness.

To increase our sensitivity for the differences between weight and body size, slimness and fatness, it helps, I think, to study the history of weight as a beauty standard. Hence, this chapter addresses two historical questions. First, when did we learn to link body weight and body size? And second, how did this change the character of beauty in so far as it came to be determined by body size? My answers are, of course, not full and universal, but partial and local. I focus on the Netherlands, and Dutch men and women learned to weigh themselves in the early twentieth century, but the Nigerien women described by Popenoe (2005, 11), for example, did so much later, around the 1970s. And whereas the Nigerien women wanted to be fat, the actors in my case study, like many westerners, were striving to remain or become slim.

My case study consists of two parts. The first part shows that body weight is not a natural standard of slimness. I analyse the non-medical use of scales in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Netherlands to show that things used to be different: weight had not yet become a beauty standard but functioned instead as a bodily curiosity. This was the case even when slimness had already become a beauty ideal. The link between weight, being slim and beauty emerged later, in the Netherlands in the 1920s. The second part of my case study focuses on advertisements for slimming remedies in the 1930s. It demonstrates that by then weight was securely established as a beauty standard. It also investigates how advertisers – who, as we will see, relied on beauty as a visible characteristic – dealt with this invisible beauty standard.

Methodology

My research is based on sources that include newspaper reports on fairs, beauty manuals and newspaper advertising campaigns for slimming products. A significant number of these sources were selected with the help of digital search techniques. I worked with the newspaper database of the Dutch National Library and extracted my sources from this database using keyword searches before its most recent updates (April 2016 and December 2017). When I carried out my searches, this database contained over eight million newspaper pages published between the early seventeenth and late twentieth centuries.[2] Although that places it among the largest in Europe, it contains only ten percent of all the newspapers ever published in the Netherlands. The percentage differs between periods, and my focus here, the early twentieth century, seems to have above-average representation, although it is hard to give an exact figure. What can be said is that for this period the database's spread of newspapers is substantial, ranging from the regional, socialist *Zaans Volksblad* to the national, liberal *Algemeen Handelsblad*, and from the catholic *De Tijd* to the national-socialist *Volk en Vaderland*. I have offered a detailed discussion of my approach in searching these newspapers elsewhere, including an overview of the limitations of these techniques: in particular, digital repositories help us find more and different sources than before, but they offer neither completeness nor objectivity (Huistra 2017; see also Bingham 2010; Brake 2012; Hitchcock 2013; Putnam 2016). After selecting the sources, I analysed them manually.

This analysis is informed by theoretical work on standards, standardization and quantification. Building on the work of sociologists Stefan Timmermans and Steven Epstein (2010), I define a standard as a property, or a set of properties, that a certain object, procedure, person or process should meet according to the person, institution or social group that has set the standard. Standards can be set and enforced either formally, for example, by professional organizations or the state, or informally (Timmermans and Epstein 2010, 71).

Beauty standards are informal: there is no Agency of Beauty issuing official guidelines on our appearance that have been established through carefully arranged committee meetings involving all stakeholders. Their informality makes it harder to track their history, and this may tempt us to take them for granted, but informal standards are neither more natural nor less powerful than formal standards.

All standards change the world around them, including the qualities they standardize, but each standard does so in its own way (Espeland and Stevens 2008; Lampland and Star 2009; Timmermans and Epstein 2010). A standard's effects depend on its type (for example, quantitative standards differ from qualitative ones), on what is being standardized and on the social domain in which the standard functions. Therefore, Timmermans and Epstein call for specific, empirical analyses that enable us to compare standards and standardization across distinct social domains (Timmermans and Epstein 2010, 84–85).

In the last two centuries, ever more products, procedures and processes have been standardized, from scientific measuring units to fruit and vegetables, from ethical behaviour to child seats. Some types of standardization have received more attention than others. Body weight is a quantitative standard regulating the body. Quantitative standardization of the body has been studied extensively by historians and sociologists of medicine (Czerniawski 2007; Dawes 2014; Fletcher 2014; Jorland, Opinel and Weisz 2005; Jutel 2001, 2006; Porter 1995), but mainly in the domain of medicine and health. Quantitative standardization of the body in the domain of beauty, the topic of this chapter, has received less attention. Yet the introduction of quantitative standards poses specific challenges for actors in this domain. Quantitative standardization results in what Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (1992, 2007, 115–90; see also Porter 1995) have called 'mechanical objectivity,' that is, an objectivity produced by mechanical means (in the case of quantitative standardization, this means measuring instruments) that in theory exclude all human involvement, although in practice,

this is an unattainable ideal. The mechanical objectivity produced by scales contrasts with a crucial aspect of beauty: beauty is about being seen through the *subjective* eyes of other individuals – exactly the human observers that mechanical objectivity aims to exclude. This tension is less prominent in the domain of modern health and medicine, which is why quantification of the body in the domain of beauty deserves to be studied in its own right. To do so, we will now return to the late nineteenth-century Netherlands, just before weight became what it is now: the most prominent quantitative beauty standard.[3]

Slimness around 1900: a qualitative beauty ideal

Historians of the body have dated the rise of being slim as the dominant beauty ideal in Western Europe and the United States in the mid to late nineteenth century (Stearns 2002). The Netherlands seems to fit this pattern. An 1898 Dutch beauty manual describes corpulence as 'disturbing … the harmony of forms,' although it stresses that being too thin is no good either: 'With the notion of perfect beauty, a certain "too much or too little" with regard to the curves of the forms of the beauty cannot be reconciled' (Goupy [1898], 96). Advertising campaigns for slimming remedies from the early twentieth century show that slimness had by then been firmly established as a beauty ideal.

Take the campaign for the Boranium berry, which ran in the 1910s. The Boranium berry was a slimming product that was introduced in 1914, presented as the newest discovery from England. This little brown berry was, the ads claimed, 'the most pleasant and easiest method' to lose fat: just one berry after every meal (or three to four per day), and the rest would take care of itself (*Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 20 July 1914, 10).[4] This paints a rather rosy picture of how things worked. First, the berry was not actually a natural berry, but an artificial pill that looked like a berry. The main active ingredient was phenolphthalein, a laxative; in addition, it contained peppermint oil and sugar, to help the medicine go down.

The laxative no doubt helped people to become thinner, but as far as slimming methods go, it was not ‘the most pleasant ... method one can think of’ (ibid.): the laxative effect was strong, and it had serious side-effects. None of this was mentioned in the ads – and wisely so. Instead, the ads focused on explaining to the reader why he or she would want to become thin. Beauty was one of these reasons; health was another major reason. This chapter focuses on advertisements discussing beauty, but beauty ideals and health ideals cannot always be separated, and they often influenced each other.

The most prominent example of the use of the beauty frame in the Boranium campaign is the ad *‘Dit is het geheim van mijn mooi figuur*’ (‘This is the secret of my beautiful figure’), which is formatted as a testimonial (*Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 19 July 1914, 7). The nameless user states: ‘A few months ago I was just as fat and plump as hundreds of others and, having tried all advertised remedies available, I had almost, filled with despair, given up all hope to ever regaining my past slenderness and beautiful figure.’ Then, of course, the person encountered Boranium berries, which delivered excellent results within a month. Here, the explicit aim is a ‘beautiful figure.’ In other ads, it was not so much being beautiful as looking young that counted – being slender was strongly linked to appearing young, an important value at the time. The ad ‘*Eet en wordt mager*’ (‘Eat and become thin’), for example, explains that ‘women in particular will value this advice [to take Boranium berries], because continued use will quickly enable her [sic] to follow fashion better and to appear years younger with regard to features and posture’ (*Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 18 February 1914, 5).

Most of the Boranium ads that link slenderness to beauty also link it to health. In another early twentieth-century campaign, the Tonnola campaign, the focus on beauty was more exclusive. The campaign ran between 1912 and 1915, and was relaunched in the early 1920s. It had three different advertisements (most campaigns had more; the Boranium

campaign had ten, and the campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s sometimes had around one hundred different advertisements), though only one of them was used between 1912 and 1915. This campaign focuses on appearance and frames being slim as being beautiful. In particular, the ad promises the Tonnola user a 'slender, elegant figure' and a 'graceful waist,' instead of a 'broad body' with 'broad hips' (*Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 15 October 1913, 8). The ad is illustrated with two male figures (one fat, the other thin). Fatness was not just a female issue in early twentieth-century Europe (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2005). Most of the advertising campaigns discussed in this chapter addressed both men and women, although not to the same extent: the majority of the advertisements, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, focused on women.

It is striking that in both the Boranium and the Tonnola campaigns, body weight is absent. The Tonnola advertisement does not mention it at all. Two of the Boranium advertisements do so, but they only talk about 'weight loss' as a general goal and do not quantify the amount of body weight lost (*Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad,* 16 April 1914, 14; *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 15 April 1914, 10). They focus instead on a loss of *fat,* and some of the Boranium ads do quantify this: they state that one berry will remove thirty grams of fat from the body. But although the loss of fat is quantified, the loss of weight is not, nor are slimness and fatness as such. Apparently, fatness was not expressed in kilos in early twentieth-century advertising; weight had not yet entered the domain of beauty. Instead, it could be found elsewhere, in a place we may find surprising: the fairground.

Weight around 1900: a fairground curiosity

In the Netherlands around 1900, one could hear the fair coming days before it arrived from the fairground songs sung in the streets (Bruin 2002, 29). The cheerful songs anticipated the experiences the fair would bring to town. While some of these experiences have not changed

much in the past century – such as having a ride on the merry-go-round, eating traditional pastries, and making advances at potential partners – others might now seem out of place at a fairground. Take this suggestion in a fairground song from Groningen, a city in the North of the Netherlands: '*Of anders, stap de weegschaal op, die twee cent maakt u ook niet dop*' ('Or else, step on the scale, the two cents won't kill you;' Huizinga [1900?]).

The song represents having oneself weighed as a standard fairground attraction, as do newspaper reports and other fairground descriptions from this period, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The fair in Groningen, to which the song above refers, was at the time one of the largest in the Netherlands, but other, often smaller fairs across the country had scales as well, including those in Tilburg, Wormerveer, Zaandam, Leeuwarden and Hoorn (Oers, Spapens and Wijffels 1986, 106; Tjeertes Sr. 1978, 204; Maas 1950, 12; Schat 2005, 88; Zoonen 1996, 51). The author of a local newspaper report on the fair in the northern city of Zwolle in the 1870s explains why he left out the personal scales from his overview of attractions: 'I have kept silent about the scales with the stereotypical "get on and have yourself weighed!" or "this is where you weigh the heaviest." … Such enterprises can be found everywhere, and they are the same everywhere' (*Provinciaalse Overijsselsche & Zwolsche Courant,* 31 July 1873, 3). The quotation suggests not only that scales for weighing the individual were common at fairs, but also that their presentation and framing did not differ much between the different fairs. Indeed, the phrase 'Get on and have yourself weighed!', which occurs both in the Zwolle newspaper report and in the Groningen song, was used regularly to describe this attraction. The exclamation mark suggests an enthusiasm for weighing oneself that many of us nowadays do not share. Most of us do not weigh ourselves for pleasure and thus would never expect to find scales at a fairground, which we consider a site for entertainment instead.

Until the early twentieth century, however, fairs were about more than just entertainment (Jacobs 2002; Jansen 1987; Keikes 1978; Keyser 1978). Take the Leeuwarden fair around 1850 (Schat 2005), which took place in July and lasted for two weeks – not uncommon for fairs at the time. During the fair, visitors could ride on the merry-go-round, eat waffles, drink wine and enjoy music, but they could also have themselves weighed, study anatomical wax models to learn about the human body, gaze at panoramas informing them about historical and current events, have their teeth pulled, and buy shoes, hats, books, scissors and umbrellas. Fairground experiences varied from the pleasant to the painful, but what they shared was their uniqueness. The stalls and stands offered objects and experiences that could not easily be found elsewhere.

Having oneself weighed was one such unique experience. At the time, scales were not yet household instruments. Bathroom scales did not yet exist, and weighing people was usually done with platform scales or weighing chairs. Both types of scales are large and expensive instruments and thus not suitable for individual purchase. To weigh themselves, most adults depended on scales in public spaces; and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fairgrounds were a major space for weighing. Travellers had yet another option: they might encounter scales when visiting spas. Furthermore, scales also started appearing in doctor's offices, but around 1900 many doctors still did without them (Horstman 2001, 85; Stearns 2002, 27).

When the fair came to town, the atmosphere changed: fair time was accompanied by a specific set of norms and customs, often involving reversals. In many towns, for example, women asked men out to the fair instead of the other way around. The reversal of norms and the uniqueness of the experiences on offer supports a conceptualization of fairgrounds as Foucauldian heterotopias, counter sites that represent other sites but at the same time contest and invert them (Foucault 1986; Stallybrass and White 1986, 27–43).

But the boundary between the fairground and other, non-heterotopian sites was permeable. The fair did not just mirror society as it was; it also anticipated society as it might become. Philosopher Petran Kockelkoren (2003, 26) has argued that fairs should not be seen as places letting people escape 'cultural conditioning' but as 'cultural normalization machines,' places that offered people the opportunity to get used to unfamiliar technologies and practices. The fair introduced visitors to new objects and experiences, thus preparing them for the incorporation of these objects and experiences into their daily lives. Many new technologies were first introduced at the fairground. In the early days of cinema, for example, the fairground was a major site for movie screenings. Once permanent cinemas emerged and the moving image lost its uniqueness, it disappeared from the fairgrounds (Hemels 2002).

Between roughly 1850 and 1920, many of the non-entertainment elements at fairs became available elsewhere and throughout the year: newly established department stores sold products until then only available at the fair, emerging mass media made world news accessible to a large audience, and public museums replaced travelling exhibitions. Together, these changes modified the character of the fair, resulting in a predominance of entertainment (Schat 2005). Thus, the period discussed here was a transitional period, when the multi-layered character of the fair was still present, although slowly dissolving. This provides the context in which we should understand the fairground scales and the bodily quality they measured: a context of entertainment and education, of uniqueness and normalization.

In this context, fairground scales enabled people to become acquainted with weighing and quantifying their bodies, but they did not (yet) standardize their bodies. Stepping on to a set of scales was something out of the ordinary, a unique experience, to be done once a year at most. The limited accessibility of scales made it difficult to monitor one's weight. Moreover, not only did incidental weighing prevent people from checking regularly whether they adhered to the standard, they also lacked any standard to adhere to. A common slogan

for the weighing attractions was ‘*hier weegt men ‘t zwaarst’* (‘this is where you weigh the heaviest’). This slogan focuses on an extreme bodily state – ‘the heaviest’ – instead of a normal one, or a standard. The focus on extraordinary bodies could also be found in the fairground shows exhibiting ‘freaks’ (Sliggers 2002), that is, (living) persons with unique bodily properties, such as the very short or very tall, Siamese twins and bearded women (see Herza, this volume). A common feature in the freak shows were people billed as ‘fat’ (or even ‘the fattest’), whose weights were listed in the shows’ announcements. When fair visitors stepped on the scales, these weights were what they had in mind – perhaps they even strived to compete with ‘the heaviest’ or ‘the fattest’ man or woman in town.

Thus, while interpreting weighing oneself at a fairground as a form of plain entertainment might be too simplistic, the experience was certainly something (still) out of the ordinary. Furthermore, the resulting measurement was not compared with a standard weight since the only weights available for comparison were the extraordinary weights of the fat men, women and children in the curiosity cabinets. Hence, the weights measured on fairground scales were curiosities, not standards of beauty. This does not mean that people did not care about their body sizes, though. As we have seen, being slim had already become a qualitative ideal of beauty: it was simply not yet measured in quantitative terms. This changed in subsequent decades. In the next section I will show how, contrary to slimming remedy ads from the 1910s, those from the 1920s and the 1930s express a new consciousness of body size in kilos.

How exactly slimness and body weight came to be linked to each other is a complex question, and to disentangle the multiple causes involved we require more research on this topic. Possible causes include the growing importance of weight as a measurement of health, driven in part by the life insurance industry, and the wider availability of scales. We might think that the latter is simply a consequence of the emergence of weight as a norm, but, as

science and technology studies have shown, we should be careful not to underestimate the power of instruments to shape the world instead of the other way around (Latour 1988, 1992; Pickering 1995; Verbeek 2005). In what follows, I focus not on the causes of the emergence of weight as a standard of beauty but on one of the consequences, namely that it complicated the character of beauty by objectifying beauty mechanically and thus separating it from the gaze of others. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, slimming remedy advertisers still relied on this gaze as an incentive for their potential customers to reduce weight, while at the same time propagating weight as a standard of beauty in their advertisements.

Weight in the interwar period: a quantitative beauty standard

Advertising campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s regularly express body size or a change in body size in kilos or pounds. The extent to which someone meets the ideal of slimness is increasingly expressed in quantitative terms, namely in body weight. In this section, I analyse the most influential slimming remedy campaign from this period, the Bonkora campaign, occasionally supplementing my analysis with examples from other prominent campaigns of the era. Bonkora was a slimming cure sold internationally. Its ingredients were kept a secret, as was common with these kinds of remedies, but analysis by the Association Against Quackery revealed that its active ingredients were simple laxatives ("Bonkora" 1936; "Het wondervermageringsmiddel 'Bonkora'" 1937; "Bonkora" 1938). It was introduced in the Netherlands in the 1930s and became well known, judging from newspaper articles mentioning the brand without further explanation. One example is the preview of an upcoming hockey game in the regional newspaper *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant* (21 October 1939, 12). The newspaper writes mockingly: 'But the goal of the Pelicans [team name] is narrow, given their large goalkeeper. Or could it be that "Bonkora" has meanwhile offered a helping hand?'

The Bonkora campaign has the most advertisements of all the campaigns I have analysed. When searching for advertisements on slimming remedies between 1918 and 1940 in the National Library's newspaper database, I found approximately 1,150 advertisements for Bonkora. For other prominent campaigns in this period, such as for Richter's tea, Remmler's de-fattening beans and Facil tablets, I have found a few hundred advertisements each at most.

Virtually all the Bonkora advertisements use weight to indicate a change in body size.[5] Regularly, the headings mention specific cases of amounts of weight supposedly lost through taking Bonkora. For example, one ad prominently describes a user with the words: 'Has lost 18 pounds in barely 2 weeks' (*De Gooi- en Eemlander*, 11 May 1936, 4). This ad contains a letter signed by a Mrs F. Cole, whose portrait is also included. It says: 'I am so grateful for what Bonkora has done for me that I would like to shout it from the rooftops. By using just 2 phials I have already lost 16 pounds [8 kilos] in 2 weeks. My weight has decreased from 167 pounds [83.5 kilos] to 151 [75.5 kilos].'[6] Such user testimonials were printed regularly, not just in the Bonkora campaigns but in other campaigns as well. Producers of slimming remedies liked to employ lay users as external authorities in their advertisements to convince potential customers to buy their products (Huistra 2017). Most Bonkora advertisements contain one or more user testimonials, but references to weight occurred outside user testimonials as well. Several Bonkora advertisements make general claims about the amount of weight that can be lost in taking Bonkora: for example, 'Thousands of people … have lost dozens of pounds without a diet' (*De Graafschap-bode*, 17 May 1937, 7) or 'How to reduce a pound a day without a diet' (*De Telegraaf*, 31 July 1936, 20).

In the Bonkora advertisements, body size is expressed first and foremost in terms of weight. This distinguishes them from earlier advertising campaigns, such as Boranium and

Tonnola discussed above, which did not quantify body size at all. Moreover, in the Bonkora campaign weight is more than a matter of quantification, it is also a standard. Bonkora users do not just express their body size quantitatively, they also strive to meet a specific value for this quantitative measurement. In some Bonkora advertisements this is very explicit, as they encourage people to take Bonkora until they have reached their 'normal, healthy weight' (see, for example, *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* 27 July 1936, 12; *De Gooi- en Eemlander*, 26 May 1938, 7; *Limburger Koerier, 7* May 1937, 4).

As Ian Hacking (1990, 160–69) has explained, the modern concept of 'normal' is a not a neutral description referring to a statistical average, but a morally loaded term prescribing how things ought to be. Defining the 'normal', healthy body then becomes a way to exert what Foucault has called biopower, control over people's bodies (either individual bodies or populations) (Foucault 1990).[7] When advertisements mentioned a 'normal weight', they referred to a standard that their readers had to make their bodies adhere to. The fact that the term was used regularly in advertisements shows that people were now familiar with this standard, that they knew their own 'normal' weight and that they were aware they should strive for it. The advertisements could refer to a 'normal weight' because their audience was familiar with this concept; and through these references, the advertisements reinforced the importance the public attached to having a normal weight – advertisements not only reflect but also shape the society that produces them (Huistra 2017; Lears 1994; Marchand 1985).

With weight becoming a standard measurement for slimness and fatness, scales changed from fairground attractions into essential instruments to determine whether one has met the new beauty standard: weight. The Bonkora campaign indeed presents scales as such, not just because most advertisements express body size and the success of slimming in pounds, but also because some advertisements explicitly depict scales as judges of beauty. A striking example is displayed in Figure 3.1, where we see a woman standing on a scale.

Compared to the type of women explicitly labelled ‘slender’ in other Bonkora ads, she has a rather large body size. She also has a troubled look on her face, looking down at the scale dial. The dial, depicted as a face, also looks troublesome, staring back at the woman, and uttering a warning: ‘You are really becoming too fat.’ The advertisement is entitled ‘My scale has warned me’ (*Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant,* 25 September 1936, 15).

<FIGURE 3.1 ABOUT HERE> (Advertisement for the Bonkora slimming cure, captioned ‘My scale has warned me.’ The scale says: ‘You are really becoming too fat.’ *Limburger Koerier*, 26 February 1937. The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands.)

The illustration in another advertisement, ‘Lose 13 pounds in 11 days,’ shows two women, one fat, the other thin (*Leeuwarder Courant*, 23 October 1936, 8). The first is standing on a scale, looking worriedly at the dial. The second, smilingly, tells her: ‘Take a cure too; in a week’s time you will be amazed.’ The implicit message is that the scale is a judge of the too-fat woman urging her to do something about it.

The scales-as-judge motif required weighing practices different from those of scales as fairground attractions. Instead of weighing themselves occasionally at the fairground out of curiosity, people now were supposed to monitor their weight regularly, either to ensure they were not deviating from the beauty standard or to check whether they were indeed getting closer to that standard. The claims made in the Bonkora testimonials about losing a pound a day, or ‘21 pounds in 6 weeks’ (*Het Vaderland*, 11 May 1936, 8), ‘9 pounds in 10 days’ (*Limburgsch Dagblad*, 12 November 1937, 10), ‘18 pounds in barely 2 weeks’ (*De Tijd*, 12 February 1937, 8) etc., cannot be made based on an annual weighing at the fairground, nor even on irregular weighing in the doctor’s office whenever the doctor considers it necessary. Regular weighing was facilitated by personal scales moving from the

fairgrounds first into the streets and later into private households (Bivins and Marland 2016). The scale, like other technologies such as the cinema before it, changed from a unique fairground experience into an ordinary practice or household staple. This required different types of scales.

The first type of scale that enabled regular weighing was the penny scale, a platform scale that required the user to put in a small amount of money and then disclosed his or her weight (Schwartz 1990, 165–68). Penny scales could be found on the streets and in public buildings such as department stores, post offices, railway stations, drugstores and apothecaries. That these scales were supposed to be used regularly is illustrated by the 'weight booklet' published by a druggist from Eindhoven in the southern Netherlands ("Gewichtsboekje" 1918). The booklet offered customers the possibility to record their weight on subsequent dates so as to monitor changes closely. Because of their size, platform scales (such as the penny scales) where not suitable for household use. Weighing at home would become possible only after the introduction of bathroom scales. The scales depicted in the Bonkora advertisements are the size of bathroom scales. Moreover, those shown weighing themselves on these scales are often wearing minimal amounts of clothing, which suggests that by then, in the late 1930s, at least some people were also weighing themselves at home.

As weighing became more common outside the fairground context, weight ceased to be a curiosity. People no longer compared their weight with the extreme weights of human 'freaks,' but with those considered 'normal' for their age, height and gender. In 1932, the journal of the Dutch medical association described a 'standard [public] personal scale' as having 'some lights and mirrors, a dial, and tables of normal weights in relation to age, sex and length' (Pinkhof 1932). Such scales told you not only what your weight was, but also what it ought to be. The tables with normal weights that were used for this were first introduced in the Netherlands (as in many other European countries and the US) through the

life insurance industry and then travelled into the public domain (Czerniawski 2007; Stearns 2002, 111). Many scales not only displayed weight tables on the instrument itself, but also printed out cards with one's actual weight – a recording that in itself was an incentive to keep track of one's weight – alongside one's 'normal' weight. Unlike the weighing chairs at the fairs, these scales strongly communicated the message that there existed such a thing as a 'normal' or standard weight and that this was something one should actively strive for. Weight tables could be found elsewhere as well, for example, in personal diaries (Byrdal 1939, 93). The references to 'normal weight' in the Bonkora advertisements mentioned above suggest that people were indeed supposed to know what their 'normal' weight was.

This shows that, by the time the Bonkora campaign was running in the 1930s, beauty had been standardized in quantitative terms. The quantitative standard was body weight; the accompanying measuring instruments were scales. What should be emphasized here is that neither the standards nor the instruments that measure them simply reflect an existing reality. Instead, as historians and sociologists of science, technology and medicine in particular have shown repeatedly, standards and instruments actively co-shape that reality, changing the qualities they quantify, standardize and measure. How, then, did weight and the scale change ideals of slimness and beauty?

Quantifying beauty

To investigate the effects of weight as a beauty standard and the scale as a measuring instrument, it is instructive to consider the medical historian Volker Hess's (2005) study of the thermometer and the quantitative standardization of body temperature. Hess has shown how, in the second half of the nineteenth century, standardization of the thermometer and the accompanying measuring practices shifted the balance of power in the doctor–patient relationship. Because the thermometer 'objectified' fever, patients could use their

temperature readings to convince their doctors that they required treatment. They no longer needed to phrase their complaints in a language the doctor could understand, a requirement that constituted a strong impediment to lower-class patients, who were not skilled in the art of conversation as practised by the upper classes to which the doctors belonged. Thus, with the spread of the thermometer, whether a patient received medical treatment and the treatment he or she received became less dependent on the doctor's subjective judgment.

Just as thermometers objectified fever and separated it from the doctor's subjective judgment, scales objectified slimness, enabling it to be established without relying on the subjective judgment of others. Until then, slimness had been judged quantitatively only in the medical sphere, where doctors used other tools for quantification, such as measuring tapes. Outside the medical sphere, it had been established qualitatively, in the eye of the beholder. Thus, one needed to see oneself through the eyes of others to determine whether one was fulfilling the prevailing standard of beauty. This could be done either by actually encouraging others to judge, or through imitating their judgment by looking in a mirror. Either way, there was a strongly subjective, interpersonal element in assessing beauty as determined by body size. When slimness came to be quantified and the scale partially replaced the eye as the judge of beauty, one no longer needed to *be seen* to establish to what extent one met the beauty standard. This partially separated beauty from looking and thus to some extent individualized the assessment of beauty. In so far as body shape was concerned, all one required was an instrument; involving other people became superfluous.

This individualized assessment of beauty contrasts with what, in the advertising campaigns for slimming products, was presented as a major incentive for becoming beautiful, namely avoiding social exclusion. Take, for example, an ad promoting Facil tablets entitled *'Gaat u dansen, dan moet u slank zijn'* ('If you go dancing, you have to be slender'; *De Telegraaf*, 15 November 1934, 13). The ad shows a dancing couple, both smiling; the woman

in particular has a slim figure. The accompanying text explains that women especially have to be slender to fully enjoy dancing. Slender women, it states, are ‘admired’ (and even ‘envied’); corpulent women ‘are usually asked to dance solely out of courtesy.’ In a Bonkora advertisement, the situation is presented as even more dire: corpulent women are not asked to dance at all (*De Telegraaf*, 8 August 1938, 8). The advertisement opens with a drawing of several couples dancing and one woman sitting on a bench on her own. The accompanying text states: ‘People scrupulously avoid her; she is too fat and dances too heavily.’ Other Bonkora advertisements likewise regularly depicted fat persons as being excluded from social events. The advertisements show fat women standing apart or even being ridiculed, while other, slimmer women are dancing or enjoying themselves at the beach or the swimming pool. In many advertisements, product users explain how unhappy they were until they finally managed to become slim. Being fat, according to these advertisements, leads to unhappiness resulting from being laughed at, not being able to participate in social occasions and having difficulties, especially as a female, in finding a partner.

<FIGURE 3.2 ABOUT HERE> (Advertisement for Dr E. Richter’s herbal slimming tea, captioned ‘Your appearance is your capital!’ *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 30 November 1933. The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands.)

Fat people, however, were said to risk even more than social exclusion. An ad from the campaign for Dr Richter’s slimming tea from 1933 (Figure 3.2) is a case in point. It shows a slim man in a suit and tie, presumably drinking a cup of Dr Richter’s tea. Appearing in the middle of the economic crisis following the 1929 stock market crash, the ad warns: ‘Your appearance is your capital’ (*Algemeen Handelsblad* 21 September 1933, 4). A 1935 beauty manual confirms the importance of appearance in finding employment in these

difficult times: ‘The large number of persons in search of employment has no doubt created the wish to look young. Exhausted, weak, fatigued people do not inspire confidence in employers’ (Alsen 1935, 38–9). Thus, fulfilling beauty standards is presented as crucial not only in participating in social life, but also in getting a job.

The advertisements’ stress on the importance of beauty for social inclusion is somewhat at odds with their propagation of weight as a beauty standard. Since weight as a standard objectifies and individualizes beauty, it separates it from the judgments of others. Yet, beauty can only play a part in social inclusion if it is readily accessible to others. The advertisers’ examples of being asked to dance, not being ridiculed and using your appearance as your capital only make sense if a person’s body size and shape can be judged by outside observers. But someone else’s body weight can only be known if that person decides to share it. Thus, if weight were the main beauty standard related to slimness, all one had to do to hide one’s lack of beauty in this respect was hide one’s body weight. But the advertisements make it clear that things were not that simple: although they stress the importance of body weight, they also make clear that a lack of beauty due to fatness will ultimately be noticed by others.

The advertisements commonly confront readers with situations in which fatness cannot be hidden, even if they keep their weight a secret from others. Particularly popular for this purpose were advertisements situated at the beach, a new travel destination in the early twentieth century (Pater and Sintobin 2013). As an advertisement for Facil tablets puts it: ‘The bathing costume betrays one’s figure’ (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 July 1930, 3). Figure 3.3 reproduces an illustration used in several Bonkora advertisements, sometimes as a photograph, sometimes as a drawing (for example, *De Gooi- en Eemlander*, 11 May 1936, 4; *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant,* 28 August 1936, 8; *Limburger Koerier, 7* May 1937, 4). In it, we see three people: a slim man and woman, and a fat woman. The slim man is holding the arm of the slim woman as they run through the water smiling. Separated from them, in the

front, stands the fat woman on her own, looking sad. The illustration depicts the social exclusion of fat people once more, and it also suggests that, when they cannot hide beneath layers of clothing, fat people can be identified even without scales. Finally, another Bonkora beach advertisement depicts two slim women in bathing suits and a more corpulent woman in a summer dress (*Zaans Volksblad*, 14 June 1939, 11). The accompanying text states '[She] would have liked to wear a bathing costume as well, but … her figure does not allow her. The excess fatness gets onlookers laughing.' The message here is again that fatness leads to social exclusion – in this case, not just by being ignored, but by actively being mocked. Once you are dressed in a bathing suit, your fatness will be impossible to hide.

<FIGURE 3.3 ABOUT HERE> (Advertisement for the Bonkora slimming cure showing how fat persons risk social exclusion. *Limburger Koerier,* 12 June 1937. The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands.)

<FIGURE 3.4 ABOUT HERE> (Advertisement for the Bonkora slimming cure. The woman on the right asks: 'How are you planning on hiding all this ugliness this summer?' *De Gooi- en Eemlander*, 23 April 1937. The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands.)

Yet another Bonkora advertisement (Figure 3.4) suggests that even minimal clothing does not reveal everything (*Leeuwarder Courant*, 23 April 1937, 8). The illustration shows two women, one fat, one thin, both wearing short, tight underwear – clothing comparable to bathing suits when it comes to its ability to hide fatness. The fat woman is standing on a scale, worriedly looking down, reading the dial. The other woman asks her 'How are you planning on hiding all this ugliness this summer?' On the one hand, the advertisement stresses that there are situations when ugliness cannot be hidden, namely in summer, because

it then becomes easily accessible even without scales. On the other hand, it stresses the importance of the scales. The fat woman is not asking the other woman, presumably a friend, to assess her appearance, although her clothing, comparable to beach wear, would enable this. Instead, she looks down at the scale, letting the dial make the assessment. This advertisement nicely illustrates the combined standards that existed for judging to what extent someone fulfilled the beauty ideal of slimness. The woman steps on to the scales because, by the 1930s, weight had become a prominent beauty standard. Yet, she must fear the coming of summer because weight was not seen as the only way to establish fatness: visual judgment continued to be a valid way to do so as well. A combined standard existed: the quantitative standardization of the body in the domain of beauty, with its reliance on the visual, did not replace the qualitative judgment by outside observers to the extent it did in the domain of health.

Conclusion

Today, many of us use weight as a quantitative beauty standard. In the Netherlands, weighing is no longer done at fairgrounds but as in other western countries has become a private act, to be carried out alone, naked, in the bathroom or bedroom. Women in particular can be reluctant to share the results. This can take extreme forms: in a US survey of female medical personnel, over ten percent of the respondents reported that they had cancelled or delayed medical appointments because they expected to be weighed – the higher a woman's weight-height ratio, the more likely she was to cancel or delay her appointment (Olson, Schumaker and Yawn 1994). These women were unwilling to share their weights with their doctors and perhaps even wanted to hide it from themselves. As long as no one knows your weight, it is impossible to judge whether you meet this beauty standard, and thus your beauty, or lack of it, becomes invisible. Yet, like their historical counterparts in the Bonkora advertisements,

many present-day western women fear the summer, the beach, the swimming pool: the fewer clothes they wear, the harder it becomes to hide their fatness from the eyes of others. Apparently, weight is not the only beauty standard that matters in relation to body shape and size; there is another, qualitative standard of slimness as well, which can be judged by subjective observers, through looking.

This combination of standards poses questions requiring further research. When do we rely on which standard? What do we do when the two standards conflict – do we trust our scales or our mirrors? Why do we hide our weight if we are convinced that others can see our weight gain (or loss); and if we do not think that others can see our weight loss, why do we measure the effectiveness of our diets by relying on our scales? To address these questions, we first have to be able to ask them. This requires us to separate body weight from body size, fatness and slimness. As this chapter has shown, these may be related, but they are not the same, nor is their relationship self-evident. Body weight, I have argued, is neither a natural nor a neutral standard for a bodily state such as slimness. Stepping on to scales to measure how fat or thin we are is not a necessity, but the contingent outcome of a historical process. Thus, investigating solely the beauty ideals of fatness and slimness does not suffice to understand the role of the scales in our societies. Weight, I have attempted to show, requires and deserves its own historical and cultural analysis to understand better the relationship between beauty and bodily norms.

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[1] In this chapter I follow the convention in the field of fat studies of using ‘fat’ and ‘fatness’ to describe larger bodies without judging them. This solution is not ideal (one problem is that the dividing line between fat and thin or larger and smaller bodies is itself historically constructed), but I think it is the best available. For more on this issue, see Lupton 2013, 5–7; Saguy 2013, 7.

[2] The database is freely accessible online at http://kranten.delpher.nl (Delpher; last accessed 3 October 2017). I did not search the database through this website but instead used Texcavator, a digital tool to engage with large text repositories, which has been developed in the digital history project Translantis (http://www.translantis.nl, last accessed 3 October 2017). For a detailed discussion of Texcavator's dataset, see Wevers 2017, 70–85; see also Eijnatten, Pieters and Verheul 2014. I did use Delpher to access specific articles and advertisements after locating them with help of Texcavator.

[3] Weight is the most prominent quantitative beauty standard in the modern West, but not the only one. Other examples include cup size, dress size and waist-hip ratio.

[4] All newspapers cited have been consulted online at http://kranten.delpher.nl (last accessed 3 October 2017). The advertisements tended to appear in multiple newspapers and on multiple dates; for each advertisement I refer to one instance.

[5] I have analysed 1,148 Bonkora advertisements; 1,100 of these refer explicitly to weight.

[6] A Dutch pound (*pond*) is 500 grams, so slightly more than a US pound.

[7] For more on how Foucault's work can be used to analyse the emergence and the effects of weight as standard for the healthy body, see for example Czerniawski 2007; Kwan and Graves 2013, 43–45, 133–36; Lupton 2013, 38–41; Wright and Harwood 2009.