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Disputing about taste: Practices and perceptions of cultural hierarchy in the Netherlands

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Chapter 5
Combining and ignoring repertoires: Ambivalences and neutrality

It is kind of uppish to pretend to know better, or that your interest is supposedly more fun or more interesting than someone else’s. It’s not like: we are going to elevate your life, but we will try to show that there are different things that are nice as well.

This is how television producer Marnix Ouweeneel defends the choices made in the TV show Cultuurshake. In this programme, which was broadcast in the spring of 2008 and which consisted of ten episodes of about 25 minutes, people who were not accustomed to arts and culture were sent to stage plays, ballet performances and exhibitions. In each episode, a Dutch celebrity introduced a group of three ‘ordinary’ people, such as street sweepers, combat athletes, women from the countryside and youngsters with a Turkish background, to three different cultural events. Their expectations, immediate responses and evaluations were filmed. The participants were selected by the editors on the basis of opposites, mainly with the aim to let cultures ‘shake’. However, although these hierarchical contrasts were sharpened by the suggestive editing and somewhat ironic voice-over, the quote above illustrates the producer’s more egalitarian aim: something different is not necessarily something superior. However, some of the participants were hardly aware of these hierarchical and potentially elevating aims of the show; they spoke about culture in a more neutral way.

Hence, Ouweeneel shows ambivalence between a hierarchical and an egalitarian narrative. These narratives were discussed separately in the previous chapter, because of their conflicting nature. It would make perfect sense to believe that one speaks either in a hierarchical way or in an anti-hierarchical and hence egalitarian way, even though we have seen that the latter can be interpreted as morally distinctive. We often expect people to be coherent: you either think this or you think that, unless you are unsure. Most surveys are built on that idea; the intermediate category ‘mixed feelings’, ‘undecided’ or ‘agree nor disagree’ is almost never analysed. However, similar to Ouweeneel, many respondents use elements of both narratives at the same time. While speaking about their and others’ tastes, or about more abstract issues such as high culture, they choose from different ‘cultural repertoires’ (Swidler 2001) in order to create their own mixed narrative. Furthermore,

171 It was broadcast on the public channel Nederland 2 by broadcast organization AVRO, from March until May 2008.
172 The celebrities mainly included actors and (former) politicians.
some respondents use neither of the repertoires, or only slightly. They speak about cultural
taste in a more neutral way, similar to some of the Cultuurshake participants. This neutral
look can be described as a non-hierarchical rather than as an anti-hierarchical narrative. In
this chapter, I will unravel how both the ambivalent and the neutral responses can be
explained, as compared to those respondents who limit themselves to either the
hierarchical or the egalitarian repertoire. Swidler’s ideas about culture as a ‘toolkit’ with
different cultural repertoires, combined with Holstein & Gubrium’s (1995) methodological
ideas (see chapter 2), help me analyse these different types of stories.

I begin this chapter with a case study of the mentioned TV show Cultuurshake,
which gives an excellent example of both ambivalent feelings and neutral attitudes.
Second, I present an argued typology of four different types of respondents, based on their
repertoire use. This results in two new types – the ambivalent type and the neutral type –
which will be discussed respectively, including, again, two typical cases: Inge and Arie.

The case of Cultuurshake: Ambivalence and neutrality about hierarchies
in a television show

Cultuurshake was broadcast as part of the cultural programming that is obligatory for each
Dutch public broadcast organisation. The aim of Cultuurshake was to heighten the
participants’ and, consequently, the viewers’ interest in ‘the fine arts’. The makers’
intention can be seen in light of a long tradition of cultural edification (e.g. Bevers 1988).
The aim of this is to introduce people from lower strata of society to ‘high culture’, as this
can enrich their lives, which in its turn can benefit society as a whole. Edification (in
Dutch: verheffing, literally to be translated as ‘elevation’) implies an underlying logic: the
existence of a cultural hierarchy, in which one can actually be elevated from one rung of
the ladder to the other. This elevation aim has decreased in recent decades. Besides, one
can wonder whether people can still be culturally elevated when the hierarchical discourse
as such has come under pressure, when ‘high culture’ is less and less perceived as
superior, and when egalitarian views gain ground.

How did the producers of Cultuurshake cope with these contradicting views? And,
what did the participants think of the idea to be elevated? In order to answer these
questions, I conducted a case study on Cultuurshake, which preceded the main research of
this dissertation. Early 2009, eight months after the show had ended173, I analysed the ten
episodes and conducted interviews with the main producer and five out of thirty

173 Partly due to poor ratings (among others caused by non-prime time scheduling), the show was cancelled
after the first season.
Combining and ignoring repertoires: Ambivalences and neutrality

participants. This section sheds light on ambivalences in the relation to (cultural) hierarchy which I found in this case study.

In the first few episodes of Cultuurshake, a hierarchical view on culture is displayed very clearly. The tastes of the participants, such as Dutch language songs and action movie star Steven Seagal, are contrasted with the cultural activities they are about to experience, such as experimental jazz, both heavy and absurdist stage plays, and abstract and confronting paintings. The effect-driven editing and voice-over add to the resemblance to entertainment shows such as Wife Swap, which aim is to laugh about the awkward interactions between people from opposite milieus. Some outspoken negative or ironic reactions are shown, for instance by three street sweepers watching a modern ballet performance (‘two gays doing a dance of joy’); others just fall asleep during a play. On the other hand, the contrasts are not always that strong, and sometimes even absent. Not all participants are from the lower strata of society, and not all cultural activities (such as musicals, comedy shows and rock concerts) have a high status.

Producer Marnix Ouweneel explains in an interview that the main purpose of the show was to make ‘positive television’, which means that viewers should respond in a positive way. When the participants only express negative opinions, the mission to make viewers enthusiastic about culture will be harder to accomplish. Therefore, the producers aimed for a mix of more and less accessible – and certainly not too complex or ‘alienating’ – cultural activities in each episode. They wanted the participants to make some kind of positive development. They concealed the elevating goal out of pragmatic considerations.

Besides this pragmatism, both Ouweneel (in the interview) and some of the celebrity hosts (in the show) reject cultural hierarchies. The celebs want to introduce the participants to something they ‘do not know yet’, to a ‘different’ or ‘new’ world that they can ‘discover’. People do not have to like it, as long as they have ‘an open mind’.

Producer Ouweneel makes this relativistic and horizontal view more explicit in the quote that opens this chapter. He had the impression that the first episodes, described above, did have a ‘condescending tone’, ‘like: we are art lovers, and it’s ridiculous that they like Frans Bauer’. As the producers felt awkward about this themselves, they changed the tone and reduced or even reversed the contrasts in later episodes. In the ninth episode, for instance, three female members of the (elite) Lions Club went to the musical Tarzan and to a handbag museum. Hence, during the initial use of the hierarchical and elevation discourses, the producers felt uncomfortable. They did not want to be perceived as elitist.

174 The respondents were selected on a theoretical basis: those participants who could be interesting for research because of their background and their responses during the show were contacted. As the editors did not save the participants’ personal details, I had to retrieve them via alternative sources, such as the internet. Unlike the other respondents, they are presented with their real names.
175 For a more detailed analysis of this case study in Dutch, see Van den Haak (2009).
176 On the other hand, some of the celebs also express the view that people should learn how to look at art with a more aesthetic view, which comes close to Bourdieu’s notion of the ‘pure’ aesthetic.
It is therefore remarkable that the participants that I interviewed did not say they felt treated in a condescending way at all. Participants took over the producers’ and celebs’ vocabulary of learning something ‘new’ and ‘different’. They were ambivalent about the elevating aim. Some just did not understand the cultural activities they were sent too, others became enthusiastic and even said (in the show) that they wanted to continue attending cultural activities in their spare time.\(^{177}\) Even the participants from the contested first episodes were very enthusiastic about both the shooting and the eventual result on TV. They did not feel offended by the humorous editing or the explicit contrasts. Gym owner and combat sports trainer Bert, from the first episode, even found that the contrasts could have been presented in a more explicit way. The participants did not feel embarrassed about their own taste or about their reactions to the presented cultural items. The three catholic women from the countryside, for instance, brought their childhood’s ‘poesiealbums’\(^ {178}\) with them to a poetry evening, without realising that poets and television viewers might laugh at them. On the other hand, some participants did express some hierarchical consciousness. They used words like ‘Philistine’ (cultuurbarbaar) and ‘ordinary folks’ (klootjesvolk) to describe themselves, whether or not in an ironic way. Another participant, nail salon owner Kimlien, objected to her perceived low position in the social hierarchy by presenting an alternative: she describes herself as ‘street smart’ rather than ‘book smart’.\(^ {179}\)

Hence, rather than expressing a purely hierarchical view on culture or taking an anti-hierarchical, egalitarian position, the producers of Cultuurshake and the celebrities involved are more ambivalent on cultural hierarchy. They downplay the elevating aim of the show, because they do not wish to adopt an elitist view on culture. In order to avoid an arrogant or conceited tone, they gradually take the participants’ taste more seriously and reduce the contrasts. Partly, this stems from pragmatic considerations – they expected to get higher ratings from showing positive storylines only – but the relativism is also the result of embarrassment or to prevent any criticism. Most participants, on the other hand, are not aware of other people’s distinctive view on their taste, nor of the producers’ aim to elevate them, to lift them to a higher level. They merely enjoy being on the show, whether or not they like the cultural activities they are introduced to. The producers’ worries are not justified.

\(^ {177}\) When interviewing five of them eight months later, however, only one of them actually had, during a visit abroad.
\(^ {178}\) The ‘poesiealbum’ (poetry album, but pronounced in a different way) is a booklet that young girls give to their friends and relatives with the request to write a simple verse, often accompanied by some drawings.
\(^ {179}\) She uses the original English words.
Cross-tabulating cultural repertoires: Developing a typology of respondents

The case of Cultuurshake excellently shows that hierarchical and egalitarian speech, both discussed in the previous chapter, can go together. People can be ambivalent by being inconsistent or by downplaying distinctive statements, often out of embarrassment that others might find them elitist. Others do not seem to be aware of cultural hierarchies: they neither adopt this view nor reject it, but speak about culture in different – neutral – terms.

Both ambivalent and neutral attitudes can also be recognised among the main respondents of this dissertation. In the previous chapter, I presented a clear-cut distinction between hierarchical and egalitarian views as if these are coherent narratives, told by coherent respondents. However, these narratives should be seen as opposing ‘cultural repertoires’ from which people can pick what they need for the argument they are making. Swidler (2001) showed that people are often inconsistent during an interview (as well as in everyday conversations). They use culture as an ‘oddly assorted toolkit’ rather than as a ‘great stream in which we are immersed’ (p. 24):

\[ \text{[M]ost of the expressive culture with which people normally come in contact has an ambiguous relationship to experience. People make use of varied cultural resources, many of which they do not fully embrace. The analytic problem then is to describe the varied ways people use diverse cultural materials, appropriating some and using them to build a life, holding others in reserve, and keeping still others permanently at a distance. (ibid.: 19)} \]

This picking from the toolkit is not as conscious and rational as the metaphor suggests (ibid.: 24), but by choosing a certain repertoire people at least show that they are familiar with it.\(^{180}\) They have, to a certain extent, command of certain repertoires and they can, more or less, easily switch to another repertoire when the circumstances demand this from them (ibid.: 25). For example, someone can speak very distinctively about taste – hence using a logic from the hierarchical repertoire – but suddenly switch to an egalitarian repertoire when discussing the taste of a personal acquaintance, or when thinking about taste in a more abstract way (such as the meaning of ‘good taste’). Most scholars on cultural taste, whether it is Bourdieu, the cultural omnivore scholars or even the more recent qualitative researchers, ignore these ambivalences.\(^{181}\) However, as Van Eijk puts it, ‘rather than declaring such struggles [with class] as inconsistencies and contradictions, unusable for a solid sociological analysis, we could see them as expressions of a certain line of thought’ (2011: 253, my translation). A thorough analysis of people’s self-presentational narratives reveals these inconsistencies, denials and doubts and can uncover

\(^{180}\) Naturally, by not using a certain repertoire, one does not show that one is not familiar with it.

\(^{181}\) Some exceptions, such as Lahire and Vander Stichele, are discussed below.
what lies behind them. I will use Swidler’s theoretical framework in order to analyse the different repertoire uses, though in a more systematic way than she did herself.

In order to further unravel the ambivalences experienced during the interviews, it is first important to know who exactly are the people who combine both repertoires, and who do not. Therefore, I developed a typology of respondents, based on my interpretation of the degree of hierarchical and egalitarian repertoire use for each individual respondent. Although somewhat arbitrary, I tried to interpret people’s narratives and repertoire use in the most conscientious way. I do not want to give the impression that the typology is rigid and unambiguous: differing interpretations of certain phrases can result in a different distribution over the types. I will discuss some of these possible deviations in the sections below.

The first step in order to reach this typology is deciding the degree to which people use the hierarchical repertoire. Table 5.1 below shows the distribution of respondents over the degree in which they distinguish from below (‘looking down’) and the degree of looking up to those above (including the explicit refusal to look up: anti-elitism).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>looking up</th>
<th>looking down</th>
<th>not looking down</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>looking up</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not looking up</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anti-elitist</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most frequent combination is looking down and up (24 respondents), which corresponds with the finding in chapter 4 on people positioning oneself in between others. This combination is followed by doing neither (18 people) and by the combination of looking down and anti-elitism (also 18). Two cells in this table, printed in italics, correspond with a non-hierarchical attitude; the other four cells are interpreted as hierarchical in one way or the other. In other words, 27 respondents do not use a hierarchical repertoire, whereas 63 do.

The degree of egalitarian repertoire use is established in a simpler way, by looking at the respondents who explicitly speak out in an egalitarian, anti-hierarchical, or

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182 I started with a qualitative data matrix in the form of an extended Excel file. As I regarded the initial typology that resulted from this file as still too intuitive, I formalised and further developed the categories by means of both Atlas.ti (counting specific codes) and SPSS, in order to develop a more sound typology and to substantiate possible alterations.

183 Initially, I coded both variables with four values, but for the sake of simplicity I reduced them to two and three values respectively. However, ‘not looking down’ now also comprises 18 respondents who do look down slightly: only once or twice in the interview or in a non-significant way. I will come back to this later.

184 Chapter 4 showed that the anti-elitist attitude can be interpreted as morally distinctive, but in this table I treat it as non-distinctive. Furthermore, in this table, looking up and anti-elitism are mutually exclusive, whereas in reality they can go together. However, this is extremely rare.
individualist way, as coded in Atlas.ti. 27 respondents do not use such a narrative at all during the interview; the other 63 do. 28 of these 63 people already speak in an egalitarian way during the open part of the interview; the other 35 only in response to one or more of the structured questions in the second part (on reviews, occupations, high and low culture, good and bad taste, art subsidies, and/or the card ranking). I will come back to this nuance later in this chapter.

Combining both repertoires results in the following cross-table (table 5.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>use egalitarian repertoire</th>
<th>no egalitarian repertoire</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>use hierarchical repertoire</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no egalitarian repertoire</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This cross-table is the basis of a typology of respondents\textsuperscript{185}, consisting of four types:

1. The \textit{hierarchical type}, in the lower left: 22 respondents use the hierarchical but not the egalitarian repertoire. Ria, discussed at length in the beginning of chapter 4, is one of them.

2. The \textit{egalitarian type}, in the upper right: an equal number of 22 respondents use the egalitarian but not the hierarchical repertoire. Nel, presented extensively in the second part of chapter 4, is one of them. Note that many respondents of this type did rank the cards in a hierarchical way, but this is no reason in itself to define them as ambivalent: it only shows that they recognise the hierarchical repertoire and can ‘work’ with it when asked, without using it of their own accord.

3. The \textit{ambivalent type}, in the upper left: 41 respondents (the largest group) use both repertoires simultaneously, or in different parts of the interview. This type will be analysed below, among others by looking into the example of Inge.

4. The \textit{neutral type}, in the lower right: only 5 respondents use neither repertoire but only speak about cultural taste in a more neutral way. They might be unaware of the hierarchical repertoire, which they neither support nor oppose. In the second part of this chapter, I present one of them, Arie.

\textsuperscript{185} A better formulation would be a typology of ‘interviews’ or even ‘narratives’ rather than of ‘respondents’, as an interview is only a self-presentational snapshot in a respondent’s life (cf. Swidler 2001: 243 n5). For reasons of readability I will stick to ‘types of respondents’, though.
This is a very formal way of classifying respondents. Later in the chapter I will propose some argued alterations, which would expand both the ambivalent and the neutral type.

Table 5.3 gives an overview of the distribution and characteristics of respondents in this typology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>respondent type</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>mean education*</th>
<th>mean age</th>
<th>% women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hierarchical</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>egalitarian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ambivalent</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Education is measured on a 4-point scale (see chapter 2)

The hierarchical repertoire, whether used solely or with ambivalences, is mainly used by the higher educated, whereas the egalitarian and neutral respondents more often have less education. These educational differences between the four types are significant (p < .01). The hierarchical respondents are somewhat older than average and the egalitarian a little younger, but these differences are not significant. Thus, on the basis of this typology, I cannot draw conclusions about a shift from a hierarchical to an egalitarian generation, nor about people becoming more hierarchical as they grow older. Although women appear to be ambivalent more often than men are, these gender differences are not significant either. The differences between the four types also become clear in the card ranking assignment: the ambivalent and hierarchical people have tastes that more closely resemble their hierarchical ranking, which means that they have a preference for the items that they perceive as high culture. The egalitarian and neutral people, on the other hand, have tastes that deviate more from their hierarchical ranking.

I will not discuss the hierarchical and egalitarian type in great detail, but refer to the analysis of both repertoires in chapter 4, and to the typical respondents Ria and Nel, who I presented in particular. I now go on with the ambivalent type, followed by the rare neutral type.

186 Of course, when there had been a significant age effect, I would not have been able to conclude whether this is due to ageing or to generational shift.
Switching between repertoires: The ambivalent type

‘I don’t mean it in a derogatory way’: The case of Inge

Inge (UYF3) is one of those ‘ambivalent’ respondents who were already quoted several times in the previous chapter, both in the section on hierarchical narratives and in the section on egalitarianism. She is one of the few respondents who use the term ‘higher culture’ themselves, but she places it ‘between large quotation marks’. In her view, it is invented by ‘the bigwigs’ and there is ‘an elitist flavour’ attached to it. However, she makes these defensive remarks after giving examples of both high (classical music, the arts, architecture, late night public television) and low culture (commercial TV, Top 40 music*). She then continues:

But I find it... I have many difficulties with that distinction, because the words ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ already imply that one is better than the other. (...) I think it might be more intellectual, but that doesn’t make it more valuable than something a carpenter has made, or something. Then it cannot be called art, but it can be the result of as much blood, sweat and tears, I would say.

She recognises the hierarchy, but does not agree with its exact nature. A little earlier in the interview she said something similarly anti-hierarchical:

When people get a good feeling when they see Gerard Joling* with a boa on stage, haha, then they have every right to, just like people who get a nice feeling at a classical concert, or something.

She not only downplays her distinction from Joling, but her comparison with classical music reveals an egalitarian opinion. The reason Inge gives this remark is in order to downplay the ‘embarrassing’ anecdote she had just told about De Toppers*, the party band of which Gerard Joling is a member. Her sister once showed her a YouTube video of this band, which she liked more than she had expected. She confessed her appreciation to a befriended couple who always have strong opinions on the ‘right’ tastes. When speaking to this couple, ‘I can start a sentence with “I know you both find it very fout*, but...”’, and then she continues about the flowery bric-a-brac in her house or, as said, De Toppers.

This awareness of other people’s tastes and opinions and the urge to relate herself to these, combined with the downplaying of her own hierarchical remarks and her egalitarian attitude towards high culture, might have been shaped by her social trajectory. Inge is one of the few younger respondents in my sample with an extreme upward
mobility. She was born in 1979, in a village in the countryside, W.\textsuperscript{187}, as the daughter of a fork-lift truck driver and a housewife who both did not receive much more education than primary school. After an extended school track (mavo, havo, vwo*, university) she eventually received two Master degrees with distinction, although at the moment of the interview she works as a shop assistant. In the interview, she links her educational trajectory to both her geographical and her cultural taste trajectory. At the primary school in W., she liked the boy band New Kids on the Block, because that was what the ‘cool girls’ in her class liked; the group to which she wanted to belong. She also liked rock bands such as Guns N’ Roses and singer-songwriters such as Joe Jackson, but ‘that remained under the surface; to the outside world I went along with the mainstream’. When she went to secondary education in a provincial town nearby, E., – which she calls ‘much more urban than W., though still not very urban’ – she felt that she could be herself more. She discovered Tori Amos, who is still her favourite singer because of her ‘poetic and illogical’ lyrics and her comforting, warm music.\textsuperscript{188} The kids in W. did not know Amos, but she could now share her taste with her ‘other peer group’ in E. Later, when she attended different universities in larger towns, she became acquainted with museums, art house cinemas, and the theatre. She hardly knew about the existence of such institutions when she was younger and lived in W. and E.

Now she has developed a specific taste in different fields, which she can describe in great detail. She, for instance, talks about Scandinavian films such as Together and Jalla! Jalla!, which she finds on the one hand ‘more light-hearted’ than certain other European art house films (such as La pianiste, her favourite), but on the other hand ‘better thought-out than most Hollywood productions’. In relation to the visual arts, she not only mentions the usual names, such as Van Gogh and Vermeer, but describes her love for Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt too.\textsuperscript{189} However, she does not like abstract paintings. She evaluates her recent visit to a ‘cubism-like’ exhibition in the Hermitage Amsterdam* with:

Abstract art I don’t really understand. I must know the concept to know why it’s interesting. A Kandinsky painting – well, perhaps it sounds very W-ish [referring to her native village] – but in my eyes it’s just a mess, haha! Yes, I just don’t get it. Maybe it’s also because I lack the visual ability to see the harmony between the different isolated things, or something.

In other words, she knows exactly what she does not like and why others probably do, while she jokingly looks down on herself and on the milieu she is from. At the same time, however, she distinguishes herself from this milieu. With her parents and sister she does

\textsuperscript{187} For anonymity reasons, I do not fully mention the towns she has lived.
\textsuperscript{188} Tori Amos – coincidentally one of the items in the card ranking question – ends up on the top position of her taste ranking and on number 6 in her hierarchy.
\textsuperscript{189} Lower educated people who talk about art often only mention the most well-known names, such as Rembrandt and Van Gogh, whereas the higher educated, and particularly art lovers, are more specific (cf. Pérez-Rubiales 2011).
not talk about the ‘more sophisticated things’, not only because ‘it doesn’t speak to them at all’, but also because she knows ‘they find it boastful when you talk about the museum you visited, that’s bragging’. Rock music is the only link to her parents’ taste, as both she and her father love Pink Floyd.

With her older sister – who still lives in W., works in a supermarket, and lives together with a plumber – she shares an addiction to America’s Next Top Model, although she has mixed feelings about this TV show:

It’s just like eating a large bag of potato crisps at once, you know. Actually it’s not nice, but actually it is nice, you know. Afterwards you don’t have a saturated feeling, like when you have made a nice fruit salad or something. It’s just snacking, just like McDonald’s or something. (...) I also kinda like that it is not completely politically correct and culturally sound. Plus, that my sister, I’m very close to my sister, and she is really the RTL4 type so to speak, but – well she’s wonderful, I don’t mean it in a derogatory or negative way at all – but I also like it because she watches America’s Next Top Model as well. And then we love to nag about it between the two of us, about how stupid these girls are, you know. So that’s also part of why I watch these kinds of shows.

This quote shows many ambivalences: not only about the show itself and about why she likes it (both she and her sister look down on the ‘stupid’ competitors), but also about her sister. Inge loves her sister, is close to her, and shares a part of her cultural taste with her, but, at the same time, she presents her to the interviewer in a way that sounds derogatory, which she immediately downplays. She negotiates between two self-presentation: as a higher educated woman with a ‘good’ or distinctive taste who must justify the deviations in her taste, and as a good and loving sister who treats her family members as equals. As a social climber, she can easily get along with people from different milieus: her sister and friends (whom she also refers to in response to my question on bricklayers), her cultural capital friends, her ex-boyfriend’s more economically oriented friends, et cetera. She easily switches between them, and she feels obliged to explain this towards the interviewer. Although she is well aware of the positions of all these people on the social and cultural ladder and although she places herself somewhere in between them, she is hesitant to speak in a hierarchical way. She is distinctive but only reluctantly; she wants to be egalitarian but cannot maintain this view. She draws from different repertoires, depending on the situation, which can change because of a new interview question or because she suddenly realises that her narrative can be looked at from a different point of view.

These friends like ‘football and beer’. Although she is still friends with them after her relationship ended, she feels like an outsider.
In the next two sub sections, I explore the ways in which ambivalences to hierarchies can come to the fore, namely being inconsistent within the course of an interview and downplaying statements immediately after they are made. This will be followed by three sub sections that suggest explanations for these ambivalences.

**Distinctive or not? Being inconsistent**

There are several ways in which ambivalence about cultural hierarchy can come to the fore. The first one, being inconsistent within the course of an interview, can best be illustrated by presenting contrasting quotes from respondents who have already been quoted before. Some explicit hierarchical or egalitarian statements in chapter 4 were made by people who said something opposite in a different part of the interview, as the example of Inge already showed. Take, for instance, Koos (UMM3), a construction engineer, who was briefly quoted with his distinctive remarks on his brother’s preferences for singer André Hazes, TV channel Veronica and newspaper De Telegraaf (‘it all fits perfectly’). On the latter example, he sometimes tells his brother, an elevator mechanic: ‘You should get rid of that paper, those people only tell lies!’ He continues that construction workers ‘can only talk about chicks and football, that’s how it works’. He also disqualifies the boisterous nouveaux riches in his village (‘not my kind of people’), who have a lot of money and drive big cars, but who like Hazes too. Later, however, he says that ‘you just cannot use’ the concept low culture, because it is based on stereotypes and prejudice. He finds high culture ‘a nasty expression’ (also quoted before). Furthermore, he criticises people who look down on watching television, whereas in his view this medium does not only bring bad stuff.

Hence, Koos is very distinctive during the more open part of the interview, when he can speak about his and others’ likes and dislikes in his own words. At that time, his value judgements about other people’s tastes are very strong. He can present himself towards the interviewer as a cultured person who has thought about his taste and who distinguishes himself from bad tastes, which the interviewer will probably share. However, when I later ask specific questions on high and low culture and on good and bad taste, he suddenly realises the hierarchical and unequal connotations of these terms. His self-presentation changes into having a relativist and egalitarian opinion, which he might believe is more sound. There is a distinction between his concrete views on his and others’ taste on the one hand and his opinions on more abstract cultural taste notions on the other hand (cf. Payne & Grew 2005 on class). Not all distinctive respondents change repertoires in their responses to these concepts, but the terms are rarely defended either. Most people who do not explicitly oppose ‘high culture’ simply give their definition or an interpretation, without value judgements.
Besides specific and structured questions in a distinct part of the interview, also follow-up questions can trigger a change of repertoires. Henny (UMF5) was quoted in the section on egalitarianism with her resistance to people who make high culture ‘high themselves, above the rabble and the riff-raff’. Furthermore, although she strongly dislikes Dutch language music, she initially does not look down on those who do like this; she just would never attend such concerts herself and she would not dance the polonaise* (see the section on distinction in chapter 4). However, when I ask her whether she ever speaks with her friends and colleagues about their taste differences, she changes her attitude:

Yeah, well, then I say like ‘it doesn’t appeal to me and I don’t get a kick out of it’, but I accept the person as he is, because he does like it. And I try to ask: ‘What is it that you like about it, and what makes you go there?’ So you sometimes discuss that, yes. Because it’s not like everyone should like what I like, that’s not the way it is. And I accept those people as they are, who have a nice evening, because that’s what it’s supposed to do, doesn’t it? That everyone has some fun and pleasure in his life. But er, no, not for me, haha!

Because she is asked to look at something from another perspective, she suddenly realises that she does not want to look down on her friends and colleagues, let alone in their faces. She switches from a distinctive to an inclusive repertoire, although she seems to limit the use of this repertoire to her actual conversations with these other people.191 The shift to an actual or imagined experience provokes the use of a different repertoire, because she has to ‘[make] sense of many different scenes or situations of action’ (Swidler 2001: 34). She changes repertoires several more times during the interview. I will come back to personal acquaintances as a reason for ambivalences below.

A final but slightly different example is Yvonne (LOF3), the lower educated widow of a local bank manager in an affluent region of the Netherlands, who is not consistent in looking up to other people. On the one hand, she thinks she has ‘a bit of a common taste’ because she does not like poetry, she once hardly dared to confess to friends that she had never visited the Concertgebouw*, and she dislikes a certain literary book that was praised by many others:

Then I feel like an inferior person. [This writer] wins awards and is praised in every possible way, and actually I don’t like it. Then I think: yes, it must be me, I guess. But fortunately there are more people like me.

With the latter phrase, she refers to a woman she met, who had the same opinion as she had about that particular book. This also helps her to put her feelings of inferiority in
perspective. She suspects the persons who she initially sees as superior of being fake: they are ‘fanatics’, they like books because ‘one is supposed to’, and they pretend to have visited things although they have only read about them. The wish to no longer look down on herself suddenly turns her cultured friends into elitist and inauthentic snobs, from whom she can now morally distinguish. She is looking for arguments to legitimise her situation, and she finds herself one from a different repertoire, which helps her to downplay her initial feelings. According to Swidler, ‘people orient themselves partly by situation, and she finds herself one from a different repertoire, which helps her to bounce their ideas off the cultural alternatives made apparent in their environments’ (ibid.: 30).

‘That’s not a value judgement’: Downplaying statements

Besides being inconsistent in the course of an interview, many respondents, including those quoted above, downplay certain statements immediately after saying them. This particular form of switching repertoires is ignored by Swidler. Both Henny and Koos, for instance, want to make sure that I understand that they do not think Frans Bauer and André Hazes to be bad people (Henny on Bauer: ‘He’s a nice bloke and a good person’; Koos on Hazes: ‘Nothing at the expense of that man, he’s not a swindler or anything’). Downplaying can also occur before the act: Koos precedes his negative valuation of the nouveaux riches with ‘I’m not allowed to say that of course…’.

This is the second way in which ambivalences can come across: the immediate downplaying of distinctive statements. People say they do not want to be ‘negative’, ‘mean’, ‘insulting’, ‘derogatory’, ‘shitty’, ‘elitist’, ‘arrogant’, ‘snobbish’, or ‘pedantic’, right before or after saying something that can easily be interpreted as negative, mean, insulting, and so on. They mean things ‘with all due respect’. They say that they ‘actually cannot judge’ the item they just denounced, because they hardly know it. Or they conclude that ‘tastes differ’ after all. As said, some downplay their statements in advance: ‘It sounds very elitist when I will say that, but I don’t think the average bricklayer has the erudition to go to a concert building’ (Helma, UOF3; italics added).

Respondents who downplay hierarchical utterances without explicitly switching to the egalitarian repertoire are not classified as ambivalent, but it would make sense to do so. Four of these ‘hierarchical people’ downplay their statements often, ten others occasionally.192 If I were to transfer these four to fourteen respondents from the hierarchical to the ambivalent type, the latter would even expand to more than half of the sample. Let us therefore explore this type of ambivalence a little more.

192 Often means that three or more quotes are given the Atlas code ‘downplaying’; occasionally means that one or two quotes are given this code.
Often people do not want to insult the *producers* of culture that they look down on, as the Bauer and Hazes examples above illustrated. They think the singers are nice people although they do not like their music. Or they admire their ability to reach a large audience: ‘There are so many people who have fun with him [Bauer], who am I to reject that?’ (Berend, LOM5). Others respect disliked artists for their craftsmanship, such as Sandra (HYF1) on certain Dutch language singers: ‘They are professionals as well (…), they can sing better than I can, probably.’

More common is the unwillingness to look down on the *consumers* of certain culture. Charles (HOM3), for example, speaks about low culture as ‘very accessible, easily recognisable, for the general public,’ but downplays the latter remark by saying: ‘I don’t mean that the general public has it wrong, per se’. Vincent (UMM5) explicitly distinguishes between producers and consumers of culture. When talking about bad taste, he thinks of simple, coarse, and banal humour, such as in improvisational comedy show *De Lama*’. He becomes quite enraged, but then he puts it in perspective: ‘I’m talking about the people who do this [make these TV shows], not about the people who watch. I mean, (…) I don’t judge them, I only think “Good heavens”.’ Peter (LMM1) is the most outspoken respondent in downplaying his choice of words. He describes low culture as ‘more *volks*’, to express myself that way, more coarse’, but he continues:

That’s not a value judgement by the way. Let that be clear. You have to give it a name, and I think that’s the danger of language and giving names, that you sometimes say things with which you perhaps express yourself in a derogatory way, but that you don’t mean that way. (…) And *volks* doesn’t really sound, er, yes, I wouldn’t know how I could say it differently. If there are different terms for it, I’d be glad to hear it!

These hesitations to disqualify certain people mainly occur when discussing people who are perceived as lower on the ladder, who have tastes that strongly deviate from the respondent’s. Therefore, it is no wonder that specifically the questions on high and low culture, good and bad taste, and the taste of a bricklayer trigger such downplaying remarks. Many respondents object to these questions, by saying that their answers are based on ‘prejudices’, ‘stereotypes’ or ‘generalisations’, but they reply nevertheless. They, for example, address the stereotypes but add that it could also be otherwise, such as Louis (UMM4) comments on a bricklayer:

I expect of course that his preference is less sophisticated, yes, I think that he – that counts for everyone with more practical and less theoretical schooling – likes André Hazes. Of course it sounds silly and prejudice-like, but in 80% of the cases it will be that way. But there

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193 It is particularly André Rieu who is, despite people’s dislike, admired for his worldwide successes and for the way he brings classical music to a large audience (cf. Bellavance 2008: 201-2 on the Québécois ambivalence about Céline Dion).
are also... a bricklayer could just as well be a member of a choir, where he started to appreciate Bach. That’s possible, isn’t it? But well, most prejudices are correct. Yes.

The more subtle distinctions – i.e., from people with about the same status, from people with more economic than cultural capital, or within certain cultural domains – are less often downplayed. Apparently, people do not perceive distinction as such as a taboo, but they are more often anxious about distinction from people further down the ladder. Looking down on bricklayers, or on people who like ‘low culture’, does not uphold the egalitarian attitude that they want to perform, whereas ‘horizontal’, anti-elitist or moral distinctions are acceptable. Downplaying distinctions based on the frequency of cultural participation, on cultural knowledge and on the open attitude (see chapter 4) is even rarer. Distinction from certain ‘lower’ tastes that people simply have is less acceptable than distinction from people who have – according to the individualist and meritocratic idea – ‘chosen’ a certain taste. People with about the same educational level can easily be blamed for their bad taste, whereas lower educated people cannot (cf. Van Eijk 2011; 2013).

One might interpret such downplays as the switching of repertoires in an instant, but often they only give a slight glimpse of the other repertoire. As said before, I often did not code these people as using the egalitarian repertoire at all. Rather than exploring the repertoires people draw from to make sense of their lives and their opinions, it is useful to look at the different presentations of self people give in an interview. After all, it is not only a question of searching for the right argument, but also of presenting this argument towards the interviewer.

In interviews, as in daily life, people want to give a good presentation of their ‘inner self’. When they say or do something that conflicts with this ideal self, or that they think might cause misunderstandings, they must correct this. Therefore, they often contradict themselves, laugh nervously, or downplay certain remarks that they made too quickly. When people are, for instance, speaking in a negative or generalising way about ethnic minorities, they often explicitly add, right before or after the remark, that they are certainly not racists (cf. Eliasoph 1999). When they use a word such as ‘volks’, when they say something negative on bricklayers, or when they firmly reject an artist, they suddenly realise that they do not want to be perceived as an elitist or unsympathetic person. They feel they must correct the wrong image that the interviewer might have gotten, in order to restore the balance. It is good to have strong opinions, as long as these are not at the expense of other people, in particular of people from lower status groups. By downplaying, often in fixed phrases, they try to equilibrate the hierarchical and the egalitarian repertoire.\textsuperscript{194} It is less necessary to downplay distinctions from people closer on the status ladder, or even on the same rung, because in these cases the egalitarian idea is not challenged.

\textsuperscript{194} See the last section of chapter 2 for the methodological argument for exploring self-presentations.
In the next two sections I will explore in more detail an important cause for both inconsistent narratives and the downplaying of derogatory statements: the social proximity of people with different tastes in general and the proximity of family members of upwardly mobile people in particular. Finally, I will turn back to Swidler and connect her general theoretical framework to Lahire’s ideas on multiple habitus.

‘I don’t dare to say it’s kitsch’: The bad tastes of proximate others

An important reason I observed why people experience difficulties with (cultural) inequalities is because they personally know people with different tastes. It is relatively easy to look down on ‘abstract’ people from lower classes and with a lower education, such as bricklayers (although remarks about them were often downplayed too), but it becomes more awkward when friends or colleagues are at stake (cf. Payne & Grew 2005, on class perceptions). I unintentionally triggered these kinds of responses by continuously asking follow-up questions – however neutrally formulated – on significant others’ tastes. Above, we saw the example of Henny, who downplayed her dislike for Dutch language music because some of her colleagues do like this. She works as a policy adviser at the town hall of a medium-sized municipality, where people from different social groups work. Similarly, Marleen (HOF5) says about taste differences: ‘I think you should accept that from each other; otherwise it’s very intolerant.’ And Monique (HYF5), also on a friend who likes Dutch language music: ‘I’m not crucifying her for it because it’s not my taste’.

The proximity of others with opposite tastes can lead to uncomfortable situations in which one keeps one’s opinions to oneself, in order not to hurt these acquaintances’ feelings. Brigitte (HMF5) is an art teacher at a child care institution, where most of her colleagues received a lower level of education than she did, and certainly no artistic training. To my question if she knows people who like the American TV series that she abhors, she says:

Yes, the girls with whom I work, they often have – yes, that’s very mean to say – but they often have MBO* schooling, and they love following these series. Yes. They really like it a lot. They also get many of their ideas from these series. That’s why it’s often difficult to pass, er, my vision of art on to them. Because they say: ‘Yes, but that’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ No, it’s kitsch, you know! But, yes, I don’t dare to say that, then I say: ‘Well, you can also see it in another way.’ So I address it very carefully, because when I say ‘It is kitsch’, then I insult them of course. And I don’t want that of course, because I would only make them insecure. I think.
These sensitive contacts with lower educated persons at work even become somewhat schizophrenic in the case of Karin (UMF4). This former actress strongly dislikes Dutch television (‘it’s all about ratings’), but earlier in the interview she said that she coaches TV show hosts for a living. After some further negative remarks on Dutch TV I ask her:

**You are coaching people (...) and you work for television, whereas you are mainly irritated about it.**

Yes. No, I don’t show it to these people. I don’t interfere with the programme. That’s not my responsibility. I coach hosts and they are darlings, then it’s about people. And then I just think: if you want to get better at your job, then you say ‘they have’ and not ‘them have’.195 (...) So I coach on language, posture, being natural, being yourself, no mannerisms, no clichés, (...). And which programme it is, I couldn’t care less.

**But do you work for commercial or public [television], or both?**

No, commercial. Entertainment even. It’s just everything that you don’t want to see. I don’t care.

**But you sometimes watch it to see if they’ve done well.**

Yes, I watch, of course. I just trained A. [name host] for the show B. [name show], so I had to see it once. (...) It doesn’t matter to me, there are hordes of people who watch it. But it’s not my kind of TV. But A. is a darling.196

Naturally, this uneasiness comes to the fore during actual interaction with people from other backgrounds, but it is also experienced when the discussed others are absent. Patrick (HYM3) describes discussions he sometimes has with his girlfriend about the question whether it is allowed to condemn others’ tastes. She feels more awkward about this than he does:

I can say ‘Well, that’s really shit’, but I won’t say it to that person, I would say it to my girlfriend. (...) But she thinks: ‘You cannot say that, because they like it.’ [Then I say:] ‘Yes, but I don’t say it to them, I say it to you.’ [Then she says:] “That isn’t nice, is it?”

This explains why the uneasiness is often also felt during a sociological interview: many people do not want to speak badly of others they know, even when these others are not present.

Some scholars claim that people’s increasingly broad tastes are caused by a more open society or a decreased isolation, leading to more contact with people from different social groups (Peterson & Kern 1996: 905). Bryson (1996) coined the concept ‘multicultural capital’ to address the increased ‘tolerance’ for others’ tastes (cf. Ollivier 2008a). I argue, however, that contacts with different kinds of people do not necessarily lead to *broader* tastes, but to less distinctive and, moreover, more ambivalent stances

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195 ‘Them have’ (‘Hun hebben’) is one of the most well-known mistakes in the Dutch language (or: deviations from standard Dutch), particularly made by lower educated people in certain regions.

196 She mentions one other name, and then asks me to keep the hosts and shows anonymous.
towards others’ ‘bad tastes’. Tastes and opinions do not change that easily, but the expressions about tastes towards others do. On the other hand, the question is whether the degree of social contacts with different classes actually increased in the past decades, which the authors above assume. Some have suggested a growing gap between (often urban) elites and (often rural) ‘common people’, who increasingly live in completely separated worlds (Prieur & Savage 2013). Kuipers (2010: 17-18) assumes that it is the increased unease with status distinction that leads to a decrease of contacts between higher and lower educated people. Often, it is assumed that educational ‘homophily’ in marriage relations (which is high) has increased in recent decades, but longitudinal studies in different countries show mixed results on this process, partially due to diverging operationalisations (Blossfeld 2009). Network analyses on class and educational homophily in friendship relations do not provide longitudinal data at all (McPherson et al. 2001).

Whether or not such a change has occurred, contacts between classes did become more informal in the course of the twentieth century (Wouters 2007). In a more formal, hierarchical society the positions people occupy are clear, so it is easy to express feelings of superiority (cf. DiMaggio 1987). But when informalisation occurs, display of superiority becomes suspect:

Many remained convinced of the superiority of their own lifestyle, but as successful social mixing required a higher level of education and solidarity with people from lower-status groups, they came to experience excessively arrogant display of superiority as awkward and embarrassing. (Wouters 2007: 49)

It is therefore likely that this embarrassment and unease with expressions of superiority and distinctive behaviour is more widespread in a more informal and egalitarian society such as the Netherlands in the early 21st century than it would be in a relatively more formal and hierarchical country such as France in the 1960s.

‘It’s just not their world’: The unease of upwardly mobile people

Social contacts with lower educated people can become even more awkward when the relationship is more intimate, for instance when the acquaintance with a different, ‘bad’, taste is a family member. Koos (UMM3) for instance, who was already quoted twice about looking down on his Hazes and Veronica liking brother, felt uncomfortable about this: ‘I am the oldest (...) and the oldest are always a little conceited (...), they want to dominate.’

197 Sociologists describe relationships with the term ‘homophily’ to describe a similarity between certain attributes, in this case educational level.
Koos does not want his brother to think that he dominates him, so he tries to respect his choices. He does not explain why two people from one family can grow up so differently. Trudy (LMF1), who was born and raised in the Southern province of Brabant, explains her brother’s diverging taste with his marriage to an Amsterdam woman. She says she does not mind, as they are good people, but she often feels awkward too. Hence, she downplays her brother’s cultural inferiority by switching to a moral repertoire (cf. Van Eijk 2011: 265):

He is a very nice chap, that’s not the point, but we think: good, it’s your taste, fine, he lays a plush carpet on the table, haha, well, if it makes him happy… (...) Also as regards clothing, then I think: ‘My God, do I have to walk through town next to him?’ Haha! (...) The taste difference is very large, but what matters to me is: how are they themselves? I mean: when you visit them, they welcome you in the warmest way, you’re never too much, if necessary they will always help you. It’s just, yes, we have a completely different taste!

Most respondents who distinguish themselves from family members’ tastes find an explanation in their own upward mobility. They received more education and ended up in higher occupations than their parents, sometimes also higher than their siblings. Just as Inge, they find it hard to deal with these differences with the people they grew up with. Carmen (UYF6), who studied film, thinks that her parents ‘don’t have the faintest idea what I did at the university, they really don’t get it’. Piet (HMM3) observes severe differences with his four brothers and sisters:

I really notice that I’m the only one who did HBS* (...), where they stimulated [cultural things], I always benefited a lot. (...) I cannot talk to them about that, about classical music and such, no, that really doesn’t appeal to them. I won’t say that I am an intellectual, but you can just notice clearly that they started to work immediately after the Mulo*, and more in the technical occupations. No, er, about art I cannot talk to them, no.

Upwardly mobile people often do not speak about cultural taste with their family members. It is a subject that is either deliberately avoided or that just does not come up. And, when it does come up, they often try to spare their family’s feelings, by not speaking out (compare the careful conversations with lower educated colleagues above). When for example a movie is visited together, the social climber must make concessions. A few climbers, however, try to educate their family members, because they want to share their newly acquired taste with them. Kirsten (UYF5), for instance, discovered classical music and the theatre by herself and wanted to pass her interests on to her ‘little sister’. She

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198 Koos is upwardly mobile too, but I had the impression that he perceived his brother as downwardly mobile rather than himself as upwardly mobile. Their father was a caretaker.
199 Piet is no upwardly mobile in my categorisation, as his father was a teacher at a secondary school. His siblings however all had a lower education than Piet had.
found it ‘important for her cultural background’, ‘like cultural and artistic training’. However, this transfer does not always work out, which can result in embarrassment. Deirdre (HYF6), who works behind the scenes of an opera company, often gives her free tickets to people who never go to the opera, such as her parents:  

‘Nice,’ my mother then says, ‘but I don’t understand why it was so grey’. [the opera was about Russian peasants] (...) But whether she liked the music? It was more like ‘well, it took a long time’. So, it’s just not their world, let’s put it that way. Yes, I won’t try it again. No.

Some social climbers feel that they are stuck between their parents’ milieu and the cultural tastes of their present friends and colleagues, as we saw with Inge. Don (UYM3), for instance, distinguishes himself from his parents, particularly when he was younger (‘I found them petty bourgeois and simple, and I found myself very articulate and, how do you say that, very original’), but sometimes feels uncomfortable among his educated friends and colleagues too. Most of his friends want to see art house films, whereas for Don a ‘Pathé* movie’ is often fine as well: ‘I don’t always want to see an intellectual film.’

The funny thing is: I now mainly work with people who, I think, often visit the theatre and who are more art minded. But for myself, I notice that I have that interest far less, particularly with respect to speaking about it and discussing and analysing everything.

He watches movies and listens to music in a more emotional way, whereas a good friend is much more critical and analytic:

We don’t quarrel about it, but er... often I do have the feeling that he puts his own taste first and finds mine inferior, so to speak, but that could just as well be a feeling of mine. Well yes, I learned to just follow my own feeling and not feel ashamed when I like something.

(...) On the one hand, we can find each other in our experience, and on the other hand, well, I wouldn’t exactly call it ‘irritated’, but I sometimes regret that he doesn’t get over his critical view (...). I’d say: give room to your emotion as well.

He shows ambivalent feelings about the taste differences both between him and his parents and him and his friends. He looks down on his parents’ taste (although situating this in the past) and he looks up to the intellectual art perceptions of friends and colleagues, which he downplays by giving more room to emotion.  

200 Deirdre is no upwardly mobile in my categorisation – her father studied mathematics but did not finish his education – but she implicitly describes herself as one, particularly with respect to culture. Her parents did not perceive the art academy she attended as a ‘real’ education.

201 More on the perceived distinction between ratio and emotion in chapter 7.
Similar ambivalences and uneasy feelings, yet in a broader sense than cultural taste, have been found in two Dutch dissertations on upwardly mobile people, defined as the university educated children of working-class parents (Brands 1992; Matthys 2010). According to Matthys, they often first gained the ‘social identification’ with ‘high culture’. Only later, they actually felt this ‘high cultural’ taste (pp. 260-5). This late ‘embodiment’ of taste is slightly recognisable in some of the narratives (such as Don above, who, with regard to art house movies, does not ‘feel’ this taste ‘yet’), but with most upwardly mobile respondents I do not recognise this. Nori (UYF2) for example, the most outspoken proponent of individual tastes in the previous chapter, explicitly denies social pressures in developing a preference for art house films:

The first few times that I saw such a film, I also thought them to be boring, and, yes, I sort of grew into it, I don’t know how that originates, but… It’s not like I suddenly thought: oh yes, I’m higher educated now, so I should like that kind of films a lot, no, no.

Later in the interview, it becomes clear that she recognises the opposite in others, from whom she wants to distinguish: ‘Taste is actually very primitive, (...) I think that people do it [changing tastes because of social position], by the way, but I would never fake a taste myself.’

In his research on tastes in humour, Friedman (2012) explains the ‘cultural homelessness’ that social climbers often experience during their life course. He downplays their ‘successful’ and ‘flexible’ broad tastes, such as described by omnivore scholars, and instead stresses the uncertainties and status anxieties that upwardly mobile people experience:

He [a social climber] may cross the cultural hierarchy, but he still feels the pressure it exerts, the institutional power it wields, and therefore, he finds himself defending (rather than celebrating) his diverse comic style. (Friedman 2012: 484)

Of course, the above does not mean that all upwardly mobile people face such difficulties. For instance, Joris (UYM1) looks down on his parents’ taste too, but he just enjoys mocking them. When his mother watches TV show *Bananasplit*, or when his parents-in-law want to see *The Lord of the Rings* at Christmas, he prefers ‘to keep the standards high’:

Yes, sneering and acting sarcastically, actually to spoil other one’s fun! (...) Well, with my mother I wouldn’t call it spoiling: it’s the way we watch TV, we continuously sneer and make remarks (...). She also likes to read a lot, well, let’s say the lighter novels, romantic, or literary thrillers (...). I used to carp at her, but nowadays I think: well, yeah, I now give these books as a present. I wouldn’t have done that back then. I guess I’m growing up.
Besides mocking his parents’ taste without clear ambivalent feelings, he also links this behaviour to his youth, just as Don did. In their view, adolescents simply collide with their parents, including on such things as cultural taste, which is a stage that passes. When grown-up, one can still distinguish oneself from one’s parents, but there is no more need to do this in front of their faces. However, this does not necessarily mean an end to ambivalent feelings.

To conclude

Swidler proposes that people who have ‘unsettled lives’ more often switch repertoires. During or shortly after life-changing events, such as a divorce or, simply, adolescence, people think more intensively about their identity and use several repertoires (2001: 89-93). People who have a more ‘settled life’, on the other hand, ‘are operating within established strategies of action’ (ibid: 89). One might interpret upward mobility as such a life-changing event. However, this passes far more gradually and often has already occurred in the past. Furthermore, this chapter showed that upwardly mobile people are not the only ones who often change repertoires or who downplay the one they use.

It is, therefore, useful to look a little further in order to theoretically explain the ambivalences that many people nowadays experience. Lahire (2003; cf. 2008) provides such an explanation. He argues that people are more and more socialised in different settings – the family, the school, the peer group, the media – that all influence their perceptions, opinions and tastes. These influences can contradict each other, causing internal conflicts between ‘dispositions to act and dispositions to believe’ (2003: 336; cf. Swidler 2001: 185; Van Eijk 2011: 253).

Such gaps between a person’s beliefs and the objective conditions of his existence, or between beliefs and dispositions to act, often lead to feelings of frustration, guilt, illegitimacy, or bad conscience. (Lahire 2003: 337)

People in socially mixed working environments and upwardly mobile people can experience such a diverse set of influences in a more extreme way. People are not as coherent as Bourdieu suggests with his notion of an all-encompassing class habitus, influenced first and foremost by upbringing, nor as fragmented and agentic as postmodern scholars or researchers on cultural omnivores suggest (Lahire 2003: 345). People are shaped by several forms of habitus and by dispositions from different sources, which results in ‘mixed cultural capital’ (Friedman 2012). Bourdieu (2004, quoted by Friedman

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2012: 485) would later call this the *habitus clivé*, or ‘split habitus’. Therefore, they have the *idea* that they are purely individual in their opinions and tastes (Vander Stichele 2007: 33-46). However, they often experience doubts on whether they are ‘allowed’ to like a certain TV show or a pop song, which results in justifications towards others as well as to themselves. At the same time they wonder *why* they feel embarrassed. In this chapter, I showed that people also have doubts on the righteousness of cultural distinction, particularly but not only from people further down the ladder. These doubts lead to the continuous downplaying, often instantly, of what has been said before, which is strengthened by doubts on the presentation of self they want to give during a sociological interview. Upward mobility and informal relations that bridge class boundaries are only part of this explanation.

These internal struggles have often been ignored in sociological research, which has focused more on people’s ‘objective’ tastes and their rational clarifications for these tastes. Swidler’s and Lahire’s theoretical ideas and Holstein & Gubrium’s methodological approach encouraged me to unravel these contradictions, doubts, embarrassments, self-justifications, downplaying remarks and inconsistencies.²⁰³ However, despite these ideas, I must stress that the ‘ambiguous type’ only consists of 46% of my respondents (to be expanded to a maximum of 61% if the hierarchical respondents who downplay their statements are included). The other respondents do not show these ambivalences when cultural taste is concerned. They either purely use a hierarchical repertoire or an egalitarian one, or neither. I will now continue with the last type.

**Not engaging in the hierarchy debate: The neutral type**

There are five respondents left who have not been discussed before. These five people do not speak in a hierarchical nor in an anti-hierarchical way during my interview with them, and therefore cannot downplay anything either. They do not reflect on this discussion at all. Table 5.3 showed that these five people are mainly lower educated and somewhat older than the average respondents, but what else can be said about them? It is not easy to describe these respondents, as they are mainly defined by what they do *not* do: they do not refer to superior or inferior culture, higher or lower tastes, by themselves, nor do they oppose these hierarchical views. They do not even use egalitarian or individualist phrases such as ‘one cannot dispute about taste’ or ‘tastes just differ’. Instead, they use a more neutral tone and seem to be ignorant about the discussions that all other respondents, to a more or lesser degree, relate to. Cultural taste does not seem to play a significant role in

²⁰³ Vander Stichele’s dissertation (2007) was also influenced strongly by Lahire, with very fruitful results, but he still uses a rather objectivist approach in the eventual analysis of the interview transcripts.
classifying oneself and others, but perhaps other attributes do. In the card ranking question, their knowledge is relatively low, but their tastes are highly diverse. Four of them do recognize a cultural hierarchy that is more or less similar to the average perceived hierarchy.

Giving examples of ‘neutral’ or ‘non-reflexive’ quotes will not be useful, because all respondents often speak in a neutral sense: most dislikes are described without explicit distinction, as I showed in the distinction section of chapter 4. The other three types just do not limit themselves to this neutrality. Let me therefore begin with extensively describing one typical example, Arie, to show what he does say about his cultural taste.

‘It doesn’t appeal to me’: The case of Arie

Arie (LMM2) does not like what is generally perceived as high culture, but explains his dislikes in neutral terms. Classical music ‘is not easy on the ear’; Mozart and Bach ‘have some nice little tracks, but they mean nothing to me’; the theatre ‘does not appeal to me’. He does not like ‘modern’ art (Picasso) either: ‘these modern [paintings] are wasted on me.’ On my question what he perceives as modern art, he replies:

Well er, Herman Brood* and whatever, that’s for me, er, sometimes, just a bit of lines, and, that’s supposed to be art. Well, then I think: guys, I won’t spend any money on it.

He does not explicitly look up to these matters, nor does he express clear anti-elitist views. He probably presumes that others do perceive Brood paintings as art, but does he perceive these people (and Brood himself) as higher on the ladder?204 Conversely, he does not particularly like Palingsound* and smartlappen* either – both often considered low culture – but he simply defines it as ‘more quiet music’. He says that Dutch language music used to be ‘old-fashioned’, but that nowadays the youth has rediscovered it. His wife and children have different tastes than he has, but he can explain this with gender and age: soap series are ‘for the women in the house’.205 Finally, he attributes different tastes to the three occupations I asked about, but does not add value judgements to his responses.

He explains his lack of interest in art with his upbringing: ‘I don’t think that my father and my mother have ever seen a museum from the inside, so I did not grow up with that.’ Arie was born in 1951 as one of eleven children in a farmer’s family. He still lives in a village nearby. He only received a Mulo* education, but after he started working at the regional branch of a bank, he followed several courses, to eventually reach the position of

204 In the art world, Herman Brood – also a rock singer – is generally not perceived as a high cultural artist, partly because he mass-produced his paintings. The most probable reason Arie mentioned him, is because Brood was well-known as a TV celebrity and rock singer. See appendix for further details.

205 More on perceived gender and age differences in chapter 6.
financial controller. In his youth he listened to pop/rock music a lot – his favourite band being Creedence Clearwater Revival – but nowadays he only listens to music in the background, to break the silence. Sometimes he watches a nice thriller on TV. His wife chose the painting on the wall, which they bought in a furniture store. Two close friends from Africa gave them some African art, which he appreciates because of the personal connection (‘otherwise I would not have bought it’).

This neutral attitude about taste does not mean that he does not recognise cultural hierarchy when asked. After some hesitation, Arie ranks the cards with musical items from highest to lowest in a way that is quite similar to most respondents: from classical music (‘what lasts’) to Tiësto (‘just a DJ, is low to me’). The preceding question on high and low culture, however, did not ring any bells. He started guessing:

High culture? [silence] Pff, yes that is er... [silence]. Yes, is that er... the culture er, that it, then comes the idea of history, of er, that er, yes, er, in Egypt and whatever, that they did things there which are hardly understandable for that time, even now, building the pyramids and whatever. Nowadays they still make discoveries, it’s almost a mystery that people could do it back then. Yes, that’s... I see that as a high culture. But I can’t come up with another understanding.

And the concept low culture?
Yes, that’s er, the people in the bush-bush206, people who only live from nature, and er, without tools or whatever, without modern... That’s how I understand it, and not with the theatre and whatever, I’m not thinking of that at all.

Apparently, Arie understands the concept ‘culture’ in the sense of ‘civilisation’. For instance, he talks about ‘a high culture’. At other moments in the interview, on the other hand, he uses a narrower definition than most respondents do: culture is what many would call high culture. He does not rank the cards from high to low culture, but from ‘culture’ to ‘no culture’, which is more a question of in- and exclusion than of hierarchy. Culture is the domain of classical music, the theatre, and museums, to which Tiësto does not belong. Nor does Arie himself: when I asked him to be interviewed, he warned me that ‘culture is not his sort of thing’. Only when saying that he likes choir music because he used to sing in a church choir, he concludes: ‘So in that respect I’m a little bit of a cultural person after all, I think.’

Apart from the card ranking question, he does not clearly perceive ‘culture’ as something higher. In his view, it is just something else, something he dislikes. Hence, he speaks about cultural taste in a neutral way, without explicit egalitarian statements: he does not say that ‘tastes just differ’ or that one should not speak of ‘high culture’.207 He is not reflexive about these matters; he does not relate to the hierarchies that others perceive,

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206 In Dutch, one can use the quasi-English term ‘bush-bush’ to refer to the wilderness, the jungle.
207 Unfortunately, I did not ask him about good and bad taste.
nor to the way others criticise these hierarchies. Cultural taste does not play an important social role to him. It is not important for his ‘identity’, it just is. Perhaps he uses other ways to classify and categorise people, such as moral distinctions (Lamont 1992), but cultural taste is not one of them.

*Exploring and extending the neutral type*

A similar story can be told about four other respondents. These include two elderly people who were entirely occupied with other things than cultural taste and did not relate much to my interview questions. The first is Ruud (LOM2), a 70-year-old taciturn man who grows flowers (like his father and brothers) and who replied to most questions with long silences and extremely brief answers. He was particularly proud of his award-winning moustache, but he did not have much to tell about his musical or artistic preferences. The second is 74-year-old divorced Brecht (LOF4) who was completely occupied with her extraordinary mix of spiritual self-help books that helped her cope with life. She also extensively showed me her record collection, ranging from Beethoven to Nana Mouskouri, but she spoke more in a factual and anecdotal than in a reflexive and explanatory way. I could not interpret her strong dislike of abstract art as an anti-elitist distinction either.

The third one, 85-year-old retired architect Frank (UOM5), was more engaged with cultural matters, as he often listened to classical music, used to play occasionally in an orchestra with family members, and had paintings on the wall which were made by a befriended artist. However, he did not use a hierarchical repertoire other than perhaps describing the development of his musical taste from ‘flat’ to ‘deeper’ and ‘more complex’. He could not provide examples, though. Finally, Elly (UYF1) is a 41-year-old upwardly mobile woman (her father was a factory worker) who works as a web editor for a large municipality. Although she does realise that her taste for Dutch language pop music and her lack of interest in museums do not fit her educational level and her colleague’s preferences, she does not show much of a hierarchical conscience.

The latter example is a doubtful case, as her somewhat embarrassed narrative can be interpreted as looking down on herself and hence as using the hierarchical repertoire. Classifying respondents by means of coding interview transcripts is a delicate matter, as slight re-interpretations can alter some classifications. I coded people who only rarely or slightly used hierarchical utterances, such as Elly, as non-hierarchical, but I coded people who only rarely or slightly used egalitarian utterances in a stricter way: only one such phrase was enough to classify the person as egalitarian. If I would have used a similar loose classification, seven egalitarian people (also relatively low educated) would have been categorised as neutral too. They express themselves in an egalitarian way only once, in response to one of the more specific questions in the second part of the interview.
Chapter 5

Noortje (UYF4), for example, a 24-year-old woman who has an office job in a health care institution and who is an avid salsa dancer, stays neutral in almost the entire interview. For instance, she discusses her taste differences with two of her friends (rural music and hardcore respectively) and with her mother (classical) in a factual way. She only answers the question on good taste with:

I think that everyone has their own taste and I don’t think that my taste is necessarily a good taste. For me it’s a good taste, but I think there are many different tastes. And I think that everyone should do what they like.

She continues by saying that these matters are not a usual subject for discussion with others. Hence, based on the overall tendency of her narrative, she could have been classified as a neutral respondent too, despite this single egalitarian quote. The same counts for six other respondents. Similar to the ambivalent type, the neutral type can be extended, in this case to about twelve people, when looking more closely at the data, which makes this type more widespread. The next section discusses how we can take this neutral, or unreflexive, type serious.

Taking serious non-hierarchical narratives

That the neutral respondents should be distinguished from the anti-hierarchical ones can also be illustrated by means of Bröer’s model of ‘discourse resonance’ (Bröer 2006: 55-56; 2008). He developed this model, drawing from discourse analysis and framing theories, to analyse whether and how people use the dominant discourse in a certain field. He calls people who mainly use the discourse that is dominant in society, in this case cultural hierarchy, ‘consonant’ with this discourse. The second type is ‘dissonance’: when people explicitly disagree with the dominant discourse, they must nevertheless refer to it to be able to attack it (cf. Van Eijk 2011). Hence, the dominant discourse still ‘resonates’ in the discussion and structures people’s narratives. In my research, the ‘dissonant’ attitude is the egalitarian repertoire, which is anti-hierarchical and sometimes anti-elitist. The individualist argument that ‘tastes just differ’ is expressed to distinguish from well-known (whether or not dominant) views that taste differences are important. Bröer added a third type to his model, which can explain the neutral respondents at hand, who are neither consonant nor dissident. He calls them ‘autonomous’, but I would prefer the less agentic word ‘neutral’:

208 Bröer does not mention a fourth type, but ambivalence can be seen as a sub-type of the dissonant type, as people only partially conform to the dominant discourse, or struggle with it.
When people speak a different language (…), it is not a matter of dissonance, but of autonomy. Autonomy does not mean that the attribution of meaning takes place individually, but that the dominant political discourse is not or little used, and that the deviation of the dominant discourse does not result in conflict. (Bröer 2006: 56; my translation)

Although the discourse in my research is not necessarily political and its dominance can be debated, this discursive model can provide us with a good theoretical argument to distinguish the ‘neutral’ respondents from the egalitarian ones. Rather than being anti-hierarchical, they are non-hierarchical. It is simply not important to them, or so it appears in the interviews.

Vander Stichele (2007: 393-5) argues that such neutral, or in his terms ‘unreflective’, people are often ignored in sociological research. Taciturn men like Ruud; people such as the spiritual Brecht who are occupied with entirely different things than what interests the researcher; respondents who speak in a neutral and factual way such as Arie, Frank and Noortje – sociologists often regard interviews with such people as a disappointment or even a failure. However, we must admit that the topic that interests us as sociologists is not always relevant to the people we interview. The above five (or in the extended version: twelve) respondents might be much more ‘reflective’ on other topics, which Brecht for instance showed when she extensively related the different spiritualities in which she believes with the problems she had experienced in life (cf. Swidler 2001: 220). They might classify themselves and others with other criteria, for instance by using economic and/or moral boundaries (Lamont 1992). I did not retrieve such alternative boundaries, because this was not the focus of my research. Furthermore, they might use several other repertoires to describe their cultural likes and dislikes, such as the artistic criteria which I will discuss in chapter 7.

Hermes (1995: 12-17; cf. Vander Stichele 2007: 394-5) states that scholars tend to overestimate the significant meanings people attach to their cultural taste. She calls this the ‘fallacy of meaningfulness’: researchers tend to think that all respondents attribute significant meanings to the topic under study and they eagerly search for quotes that support these meanings. Many people, though, can routinely read magazines – Hermes’ topic of study – for some relaxation during dead moments, without reflecting on their choices or on the contents of the articles. The cultural taste of these ‘neutral’ people is not significant for their identity and for their classification of other people. Williams (2001), for instance, deliberately interviewed ordinary adolescents, rather than particular ‘fans’ or members of certain subcultures, about the meanings they attach to their (mainstream) musical preferences. These meanings were minimal. Other researchers studied tastes without focusing on distinctive practices and hierarchical perceptions, such as DeNora (2000) on the way women use music in everyday life, and Hennion (2001) on listening
attitudes. These scholars probably would have found interesting meanings in my ‘neutral’ respondents’ narratives that I ignored because of a different focus.

Therefore, we must not exaggerate the fallacy of meaningfulness either. Indeed, the neutral respondents do not attach social meanings to cultural taste and they speak about culture in non-hierarchical terms, but perhaps they do attach different meanings to taste or speak about different topics in hierarchical terms. Furthermore, the neutral type consists of a minority in this research. By systematically retrieving meaningful (in my case hierarchical and/or anti-hierarchical) phrases and their interconnectedness, I was able to specifically distinguish ‘neutral’ respondents from other types. For the majority of my respondents, cultural taste is a more or less important classifying tool, whether in a consonant or in a dissonant way. Although the neutral type is probably underrepresented in my sample due to both the small quota of lower educated people (33%) and self-selection according to interest in the topic, the lack of reflexive meanings is not widespread. I must certainly be aware of the ‘fallacy of meaningfulness’, but I do not want to fall into the trap of the ‘fallacy of meaninglessness’ instead.

**Conclusion: Uneasiness about cultural distinction**

At this point in the dissertation, it is time to recapitulate what we have found so far. Although the discursive strength of cultural hierarchy is high, which can be observed in the strong recognition of and consensus about the musical hierarchy and the familiarity with the terms ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’, many people resist its implication: social inequality. In an allegedly egalitarian and individualist age, many people in the Netherlands oppose the idea that one cultural taste is better and thus higher than the other. They are often familiar with the idea that others culturally distinguish and thus actively practise hierarchy, but many, for their part, morally distinguish themselves from these ‘snobbish’ elites. Thus, perceptions of cultural hierarchy often go together with negative opinions, which can result in an alternative, moral, hierarchy.

Despite these often strong opinions against the drawing of cultural boundaries, many respondents do practise cultural hierarchy themselves. They look down on the tastes (and knowledge, attitudes, et cetera) of people below, and, at the same time, up to the tastes of people above. However, many of them do not feel comfortable with expressing such harsh opinions, particularly when the ‘bad’ tastes of people lower on the status ladder are at stake. This uneasiness about cultural distinction is often strengthened by the social proximity of these others. I showed that they can be ambivalent by switching between cultural repertoires (hierarchical and anti-hierarchical) and also by downplaying the use of the hierarchical repertoire. These balance restoring phrases can be explained with the self-
presentation people give in a conversation: their sometimes strong distinctive utterances, used in order to present themselves as cultured people with a good taste, must immediately be downplayed when they might be interpreted by the interlocutor as offensive to other people, and hence as arrogant or elitist. In their view, the ‘victims’ of their distinction cannot help having a ‘lower’ taste. Drawing cultural boundaries between themselves and people closer on the status ladder is more common, as differing tastes are considered their own choice. Hence, the individualist and egalitarian idea not only results in a rejection of class distinction (which includes distinction on the basis of educational level), but also in a strong distinction from more or less social equals who ‘individually’ chose a wrong taste, or who lack individuality (by simply following the majority: either the ‘mainstream’ or ‘high culture’).

I analysed the distribution of these practices and repertoires in a structured way, which showed that the ambivalent self-presentation is the most common. It appears that particularly higher educated people express themselves in a hierarchical way. These are the people who position themselves at some point in the upper half of the social ladder and who show an awareness of their hierarchical position vis-à-vis others. At the same time, a large part of this group does not feel comfortable with the social implications of their (self-defined) high position, which leads them to be ambivalent or to downplay their distinctive utterances. Especially, but certainly not only, upwardly mobile people express such unease, as they are more aware of the excluding effects of distinctive behaviour, and as they sometimes feel awkward in their relations to both their relatives and their present acquaintances.

Most lower educated people also perceive cultural hierarchy, yet to a lesser degree, but express themselves more often exclusively in an anti-hierarchical way. They often share egalitarian and individualist notions about cultural taste – as well as about social stratification in general – because they do not wish to be looked down on: whatever one’s social position is, everyone is, or should be, (morally) equal. Consequently, they do not produce a reverse hierarchy either. Finally, some of them (their number might have been higher with less self-selection bias in the sample) do not relate to, or reflect on, the hierarchy discussion at all, but speak in a more neutral way about taste. This does not mean that they do not classify themselves and others, but they do not use cultural taste for such classifications, nor do they oppose others who do so.

Although the hierarchical type is on average somewhat older and the egalitarian type somewhat younger, these age differences are not significant. Hence, I can only cautiously speculate about a turn towards a less hierarchical era, in which people more and more refrain from cultural distinction. Whether the differences between my findings and Bourdieu’s theory stem from deviations in time (and place) or from my specific research question on hierarchical practices and perceptions cannot easily be answered. Similarly,
gender differences are not significant either, although women express themselves more often ambivalently than men do.

In the two final chapters, I focus less on hierarchical and anti-hierarchical *practices* and *opinions*, but more on how people actually *classify* people and cultural items respectively. Chapter 6 discusses the narratives and characteristics people use to explain their own and others’ *tastes*, and chapter 7 unravels the criteria with which they classify *cultural items*, both in explaining their cultural likes and dislikes and in defining cultural hierarchy.