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

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Chapter 6

**Taste biographies and classifications:**
How people explain their own and others’ tastes

*Het is me met de papplepel ingegoten:* it was poured into me with the porridge spoon. It is what Dutch people say to explain how they were influenced by their parents from a young age on. In English one would say ‘I took it in with my mother’s milk’ or ‘I learned it at my mother’s knee’. Nine respondents use this expression with regard to their cultural taste\(^{209}\); once, even the single word *papplepel*, porridge spoon, was enough. Even more people, twenty, use the expression *van huis uit*, literally: from home.\(^{210}\) This includes those who explain why they do not like something and those who speak about others’ upbringing.

According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural taste is shaped in the habitus by upbringing. People from the dominant class are (often implicitly) trained from a young age on to like the high arts, to distinguish between cultural items, and to speak about art in a sophisticated way. They recognise each other by their way of speech. Middle-class people who rise on the social ladder by education learn about arts and culture at school too, but this is often not enough to really be able to join the conversation of upper-class people. Thus, cultural taste is an exclusion mechanism. Other research has shown, by means of multiple regression and other statistical techniques, that cultural taste and cultural participation can indeed be explained more in relation to parental milieu (class, parents’ education, or more specifically: parents’ cultural behaviour) than by level of education (Nagel 2004; Bennett et al. 2009; Vlegels & Lievens 2011; for an overview see Sullivan 2011). Atkinson (2011) and Rimmer (2011) complemented these findings with qualitative data.

What these scholars did not research, though, is how people themselves explain the origin of, and dynamics in, their cultural taste. Do they see their taste as an individual attribute and a personal achievement, as the result of discoveries by chance perhaps? Or do they share the sociological view on the role of upbringing and education? In other words: how do people narrate their ‘taste biography’? These questions have rarely been investigated, as most researchers focus on either people’s static tastes, or on objective explanatory factors. Atkinson (2011) and Vander Stichele (2007: 316-323) are two of the few exceptions, although the former does not discuss deviant outcomes nor the role of

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\(^{209}\) One of them, Kirsten (UYF5), uses the less common version *pollepel*, wooden spoon.

\(^{210}\) Although, in English, one would say ‘by birth’, I will use the literal translation ‘from home’ throughout this chapter, always printed in italics.
other network members than parents, and the latter describes the influences in a relatively
more objectivist way.

Second, how people perceive the origin of their and others’ tastes has never been
researched. In quantitative research, background variables such as gender, age, income,
residential area, religion and ethnicity are used to explain the variation of tastes within
society, besides social origin and education. But, how do people themselves explain why
their taste differs from their neighbours’? Do they attribute this to age, to gender, to class?
The previous two qualitative chapters focused on people’s opinions on others’ tastes –
looking down or up; treating them as equal – but this chapter looks at the question how
people explain the origin of their own and others’ taste. Although I never asked specific
interview questions in order to explore such explanatory narratives, people’s taste
biographies and their discussions about others (from family members to bank managers
and bricklayers) often reveal how they explain these differences.

Hence, the main aim of this chapter is not to counter or downplay the usual
explanatory factors, but simply to investigate how people themselves perceive these
matters. As I do not test one or more theories, and as I initially did not intend to research
these specific questions, this chapter has a more explorative and inductive nature than the
rest of this book. The first part of this chapter deals with the explanations people give for
the origin of their taste, by means of an exploration of their taste biographies. It shows that
parental influence plays a large role in people’s narratives, both among those who say they
inherited their cultural taste from their parents and among those who say they did not. In
addition, many respondents want to pass their taste on, successfully or not, to their
children. Furthermore, several sources of secondary socialisation are explored: not only
school, but also some often ignored influences, such as friends and partners. Although this
section is mainly devoted to examples from what is generally perceived as high culture, I
include a sub-section on the parental transfer of tastes for pop music, which has never
been described before. The second part of the chapter discusses people’s perceptions of
the nature of taste differences. In a quantitative way, I show that the usual explanatory
factors, such as age, gender and class indicators, are important in people’s minds too.
Furthermore, I unravel how they exactly speak about these factors, such as the preference
for individual and agentic explanations (level of education, place of residence) over more
or less predetermined factors (class, intelligence).

211 An exception might be De Waal’s (1989) study on Dutch adolescents’ perceptions of art lovers.
Porridge spoons and planting seeds: Perceptions of the origins of taste

I begin this section with diverging accounts of parental socialisation, which will be followed by accounts of secondary socialisation, such as the school and significant others besides parents. Then I turn to the way respondents aim to pass their cultural taste on to their own children. I conclude with a section on the transferral of pop music, which people narrate in a similar way as that of ‘high culture’.

‘Brought up with culture’: The importance of parental socialisation

I was brought up with classical music, and particularly opera, because my father always listened to opera.

(...) 
Your father listened to opera. What did you think of it?

Yes, I have always liked it. Recently, I went to see another opera. I was in Sofia with a friend, and then we saw La Bohème. Yes, fantastic! But it’s also... something that I don’t play myself often. But I never hated it. And my father, he collects records, LPs, several thousands, maybe he has 5,000 records [not only opera]. (Ronald, UYM4)

Did you also visit museums when you were young?

Yes, certainly, my parents always took me with them. My mother also organised exhibitions, and she framed lithographs. I always helped. I know everything about frames! (Hanneke, HMF4)

I can also – I learned it from my father – I can also really enjoy Bach cantatas. (Paul, HMM1)

Several respondents explicitly state – whether or not in response to a specific question on the origin of their taste – that they thank their cultural taste to their parents. This inherited taste mostly concerns items from what is generally perceived as high culture, such as classical music and the visual arts (exceptions are discussed below). It is not necessarily people’s first preference: they can for instance prefer pop music, but like their parents’ classical music too (cf. Atkinson 2011).

Whether or not people use the pamplepel metaphor, the repertoire of cultural upbringing by parents is strongly present. People’s belief in this influence also comes to the fore when they compare themselves to others with a different upbringing:

Tonight we’re going to [the opera] The Flying Dutchman, and my friend wouldn’t think of going there.

212 This is not a literal quote, as this interview was not recorded.
No, she doesn’t like it at all?
Yes, she wasn’t brought up with it. I think, these kinds of things, you have to hear it a lot before you start liking it. (Marianne, LOF2)

But also my partner, well, where she’s from, the German countryside, a milieu and environment where she’s from is not oriented at all towards art and culture (…). Errr, so she isn’t used to that from home and now she is discovering it through me. And she really likes it. Also in music. She now discovers different things, that she never encountered before. And museums: we went to Munich, she has lived there for seven years and studied at the university, but this was the first time she visited (...) the [museum] Alte Pinakothek. (Marsha, HYF2)

The parental influence repertoire becomes even more salient when people who did not grow up with ‘high culture’ – often lower educated or upwardly mobile – explain their lack of interest with the same logic (cf. Vander Stichele 2007: 319-320). Remember Arie, the ‘neutral type’ from the previous chapter, who explained: ‘I think my father and mother never saw a museum from the inside, so I didn’t receive it from home.’ Similarly, 57-year-old Didi (LMF4) partly explains her dislike for operas with her parental background and her upbringing in the countryside:

I think: maybe you must learn to like it. (…) But firstly: we weren’t taught that when we were young. Because there was nothing. I mean: when I was young, I believe the first six years we didn’t even have a car. And you live in a backwater, so you don’t go anywhere. You go to primary school, you go to church on Sundays, you go to catechism, and once in a while you visit relatives. And that’s it! I didn’t experience it as a lack. Back then. Absolutely not. We weren’t trained in music either. I remember that, at primary school, we had a teacher who could give recorder lessons [the musical instrument]. Well, my parents allowed me to buy a recorder. So I had recorder lessons for a short while, and when the teacher left, the recorder got back into the box. Because there was no one else to teach me, haha, yes, so we weren’t spoiled. And television: we had the first... well, I’d almost moved out when we got television. There just was no television. You can’t imagine, can you?

Some respondents downplay the strength of their parents’ influence, though, because their brothers and sisters have a different taste despite a similar upbringing (cf. Vander Stichele 2007: 320).

Whether one was brought up with ‘high culture’ or not, the pamplepel repertoire comes to the fore in two different ways, depending on the degree of explicitness. First, parents can deliberately feed their children with a certain kind of porridge: they can explicitly educate or stimulate them in liking certain music or in visiting museums. Sheila (HMF1), for instance, remembers that ‘my mother found it important to pass it on’. Yvonne (LOF3), a foreman’s daughter, was not brought up with classical music herself, but recognises the deliberate cultural education in a childhood friend:
There were these Sunday afternoon concerts, and my friend had to listen compulsory. (…) But she’s, from her youth onwards, since she was a little child, she was confronted with that. And her parents had lots of it, and they told her all about it. She knew and knows a great deal about it. And that was to her advantage, because later she met her husband and she could continue with it of course.

(…)

And at her home, her father listened to…, or her mother…

Er, her father was the school principal in our village, and her mother also had a similar function, and, well, they were from a different milieu than I was. At her place they did listen to this music, her father also played the piano really well, he could also compose, er, knew a lot, he wrote operettas for the children. It was a really really different upbringing she got.

One does not even need a good relation with one’s parents to have fond memories about one’s cultural upbringing. Johan (LOM1) was taught how to play the piano by his father, whom he calls ‘dominant’ and ‘not easy’. ‘He imparted it in a less pleasant way’, with severe corrections following mistakes. However, at the age of 79, Johan still plays the piano regularly: ‘It wasn’t nice (…) but still, I learned it from him!’

The second way in which the pablepel repertoire is used is by means of more implicit exposure: all kinds of healthy ingredients come along with the porridge without specific purpose. When children are exposed to something, such as Ronald to the opera in the opening quote, they can begin to like it and remember it. Yme (UMF2; 64 y.o.) tells about her youth, when she was influenced by both her older brother and her father:

When my brother came home at night, he put on classical music. So, as an 8-, 9-, 10-year-old I was lying in my bed and then I heard – yes, what do you hear – Vivaldi, Mozart, Bach. And that music has become so safe, so familiar, so it always stayed. My father really loved music, he sang in a choir, a church choir, so I… I regret that I never learned how to perform it myself, but I did learn how to listen. And I’m very glad I did.

Several respondents did not like classical music or museums as a child, but began to like it when they grew older (cf. Vander Stichele 2007: 320). They suddenly recognised the melodies they always heard on Sunday mornings (Sandra, HYF1) or made a decision when entering a record store (Paul, HMM1):

I was looking for something that I recognised from home, apparently I was looking for something familiar, I guess. I wanted to hear something in my digs, but not my father’s records, it had to be something different. Something that elaborated on it. So I think my taste was influenced a lot, now I’m saying this!

Hence, the healthy ingredients included in the porridge can take some time to have an effect on people. This longer ‘incubation time’ can also occur after deliberate porridge
feeding, though: ‘We were always dragged along [to museums], of course, and at the time I didn’t like it at all, but afterwards I did’ (Stephan, HYM1). Anneke (UMF1) says, in retrospect, that her initial resistance to her cultural upbringing was due to her adolescence: ‘I think, when I’m really honest, that I always liked it, but now I can just admit it.’

Besides studying the various usages of the upbringing repertoire, it is worth taking a look at the distribution of actual taste homologies between my respondents and their parents. If we look at the specific case of classical music, about which I have the most complete information, parents’ tastes are often indeed similar to the respondents’, but there are also many deviations. Table 6.1 shows the indicative numbers of respondents who do and do not like classical music, as compared to (what they told about) at least one of their parents. 28 respondents were less clear about either their own or their parents’ taste for classical music, because they did not tell much about it or because they were ambivalent. They are not included in the table. The table also shows the distribution over the three education groups from the quota sample and the mean age.

Table 6.1 makes clear that the largest group consists of people who like classical music similar to their parents (27 people). This group includes six people for whom it took a few years before the proverbial penny dropped. Parental background is important in this matter: more than half of them have parents with a high educational level. Furthermore, they are relatively old, as are the people who like classical music despite their parents’ dislike. The group that does not like classical music similar to their parents is also significant, with 15 individuals. They are mainly lower educated and relatively young. As we saw above, some of them use the upbringing repertoire to explain their dislike.

Table 6.1. Respondents who like classical music, as compared to (one of) their parents: number, education group, mean age (n = 62)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(one of) parents like classical music</th>
<th>respondent likes classical music</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>high educ.</th>
<th>upw. mobile</th>
<th>low educ.</th>
<th>mean age</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>yes</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite these high numbers for taste homologies between parents and their children, there are also twenty respondents who show a deviation from this pattern. First, five people do not like classical music ‘despite’ their parents’ liking. They are mainly young (which implies that the penny might drop later) and lower educated. Classical music was not as omnipresent in their parental homes as it was in the homes of those quoted above, because only one of the parents liked it, and only as part of a broader taste. Marit’s (LYF2) father, for instance, likes both classical and folk music, and he plays both
the violin and the mandolin. ‘I was brought up with that too (…), so er… but I don’t like these CDs or anything.’ Some respondents do not seem to know what their parents like exactly: Rik (LYM4) mentions Bach, ‘heavy violin music’ and André Rieu in one sentence, although this combination is rather unlikely.

The second deviation regards fifteen people who like classical music ‘despite’ their parents’ dislike. It will be no surprise that, in this group, upwardly mobile people are somewhat overrepresented.213 These people came into contact with this music in a different way, such as at school or via a partner. This secondary socialisation will be discussed in the next section.

**Opening windows: Different sources of secondary socialisation**

Some of the fifteen respondents who say to like classical music despite their parents’ dislike cannot explain how their interest came about: ‘It just emerged’ (Piet, HMM3), ‘not everything can be explained’ (Alfred, UOM3). Similarly, Kirsten (UYF5) says that she has ‘always been interested in art, and my parents didn’t provide for that either, but I’ve always been searching for that a bit.’ At age twelve, her interest prompted her to apply for a secondary school that was known for its artistic mission, although it was in a different town, far from home. During an open day, she saw ‘many paintings in this school, and they did a lot with creativity and art, that was their showpiece, and I liked it so much to see this! So it triggered me tremendously.’ However, many people who said they were not influenced by their parents do provide alternative explanations for the origin of their cultural taste. Whereas sociologists often confine secondary socialisation in ‘high culture’ to formal education while ignoring other sources, in this section I will discuss people’s narratives on various secondary influences: school itself, friends, colleagues, and partners.

According to Bourdieu and others (see above), school mainly strengthens the cultural influences that were already present thanks to the parental milieu. Because children of higher educated parents attend different schools than children of lower educated parents, and because they are more inclined to pick up what they are presented with, they have a head start, it is argued. Indeed, some respondents, particularly older ones, who spontaneously recall a specific music or art teacher already came from a culturally minded milieu:

> I still see him sitting there. Just a piano, it wasn’t a grand piano, just a piano. And he sang Schubert for us, he also analysed it, how the piece was constructed, and how those two voices were opposed. Yes, *that* is useful, (…) I always remembered it. (Jacobs, UOM4)

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213 HBO educated people are also overrepresented, with seven people, compared to four academics.
What kind of visual arts do you like?
Yes... err... visual arts... how shall I say it? We had a tremendously good teacher at grammar school: L.H. He was a painter himself: he did painting and mainly drawing, I think. I also loved to draw, the art of drawing attracted me, this black-and-white. (Henricus, HOM1)

Where Jacobus and Henricus do argue that their school teachers played some part in their artistic upbringing, others give their school teachers the main credits for their interest in classical music or the visual arts. In reply to my question whether he visited museums as a child, for example with school, Piet (HMM3) says he ‘discovered’ museums via school. ‘A new world opened up’, he later adds. Two more respondents share their memories of specific teachers:

Did your [musical] taste change in the course of your life, were things added?
Well, at primary school, I had Mrs. B., she played the violin (...). She introduced the Nutcracker Suite to us, she brought the record to school, and Peter and the Wolf. So she laid the foundation a little bit. Well, there were some kids who hated it, but I really liked it. Yes, and later I met my husband, who was a musician, and then I was really introduced. (Joke, LOF5)

How did you discover art?
(…) Look, I think the foundation of all this can actually be traced back to my secondary school. We had an extremely stimulating Dutch teacher, and he not only gave Dutch literature, but he also knew how to speak about it (…) and who stimulated your eagerness and your curiosity. And, well, after that there were some college friends who influenced it – let’s go here; did you see that? – and who took me with them. And this is how it develops: stimuli from the outside and then fermenting in the inside. (Rudolf, UOM1)

Although not everyone has fond memories of art and music classes, the specific interview question on the usefulness of cultural education receives applause by almost all respondents. This is probably not due to social desirability, as the preceding question on the usefulness of art subsidies does meet some criticism. Some people who do not support art subsidies already make an exception for money that is aimed at cultural education before the specific question on this matter is asked. Some respondents use this question to reflect on the lack of education in their own youth. Monique (HYF5) and Coen (UOM2) regret not having received a good cultural education: ‘If I would have been introduced to it at a young age, I would perhaps have developed an eye for it’ (Monique); ‘I think my disinterest is partly due to my secondary school, that they – in one way or the other – didn’t manage to do that properly’ (Coen).214

When parents nor school teachers transfer a certain cultural taste, there are still other possibilities for secondary socialisation. Strikingly, Atkinson (2011: 181, n. 12) did

214 Of course, not all respondents picked up the art lessons at school, similar to those who said not to have learned it from their parents.
not find such accounts in his qualitative research in the UK on the genesis of cultural
tastes.\textsuperscript{215} However, when reflecting on his former colleagues, Rudolf (UOM1) mentions
many sources that can affect you:

Your entire life you meet people who influence you. And you \textit{know} they influence you and
that it is \textit{nice} that they do that. And who open doors, no, windows I should say, who open
windows for you.

The first source of these opened windows is friends. Kirsten, quoted above, could not
explain her love for art as a child, but she does remember how she discovered classical
music, particularly opera. Her childhood friend’s parents listened to it, ‘with some wine in
the garden, and the whole setting was great (…), and then I started listening to it myself
more.’ Similarly, 70-year-old Toon (HOM5) discovered classical music forty years ago
thanks to a friend, who took him to a Bach concert. He quotes him: ‘You should listen to
this, you with your jazz music, come with me!’ Toon was very impressed, and it never left
him.

Second, colleagues at work can influence people’s taste, particularly when people
from different backgrounds work together. A respondent from a working-class family,
Dick (UMM2), once had a senior colleague who played classical music in their mutual
office. He found it very relaxing. Twenty years later, he still listens to it. Trudy (LMF1), a
nurse with working-class parents, was taken to the Concertgebouw by a professor who
worked in the same hospital and who had an extra ticket. Afterwards, she wondered why
she had never gone there before.

Third, the most frequent factor in secondary socialisation that people mention is
(ex-)partners. Take Joke (LOF5), who said above that, besides school, her husband \textit{really}
introduced her to classical music: ‘He told me everything, and explained everything, how
you should listen, (…) it was a drastic change.’ Although they got divorced a long time
ago, she is ‘still grateful’ for his influence. In return, she told him everything about jazz,
which was at the time not appreciated (‘a dirty word’) in the conservatory where he was
educated. Another fine example is Annemarie (UOF2), who immediately starts talking
about her partner when I ask her about her musical taste, and who contrasts her partner
with her parents:

\begin{quote}
My partner (…) is \textit{much} better in musical knowledge, and she very much influenced my taste.
\textit{From home} I like simple pop, songs that are easy for the ear, and some popular classics, so to
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
speak, like Tchaikovsky, Liszt, that kind of work, Dvorak. And via E. I have… she is very
good at keeping up with current developments in pop music, world music too. And I like to
listen along with her, but she is the creative one in discovering things. And we also regularly
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{215} Vander Stichele (2007: 320) does mention such influences in his account of in-depth interviews in
Flanders, Belgium, but he does not discuss them further.
visit concerts. And gradually I became more acquainted with – I used to like Beethoven – with Monteverdi and Bach on the one hand, and on the other hand also the modern serious music. And that is really an acquired taste that you must learn to appreciate. (…)

**And you discovered that via your partner?**

Yes, yes. Of course I did have some... look, my father whistled Tchaikovsky’s *Waltz of the Flowers* while shaving, but he didn’t go much further, so I didn’t receive much more from home. And E. used to visit concerts with her parents, so it was much earlier that she developed it a little further.

Both Annemarie and her partner had notable careers, but they have different backgrounds. Annemarie’s parents owned a small hotel, whereas her partner is ‘from a rather well-to-do environment’, ‘a more sophisticated milieu’: her father owned a large company and the family was acquainted with well-known Dutch artists and writers. Note that Annemarie was not entirely sealed off from classical music. Her father whistled popular classical tunes, and she herself liked Beethoven before meeting her partner. However, she experienced her introduction to both Baroque and contemporary classical music as a significant change. Some others who already liked classical music were also introduced to other genres by partners. Both Ton (HMM4) and Karin (UMF4) became acquainted with opera, and Yme (UMF2) with choir music, thanks to their (former) partners. The same counts for the visual arts: art lover Ria (HOF1) learned to like abstract art thanks to her ex-husband, a sculptor.

Hence, when the love for ‘high culture’ is not provided for in the parental home, there are still several sources of secondary socialisation left that can culturally influence someone. Similar to cultural upbringing in the family, in the above quotes on secondary influences we can recognise two ways in which this can work: both intentionally (‘You should listen to this’) and via sheer exposure (classical music in the office). Some people are still enthusiastic about certain school teachers; others thank friends and colleagues from different backgrounds for taking them to concerts or museums or for playing different music at work. But, people mainly remember their partners to have influenced their cultural taste. It is striking that many of the quoted respondents still express their gratitude for the discoveries they did thanks to former partners, sometimes decades ago.

**Turning Orfeo into a fairytale: Passing culture on to one’s children**

Arie (LMM2), who I presented in chapter 5 as the typical example of the ‘neutral’ type, says that he does not like art, because his parents did not like it either. Asked about his own three children, who are in their early twenties, he says something similar:
When the lack of cultural upbringing is passed down the next generation, it will be no surprise that the opposite is also true: people try to teach their children what they were taught by their parents.\textsuperscript{216} Whereas most people do not know exactly what rationale their parents used in their passing on of culture – and whether their parents even \textit{had} a rationale – they often do know why and how they pass(ed) culture on to their own children. As Atkinson (2011: 176) put it, a cultural upbringing is ‘undertaken not through rationalistic calculation or reflexivity but with the vague belief that it is “useful” and “normal” – “the kind of thing you do”’.

Both aspects of the upbringing repertoire that I derived above from people’s accounts of their own youth – explicit education and implicit exposure – can be recognised again when they speak about their children. The deliberate and active aspect of the \textit{paplepel} is emphasised by Gabriëlle (UOF1): one should take children to stage plays ‘to let them get used to it’, ‘to teach them a little’. She is glad that her adult son now does the same with \textit{his} children. Even someone like Michiel (UMM1), who does not particularly like art himself, stresses deliberate transferral: ‘We try to visit a museum once a year, and we do. Certainly with the children, we always did that, because we think it is important.’ Others stress the more implicit upbringing by means of exposure, such as Henny (UMF5): ‘I don’t believe that I indoctrinated him [her son], but I do think I influenced him with my interests in certain things.’ Frank (UOM5) says that his son ‘at a certain moment, also liked string quartets by Mozart’, because ‘he had heard it so often, then you start hearing something in it, don’t you?’

One more element of the \textit{paplepel} repertoire that is often heard is the idea that a spoonful of sugar helps the porridge go down. Children should not be overwhelmed with culture that is too complex or too far from their personal interests, but it should be made accessible to them, offered in small steps (cf. Van den Haak 1999).\textsuperscript{217} Joke (LOF5), for instance, took her children and now takes her grandchildren to museums, concerts and ballet performances. In the Rijksmuseum*, she starts with the historic dollhouse department and then ‘you sneakily take them to some other things’, because ‘you shouldn’t overwhelm them with it, I think, you should do it step by step’. Similarly, she takes her granddaughter to the Concertgebouw, ‘but it should be something that’s easy for the ear, because it’s a long sit for an eight-year-old.’ When one \textit{does} take a giant leap at

\textsuperscript{216} There are also a few exceptions, such as Anneke (UMF1): ‘As a sign of resistance to my parents, I didn’t take \textit{my} children to \textit{any} museum.’ She continues: ‘They should either discover it by themselves, or not.’

\textsuperscript{217} Koos (UMM3) uses the same logic when explaining his own rising interest in classical music in his youth, thanks to popularising musicians such as Waldo de los Rios and James Last (‘music for the millions’). He thinks that, nowadays, André Rieu performs a similar ‘bridging function’.
once, one should explain to one’s children the elements that might interest them. Deirdre (HYF6), for example, discusses how she gradually passes on her newly acquired passion for opera – which she was not brought up with herself – to her daughters, aged 10 and 12:

I play these operas for my children, because you can just explain Orfeo like a fairytale: that Eurydice died, that he wants to bring her back, that he wasn’t allowed to look behind him; well they like it. And they also joined me to La Bohème, I brought them with me, also to ballet performances. So they get much more than I got...

Yes, and do they like it?

Yes, they like it. But they can also look behind the scenes. Because I think that sitting still for two hours is not fun. Even though something happens, with ballet they become annoyed because they don’t speak, it’s only dancing. They find that difficult, that Cinderella expresses everything through dance. Yes, and in opera you have to get through it before you..., sometimes we leave during the interval. At the beginning I say ‘Well, now comes a nice part’ or ‘There’s a horse in it, a real horse’ or whatever, other crazy things, and then we leave at the interval. That’s just enough for their attention span and then we go. That’s fine with me. But they become acquainted with it much more than I used to.

Hence, by offering a fairytale-like interpretation, by pointing at elements that children may like, and by leaving before the break, she tries to make her daughters enthusiastic about a cultural genre that usually does not attract children quickly.

Some respondents legitimise the cultural upbringing of their children with what Isaiah Berlin called ‘positive freedom’: children do not have to like it necessarily, but they should be offered a wide range of possibilities in order to become acquainted with what is out there, and to eventually make their own choices (Bloktland 1993; cf. Van den Haak 1999). Joke, who I quoted above about her grandchildren, continues: ‘When they don’t pick it up, well that’s fine, too. But you should give them the chance to learn something and to be able to enjoy it.’ She uses the metaphor of seeds: parents plant some seeds, and with one person the seed germinates, with the other it doesn’t.’ In her case, her daughter did adopt her taste, but both her sons did not (‘they will never visit a museum’). Karin (UMF4) uses the same metaphor when she tells that her children, who are now young adults, initially did not like the cultural excursions during vacation:

In the beginning they hated it, as small children, haha! So I promised them an ice-cream as soon as we left the church, but we did go. (...) I noticed it when they got older, that the seed was planted anyway. I notice that they – also without me – visit a museum when they are in a certain town. Fortunately, it worked. Yes. [italics added]

On classical music, Karin later says that her children are not engaged in it ‘yet’. When I repeat the word ‘yet’, she explains: ‘I hope it will happen, yes’. Didi (LMF4) experienced

218 Cf. the expressed rationale in the case of TV show Cultiurshake in chapter 5.
the same thing, now that her daughter of 22 has begun visiting old towns on her holidays rather than just lying on the beach: ‘You give them a bit of education, and for the rest they have to develop it themselves.’ Rudolf’s (UOM1) daughter (26) only recently began to ask her father about his passion, classical music, which she was always exposed to as a child: ‘She now says: “Show me the way, give me some CDs that I should hear.”’ Thus, the seed often needs some time to germinate, as we saw earlier with the respondents who discovered certain cultural items themselves a long time after having been exposed to it during their childhood. But, even then, not all seeds germinate, as some parents say in a somewhat regretful way.

Understanding Jimi Hendrix: Parental influences in pop music

‘I have been to Bob Dylan in my mother’s belly’. This is how 31-year-old Joris (UYM1) illustrates in a rather extreme way how he was brought up with popular music. According to him, his father was, ‘until my adolescence (...), the main supplier, so to speak, of music’. Attending concerts ‘was not that much stimulated, but certainly not stopped’.

Thus far, I only discussed the transfer of classical music and the visual arts, which are usually perceived – also by most of my respondents – as high culture. Bourdieu and others also spoke mainly about ‘legitimate culture’ when stressing the important influence of parental background and – to a lesser degree – school education. Of course, among lower-class people cultural taste is transferred by parents too, but Bourdieu and others write less about this kind of habitus formation. Popular culture, in particular pop music, is often exclusively perceived as youth culture. Socialisation in pop music is mainly explained by the influence of peers (e.g. Van Wel et al. 1994: 21), which might include siblings (ibid.: 62-63), and by mass and niche media (Bennett 2001; Wermuth 2002). Youth subcultures such as rock ‘n’ roll and punk are first and foremost described as oppositional to the (musical) tastes of older generations, particularly parents (cf. Bennett 2000; 2001; 2013). Although the relations between parents and children have become easier in recent decades – a shift from a command model to a negotiation model (De Swaan 1979) – children’s musical tastes are still often perceived as deviating from their parents’ tastes (Bennett 2013: 124-8). And, although the first pop generations have grown older and have raised children themselves, their tastes often still diverge from their children’s due to the fast succession of musical styles and artists. Therefore, parental influences in popular music have almost never been researched. The first exceptions appeared only recently. Ter Bogt et al. (2011) quantitatively analysed the influence of parents’ taste for musical genres during their adolescence on their teenage children’s present taste. Andy Bennett (2013: 128-150) gave an interesting qualitative account of aging rock fans, which includes some sections on their ‘mentorship’ towards younger
generations, including their own children. In this section, though, I mainly look at the perspective of the adult children, rather than the parents’ point of view.

It is mainly the children of lower educated parents who mention these influences. It is striking that they use similar repertoires as higher educated respondents do when speaking about the transferral of ‘high culture’. In the following quotes, the similarities in vocabulary are printed in italics. Geer (LYF1) always listens to the radio, because ‘you get it from home, in our home the radio was always turned on’. Cora (LYF5) notices ‘that indeed my father provided that, like Leonard Cohen, I still like to listen to him very much’. Ronald (UYM4), whose father also listened to opera (see above), ‘really grew up with John Denver; my parents always listened to him’. And Joachiem (UYM2) says he was ‘infected’ by his father. In contrast, Rik (LYM4) was ‘not brought up at all’ with music: when his parents were out working, ‘the nanny just turned on what she liked’. As with high culture, in popular music we recognise both the active transfer and the simple impact of exposure.

Furthermore, as in classical music, the penny might drop somewhat later. Carmen’s (UYF6) father listened to sixties’ and seventies’ rock music, such as The Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin, which he ‘provided’. On my question what she herself thought of her father’s taste, she mentions Jimi Hendrix as an example:

Well, I do notice that it certainly influenced my taste, but I noticed it much later, actually. And I also noticed much later that... My father used to listen to Jimi Hendrix a lot at home, but at the time I didn’t like it at all. Actually, it irritated me when I was younger. But when I was older, I started working in a store, and my boss, an old surfer, played Jimi Hendrix. And actually, only then I started to like it. And then I thought: gosh, my father already passed it on to me back then. Although I didn’t understand it at that time. But when I was working in that store and I had no choice at all, because he played it almost every day, then, yes, then suddenly you get it. Suddenly you understand Jimi Hendrix!

It is no surprise that only younger respondents mention popular music when discussing their parental influences. Their parents were the first generation to be exposed to pop/rock music, and they later – implicitly or explicitly – transferred it to their children. These children adopted this and developed their own particular taste from that point onwards (cf. Bennett 2013: 145-150). The mentioned influences mainly concern singers and bands from the sixties and seventies, but the respondents do not restrict themselves to these ‘classics’. The respondents quoted above mention contemporary bands such as Coldplay and The Editors and genres such as hip hop and techno among their favourites. They might, in their turn, pass their taste on to their children.

219 School is absent in this story. Some respondents do remember how, conversely, teachers’ denunciations of pop bands triggered their interest. See for example Vincent’s account on Elvis Presley in chapter 5.
220 The recording is not clear at this point. This sentence is my interpretation, based on the context.
Some of my respondents ‘teach’ their children about pop music. Deirdre (HYF6) for example, who was quoted in the previous section with her active opera lessons, also shows her children YouTube videos from the time of her own youth. She tried to explain them that Nirvana was once pioneering, although her daughters do not quite understand the innovative nature of this grunge band: ‘It didn’t make much of an impression, I must say.’ Marieke (LMF5), on the other hand, tells that her children (7 and 8) cannot get enough of Michael Jackson, whom they – like many children – discovered when he had died. Passing on pop culture is a relatively new phenomenon, that will only become more important in the future.

My respondents, however, speak more often about the transfer of popular music in the opposite direction. Parents ‘learn’ (Marieke) new music from their children; they say to have been ‘influenced’ (Charles, HOM3) or even ‘raised’ (Henny, UMF5) by them with respect to contemporary genres (hip hop, r&b, dance) and artists (Adele, Amy Winehouse). Hence, people are not only influenced by their parents, siblings, partners, friends, colleagues and school teachers, but – somewhat later in life – also by their children.

In this first part of chapter 6, we saw how people explain the origin of and changes in their cultural taste. People who like ‘high culture’ are brought up with this by their parents and/or they learned it at school. When this did not happen, they could catch up with the help of friends and partners, who in their turn did probably receive a cultural paplepel, either from their parents or at school. This repertoire is also used by several people who were not raised with ‘high culture’ themselves. This implies that people explain taste differences with differences in parental milieu and, to a lesser extent, educational level. Some of the quotes in this section made this more explicit, such as the references to income (‘well-to-do’, Annemarie), occupation (the school principal, Yvonne), milieu (both Annemarie and Yvonne), and place (German countryside, Marsha). In the second part of this chapter, I will explore the different factors – both the above mentioned and influences such as gender and age – that my respondents come up with to explain taste differences.

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222 Bennett (2001: 155) also speculates about ‘a scenario in which middle aged, middle class professional couples continue to […] share their musical heritage, and the nostalgic moments it inspires, with their own children’.
Chapter 6

‘They are too simple for that’: How people explain taste differences

I try not to read too many reviews, because I know that many critics are just male sourballs: male, higher educated, white, sometimes homosexual, they’re often sour I think. (Carmen, UYF6)

At the [Fantastic Film] Festival you see many common-or-garden people, so to speak, not those exotic, culturally sound, Amsterdam citizens, but also ‘normal’ people like me and my next-door neighbour, who go there specifically for that. So: a bit of everything. (Monique, HYF5223)

People use all kinds of characteristics to categorise themselves and others, and to explain differences between people, in this case cultural taste. In the first quote above, Carmen uses gender, educational level, ethnicity and even sexuality in one sentence in order to distinguish herself from critics (although she shares high education). Monique adds place of residence and a sense of normality. Although some people explain taste differences simply in terms of individual personality (‘When your character is more extreme, you like more extreme music’, Sander, HYM2), most people use group characteristics that explain why they or others have a certain taste. This can go as far as religion (‘It’s because of my catholic background’, Pauline, UMF3), ethnicity (‘You don’t see many ethnic minorities in museums or at concerts, unfortunately’, Hans, LMM4), and sexual orientation (‘He’s a huge Madonna fan, but maybe it has something to do with his sexual inclination: there are many gays who happen to like Madonna’, Peter, LMM1). However, the most common characteristics are age, gender and several indicators of social stratification, particularly educational level.

These are the same criteria that I used myself to design the quotas with which I selected my respondents, as well as the main independent variables that are used in most sociological studies on cultural taste and participation. Previous chapters showed that some of these variables are indeed related to tastes, hierarchical perceptions and the use of hierarchical and anti-hierarchical repertoires. Only gender, in correspondence with previous research (see introduction), did not play a large role. This chapter, on the other hand, deals with the differences that people experience themselves and with the nature of the symbolic boundaries they draw between themselves and others. How do they legitimise their own taste and its development, and how do they clarify why their partners, children, friends, etcetera, like something else, besides the specific cultural upbringing discussed above? Earlier, we saw that many people look down on or up to others, whether or not downplaying this, but does this mean they use class or educational level in these distinctive practices? This section delves into these rarely researched questions.

223 Monique herself lives in a suburban town close to Amsterdam.

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Of course, the initial questions I asked over the telephone about people’s age, education and parents’ education might already have given respondents a clue about my interests. However, I believe that this initial knowledge influenced only a few people in their narrative. On the other hand, specific interview questions on the tastes of three occupations and on high and low culture and the card ranking assignment did guide respondents in a certain direction. Many people only mentioned class or educational differences in this final part of the interview. Therefore, in this chapter, I consistently separate remarks in the ‘core’ or open interview from those in the final, more structured, part (which starts with the three occupations). One might argue that questions in the core interview (about the respondents’ parents, children, partners and siblings) also evoke responses on age and gender. Similarly, questions on the dynamics of taste trigger them to reflect on the consequences of growing older. However, only when people explain a taste difference or a personal change with these characteristics (‘My children like pop music and I don’t, because they are young and I’m not’; ‘I started to like art, because I grew older’), it was included in the analysis.

Table 6.2 shows the number of people that refer to a certain characteristic in the core interview and the number that first mentions it in the more structured part. They are ranked by number in the core interview. Social stratification is subdivided by three indicators, which do not add up, because many respondents mention more than one indicator.

Age is the only characteristic that more than half of the respondents (59) mention during the core interview. It is followed by several indicators of social stratification. These indicators are most often added in the second part of the interview. Respondents mention on average 2.1 characteristics in the core interview (up to a maximum of 8, by Inge (UYF3)), and 3.2 in the entire interview (maximum 9, by Sandra (HYF1); minimum 0, by three respondents). Younger and higher educated people mention slightly more characteristics than older and lower educated people. Looking at the typology in chapter 5, ambivalent people mention most characteristics, and neutral people the least.

In this section, I will not discuss the characteristics in the exact same order as in the table. I begin with the most salient characteristic, age, which includes perceived differences between birth cohorts and between parents and children. Next, I discuss the perception of gendered tastes. Subsequently, I discuss the several ways in which people

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224 These are fictitious quotes.
225 This table does not contain hard numbers, as it is often a matter of interpretation whether a certain characteristic is applicable for a given quote. Compare the typology in chapter 5.
226 The different aspects of social stratification are counted separately.
227 However, the differences are not strong. For educational level it is significant (p < .05; using Anova), but for age it is not (p < .05; using Pearson’s r). The number of mentioned criteria does not significantly correlate with the duration of the interview either (Pearson’s r is .20).
228 These differences even become larger when taking into the account the reconsidered typology, which consists of more ambivalent and neutral respondents, and fewer hierarchical and egalitarian ones.
refer to social stratification: both in terms of class and its several alternatives (occupation, education, intelligence). The next sub-section shows that place of residence often functions as an alternative for class too. Finally, I show that people also take into account economic capital and the type of education one received (humanities vs. science). The other mentioned characteristics are too rare to discuss separately.

Table 6.2. Numbers of respondents who refer to certain differences during the core interview and who first refer to them in the later part of the interview (n = 90)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>characteristic</th>
<th>n core</th>
<th>n later</th>
<th>n total</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>age</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social stratification</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
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<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>* class/milieu/stratum</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* intelligence</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* occupation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* economic capital/income</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>place of birth; place of residence</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>type of study/occupation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sexual inclination</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethnicity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other characteristics</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Youth culture and conservatism: The interrelatedness of age and birth cohort

Often it is people’s surprise about a certain individual’s taste that reveals their idea of what is supposed to be ‘normal’. Berend (LOM5) shows this in a quote on jazz:

I experienced it several times in my life, that you are at a certain place and unexpectedly someone says: ‘This Stan Kenton, I find him terrific!’ A former friend of M. [his daughter] was here once, she heard Stan Kenton, and she was so surprised. ‘How wonderful that is!’, she said. [whispering:] I was astonished. Very young girl, she was seventeen or something!231

229 Class includes references to the elite and posh on the one hand; and volks*, the masses and the common people on the other. It partly scores high due to its function as a rest category for social stratification; the word ‘class’ itself is mentioned by only eleven respondents (with regard to cultural taste), mostly in the later part of the interview.

230 Intelligence is not a source for social stratification as such, but is often used by respondents as an alternative for educational level.

231 This quote follows his answer on the bricklayer’s taste, to which he also answers that he can be surprised. He speaks in retrospect, as his daughter was 44 at the time of the interview.
17-year-old girls generally do not like jazz, Berend presumes, let alone the progressive big band leader Stan Kenton. Conversely, 25-year old Jeroen (LYM3) expresses his surprise that his mother listens to the mainstream pop station Radio 538*, which mainly plays ‘young guy’s music’. An example of such a Radio 538 listening mother is 55-year-old Henny (UMM5), who claims that her 29-year-old son finds her ‘cool’:

Years ago, me and a younger friend went to, what’s it called, Dance Valley*. My son was bragging about it to his mates: ‘My mother goes to Dance Valley’, haha! You know, I thought: I’d like to know what it’s like up there and what goes on, just to experience it. Like I said, I’m in for these kinds of things. And then you can think ‘yes, god, you’re that old’, but there’s a whole mixture of ages at these parties, so you don’t have to be ashamed or whatever. And still, I was like, well, what do I care, no one knows me there, I want to experience how it is. Yes. Yes, he found it cool.

50-year-old Michiel (UMM1) also visits dance festivals, but his daughter is less supportive: ‘According to my daughter, I should be ashamed that I like Armin van Buuren* and Tiësto, well, I don’t give a damn, haha!’. He thinks she associates both DJs with ‘16- and 17-year-old kids’, not with ‘a 50-year-old geezer’. Two middle-aged respondents want to avoid an elderly image and therefore stay away from classical music: Henny says that ‘I feel too young for that, haha, it’s more for old and settled people, they go to concerts and such’; and Hanneke (HMF4; 47 y.o.) would find herself ‘an old tart if I were to like classical music’.

These examples mainly have to do with age itself. They express the idea that people quit pop music and start liking classical music and serious art when they grow older. This view is shared by most popular music scholars, who focus on the relation between popular music and (oppositional) youth culture (Bennett 2013: 1-4). Aging rock fans are often ridiculed and stereotyped in popular media (ibid.: 13-20). It is a strong repertoire: some young respondents presume that their interest in ‘high cultural’ fields will develop later on; parents hope the same when speaking about their children. If this change does not happen, it is met with surprise by others, as the quotes above indicate. However, age differences often have more to do with birth cohorts and with relations between parents and children than with individuals growing older. Bennett calls the idea that people (should) change when reaching a certain age a social construction. Its significance has decreased in recent decades, but this is not often recognised (ibid.: 2013: 14; 20-23). In this sub-section, I discuss the taste differences that people attribute to these three interconnected aspects of age: first age itself, then birth cohort and finally parent–child relationships.

Besides a change from popular to ‘high culture’ described above, age also plays a role in people’s perceptions of changes within pop cultural taste during and after
adolescence. Several young respondents who describe such an individual change believe this to be more general. 25-year old Sander (HYM2), for instance, says: ‘I used to like pop music, from when I was about 12 until 18, like most teenagers I think. And after that it started to develop and then [I began to like] less-known artists.’ 30-year-old Inge (UYF3) generalises her own adolescence too, although it was quite different from Sander’s:

I notice that, now I grow older, I want to hear more quiet music, haha, I lost much of my bleakness, I think. (...) During adolescence, like many people, I think, I liked to be down a bit and wallow in my misery, and like ‘Kurt Cobain does understand it’, you know, haha, a bit in that mindset. And fortunately you grow out of that.

Apart from the growing interest in ‘high culture’ and the changed taste within popular culture, age is also associated with a decreased interest after a certain point. Elderly people, on average, do not go out much, as many studies on cultural participation have shown (e.g., De Haan & Knulst 2000; Newman et al. 2013). Several elderly respondents indeed say they are not as culturally active anymore, because they rarely leave the house, let alone at night. ‘When you’re a little bit older, you don’t feel the need any more (...) to get into the car at night and drive to Amsterdam’, says suburban Joke (LOF5; 66 y.o.). People not only participate less outdoors, 94-year-old Henricus (HOM1) says that even his interest in listening to music diminished:

I think it has to do with old age. It’s very strange, I think, when you get old... You withdraw into yourself more. That’s a danger, and I try to avoid it, but you can’t avoid it completely. Clearly. You turn inside yourself more. So the distance that I used to have, or the affection, I can’t find the word, for classical things such as Bach (...), it has decreased, yes. It’s decreased. Slowly, it’s become something from your past. I still like it, but it doesn’t grab me as it used to. Do you understand? But that’s of course the youthful enthusiasm you have then... and the older resignation, yes. You just let it be. Maybe I say it a little too strong, but in a way that’s what it boils down to.

Distinctive remarks with respect to age are more often directed towards the tastes of older people than the reverse. ‘Jan Smit*, at age 12, he’s nice for grandma but not for me’, mocks Alexander (HYM4; 38 y.o.). 31-year-old Joris (UYM1) remembers the ‘elderly performance’ of the stage play Phaedra he once visited, in which a member of the audience caused a loud beep when re-adjusting his hearing device. Since then, he associates ‘classic plays’ with hearing devices, and thus looks for more innovative plays with a younger audience instead. Furthermore, some older and middle-aged respondents speak in a somewhat self-deprecating way. They call themselves ‘conservative’ (Piet, HMM3, 59) or ‘old-fashioned’ (Marieke, LMF5, 47) for not liking contemporary pop music; they conclude a negative opinion on present-day norms with ‘says granny’ (Helma, UOF3, 71); or call their dislike for modern sceneries in opera ‘a little antique, but hey,
that’s what I am myself’ (Sjef, HOM4, 79). This one-way distinction in favour of the young also explains why some of the middle-aged respondents above want to prevent developing a taste that is associated with old people.

The image of the elderly as conservative is probably caused by the changing of birth cohorts rather than by age itself: older people do not like new developments which are preferred by people who were born in a later time period, and hence they cannot catch up. This is the second aspect of age differences that some people reflect on. People who grew up in a certain era like different music, different comedians and different theatre genres than those who grew up twenty years later. They are more likely to preserve the taste they developed when they were young than to change it when they grow older. Many respondents refer to ‘my time’ when they talk about their formative (often teenage) years; cultural items from before and after this period they do not know or understand. 85-year-old Marianne (LOF2) still talks with anger about the revolution in the Dutch theatre that took place in the 1960s (the ‘Tomato Action’), which ‘ruined many things for our generation’. She continues: ‘And we were not the only ones, but our generation, such as friends and neighbours... Since then, me and my husband never attended a stage play anymore. Well, that’s terrible, isn’t it?’ The oldest respondent, 94-year-old Henricus (HOM1), speaks about the emergence of youth culture after his own youth:

I hardly knew it. Of course, I’m from a very early generation, and pop music is really something that gradually emerged after the war. Before the war you didn’t have that, and it took some time before this pop music really received some attention. Whereas nowadays it’s become a kind of vital necessity, apparently. For many young people that is. If you hear what’s on television and such, on the radio... in news bulletins, you are disturbed all the time by one or another piece of pop.

His lack of interest did not prevent him from appreciating the iPod filled with contemporary music that his grandchildren recently gave him. He tries to acquire a bit of taste for it, ‘or at least some understanding’. For the middle-aged respondents who did grow up with youth culture, it is the contemporary genres such as dance and hip hop that are not appreciated anymore: ‘The current pop scene, I completely lost that connection’ (Piet, HMM3, 59 y.o.) (cf. Bennett 2013: 124-8). The developments in popular music are perceived as moving so quickly that some respondents even notice severe taste differences between themselves and their brothers and sisters who are only a few years older or younger.

These cohort differences often lead to quarrels between parents and their children, the third way in which age plays a role. 43-year-old Patrick (HYM3) analyses the development of musical tastes between the cohorts in his family:

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232 Of course, this might also be caused by the young age of the interviewer.
My father said: ‘You should listen to jazz, because this pop music is absolutely nothing!’ (...) And then I said: ‘Yes, but your father told you to listen to classical music, and you stubbornly listened to jazz.’ His father hated jazz. ‘And that’s how music develops, dad.’ (...) And that’s true of course. If I now look at certain hardcore house festivals, then I think... I can’t stand that either. Like my grandpa couldn’t stand jazz. (...) You know, it’s as if a person has only a few decades in his life in which he opens his mind for new things, and, at a certain moment, it’s done.

Some respondents see these quarrels inherently connected to growing up, apart from differing formation eras. ‘Children never follow their parents,’ Jan (LOM3) concludes with regret, ‘raising them doesn’t imply they follow in your footsteps’, although in the first part of this chapter we saw that they often do. Don (UYM3), now 36, looks back on his youth:

When I was 18 or so, around the time that you leave home and go to college and things like that, I sometimes had discussions with them, and then you react against your parents a little, so you start developing your own taste, and, well, this taste didn’t correspond with theirs.

Often, it is believed that this generation gap has decreased since the 1960s and ’70s (cf. De Swaan 1979). Nowadays, parents are used to youth culture and can understand new genres more than their parents could understand youth culture as a whole (Bennett 2013). 45-year-old Anneke (UMF1), for example, expresses her openness to the musical tastes of her children, who often let her hear music, whereas her parents at the time found her taste just ‘noise’. Not everyone agrees with this idea, though: 61-year-old Greet (LMF3) perceives the gap with her children as larger than she had with her parents, who used to like Cliff Richard just as much as she did. This might have to do with her specific adolescent taste, as Cliff Richard was not as ‘wild’ and ‘deviant’ as many other singers and bands in the 1960s.

Hence, age, cohort and parent–child relationships are intricately interconnected. People’s tastes often change when they grow older, but the degree and direction of this change can differ between birth cohorts, who are raised in different eras. In recent decades, the change that implies increasing interest in classical music when growing older, which was discussed in the first part of this chapter, becomes less significant. More often, changes occur within popular culture. Furthermore, generational gaps between parents and their children probably have become weaker for younger birth cohorts, both because of more informal and equal relations between parents and children, and because present-day parents grew up with popular youth culture too.
Chick flicks and macho shows: Perceptions of gendered tastes

‘I am a man, I always say, so I always represent myself as such too, and I can’t do that with a chick film.’ Rik (LYM4) uses his cultural taste for his self-presentation as a masculine man, as he does not want people to think that he is even a little feminine. *Sex and the City* is taboo to him. Emotional TV shows are only watched by his mother and by other women he knows, ‘and then they also cry, they really empathise with it’.

Whereas age and cohort differences are associated with music and — to a lesser extent — the ‘high’ arts (the visual arts, the theatre), gender distinctions are pronounced much more when talking about fields such as film and television, which contain a more explicit narrative. There are only a few respondents who speak about ‘men’s music’ (Marsha (HYF2): ‘Bruce Springsteen, you know, that kind of stuff’) or ‘women’s humour’ (again Marsha), but these kinds of qualifications are much more common with regard to film and TV. Spectacular action movies full of violence are associated with men; soap series and emotional drama films with women. The latter are sometimes called ‘women’s films’ or ‘chick flicks’, both by women and men. These are the terms used to explain why one’s partner does or does not like certain films, such as Greet (LMF3) about the Dutch film *Komt een vrouw bij de dokter*: ‘My husband didn’t want to join me, (...) he’d heard that not many men go to watch this film, it’s really a women’s film.’ Midas (LMM5) explains why he dislikes soap operas: ‘I don’t belong to their target group. That’s my wife and maybe my daughter. They love that kind of stuff, I don’t understand why.’

Due to the male dominance in cultural production (see introduction) and traditional perceptions of female inferiority, one might expect that stereotypical feminine tastes are often looked down on. While this is indeed the case, women also look down on stereotypical male tastes. Monique (HYF5), who likes art house movies, works in the IT sector, in which ‘nine out of ten colleagues are men, and they really watch these men’s films, with car chases and that kind of things’. Furthermore, both men and women look down on stereotypical tastes by people of their own gender, or speak ironically about their gendered taste. Rik, quoted above, prefers masculine films such as the street racing film series *The Fast and the Furious*, but he does not express himself completely seriously when describing it: ‘The little boy’s dream, you know, the nice cool big car, driving like crazy, story line makes no sense, but it’s easily enjoyable.’ Similarly, Paul (HMM1) calls the British car show *Top Gear* that he sometimes watches a ‘super masculine show, a macho show’.

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233 The lack of perceived gender differences in music corresponds with the lack of actual gender differences in the card ranking question (see chapter 3) and with previous research (see introduction).
234 The Dutch often use this original English term.
235 However, Bennett et al. (2009: 102-4) showed that women are more defensive about their taste for romance novels than men are about their taste for whodunits and other ‘male’ genres.
It is not women’s tastes per se that are looked down upon, nor simply the respective tastes of the other sex. Some respondents seem to distinguish from gendered tastes as such, whereas they perceive good taste, or high culture, as gender-neutral. This idea can most clearly be observed in Inge’s case (UYF3), who has a Master’s degree in gender studies. When speaking about her sister’s friends, who have a lower education than she has, she says:

It’s just, well, very nice, but they’re also quite average people: the boys watch Die Hard and the girls Sex and the City. (...) Then I don’t bring up [art house film] La Pianiste, haha.

She elaborates on this issue in response to the interview question on the bricklayer’s taste:

Er, yes, then I have a stereotype that I think is correct, because I know quite some bricklayers, construction workers, plumbers, carpenters, and it’s really, traditionally very much gendered: men watch men’s shows, that’s what bricklayers do, I guess, a little sensational and such. And of course that’s over-simplified, I know, but that’s the image that I see confirmed around me.

And in music?
Er, that’s more difficult, TV is easier (...). Maybe Bon Jovi or something, quite male music, it’s mainly gendered, that’s what I think, male stuff. So, not a nice piece of jazz, or, no, some guitar, or Slam FM*, that kind, Top 40*.

Hence, Inge links gender differences to both working-class and ‘average’ people, in contrast to the more gender-neutral tastes among people with a higher educational level such as herself. This idea corresponds with earlier findings on the strong significance of gender differences in the working class (Bourdieu 1984: 380-4), caused by the separate spheres in which men and women live, due to a less advanced women’s emancipation in this class (Kuipers 2006: 52). Bennett et al. (2009: 233) relate this to the different status attributions of gender stereotypes between classes:

Possibly, with a more rigid and less varied range of cultural capitals available, being a feminine woman, or a masculine man, operates as cultural capital in itself among the working class. A more fluid gender style has greater currency among the women and men from the professional-executive class.

On the other hand, significant gender differences are often found among the educated in relation to participation rate: women read more and visit more cultural events than men do (see introduction). Louis (UMM4) also refers to this, yet in a hyperbolic way: ‘90% of all literature is read by women, I believe.’
Coalmen, PhDs, and high IQs: Finding alternatives for class differences

Bourdieu explains taste differences first and foremost in relation to class background, through the habitus formation in the parental milieu. Class, however, is rarely mentioned explicitly by my respondents in the core interview. Upwardly mobile Yme (UMF2) is one of the exceptions. When she reflects on the concepts ‘good and bad taste’, she explains her taste difference with the woman next-door: ‘She is clearly from a different social class. Yes, old money. Different, raised completely differently. I’m from the working class.’ Others use words that more implicitly refer to class, such as ‘elite’, ‘posh’ (Dutch: kak), ‘a different milieu’, ‘higher layers’, or even a reference to the royal family (‘You won’t find these kind of paintings in the house of [Queen] Beatrix’, Rik, LYM4) for the upper class; and ‘volks’, ‘common people’, ‘the masses’, or ‘the man in the street’ to refer to lower classes.

Previous research showed that the Dutch generally do not like to speak in terms of class: they are not only hesitant to look down on lower classes (which corresponds with my findings on ambivalences on cultural distinction in general), but also to define themselves in terms of class (e.g., Van Eijk 2011; 2013; cf. Payne & Grew 2005). However, many respondents search for alternatives that refer to social stratification after all. As Payne & Grew concluded from their study in the UK: ‘[I]t is possible to talk about class without ever mentioning the “c-word”’ (2005: 902). In this sub-section, I discuss occupation, educational level and intelligence respectively, followed in the next subsections by place of residence and income.

The first class indicator that is often mentioned is occupation: ‘high’ occupations are associated with ‘high culture’. When 94-year-old Henricus (HOM1) recalls the poor cultural participation in the small village where he was the general practitioner, he says that, besides himself, only the head teacher, the minister, the priest, the notary and an engineer might have visited the theatre. In short: the dignitaries of the village. Sometimes, the relation with occupation is triggered by the interview question on bank managers, bricklayers and writers. Marleen (HOF5) links a bricklayer to TV series Baantjer*, but continues that ‘a good friend of mine, a mathematician, loved Baantjer too, so you never know’. As with age, with class indicators it is often the surprise people express about others’ tastes, or the anticipation of the potential surprise of the interviewer, that reveals their perceptions of differences. Joke (LOF5), for instance, reflects on her father’s love for opera and choir music: ‘Despite him being a coalman, he had an ear for this music.’ The unexpected ‘low’ taste of people with a high occupation, such as the mathematician’s preference for Baantjer, can also function as an alibi to like this oneself:

I’m mad about As The World Turns. That sounds extremely contradictory, but (...) to me it’s a kind of antidepressant in the morning. [I once met] a gynaecologist and she was mad about
it as well. I think: well, if even a gynaecologist likes this, I don’t have to feel like an idiot. (Helma, UOF3)

Similar surprises can be found with regard to the second indicator of social stratification: educational level. Some respondents, for instance, link the occupations I ask about with their presumed educational level. Emiel (HOM2), a retired medical professor, replies to my question on bricklayers’ tastes by discussing unusual people he sometimes meets at concerts for contemporary classical music:

That can be all kinds of things. Yes, there are... look, a bricklayer doesn’t have a high education, but also among the ‘not-high-educated’ there are people who like classical music. And to my surprise, you also see in the series that I visit in the Muziekgebouw aan ’t IJ* on Thursday nights [with contemporary classical music] – where you see alternative companies playing music from different countries, and where you hear music that’s not easy on the ear (...) – that you sit next to someone who, when you hear him talking, clearly has less education, and who can enjoy it. I sometimes find that unusual, that this music, which my own acquaintances dislike, is sometimes appreciated by those kind of people. (...) Coincidentally you sit next to someone with whom you start talking, who shows – or ‘shows’; of whom you can presume – that he didn’t have a college degree or some other high education, but that he does find it worth visiting. That’s striking with this modern music, that suddenly people like it of whom you’d never expected it.

Not only does Emiel reflect on the exception to the rule, which he expresses as a surprise, he also turns the bricklayer into a person with a low educational level. Many respondents answer one or more of the interview questions on the three occupations in such an indirect way. They want to avoid clichés, stereotypes and generalisations, but reveal their beliefs after all. Also self-legitimations, which Helma above showed by referring to a person with a high education who likes As The World Turns, occur with references to educational level. Joke (LOF5) legitimises her taste for the TV series Star Trek as follows:

Yeah, well, some people think you’re a nerd or crazy when you like it. Well, that, phew, I like it, and I’m in good company: my boss has a Master’s degree and a Ph.D. and he has all seasons of Star Trek at home, he bought them all on DVD. So he’s as crazy as I am, so I’m in good company, haha.

Although educational level is the most frequently used hierarchical characteristic to explain taste differences, the rationale behind it is diverse. The actual additional cultural value of a high educational level is not mentioned as often as one might expect, apart from the examples on the school’s role in the first part of this chapter. Berend (LOM5) is one of the few examples:
More often, respondents refer to a certain subculture of people who had the same type of education and who therefore have similar tastes. Michiel (UMM1) says of his deviant taste among academic friends: ‘I liked these alternative genres like Pink Floyd and so on far less, but, in university circles, this was much more in focus.’ Similarly, Sandra (HYF1) says that she does not have much contact with lower educated people, who live in a different world: ‘We did VWO* of course, you know, so you’re in such a scene.’ By attending higher educational levels, one ‘gets in touch’ (Pauline, UMF3) with things one would otherwise not have: ‘If you went to college, you were recommended certain things of course’ (Sandra, HYF1). This difference between the actual educational value and simply the circle of educated friends in the influence on cultural taste has also been pointed out by Friedman (2012: 476-7).

A third indicator of social stratification in people’s perception is intelligence or intellect. This is often used as an alternative for educational level, in order to explain taste differences between classes or occupations. Some explicitly connect intelligence and education, as Berend above does when he links his average education with not understanding poetry, but others focus on intelligence as such. Hence, they attribute taste differences to a personal (innate perhaps) characteristic, whereas those who use educational level as their main explanatory factor focus more on achieved merits. Some people, for example, contrast ‘intellectuals’ and ‘simple people’. Marleen (HOF5) presumes that a bricklayer will not appreciate a certain Dutch comedy show (Toren C*, her favourite), because he will not be able to apprehend the ‘cynical and sarcastic’ element of this ‘really coarse humour’: ‘They’re too simple for that, they don’t understand that.’ Henny (UMF5), although later downplaying the concept ‘low culture’, presumes that ‘there are gradations (...) as regards level of intelligence (...); someone who has a lower level of development will not desire to go to a museum with Rembrandt or anything’. Louis (UMM4) even links it to specific IQ values. In reply to a question on cultural education at school, he says:

> I assume that in general people with brains, let’s say with an IQ over 110, are spontaneously inclined to be curious about cultural expressions. I mean, there’s no escape, even when they don’t go to a school where it’s taught, then they start searching for it themselves. Yes, people with brains sooner get bored, so they are looking for things not to get bored, and then you end up there [with ‘culture’].

In other words, these respondents express views that closely resemble Ganzeboom’s (1982) ideas on the varying degrees of the ability to understand ‘complex’ culture. That
class and intelligence do not necessarily go together is illustrated by Deirdre (HYF6), who claims that high culture is not necessarily ‘for a higher class, it’s more about the level of intelligence you need to understand it’.

Hence, in order to avoid speaking about class, which is seen as a predetermined characteristic of people and which is hence perceived taboo to classify individuals with (see also the taboo on class distinction in chapters 4 and 5), people use alternatives that have a more agentic and meritocratic touch: one’s level of education or one’s chosen occupation. However, some respondents’ focus on intelligence, which is perceived as a more innate characteristic, diminishes the agentic notion of education. In the next subsections we will see that place of residence, too, often implicitly refers to social stratification, and that income plays a quite different role.

‘Grachtengordel’ and mobility: Place as a metaphor for class

There are clear boundaries in Holland, I find, between high and low culture, between the Grachtengordel and the Vinexwijk... That some people can live in such a superficial way, it’s a mystery to me, no, there’s a clear boundary between them. (Piet, HMM3)

Piet, who lives in a small historical town near Amsterdam, links my question on high and low culture to certain places, which he uses as metaphors of class. The Grachtengordel is the famous ring of canals in the Amsterdam city centre, where the housing prices are high and many national cultural institutions are based. Therefore, the term is often used – mostly, but not only, in a pejorative way – as a pars pro toto for the cultural elite. Sander (HYM2), for instance, places the card with singer Ramses Shaffy* high in the hierarchy, because ‘I find him of some higher value, a Grachtengordel person’. In contrast, Vinexwijk is the general name of large suburban neighbourhoods built in the 1990s and 2000s, which – in people’s perception – are highly homogeneous, both in terms of morphology and population (e.g. Lupi et al. 2007: 7). They mainly attract middle-class families and people who are richer in economic capital than in cultural capital (De Stigtger-Speksnijder 2007: 41; De Wijs-Mulkens 1999: 188-194). Among city dwellers (who more often possess cultural capital), it has a connotation of boredom, partly because living areas are usually strictly separated from working, shopping and leisure areas.

References to place often relate to the availability of cultural institutions. In the countryside, there is less opportunity to participate in ‘high culture’. 58-year-old Truus

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236 Hubert Smeets (2013) calls it ‘the centre of Dutch high culture’ (my translation), because one fifth of all Dutch cultural institutions is located either in the Grachtengordel or in the equally well-to-do neighbourhood Old-South (Ouded-Zuid). He dates the origin of the pejorative use of the term back to the 1990s.

237 In the strict sense, the term Vinexwijk only refers to neighbourhoods built according to a specific policy (of which ‘Vinex’ is an acronym), but it is generally used in a broader sense.
Landscape

A Mystery to Me, No, There's a Clear Boundary Between Them.

There are clear boundaries in Holland, I find, between high and low culture, between the countryside and the city, the Grachtengordel for the cultural elite. 236 Hubert Smeets (2013) calls it ‘the centre of Dutch high culture’ (my translation), because one fifth of all cultural institutions are based here. However, some respondents find it hard to unravel whether it is mainly the geographical or social mobility that changed their interests. They, too, use their movement as a metaphor for class mobility. In chapter 5, we saw how Inge’s taste moved from New Kids on the Block in her native village, via Tori Amos in the small town where she went to school, to museums and theatres in Amsterdam, and that she again uses a reference to her native village to explain why she still does not understand Kandinsky. Similarly, Joris (UYM1; 31 y.o.) recalls how he and a friend used to rent CDs from the local library in the village where he was born (about 15,000 inhabitants). Later they moved to a larger town nearby (about 150,000 inhabitants), where the library had a larger and more diverse collection:

There, we were looking for more depth, so to speak. In H. [village] they did have Nick Cave, but still very much at the surface (...), and in A. [large town] they had so much vague stuff, there you ended up with The Inspiral Carpets, a vaguer band in the 1990s. And Britpop was guiding us a bit, so we read NME [New Musical Express, British magazine], because they had it in A., rather than OOR* [Dutch rock magazine] of course.

What is striking about this quote is not only the geographical distinction within popular music that Joris experienced, but also the relativity of this distinction. Singer Nick Cave and magazine OOR, which he both found in the village library, are generally perceived at the more alternative (‘vague’) side of the popular music spectrum already, but apparently this was not ‘vague’ enough for him.

Among the respondents who link cultural taste with place of residence, the city is valued more positively than the countryside or small towns ‘in the province’. The opposite, a romanticisation of rural areas such as in the late eighteenth century, does not...
appear in the interviews. Furthermore, I must be cautious not to interpret all references to place as a class indicator. Four respondents explain their and others’ preference for Dutch language music with their Amsterdam roots, in particular linked to the ‘Jordaan’. The Jordaan used to be a poor working-class neighbourhood, which is still famous for its tradition of Dutch language songs. For some respondents, this is indeed a matter of class, but for others it is strictly the local influence of a specific kind of songs they are referring to.

### Nouveaux riches and snobbery: Cultural versus economic capital

Another hierarchical characteristic that is sometimes mentioned, income, works in an opposite way. Many people condemn those with very high incomes, because they are associated with snobbery and insincerity. Hence, people replace economic boundaries by moral boundaries (cf. chapter 4; Lamont 1992; Van Eijk 2013). Income is mainly discussed in reply to the interview question on bank managers. Some look down on the *nouveaux riches*, who are only interested in money, material goods and status. Koos (UMM3), for example, gradually increases his anger towards some of his fellow villagers:

> These new rich, here in A. [name village], there is a substantial group of those kind of people. I cannot say it of course, but they’re not my type of people, they all have an SUV, you know, a too large car that uses too much gas. You can also see it a bit in the interiors of their homes, at least, it’s not my taste. And you notice it in their behaviour: they don’t give a shit about anything. And they’re in the wrong businesses, like gambling machines. There were also many of those drug dealers when we just arrived here.

Some respondents distinguish different types of bank managers. Helma (UOF3), for instance, says that she knows ‘bankers who visit the Concertgebouw* two or three times a month, but our son-in-law is absolutely not interested in that, he’s only occupied with money.’ Her husband, who just enters the room, a retired businessman, adds that he once knew a well-known banker who was ‘a very erudite man’ and who loved classical music. He compares this man to ‘such a Mister Rijkman Groenink [former CEO of ABN Amro], just to mention a name, well, he does visit concerts, but for different reasons.’ These quotes show that valuations of people with high incomes do not go together with valuations of people from higher social classes, with high educational levels and high intelligence, discussed above.

These examples of high incomes as a negative benchmark can be related to Bourdieu’s distinction between economic and cultural capital within the dominant class. People who possess more cultural than economic capital often look down on those with an opposite distribution of capitals. Only a few respondents speak about such differences in
cultural taste; more often they refer to divergent motives to visit the arts. The interview question on bank managers and (female) writers reveals such differences between snobbery and individual taste, as described in chapter 4. Besides this specific interview question, differences between cultural and economic capital are only hinted at by two respondents: Inge (UYF3) speaks distinctively – though in a downplaying way – about her economically oriented friends ‘who like football and beer’; and Carmen (UYF6) conversely becomes irritated by her ‘dramatic’ and ‘emotional’ artistic acquaintances, whom she perceives as ‘arrogant’ because they are convinced that they are studying ‘a higher art’.

**The bicycle repairman from Delft: Perceptions of type of occupation**

Most references to the type of occupation people have do not imply differences between cultural and economic occupations, but are related to the type of study they did at university: technical studies versus the humanities. Let me illustrate this with the example of Sjef (HOM4), a retired mechanical engineer with a great passion for classical music and classical arts. More recently, he began to appreciate more modern, non-figurative art, but his preference remains with the classics. He explains his taste with the peculiar phrase: ‘Of course, I am what they call a bicycle repairman from Delft.’ Sjef studied mechanical engineering at the well-known University of Technology in Delft. 238 By calling himself a bicycle repairman, he speaks ironically about his technological background. To my question whether his friends with whom he visits museums have a different background, he replies:

> Yes, they have a different background, they’re no bicycle repairmen, haha! No, they’re more from the humanities, I’m a science guy. 239 And that does make a difference. We also look at the technical side of art. We always want to know how it’s constructed, whereas others watch art more with their feelings I suppose. So, there’s a clear difference. (...) And others, well, they cannot understand our profession at all. When you’re not a science guy, that doesn’t work!

The way people appreciate art is influenced by the type of (university) background they have. Particularly respondents with a technical training explain how they look at art in a different way. Patrick (HYM3) is the son of a painter and an art gallery owner, but he studied to be a constructional engineer himself. When speaking about art, he says:

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238 Delft is nowadays best-known for its high percentage of technical students. Thus, a reference to Delft as such implies a technological association.

239 In Dutch, these differences are referred to with Greek letters: ‘They’re alphas, I’m a beta.’ The third Greek letter, gamma, refers to the social and behavioural sciences.
I’m rather analytical, I’m really technical in heart and soul. I have much more with technique than with art, or with how it looks. I’m much more curious about the construction of a couch than whether it is comfortable or how it looks. (...) [He points at a painting on the wall:] I really like this image, but I’m specifically curious about the techniques, how he made it.

Some other respondents recognise such a technical attitude in friends. Sander (HYM2), who studied classical literature, speaks about his museum visits with a friend, a furniture designer. This friend is more ‘mathematically inclined’; in the Parthenon in Athens he looks for ‘the golden ratios’, ‘that’s what he finds interesting’. Apart from the visual arts, it is mainly film with which technically oriented people distinguish themselves from others. They prefer films with special effects, as long as they are based in reality: ‘I am too exact for that’, says physicist Paul (HYM1) about the ‘fairytale-like’ comic book adaptation X Men. Apart from some possible exceptions, these differences are not clearly perceived in a hierarchical way. Sjef might speak in a derogatory way about himself, but he also turns it around (‘they cannot understand our profession’); others sound rather neutral on the matter. Prieur & Savage (2013) propose an increased symbolic value of scientific and technical orientations as compared to a humanities based cultural capital (cf. Lamont 1992 on the American-French distinctions in this matter), but I did not find indications that people perceive such value.

**Conclusion: Ambivalent perceptions of agency and structure**

After exploring distinctive and anti-hierarchical practices and narratives – whether or not with ambivalence – in previous chapters, which showed how people value their and others’ tastes, this chapter analysed how people explain taste differences. I showed that people’s narratives often correspond with sociological notions on the influence of parental background. Bourdieu (1984) theorised on the acquisition of cultural capital in the parental milieu and on the habitus formation from early childhood, which was further empirically proven in both quantitative and qualitative research. When parents listen to classical music or visit museums often, it is likely that people imitate this behaviour. This process becomes visible in the vocabulary my respondents use: they were provided with their taste ‘from home’ (van huis uit) and it was poured down into them with the porridge spoon (paplepel), either deliberately or more implicitly, by means of exposure. This repertoire is even more stirring when realising that people who did not grow up with ‘high culture’ – as their parents did not know or like it and therefore were not able to pass it on – use the same vocabulary.
However, this does not mean – as the second part of this chapter showed – that people often refer to class background when explaining taste differences with others. Only a minority of respondents actually uses terms like ‘class’ or ‘milieu’, or specific concepts such as ‘elite’ and ‘volks’*, to point at such differences in parental background. As chapter 5 already indicated, people in the Netherlands often do not wish to speak in terms of class, although many people do express themselves in hierarchical terms (yet often ambivalently). This chapter showed that they replace class as an explanatory factor with attributes that are less determined by parental background but that are believed to be personally chosen: level of education (including the specific type of study), occupation and place of residence. They value individual agency more than structural explanations. Although they clearly recognise parental influence, the meritocratic idea of individual achievement is strongly anchored in people’s narratives.

This also comes to the fore in the narratives of respondents (though a minority) who like classical music or visual arts despite their parents’ lack of interest and despite a lower class background. First, specific cultural education at (secondary) school plays a role, although for many who recall this it meant a complementary effect on top of parental milieu (again in line with Bourdieu and others). However, a more frequent narrative, which is often ignored in sociological research, is the influence of significant others besides parents. Friends, colleagues at work, and (ex-)partners play an important role in people’s recollections of the shaping of their taste. This is particularly true for upwardly mobile people, who became acquainted with people from higher milieus during their social trajectory. It is no surprise, then, that educational level as an explanatory factor for taste differences often refers more to the influence of different people one meets at schools and universities than to the actual educational value of these educational institutions.

Besides indicators of social stratification, this chapter also showed the value people attribute to other characteristics, such as age, in order to explain taste differences. Respondents often believe that people only start to appreciate classical music and other aspects of ‘high culture’ once they get older. However, I only heard such stories from people who were brought up with it but for whom it took a little longer before the ‘seed germinated’, for instance due to active resistance during and after adolescence. Cohort effects seem to play a larger role, both in reality and in people’s narratives. People who were brought up with youth culture, starting with the baby boom generation, often stick to this taste, whether or not complemented with, for instance, classical music. Furthermore, they often transfer this taste to their own children, who in their turn develop their own preferences in contemporary music, too. This chapter showed that children of younger (and also lower educated) parents describe this process in about the same terms and metaphors as others describe the transfer of ‘high culture’.

Hence, this chapter showed that the hierarchical perceptions described in previous chapters are related to different, sometimes contrasting, explanatory narratives. On the one
hand, many explain their and others’ tastes with exposure in the parental milieu (which idea should be extended with the transfer of popular culture among younger cohorts), but, on the other hand, they often avoid speaking explicitly in terms of class background. Besides some fond recollections of inspirational teachers who complemented parental influence, the role of higher educational levels is often reduced to the friends one meets along the way. People prefer notions of individual agency, and they complement parental influences with the effect that personally selected friends and partners have on their taste.

I now move from the classification of people to the classification of cultural objects. The next chapter explores the criteria that people apply to like or dislike specific cultural artefacts and to distinguish from others, as well as the criteria by which they define high and low culture and rank items accordingly.