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

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Conclusion

Because so-called ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ (or high and popular culture) increasingly mix – thanks to boundary crossing artists and cultural consumers with broad tastes – the social significance of these concepts crumble, it is often said. In a postmodern view, cultural items, such as songs, films and books, are not (or should not be) placed in a hierarchical order, but are (or should be) valued equally. There is no disputing about taste, as the expression goes. This is the cultural equivalent of a more general egalitarian ideal that has often been heard in Western countries during the past half-century.

However, people do dispute about tastes, and social inequality still exists. Higher status people often distinguish themselves from lower status people, who have ‘bad tastes’. Furthermore, people who are closer in the social hierarchy make more subtle distinctions vis-à-vis each other. Hence, cultural hierarchy largely corresponds with social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984). This idea has been contested by scholars on so-called ‘cultural omnivores’ (e.g., Peterson & Simkus 1992). The existence of high status people with broad tastes, who cross boundaries between ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’, challenged both this ‘homology’ between cultural and social hierarchy and the idea of distinctive practices of elites. One can wonder whether it makes sense for people who combine high and low culture to derive status out of high culture and to look down on those who like low culture. And, more generally: how can people look down on others, when these others are perceived as equal? Scholars soon proposed several ways in which ‘omnivores’ can nevertheless distinguish from others, such as with their broad taste (looking down on the narrow-minded) and within their broad taste (e.g., looking down on bad tastes within a genre). This dissertation aimed to contribute to this discussion in a more detailed way, focussing on the potential ambivalences between cultural distinction and the perception of (and/or wish for) an egalitarian society.

Another important question that remained open is what the concepts ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ actually mean. Does everyone understand the same when they use the terms? Many people, both within the cultural world, in the media and in academia, use these concepts uncritically, while at the same time claiming that their significance is declining. Some researchers simply defined high culture as the sum of certain a priori defined fields, such as classical music and museums. Such a definition, however, undervalues potential dynamic classifications. Cultural hierarchy is a socially constructed phenomenon, which gradually developed. Furthermore, there is no consensus on high culture’s characteristics: it cannot be classic and innovative at the same time,\textsuperscript{283} and the

\textsuperscript{283} One can recognise the innovative character of certain art in its time, but in the present the two criteria are incompatible.
alleged complexity and moral value of high culture are contested, too. Even the historical accounts of the *emergence* of high culture differ, partially due to contradictory definitions.

In this conclusion, I first recall the research questions and a brief sketch of the methodology. Subsequently, I present the main findings by answering the three research questions in separate sections. Finally, I give some suggestions for further research, based on (methodological) shortcomings of this research and on some afterthoughts on the relative role of cultural taste in hierarchical practices.

**Research questions and methods**

This dissertation aimed to unravel how people in the Netherlands perceive cultural hierarchy. In order to do this, I researched three different but related aspects of cultural hierarchy. First, how people *practise*, or ‘do’, cultural hierarchy when speaking about their cultural likes and dislikes. In other words: do they look down on, and up to, people with other tastes, or do they treat all tastes equally? Second, how people *perceive* and *define* cultural hierarchy: are they familiar with the concepts ‘high’ and ‘low culture’, and, if so, how do they define it and how do they classify cultural items? Third, what their *opinions* are on cultural hierarchy: one can perceive something hierarchically when asked or even sometimes practise hierarchy in one’s narrative, but nevertheless reject the idea of ‘high culture’ being superior. Finally, I connected these three aspects in order to explore contradictions and ambivalences.

I compared several groups of respondents, in order to take into account birth cohort, gender, educational level and parents’ educational level. The tendency of increased egalitarian ideals led to the expectation that younger people express themselves in a relatively less hierarchical way. The comparison between upwardly mobile people and both high and low immobile people enabled me to study (perceptions of) the influence of parental upbringing, as compared to formal education.

This resulted in three specific research questions:

*How do people in the Netherlands practise, perceive and value cultural hierarchy, and how is this related to their own taste preferences?*

*To what extent are people consistent in their narrative, and if not, how can contradictions and tensions be explained?*
How are these practices, perceptions and opinions related to people’s social position, as indicated by education, social origin (i.e., parents’ education), age and gender?

I studied these questions by means of an innovative research design, consisting of interviews, analysed both in a qualitative and quantitative way, with a carefully selected sample of ninety Dutch people. The in-depth interviews were designed to first let people speak openly about their and others’ tastes in a variety of cultural fields, before moving on to more structured questions about, among others, high and low culture. I took in mind that people do not necessarily tell ‘facts’, but that a sociological interview is an exploration of the self-presentations people give, in interaction with the interviewer. The scrutiny of contradictions, ambivalences, hesitations and nuances enriched my understanding of cultural hierarchies in practice. Furthermore, I used a card ranking assignment to statistically analyse the actual shape such a hierarchy takes (as compared to people’s personal taste rankings), as well as the degree of consensus about or variations within the order of items. This mixed methods design enabled me to thoroughly study cultural hierarchy from different points of view.

Hierarchical practices, perceptions and opinions

Practising cultural hierarchy

While the significance of cultural distinction, particularly in contemporary societies, has been contested, my research shows that there are many ways in which people – particularly higher educated – ‘do’ cultural hierarchy. First, they look down, though often not explicitly, on ‘lower’ tastes and on people who like these ‘lower’ tastes. They mock and stereotype others’ tastes and distance themselves from the popularity of these tastes. Sometimes, they speak somewhat ironically or apologetically about their own occasional ‘guilty pleasures’. These distinctions do not only concern the specific tastes of others, but also the perceived absence (or low frequency) of certain cultural practices, the lack of knowledge, and the refusal to be open to new forms of culture that do not immediately appeal. Conversely, people pride themselves – though less explicitly – for their good taste, their frequent cultural activities, vast knowledge and open attitude towards ‘difficult’ art. Chapter 4 described such practices in great detail.

These distinctive practices also come to the fore when looking at the criteria people (often implicitly) use to explain their likes and dislikes, as discussed in chapter 7. In accordance with Bourdieu, the higher educated distinguish themselves from the lower
educated by more often applying a ‘pure aesthetic’. They prefer music, films and paintings that they perceive as more complex, original and authentic; and they dislike what they see as the simple, the cliché and the fake. They propagate the ‘acquired taste’: one should make an effort to learn to like something that at first sight does not appeal. Contrary to Bourdieu’s theory, though, they do not reject the ‘popular aesthetic’ that the lower educated apply. Instead, they are ‘omnivorous’ in the criteria they apply to judge cultural items. However, they do use this popular aesthetic in a slightly different manner, by speaking in a more elaborate and detailed way than the lower educated do. They often expect somewhat different emotions in music than the lower educated do, they wish to interpret ‘layers’ in the content of a film, and they tend to perceive craftsmanship in art not as a goal in itself but as a necessary, though not sufficient, precondition.

Higher educated people seem to use some of these criteria as the basis for hierarchical scales, whether it is emotion (from cheap sentiments to being moved by ‘unknown’ emotions) or originality (from the cliché to far-fetched experiments). Higher educated people position themselves on a certain location on these scales: they, for example, like to make some effort to understand complex symphonies, whereas they look down on those who prefer simple melodies and look up to those who understand ‘incomprehensible’ atonal compositions. Most lower educated people, on the other hand, only apply the ‘popular aesthetic’, which implies an emphasis on the sheer attraction of cultural items and a relation to personal life. Hence, they do not position themselves on such scales.

This positioning of specific artistic criteria on a scale is, among others, the basis of people’s self-positioning in a cultural hierarchy. This brings me to the second way of practising cultural hierarchy, described in chapter 4: looking up to others. Whereas people are often reluctant to openly look down on others, they experience it as easier to express their awe towards ‘higher’ tastes. Similarly, acquaintances with vast knowledge, a more open attitude and more frequent cultural activities are often admired. This goes together with self-deprecat ing speech on these several issues: downplaying one’s own taste, expressing embarrassment on one’s lack of knowledge, and so on. Although it is mainly the higher educated who look up, also the lower educated sometimes use such self-deprecat ions, for example by apologising for watching soap series. Their hierarchical perception of cultural tastes makes the higher educated both look down and up, whereas the lower educated – as we will see below – more often resist hierarchical speech or even ignore it entirely.
Defining cultural hierarchy

Above, we saw how people can practise cultural hierarchy in daily life – or, to be more precise: during an interview on taste – but defining it is something different. I studied how people describe ‘high culture’ when asked, and how they rank cultural items hierarchically. Chapter 3 showed that the great majority of my respondents are able to rank musical items in a hierarchical way, which often differs from their personal taste rankings. Some lower educated respondents even say that they personally prefer low culture. Regardless of their own preferences, people perceive classical composers as high culture and certain Dutch language singers and contemporary pop artists as low. In between, there are more deviations, but overall there is consensus.

Chapter 7 extensively analysed the criteria people apply to rank these items and to define high and low culture. The main logic people use is the link to social hierarchy: high culture is what high status people like. This interpretation is validated by the results from the card ranking: what is generally perceived as high culture corresponds with the tastes of most (older) higher educated respondents. This logic is partly triggered by the adjectives ‘high’ and ‘low’, which give clues to the respondents who have never heard of the concepts. A strongly related logic is the size of the audience: high culture is preferred by a minority; low culture by the ‘masses’. There are only a few exceptions: some people turn this logic around in their rankings, by positioning the most popular items on top.

Another often used criterion is seniority: high culture is older than low culture, it has survived (or, when somewhat younger, will survive) the ages. The divergent applications of this criterion explain the variations in the ranking of some popular music items from the 1960s and ’70s, which, according to younger respondents, have already survived the ages (read: decades). The two mentioned criteria – seniority and the social logic – can also collide, which partially explains the high dispersion in the ranking of popularising classical musician André Rieu: some perceive him as high (because of the seniority of the music he plays), others as low (because of the perceived low status of his audience), some express their doubts.

A third important characteristic attributed to high culture is complexity: it is perceived as more difficult to understand (sometimes even too difficult) and thus requires training. Conversely, low culture is perceived as simple and easy to comprehend. This criterion corresponds with how people actually practise hierarchy, as we saw above.

Furthermore, there are some other criteria that are applied, sometimes contradictory. Craftsmanship, for instance, is perceived by some as constitutive of high culture, whereas others think that this criterion is mainly appreciated among lower classes. The latter idea corresponds with the aversion of abstract art by many lower educated people, who dislike this art (among other reasons) for being too easy to produce. The civilisation discourse with which some intellectual proponents of high culture (quoted in
the introduction) justify its value is rarely used, but the related concept of morality is sometimes applied to describe the opposite: low culture and bad taste. Finally, some relate high culture to original, innovative or experimental art, which, however, often contradicts the logic of seniority. Below, we will see how such contradictions can be explained and contextualised, but first I discuss the third aspect of cultural hierarchy: opinions.

**Valuing cultural hierarchy**

Because I never explicitly asked for people’s opinions on cultural hierarchy, many people gave definitions and classifications when asked, without value judgement. Spontaneous expressions of approval were rare, whereas spontaneous objections and downplaying remarks were made much more often. This does not imply that those who did not give their opinion necessarily approve of cultural hierarchy. This section therefore focuses on the large minority (about 26 respondents) who spontaneously shared their negative opinions, as well as on those who expressed an ambivalent opinion (about an equal number).

What struck me most while conducting interviews was the fierce resistance against the concepts ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’, as well as against ‘good taste’ and ‘bad taste’. The second part of chapter 4 shows that many people – mostly, but not only, lower educated – reply to the specific interview questions on these matters with strong objections against the ‘arrogant’, ‘elitist’, ‘derogatory’ and ‘humiliating’ connotations of such terms. The concepts remind some of the past, as they remember low or popular culture being condemned by parents and teachers, while others try to clarify them in light of sociological explanations on social constructions by elites. Many people try to refrain from cultural distinction themselves (in other words: they do not want to practise hierarchy), and they object others who do distinguish. Snobbish elites are criticised strongly, whether it is the conceited cultural elite who unjustly regard their own taste as superior, or the insincere economic elite who visit the Concertgebouw only for status reasons. These responses are often accompanied by egalitarian utterances. When speaking about taste differences with others – whether they be relatives or anonymous bricklayers – relativist expressions such as ‘tastes just differ’ and ‘one cannot dispute about taste’ are frequently articulated.

Some other people – though a small minority – do not only keep away from hierarchical ideas, but do not speak explicitly in an anti-hierarchical way either. They avoid narratives of hierarchy and anti-hierarchy completely, and speak in a more neutral way about cultural taste, as the second part of chapter 5 showed. Taste does not play a role in their classification and valuation of themselves and others; they seem to be occupied with other things. Many (not only in this particular group) have never even heard of the concept ‘high culture’, or pretend not to know it.
These findings correspond with egalitarian ideals in contemporary Western countries, in particular in a country such as the Netherlands. One of the main elements of the Dutch national self-image is the quest for normalcy and the resistance against expressions of superiority. However, as we saw above, many people do practise hierarchy, particularly people with a high educational level. Therefore, we cannot simply explain the resistance against cultural hierarchy with ‘broad-minded’ and ‘tolerant’ cultural omnivores in an age of blurring boundaries. The tension between practice and opinion will be discussed below, alongside other tensions.

**Analysing contradictions and tensions**

The juxtaposition of the above sub-sections invokes some questions. A number of discrepancies and tensions come to the fore when the different elements of cultural hierarchy are combined. First, many people practise and oppose cultural hierarchy simultaneously (sections 1 and 3). Second, people sometimes practise cultural hierarchy in a different manner than they define it (sections 1 and 2). A third possible tension, between perception and resistance (sections 2 and 3) can easily be explained with the design of the research: I encouraged people to hierarchically rank items despite their objections or ambivalent feelings, according to the perception they have of the logic that others apply. This section will reveal and explain the first and second tension.

**Practising and opposing cultural hierarchy**

The first tension to be analysed is that cultural hierarchy is often rejected by people who practise it nevertheless. They are inconsistent in the course of the interview, and often they even seem to change opinions within one sentence. Respondents – particularly the higher educated – who show such ambivalence outnumber those who confine to either a hierarchical or an egalitarian narrative. In chapter 5, I used Swidler’s (2001) theoretical framework to explain these ambivalences. She showed that people often change repertoires when trying to narrate their lives or to build an argument. They can choose from several ‘cultural repertoires’, which shows their knowledge of these repertoires. For instance, people can speak about a certain cultural taste in a highly distinctive way, until they realise that they personally know someone who has such a taste. Opinions can alter when they are personalised, particularly the presentation of such opinions in the interaction with others, in this case with an interviewer. Besides, anti-hierarchical opinions can also be interpreted in a hierarchical way after all, as chapter 4 showed. People who
emphasise egalitarianism and who object ‘high culture’ distinguish themselves from ‘snobs’ who do look down on others’ tastes. They apply moral rather than cultural criteria (cf. Lamont 1992) to classify themselves and others. They implicitly produce a new hierarchy, which ranges from ‘honest’ and ‘authentic’ individuals to people who use cultural taste for status reasons or who follow the majority.

The switch in self-presentation described above occurs even more in the instant nuances people add to their distinctive utterances, by means of downplaying remarks such as ‘I don’t mean it in a derogatory way’. They suddenly realise that the interviewer might perceive them different from the self they wish to present, or that their expressed opinion contradicts social desirability; and they must correct this at once. Such corrections mainly take place when large distinctions from people further down the ladder are at stake, as they regard it as taboo to look down on lower classes (compare the objections against high and low culture). Distinctions from people who are more proximate in the social hierarchy are much easier. When people with about the same educational level have bad taste, they can simply be blamed for their ‘individual choice’ without remorse, whereas those lower educated are not held responsible for their ‘bad’ taste.

As said, the switching between repertoires may be triggered by the sudden awareness that acquaintances have a different taste. People who work at socially diverse workplaces are more often confronted with people with ‘low’ tastes from whom they do not want to openly distinguish. Particularly in an informalised society such as the Netherlands, social exchange between people with different educational levels has become more awkward and complex, as Wouters (2007) argues. It even becomes more difficult for upwardly mobile people, when they feel they have outgrown their own relatives. On their way up, they became acquainted with new cultural tastes and they began to deviate from the tastes with which they grew up. But, unlike their equally educated friends with higher educated parents, it is hard for them to distinguish from ‘lower’ tastes, as they do not want to alienate themselves from their parents and siblings. Due to the increasing diversity of settings in which people are socialised, Lahire (2003) claims, people do not have a coherent ‘habitus’, and hence their actions and opinions are often inconsistent.

**Practising and defining cultural hierarchy**

The second tension, the different ways in which people practise and define cultural hierarchy, might be clarified with the above theoretical explanations, too, but there is more to be said. The question is how hierarchical practices in the core interview correspond with the rationale people use to describe hierarchies and rank items. People not only distinguish themselves with their ‘high cultural’ taste from people with ‘low cultural’ tastes, according to their own definitions and rankings, but they also distinguish within low (or popular)
culture. Of course, this can simply be interpreted by proposing a hierarchy within a hierarchy, as the card rankings indicate: Radiohead is positioned higher than Britney Spears. However, the deviations between taste rankings and perceived hierarchies reveal a more complex situation. People sometimes distinguish themselves with items that do not appear high in their perceived hierarchy. Also, some position classical music high in the hierarchy, but criticise others who derive status out of their love for this music.

Furthermore, they often apply different criteria. Lizardo (2008) claims, following Bourdieu, that cultural hierarchy is mainly founded on the modern logic of the autonomous art world, which emerged in the nineteenth century: the ‘pure aesthetic’ of innovation as well as authenticity. Because, in the twentieth and twenty-first century, people use the same logic to distinguish within popular culture, he argues, the domains of high and low culture lose their worth. One could conclude, though, that this should lead to ever changing hierarchies: high culture (which Bourdieu calls ‘legitimate culture’) always consists of those cultural items with which high status people distinguish themselves, valued for their formal, innovative and authentic qualities. This means that the rigid hierarchy and complexity. This way of defining high culture corresponds more with the classic logic of cultural hierarchy that I analysed in chapter 1. I argued that high culture gradually emerged as a separate domain in the course of several centuries, due to increasing demands for civilisation. A canon was being shaped of classic, highly moral and often complex culture, which was worth saving for, and transferring to, future generations. This is similar to the definition of high culture that most of my respondents give. In the nineteenth century, a competing logic appeared, by instigation of Romantic artists, who celebrated formal innovation and art for art’s sake. From this time on, both hierarchical logics were conflicting continuously, although in most people’s perception both domains of high culture seem to have merged into one homogeneous block. This still leads to confusion, when intellectuals, as quoted in the introduction, use diverging arguments to defend or to attack high culture.

People practise cultural distinction with this modern logic, across the domains of high and low culture that were shaped according to the classic logic. But, because most people still perceive high culture in terms of the old definition, their distinctive practices do not result in a new ‘high culture’. Until the nineteenth century, people’s practising and
defining of cultural hierarchy were presumably strongly related, but, since then, the
competition between logics has broken down this strict relation. This has led to confusion
on the question whether the relation between cultural hierarchy and distinction has faded
or not. I hope this dissertation will contribute to clarifying this issue.

**Differences between research groups**

The third research question dealt with the relation between the findings and people’s social
position, in other words with the differences and similarities between the groups under
scrutiny. I designed a quota sample in order to systematically compare three educational
groups (high stable, upwardly mobile, low stable) and three birth cohorts (before 1945,
1945-‘65, 1965-‘85); and in each of the nine combinations I interviewed an equal number
of men and women. As previous research already showed strong taste differences between
educational groups and birth cohorts, this section focuses on differences with regard to the
specific research questions. Of course, the presented differences are not as absolute as they
may sound. They are general tendencies, gradual variations, and – in the quantitative part
– statistically significant differences, but there is always considerable overlap between
groups. For instance, in chapter 2, I already indicated that the operationalisation of upward
mobility by means of educational level rather than occupational status causes some
difficulties, due to credential inflation. Differences between high stable and upwardly
mobile respondents are rare, except for some specific examples on ambivalences when
dealing with two different milieux.

A striking difference between higher and lower educated respondents is the degree
of details and – though a subjective criterion – sophistication in the narratives. The higher
educated are more reflexive when speaking about their and others’ tastes and about their
hierarchical perceptions than the lower educated are. Whatever I counted – explanations
for taste differences, artistic criteria, specific examples – the higher educated mentioned
significantly more than the lower educated did. On average, the interviews with them
lasted longer. This partially strengthens the other results, for instance when discussing the
use of many different criteria (a combination of both the popular and the pure aesthetic) by
the higher educated (see above), and the ‘neutral’ or ‘non-hierarchical’ narratives of some
of the lower educated.

The higher educated distinguish themselves more from others’ tastes, but they also
look up more. Hence, they more often practise cultural hierarchy, and they clearly
perceive themselves on a certain position on the ladder, which is almost never at the top.
Furthermore, many of them downplay their distinctive utterances, particularly (but not
only) upwardly mobile respondents. Hence, expressions of inferiority are more widespread
than Bourdieu suggested, who focussed on cultural distinction among the dominant class (including the ‘dominated’ cultural elite), ‘cultural goodwill’ among the middle class, and feelings of inferiority among the working class. The lower educated, on the other hand, more often express themselves in an anti-hierarchical, egalitarian or individualist way. This implies that Bourdieu’s idea on the acceptance of an inferior position by people from lower strata, which contributes to the legitimation and reproduction of cultural hierarchy, must be rejected. Most of them indeed perceive a cultural hierarchy when asked, but often they do not agree with it. Some of them do not speak in hierarchical terms, not even to resist it, but remain neutral when discussing their own and others’ tastes.

The interplay of educational level and age comes to the fore best in the card ranking assignment. The musical hierarchy that most people perceive corresponds closely with the mean taste ranking of older, higher educated respondents. In contrast, the tastes of younger, lower educated respondents are more or less the opposite of this hierarchy, which they do recognise. This implies that cultural hierarchy as perceived by people not only resembles social hierarchy, but that it also represents the preferences of an older generation. This can mean two things. First, age itself can contribute to the perception of social hierarchy: older people, who have on average higher occupational positions and higher incomes, are more often perceived as part of ‘the elite’ than younger people with the same educational level, and hence their taste is perceived as higher culture. Second, it can imply that high culture is perceived as classic culture, which has survived the ages, and which is ‘coincidentally’ preferred by this group. This second interpretation is validated by the minute analysis of people’s definitions, in which classic criteria outnumber modern ones. Either way, it would be interesting to wait and see how hierarchical perceptions might change in the future, when newer generations, with tastes in popular culture and jazz, will have grown older (see also the suggestions for further research below). Younger people already perceive ‘classic’ rock bands and chansonniers as higher in the hierarchy than older people do.

Differences between birth cohorts as such are mainly found in the quantitative study on musical tastes: classical music lovers are older than fans of contemporary pop/rock acts. Other significant age differences can be found in the application of some specific artistic criteria, but these differences can partially be explained with the specific use of certain criteria (adjectives such as ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’) within popular culture. In the qualitative study on hierarchical practices and opinions, however, generational differences are weaker; when quantifying certain quotes and codes, these differences are not significant. There is a slight tendency towards egalitarianism among younger generations: younger people more often refuse to look up to others and they more often resist hierarchical concepts such as ‘high culture’. On the other hand, younger people tend to look down on others more than older people do. Therefore, we must be careful with interpreting these small differences as increasing egalitarianism.
Conclusion

Gender does not play an important role, neither in the quantitative study nor in the qualitative one. Only three items in the card ranking showed significant differences between men and women, but I could not provide a logical explanation. Similarly, there is no explanation why women used two artistic criteria significantly more than men did (personal motives and craftsmanship). Men tend to look down on others more often and women tend to look up to others more often (which does not necessarily mean that they speak about each other), and women are a little more ambivalent on cultural hierarchy than men are. But again, these differences are small.

Finally, it is interesting to reflect on people’s own perceptions of taste differences, as discussed in chapter 6. This showed that many people explain tastes with socially stratified characteristics. People apply several alternative indicators of social class, such as educational level, occupation and intelligence. Furthermore, they explain class and educational differences by reflecting on their own and others’ parental upbringing and – to a lesser extent – art lessons at school. Those who were not brought up with ‘culture’ or who did not learn it at school, often do not like it themselves. This logic is recognised by many who did not receive this ‘from home’ or at school. Hence, many are familiar with the logic of the importance of parental upbringing, linked to social milieu, to become acquainted with and to enjoy art or classical music. With regard to age, taste differences between birth cohorts are recognised, too, but these are complemented with perceptions of age differences as such: several people think that a preference for ‘high culture’, particularly classical music, will increase when growing older. However, I only found a minority of respondents who indeed claimed to have ‘discovered’ classical music at a later age. Gender differences are also reflected on, but particularly within the lower strata of society: people tend to look down on strongly gendered tastes.

Discussion and suggestions for further research

Limitations of this research

This study knows several limitations, which could be countered in future research. First, although the carefully designed quota sample enabled me to compare certain groups and to bring to light some significant phenomena, the lower educated were severely underrepresented. Not only because they consisted of no more than one third of the sample, but also because (middle-aged and older) manual workers more often refused to be interviewed than the lower educated who were upwardly mobile, as defined by occupational status. With a random sample from the Dutch population and less selective non-response, I would probably have found more clearly egalitarian attitudes as well as
more ‘neutral’ respondents, and less consensus on hierarchical rankings. Future research should be more deeply involved into the cultural attitudes and hierarchical perceptions of these lower educated, who have often been underrepresented or even overlooked in previous research.

In order to better grasp the exact, and perhaps contradictory, hierarchical perceptions, definitions and classifications that are salient in the cultural field, it would be interesting to focus on cultural professionals, such as artists and cultural intermediaries (reviewers, publishers, curators). Their opinions matter more than the opinions of ‘ordinary’ people, and they shape (and are shaped by) the particular field. Furthermore, they have probably thought about the topic before and might express themselves more eloquently. A hypothesis would be that professionals more often apply the modern logic to their hierarchical classifications, which would imply that they perceive high culture as more innovative and authentic than non-professionals do, and that their hierarchical practices and perceptions are more similar. Another possibility would be complete rejection of cultural hierarchy.

Furthermore, although the broadness of discussed cultural fields helped me explore the potential similarities and differences between fields with regard to hierarchical perceptions and artistic criteria, this breadth of scope limited the depth of the interviews. Thanks to the large number of respondents, I was able to give an in-depth account of people’s practices and perceptions, but on an individual level many lacunae appeared. I sometimes skipped questions or neglected to ask for people’s motives on rankings, in order to prevent fatigue, which later hindered me in the precision of the analysis. I could have gained more depth if I had discussed fewer cultural fields and spent less time on biographical information. Future research could be restricted to only a few cultural fields in order to really grasp the hierarchical perceptions within such fields. An interesting field to be included would be literature. There are many sociological studies on subjects such as reading habits (e.g., Knulst & Kraaykamp 1998; Zavisca 2005), literary prestige (e.g., Verboord 2003) and publishers’ decisions (e.g., Franssen & Kuipers 2013), as there are debates in the literary world on cultural hierarchy within the field (cf. Vaessens 2009), but sociologists have ignored readers’ hierarchical perceptions and opinions.

Finally, as my research gives a snapshot in time of the practices and perceptions of a part of the Dutch population (in particular the province of North-Holland), comparative and longitudinal research designs are highly recommended. My findings deviate from Bourdieu’s theory in several ways and also downplay some of the claims on cultural omnivores, but it is hard to find out to what extent these deviations stem from differences in time and space, and to what extent from the specific research. Therefore, this research could be repeated in a similar way in several other countries in which social hierarchy in general is differently perceived. A second, but far more difficult and costly, expansion is research over a longer time period. As I was the first to specifically study hierarchical
perceptions and opinions, I do not know for sure whether something has actually changed over the past decades. A few respondents hinted at *perceived* changes, which also can be explained with some changes in society (the rise of popular culture, upward mobility, informalisation, and so on), but the *actual* change in hierarchical perceptions has not been researched. How will people rank items in twenty years from now? Will classical music still be on top, based on seniority and elite preferences, or is it replaced by more innovative genres within jazz and popular music, as some younger respondents already did? And, will distinctive practices have become even more awkward, and more restricted towards allegedly individual choices?

**The relative role of cultural taste in hierarchical practices: Some afterthoughts**

What does the conclusion – many people resist, or are ambivalent about, cultural distinction, while at the same time practising and perceiving cultural hierarchy and being able to define it – mean for practices, perceptions and valuations of social stratification in general? Which role does cultural taste play in this stratification, compared to people’s other characteristics and choices?

This study shows that many people feel uncomfortable with social hierarchy. They have egalitarian ideals and do not wish to speak in terms of social class, but this does not correspond with social reality as they perceive it (cf. Van Eijk 2013). They believe that everyone should be equal, or at least should be treated as equal, but they nevertheless often look down on (and up to) others. Contacts with people of other backgrounds have become more informal than a few decades ago, which causes embarrassment when people still feel superior. This results in ambivalent phrasings and downplaying remarks during interviews. At the same time, the *number* of contacts with people from different backgrounds seem to have decreased: people seem to live more and more in separate worlds, each existing of people with a more or less similar lifestyle, class background or educational level (cf. Prieur & Savage 2013; Kuipers 2010). They meet people from other groups only occasionally or on a more professional basis, and they probably gain their (distorted?) knowledge about these other groups mainly via the media.

The question we have to ask is which characteristics of people are the objects of distinction and which characteristics are not. To what extent does cultural taste play a role in these hierarchical practices? Because of the focus of this particular research, and of many other cultural sociological studies, cultural taste and practices seem to play a significant role, but other practices and opinions of people have been ignored. However, one needs only to follow the media to know that many openly look down on others’ political viewpoints, manners, bad health or use of language, to name just a few. This counts in particular for the characteristics of lower-class people, who are looked down on
because of gross behaviour, populist voting, physical appearance, and so on. Moreover, among the higher educated, this looking down on lower classes seems to be more \textit{bon ton} than looking down on, for instance, other ethnicities.\footnote{However, Bennett et al. (2009: 211) claim that mainly ‘respectable’ working-class people, rather than middle and upper-class people or the higher educated, look down on these ‘chavs’.} It explains why ‘classism’ is seen as a much smaller problem (and also why the term itself is less known as well as less studied\footnote{General literature on ‘classism’, particularly on ‘classist’ attitudes, is scarce. See Barone (1999) for a discussion on this omission.}) than equivalents such as racism and sexism, of which people from the lower classes are often accused by people from the higher classes.

This study gives some clues for a possible solution. When cultural taste is at stake, many people do not wish to distinguish openly – and many others immediately downplay the distinctions they do express – from people who they believe cannot be accounted for their ‘bad taste’. As chapter 6 showed, people explain their own and others’ taste to a large degree with parental background: one must have learned certain cultural tastes (‘high culture’, such as classical music) from a young age on in order to be able to enjoy it. Conversely, they associate other tastes with people from lower class backgrounds, although they try to avoid speaking in terms of class. Distinctions from people closer on the social ladder (or at an equal position) who have ‘bad’ tastes are easier made and downplayed less. These tastes are perceived as individual choices, in line with notions of an individualising society, and can be criticised more easily.

Hence, distinctive practices seem related to the perception people have of the role of individual choice, or agency, as compared to structural constraints. Chapter 5 showed that moral judgements, for instance against snobbish elites, are more easily made (cf. Lamont 1992; 2000), possibly because immoral behaviour is perceived as more agentic and less structurally constrained (cf. Van Eijk 2013). What complicates things, though, is the ambiguous role of meritocratic notions in this explanation. People increasingly explain social inequality with individual merits: people who are capable of following a high educational level and of occupying prestigious professions thank their high status (and high income) to their own efforts, it is thought. Conversely, people with a low status can be blamed for their lack of efforts.\footnote{Although Young (1958), who coined the term ‘meritocracy’, defined merits as a combination of capabilities and efforts, people often focus on the latter when distinguishing from others.} However, although many respondents use educational level, a more meritocratic concept, in order to avoid speaking in terms of class, they nevertheless believe parental upbringing to be the most important source for acquiring a certain cultural taste. Furthermore, another alternative that some people use for class is intelligence, which, as a basis for educational level, is often perceived as an innate characteristic, and hence not as agentic either.

Therefore, it remains an open question why class differences in cultural taste are often perceived as caused by external influences (mainly the family), whereas differences
Conclusion

in political opinions and manners seem to be perceived as caused by individual choice. Or are they? Perhaps other factors play a more important role in social distinction, such as the importance people attach to the actual societal consequences of different characteristics: both voting behaviour and manners seem to matter more than cultural taste does. Another possibility might be that people in interviews often downplay distinctions on whichever topic, because they do not want to present themselves as arrogant or elitist, whereas the (social) media – one of my sources for the distinctions on voting behaviour, manners, and so on – represent a strong bias towards harsh opinions, including on cultural taste.

Further specific and perhaps comparative research on people’s perceptions of, and opinions on, others’ political viewpoints, moral behaviour, language use, and so on, is needed in order to gain a more thorough insight into the relation between the role people attribute to agency versus structure on the one hand and their distinctive behaviour on the other. In line with Lamont’s (1992; 2000) studies on the cultural, economic and moral boundaries that people apply to judge others, such a study could make more clear which role cultural taste and lifestyle play in relation to other attributed characteristics of people in their hierarchical practices, perceptions and opinions.