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The Aesthetics of Work-Readiness: Aesthetic Judgements and Pedagogies for Conditional Welfare and Post-Fordist Labour Markets

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Abstract

Recent legislation in the Netherlands takes conditional welfare to a new level. Local welfare offices can now give benefit sanctions to welfare clients that ‘obstruct employment’ by their appearance. Through a qualitative and ethnographic study of aesthetic evaluation practices in Dutch welfare offices it is argued that: (1) an everyday aesthetic labour is pivotal in post-Fordist labour markets; (2) in times of precarization, this is so for unemployed as well as formally employed populations; (3) welfare clients are expected to give an aesthetic performance of work-readiness and adaptability; and (4) case managers use aesthetics as a pedagogy to achieve this readiness and adaptability. Aesthetic labour, it is then argued, is best conceptualized as a continuous, everyday, backstage labour for labour: a daily calibration for work contexts in flux.

Keywords

aesthetic labour, conditional welfare, pedagogies, policy implementation, post-Fordism, precarization, responsabilization

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Aesthetic judgements for conditional welfare

Should a person wearing flip-flops to a job interview for the position of desk-clerk receive a welfare benefit sanction? Should the unemployed be advised on their smell? How to deal with facial tattoos or burqas? These questions are part of the everyday practices of Dutch street-level bureaucrats¹ responsible for implementing welfare policy. Recent legislation in the Netherlands takes conditional welfare to a new level. In an unprecedented move, aesthetic performances are made an explicit condition for the right to welfare. In the new Dutch Participation Act, effective from January 2015, welfare clients² are required not to 'obstruct employment by appearance' (Article 18, section 4). The street-level bureaucrats responsible for implementing this, or case managers (the emic term), therefore make aesthetic judgements in their assessment of welfare deservingness. In this article, this legislation and its implementation in Dutch welfare offices is explored as a case of the often underestimated importance of aesthetics in contemporary precarious labour markets. If aesthetics have become a legal prerequisite for retaining welfare rights, the questions that are addressed in this article are: (1) just what performances grant this right; and (2) what does this tell us more generally about the politics of aesthetic performances for post-Fordist labour markets?

The Dutch Participation Act fits in an international trend towards more conditional forms of welfare provision. In the Netherlands, as well as in many other European countries, the welfare state has been drastically reformed since the 1980s. These changes are often described as a development 'from welfare to workfare' (see Kenworthy, 2010; Lødemel and Trickey, 2001; Peck, 2001). Welfare benefits are seen as temporarily bridging the gap between one paid job to another and are conditional on participation in welfare programmes and the perceived effort welfare clients make to find paid employment as soon as possible and to the best of their abilities. Consequently, the right to benefits has to be 'earned' (Van Houdt et al., 2011; compare Dwyer, 2008 for the UK context).

One of the characteristics of contemporary policy schemes for unemployed populations is their focus on what is often called 'activation' (Adkins, 2012; Clarke, 2005; Newman and Tonkens, 2011). Problematizing the 'inactivity' of some populations (Van den Berg, 2016a), 'activation' has become a widely used phrase in labour market policy throughout Europe. Although the dominant conception of 'activity' in most welfare states is involvement in paid labour (Clarke, 2005), the 'activation' of the unemployed can mean many things, ranging from physical exercise to following courses or doing mandatory voluntary work (Clarke, 2005; Kampen et al., 2013). Adkins (2012) therefore argues that the materiality of unemployment has changed quite radically. Instead of a period of inactivity, for many unemployment has become part of 'a continuum of productive moments' (Adkins, 2012: 622). Unemployment involves work, or is in any case eventful. Meetings, mandatory volunteering, job coaching – the unemployed are hardly 'doing nothing' in times of workfare. Employment and unemployment, therefore, are more alike in this economy. Many now move in and out of paid employment, moving from job to job or 'gig' to 'gig', even when more durably outside of paid employment. A typical week is thus filled with mandatory activities that are oriented towards paid work and the formal labour market. This article sets out to show how the work that is expected from the unemployed involves *aesthetic labour*. Our case of Dutch conditional welfare

shows expectations of backstage labour to be performed by the unemployed, often in the hope (either on the part of the case manager or the unemployed themselves) of entering precarious jobs. It builds on the argument made by Adkins (2012: 622) that unemployment is 'an important site for the theorization of post-Fordist labour'.

This article is based on a qualitative and ethnographic study of the implementation of Article 18, section 4 of the Dutch Participation Act. Qualitative interviews with 18 case managers of three Dutch municipalities were conducted in 2015 and observational data were collected in 2016 during a four-month ethnographic study at one of those municipalities. In these field sites, the ubiquitous discursive category of '*representatief*' is used by Dutch case managers to describe an appropriate performance by welfare clients. '*Representatief*' can perhaps best be translated into English as 'presentable'. Reminiscent of the category 'respectable' in the British context (the dominant category in Skeggs' (1997) 'Formations of Class and Gender'), the category 'presentable' differentiates the unemployed who are deemed employable from those deemed pathological (compare Skeggs, 1997: 13). The term 'presentable' in welfare offices first operates as a negative, as a way to pathologize that which is not 'presentable': the slouching, the scarcely dressed, the smelling. Second, it is taken to mean a performance of 'active' work-readiness as part of a continuous calibration of the self in potential work contexts. The stress on aesthetics in welfare offices' activation, moreover, also works as a pedagogy: it is partly through aesthetics that work-readiness more broadly is achieved.

This study is not the first to scrutinize encounters between citizens and the state in the context of welfare (see, for example, Dubois, 2010; Korteweg, 2006; Schram et al., 2010). It is, however, relatively rare for those studies to analyse aesthetic judgements. In Gatta's (2014) study of the public workforce system in the USA, dress advice in the context of job coaching (and the anger and humiliation felt by participating women) is briefly mentioned, but not the focus. Other research briefly addresses dress advice as an example of ritualized practices of case managers in which the advice given does not necessarily correspond with what is actually requested from employees in lower wage labour markets (Brodkin, 2015; Marchevsky and Theoharis, 2008). Nickson et al. (2003) are perhaps the exception because they do focus on the aesthetic training of what they term the 'excluded'. Their study, however, focuses on how to go about addressing an aesthetic 'skills deficit' among the 'unemployed'.

This article proposes a different perspective by looking at the aesthetic evaluation and pedagogic practices employed by welfare case managers and their conceptualizations of appropriate aesthetics. The aim is therefore not to judge the aesthetic performances of welfare clients, but to study the way case managers do so. It aims to understand the new Dutch formal obligation to perform a *continuous* 'aesthetic labour' in the context of aestheticization of labour in post-Fordism, precarization and activation.

Aesthetic labour, precarization and activation

One important aspect of the post-Fordist organization of economic life is the surge in service sector employment. Throughout western welfare states, the majority of workers today work in (interactive) service sector jobs. Much contemporary work and especially interactive service work requires characteristics *in work* which are usually thought of as

personal or private (Leidner, 1991; McDowell, 2009; Wellington and Bryson, 2001). Famously, the flight attendants in Hochschild's *The Managed Heart* (1983) sold their smiles as part of their service in interactions with clients; they performed both emotional and aesthetic labour. Coined by Warhurst et al. (2000: 1), 'aesthetic' labour is often conceptualized as 'a supply of embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment'. In the Glasgow service industry, Warhurst et al. (2000) observed that employers hired personnel in large part because of certain aesthetic preferences and the conviction that a staff member who 'looks good' and 'sounds right' (compare Williams and Connell, 2010), or would otherwise fit their brand, would create more revenue. This perspective has led to a host of studies focusing on such embodied characteristics and their impact on hiring procedures and employability, such as tattoos (Timming, 2015), accents (Nath, 2011), stammering (Butler, 2014) and 'aesthetic literacy' (Sheane, 2012: 145).

Warhurst et al.'s (2000) conceptualization focuses on the 'point of entry' into a job or labour market position. This article builds on this literature but shifts its focus towards the continuous, day-to-day 'backstage' work (see Goffman, 1959) that goes into 'looking right' (and the expectation of case managers that welfare clients perform such labour). Whoever is hired for their looks needs to maintain these looks and continuously stay up to date in order to secure a 'fit' between their look and work, with the purpose of remaining employable in this economy. For most workers, therefore, exercise, dress and make-up are part of a continuous labour for labour. Such continuous labour is also required from welfare clients as part of a performance of flexibility, employability and a display of a desire for paid labour. This is characteristic of post-Fordism: not only are aesthetics important in new ways in post-Fordism (when compared to Fordism) because of the surge in interactive service labour, but post-Fordist labour is also often much more precarious and discontinuous and therefore necessitates this continuous calibration. At the height of Fordism and Keynesian welfare politics, full and lifetime employment in unionized jobs with family wages were not only explicit political goals, but also the reality for the majority of men, at least in Western Europe. By contrast, precarity, as Lorey (2015) pointedly puts it, is the norm in post-Fordism: insecure, discontinuous labour and the concomitant adaptation to work-contexts in flux has become a primary concern for workers and, as this article will show, the unemployed.

The aim of this article is to shift the focus in our understanding of aesthetic labour from paid labour and employment to *aesthetic labour for unemployment and as part of activation to find jobs* in what Standing (2008) terms the 'precarariat'. In much research on aesthetic labour, the focus is on (middle-class) performances for paid work, for example on career women in positions of power (Rucker et al., 1999), on image consultancy for professionals (Wellington and Bryson, 2001), on the modelling industry (Holla, 2015; Mears, 2011) or on interactive service work in urban economies (Sheane, 2012; Timming, 2015; Warhurst et al., 2000). This article argues that aesthetic performance is an increasingly important part of labour in low-wage interactive service jobs like it is in other, frequently better paid and more stable sectors. Standardizations of the presentation of self for work such as uniforms (an aesthetic symbol of Fordist times) are becoming less prevalent and, consequently, aesthetic labour in post-Fordism is becoming more ambiguous and fraught with uncertainty, especially in precarious labour markets.

Welfare clients in the Netherlands often move in and out of welfare and precarious jobs. Temporary, discontinuous, badly paid and highly insecure employment is often all that case managers have to offer clients: call-centre work; maintenance jobs; and hospitality positions. These types of employment are considered typical of work in the precariat (Standing, 2008) or even typical for a new class altogether (e.g. in Savage et al.'s (2013) classification of class in the UK; see Skeggs (2015) for a discussion). Unemployment and employment in post-Fordist conditions, at any rate, are usually stages in a continuous situation of precarity (compare Adkins, 2012; and Lorey, 2015 for this focus on continuity). Lorey (2015) writes of precarization as a mode of government that destabilizes employment and destabilizes life itself. It includes ideas of freedom and self-determination in subjectivation: the idea that the most private self and work should align. The focus on autonomy in work and the idea of work as a project of the self has become much more widespread today and is not only expected from professionals and artists (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Consequently, much 'activation' focuses on the self as a project in which individuals are coached to 'invest' and which they can then 'market'. Those in activation programmes, therefore, are called upon to mobilize aspects of their self that are usually thought of as private: their desires, caring nature or risk-taking character for instance. In the activation programmes studied for this article, assignments involve emotional soul-searching and therapeutic work to discover a 'true talent' or 'dream'. As shall be shown in the analysis below, this mobilization of the most private aspects of life for work contexts also translated into calls for aesthetic investments and a continuous aesthetic labour. Precarization does not only touch those in the precariat and indeed, many who consider themselves middle class now have to deal with similar insecurities, including aesthetic insecurities. This article, however, focuses on the unemployed that move in and out of what can be termed precarious 'bottom-end' jobs.

Aesthetic judgements in welfare offices are not new. In fact, especially in the Netherlands, there is a long history of civilizing offensives, particularly in the context of the welfare state (Van den Berg, 2016b; Van den Berg and Duyvendak, 2012). Disciplining the poor and working classes to be clean and proper and holding that as a condition for help can in fact be considered part and parcel of paternalism (Van den Berg, 2016b). What is different in the context of post-Fordism and the current situation created by the Participation Act is that aesthetic labour in unemployment is not just appearing clean and decent (though it most certainly is too), but entails participating in a continuous calibration of aesthetic appearances to ever-changing and insecure work contexts. Moreover, on an emic level, what is different in the situation created by the Participation Act for individual case managers in the Netherlands when compared to before is that the act gives them 'a stick to beat with', as they put it. In other words: the explicit mention of appearance in the Dutch law offers case managers an instrument for interactions with clients.

Case and methods

The Participation Act is the result of an ongoing discussion about what can be demanded from welfare clients to maximize their chances of reintegration into the labour market (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2014) and can be seen as a culmination of the activating welfare state. Organizing basic welfare and income support, this 2015

law stipulates that an appropriate appearance is now an obligation for welfare clients. To be precise, the law states that it is prohibited for those in welfare to ‘obstruct employment by dress or personal care’ (Article 18, section 4). Welfare offices can now apply benefit-sanctions of up to a couple of hundred Euros per month for possibly several months, to welfare clients who ‘obstruct’ employment by their appearance. While addressing ‘problematic’ appearances was already part of their jobs, the ability to give benefit-sanctions based on appearances means that case managers are arguably more involved in making aesthetic judgements than before. Such evaluation practices are mostly implicit, but produce very tangible effects for those under scrutiny. Moreover, this formal institutionalization of individual responsibility in conjunction with aesthetic norms is unique in the history of welfare provision in the Netherlands.

Methods

This article is based on interview and observation data that are part of a larger research project on aesthetic labour as well as a larger ethnographic project on normative dimensions of the daily practices of case managers in Dutch municipalities in the context of the new Participation Act. For this study case managers were selected that work with welfare clients that are so-called ‘job-ready’ as opposed to those who are considered to be ‘not-yet-job-ready’ due to mental, physical or social limitations, severe financial problems or a lack of (recent) employment history. This means that, at entry in the welfare office, ‘job-ready’ welfare clients are considered to be able to re-integrate into the labour market within the foreseeable future. Labour market activation and responsabilization are most prevalent in welfare office departments where this group is attended to, since they are perceived as healthy members of the labour force who are, more than others, expected to independently provide for themselves through paid employment. In total, 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with case managers from three municipalities in 2015. Additionally, daily practices were observed at one of the municipalities from January until May 2016. The data collection focused on the practical translations of the Participation Act, aesthetics and unemployment, as well as day-to-day interactions of case managers among each other and with their clients.

Local governments in the Netherlands are relatively autonomous to implement welfare policy in accordance with their own political views and purposes. The municipalities were, therefore, selected to maximize variation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). They differ in policy objectives, number of welfare applicants, exit rates, budget and time pressure. These constraining characteristics can be expected to influence case managers’ evaluations of welfare clients (compare Lipsky, 2010 [1980]). The cases enable in-depth research while highlighting broader characteristics and contributing to theoretical perspectives on aesthetic evaluation for conditional welfare. At the municipality that was selected for additional observation, the importance of aesthetics for welfare clients became especially salient during interviews with case managers. This municipality is an ‘extreme case’ of workfare policy (Flyvbjerg, 2006). It has one of the largest numbers of welfare applicants relative to the number of inhabitants (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016) and is known to enforce relatively stringent welfare arrangements. Strict rules apply and welfare clients frequently have to attend mandatory activities with a strong focus on finding paid employment as soon as possible.

The primary object of the interviews was to grasp case managers' experiences, perceptions, opinions, judgements and actions with regard and in response to aesthetic performances of welfare clients. Additionally, case managers were asked which options they have at their disposal when client non-compliance is apparent to them, as well as concrete examples of situations when this occurred and what action they took. Case managers were specifically asked whether they have ever financially sanctioned clients due to what they judged to be inappropriate appearances. Case managers were also asked whether clients' 'inappropriate' appearances can be altered and whether this is deemed to be desirable. Lastly, they were asked whether the Participation Act had influenced their daily practices with regard to aesthetic presentations of welfare clients and why they think aesthetics have been explicitly included in the act.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed through a combination of conventional and directed content analysis. Some categories were defined before data analysis, drawn from literature on activating welfare and aesthetics, while other categories were derived from data during the analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

To study the actual translations of the Participation Act into daily practices, participant observation was conducted for 41 days over a period of more than four months at one of the three welfare offices, where one of the researchers was present for two or three days a week. Approximately 70 formal interactions between case managers among each other and with their superiors (in team meetings), as well as with welfare clients (during the general information meeting, workshops and scheduled individual conversations) were observed. All observations were recorded in extensive field notes. To ensure the privacy of the respondents and informants, the data are anonymized by leaving out their names as well as characteristics that might enable acquainted readers to trace the data back to specific individuals.

'Presentable': The proper aesthetic performance

The term most often used by case managers to describe what aesthetic performance they look for in clients is 'presentable' (*'representatief'* in Dutch). Almost all the respondents talked of the need for clients to dress 'presentable' when going on a job interview or even of their own practice of dressing 'presentable' for their job and interaction with welfare clients. 'Presentable' proved to be a rather vague category: when pressed to make explicit what 'presentable' means exactly, many were unable to respond adequately. In practice though (as observed in the ethnographic research), the category 'presentable' worked, first, as a negative: to point out what was *not* appropriate and *not* 'presentable'. Therefore, what became very clear in the interviews was that certain very concrete aesthetic performances (and material objects) were on the wrong side of this non-presentable/presentable dichotomy. In the following, these meanings of 'presentable' and 'non-presentable' are first investigated based on interview data. Second, the ethnographic data show the actual practices in the welfare offices and offer the opportunity to further develop a perspective on how 'presentability' is taken to mean a performance of 'active' work-readiness. For case managers, the 'right' aesthetic labour pointed towards the required flexibility and subjectivity for labour more widely. 'Looking right', in short, did not just involve neat shoes and ironed shirts, but an aptitude for and proven capability of continuous change and adaptability.

The non-presentable: Pathologies

While class was never explicitly mentioned, specific class and gendered aesthetic performances were mentioned to be on the ‘wrong’ side of ‘presentable’. As van Eijk (2012) has argued, class in the Netherlands often operates as a latent category: not explicitly addressed yet important. Unlike in the UK context, therefore, both case managers and clients are unlikely to explicitly identify as working or middle class. Nonetheless, the pathologizing way in which case managers talked of non-presentable aesthetic performances shows remarkable resemblance to familiar repertoires of middle-class disgust at the aesthetic performances of those in the working class (Lawler, 2005). Three salient examples of the ‘non-presentable’ are dealt with here: flip-flops; cleavage; and smell. These were notably not the only examples given in the interviews, but they were selected because they were given often and by many respondents. Moreover, they can stand as qualitative examples for an argument that was applied to various other aesthetic appearances which were potential grounds for welfare penalties.

For the case managers, wearing flip-flops was an obvious example of not looking presentable. In the interviews, it was the first example used of legitimate grounds for a financial penalty. Flip-flops were often spontaneously brought up in the series of interviews and in several cases even the brand Adidas was frequently mentioned, for example in this excerpt:

- CM: Oh, you know, the standard stuff, like men coming in with Adidas sports flip-flops (...)
- I: So why are flip-flops inappropriate?
- CM: Well, (...) that depends, I guess, on what kind of flip-flops. I’m wearing sandals myself now (the interview was done on a hot day in June). So I bought these, with open toes and I guess some of my colleagues think that this doesn’t ‘go’ either. But... sometimes you have these flip-flops that are more like sandals, you know? That’s a different category. Then I think it is a little more dressed, but maybe it is still inappropriate. But Adidas flip-flops: no. They belong on a poolside, at home or on the beach. That is just very obvious like: ‘Hey, there’s a line there!’ (...) So it is important that it’s presentable somehow.

Adidas flip-flops, for this case manager, are associated with the typical leisure activities of swimming and sports. Crossing the boundary (‘Hey, there’s a line there!’) can result in serious repercussions, ranging from (more or less obligatory) dress coaching to financial penalties implemented by case managers.

A second recurring concern of case managers was the showing of skin. This was most often voiced with direct reference to women. For them especially, it seemed, showing skin was non-presentable. To quote one (female) case manager:

Just too naked (*bloot* in Dutch). Sometimes you see a photo on a CV and you see too much of a woman’s cleavage. Then, in interaction with the client, I try to show her: ‘Look, do you see the difference between when I put my hand over your cleavage in the photo and when you can see the cleavage? This is how you learn how you come across.’ (...) It maybe shouldn’t be like

this, you know, but I try to make women conscious of that, you know, men, you know, you just dress very revealingly and they try to look away and it does have an impact...

Very clearly gendered, this quote reveals that an excess of femininity or skin is non-presentable. Moreover, there is a clear pedagogy at work here ('This is how you learn'): this case manager strives to teach women to show less skin by showing them on their own picture what that would look like.

On the other side of the masculine–feminine binary, the third concrete example of non-presentable performances was smell, or, in the words of one respondent: 'clients that smell of poverty'. Much more linked to 'pathological masculinities', smell came up frequently in the interviews: 'Mostly, these are people that are alone, single. And usually they are men. Women take care of themselves more. But a single man, middle-aged: no one warns him!' In the eyes of the case managers, 'being presentable' involves 'not smelling bad'. The wrong smell could, in their view, 'obstruct employment' (to refer to the phrasing in the Participation Act).

These examples show that 'being presentable' involves *not* wearing flip flops, *not* showing too much skin and *not* smelling bad. The category 'presentable' here works as a negative: as a set of ideas of what not to do. These judgements are more than a simple evaluation of looks: they constitute a *moral* judgement (compare Lawler, 2005). The inadequacy is interpreted as a deep set of wrong preferences and knowledge that presents itself aesthetically in the welfare office, but is indicative of wrong ways of being and doing more generally: 'An assumed ignorance and immorality is read off from an aesthetic which is constituted as faulty' (Lawler, 2005: 437). This is why certain welfare clients are deemed unfit for work: the way they *look* symbolizes a whole range of other things wrong with them.

Furthermore, these examples show that what becomes seen as a problem in aesthetic performances for labour is the body's materiality itself. There are clear gendered and class meanings here. Both women and the working classes, or the precariat, have often been depicted as being too material (Lawler, 2005). This *surplus* of materiality is then often presented to indicate a deeper, underlying pathology. This was a recurring response of the case managers when they talked about smell especially, but also when talking about showing too much skin. Then they would refer to someone's financial problems, loneliness or, ultimately, psychiatric illness as underlying causes. This analysis, therefore, shows important continuities in the narratives of case managers with the abovementioned historical civilizing offensives and disciplining welfare states in Fordism. What is different in post-Fordism, though, is the interpretation of aesthetics as a performance of activity and adaptability.

Under post-Fordism, welfare is restructured through activation which pressurizes welfare clients to (aesthetically) present themselves as *active* job-seekers instead of rights bearers. Importantly, they have to continuously adapt this active presentation in order for it to be in accordance with the work-situation at hand. In the interviews, when the category of 'presentable' became positive – a description of 'dos' – it referred to a performance of adaptability and activity. Focusing on this theme of adaptability, the following excerpt is important (though this theme generally came up much more clearly in the ethnographic data explored below). Here, a case manager explains why wearing a

three-piece suit can be inappropriate in certain settings and therefore a potential basis for a welfare sanction. What is important here is the stress on the ability to read a situation and adapt an aesthetic performance accordingly:

- CM: I did sanction someone last year because (...) he (wanted) to work in the asbestos (removal). (...) Well, fine. A colleague of mine was responsible for the recruitment and selection and had discussed with him and a group of others to wear decent but relaxed clothing. This man showed up in a three-piece suit. So they really thought: 'what are you doing?' (...) They sent him away.
- I: Really?
- CM: Yes.
- I: That was considered to be so inappropriate that...
- CM: Yes, but look, this was just not the idea. You have to look good, but you're not supposed to... you're not applying for an office job. You are going to do construction work, that is very dirty and dangerous.
- I: But maybe he thought 'I will make a special effort for that interview'.
- CM: Well, he was told to, yep... I don't actually remember whether I really sanctioned him for it. I don't actually remember.

Interestingly, in the ethnographic observations 'presentable' as a category of active performances of work-readiness and adaptability (as opposed to 'not presentable' as a pathology) was a much more prevalent theme. Moreover, it is in these ethnographic observations that aesthetic pedagogies come into clearer view.

Presentability: Aesthetics as a pedagogy of work-readiness and adaptability

In addition to the interview data, one of the researchers conducted ethnographic research at the welfare office in Rotterdam. This welfare office employed about 30 case managers and was one of several services that the municipality of Rotterdam offers welfare clients. Upon entrance into welfare, clients who were deemed 'able to work' were directed towards this service. Participation was obligatory and entailed attending two group workshops per week, each lasting three hours, and also homework as well as paid work for at least eight hours a week. If clients were not able to find this number of hours in paid employment, they had to perform (unpaid) work for eight hours a week at a contracted employer. The workshops and accompanying homework were focused on developing 'employment skills'. Improving one's personal appearance was a recurring topic in these workshops.

On their first day of the programme, welfare clients had to attend the general information meeting. The objective was to inform new clients about what was expected of them. Clients were told that looking for paid employment is like having a job. This includes aesthetic requirements, as one case manager formulated it:

We are hoping you will display the behaviour and attitude you would display at an employer. Also with regard to clothing (...) that you present and dress yourself in such a way that you are always ready to have a job interview.

In addition to this, welfare clients were invited to participate in dress workshops (provided by *Dress for Success*, a local foundation) for welfare clients in order to inform, advise and help them to look 'presentable'. While participating in the re-integration programme, welfare clients were continuously coached to behave the way they would in their workplace. This explicitly included personal care and dress and was formalized into a kind of contract that was called 'working agreement' which stated the following: 'We expect you to look decent and well-groomed (*'netjes en verzorgd'* in Dutch). During the programme you will not wear a cap, overcoat or sportswear. You will not wear a headphone and/or earphones either.' In some cases, indeed, clients were asked to take off their cap, overcoat or headphones. Most case managers addressed welfare clients who were wearing sportswear by saying that it is not allowed and should not happen again. At one time, a case manager sent a welfare client home in order to change his clothing and come back right after. The immediate pedagogy at work here is correction and it is relatively punitive: clients are always at risk of losing their benefits if they do not comply.

After the general information meeting, clients were assigned to a group and a specific case manager. The case manager would repeat what was expected of participants in an individual meeting once they started participating in the workshops. As one case manager told his new client in such an event:

What we are actually saying is that this programme is like having a job. You don't have to wear a business suit, but you shouldn't wear a tracksuit either. We have vacancy finders (job hunters in Dutch) walking around here. They are like employers and they say: 'I won't talk to people who look horrendous.'

Other case managers also referred to the vacancy finders, who were in fact their colleagues and employed by the municipality as part of the re-integration programme. It was their job to contact employers and find vacancies for which the welfare clients could apply. Sometimes the word 'vacancy finder' and 'employer' were used interchangeably, as is the case in the following example where a case manager informed a small group of newly arrived welfare clients: 'Sometimes employers, vacancy finders, will visit our group. Make sure that you always look presentable. Wash yourself regularly, take a shower, put on clean clothes: that makes you look good.' The logic behind this (besides the assumption that the unemployed do not shower regularly) is that in order to get a job you have to aesthetically present yourself as if you have a job already. As one case manager told a group of clients: 'I want to see, smell, feel that you intend to get back to work.' The stress on the aesthetic experience of participants is crucial here: it is through smelling, seeing and feeling that the assessment of deservingness and work-readiness is made. It goes beyond just smelling right, though: the performance the case managers were after is not just one of decency, but of activity in the sense of readiness: always ready to enter paid employment.

Importantly, this stress on aesthetics does something else too: it is part of a pedagogy to *become* work-ready. The objective is not only to 'look good' for potential employers, 'looking good' also serves the purpose of, as one case manager put it: 'getting you in the work-mode'. Welfare clients were encouraged to feel and look like they were already

working because that would help them to, in fact, become a work-ready subject. Aesthetics were here part of a responsabilizing pedagogy: for the unemployed, ‘active participation’ meant displaying an eagerness to find work and to actively participate in the labour market as a job-seeker, mimicking the behaviour of actual workers. Looking ‘presentable’ while being unemployed was interpreted as being committed to work and becoming independent from welfare. An aesthetic performance was thought of as a concrete way in which a client can be ‘transformed’, more broadly speaking, into being more work-ready. A further concrete example of this pedagogy is the problematization of posture and especially of slumping in one’s chair. One case manager told his clients what he did when he received vacancies from the vacancy finders:

When I receive vacancies I close my eyes and picture all my clients and visualize which of them fits the job description. And I know I am not the only one who does this, intermediaries at employment agencies work like this as well. If you are always slumping in your chair, then that’s the image I have of you.

Again, aesthetics are crucial here, since it was primarily through *visualization* that deservingness was evaluated. The work-readiness that was aimed at in this pedagogy was also a display of adaptability. This adaptability was required, it was often explained, because in a precarious labour market and in the wake of an economic crisis, all that is on offer is short-term work in varying fields. Consider for example these notes about a workshop in which a case manager had invited a recruiter from an employment agency, specialized in construction work and engineering. The recruiter explained the importance of ‘fitting into the organizational culture’ of the company where you are applying for a job:

RC (Recruiter): ‘Your character has to suit the company. You might fit the job requirements perfectly, but that is not enough, you have to match the company culture. (That can be) more or less formal for example.’ One of the welfare clients responds by saying that he gets rejected regularly on the basis of ‘not matching the company culture’, which he does not understand. He asks the recruiter what it means. The recruiter replies by saying that ‘feedback like that lacks specificity and is not very helpful. The question is what that company actually refers to. For example, whether they mean to say that their company culture is formal. It is sensible to present yourself in accordance with the position you are applying to. This means wearing a suit to a job interview if the position requires you to wear a suit.’ The recruiter underpins her advice by giving an example: ‘A man once applied for a position as general manager wearing jeans. (...) I don’t want to have to tell you to wear a suit.’

The phrase ‘It is sensible to present yourself in accordance with the position you are applying to’, is exactly what makes the aesthetic presentation so complex for clients. Sometimes this entails wearing a suit, as the recruiter explained above, but sometimes it means *not* wearing a suit, as the case manager explained in relation to a job interview for construction work. Wearing a suit can be fitting in, showing adaptability *and* it can be a cause for a welfare sanction. This indicates that part of the performance of ‘presentability’ and ‘work-readiness’ is not only looking like one works already, but also to display an ability to calibrate dress continuously for varying work contexts.

Conclusions

This article set out to investigate the implementation of the Dutch Participation Act as a case of the importance of aesthetics in both unemployment and in precarious service labour under post-Fordist conditions. It asks: (1) just what performances grant the right to welfare benefits; and (2) what does this tell us more generally about the politics of aesthetic performances for post-Fordist labour markets? From the qualitative interviews, it appears that the right to welfare is granted to those that can appear 'presentable'. This omnipresent category works primarily as a negative: case managers were well able to give examples of what is considered not presentable and therefore potential grounds for sanctions – wearing flip-flops, showing too much skin and smelling. When looking more closely at the daily practices of case managers through ethnographic methods, however, it appears not only that aesthetics are a continuously recurring concern in case managers' practices, but also that aesthetics can operate as a pedagogy: sitting up straight and dressing 'as if' working is to get the unemployed into the 'work-mode' more generally. Performing 'presentability', then, is to give an aesthetic performance of responsibility and work-readiness *as well as* a pedagogy through which this work-readiness is to be achieved. Not only should an aesthetic performance *communicate* activity and work-readiness, it is also meant as a technique of self-development to become more work-ready. This is an important difference from earlier disciplining and civilizing offensives in Fordism: the stress is, to be sure, on cleanliness and decency, but is ultimately much more on pedagogies to become a flexible, adaptable subject.

Related and on a more conceptual level, this study shows the importance of understanding the concept of aesthetic labour in post-Fordist labour markets as a *continuous* backstage labour. In contrast to conceptualizations of aesthetic labour as embodied characteristics at the 'point of entry' into labour, the analysis presented here shows how in post-Fordist labour markets, in which increasing numbers of people move in and out of precarious employment and unemployment, a continuous calibration of aesthetic appearances is at stake. Aesthetic labour is a daily backstage practice in which workers and, as it turns out, unemployed people engage in work-self calibrations. The crucial ability for precarious workers in post-Fordism is therefore not just to present an attractive appearance or to understand that flip-flops are a no-go, but the ability to adapt to work contexts in flux: potentialities, company cultures and ever-fluctuating opaque assessments of aesthetics by case managers for welfare.

Unemployment and employment, in a much more continuous fashion, are both states in which individuals have to deal with the imperative to work on their self as a marketable product. Aesthetics are an important aspect of this ongoing marketing and an integral part of labour. Far from a lofty or trivial pursuit, then, clothing and personal appearance are increasingly constitutive of social inequalities and even access to citizenship rights, as this study shows. In post-Fordist labour markets, it may be expected that inequalities will increasingly go along aesthetic lines. Indeed, for the unemployed in the Netherlands, performing aesthetic labour is possibly even more important than for those in paid employment because of the looming risk of financial penalties.

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Notes

1. A term that was introduced by Michael Lipsky (2010 [1980]: 3), who defined it as: 'Typical street-level bureaucrats are teachers, police officers and other law enforcement personnel, social workers, judges, public lawyers and other court officers, health workers and many other public employees who grant access to government programs and provide services within them.'
2. This term is not often used by case managers. Rather, they refer to 'customer' or 'job-seeker' and to a lesser degree to 'client'. The first term, however, does not do justice to the power relation that is characteristic of the relationship between case managers and their clients and the second term implies certain expectations from welfare clients that are politically contested. The term 'client' therefore is preferred. This term implies a power relation between case managers and clients in which the former have relatively more power over the latter. Moreover, the term 'client' does not imply specific expectations with regard to welfare clients' behaviour. Lastly, the more descriptive term 'welfare recipient' is not preferred, since this term underexposes the power dimension that is central to the relationship between case managers and clients and it implies a passive state of being as a recipient.

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