

Chapter 6

Generating Aesthetic Capital: Prospects from Autobiographical Narratives

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The sociological conception of aesthetic capital refers to relations of physical appearance and its sanctions that appear at the level of society. In other words, certain forms of physical appearance are systematically valued and sanctioned in certain ways, which makes such appearances function as social currencies or capital (see Kukkonen, Chapter 1). From large-scale statistical data, we can detect the macro-level powers of that capital: how different aspects of appearance (for example, attractiveness, symmetry or fatness) are related to unequal outcomes in many aspects as well as they show how our relationships to appearance reflect social (class) structures in many ways (e.g., Vandebroeck, 2016). However, it is also important to look on the level of lived lives to better understand how these differencing mechanisms appear in actual experiences and how appearances and capital are interrelated.

In this chapter, I will approach aesthetic capital without predetermined measurements and turn the examination on the subjective level – perceptions and narrations of how appearance has affected the lives of individuals. I focus on the individual narratives and explanations of the consequences of physical appearance in narrators' lives in the autobiographical appearance narratives. The aim is to open up the process of appearance turning into capital by shifting the focus onto individual perspectives and to ponder whether these perspectives could broaden the understanding of how appearance-related inequalities are generated on the larger scale.

Background for the Study

Physical appearance has a major role in shaping societal dynamics in many ways. Studies report its consequences on economic and social rewards, such as higher income (e.g., Anýžová & Matějů, 2018; Biddle & Hamermesh, 1998; Cawley,

Appearance as Capital, 103–115



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2004; Johnston, 2010; Kanazawa & Still, 2018), better hiring opportunities and career advancements (e.g., Baert & Decuyper, 2014; Hamermesh, 2011; Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2013; Hosoda et al., 2003; Ruffle & Shtudiner, 2014; Wolbring & Riordan, 2016), electoral success (e.g., Berggren et al., 2010; Jäckle & Metz, 2017), partner selection (e.g., Mathes & Kozak, 2008; McClintock, 2014) and socioeconomic status (Jæger, 2011). Hence, it has been argued that physical appearance should be conceptualised as a form of capital (Anderson et al., 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2015; Shilling, 2004; cf. Bourdieu, 1984; this book). The measurements of physical appearance vary in these studies. Very commonly, physical appearance has been approached as attractiveness or beauty, but size and shape of body, facial symmetry and aspects of femininity and masculinity have also largely been used as measurements. Altogether, the variables in such studies are always predetermined. These studies produce information about the magnitudes of different measurements that are prechosen by the researchers. The empirical justification to use the concept of aesthetic capital comes from these studies, as they aim to find generalisable logics in how physical appearance causes systematic inequalities. However, these approaches do not provide data to develop explanations and understanding of aesthetic capital further, as they just calculate the volumes of already-presumed variables and outcomes. Explanations for the different effects of appearance are construed from previously made hypotheses that could be either confirmed or supported (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; see for example Maestriperi et al., 2017; Wolbring & Riordan, 2016).

Novel meanings and outcomes of appearance, in contrast, could be brought out in studies that employ data that are less structured by the researchers in the first hand, allowing more spontaneity to appear. Examples of these are ethnographically oriented studies that observe appearance-related questions of certain groups (e.g., Balogun, 2020; Mears, 2015; Weinberg & Williams, 2014), interview studies that are open to meanings the participants create (e.g., van der Laan & Velthuis, 2016; Ojala & Pietilä, Chapter 4; Pajunen, Chapter 6), observations based on the Internet and social media (see Puhakka, Chapter 8; Åberg & Salonen, Chapter 9) and studies employing expressive literary data, such as autobiographical writings (e.g., Innola, 2020). The theoretical understanding of aesthetic capital could be expanded from the results of these kind of studies. They provoke new questions about the impacts of appearance, illuminate more precisely the logics of accumulation and conversion in different fields and show how people relate to appearance-related issues and *how* they are meaningful for them. In addition, these approaches have a potential to inform about the processes of how appearance may turn into capital. In turn, they rarely provide information about the scale of those phenomena or formulate suggestions on how their findings could be operationalised to study them on a larger scale.

Both of these strains of research (generalisation-reaching statistical analyses and theory-broadening qualitative analyses) are important in themselves and increase the general knowledge of the impacts of appearance in our everyday life and society. Yet there are fewer attempts to make a framework that synthesises the findings and makes room for a more comprehensive understanding of appearance-related issues. The concept of aesthetic capital, however, bears a

potential to combine these quantitative and qualitative perspectives (see e.g., [Kuipers, 2015](#)).

Bourdieu's theory of the forms of capital itself is built on various kinds of data that Bourdieu had adopted and which he developed into a more or less uniform description of how society works. It is widely applied in empirical research, which means that many find it to meaningfully explain empirical phenomena. However, Bourdieu's original formulation of the theory was not particularly clear or conclusive. Hence, it was interpreted and complemented in many ways afterwards in the research, and there is not one theory of capital but many formulations and interpretations (see [Kukkonen, Chapter 1](#)). This chapter's relation to capital theories is essentially an explorative one by spectating on the movements of capital from the perspectives of individuals. Although capital per se refers to macro-level phenomena, it consists of actions of individuals. However, the perspectives of individuals are never fundamentally unique and subjective but are thoroughly embedded in cultural ways of understanding. In brief, these different levels are thus fundamentally inseparable and co-constitutive, meaning that the macro-level inequalities are produced in the actions of individuals, whose actions are guided by cultural frameworks (e.g., [Lamont et al., 2014](#)).

In Bourdieu's terms, those frameworks that guide action are habitus – a person's internalised and embodied history – as structuring structures ([Bourdieu, 1990](#), p. 56). However, the concept of habitus has been criticised for putting too much emphasis on habituality and continuity of action while acknowledging to a lesser extent individuals' potential to change the 'cultural script' they are acting in. [Shilling \(2004, pp. 478–479\)](#) suggests that the concept of habitus should be replaced with a pragmatism-based concept of situated action. In short, while the concept of habitus highlights how the actions of individuals are determined by their backgrounds and environments, pragmatism sees individuals as being in a constant dialogical relation to their surroundings. Actions of individuals are sometimes unpredictable because individuals have a potential to reflect on their actions and act differently than is expected (*Ibid.*, p. 480). Reluctance to adopt the norms of thinness or hairlessness (see [Puhakka, Chapter 8](#); [Åberg & Salonen, Chapter 9](#)) by being proud about something that one should be ashamed of are examples of the kind of dialogical relations that may eventually change norms (which are a constituent of a cultural framework) and thus affect the logics of aesthetic capital. From the perspective of situated action, individuals' relation to the cultural framework (including aesthetic norms) guiding their action could be habitual (they rather unreflectively reproduce the norms), they could end up in crisis with the norms or they could find new ways to act beyond a previous framework ([Shilling, 2004, pp. 481–482](#)).

I understand aesthetic capital as a macro-level term that reflects the systematic 'doings' of individuals whose actions are guided by (meso-level) cultural frameworks, and these frameworks are changed by the (micro-level) reflective actions of individuals. In order to broaden the understanding of how appearance can turn into capital, focus should be turned to the relations between micro- and meso-levels ([Lamont et al., 2014, p. 24](#)). That means examining how individuals interact with the cultural framework provided, which in this case is how they relate to

aesthetic expectations (i.e., aesthetic norms). This is about studying the processes of how appearance turns into capital, which in turn reflects how appearances are related to social inequalities.

In contrast to studying the mechanisms of aesthetic capital, which aim at explaining the causal relationship between two variables (certain cause and effect), a process-oriented approach does not necessarily presume any pre-determined causes and outcomes (Lamont et al., 2014, p. 26; cf.; Wolbring & Riordan, 2016). In other words, the aim is not to explain why, for example, attractive people are more often favoured in recruitments than less attractive people, but to study the generative process that ends up producing inequalities – for example, how classifications and links between things are made in practice.

Here I will focus on how individuals understand the outcomes of appearance. The definition of appearance is left open for individual interpretations by enabling one to understand it, referring either very particularly to a certain trait or to the totality of one's outward appearance. Additionally, the outcomes are here treated as an open-ended question that emphasises the 'effects' individuals themselves identify as relevant. I will thus ask how the process of appearance turning into inequalities-producing capital appears from individuals' perspectives and how individuals define the outcomes when their appearance either fits or fails to fit prevailing aesthetic norms. In addition, I will ponder whether this prospect could broaden the understanding about the process of how appearance functions as capital.

Data, Methods and Research Questions

I employ data from autobiographical appearance narratives of Finns. The data consist of 40 textual narratives that were sent in response to data collection conducted by the Unit of Economic Sociology in Turku on 2016. The participants were instructed to write an autobiography in which they reflect on the role of appearance throughout their lives. Participants were provided with a few prompts to guide their writing; they were asked to reflect on the meanings and importance of appearances in different stages of life and invited to discuss the possible beneficial or disadvantageous effects that appearance has had in their lives. In this chapter, I will focus on the latter aspect – the descriptions of the effects of appearance in the narratives.

The analysis is a product of thought that has developed over three years of being in touch with the data. I have read and coded the data on multiple occasions in a longer period of time from different perspectives and interpreted it from different angles. I have, for example, examined what usual situations of appearance-related outcomes are mentioned in appearance biographies, how appearance is affected in those situations and how the meaning of appearance changes and develops through life in the narratives. These are all relevant aspects in terms of how aesthetic capital manifests on an individual level, but at the same time they require more space for their analysis than the length of this chapter provides. Here, I focus only on the narrated outcomes of appearance in the writings.

The qualitative variation of the narratives is large, and they vary greatly in their length and level of detail. Those aspects set certain limits as well as open some opportunities for interpreting the data. The limitation is that the variety of styles and discussed themes in the narratives makes comparisons between texts difficult in some cases. The advantage of the variation is that novel perspectives may more likely arise. Although the participants had some guidelines for writing, there was more heterogeneity in the data than was present in more researcher-controlled settings, such as structured interviews. Here, the participants wrote about various kinds of appearance-related advantages and disadvantages that they had faced.

I employed content analysis and multiple-time coding on the data. After coding the outcomes the narrators mentioned, I analysed their contents and further categorised them by the main themes that were presented in the analysis. With this method, I aimed to discern how appearance issues appear at the individual level, when researchers have not predetermined outcomes, and to ponder what that reveals about the process of appearance turning into inequalities-producing capital.

This leads me to ask the following questions:

What kinds of descriptions do narrators give about the appearance-related outcomes?

Do they widen the understanding of how aesthetic capital is constructed, and how do appearances matter in society?

Appearance-related Outcomes in the Biographies

In the following analysis, I will examine what kinds of appearance-related consequences the narrators perceived as relevant in their life stories. These fell under three larger themes: (1) appearance as a symbol of making an impression, (2) appearance as a medium of social inclusion and exclusion and (3) the relation of appearance and psychological well-being. The themes are not ultimately separate from each other. Rather, they are different dimensions in the process of appearance turning into capital.

Appearance as Symbol of Making an Impression

Very common to our basic knowledge is that the first impression we get of people is largely based on their looks. Appearance is a symbol that communicates nonverbally certain meanings that, either truthfully or not, tell something about the carrying person as well (cf. [Burgoon et al., 2016](#), pp. 95–124; [Knapp et al., 2014](#), pp. 153–196). Thus, it was no wonder that appearance-mediated impressions were often brought up in the biographies as well. Although impressions are to a large extent subjective and context-dependent, they certainly could be seen as socially relevant outcomes of physical appearance. Next, I elaborate how these appearance-related impressions appeared in the narratives.

Being uncertain of my physical appearance has influenced my career choices to some extent. I dreamed of a career as physical training master, but I discarded those dreams because I felt that my appearance was not enough to be credible in that job.

(Elli, female, 26)

In the above citation, there was not even an actualised situation – only a fearful belief of the narrator that she could not make a right impression with her physical appearance to pass for a physical training master. Yet the narrator's concern in the citation of being disqualified on the basis of her outward looks argues for the meaningfulness of appearance as an impression-giving symbol for individuals.

However, impressions per se are not tangible but rather abstract images in respondents' consciousness. One cannot see straightforwardly what kind of impression any appearance gives to someone else, but impressions often precede (re)actions. Then, we can look at how people treat each other on the basis of their appearances and deduce something about the impressions made. There is a vast amount of research on that subject. For example, most 'CV studies' that examine the callback rates in CVs of different-looking persons could be seen as studying impression-based reactions to appearances (e.g., Maurer-Fazio & Lei, 2015; Patacchini et al., 2015; Ruffe & Shtudiner, 2014). Also, studies examining how attractiveness of a person affects different aspects of how they are treated by other people inform us about the same phenomenon. Narrators in this study thus brought few novel outcomes to the appearance research. In line with previous research (e.g., Hamermesh, 2011), there were stories about, for example, how attractiveness had helped participants to get a job or a spouse as well as how participants had been discriminated against due to their body size. In the narrators' texts, making a right impression with physical appearance was important in many contexts, including being a customer in a store, seeking a job, trying to impress a potential spouse, being an employee and a representative of a job, etc. (cf. Warhurst & Nickson, 2001). The right impressions opened doors, while diverging from the norm closed them.

What is noteworthy is that the impressions given and others' interpretations of them were described in situational terms in the narratives. Unexpected parts of participants' appearances had affected the impressions of others, and their appearances were interpreted and treated differently depending on the situation and context. In other words, in their depictions, any kind of appearance, such as beauty or attractiveness, that worked in every situation was absent. Instead, narrators described how changing the environment and people with whom they interacted affected what kinds of impressions were created. For example, one narrator was living in a bad relationship in which her husband mocked her physical appearance, as he did not like his impression of the narrator. She described that divorce and finding a new partner who adored her appearance improved her quality of life and general well-being. Beauty was in the eye of the beholder in cases such as this.

The main finding here was not that people make impressions of each other based on their appearance and that those impressions have social relevance. The

key point, instead, was to show how the narrators described the relation between appearance and the impressions it 'caused'. The result was that visual cues rarely give similar impressions in every situation and for everyone. Physical appearance is a symbol that is interpreted always by someone in some context, which causes variation in the impressions made. This should be taken as a prerequisite for any research studying the outcomes of physical appearance.

Appearance as a Medium for Inclusion and Exclusion

One main theme in the biographies that described the process of how appearance may turn into capital was the narrators' explicit testimonies on how they had experienced that appearance acts as a mediator that determines who are to be included and excluded from various social circles and groups. In those cases, appearance either helped the narrators to get acceptance from others or prevented them from it. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion were said to happen in different levels of social life, both in personal relationships between two or more people and on a larger scale as a profound feeling of being accepted by other people in the society. Next, I will show how these dimensions of acceptance were described in the narratives.

Firstly, a rather common theme was romantic relationships, on which the narrators wrote that their appearance had played a central role in arousing initial interest and getting to know another person. Relations between two people are the smallest form of social inclusion and exclusion. In the case of romantic relationships, judgements on whether to include or exclude were described as matters of personal taste or mutual attraction and were described to have at least some degree of 'biological' or 'natural' justification. But the logics of inclusion and exclusion applied also on levels that involved more people and thus reflected preferences not just of an individual but of a group of people and their culture, as in the following example:

[When I was at high school,] we went on a holiday trip to Vyborg [with my family]. They bought me pirated Levi's jeans and buttoned Adidas sweatpants from there. [-] Buttoned sweatpants were in fashion, and now I've got those. I didn't feel like I was selling myself to the mass fashion, because at least I had chosen the pirated version. Companies that trick people with commercials to buy their products didn't get any profit off those. Yet I was able to fit in, to be part of the mainstream crowd and not an outsider. On one hand, I tried to be unique and different from the others, but on the other hand, I wanted to be like everyone else – not too different.

(Reima, male, 37)

Reima's appearance reflected here the norms of his peer group (not any individual person), which in turn reflected the current fashion. His desired outcome was to be accepted by a certain group of people but at the same time to

be slightly different from them to accentuate his individuality. Reima used his appearance as a means to get a certain social acceptance, but he utilised it rather consciously by taking a distance from the masses and multinational companies. Altogether, he conveyed that appearance had a central role in the dynamics of fitting in and gaining acceptance in certain social circles, because otherwise there was a threat of being excluded.

Reima's citation reflected the importance of appearance, especially in adolescence, identity construction and friend relationships. However, similar logics of inclusion and exclusion appeared also in the narratives in later stages of life. The most commonly discussed context in the narratives was working life and its various fields. Appearance helped or hindered narrators, both in entering working life and while being employed and acting in everyday work. The previous citation of Elli, who dreamed of a career as a physical training master, exemplifies the exclusion of people by their appearance in certain occupations by preventing them from entering the job in the first hand. Some other narrators instead described their experiences of being more easily employed because they felt they had had a suitable appearance for the job. In other words, appearance was depicted as a mediator to control entering working life in the narratives as well. This phenomenon has also been widely documented by previous research (e.g., [Paustian-Underdahl & Walker, 2016](#); [Rooth, 2009](#); [Ruffe & Shtudiner, 2014](#)).

Besides the recruitment situations, the importance of looks in everyday working life was also discussed in the narratives (see also Pajunen, Chapter 5). The narrators were rather vague in their descriptions on how appearance controlled the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in everyday work. They wrote, for example, that it was important to 'dress accordingly' and 'correct[ly]', 'be well-groomed' and 'give a good impression' while at work, which was described as 'advantageous' behaviour in work. Kerttu said, 'My job allowed for dressing up and even encouraged it; without my job, things would not have been quite like that. I think it is important to present and represent oneself'. It was thus clear that appearance mediated how well the narrators could perform in their jobs, but they did not elaborate the details of how exactly it did. Chapter 7 by Åberg and Koivula could also be read as complementing this question.

Lastly, appearance was described as mediating the sense of belongingness in a more extensive sense in relation to the whole society – a sense of being fundamentally different and excluded from other people. There was not any single act of being excluded or included, but multiple experiences of being treated as different by others had shaped narrators' conception of their 'compatibleness' with society. The most illuminating example of this was the narrative of Såde, a young transgender person. She vividly described her experiences, how appearance (gender, clothing, hair, body size) is determined, how one gets friends, acceptance, relationships and employment and, more generally, how people treat each other. If one does not meet the standards of 'the audience', one gets bullied and receives nasty comments from others, and if one does not conform, one is excluded from the social circle in question. She highlights how diverging from appearance norms is a constant struggle that requires a lot of courage from individuals. At the moment of her writing, she was in the middle of the process of a surgical sex

change. Writing about experiences of exclusion, she gave a rationalisation of the need for the surgical operation. The cross-sectional theme in her narrative is to show that when one does not meet appearance standards, it is possible to see and sense how central appearance actually is to controlling one's sense of belonging and hence to affecting one's identity and self-worth.

The Relation of Appearance to Psychological Well-being

As may have already become apparent from this analysis, the so-called 'inner consequences' of appearance went hand in hand with the more 'objective' or 'tangible' outcomes (such as economic or social outcomes). In many cases, these psychological consequences were the most predominant topics in the narratives. These 'outcomes' are in the first place subjectively observed mental states, and they do not necessarily cause any 'objective' outcomes that others could detect. However, a person's psychological well-being determines to a large extent that person's ability to act in the world. Hence, while the appearance-related psychological consequences could not be taken straightforwardly as outcomes that reflect movements of capital, they at least could be defined as a mediating factor in the process of how appearance generates inequalities (e.g., [Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006](#)).

These outcomes appeared in many forms in the narratives, and appearance was depicted to influence one's well-being in both positive and negative ways. For example, narrators described how positive comments from a spouse, their own reflections in the mirror or daily practices of getting groomed for work raised their spirit and conferred self-confidence. For many, though, their own appearance caused anxiety, lowered self-assurance, made them feel isolated from others, caused depression and led to eating disorders.

When I was younger, physical appearance was a source of issues and strain. I was a chubby child, and I guess I was told so too. When I was in my twenties, I developed bulimia, which I suffered from for about four years. In those days, I was having very bad fights with my mum, and I was dating a man who was into bodybuilding. At that time, one had to be slender yet curvy. I could say that my self-esteem was very low, and I could not respect myself.

(Reetta, female, 44)

The negative effects of appearance on psychological well-being were often described as being rather long term and not necessarily materialised immediately. A single negative appearance-related comment may have felt bad instantly, but they also built a more profound sense of self and thus affected longer-term well-being and self-respect.

The sources, which were described to affect one's psychological well-being, varied from direct comments from others to a more abstract sense of appearance norms or what is required to meet appearance standards. For example, in Reetta's

citation, she had a sense that ‘one had to be slender yet curvy’. In these cases, narrators compared themselves to the prevailing norms, and divergence from those caused mental issues for some. Weight-related norms were the most often mentioned issues in the narratives, but height, clothing, skin, hair and other body parts were also mentioned as negatively affecting narrators’ well-being if they found such features to diverge from the norm.

On the other hand, some found that appearance was a means for them to enhance their well-being. Some discussed, for example, that their body made them feel good, but more often, the positive effects of appearance were due to putting on makeup or wearing ‘sharp’ clothes. Time and effort (for example, exercising or grooming – i.e., *aesthetic* or *appearance work*) were thus often required to gain these positive effects, which could be seen as accomplishments to meet with appearance norms (cf. Kukkonen, Chapter 2).

It appeared as an unquestionable fact that appearance issues were seen to affect narrators’ psychological well-being to a large extent. From a sociological perspective, these psychological effects could also be seen as consequences of appearance-related social norms in those contexts. They may manifest as sanctioning by other people, or they may be internalised and guide individuals’ behaviour as an ‘inner voice’, as in the case of Elli. Altogether, prevailing (appearance) norms reflect individuals’ psychological health and alter it in various ways and degrees.

Conclusions

The first aim of this chapter was to explore how the effects of physical appearance appear in subjective narratives in comparison to the macro-level findings on aesthetic capital. The answer is that the narratives provided supplementary rather than contradictory details to the whole understanding of how aesthetic capital affects people and society. This analysis provided two key points to this discussion.

Firstly, the relations of appearance and its outcomes were depicted as more diverse than beauty and ugliness. Appearance was described as a means to create impressions and as a mediator of social inclusion and exclusion. The interpretations of appearances were always tied with certain situations, contexts and interpersonal dynamics. Hence, the same appearances were not valued and treated similarly in every situation by every individual. Instead, there were always field-specific logics that controlled how different traits of appearance were treated (see also [Green, 2014](#)). Furthermore, some of the narrators also had experiences of economic-related outcomes of physical appearance, for example, in a recruitment situation, yet such outcomes could be interpreted as a particular example of more general logics of physical appearance as a mediator of social inclusion and exclusion. The conclusive recommendation for future research based on these findings is that the context and field in which appearance is being evaluated should always be taken into account when analysing appearance-related outcomes. Different fields have different appearance norms and thus they differ in their logics of inclusion and exclusion.

The second aim of this chapter was to broaden the understanding of the outcomes of aesthetic capital. The main contribution thereby was to link appearance-related psychological and mental health issues with appearance norms. There is still little multidisciplinary discussion that links appearance-related mental issues to macro-level social inequalities. The link of mental illnesses and social structure (including the compositions of capital) seems to intersect with various appearance-related issues, which future investigations should better take into account. The relation between appearance or different traits of appearance and capital is rarely straightforward (e.g., attractive individuals are paid more). Instead, the relation is more often less direct and a result of multiple different level interactions that include different actors, their actions and interpretations and situational social norms. For example, appearance-related bullying is firstly an act of social exclusion and affects one's social capital, but it also may have an effect on one's self-esteem, which further affects one's future choices and social stance. Thus, the whole process of how appearance may turn into capital should be scrutinised in order to understand and solve the inequality-producing mechanisms of physical appearance.

I have discussed here how the different consequences of appearance appear on the individual level and how they could complement the understanding of aesthetic capital. On the basis of the narrators' subjective perspectives on this matter, I suggest that further research on aesthetic capital should attempt to combine and adopt a more multidimensional interpretation framework that addresses the impact of appearance on economic, social and psychological levels to understand more fully how appearance is linked to social inequalities.

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