

Conclusion

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Physical appearance can be approached as a form of capital. To some extent, this form of capital can be accumulated and converted into economic and social rewards. However, the logic of the aesthetic work done to accumulate physical appearance -related assets is far from straightforward. The same applies to composition and the convertibility of physical appearance as a form of capital as well. In this book, we have shown how different cultural, institutional, group-specific and situational norms regulate the possibilities of accumulating and converting aesthetic capital.

This finding constitutes the central contribution of this book. In contemporary consumer culture, physical appearance is often represented as a meritocratic form of capital that everyone can accumulate and use as a ticket to success. This gospel of aesthetic self-expression and self-improvement comes with undertones of responsibility, particularly in discourses around working life. As the chapters in this book have shown, the gospel clashes in many ways with cultural ideals and gendered, aged and classed norms. Although everyone carries a responsibility for his or her appearance, not everyone is allowed equal agency with regard to his or her physical appearance. Furthermore, not everyone has equal opportunities to convert such a form of capital into other forms (e.g., economic capital).

In very recent considerations, however, physical appearance has been approached as an independent form of capital (e.g., Shilling, 2004; Anderson et al., 2010; Hakim, 2010; Green, 2013; Mears, 2015; see also Holla & Kuipers, 2015). Early scholarship employing this theoretical stance examined the bodily and physical capital, particularly in terms of movement and strength (Shilling, 2004; Wacquant, 1995). Other researchers focussed on sexual and erotic capital (Green, 2008; Hakim, 2010; Martin & George, 2006). More recently, scholars have focussed on the gendered forms of the body as capital, such as girl capital (Mears, 2015), and they have made attempts to draw together the scattered scholarship on physical appearance and inequality using the term ‘aesthetic

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capital' (Anderson et al., 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Sarpila et al., 2020; see also Kukkonen, Chapter 1).

In this book, we have approached physical appearance as aesthetic capital – a bundle of resources that includes the facial features, shape and size of the body, as well as personal styles of (body) hair, dressing and grooming (Anderson et al., 2010). We posited that aesthetic capital may work as a 'primary' form of capital (Kukkonen, Chapter 1; see also Neveu, 2018): that is, rather than being conditioned solely by class (as embodied cultural capital), it shapes class. While physical appearance per se has gender, age, ability and ethnicity as axes of inequality, it is also part and parcel of class (i.e., a combination of economic, social, cultural and aesthetic capital). Capital is mobilised in particular fields through reflexive practices that individuals with certain 'habitus', in Bourdieusian terms, have adopted. However, the abovementioned axes of (dis)advantage also shape individuals' opportunities in contemporary societies. In this book, we have argued and shown how social norms regarding the accumulation and conversion of aesthetic capital function as 'fences' that mostly advantage those already in advantageous positions (cf. Devine & Savage, 2005; Friedman & Laurison, 2020).

Thus, without mitigating the value of any strand of research on physical appearance and inequality, the book has joined an emerging body of research that takes a critical stance towards an economics-inspired analysis of physical appearance, with physical appearance being described as simply 'beauty' or 'attractiveness' based on a universally definable value standard for individuals. We argue that the term 'aesthetic capital' used in this book is useful in many ways. It not only leaves room for appearance-related qualities to be considered but also recognises the possibility of their accumulation and convertibility to other forms of capital. In terms of meritocracy, the concept thus recognises both accumulated and ascribed forms of aesthetic capital as problematic. This approach leaves no room for a simple economic view of physical appearance as beauty based on monetary investments (see Mears, 2014).

Previous sociological studies examined physical appearance as an independent form of capital, and they focussed on the power relations defining the value of aesthetic capital (e.g., Mears, 2011, 2020). However, this book has explicitly focussed on the regulative and negotiable norms embedded in the social space or social fields, where individuals accumulate and convert their aesthetic capital. That is, this book has invited scholars to consider the manifestations of power relations in terms of social norms. As Vandebroek (2017) points out with respect to the issues of inequality and physical appearance, approaching physical appearance only from inherited qualities can lead to the misrecognition of class-based physical appearance-related inequalities. He calls for broader insight into the privileges and advantages that physical appearance shapes:

Moreover, unlike the stigmatization of relatively 'ascribed' physical traits (skin colour, sex or age[,] for instance), class-based physical differences provide a much less stable foundation for the development of an assertive 'counter-culture'. In fact, whereas critiques of sexual or ethnoracial domination can more

easily invoke the unjust and anti-meritocratic nature of social mechanisms of exclusion on the basis of factors over which agents ultimately have little or no control, physical markers of class [...] are more often deemed to be a simple matter of 'lifestyle-choice' and hence of individual responsibility.

(Vandebroeck, 2017, p. 232)

In line with Vandebroeck, we have shown how physical appearance -related traits are not simple matters of lifestyle choice and individual responsibility. This is not only because they mostly have to do with the mechanisms of exclusion that are beyond individuals' control but also it is because even when individuals are seemingly allowed to choose their aesthetic practices and lifestyles, the enactment of lifestyles and practices is socially controlled and sanctioned. We argue that the capital metaphor can be useful in revealing and challenging both larger societal mechanisms of exclusion and the more local, field-specific normativisation of bodies and their appearances.

Moreover, considering physical appearance as an independent form of capital allows for the recognition and analysis of physical appearance -related inequalities even in social spaces where cultural capital is considered to play a less significant role in producing and maintaining inequalities. In this book, we focussed our lens on Finland, a country that never had a feudal nobility that 'could have slowly cultivated different tastes and distinctions vis-à-vis the lower classes' (Purhonen et al., 2010, p. 269). Indeed, Purhonen et al. (2010) conclude in their study on taste preferences in Finland that 'Finland is a democracy of taste'. Finland is known for its welfare states policies, and the Finnish educational system is known for producing a rather large amount of educational mobility compared with other OECD countries (for a discussion, see Heiskala et al., 2020). Further, Finland is commonly indexed as a comparatively gender-equal society and is lauded for it (see Introduction chapter).

Despite this, or perhaps precisely because of this, we claim that Finland has become what we call an appearance society. By this, we mean a society in which aesthetic capital plays a key part in shaping an individual's class position – that is, a society in which physical appearance acts as a form of capital in itself. As cultural and economic capital are supposedly democratic, and as gender seemingly does not matter, appearance is at centre stage as Finns engage in global consumer culture and social media. However, the findings of this book suggest that a focus on appearance does not actually smooth over previous inequalities. Rather, it seems to enhance them, particularly in terms of gender.

The findings in this book suggest that the norms that guide the accumulation and, to some extent, the conversion of aesthetic capital are first and foremost gendered. Focussing on one's appearance is strongly coded as feminine, and gender differences in consumption have remained remarkably stable in Finland (see Sarpila, Chapter 3). This has consequences for both women and men. Although Finnish women and men equally endorse a belief in appearance as a currency – a ticket to success or social mobility – this belief gains a very gendered practical meaning: for women, the belief is straightforwardly linked to daily

appearance work, whereas for men, no straightforward connection exists between beliefs and practices (see Kukkonen, Chapter 2). It is possible that even if men believe that appearance is important for achieving success, focussing on appearance does not even appear to be a possibility for them. The continued genderedness of physical appearance-related practices may be viewed as limiting men's choices and experiences as much as it limits those of women. This becomes clear in the fourth chapter of this book, where an elderly man narrates how the opportunity to buy his own clothes appeared to him for the first time at old age, and how nice it was. When he got to select his own corduroys, it seems that a new world opened up before him. Previously, the women in his life – his mother, his wife – had always bought his clothes. In a sense, women have a monopoly over appearance-related practices and consumption (whether they like it or not).

This is not to belittle the ways in which the gendered norms concerning physical appearance are hard on women. This monopoly drives particularly women to invest a tremendous amount of not only effort but also resources in terms of time and money on appearance. These efforts are looked down upon as vanity and are rarely taken seriously. Although appearance-related practices can certainly be enjoyable, light-hearted, frivolous and even vain, they can – in their repeated and mundane forms – also be regarded as appearance work, a form of labour which is also taxing and consuming (see Kukkonen, Chapter 2).

The book clearly shows how even in such a country as Finland, which is viewed as highly gender equal, aesthetic capital works together with the gender and normative expectations related to it. Although it would be tempting to interpret Finland as a 'lower-bound estimator' compared with other cultural contexts, this is hardly the case. As the chapters that go beyond the national context indicate, a very similar gendered normative logic crosses not only different fields but also different social spaces more generally. Thus, it seems clear that gender does not have to be taken into account when one is analysing the processes of the accumulation and conversion of aesthetic capital. However, it has to be integrated into the Bourdieusian analysis of fields and social space. Theoretically, this could also mean moving beyond the traditional conceptions of intersectionality (for a discussion, see [Vandebroeck, 2018](#)).

The second point of theoretical integration that the chapters in this book stress is that the roles of a consumer and worker can no longer be separated in terms of appearance work and consumption. As consumers and workers, or as aesthetic labourers, all individuals are expected to enhance their aesthetic capital to some extent (see also [Pettinger, 2008](#); [van den Berg & Arts, 2019](#); [Elias et al., 2017](#)). As Tero Pajunen's analysis (Chapter 5) clearly shows, the general societal norms and contextual norms do not always match, and even the social fields that one worker crosses during a day at work may have different appearance-related norms that the worker has to juggle. Although previous research on aesthetic labour and aesthetic norms in the workplace focussed on how employers normatively regulate the physical appearances of employees (see, however, [Mears, 2020](#); [Vonk, 2020](#)), Pajunen shows how normative aesthetic regulation at work happens as an interplay among employers, customers and co-workers. Hence, no particular type

of appearance acts as capital. Instead, the appropriateness of an appearance is determined in interaction.

Although this is a commonsensical statement, it is poorly understood in scholarship on working life as well as in recruitment and management. It appears that employers may prescribe and maintain appearance norms that are against anyone's profit, based on poor knowledge about how appearance actually works in social interaction, or appearance acts as capital in a particular social field. In line with the logic of the service industry, workers are possibly commodified and forced to fit the logic of the standardised 'customer knows best' model of service. Pajunen illuminates how norm disobedience can actually help with interaction in working life. Pajunen also argues that loosening appearance norms in working life could actually serve workers, customers and profit-making employers.

Yet, paradoxically, the loosening of norms may place even more stress on workers trying to get it right. 'Getting it right' is far from easy, as context and situations matter. Moreover, as underlined in Iida Kukkonen's chapter (Chapter 2), appearance work is also resource-consuming backstage work that is sometimes paired with an empty promise of social mobility.

The interplay of general norms and contextual norms is perhaps most clearly present in the chapters which are integrated into the analysis of social media. Erica Åberg and Aki Koivula suggest that generally among Finnish social media users, and particularly among young Finnish women on Instagram, social media use drives appearance dissatisfaction, which again drives online content creation, which again drives appearance dissatisfaction. However, it is also clear that social media offers to some individuals a virtual space in which they can challenge and negotiate the prevailing norms on valuable bodies and appearances. Simultaneously, it seems that particular individuals with cultural capital and other privileges, including whiteness, are allowed to develop and showcase reflexivity on their aesthetic practices on social media. Anna Puhakka shows in her analysis of Danish fat activist Sofie Hagen how she applies certain strategies to challenge prevailing appearance-related norms. As discussed previously, challenging physical traits that are commonly regarded in terms of lifestyle, choice and individual responsibility is not an easy task. It is worth asking what strategies can be deployed to develop what Vandebroek (2017) terms 'an assertive "counter-culture"'. Furthermore, what capital does one have to possess to join the counter-culture in which prevailing appearance ideals are contested? What does challenging aesthetic norms take? For example, is fatness more acceptable from a funny woman? A white woman? Åberg and Salonen show how the challenging of the hairlessness norm online typically comes with the package of youth, whiteness and slimness. It seems that even though singular appearance norms can be disobeyed, the disobedience has to be done in 'the right way'. In the context of social media, the diverse outcomes (i.e., likes, comments, harassment) of breaking such general norms is unpredictable due to the blurring boundaries of fields – the vantage points from which aesthetic assets are evaluated on.

Although social media platforms allow for the voice of certain, often young and somewhat privileged, white and female voices to be heard on the topic of appearance-related norms, it is clear that appearance and appearance-related

norms impact just about everyone's life. Although a great deal of contemporary research on physical appearance has dealt with social media or working life, negotiations of the value of appearance and the content of appearance-related norms are ongoing offline as well (see Chapter 6). Importantly, appearance-related capital does not necessarily carry any less value outside of working life than it does therein: appearance matters for capital exchange among the 'economically inactive' population as well.

In the Finnish context, it is particularly clear that the appearance society is not only a gendered society but also an ageing society. In societies that put youthful looks on a pedestal, everyone's aesthetic capital erodes with ageing. However, this 'erosion' is felt most heavily by the elderly. In a society, such as Finland, that is ageing fast (see the introduction of this book), the largest and fastest growing proportion of the population face this dilemma, and this tendency may somewhat paradoxically increase the value of aesthetic capital rather than lead to its devaluation. According to the logic of consumer capitalism, money goes where 'loose money' is available, and as the chapters in this book show, the appearance-related insecurities that ageing people face have already been tapped into. Being seen and not being reduced to an invisible and marginalised part of society is a pressing concern, which also has to do with the attainment of social services.

Overall, the studies in this book make certain key points. First, the studies in this book highlight the deep entanglement of physical appearance and gender. Any discussion on physical appearance -related inequality is also a discussion on gender – whether we like it or not. It is not enough to regard gender as one control variable or to mention it in passing. We are dealing with phenomena so inherently gendered that gender indeed needs to be integrated in analyses.

Second, the studies in this book help one to think of appearance-related inequality not just in terms of an economic fatality but also as an endless series of actual social situations in which people interact and have agency. Although strong and persuasive social norms – universal, national and more field-specific ones – guide the practices that we undertake and the valuations we make, the studies in this book highlight that these norms are constantly negotiated and challenged. Norms change and can be changed. From this perspective, physical appearance -related inequality is not a natural law but rather is something that can be acted upon and changed.

Third, the studies in this book show how very different methods, methodologies and data can be used in the study of appearance-related inequality. Strength exists in such a diversity of approaches. Clearly, no one particular approach can illuminate the ways in which physical appearance engenders and deepens social and economic inequality. To develop a deeper and more multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon, it is therefore crucial to develop a dialogue between various methodological approaches within sociology, on the one hand, and between the various disciplines that grapple with the topic, on the other hand. It is also important to see that there is more to physical appearance -related inequality than just socioeconomic outcomes.

This book has presented many approaches to physical appearance and has invited its readers to 'a smorgasbord of appearance studies'. We can guarantee for

a fact that the role of physical appearance in society will not plummet or diminish in the following years. In the future, we suggest comparative studies among countries to explore whether the Finns truly differ from other countries in terms of, for example, their appearance orientation and consumer attitudes. Additionally, the boundaries between cultural and aesthetic capital invite more theoretical discussion. In addition to conducting more research on the outcomes of appearance, norms should be integrated into appearance research. Norms should not just be considered to be an explanatory framework for appearance studies. Rather, we encourage the creation of new directions for studying the normative regulation of accumulating and exploiting aesthetic capital. Appearance has multiple possible directions for research, and room exists for more enthusiastic researchers.

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