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Chapter 10

Interpretative Repertoires

10.1 Introduction

In chapter 9, I argued that a performance is a way of acting up to certain norms. These might be greater discursive norms, like those governing gender and ethnicity performances. From the way the girls talked about their and other's appearances and media use, additional standards came up as well. In this final results chapter, I address the final sub-question: what are the criteria governing girls' performance?

The girls spoke in different ways about their choices and behaviours, but these ways of speaking were relatively coherent. In discourse analysis, such ways of speaking have been conceptualised as interpretative repertoires. The concept was first used in a study by sociologists Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) and further developed by social psychologists, Potter and Wetherell (1987). The latter define interpretative repertoires as "recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena" (1987: 203). Individuals draw from available interpretative repertoires, as these provide a basis for shared understanding. In his explanation of the concept, Edley uses the helpful metaphor of dance steps: "interpretative repertoires are like the pre-figured steps that can be flexibly and creatively strung together in a dance" (2001: 198). Edley (2001; see also Hermes, 1995) explains the difference between discourse and repertoire as conceptual and methodological. Discourse is concerned with power and the ways discourse subjects people. Repertoires are "smaller and more fragmented" and "place more emphasis upon human agency within the flexible deployment of language" (Edley, 2001: 202). I follow this distinction.

In the interviews and the focus groups, I placed media and appearance under investigation. In their discussions, the girls used various repertoires in which they constructed their sense of these phenomena. Repertoires need not be used consistently, and the girls used the different repertoires at different times. In section 6.5, I discussed how different contexts in the focus group interviews solicited different, almost conflicting understandings of the importance of appearance. In addition, a discrepancy sometimes existed between observation and the participants' repertoires. For instance, although bullying was common at both schools (albeit to a lesser extent at the Kantlijn), all girls repudiated bullying in talk with me. Gilbert and Mulkay acknowledge this apparent incompatibility:

> Actors continually reinterpret given actions as their biography unfolds and as changing circumstances lead them to fit these actions into new social configurations. … Consequently, participants' observable accomplishments of actions at a specific point in time cannot be neatly distinguished from, or separated from, the kind of retrospective storytelling which is generated in interviews and other indirect methods of data collection (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984: 9).

The challenge for the researcher is to allow for variability in repertoires, and for inconsistency between actions and repertoires, and to understand these in relation to the contexts in which they have been produced. These repertoires show the ways the girls thought about media, appearance, and other identity issues. They thus provided an understanding of the norms the girls held and the ways they understood the world around them. Going through field notes and transcripts, I inductively reconstructed four repertoires: the repertoires of choice, authenticity and normalcy, and the politically correct repertoire. I start with the latter, then turning to each repertoire separately.

10.2 The politically correct repertoire

The politically correct repertoire[1] designates a way of speaking in which the girls avoided language that would offend people or groups. Unlike the other three repertoires, it is one of *morality*, of good or proper behaviour. Much attention has been paid to anti-bullying in the Netherlands. Schools organise a variety of anti-bullying measures and projects, like the Gunningschool's golden rules described in chapter 5. Organisations like the Stichting tegen zinloos geweld [Foundation against random violence] and SIRE (Stichting Ideële Reclame [Foundation public service announcements]) had anti-bullying campaigns in the mass media

in 2006. Popular culture also spreads an anti-bullying message, for instance in the song *STOP!* by singers Roel Felius and Glenn Eilbracht, and in the popular soap opera *Goede tijden, slechte tijden*. The girls have grown up with this ubiquitous message, which most parents further impart on their offspring. Related to bullying is discrimination, another notion which all the girls knew was wrong. The girls used the politically correct repertoire mostly when talking about these two practices: bullying and other forms of social exclusion, and the multicultural society.

Social exclusion

> Consolacion: If you're bullied that can have like serious consequences after, but also after school time. So that's bad. In movies you also see that these children might be committing suicide, so that's bad. If you only because of that… because you're fat, that makes you feel inferior to others, then that's no reason to commit suicide. [Interview Consolacion, 8 June 2006]

Consolacion's opinion about bullying is exemplary for the political correct repertoire. She had seen movies about bullied children committing suicide. Bullying is clearly wrong because it can lead to suicide – a horrible effect, especially if it happens 'only' because "you're fat". All the girls agreed bullying was bad and they all agreed bullying was to be shunned. One should be nice and respectful to others; social exclusion must be avoided or remedied. These are undisputed standards amongst the girls, and they reproduced this repertoire to me with great ease. Nonetheless, in my observations I noted many instances of bullying. How to account for these differences between what girls do and what girls say? The girls' anti-bullying rhetoric does not mean that they consider all bullying bad. They negotiated situations in which bullying was appropriate or even deserved, and whilst doing this they employed a repertoire of choice (see section below).

The opposite of being bullied is being popular, and popularity was also approached with a politically correct repertoire. Again 'being nice' is the ultimate standard and from that perspective other elements should not matter:

> Odecia: I can just be friends with anybody. It doesn't matter what you look like or what faith you have or something. It's just about being nice and trusting each other. So I don't really think it's due to appearance to have someone as a friend. I mean I can also just have a gorgeous beautiful girl as a friend or an ugly duckling as a friend too. [Interview Odecia, 27 June 2006]

Thus, appearance or ethnicity should not have any significance in judging people. Other girls also used this repertoire whilst discussing popularity. They indicated that being nice and friendly was more important, whilst at the same time they did not want to be bullied. At some points, I felt the girls had difficulty in continuing with this repertoire. For instance, when I asked if girls with flabby bellies could also wear crop tops, the girls responded with laughter and reverted to a repertoire of choice.

Multiculturalism

The girls also employed a politically correct repertoire in talking about multicultural matters. Unlike bullying, multiculturalism was a focus of my research and I thus solicited talk about multicultural matters. The girls all understood the multicultural society to be a good thing, an asset to Dutch society. Laila rejected uni-cultural societies, like Morocco.

> Laila: I think it's a boring country, with Morocco live all Moroccans and with Suriname all Surinamers and all. That seems boring to me. You also want to meet other people of their religion and all. I think, that seems fun to me. [Interview Laila, 7 July 2007]

Difference is a plus; the world would be a boring place if everyone looked the same. The girls' use of 'boring' in this repertoire was remarkable.

> Esther: I think that is good, because then you get to know each other. Like in villages or something, then it's out of the question that diverse people come. It's really all just Dutch people. And then at some [football] clubs black people are not allowed to come, or they can come, but cannot play for that club. And it's actually good if people from different descents play, because then it's a bit more fun. And it's fun to play with other people, otherwise it's so boring. [Interview Esther, 12 June 2006]

Diverse types of people, in Esther's words, increase the fun. Playing together is a good thing, difference is celebrated. One might argue that these utterances should not be taken at face value and should be cast aside as they are clearly socially desirable answers, produced because of the interview context. Another way of approaching this would be to note that these girls were aware of *what* the socially desirable answer is. Thus, amongst the girls existed a norm of multiculturalism, wherein diversity should not only be respected, but is also considered to be better than homogeneity.

The multicultural repertoire was also used in the focus groups, whilst discussing cliques at secondary school. The girls of non-Dutch origin all described the cliques at their schools in terms of ethnicity, whereas none of the Dutch girls did so. To check if notions of political correctness prevented them from 'seeing' ethnicity, I asked directly about ethnicity in a group of mixed descent. This group rejected cliques based on ethnicity, because they felt it was important that everyone socialised with everyone. However, Dilara later remarked in this group that all her friends were Turkish, and Gülen only had Turkish and Moroccan friends.

I asked the girls about their attitudes towards headscarves. Amongst the non-Muslim girls, this question was sometimes met with a multicultural repertoire. These girls said that because the headscarf is part of religion, this practice is beyond questioning. For instance:

> Noa: You mean Moroccan and such? That's just for their religion. I think they can do that. Because if you believe… that you then something. I don't know what they believe then, but if you it for your faith then I think it's allowed. [Interview Noa, 20 June 2006]

Noa felt no need to understand the practice: the realm of religion is unassailable. Similarly:

> Marisol: But… that's because of their faith… Good, well if that's the rule than you should just put that on. I do think it's stupid that at some schools they said that you couldn't wear headscarves anymore because you also don't have any caps anymore. That I think is nonsense, that's just for their religion, that they have to do that. And then they just should go and wear that. [Interview Marisol, 3 July 2006]

Marisol refers to schools that argued that all headgear was to be banned, including caps. She thus showed even more politically correct awareness and added to the debate about the headscarf. This did not mean that all non-Muslim girls agreed with the headscarf because of politically correct notions. Several argued they found the practice "stupid", or they used a repertoire of choice to negotiate its meaning. Conversely, Beyhan and Dilara respected girls who wore crop tops "because they have a different faith". Beyhan said:

> Linda: And what do you think of girls who do wear that [crop tops and tank tops]?
> Beyhan: Depends also on their faith. If they're Christian then I don't mind. [Interview Beyhan, 7 July 2006]

It is again interesting to see how the girls dichotomise religion: non-Muslim implies Christian. Dilara and Beyhan both argued their own religion prohibited wearing these items. They expressed the same respect for other religions as non-Muslim girls did for the headscarf.

10.3 The repertoire of choice

Freedom in/of choice is important to most girls in this study. The girls understood (aspects of) the world as being full of opportunities, options, and alternatives one can choose to utilize or not. One's individual freedom was as equally unassailable as religion in the multicultural discourse. In section 9.4, I introduced the repertoire of choice as a strategy through which the girls counter alleged the negative effects of sexually explicit music videos. From those quotes, choice resonates as something sacred: "if that's her choice, than that's okay". Maud's statement about the headscarf also clearly reflects this notion:

> Maud: I find that very sad for those children if they do that for their parents because they have to. But if they want it themselves, yeah then I think it also has something beautiful. That they really want to be loyal to that faith, so in that way I find it okay. [Interview Maud, 12 June 2006]

Maud stated it is "sad" when children are forced to do something, whereas if they themselves decide to do the same thing, it becomes "beautiful". Each girl, at one point or another, used this repertoire. In my discussion of this repertoire I focus on Islam in/and dress choice. I also discuss the negative side of this repertoire and end with a reflection about it.

The Muslim girls used a repertoire of choice when they spoke about Islam. Islam literally means submission, thus it presupposes an acting subject. The Muslim girls informed me that the choice of wearing a headscarf should always be made by the girl or woman who wears it. If a father pushes a daughter to wear a headscarf, the decision is no longer hers and the act is void or false in the eyes of Allah. Nazli and Dilara were the only girls to start wearing the scarf in secondary school. Nazli's classmates had asked her why she had started with the headscarf. Nazli's response, as she told me, was "it's my choice" ["is mijn keuze"]. Likewise, most of the other girls used this repertoire in talking about the headscarf. They argued it should be the girls' choice, and if it is her choice, it is a good thing. Conversely, when asked about their own ideas about the headscarf in primary school, they answered they chose not to. Similarly, the non-Muslim girls also used the repertoire of choice to

judge someone's decision to wear the scarf, like Maud in the example above. Nine Muslim girls indicated they were "not ready yet". Some of these wanted to wait and see what their new classmates would do (see subsection below), others found it difficult to talk about this:

> Linda: Some girls from this class are going to wear a headscarf next year. How do you feel about that?
> Romeysa: I think that is actually a good thing.
> Linda: Yeah?
> Romeysa: But I'm not going wear it right away.
> Linda: No? Why not?
> Romeysa: I have to be ready first.
> Linda: How will you know when you're ready?
> Romeysa: I'll just feel it within myself.
> Linda: Yes. And who do you think… That's hard to say of course, but when do you think that is?
> Romeysa: Don't know. Maybe seventeen or something.
> Linda: Yes. And is it important to you, to wear a headscarf later in life?
> Romeysa: Yes.
> Linda: Can you tell me a bit more about that?
> Romeysa: No. [Interview Romeysa, 7 July 2006]

To me, Romeysa's considerations about 'when you're ready' sounded much like considerations about the proper age to lose one's virginity (you know you're ready when you feel ready), namely these are considerations that are difficult to put into words.

The repertoire of choice was prevalent in discussing other dress choices as well. Several girls who would never wear porno-chic items themselves, 'allowed' other girls to do so:

> Aliye: Actually I never wore those [items like crop tops or tank tops], but just when I'm at home, then yes, but my parents allow me to wear it. But I don't know, you know, I don't feel good in them.
> Linda: No? And how do you feel about others wearing those clothes?
> Aliye: It's their choice, I can't say anything about it, you know. But if I don't like it I'm not going to go up to them and I'm not going to say 'I don't like it, take it off', you know. It's their own choice. [Interview Aliye, 8 June 2006]

In Aliye's answer we again see the sacredness of choice. By referring to something as 'choice', any decision is placed in a higher realm, which is beyond questioning and taken at face value. This was also apparent in the girls' discussions about sexually explicit music videos. "It's their life" and "if it's their choice" pre-emptively takes away the possibility of critique.

The repertoire of choice is a very optimistic one, yet it has a negative mirror. In the above section I discussed Consolacion's understanding of bullying. After she stated the opinion quoted above, I asked her if she had ever bullied anyone. Here, Consolacion switched to a repertoire of choice. She said she did, but never because someone was fat or – as Bianca herself thought – because someone had a different ethnic background. Instead, she bullied Bianca because Bianca snitched:

> Consolacion: Then I said like 'come here', you know. Then I welcomed her with open arms into our group really, but then she betrayed me with the teacher for something you know, while it was just a joke. Then I didn't like her anymore, because such people… I really hate that.
> Linda: Yeah, betrayal is really bad?
> Consolacion: Yes, I don't like that at all, then she ruined it completely.
> (…)
> Linda: Then you don't find it sad anymore?
> Consolacion: She betrayed me, why would I find it sad now? Like I feel sorry for her now, maybe she betrays me another time. [Interview Consolacion, 8 June 2006]

Choice resonates in this statement, because Bianca's behaviour was a matter of choice: she had chosen to betray Consolacion and could have also chosen not to. Consolacion thus held Bianca accountable for her actions: she deserved to be bullied because of her unacceptable behaviour. Likewise, in the focus groups, the girls at times constructed situations wherein bullying was allowed. For instance, group 1 described a boy who was "dirty" and "put things in his nose". They found it logical and acceptable he was bullied for this.

In chapter 2, I discussed the neo-liberal subject. Several scholars (e.g. Gill & Arthurs, 2006; Gonick, 2006) understand contemporary girls as neo-liberal subjects. The repertoire of choice substantiates these claims about the neo-liberal subject. The repertoire is indeed a celebration of individualism, and the sacredness of choice fits well with neo-liberalism. However, to understand the repertoire of choice one must look further than neo-liberalism's dominance in contemporary society. Girls find themselves in a disenfranchised position, because of their gender, but also because of their age. They live in a world where adults still make most of their decisions. They have to follow teachers' and parents' rules, and parental restrictions shape their use of performance practices (§8.5). Girls thus have limited control over many aspects of their lives. They do have some control over their behaviour and their appearance, and this control is treasured: 'it is my choice, I am responsible for this, I own

my life'. Thus, the repertoire of choice can also be seen as a way of taking control over, and resisting, their disenfranchised position. In other words, their insistence on their agency is a way of legitimatising their own voice and therefore themselves as subjects.

10.4 The repertoire of authenticity

To the girls, 'choice' implied a value judgment. Authenticity is another value judgment by which the girls judged their own and other behaviours, and which guided their thoughts and opinions. Authenticity as a term traces back to Ancient Greece. Historically the word was applied to texts and not to people (Montgomery, 2001: 398-399). Indeed, as Dyer points out, its application to people did not start until the rise of modernity. What is so "peculiar", according to Dyer, is that authenticity has become so central to judging people:

> The peculiarity of this use of these words is their application to individual persons as the criteria for the truth or validity of social affairs. (…) [T]he criteria governing performance have shifted from whether the performance is well done to whether it is truthful, that is, true to the 'true' personality of the performer. (I mean performer here in both its theatrical and sociological usages.) Even truth is a peculiar criterion – we no longer ask if someone performs well or according to certain moral precepts but whether what they perform is truthful, with the referent of truthfulness not being falsifiable statements but the person's 'person' (Dyer, 1991: 133).

The peculiarity thus lies with judging behaviour as 'true', instead of "right, or expedient, or formally correct, or kind" (p. 134). Dyer argues that in the modernist, intellectual revolutions[2] the individual has lost "her/his place as the guarantor of discourse" (p. 134) and the individual has thus become subject to criteria of *validity*. Although Dyer's account introduces an analysis of actress Judy Garland's authenticity, he specifically includes the "sociological" usage of performer as well. Post-modernism's emphasis on the constructed nature of identity has made achieving authenticity central to the identity project, because people experience multiple identities in differing contexts, and struggle to balance their self-values with the expectations of others (Howard, 2000). Giddens argues that in the reflexive project of the self, coherence must be given to past and mediated experiences and future projects. A person can only achieve this, if s/he is able to develop "an inner authenticity – a framework of basic trust by means of which the lifespan can be understood as a unity against the backdrop of shifting social events" (1991: 215).

Authenticity thus involves validity judgments of identity performance, and – as Giddens highlights – an aim to achieve a coherent narrative through time. I found both usages amongst the girls. They used a repertoire of authenticity when discussing people, behaviours and their styles. In addition, continuity (coherence) was essential to them as well, as already discussed in chapter 6. Throughout this dissertation, I have indicated instances in which the girls used this repertoire. Authenticity was also an issue in the assessment of ethnicity based on skin colour. As I showed in section 7.4, Amisha did not feel Surinamese because "real" Surinamese stem from African descent. In section 9.3, I demonstrated how the girls understood copying (images for the website) to be the opposite of authenticity. In this section, I focus on the use of the authenticity repertoire in reflexive talk, thus mainly addressing the authenticity of self. I first discuss "being yourself", before concentrating on the need for continuity of self.

"Being yourself"

For Thirza (Kantlijn), authenticity was central. In everyday conversations I had with her class, she often pointed out that she was different and "just herself". For instance, we once talked about drinks and she remarked how she drank less than half a litre of fluids a day. She added this was different. She also often drew attention to the fact that she was left-handed and dyslectic. She enjoyed saying others had told her she had her own, unique style. In the interview, she announced she would "stay herself" in secondary school, in order to "show who I really am". When I met up with her at her new secondary school, she stressed that popularity was now more important to her classmates, but not to her: "I don't care about that. I'm just myself". In the focus groups, she constantly made similar statements, like "I'm just myself and I don't care what other people think about that". The focusing exercise of conjuring up outfits for certain settings was pointless to her. She remarked:

> Thirza: Yes but it also depends mostly on how you are yourself, how you dress, because if you like [dress] according to this scheme we're making up right now... If you wear that, you do need to be like that. [Focus group 2, 21 February 2007]

Thirza thus stressed authenticity not only for herself, but also for others.

Thirza was exemplary in her use of this repertoire, but it was also common for all the other girls. This showed most clearly in their responses to my questions about their own style, looking good and about popularity. The girls mostly described their own style as "normal" (see

next section) and "just myself". Looking good was important, but not for the benefit of others: for themselves. Or, as Romeysa stated:

> Linda: Is it important for you to look good?
> Romeysa: No.
> Linda: And why is that then, that it's not important to you?
> Romeysa: I just wear for myself. [Interview Romeysa, 7 July 2006]

Several girls used the authenticity repertoire in response to my question of popularity. They answered it was more important to "stay themselves", "be who they are", "do their own thing".

Being yourself, and thus being authentic, is important because the opposite implies imitation or giving in to peer pressure. As I argued in the previous chapter, the girls did not want to admit to such a thing at all. These are the norms the girls have grown up with, norms propagated by schools, parents and society. Amongst themselves, the girls replicated these norms constantly. They not only applied them in judging others, but they also disciplined their own opinions and statements to this norm.

Continuity

In chapter 6's conclusion, I argued that the girls' need for authenticity and continuity in their identities (i.e. their narratives of self) impeded them from talking about radical changes between primary and secondary school. I pointed out various instances in their talk about these differences, in which this repertoire was present. In the focus groups, the girls also used this repertoire when discussing outfits for the first day at the new school. In this section, I briefly examine their understandings so as to further elucidate this repertoire.

The first day of school is important, as all the girls subscribed to the idea that you only get one chance to make a first impression. Impression management (see §3.3) is essential and all the girls paid special attention to their appearance on the first day. In the focus group interviews, this repertoire informed their discussions about inventing an ideal outfit for the first day of school. Several girls made it clear that possibilities are limited because continuity is the key. Jenna explains:

> Linda: The first situation is 'the first day of school'.
> Jenna: I already know it. I would [give] her, like, not all too special like. Well, if she does have many nice clothes it could, but if she only has a few…
> Linda: Just think that it's you, sort of. How you would [dress] yourself.

> Jenna: I would very much myself. I'd really… I wouldn't [do] something really special with all pretty, large necklaces that are really… Even if they're really in. If I hardly ever wore them, then I wouldn't…
> Linda: And why wouldn't you do that for the first day of school?
> Jenna: Yes, because then if I'd… If I'd dress like that on the first day of school, then I, for instance, don't have anything special like that, maybe then they'll think like 'Yeah, you have something nice one time and for the rest eh…' [Focus group 1, 6 February 2007]

Thus, Jenna argues that dressing especially nicely raises expectations, and if you cannot live up those expectations, your classmates will question your credibility. In general, the girls argued that you can wear your nicest outfit on the first day, but it needs to be representative of your other clothes.

Continuity was also stressed in relation to the headscarf. The girls in focus group 1 discussed a Muslim classmate who wore a headscarf on the first day:

> Noa: But now she's completely different.
> Roos: Yes, but she wasn't really sure if she already wanted to, and all… So then… But she already wore it the first day of school and afterwards, then she didn't wear it anymore, but then I thought like 'Yes, where did that one girl go?', because you saw…
> Linda: And did you find it stupid that she first wore the one thing and then did the other?
> Roos: No, it wasn't that bad… Because at first we already thought… I… At least I thought first 'yes', but it is kind of weird to wear it the first day of school and not the second. [Focus group 1, 6 February 2007]

Likewise, Nazli remarked that it was really important to her that Muslim girls stuck to their choice: you either wear the scarf or you do not, but you cannot make this decision day by day. Nazli said she found it "mean" when girls take off their headscarf, because "Allah doesn't like that" [Secondary school visit Nazli, 29 November 2006]. Continuity, then, limits the freedom the girls had in choosing outfits and performing their identities.

10.5 The repertoire of normalcy

More than anything else, these girls strived to be normal. Of course, the 'normal' is a highly problematic category. 'Normaal' [normal] and 'gewoon' [as an adjective ± ordinary, as an adverb ± just] seemed to be the girls' favourite words[3], and they were often used in combination. Many girls described their style in the interviews in this way:

> Linda: How would you describe your style?
> Marisol: Er... [silence] I don't know. Just normal...
> Linda: Just normal, yes...
> Marisol: I don't find it very cool or very sexy or something, just normal. [Interview Marisol, 3 July 2006]

It did not matter which identities the girls performed in terms of gender, age, ethnicity or class: all the girls at some point referred to themselves as 'just normal'. When each girl describes herself as normal, normal becomes an empty category. Marisol's answer showed some first entry points into discovering what 'just normal' means exactly: not very cool and not very sexy. Comparably, Laila stated: "I just sit with the normal children. I'm not popular and not a nerd either". I therefore start my analysis of normalcy by examining how the girls discussed the non-normal – in their words: the nerd.

Nerds

In section 6.5, I provided a list of the terms the girls used to designate cliques at their secondary schools. These labels show a construction of normalcy. Thus, most girls described themselves as 'normal' or 'regular'. At the same time, most of the other labels were negatively loaded: bitches, sluts, boring people. The only group that all the girls distinguished similarly were 'nerds', a label used only for boys. Kendall indeed (1999) argues that 'nerd' has been primarily a liminal masculine identity. Perhaps this association of the nerd with boys is the reason for the unanimity amongst the girls: it was thus a safe category to depreciate in an all-girl focus group. In her study on nerds, Bucholtz argues that the designation of 'nerd' is often a way to distinguish "nerds from non-nerds, and especially from cool teenagers" (Bucholtz, 1999: 212). I have already argued that popularity, let alone 'coolness', was not something the girls admittedly aspired. Instead, the term was used to describe deviant, undesired – not normal – behaviour. When I asked the girls to elaborate about nerds, they described either actual people in their classes, or hypothetical nerds. Hypothetical descriptions often stayed vague:

> Mickey: Well, they act really, they act really childish all the time and all. And they look a bit stupid. [Laughter]
> Linda: Yes, can you explain that?
> Mickey: Well...
> Pauline[4]: What's stupid?
> Vanessa: Different clothes than normal.
> Mickey: Yes, but that's not so bad in itself, but I mean, it's just wrong. [laughs] And their hair, it looks vague too. [Focus group 4, 2 March 2007]

A nerd acts childishly, looks stupid (meaning not normal), and has vague hair. Likewise:

> Pauline: How do you recognise a nerd?
> Noa: By his clothes.
> Roos: By the way he looks and the way he behaves.
> Noa: He just has three quarters trousers [Capri trousers].
> Roos: And sandals with socks and all, then a bit like this weird hair, then he has his bag all the way up in his neck. [Focus group 1, 6 February 2007]

These answers show insight into 'proper' clothing codes. Again, we see that the way in which one wears a backpack is important. Furthermore, nerds seem to be unable to get their haircuts right. When I asked them to elaborate, the girls provided extensive descriptions of specific boys and their deviant behaviour. Mickey continued about hair:

> Linda: Yes. Vague. Okay, then I still don't know much…
> Mickey: Well look, for instance a guy in my class is named [name], well that already explains a lot. But, and he has his hair, he just takes gel and he just puts it on and then he's done. That really looks horrible. [Focus group 4, 2 March 2007]

Of course there was nothing about the boy's name that was unusual, nor does Mickey's description provide any information about what was wrong with his hair. Instead, these descriptions, albeit awfully vague, are a way for the girls to construct acceptable behaviour. The same pattern returned in Amisha's description of a boy in her class:

> Amisha: So then, but then he doesn't put a belt on. That er, okay. So er, he acts really girlish. So if we have PE, then he runs like a girl. Really so funny! And er, and he's also a kind of know-it-all. Yeah, something like that. And then his hair, ieuwh! Really no, is no good! In the front it's really no good, and in the back it's really-really no good. And he always carries his books with him. And he... yeah, really such a nerd. [Focus group 4, 2 March 2007]

Mickey and Amisha were in the same focus group, but came from different schools. Amisha's background also differed strongly from the other girls, but she commented on similar 'abnormal' features: acting childishly and bad hair. Here, we see the collective construction of meaning in a focus group setting at play. Describing nerds in a similar fashion allowed Mickey and Amisha to find common ground. Furthermore, it shows how such constructions only come about by negotiation.

Constructing the normal

The girls showed great ease in describing nerds, and their descriptions in these focus groups are likely to occur in similar ways in the school classroom or cafeteria. Talking about these boys, then, offers a safe way to gossip about inappropriate behaviour, without running the risk of insulting a friend or a friend's friend. In their talk, the girls gave various descriptions of things they considered not normal. A few examples: a boy with a very large mouth, dirty hands, picking one's nose and eating the pickings, torn clothes. When the girls talked about other girls, they were more careful in their formulations than when discussing boys. For instance, one group mentioned clashing colours were not done.

> Jenna: In any case not something that really clashes. You shouldn't do that. [laughter]
> Linda: And what do you mean with 'clashing'? Pink and red together, or...?
> Jenna: No, purple and orange, or something.
> Marisol: That has [name] always by the way; that girl [inaudible]. Then she has [laughs]... er what was it again? Well, really vague in any case. She had light-green jogging bottoms – a bit apple green – and then like a pink T-shirt on top and then a bright-red bag.
> (...)
> Linda: And do you normally say something about that?
> Marisol: If someone doesn't... If we think that something clashes, or something, then I will say like 'that really clashes', or something. Or 'that looks bad', or...
> Noa: I think that's pitiful.
> Jenna: I won't say it to the person, because I think that's painful. I'm not gonna go 'ieuwh, that clashes'. When they like ask me what I think, I myself will say 'yeah, I won't wear it myself, but in itself I like it'. [Focus group 1, 6 february 2007]

Again the excerpt shows how normalcy is collectively constructed. Jenna and Marisol worked together to formulate what constituted clashing colours. Marisol stated she would tell the girl. Note how she said "if we think" – it is hence something she would discuss with her friends first. When Noa intersected that she believes it is pitiful, Jenna constructed another way of handling this. She stated she would not tell the girl, but would come up with the more diplomatic "I won't wear it myself". My interest here lies not with the truthfulness of such practices in the actual school. What is at stake is that the girls were constructing proper behaviour together.

Normal appearance

I asked the girls in the focus groups to describe appropriate outfits for different occasions. I identified the first day of the school as the most important day to look 'normal'. The girls used the word 'normal' most often in describing the outfit for the first day. Furthermore, the first day of school was the 'basis' from which the girls worked. Any 'extras', the girls argued, should be saved for other occasions.

> Group 1: Jeans, T-shirt, trainers (Converse All Stars). Hair can be either loose or in a ponytail.
> Group 2: Jeans, a top with a cardigan, trainers or boots (depending on the cut of the jeans). Modest jewellery. Hair in a high ponytail (after long debate about how a low ponytail looks prissy).
> Group 3: Skinny jeans[5], T-shirt, trainers (Nike). Modest makeup.
> Group 4: Skinny jeans, blouse or cardigan, brand trainers. Modest or no makeup. Modest jewellery.
> Group 5: Jeans, T-shirt, trainers.

The girls' answers were thus incredibly uniform. When I asked them what message they wanted to convey with their outfits, however, their answers differed more. Some wanted to look a little "cool", others wanted to look "decent". However, they all agreed they did not want to stand out much. Again, the words "normal" and "just/ordinary" were often used here.

The desire to look 'normal' is a desire to belong and fit in with the other girls. This appeared clearly in Amisha's desire to take off her headscarf in the 8th form. As stated previously, the Gunningschool banned headscarves. Amisha had previously attended an Islamic primary school and transferred to the Gunningschool in the 7th form. The headmaster made an exception for Amisha, and she was allowed to continue to wear her scarf. As a result, Amisha was the only girl in school with a headscarf. In March 2006, she took it off. I asked her to tell me a bit more about this decision[6].

> Amisha looks very happy as she tells me she had wanted to take the scarf off for quite some time. She no longer wanted the headscarf because the other children also do not wear a scarf. She was so nervous when she asked her father. She first thought about what she wanted to say and she practised in front of the mirror a couple of times. She then put the matter before her father and she explained she did not want the scarf because of the other children. He father agreed. Her father then said he was okay with her taking the scarf off, but she had to work extra hard and pray well every day. She never liked it, because it was really tight around her head. Amisha wore the headscarf since 4th form. She was really excited then, because it felt like she

> belonged with the older girls. At that school there were two playgrounds, one for younger and one for the 4th form and up. To her, the headscarf then meant she finally belonged to the older girls. [Extra interview Amisha, 9 March 2006]

Amisha's account showed how normalcy means not looking any different to the other girls. Amisha's headscarf made her stand out amongst the other girls, even though they were predominantly Muslim. This standing out was enough reason for her to confront her father. Second, the meaning of the headscarf changed for Amisha. At the Islamic school, the headscarf symbolised being older, in the same way playing on the 'other' playground did. At the Gunningschool, the headscarf no longer symbolised that, instead it became an unwanted sign of difference. When I interviewed her in March, she said:

> Linda: Do you like it, because you've not worn it for a while now. What is it like to have it off?
> Amisha: Very different, because when I came here they started to call me names, like 'oh look, she with the headscarf' and I was very lonely most of the time, because they thought oh I'm different with that headscarf and yeah… Now I have my headscarf off, everybody treats me nice. [Interview Amisha, 9 June 2006]

Likewise, other Muslim girls like Naoul and Gülen told me in 8th form they considered wearing the headscarf in secondary school, but they wanted to wait and see what their friends did first.

> Naoul: Maybe, really maybe in the 2nd form.
> Linda: Yes, how come?
> Naoul: Don't know.
> Linda: Yes. Is that something you want, wearing a headscarf?
> Naoul: Yes.
> Linda: But maybe not next year?
> Naoul: No.
> Linda: And what does that depend on if you want it next year, or in the 2nd or 3rd form?
> Naoul: [Silence] Just because first I get to know children and all, and maybe if they wear headscarf too and all. Yes, I think so, really maybe. [Interview Naoul, 30 June 2006]

The headscarf can be a sign of both belonging and non-belonging, and this can only be assessed in context. The example of Amisha's headscarf emphasises that normalcy thus refers to the dominant way of dress at a school, regardless of other issues like religion.

10.6 Conclusion

In this final results chapter, I investigated the criteria that govern girls' identity performances. I discussed the four repertoires the girls used to talk about media, appearance, and identity. The girls used these repertoires at different times, thus switching repertoires per researched setting, and alternating repertoires whilst discussing the same topic. The repertoires reveal the norms that are most important to the girls in identity – for both their own identities and for the identities of others. The girls' use of the politically correct repertoire showed that they considered bullying and discrimination to be morally wrong. Choice and authenticity were high values for these girls, and these repertoires served to legitimatise actions. Normalcy, finally, is the highest value, because in the end, all the girls aspired to be included and accepted by their peers. These repertoires are at odds. Choice can be at odds with the morality of the politically correct repertoire. Likewise, the freedom implied by the repertoire of choice is limited by authenticity. Authenticity in turn, is at odds with the desire to be normal and like the others. Normalcy is perhaps the trickiest repertoire, because it remained unclear what exactly constituted the normal. Observation and reflection – of family, of peers, of society – are the methods the girls used to disentangle ideas about normalcy. Furthermore, 'the normal' is collectively and tentatively constructed and performed.