

Women and Wardrobes

An ethnographic study of women and their clothes



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This thesis would not have materialised had it not been for a number of people.

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Introduction

It has become generally accepted that today's postmodern consumer society, with its mass consumption and production, makes for an ever widening choice of products. Congruently with this ever widening choice of products has come the ever widening choice of clothing options. This, in turn, seems to have led to the belief that today simply by means of how we dress and what we wear 'everyone can be anyone' (Featherstone 1991: 83). The numerous makeover and clothing shows on television are testimony to the widely held belief that 'clothes make the man' And the woman. Hardly a day goes by without people, and particularly women, being told 'What Not to Wear', 'How to look good naked' (ironically a show about cloths and appearance) or to look '10 years younger in 10 days' either by means of the respective television shows or the obligatory accompanying book. On these shows we can see (mostly) women enter as the proverbial sartorial ugly ducklings, and leave as beautiful and stylish swans. But we can also see something else occurring: almost without exception we see these women struggle with trying to get this new look and their new, and better, 'me' to go with something deeper, something inside. Indeed, the biggest challenge for the stylists and participants on these shows seems not to be to just look better or more fashionable, but getting the outside to fit the inside, the inner self. Thus, in addition to the more obvious constraints (and possibilities) to the individual's options of what clothes to wear, such as economic and social circumstances, there appear to be less obvious constraints with regard to what one feels one can wear. It is these less obvious constraints that form the object of this research project.

The object of this research has been to shed light on the various dimensions of the question why women chose to wear the clothes they wear. The choice of this research object has been motivated by a long held wish on my part to be able to focus (part of) my studies on material culture, in particular the anthropological and sociological study of clothing and fashion.

The subjects of my research are adult women of potentially any walk of life or part of society. No adult female was excluded from the research population beforehand. The research did not target women with a professional interest in the (high-end) fashion business or women with a particular social or ethnical background, leaving it open to practically all women over eighteen years of age.

I choose to carry out my research in my home country, The Netherlands, in part due to personal reasons on which I prefer not to elaborate, and in part to seize the opportunity to acquaint myself with the particularities of doing ethnography 'at home'. This is in line with the ongoing trend of the past few decades within anthropology to study one's own society and culture instead of the more 'exotic' places and 'primitive' peoples traditionally favoured by anthropologists, and I expect that researching one's own society will be increasingly part of the anthropologists', and thus my, professional life. Doing research on one particular aspect of society, in turn, is in line with the development within

anthropology to focus on one aspect or process of the societies under study, and to no longer uphold the traditional aim and ideal of holism, which aimed to study entire societies in all their aspects.

The research has been carried out within the framework of the Leiden University MA program with the aim of acquiring the Master of Arts degree in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology. The research has been supervised by Prof. Dr. P.J. ter Keurs.

The thesis is divided into three parts, a theoretical, an empirical and an analytical part. In the first part, in chapter one, the employed research method and research techniques will be introduced and explained. In chapter two a theoretical background on the study and functions of clothing will be given. This is followed by the second part, in which the women that took part in the research will be introduced (chapter 3), as will be their wardrobes (chapter 4). The third and final part of the thesis consists of chapter 5 in which I present the research findings and introduce the notions of the Others, the Self and the Clothes as playing a pivotal role in women's clothing choices. To finalise this chapter, these findings will then be placed in the wider context of identity formation and presentation.

1. On method

Research method and techniques should follow from the research question, not the other way around (Charmaz 2009: 134). Setting out on this research project with the very broad research question ‘*which factors influence/determine women’s clothing choices?*’, in addition to choosing not to limit my potential research population by focussing on one particular group with certain characteristics, I found myself in urgent need of a method that could give structure to the task at hand, but at the same time would not compromise the ethnographic character of the research. I decided that *constructivist grounded theory* fitted these requirements best and was the method to be employed. The constructivist grounded theory method allows the researcher to enter the field without a rock solid theoretical framework and accompanying hypotheses to test. Rather, grounded theory methods consist of systematic but flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data collected. Thus, the data form the foundation of the theory that is to follow. Be it either newly developed theory, or theory developed earlier which is then used to explain the research findings, the data are always the guiding principle (Charmaz 2006: 2). Since I set out on this project with the help and guidelines handed to me by this method rather than a theoretical framework, I thought it appropriate to start with a chapter on method first.

1.1 Research method: Constructivist Grounded Theory

Constructivist grounded theory evolved from *classic grounded theory* which was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), in 1967 (Charmaz 2009: 13). In grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss brought together their two contrasting philosophical and methodological traditions: Columbia University positivism, emphasising ‘*the scientific method*’ and assuming an external world about which an unbiased observer can discover abstract generalities that explain empirical phenomena and in which facts and values are separate (*op. cit.*: 128); and University of Chicago pragmatism, which sees reality as consisting of fluid, somewhat indeterminate processes, acknowledges multiple perspectives emerging from people’s actions to solve problems in their worlds, and in which facts and values are joined (*ibid*). Constructivist grounded theory is a contemporary revision of Glaser and Strauss’ classic grounded theory and its main advocate is Kathy Charmaz. Constructivist grounded theory recognises that conducting and writing up research are by no means neutral acts. It sees knowledge as socially produced, acknowledges multiple and varying standpoints both on the side of the research participant and that of the researcher, and it takes a reflexive stance towards the field experience and the analytic constructions following from that field

experience (*op. cit.*: 129-130). Thus, constructivist grounded theory recognises that both the research subject and the researcher bring ‘baggage’ to the field¹. It deems it impossible that the researcher will not show up in, or shine through, the research somehow or somewhere. This isn’t necessarily bad, it is simply something to be aware of and, preferably, made explicit.

Constructivists try to understand research participants’ beliefs, meanings and the actions they (do not) take, and the reasons for these (in)actions, from the participants’ point of view. They aim to unravel the assumptions on which participants construct their beliefs, meanings and actions (*op. cit.*: 131). It is the researcher’s job to place these meanings and actions in larger social structures and discourses (of which the research participant themselves may, or may not, be aware), and make visible ‘the connections between micro and macro levels of analysis (...), linking the subjective and the social’ (*ibid.*). Interaction throughout the entire research process, i.e., during data collection as well as during the analytical process, is a key feature of constructivist grounded theory (*op. cit.*: 137). Typically, when grounded theorists encounter a surprising finding while going about their research, they will, firstly, explore and consider all conceivable theoretical ideas that could account for the finding; secondly, return to the field and gather more data to put these ideas to the test; and, ultimately, adopt the most plausible theoretical interpretation. Thus, ‘abductive reasoning follows inductive inquiry’ (*ibid.*).

This research project was to be first and foremost an ethnographic research project. It was very important that the employed methods and techniques would not interfere with the ethnographic character (the fieldwork, the engagement with the research subjects, the participant observation and ultimately the writing up of the findings) of the research. An important reason to employ constructivist grounded theory therefore was that it can complement the qualitative approach of ethnography, and does not oppose it (Charmaz, 2006: 9). Rather, constructivist grounded theory holds a ‘methodological eclecticism [that] negates views of grounded theory and ethnography as mutually exclusive approaches (...)’ (Charmaz, 2009: 134). On the contrary, constructivist grounded theory and ethnography can go together very well. Employing constructivist grounded theory can help ethnographers in focusing, structuring and organising their research. After all, as Charmaz puts it, a potential problem with ethnographic research is ‘seeing data everywhere and nowhere’ (2006: 23), gathering everything and ending up with an enormous amount of data and feeling completely lost only to discover later (and then hopefully not too late) that we have overlooked something most interesting,

¹ Constructivist grounded theory should be distinguished from earlier forms of social constructivism in that the last viewed research subject’s actions as constructed, but not the researcher’s. Furthermore, constructivist grounded theory does not assume that individual consciousness is all-explanatory, as is the case with social constructivism. Instead, constructivist grounded theory tries to place research findings in relation to the relevant social circumstances (Charmaz, 2009: 134).

or worse, essential. Using the constructivist grounded theory method can help to prevent or solve this problem by encouraging the researcher, firstly, to compare data from the beginning of the research and not to wait until after all the data are collected; secondly, to compare data with emerging categories; and thirdly, to demonstrate relations between concepts and categories. After all, the logic of grounded theory entails going back and forth between data and analysis. Furthermore, doing ethnographic research takes time and demands commitment and often persistence. Constructivist grounded theory can be particularly helpful in dealing with ‘excess work without the core task [the gathering of rich ethnographic data] being compromised’ (Charmaz, 2006: 23-24). And this core task, also with the use of the constructivist grounded theory method, still means that the researcher starts by ‘engaging with the studied phenomenon’ (*op. cit.*: 24).

1.2 Research techniques

Although traditionally participant observation is *the* research method in anthropology that sets it apart from other disciplines, in practice it is usually one of a number of techniques employed for gathering data. For this study I, too, have used a variety of techniques to collect data during the fieldwork period.

Observation. In line with the anthropological fieldwork tradition I have made extensive use of observation, both *participant observation* – while engaging in what I have come to call *the wardrobe interviews* – and *passive observation*. The latter I did not explicitly plan to use beforehand, but it nonetheless became an important way of gathering information, especially in ‘non-research’ settings, during informal conversations and activities. Observing and listening came to be a ‘professional habit’, which I no doubt developed long before this research project, but which has become especially fine-tuned during the fieldwork period. Participant observation involves not only observing people and their activities in what are assumed to be ordinary social situations, but also interacting with people and engaging in daily activities. Here my main focus has been on mentioned wardrobe interviews.

The initial idea for this came to me when reading Sophie Woodward’s ‘*Why Women Wear What They Wear*’ (2007). For her research, which resulted in the above mentioned title, Woodward carried out an ethnographic study in two urban settings in Great Britain (London and Nottingham), by ‘hanging out in the home and the bedroom’ (2007: 31). She spent considerable time gaining trust and consequently access to the very private ‘backstage’ domain in which getting dressed typically takes place, and was allowed to be present while her research subjects chose what to wear, at the time of getting dressed: the ‘wardrobe moment’ (Woodward 2007: 3). Earlier this term was used by Guy, Green and Banim (2001), using it to describe the moment in which ‘a woman [is standing] in front of the wardrobe, [looking] through the clothes stored within and [wondering] what to wear’, while asking herself a whole series of questions such as ‘Where am I going and what am I doing today/tonight?’ ‘Who is going to be there?’ ‘Does it matter what I look like when I get there?’ ‘What kind of mood am I in?’ ‘Am I having a ‘fat’ day or a ‘thin’ day?’ ‘What is clean and ironed?’ ‘Does that jumper (...) go

with that skirt?’ ‘Will I get away with those trousers again or have I worn them too much recently?’ ‘Can I carry off that new top or will it make me look like mutton dressed as lamb?’ (Guy *et al.* 2001: 1). Initially I intended to copy Woodward’s approach and planned to be present at my research participants’ wardrobe moments. This, however, often proved to be an impossibility, mainly due to practical reasons such as the busy schedules of the women (it was hard enough planning the very time-consuming interview sessions), and the often unscheduled nature of a wardrobe moment. Except for perhaps in the morning, hardly anyone knows to the minute when they will get up and get dressed or change into something else. Unless it is for a special occasion, it is most of the time a snap decision followed by an ‘auto-pilot’ action, which is, at the surface at least, not very thought provoking. What’s more, to plan beforehand to have a researcher present at this precise time does away with a lot of the spontaneity of the moment; possibly, presumably, not influencing the objectivity of the research in a favourable manner.

Intensive qualitative interviewing. In addition to observation I used intensive qualitative interviewing as a data-gathering technique. In practice, these interviews and the wardrobe moment observations came to take place simultaneously, morphing the two separate techniques together into my own variety of the wardrobe moment, into what I came to call *the wardrobe interviews*. These wardrobe interviews took place in front of, and evolved around the contents of the wardrobes of the research participants. During these interviews all items in the wardrobe were discussed at length.

It is well documented that objects can mediate for a person, and that it is sometimes possible to come to insights into personal experiences through the use of people’s personal belongings where this otherwise would not be possible (see Hoskins 1998). As such, ‘the object becomes a prop, a storytelling device, and also a mnemonic for certain experiences’ (Hoskins 1998: 4). Although the main objective here was not to use the wardrobe as a means to get women to talk on any subject other than the clothes themselves and the women’s relationships with them, it turned out to be the perfect leveraging tool to get the conversation going and to get the women to open up. And, consequently, to acquire the right information about the research participants’ lived experiences of the process of choosing their clothing. It so turns out that the clothes not only were a research object, but also (part of) a research technique.

Additional interviewing. Originally, I had intended, in addition to the individual interviews, to set up a focus group discussion later on in the research process. The purpose of this focus group, made up exclusively of research participants who had been interviewed on an individual basis earlier on in the research, was to tentatively present and test outcomes of the analysis while still being in the process of analysing the data, and to possibly coax out additional information or insights. However, as is widely known and accepted (and expected for that matter) in ethnographic research, with its volatile research sites and conditions, not everything, if anything, goes as planned; and mine is no exception. The focus group interview proved to be too ambitious a plan. It has simply not been possible to get a

significant number of participating women together, at the same time and place, for the necessary amount of time within the time limits of this project. This set back has not forced me, however, to deter completely from my plan to move back and forth between the data and the analysis and to ‘by-test’ my findings. In practice, the wardrobe interviews either consisted of more than one session or were followed by another regular interview, giving me the opportunity to get participant’s to elaborate on interesting or unclear matters. In addition, ‘my’ women have been very forthcoming in spontaneously offering additional information, thoughts and anecdotes in the course of the research till this very day, often accompanied with words along the line of ‘I never gave it much thought before we talked about it, but now I’ve noticed that...’. Their enthusiasm has been of enormous value for the successful rounding up of this research adventure.

1.3 Sampling

I found my research participants by using *snowball sampling*. Snowball sampling is the well established practice of asking respondents to recommend other possible research participants for the researcher to approach. The big advantage of this method is that it almost always increases the number of respondents because people become more positive towards a researcher, and more willing to cooperate, when introduced by someone they know (Small 2009: 14). A disadvantage often associated with this sampling technique is that snowball samples are possibly more biased than samples put together randomly. Particularly in a large population not every person has the same chance of being included in a snowball sample (Russell Bernard 1995: 97). With snowball sampling, final participants in the research are more likely to know each other than would be the case had they been selected blindly (Small 2009: 14), and thus have a bigger chance of sharing a particular background and characteristics that are likely to colour their views and opinions. Both advantage and disadvantage proved to be true in this case. Starting out with four people I know and found willing to take part in this research, I subsequently moved on to people they in turn suggested to be willing to partake. Eventually I ended up with more potential research participants than I could handle in the limited time available, resulting in a small sample of seven women, all from social-economic backgrounds relatively similar to mine, and each other.

1.4 Doing ethnography at home

I did research ‘at home’ and doing ethnography in your own society brings with it its own particular challenges and pitfalls. Going away to a foreign country, as traditionally has been the anthropological practice, means becoming an ‘outsider’ enabling one to see things insiders no longer notice because they have become used to them. ‘Strange’ habits and (cultural) practices as well as noises, sounds, smells, tastes and other sensations will be fully experienced, for a while at least, and may even become overwhelming to the point of causing culture shock. So how then is one to do anthropological research

being an 'insider'? When setting out on this research project I wondered if I would be able to 'see' things seeming and feeling, to me, just normal. How would I 'unfamiliarise' myself from my familiar surroundings in a manner sufficient to enable me to actually notice things I see, hear, or experience every day? Unsurprisingly, no single recipe is prescribed for dealing with this question in the literature regarding this subject. Some anthropologists have resolved to doing comparative research, only to circumvent this problem entirely; others advise to go abroad for some time prior to the research in order to return with a fresh outlook (Van Ginkel 1998). Van Ginkel warns 'not to overemphasise the differences between anthropology at home and abroad' (1998: 256), and that is exactly my experience with home-anthropology. No doubt, whether one goes abroad or stays at home to do research, each will bring with it its own particular advantages and disadvantages.

2. Clothing Matters

2.1 The Study of Clothing

Clothing has long been the object of study in a wide variety of academic fields such as anthropology, sociology, archaeology, historical studies, fashion studies and material culture studies. Writings on the subject can be traced back to as early as the sixteenth century, with Michel de Montaigne as one of the earliest writers to address the topic with his essay *Of the Custom of Wearing Clothes* (1575) (Johnson, Torntore & Eicher (eds.) 2003: 8, 15-17). As far as anthropology's contribution to the study of clothing is concerned, there appears to be some difference of opinion. While Schwarz, in 1979, maintains that 'clothing is a subject about which anthropologists should have much to say, yet remain mysteriously silent' (Schwarz 1979: 23), that 'indeed, descriptions of clothing are so rare in some texts of social anthropology (...) that the casual reader might easily conclude that the natives go naked' and that 'in short, during the past thirty years we have increased our knowledge of the technology, psychology, and social organization and art of the naked ape, but we have made little progress in understanding his refusal to remain naked' (*op. cit.*: 23, 28), Barnes and Eicher claim that 'since the early years of the twentieth century, anthropologists have produced an impressive body of literature' (1992: 10). However, the disagreement seems to be more about what constitutes 'an impressive body of literature' than about the actual work done in anthropology. For they agree that the interest in clothing has increased, according to Barnes and Eicher 'especially after 1960, [when] distinguishing characteristics of dress of females and males (...) caught the attention of anthropologists intent on analyzing cultural similarities and differences between various societies' (1992:10), and according to Schwarz 'in the early decades of this [20th] century' when 'the search for origins and the study of social functions of adornment was clearly a matter of concern to anthropologists (...)' (1979: 27). The grievance seems to lie in the long absence in the history of anthropology of systematic study and description of clothes as a topic of interest in its own right. Instead 'analyses have tended to be treatments of limited aspects of dress published in monographs, occasional journal articles and book excerpts, or information included incidentally in the general coverage of the material culture of a group of people' (Barnes & Eicher 1992: 10), as 'most ethnographers(...), include descriptive sections on dress in their monographs, usually under the rubric of material culture' (Schwarz 1979:27).

Crawley (1912) is often cited as having been the first anthropologist to relate dress to various human behaviours (Barnes and Eicher 1992: 9-10), and, as such, pivotal in the development of the study of dress 'as a form of communication, as social display, and as social currency' (Johnson, Torntore & Eicher (eds.) 2003: 10). For over thirty years now, in anthropology, clothing has been studied more extensively, often in relation to the formation and/or presentation of a variety of identities such as gender-, ethnical- or national identities. Roach and Eicher (1979), for example, have explored the importance of adornment as an aesthetic act of expression across different cultures,

Barnes and Eicher (1992) have demonstrated the relation between clothing and gender identities and Eicher (1995) the relation between clothing and ethnicity. Tarlo (1996) has done a wonderful study on clothing and national identity in India. Fashion studies have looked extensively to the fashion industry, its organisation, pressures and patterns, to account for fashion (Miller 2010: 33), and thus – in part at least – for what women wear. But by far the most work on clothing has been done within material culture studies. It was with the ascension of material culture studies that the interest in clothing, and ‘stuff’ in general, has taken flight. In particular Miller has produced an impressive oeuvre on clothing and many a related subject, such as shopping (Miller 1998), clothing as material culture (Küchler and Miller 2005), the sari (Banerjee and Miller 2008) and denim (Miller and Woodward 2011).

For this research I am particularly indebted to Sophie Woodward and her study on women and their clothing choices *‘Why women wear what they wear’* (2007), both for my choice of research topic and for the theoretical foundation this research had at the outset. It was Woodward’s work that gave me the basic theoretical ideas around which this research evolved. I purposely do not say ‘on which this research is based’ for as I explained in Chapter 1, in order to give direction to the research, I relied on research method rather than a theoretical framework with hypotheses to test. However, as I also mentioned, no researcher enters the field completely blank and it was Woodward who gave me an idea of what getting dressed is about. Woodward sees the act of choosing what to wear as a practice of identity construction from the items present in the wardrobe (Woodward 2007: 5), and depending on the occasion for which women are dressing, different identities are presented. Choosing what to wear is ‘an act of rejection and selection’ in order to construct an identity (*op. cit.*: 7), and attempts to construct an identity can be either successful or a failure. This makes it an ambivalent process and subsequently a theory of dress and identity necessarily ‘a theory of ambivalence’ (*ibid.*). Women’s participation in fashion is always situated in their own lives, relationships and biographies. Moreover, women’s ideas of what is ‘in’ are always determined in relation to what they feel is ‘me’, tying concerns over fashion and clothing to the sense of self (*op. cit.*: 155). Additionally to being an act of ‘surfacing’ and of ‘presenting’ different aspects of the self, deciding what to wear is also an act of ‘drawing in’ relationships by means of wearing clothing items that were gifts or borrowed from other people (*op. cit.*: 158). Furthermore, women’s actual relationship to clothes cannot simply and straightforwardly be reduced to the workings of the high street, fashion and celebrity magazines or designer catwalk dictates (*op. cit.*: 154-155). Finally, the relationship clothing has to the body, how it looks, feels and allows for movement, their materiality, is considered to be central to how women decide what to wear (*op. cit.*: 3).

2.2 The Origins of Clothing

People wear clothes. At least, most of them do. And the ones that do not wear ‘proper’ clothes undoubtedly adorn their bodies in one way or another, wearing some type of coverage to protect their

modesty –whatever body parts that may be– or some kind of adornment or body modification that alters their natural appearance. As far as our part of the world, Europe, is concerned though, one can safely say that ‘people wear clothes’. But why? For ages man, ‘the naked ape’, went about his business just like that: naked. At some point however, he started covering up². Since then several ideas on why humans started wearing coverings have developed. Through the years a number of hypotheses on the origin and evolution of clothing have been posed, trying to pinpoint the reason for humans to start dressing.

The first reason often hypothesised for humans to start wearing clothes is for **protection**. Here the origin of clothing is attributed to the need to protect oneself against the elements and environmental conditions. But although a strong relation exist between the wearing of clothes and ecological conditions, there are parts in the world where one ‘would expect to find protective garments,(...), but where such items are absent’ (Schwarz 1979: 25). More evidence against this hypothesis can be found in the modern day phenomenon of some women not having to think twice about going out in skirts without tights, or some people without coats, in weather cold enough to justify the wearing of such items. Somewhat less obvious than needing protection from their natural surroundings, humans are also thought to be in need of protection against supernatural powers by means of their clothes. It has been suggested that not only the origin but the main function of ‘primitive’ adornment (including clothes) may be traced to people’s need to keep themselves safe from malign spiritual powers. There seems to be an overlap in these two dangers from which mankind allegedly needs protection though, since such evil spirits to which these powers are attributed are often associated with natural phenomena such as the wind, rain, rivers, lightning, the sun and the moon (*ibid.*).

The **shame** hypothesis is thought to have its origin in the bible. This theory holds that clothing was adopted, out of a sense of shame or modesty, to conceal the genitalia. Starting with the fig leaf, more complex types of clothing then evolved (*op. cit.*: 26). It has convincingly been argued, however, that the popularity of this theory in its time ‘was due more to the moral climate of the nineteenth century than ethnological evidence’ (*ibid.*).

The **attraction** hypothesis maintains that the original purpose of clothing was to draw attention to oneself, more particularly to the genital area and their erotic functions, thus, hopefully, ‘increasing the observer’s sexual interest in the wearer’ (*ibid.*).

And finally, according to the **status and ranking** hypothesis clothing finds its origin in the need for people to be able to differentiate between members of a society according to gender, age class, caste, ethnicity, nationality, etc. (*op. cit.*: 27).

² Not embellishing or adorning, this is a much older practice found even amongst primates, see Schwarz 1979, introduction.

From this we can conclude that plenty has been suggested as to what caused humans to start wearing clothes. But not one of these hypotheses can by itself fully explain why the naked ape decided to dress up. Instead, it has become obvious that not one singular event has been responsible for this (r)evolution, but rather that a variety of environmental, psychological and socio-cultural factors has been involved in this change (*op. cit.*: 25). More illuminating than searching for the origins of clothing therefore, may be to look into the functions of clothing, that is, what clothing is for, which job it is expected to do. On this subject more consensus seems to exist than on the origins of clothing.

2.3 The Functions of Clothing

To see what would spring to mind when people are actually asked about this, I posed the question *Why do you wear clothes?* to some of my unsuspecting acquaintances. They invariably gave me a puzzled look, often started to laugh and gave an answer along the line of ‘Well, I can’t go around naked can I?’ This response to this simple, though admittedly unusual question, readily gives away some functions of clothing. Because why is the thought of going without clothes so unthinkable, and laughable, to us? Well, for one thing, we would run a more than average risk to get cold and wet, at least in our part of the world. And what’s more, we would undoubtedly be stared at, and very possibly get arrested by the police. The matter immediately touches upon the issues of protection and decency, which are reflected in the functions of clothing, especially the material functions, as we shall see.

Various authors have written about the functions of clothing but no one as systematic as Roach and Eicher in their article *The Language of Personal Adornment* (1979), and subsequently Barnard, in his book *Fashion as communication* (2002), admittedly basing his functions of clothing and fashion on the functions of adornment identified by Roach and Eicher. For the next part I will follow Barnard though, since, as mentioned, he has focused on clothing (and fashion) whereas Roach and Eicher are dealing with adornment. And although these two are closely related and often overlapping in meaning, they are not quite the same: while (almost) all clothing is also a form of adornment, not all forms of adornment is clothing.

Barnard (2002) ‘provisionally and for the sake of argument’ separates the material functions of dress from their cultural functions. He readily admits that such a separation is flawed in that the material functions always have cultural functions too: ‘what a culture chooses to protect itself from and the ways in which it does so with (...) dress are also ways in which that culture communicates its identity as a culture’ (Barnard 2002: 49). What we will also see is that many of these functions overlap – material with cultural functions, but also material functions with other material functions, and cultural with other cultural functions. It is sometimes hard to distinguish one from the other, and they often go hand in hand, making separating them indeed seem artificial. But useful for the sake of analysis and clarity, nonetheless. Now, let’s have a look at what functions clothing can fulfil.

Protection. It was Malinowski who argued that things like shelter were cultural responses to basic physical needs (1944 :91-120). In the case of shelter, the basic physical need is that of bodily comfort and this basic need for comfort ‘prompts people throughout the world to create various forms of shelter’ (Polhemus and Procter in Barnard 2002: 51). These various forms of shelter may range ‘from igloos to grass huts to three-bedroom semis and from umbrellas to clothing. According to this view, clothing (...), is a response to a physical need for protection and shelter’ (Barnard 2002: 51). Earlier it was mentioned already that it can be argued that protection is not the only, nor the most important function of clothing. The protection hypotheses can only be held partly because of abundant evidence that confirms that cultural responses to this basic human need for protection vary widely, not only across cultures but also within cultures, and that ‘the link between clothing and protection from inclement weather is not a natural one, (...)’ (*op. cit.*: 52). But protection, from the elements and against prying eyes, is the first thing that apparently comes to mind when asked about the reasons we wear clothes. Like the answers to my earlier question indicated. So, although protection may not always be the most important argument for wearing clothes, irrelevant or unimportant it isn’t either. And the things we need protection from are numerous and diverse. If we are to believe Flügel ‘clothing protects the body from the cold, the heat, ‘accidents incidental to dangerous occupations and sports’, human or animal enemies, and physical or psychological dangers. These psychological dangers are manifold, including a whole range of ‘magical and spiritual agencies’ which may be warded off with the aid of amulets and other magical adornments. Moral dangers may also be avoided by the use of thick, dark-coloured and stiff clothing, such as a monk’s habit’ (Flügel in Barnard 2002: 51-52). And, not unimportantly, clothing may offer protection ‘against the general unfriendliness of the world as a whole’ or ‘as a reassurance against the lack of love’ (*ibid.*).

Concealment. Just as the link between the wearing of clothes and protection is arguably not always a natural one, neither so is the link between the wearing of clothes and the concealment of the body for reasons of modesty. For here, too, what is considered modest or immodest dress varies amongst and within cultures (Barnard 2002: 55). Nonetheless, the idea that certain body parts are indecent or shameful and should be covered so that they cannot be seen – around which the argument for modesty revolves (*op. cit.*: 53) – is widespread across numerous, if not all, cultures. In addition to this, it is argued that modesty results not from ‘an innate sense of modesty’, but rather from ‘customary habits of clothing or ornamentation of the body and its parts’ (Hoebel in Barnard 2002: 56). In other words: modesty and the need for concealment is not so much the reason for wearing clothes, but more likely the result of wearing them. Looked at in this way, the wearing of clothes is learnt behaviour. And learnt behaviour is by definition cultural behaviour and therefore ‘cannot possibly be the result of nature or essence’ (Barnard 2002: 56). A variety of dressing for concealment that has less to do with modesty is clothing that functions as a sort of camouflage. Here one should not only think about military dress, but any type of dress that is worn to make certain features, or even the

entire person, appear less or even unnoticeable. Here clothing has the function of camouflaging the wearer in order to not draw attention to him or herself, and clothes are worn to fit in rather than to stand out (*op. cit.*: 56-57).

Attraction. Whereas concealment is all about diverting attention away from the body or particular parts of it, the next proposed function of clothes is that of attracting attention to the body or particular parts of it. According to the ‘immodesty argument’ the function of clothing is to display the body in its most favourable manner. In contrast to men’s clothes, which are meant to advertise his social status, women’s clothes are intended to make her appealing and display her attractiveness to the opposite sex, making clothes work in order to fulfil ‘the need for women to attract a mate’ (*op. cit.*: 57-58). However, if what is considered to be modest does vary across and within cultures, so does what is considered to be immodest. Additionally, this view implies that the (different) ways of dressing between men and women come natural to them (*op. cit.*: 59), which is of course not the case. Multiple evidence shows that in the past men have worn clothes that have been at least as elaborate and extravagant as women’s clothes; and examples of women dressing in a manner that displays or enhances their social status, that status being high or low, are abundant (*ibid.*). Just as the other material functions of clothing are culturally enforced and learnt behaviours, so are gender differences cultural and therefore learnt behaviour.

Communication. With the first three functions of clothing being defined as material functions, the ‘communicative function’ (*ibid.*) is the first of what are considered to be the cultural functions. It were Roach and Eicher that pointed out before Barnard that ‘fashion and clothing symbolically tie a community together’ (Roach and Eicher 1979: 18; Barnard 2002: 59). This ability to communicate works in two ways. First, the social agreement on what will be worn which usually exists within a community is a social bond in itself which in turn reinforces other social bonds. And secondly, ‘clothing serves to communicate membership of a cultural group to both the members of the group itself and to those who are not’ (Barnard 2002: 59-60).

Individualistic expression. Clothes can express different things by different means. Colours, for example are often presumed to be linked to certain moods. Bright colours and rich patterns are often interpreted as reflecting a happy, light hearted disposition, and black, dark colours a moody, brooding or sad state of mind. In addition, the wearing of such bright clothes and colours are thought to be able to alter a person’s mood (*op. cit.*: 60). The wearing of ‘happy’ clothes is often said to be able to lift the spirits when one is feeling low. But not only colours and patterns are documented to be capable of influencing mood. The buying of new clothes, sometimes referred to as ‘retail therapy’ or ‘fashion-therapy’, is a well known way in which some people make attempts to feel better about themselves, or to distract them from an unpleasant reality. Increasing numbers of people are ‘‘addicted’ to the feelings they get when they (...) wear something new’ (*op. cit.*: 60-61), or even from just buying it. This experience of pleasure from (acquiring) new clothes is thought to be due to a

feeling ‘of increased or reinforced uniqueness’ or ‘the pleasure of presenting a different appearance to the world, (...)’ (*op. cit.*: 61). But also because of the ‘aesthetic pleasure’ that can be derived from either ‘creating personal display or appreciating that of others’ (*ibid.*).

Social worth or status and definition of social role. Clothing is often used to indicate (truthfully or not) a person’s social worth or status. And in turn, people make judgments (correctly or not) about other people’s status and social worth based on what those people are wearing. A person’s status may come from such things as family, gender, age, race or profession and as such can be either ascribed or achieved (*ibid.*). The changing of status, such as becoming married or widowed, are most marked in probably all cultures. It is at these times that ‘the most elaborate and costly changes in clothes’ are displayed (*op. cit.*: 62); and expected to be displayed, to the point that it becomes (almost) compulsory. The most extreme examples of clothes being tied to status are probably the various sumptuary laws (prescribing exactly what people of various parts of society were allowed or forbidden to wear), that were in force throughout different parts of the world at different times (*ibid.*).

From people’s social status follows their social role. Social roles dictate the way someone is expected to behave when assuming a certain status (*op. cit.*: 63). For example, the status of a daughter is accompanied by the role of a daughter, the status of being a man accompanied by the role of being a man and being a police officer, one is expected to behave like a police officer. Of course, what the role of daughter, man or any other status might entail will differ from culture to culture and will even differ from situation to situation. Nonetheless, a certain status entails certain expectations with regard to behaviours befitting that status and role. The part clothing plays in this role playing is that it is used to indicate the social role people have. They signify the social role a person occupies and therefore the way they can be expected to behave. Different (types of) clothes, worn by different people, makes social interaction much easier than it would otherwise be (*ibid.*). It would be extremely difficult, awkward and time consuming if at every encounter with another person we first would have to establish, for example, this person to be a man or a woman, to only then be able to approach this person in the correct manner. The relation between social role and fashion can be looked at in a less favourable manner too. Wearing certain clothes can make inequalities between people ‘appear to be natural and proper’ by giving them a ‘concrete form’ (*ibid.*). A difference in the clothes people are wearing may be taken as a sign that treating them differently is somehow justified (*op. cit.*: 63-64).

Economic worth or status. In addition to clothes having a social and cultural side, they have an economic, or contractual side (*op. cit.*: 64). Clothing is (or can be) indicative of the type of economy someone lives in, as well as one’s role within that economy, that is, it may be a telling sign of the productive or occupational role someone occupies. As such, it is of course closely related to social worth and status. Clothing may give away the services the public can expect of certain people while performing their occupational roles, such as the uniform worn by the policemen or the nurse. It may also give an idea of what sort of job someone has, which in turn is an indicator of the level at

which people work within an economy (*ibid.*). The best known example of this is probably the description of people's jobs as being either 'white collar' or 'blue collar' with 'white and blue, in the context of collars, [indicating] economic status (...)' (*op. cit.*: 65); and blue collar work, because of its association with manual labour, often being seen as having a lower status than white collar work, which is associated with 'pencil pushers'.

It is interesting to note, particularly within the context of this research on what women wear (as opposed to men) that, according to Roach and Eicher, 'women's dress is generally more ambiguous in its symbolism of occupational role than is men's' (Roach and Eicher in Barnard 2002: 65). This, they say, may be due to the fact that women traditionally have not been given recognition by industrial societies as being part of the work force when they are not holding a 'proper' job, but instead occupy the role of housewives and stay-at-home mothers (Barnard 2002: 65). As a result of this, women do not have a 'clearly defined or perceived status in the economic structure. There is, therefore, no form of dress that could 'correspond' to that status. And women's dress and fashions are, therefore, for the most part ambiguous with regard to economic or occupational status' (*ibid.*). A second contributing factor to this ambiguous state of women's clothing in the workplace, Roach and Eicher argue, are nineteenth century traditions which expected women to act in concordance with their 'more decorative role' and to 'indulge in more personal display than man' and that have persisted well into the twentieth century (*ibid.*), and probably even into the twenty-first.

Political symbol. This function of clothing relates to the workings of power. Barnard makes a distinction between 'Power' and 'power' with the former referring to the power of the state, government bodies or political parties, and the latter referring to power in more regular day-to-day relations between people, such as parents and children, teachers and students and the like. 'Power' we see reflected, for example, in the uniforms of the army, with the clothes not only representing the power of the state, but also being 'used as a way of helping to achieve [the] operation and legitimation [of the state]' (*op. cit.*: 66). Other examples are the Mao suit, which came to be the uniform to represent the power of the Communist Party in China, and the coronation gowns and paraphernalia associated with the crowning of a King or Queen. The use of these robes and accessories carry a sense of tradition and are a sign of continuity, giving the respective royal houses an air of legitimacy. In contrast, sometimes clothing is used to play down, or smooth out the distorted power relations between people, for example 'workers in professions like social work [being] wary of wearing anything that will mark them out as an obvious figure of power to their clients and [who] will tend to avoid a show of opulence', attempting to 'dress on a level with the client' (*op. cit.*: 66-67).

Macro-religious condition. Certain types of dress and clothing are strongly related to religion and faith. Clothing may be worn as a marker of membership of a particular religious faith or group. In addition, they may not only signify membership, but also give indications about the status or position one holds within that group, and/or the depth of one's belief (*op. cit.*: 67). Clothes here may

be worn temporarily, only during certain ceremonies and religious events, or habitually, as a sign of an individual's religious beliefs and measure of piety. Well known examples of religious dress are those of the Roman catholic clergy and the Hasidic Jews, with each of the ranks and levels of observance having a corresponding dress code (*op. cit.*: 67-68). Another obvious, and more current, example is that of Muslim women covering their hair or entire bodies, which is thought (rightly or not) to reflect the depth of their religious beliefs.

Social rituals. As in religious rituals, clothing has a function in social rituals. The most common social rituals, in western societies, are that of wedding and funeral. Clothing is used 'to differentiate between ritual and non-ritual' and 'to mark the beginning and end of rituals', and those that are involved in, or attending, a ritual are expected to wear something different from their everyday attire (*op. cit.*: 68). People do not normally wear the things they wear everyday to a wedding or funeral. However, the 'rules' in this respect seemed to have loosened, with people attending funerals or weddings in jeans no longer being an exception these days.

Recreation. Just like clothes can be used to mark the beginning and ending of a ritual, it can be used to mark the beginning and ending of a period of recreation. Although engaging in certain forms of recreation may require an outfit change (e.g. sports), this is not always necessary, the act of recreation being, generally (but not always), more informal and relaxed than said rituals. This greater informality does not make it necessarily less subject to rules, though. Some recreational activities, particularly sports, do not only demand a change of clothes, but also that these clothes be of the latest fashion (*op. cit.*: 68-69). This applies to both those practicing sports themselves and those who recreate by attending sports events. Showing up at the soccer match in last season's club shirt is just not done for some supporters. This association of clothes with the occasions of pleasure that recreation presumably is, brings about another aspect of clothes as recreation: that they may simply be fun, ways of deriving pleasure, and therefore seen as 'trivial pursuits' (*op. cit.*: 69). According to Barnard at least two misconceptions are at the base of this assumption. Firstly, that 'fashion and clothing may be seen as merely a bit of fun' while we have shown here that they 'are not only fun, but that they also have social and cultural functions' and that 'these social and cultural functions are not simply appendages to the main business of human life, but that they are essential in a number of ways to that business'; and secondly, 'that pleasure and fun are simple matters' (*ibid.*). For, in the words of Schwarz, 'in dressing up, man addresses himself, his fellows and his world' (1979: 31). And that is no simple matter.

3. The Women

From the outset of the research no adult female was excluded from the potential research population beforehand. The research was not targeted at women with a particular background of any sort, leaving it open to adult women of possibly any walk of life or part of society. In the end, seven women³ have participated in this research project, allowing me not only access to their wardrobes (and with that their homes and lives), but also agreeing to participate in extremely time consuming interviews on more than one occasion. All are women who have to keep within a financial budget when acquiring clothes, who have to juggle the selecting, maintenance, and cleaning of their own clothing with work, study and/or family life. None of them has a professional stylist, all of them are the sole person responsible for their clothes. None of the women have a particularly great interest in fashion. None of them reads high-end fashion magazines, however almost all of them read the occasional women's magazine or watches make-over shows on television sometimes but not regularly.

Anette is fifty-one years old, married and mother of three children between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one, of which two are living at home. She holds two part-time jobs, neither of which requires her to dress in a particular manner. Anette does not take great pleasure in the contents of her wardrobe saying 'I think I have stupid clothes'. On the whole it can be said that she does not care much for her clothes, with the exception of a limited number of items which she does like. One particular shirt she 'cannot part with because I like the colours so much and they always make me feel lively'. She takes noticeable more pleasure in her summer clothes than her winter clothes, her summer clothes being more colourful: '[they make me] feel very bright, and very cheerful, and very feminine also'. Despite wearing these bright colourful clothes, in summer at least, Anette's real taste in clothes inclines towards alternative, Gothic-style clothing; saying that if she had been young today she'd been 'alternative'. However, in this stage of her life she does not feel that to be age-appropriate, therefore dressing, occasionally, in her own adapted version of 'alternative', in somewhat hippy-like, flowing blouses. She says that what she wears is very much dependent on her mood: 'sometimes I prefer to walk around in old trousers and an old shirt, (...) and at other times I feel like dressing in nice clothes (..)', 'When I went [to school to become a lab technician] I started wearing jeans and at a laboratory you are always wearing your lab coat so there you don't have to wear your nicest clothes, and after that I became a mum and then it took me a long time to get over the fact that I was allowed to wear anything other than an old jumper and jogging trousers'. 'Jeans are just so comfortable, but now, also [with work] I sometimes think 'I want to wear nice clothes!' But then again, 'I am forever on my

³ The respondents' names have been altered for privacy reasons.

bicycle and you have to reckon with that too. If I'd always [take] my car, than it would be a different matter. Anette makes her clothing choices mostly by herself and the occasional negative comment of her husband does not make her stop wearing certain items. She is somewhat influenced however by her eldest daughter, sometimes wearing one of her t-shirts. She does sometimes read items in magazines or newspapers about clothing advice, and sometimes watches make-over shows on television but is critical: 'often I do not agree [with their advice]'. She does not like to spend a lot of money on clothes, because she likes to get rid of them once she is tired of them, something she does not do as easily with more expensive clothes. Anette is very creative, and has the skills and means to make her own clothes (knitting, sewing), but hardly ever does so. She owns a few tops and a lot of socks that she has made herself, but knitting is mostly done for fun and for others. The clothes she has made herself though, and they are the ones she gets most excited about, are the outfits she has made herself to go to fairs where people dress up in medieval, fairytale-like clothing. A hobby that is shared by the entire family. However, although it would be possible to wear some of those items in real life, she feels these clothes are 'not real clothes' she would ever wear in daily life because '[I would stand out and get noticed] you know, and that I do not like in regular life, (...)'. Anette does not like certain aspects of her body (anymore). Dresses and skirts must be worn on or over the knee 'because of my legs, they have a problem with gravity', her shoulders must be covered 'otherwise I feel like I am walking around in my underwear', tops must be long(ish), covering the stomach area because 'I have this bulge and that [does not look] nice when you are wearing a short shirt, that just how it is, it does not look good and I don't feel comfortable [wearing that]; it has to be a little longer'.

Lisa is twenty years old. She lives at home with her parents and has two sisters, one three-and-a-half years older who no longer lives at home, and one two years younger, who does. Having taken her A levels last year, she now has a part time job and occasionally works as a babysitter. At the time of our wardrobe interview she is getting ready to leave for Australia for three months in a couple of days to work as an au pair with the Dutch family she has been babysitting for. Lisa is very clear about what she likes and wants to wear. For the larger part her wardrobe consists of basic and casual items, in mostly darker colours. A few clothing items are different from the rest and are in brighter colours or have a print. In addition to the basic stuff, Lisa has a couple of (party)dresses and tops she wears (or has worn) on special, festive occasions. She finds it important that all her clothes and shoes go together and can be worn to (almost) any occasion. She does not own clothes in which she would not dare go grocery shopping. She wants her clothes to be 'timeless', that is, not too partial to fashion and trends. She wears clothes that 'look good' on her and something looks good on her if it makes her look 'a bit tough, yes, more beautiful', and if it is sporty. 'Bold but beautiful, that's my style'. When selecting clothes she pays attention to whether or not something has 'her shape'. She finds that 'often when something has [the right fit], than most of the time it suits you'. When something becomes 'favourite' she wears it endlessly until it falls apart. She loathes it when something she likes wears out and often buys new clothes strictly on a replacement basis, in the exact same style. At the same time

she says that something can be 'favourite' for years and then 'suddenly, it is over (...) then all of a sudden I think it's stupid'. She thinks this may be because she is getting older. A skirt she used to like a lot she now finds 'to childish'. Several items in her wardrobe are things she used to like but she now no longer wears because 'I find they no longer suit me'. A t-shirt she liked as recently as two years ago she no longer likes 'maybe because you get older' and she 'feels she has changed'. She finds it difficult to throw away clothes she no longer wears. She holds on to cloths in case they may come in handy sometime after all, 'when I have a tacky party to go to or something'. She firmly says 'I do not make bad bargains', however, she does make what she herself calls 'I-have-to-have-something buys'. 'Sometimes you kid yourself by thinking you can [pull something off for a particular occasion], but actually you can't'. Lisa hardly ever swaps clothing with her two sisters. 'They have a completely different style, much less basic and timeless'. She does not read high-end fashion magazines and only occasionally flicks through a women's magazine. She gets her ideas and inspiration from what she sees on other people. This does however have its limitations: 'other people are other people and then you run into your own physical shortcomings'. In practice she finds that she sometimes has to settle for less than perfect 'I have to let that slide of my shoulders [and get past that] otherwise I end up with nothing again'. She sometimes depends on the opinion of others in determining if she likes something, however with varying success. Sometimes cloths that other people have commented on favourably nonetheless remain unworn because 'it just doesn't feel right'.

Ria is a retired childcare worker. She is sixty-six years old, married and a mother and a grandmother. Of all the respondents, Ria is probably most able to make her own clothing, both in skills and means. However, she doesn't. She hasn't made any clothing for herself since getting married at the age of twenty. Before that time she made almost all her clothes herself, including her own wedding dress, but after that she made clothes only for her two daughters, having become 'totally fed up' with making her own cloths. Now she can buy clothes perfectly to her liking in the shops. She is very much a habitual dresser. Most of the time she wears the same type of trousers, made from one basic pattern, in either black (winter), or white or another light colour (summer) which she always buys from the same shop, often more than one at a time. She wears clothes in set combinations, one item by definition going with a particular other. Of several items she owns more than one, often buying several at once if she likes them, in different colours because: 'if this one looks good, than the other will look good too'. She feels no need to wear a wider variety of clothes because '[these trousers] feel nice, the height is good, they do not [cut in the flesh], they're the ideal trousers'. She buys tops and bottoms as a 'set' and keeps wearing them as such. She shops for clothing alone, often asking the sales assistants for help admitting that she finds it difficult to put combinations together herself. She often goes for the same shapes and materials because, 'you'll know it's good'. Ria has self imposed rules she sticks to when it comes to dressing. She does not wear slim fitting clothes because certain parts of her body need camouflaging. For the same reasons she does not wear sleeveless tops or even short sleeves, making exceptions only in case of extremely warm weather. She knows exactly

which top goes under or over another, based on shape and material, for them to be acceptable. This way, such items are still worn but considerably less frequent than more favourite clothes. She does not like skirts and hasn't worn one in years, 'they don't look good on me and I don't feel comfortable in them', and does not like blouses although she owns several, 'I figured they'd look nice and it makes for a change', and wears them occasionally because although 'they are uncomfortable, they look nice'. She also owns some pieces she bought that turned out to be failures: 'I just don't think it's right'. However, sometimes an item can be rehabilitated such as a horizontally striped shirt which she thought didn't suit her, until people started complimenting her on it. She wants her clothes to be 'modern' and feels that nice, modern clothes make her feel better and happier: '[they make me feel] like a little sun, cheerful'. Ria gets her inspiration from the shops, looking at what's on display. She finds that women's magazines do not cater to women her age and body shape. She does not have an image of how she want to look, feeling that clothes should be put on in the morning and then forgotten: 'there are other things to keep busy with'.

Emma is a twenty-eight year old interior designer. She recently started her own business and also works one day a week with children, and does voluntary work with a youth club. She lives together with her boyfriend. She recently started her own design business and works from home. This working from home has had its effect on her daily clothing choices. Often she walks around the house wearing a sweater and sweatpants and 'that keeps me from going outside, actually, because I do not go out in sweatpants'. On the one hand 'I find that bothersome because I do like to pay attention to my appearance, and when I catch myself in the mirror in my sloppy sweater and trousers...yuk. It's just laziness'. At times she 'likes to look very feminine, wearing high heels, since I do no longer mind wearing them nowadays'; and at other times a little more tough, wearing bolder clothes. Emma estimates that sixty percent of the clothes in her wardrobe are over four years old and quite a few items older than that. Most of these older items she keeps because she still likes to wear them, either regularly or on particular occasions; others for somewhat more sentimental reasons and the memories they hold, like an eight year old skirt she used to wear a lot when she just started dating her boyfriend. It is not often that she throws out clothes 'because not much will be left [to wear] then'. She admits to finding it difficult to buy new clothes. Because of a limited budget ('I would like to spend more money on clothes but I don't have it and the money I do have I do not spend on clothes, there is always something else that takes priority'); but also because she finds it hard to find clothes to her liking. Usually going to the shops with a pre-fixed idea of what she would like to wear, she often finds it impossible to find something. Also, she has a tall, slight body which, she finds, is sometimes difficult to dress ('trousers are my worst enemy when it comes to clothes. It's so difficult to find a good fitting pair'), and she finds it 'quite important' to look original: 'I always try to pay attention, at least a little, so that what I am wearing is not something everyone else walks around in'. There is nothing that she, in principal, wouldn't wear, pretty much 'putting on whatever she likes'. This is reflected in the contents of her wardrobe which varies from jeans and t-shirts to little party dresses.

Her favourite item is a flowery dress she was given to her by her youngest sister as a present. Emma does not watch fashion programmes on television, only occasionally reads a women's magazine and has no great examples when it comes to getting dressed, but she sees her youngest sister as an example of someone who is always dressed nicely 'without looking as if she [is trying too hard]'. Her other sister, also younger, 'has a completely different taste', and is not often turned to for inspiration or help when it comes to shopping. Although she admits to worrying about what she looked liked and what to wear when she was younger, she no longer does so. She thinks this may be due to getting older and more mature, but also due to '[feeling more] accepted by your surroundings (...)'. Emma usually shops alone, feeling that otherwise other people have too much influence on her choices. She does not ask sales assistant for help, and only occasionally brings along her mother or mentioned sister to the shops to help her. She does find other people's opinion important though: 'if I would have to say, on a scale from one to ten, a seven'. Of all her clothes her high heels are most precious to her, 'even though I wear them least often'. This may be due to the fact that although sometimes looking good gets priority over comfort, about seventy percent of the time she goes for comfort.

Adila is originally from Morocco and moved to the Netherlands two years ago when she got married. Before she lived with her parents in Spain where she spend the larger part of her teenage years. She is now twenty. Since Adila is awaiting her residence permit, and therefore not allowed to work or go to school yet, she spends most of her days at home, or with her inlaws, who live nearby. Adila's wardrobe reflects her descent. She owns both 'Dutch clothes' and 'Moroccan clothes', which she keeps in separate wardrobes, Dutch clothing being the typical modern items worn by young women in most Western countries such as jeans, tops, t-shirts, skirts and jackets, while the Moroccan clothing consists of long, flowing, colourful and often heavily embellished dresses and djellabas. The latter, often having multiple layers and therefore more difficult to wear, are usually worn for special occasions, such as weddings, although some simpler pieces are also worn as daily wear. On a daily basis Adila prefers to wear her western clothes, preferring 'tighter clothes because I think it looks better', 'I feel more beautiful and feminine when I wear nice clothes'. Since her marriage Adila adheres to the Muslim rules for dressing, wearing a headscarf and covering up arms and legs when going outside or spending time in the presence of men other than her husband. This does not, however, stop her from dressing in a thoroughly 'modern' manner. Much of her clothes are in the same style and materials: soft, stretchy, tight fitting shirts, some blouses that are a bit wider, tunics in supple fabrics. Adila readily admits that she finds the headscarf uncomfortable, and that she regrets no longer being able to wear a bikini to the beach but feels she made her choice and should stick to it. She enjoys cloths and getting dressed for various occasions, whether it's for a wedding or to go shopping or to the movies with her husband, she enjoys picking and wearing an outfit and is proficient in putting items together to form a appropriate ensemble. At home she usually dresses in more comfortable, and sometimes more revealing cloths, having no problem leaving head, arms and legs uncovered, provided she is either alone (or with her husband) or in the presence of women only. Her daily 'uniform'

consists mainly of jeans (she has numerous pairs), long skirts with tight tops, or shorter skirts worn with leggings. She does not have set combinations but insists that long shirts cannot be worn with long skirts; 'then the shirt must be more fitted'. She has various items in her wardrobe that she doesn't wear but won't throw away. Mostly Moroccan style dresses she does not like but which were given to her as a present by her mother-in-law. Also amongst the western clothes are items she does not wear anymore, usually because they are torn or have stains on them or are 'out of fashion', but can't part with because they are favourite items she has often worn with much pleasure in the past. Some of these, too, were presents, from her mother or a friend. She does not easily throw away clothes and when she does she finds it important that 'someone else will be happy with them', giving them to charity. Clothes worn during a holiday in Morocco once, cannot be worn there again. 'It's because they think, because I am from Europe, I am rich and therefore can afford to buy new clothes often'. These items are sometimes given as a present to friends or relatives, or worn again in the Netherlands where it is not a problem to wear something over and over again. Adila likes to shop for clothes and does so often with her husband – although he has not much to say about what she'll wear – or alone, buying new things often at a whim when she sees something she likes. Much of her clothing is bought at the market, which unfortunately often has poor quality. 'That's a pity but it's always very cheap so you cannot expect too much of it'.

Carola is a thirty-two year old customer service assistant. She works fulltime and is single and living on her own. Carola loves clothes. She has always taken an interest in them, and even considered going to fashion college when she was younger. Her wardrobe is full of clothes that are in pristine condition. She likes to put a lot of effort in her appearance whether it's for work or a night out, saying 'I am always dressed to the nines'. And although she has days that she is dressed to less effect, she readily admits that even if there is no special occasion 'I'll make up a reason [for dressing nicely], (...). Also, I would never go out without make-up'. She would never slump around the house in sweatpants 'not even in the weekend, if ever I hate something it's that', 'in the weekends particularly, I like to dress in nice clothes'. A supple grey dress she calls 'my sweatpants, that's what I'll wear when I have an off day and just want to hang on the settee'. She does not keep separate work clothes but dresses differently for work than in her free time. For work she sometimes has to visit clients and for these occasions she likes to look 'professional, never casual' and this can either mean a trouser suit ('it's always handy to have a trouser suit') or a dress, as long as it is 'representative' and in her 'own style, not too classic'. For days in the office things can be a little more relaxed but always appropriate, never 'sporty'. 'I would never wear sporty clothes to work'. The fact that she doesn't like to wear sporty clothes does not mean she's not a sporty person, however. Three times a week she goes running and even for those occasions she likes to be dressed well. She likes even her sports clothes to be 'feminine' and 'in nice colours', sometimes even at the expense of comfort. Just like with her everyday clothes Carola puts looks first. She sees spending money on clothes as an investment, lately preferring to spend a larger amount on fewer items saying: 'quality is not always in the amount spent but I see that

sometimes things remain more beautiful for longer'. This means that these more expensive items are often kept for years and hardly ever discarded. Although she has a clear picture of what clothes and colours look good on her, Carola has been shopping at the same addresses for years because these shops have the added benefit that 'they help you really well'. When buying clothes she buys complete outfits to be worn together because, contrary to what one would expect, Carola admits to finding it difficult to put a new outfit together. She actively seeks the help of sales assistants because 'otherwise I am very much inclined to keep within my own boundaries all the time' and she likes to 'remain open to new things'.

Maria is sixty-three and was born in Curacao but moved to the Netherlands in her early twenties. Since her husband passed away some years ago she lives alone. She has two adult daughters. For many years she worked as a nurse but is now retired. When Maria opens her wardrobe for our interview she immediately says: 'black, black, black...lots of black'. She has always liked wearing dark colours, black and dark blue 'because it doesn't stand out. I don't like to stand out (...) black is more neutral and I can feel certain about it'. She reckons this is maybe a reaction to having to wear white all the time in her professional life: 'I was wearing white all the time at work already, I did not want to wear white outside work as well'. On closer inspection however, it turns out that she does own quite a few more colourful items as well, mostly shirts, and she does admit that she feels more cheerful when, for example, she is wearing the bright red long cardigan she bought for a wedding years ago. She now tries to not always choose the dark colours when she buys something new, deliberately opting for items in brighter colours a bit more often, especially blue and turquoise: 'that's my colour, yes'. Black remains a firm favourite though. She prefers to wear trousers with a jersey or blouse because 'they are so easy to wear', but, after having knee surgery and not being able to bear anything on her knee for weeks, she recently started wearing skirts again after having been almost exclusively in trousers for years. She has started wearing skirts she hadn't worn for three, four years again, finding it 'quite nice actually'. But she still prefer trousers. She has a lot of clothes she once bought for a particular occasion, like her retirement or her mother's funeral, which she keeps separate for future occasions. Only after a while she may start wearing these as 'daily clothes'. However, never would she wear daily clothes to a wedding, funeral or other special occasion, even though in style these clothes are not very different from what she wears on a daily basis. Maria readily admits to feeling 'very insecure' about what to wear. She sometimes shops alone but won't buy anything yet, preferring to return with her daughter to make a purchase. When alone she asks a shop assistant to advise her whether something suits her or not. 'Only very rarely does it happen that I say, yes, this I like, this is really for me'. Maria keeps clothes in different sizes, having fluctuated in weight in the past years. Some things she throws out, but others she keeps, hoping she will be able to wear them again, especially now she is busy losing weight. A cardigan that became too small she has moved to the front of the wardrobe to keep her motivated: 'I took it out again, I hung it here, and then at times I try it on to see if it fits'. Maria sees herself as a 'fat women' and this has its repercussions on her clothing

choices. Her arms down to her elbows must be covered, as must her legs until over the knee. Blouses or jackets must cover her stomach and backside, and nothing should ever be made of material one can see through. She often picks the same things to wear despite having plenty of choice because, 'well, that's easy isn't it'. She then wears these items in the same combinations most of the time but 'sometimes I think, no that doesn't look nice, if I have worn it a couple of times, and then I change'. Other clothes she keeps, despite not wearing them, because she feels it wasteful to do away with good clothes, or because they hold certain memories for her. She has items as old as fifteen years that are still favourites and it takes her years to do away with clothes either by giving them to charity or throwing them away.

4. The wardrobes

After the women, introduced in the previous section, the wardrobe is the second ‘party of interest’ in this research. According to the Oxford dictionary *a wardrobe* is both ‘a large, tall cupboard for hanging clothes in’ and ‘a person’s entire collection of clothes’ (Paperback Oxford English dictionary, sixth edition).

All the women I worked with indeed keep their clothes in a generic type of wardrobe, which most of the time consists of a space for hanging clothes from a rail and/or a space with shelves and/or drawers to stack folded clothes. Often the wardrobe has both or all three, but not always. Lisa’s wardrobe, for example, only has shelves on which she keeps all her clothing – including jeans, skirts and dresses – folded, and Ria’s main wardrobe doesn’t offer space for hanging clothes either. All women have to content themselves with pre-fabricated, store-bought cupboards, except for Emma. Emma is the proud new owner of a small walk-in area/wardrobe that she not only designed herself according to her own exact wishes, but which she also constructed and installed herself with the help of her mother. It is adapted completely to her own wishes, from the number and location of the shelves and rails, to the lighting making visible the options from which she can select her outfit every day. A second, similar, cupboard mirrors hers and is for the use of her partner. Indeed, all women who live with a partner or husband share a wardrobe, however, the clothes are always kept separate in designated ‘his’ and ‘hers’ parts of the wardrobe.

All wardrobes were located in the bedroom, with the exception of two cases, in which it was kept in a spare room. And most wardrobes are closed by doors (Emma’s being the one exception), to protect the clothing from sunlight, damage and dust, to clear them away neatly in the room, but perhaps also to keep them away from prying eyes. Together these two features enforce the idea of the clothes being shut of in a private area (Woodward, 2007: 39-40) that is not to be entered by just anyone.

The wardrobe is more than the place where clothes just happen to be randomly stored though. In fact, there is nothing random about the placing of clothing in the wardrobe for at least some systematic principle is present in each wardrobe, be it in varying degrees. Whereas, for example, Carola’s wardrobe is highly organised with skirts, trousers and dresses hanging neatly from their hangers, tops folded and stacked on their shelves, sportswear, underwear and socks each tucked away in their own box also placed in the wardrobe, and even her little make-up bag having its own space; Ria, on the other hand, does not even fold all her clothes, more often than not just chucking them on the shelves because ‘it does not matter since they do not crease and because I will take them out again soon enough’. Each wardrobe has an ‘order’ (*op. cit.*: 10), a particular way in which the women organise their clothes, be it according to the social role they need to perform (like work cloths), functionality (sports, holiday), type (trousers, shirt, skirts etc.), texture (will it crease or not?), colours,

or something all together different; like Anette's fun, dress up outfits which are stored in the same wardrobe but are seen as 'not real clothes' and as such are kept separate from her everyday wear. Noteworthy is, despite the fact that some women wear certain items always in the same combination, they are not put away in the wardrobe in that manner, not by any of the research participants.

This physical ordering of clothes appears to reflect a pre-conceived order in which the women have divided their clothing in their minds, for example, deeming them appropriate as home wear but not for going out, branding them work wear but not right for the weekend, etc. This way of ordering is, to a certain extent, projected onto the wardrobe. In this way women are not only ordering their clothes, making it easier to choose from the whole range (which can sometimes be overwhelming), but also their lives (*ibid.*). This is not to say that such ordering is always a deliberate, conscious act instigated by complicated thought processes. Most of the time wardrobes are organised along very pragmatic lines such as according to the seasons. All the women distinguish between summer and winter clothes and keep the two more or less separate from each other; some on different shelves, others in different wardrobes. Or they classify them by their ethnicity, like Adila does, with her separate Moroccan and Western wardrobes. Most women also distinguish between daily wearable clothes and clothes for special occasions and parties. In any way, the wardrobe reflects the reality of the woman's daily life with clothes that are regularly or habitually worn taking centre stage in the wardrobe and the less current items being relegated to the sides. Yet other clothes, the ones that are waiting to get back into fashion or that are nominated for discarding, are being relegated to the wings and the backstage area entirely, being kept at places where they share space with other textiles such as towels and tablecloths, or in a storage room. Woodward makes the distinction between *inactive clothes* consisting of unworn and formerly worn clothing, *active clothes* being the clothing that is worn often or habitually and *potential clothes* being clothing that is worn rarely or sometimes, (*op. cit.*: 45). To these categories can be added the clothes that women once wore but not anymore and which they hope or expect to wear (again) in the future. Like Maria, who keeps clothes that have become too small but which she hopes to wear again soon now she's on a diet, or Adila, who doesn't particularly like wide blouses but nevertheless does not throw them all away because she might wear them when she falls pregnant.

According to Woodward 'choosing what to wear starts when women open the wardrobe doors (...)' (*op. cit.*: 40). Although this may be true when women dress for a special event, most of the time this is not the case. Most of the women I worked with decide what they are going to wear without being even near the wardrobe, let alone having opened it. This opening- of-the-wardrobe-and-having-a-pick-of-the-abundance-of-items-idea runs into some practical problems as well. For the wardrobe-cupboard is not the only place for clothes to be kept. Shoes for example are, without exception, not kept in the wardrobe but are stored elsewhere, in a hallway cupboard or on a shoe rack near the front door. And all the women are keeping clothes in a second wardrobe, an extra chest of drawers, a suitcase or boxes under the bed, or have clothes in storage at an entirely different location such as garages or parent's houses. The fact that not all clothes cannot be viewed in one glance subscribes to

the idea that women make their initial choice in their minds, having thorough knowledge of what they own. During the wardrobe interviews it was only on a few occasions that someone came across an item she didn't realise she had.

The contents of the wardrobe is 'a collection of items accumulated from previous occasions' (*op. cit.*: 10), and over the course of years, sometimes many years. The items are acquired mostly by buying them on the mass market that is nowadays' clothing market, but also received as presents, borrowed from sisters, mothers and daughter, and occasionally knitted or sewn by the women themselves (Anette, Adila). All women admit to finding it difficult to discard clothes, doing so without remorse only when the particular item is well worn out. They all feel guilty about throwing away clothes that are still nice and wearable, but that have gone out of style or they simply have grown tired of. Without fail all give the clothes they no longer wear to charity. Lack of space is another reason for women to clear out their wardrobe occasionally, as is the acquisition of new items. In general, older items have to make room for newer ones, the older clothes getting worn less and less often until they are no longer worn at all and are banished from the shelves, drawers and rails of the wardrobe.

Despite the fact that many items are shop bought and, from a material perspective, easily replaced – if not by an item exactly the same, at least by one resembling it closely – each wardrobe is unique though. For 'as women wear particular items of clothing, they come to hold memories and personal meanings. It is this act of possession and wearing of clothing over time that serves to singularize what is usually a former commodity' (Kopytoff, 1986: 61). The histories of each garment and the way in which the items are combined make a wardrobe unique (Woodward, 2007: 11).

5. Getting dressed: the Others, the Self & the Clothes

When I started out on this project, in answer to the research question (see chapter 1), I expected to eventually come up with, and present here, a neat and exhaustive list of factors, persons and circumstances that influence women's clothing choices. And as we have seen in chapter two, there are indeed numerous reasons why clothes are or aren't worn. In fact, the practical and personal reasons for (not) wearing certain clothes are virtually unlimited and a listing of these, even based on a small sample of seven women such as mine, would hardly even begin to account for the reasons women wear the clothes they wear. But also: how exactly would it matter? What would it matter to know which factors influence women's clothing choices? Not much, if it would not add up, or contribute to, a wider understanding of what getting dressed is all about, surely. Pursuing this line of thinking has brought me to this present and final part of the thesis. In this final chapter I will introduce, and elaborate on, the three factors that I found to influence the clothing choices of all women interviewed. These factors are what I will refer to as *the others* and *the self*, and *the clothes* themselves. Theoretically, women can decide to wear (or not wear) any piece of clothing for whatever consideration or reason. In practice, they do not. In practice women, when getting dressed, contemplate – sometimes consciously, often not – the above mentioned three factors that subsequently have a strong regulating influence on the eventual choice. In the second part of this chapter, having explained and illustrated the others, the self and the clothes, I will put the findings in a wider context by explaining that what is actually going on when we dress, is part of a process of identity formation.

5.1 The Others, the Self & the Clothes

The Others: real and imagined

Anette and I are standing in front of her wardrobe. On the bed are the clothes she has already shown and commented on. The item she holds now is a black short-sleeved t-shirt with on the front a picture of a bat, its wings spread and its eyes wide open, and the text 'don't panic'. On the back is the bat hanging from a branch, supposedly asleep, with the text: 'relax'. I remember seeing her wearing the t-shirt, and thinking: 'that shirt is a typical Anette shirt'. 'This one I can't wear anymore', Anette says, 'I wore it to work a while ago and saw you looking at it and realised that I can't pull that off anymore. I am too old for that now'.

The above occurrence took place during my very first interview, with my very first respondent, and alerted me to something essential that happens when women are deciding what to wear, almost right from the beginning of my fieldwork, namely; the influence of *others* on our clothing choices. When we are deciding what to wear, we consider what others think of us and what *we* think others think of us. Indeed, ‘the other’ has proven to be a consistent presence in all the interviews, influencing the clothing choices of all the women partaking in the research. This other comes in two forms: *real* and *imagined*.

Real others are the people we run into in our everyday lives. Indeed, all women interviewed mention or allude to being influenced by ‘real’ people such as partners, parents and sisters, but also people less close to them like colleagues, neighbours, sales staff in clothing shops and even complete strangers. These real others impact on us and our clothing decisions in three ways, i.e., by voicing their opinions (which we then can take to heart or discard), by leading by example (or serving as a stark warning), and by way of gift giving or hand-me-downs.

It is not necessarily so that the opinions of the people that are closest to us are of the biggest influence. On the contrary. It stands out from the research that the opinion of husbands and boyfriends seem to be of relatively little consequence to the women who have a partner. Only Maria says her (now deceased) husband had a profound impact on her clothing choices, by going shopping with her, but also in stimulating her to be a bit more diverse in her choices.

‘I used to work as a nurse and wore a white uniform. Back then I had a lot of white clothes as well but then I thought ‘I work in white and now I am wearing white [outside of work] as well’ (...). My husband always used to tease me saying ‘oh, going into work again, are you?’ I then changed to black, (...) deliberately, yes’ (Maria).

The partners of the other women, Ria, Anette, Adila & Emma hardly ever give their opinion, either positive or negative. In fact, overall involvement of the men in the women’s way of dressing appears rather limited:

‘I can recall very few times that [my boyfriend] has said anything about the way I dress. He just isn’t that interested’. (...).(Emma).

And on the odd occasion that Anette’s husband commented not too favourably on a new, wide-sleeved top, she dismissed his objections quite light-heartedly saying:

‘I do not particularly like his clothes – always jeans and a polo-shirt – either’ (Anette).

It seems that partners' influence on the women's clothing choices are of a more subtle kind. It was Emma who first mentioned that she is glad that her boyfriend is even taller than she is, so she can wear high heels; something her sister won't do because her boyfriend is a little shorter than she is. Adila, too, keeps her high heels for when she goes out with her husband, but for more practical reasons: she finds it hard to walk in them and needs her husband to steady her.

Others that are often mentioned as people that impact on the women's clothing choices by saying what they think, and in fact are often asked specifically to do so, are mothers and daughters. Maria often goes to the shops alone, but hardly ever buys something at those occasions. She prefers to go to have a look first, to then return later with someone, usually the younger one of her two adult daughters, 'to see if it really suits me', and to make the actual purchase. Often it is her daughter that is trying to convince her to not always choose her habitual black, but to choose 'something else, something nice' instead. And Anette tells how, recently, she had asked her thirteen year old daughter to select an outfit for her in the shop. It turned out not to be a flying success:

'I bought this after I asked [my daughter] to pick out an outfit for me, just for fun, when we were out shopping one day. I had chosen one myself, a bit of a hippy dress which I liked better, but the people in the shop said 'that [other]one suits you better'. When I first got it I was really pleased with it, in the beginning. But now I can't help but feeling that I've been talked into buying the whole outfit – dress, legging, cardigan, shoes – a little.' (Anette).

As mentioned earlier, it doesn't necessarily have to be people we are in a close relationship with that influence our choices, they can be people we hardly know, if at all. These more distant others can have just as big an impact as those close to us, if not bigger. The sales assistant is a case in point. More than half the women interviewed say to rely on a salesperson, actively seeking their advice. Anette does not hesitate in asking the assistance of a salesperson, or even the opinion of other customers in the shop as to whether something looks good on her or not, as does Maria. Ria too, always asks the salespersons for help and admits to buying 'straight from the dummy', meaning that she buys the outfit as it is presented in the shop. She often goes to the same shops, because she knows the people who work there, 'and they know me, they know what I like'. Carola also likes to have the opinion of others, and has a preference for certain shops 'because there they help you tremendously', but for a different reason than Ria. Whereas Ria likes to shop on 'familiar territory' because people can help her dress the way they know she likes, Carola likes to shop in certain shops so the staff can help to entice her away from her usual choices, saying 'they look at it differently':

'With my newest purchase I have spoiled myself because I went to [a Dutch designer shop] and let myself be dressed there. That causes some doubt, (...)that I am standing there looking,

and thinking 'is this it, is it not' (...), and that I know, somewhere, yes, this I am going to get myself comfortable with, or not. That kind of feeling...'. (Carola).

Most 'voiced' opinions, however, are often expressed in passing, a compliment paid by a colleague, the approval of a parent, the admiration of a sister-in-law. And, surprisingly, it often is these fleeting comments that leave the biggest impression. Ria never used to like her horizontally striped shirt, thinking it made her look 'fat':

'I bought it but later thought it wouldn't look good because of the stripes. Horizontal stripes are actually not done when you are a larger size, because it makes you bigger, at least, that's what they always tell you'. (...) 'But when I started wearing it anyway it turned out that lots of people found it actually looked very beautiful on me, (...) I now wear it all the time'. (Ria).

Maria relies even more on the opinions of others. As she puts it:

'It suits me (...) when others say it suits me'. (Maria).

Real others do not only influence our clothing by saying what they think. In fact, that may be the relatively smaller influencing factor. It is without a doubt that a compliment or snide remark can have a profound and lasting impact (my mother, now in her early seventies, still refuses to wear anything red, more than sixty years after being teased as a child for wearing, as a redhead, a red pullover), but freely giving your opinion, especially if it is less than flattering, is not something considered 'done' in most situations, most of the time. Even close friends or relatives will want to be careful not to hurt anyone's feelings by honestly saying what they think, even when asked to do so explicitly. So (honest) opinions given may be few.

A second, more subtle, way in which real others influence our clothing choices is by leading, or being taken, as an example. Sometimes though, the two, an opinion voiced and an example shown, go together, a case in point being Adila. As mentioned in the introduction, since her marriage, Adila has started to wear a headscarf, and makes sure that her arms and legs are sufficiently covered, something she didn't care for before, because 'for my parents it was never a problem, (...) it was always up to me, they did not mind'. And the same goes for her husband, but not her mother-in-law:

'To my husband it doesn't matter, he never said anything to me, but my mother and sisters-in-law all wear long, concealing clothes and a headscarf. When I was first married I didn't cover my head. But I didn't feel comfortable around my in-laws. My mother-in-law would keep telling me about how it is the right thing to do for married women, and that it is in the Quran.

So I looked it up myself and talked about it to an [Imam] and then I decided I would wear a scarf'. (...) I think it's part of being a married woman'. (Adila).

In Emma's case it's her youngest sister she credits with being one of the few people having a clothing style she really likes and sometimes tries to emulate, to a certain extent.

'... I think my sister is really an example of someone who always looks nice without having to put a lot of effort into it. She is not busy for hours every morning styling her hair or something like that, she just puts something on and the way she wears something, the combinations she makes ...then it looks really nice right away and always just that little bit different. She thinks much less about it, or at least, she's [good at] combining things, and she just puts something on but it always looks good. And that...at that I'm a bit jealous sometimes'. (Emma).

It is only her youngest sister (by seven years) which she sees as a bit of an example though, and not her other sister, who is much closer to her in age (2 years younger) but whose taste in clothing is completely different. Sisters are not by definition big influences on the clothing choices though. Adila mentions she sometimes, but not often, swaps clothes with her older sister, who also lives in the Netherlands (though not close by), and Lisa says she and her two sisters (one three-and-a-half years older, one two years younger than she is) hardly ever wear each other's clothes because they all have 'a totally different style'.

More often the respondents are inspired, influenced, by strangers. Almost all women interviewed find themselves, at times, looking at others, and this helps them determine what they like.

'I get my ideas from people I see in the street'. 'I pay attention to what other people are wearing and then try to remember what I like about it. Most of the time it is not a particular piece of clothing but more the overall picture, a style that appeals to me'. (Emma).

Or don't like. Anette sometimes sees someone 'with one of those cute scarves which I then really like, but, when I wear a thing like that myself I think 'hm''. Lisa and Carola are also aware of the 'danger' of copying someone. When trying to imitate something seen on someone else there is a possibility that you will not be able to pull it off:

'I think I get a lot of my ideas from what I see on other people. But other people are other people. Just like when you are at the hairdressers, you want something that's not possible, you run into your own physical limitations'. 'So I try to limit [the preconceived ideas] in my head a little, and to try out something new a little more often'. (Lisa).

'It occasionally happens that you see someone in the street and that you think 'wow' that is really very cool and..but .. then, when you see it on yourself then you really have to put yourself, force yourself, over a certain boundary'. (Carola).

And then there are the occasions on which we find ourselves looking at others and realise how we do *not* want to look:

'It so happens that I feel really nice in my skirt and shirt until I run into someone who's wearing a size 56 and is also wearing my skirt and shirt, and who is butt ugly, and then I think, o right, those people buy [my clothes] too'. (Anette).

The third and final way in which real others are influencing women's clothing choices that I'll discuss here, is through gifts or hand-me-downs. Woodward (2007) says that during her fieldwork she was struck by the number of clothes that women possessed that were given to them by their partner or mother, or borrowed from sisters or friends. Amongst my respondents however, the number of clothing items in the wardrobe that are either borrowed or received as gifts is small. Emma has a number of pieces that were given to her by her sister. Sometimes these items have been worn by her sister, who then gave them to Emma knowing she liked them. Other pieces her sister bought her especially. Emma's very favourite dress was a present from her sister:

'My favourite piece of clothing at this moment is this dress. I got it from my sister. She has the exact same one herself, and I saw it on her first and really liked it. So she got me one too, for my birthday'. (Emma).

Apart from Emma though, only a few women had the stray item that belongs (or formerly belonged) to someone else lying about. Like Anette, who has a few of her eldest daughter's t-shirts in her wardrobe, and Ria, who has clothes that were handed down to her from others, but which she never wears and, in turn, plans to pass on again herself. Some did not mention having any clothes that were given to them at all, like Carola and Maria. More significantly perhaps is that only a few of the women are particularly attached to clothing items that were given to them, especially because they were given to them as a present. Often quite the contrary. Clothes that were a gift but not particularly liked are kept in the wardrobe because the women feel obliged to keep the clothes, feeling they can't throw them away or pass them on in the same way they would have done had they bought them themselves, out of fear of hurting or offending the giver. A case in point is Adila, who has received a number of elaborate Moroccan and Arabic dresses from her mother-in-law from travels abroad. They are hanging in her wardrobe despite the fact she doesn't think they are particularly beautiful, well made or expensive, pointing out that 'they are cheap, look, the seams and the material, it's not [good quality]'.

Yet, she does not want to do away with them because she doesn't want to hurt her mother-in-law's feelings; she feels it to be not good form to discard a present just like that. Instead, she keeps the dress in her 'Moroccan' wardrobe, and wears them occasionally to please her mother in law.

The **imagined other** is the second other we take into consideration when we are deciding what to wear. However, where the concept of the real other, as demonstrated above, is rather straightforward – they are real persons which have crossed our path, however briefly or fleetingly, and their comments or appearance have left an impression profound enough to influence our choices –, the imagined other has not, physically, crossed our path. They may do so later, but at the time of dressing we have not (yet) met them. And we may never do so.

The imagined other is the other that makes Anette change into something else when wearing her jogging pants and needs to go grocery shopping:

'I never change when I go outside to do the grocery shopping [or something], just never in jogging pants. I never wear jogging pants outside. I put them on in the morning when I know I have to do the vacuuming or something first, and even then not always. But if so, I always change into something else after'. (Anette) .

The imagined other may also very well be the one keeping her from wearing the 'alternative' clothes she really likes, but feels she cannot wear because 'that's nice when you are young, (...) but not at my age'. It's also the other that makes Carola wear some of her clothes to the office for work, but not to visit a client, feeling that for that occasion she needs more formal clothing, something like a trouser suit, 'never jeans, (...), that's too casual'; or lets her wear a bikini on holiday because she feels she 'can still pull it off', but perhaps not to take her little three year-old nephew swimming, thinking that 'for that [occasion] a bikini may not be the most appropriate choice and perhaps a one-piece bathing suit would be better'. It's the other that stops Ria from wearing the more beautiful clothes she has hanging in her wardrobe for more everyday occasions, because she imagines that

"When I go to just [visit my daughter], I do not go all dressed up to the nines, in my skirt and jacket. They would ask me whether I've forgotten to take of my coat, shouldn't I take of my coat'. (Ria).

The women may not be explicitly aware of this imagined other playing a part in their decision making process, but recognise him when asked about it. As Emma said:

'That other you have in mind doesn't even exist' (...). 'The strange thing is, like, even last week, when we were on holiday at a holiday park, [my boyfriend] and his sister and her boyfriend went for a swim, and I didn't go with them because I had a headache and didn't feel like going. After I had taken something against the headache and it had subsided a bit, they texted me that they were having a drink, just at the little restaurant you always have on those parks, and whether I felt like coming and joining them. At that moment I was wearing one of those house pants, and then I do go and change into something else, but...for whom? For the waiter there? That park was almost deserted at that time of year, so the people being there wouldn't have been many anyway, and they were just coming out of the pool too, but yet, I change clothes. Not that I put on a gala outfit, but I did put on some jeans and a half-decent shirt instead of going there in some sort of pyjama, even if that would have been perfectly acceptable. Earlier, when I did go to the swimming pool I did wear those pyjama pants, those flower printed trousers. (...). So at that time it didn't matter. That time I did go out into the street with in my head the [destination] I'm heading to, and in that instance it is okay, but when I go to that restaurant, to which I have to walk the exact same way, then all of a sudden it does matter what I am wearing'. (Emma).

So, the imagined other is the person we have in mind when we dress, the person we may, or may not, meet later and on whom we want to make a certain impression. As such, 'living' in our own minds rather than actually existing outside of it, the imagined other is arguably closely connected to, or even part of, the next influencing factor I identified, namely 'the self'.

The Self

A woman is standing in front of a mirror, looking at her reflection. She is wearing a red dress. She looks ill at ease, not happy at all. Peering over her shoulder are two other women, stylists, who have chosen the dress for her. 'I don't like it' the woman says. 'But, you look fabulous', the two other women tell her, 'so much better, can't you see that?' 'I do not like it' the woman says again, now in tears. 'I don't know why, but it feels all wrong, it just doesn't look like me, this just isn't me'.

The scene described here is a scene I remember from the British make-over show 'What Not To Wear' but could have been from any of the many make-over shows aired on Dutch television. I think everyone at some point has experienced this feeling of something 'just not being me' when wearing something that, well, just doesn't feel right. Often it is impossible to pinpoint why something feels off, it just does. And this sense of something not being me, this sense of self, has come out of this research as being a very important factor in what women will or will not wear. As such, this finding contradicts

Featherstone's⁴ claim that 'today there is no fashion: there are only *fashions*.' 'No rules, only choices.' 'Everyone can be anyone.' (Featherstone 1991: 83, emphasis in the original). What I found is, that where it concerns the lived, everyday experiences of women, the freedom to be 'anyone' has its limitations, and these limitations are put into place by the sense of self. Indeed, all my respondents, without exception, report having experienced this 'not me' feeling and the feelings of uneasiness that follow from putting on a 'wrong' clothing item. As Anette says:

'I fall for a print or I fall for a colour'(...) 'but if I don't feel comfortable in it, or if I find it too tight, then I'll return it, no matter how much I like the shirt or no matter how beautiful the colour, but I have to feel good [wearing] it'. (...), *this [shirt] I bought because I wanted to buy something but I feel [terribly] unhappy in it'(...)*, 'I fell for the colour, I fell for the print, thinking it's nice and light, and then I am wearing it and I find it far too revealing'. 'I feel uncomfortable in it'. (Anette).

And Lisa too describes this feeling of something not being 'her'. Holding up a pretty, little black blouse, with a tucked in waist and puffy short sleeves she tells me that

'It's too feminine, too ladylike, (...), [the shape] is just not me. I'm not a woman, I'm not a lady. On this day, (...) I do not think it [right]. That's just a feeling...'. (Lisa).

Alternatively, there is the other side of the same coin: the experience of something feeling 'exactly me' and in which the self is experienced in a positive, affirmative way. Emma has experienced the 'this is me' feeling:

'[This cardigan] really suits me very well I think' 'I don't really know why but I think because of the little drawings on it, it's a bit playful, a bit childlike or something, I don't know but I just find it suits me really well', (...) 'I do see clothing on other people that I find very beautiful but I find won't suit me'. (Emma).

The sense of self is a permanent feature in people⁵ but a person, of course, is not unchanging. People change, their lives change, tastes and preferences change, and with that, their sense of what is (not) 'me' and subsequently, possibly their choice of clothing. Still, the large majority of the wardrobes hold clothing items that women no longer wear, with the exception of Carola's perhaps,

⁴ Featherstone is quoting Ewen & Ewen from their *Channels of Desire* (1982: 249-51)

⁵ That is, in healthy people. A lack or absence of a sense of self is considered a pathology (see Jenkins 2004 : 44).

who at the time of our wardrobe interview had just held a thorough clear out. The others all have clothes they really liked at one point but no longer feel is 'them', and which in that way can be seen as being part of a former self. Lisa owns several pieces of clothing, including one top of which she says

'(...) two years ago I still liked it but not anymore. Maybe because you get older..(..)'. 'It's not so much that I have decided I want to look differently now, just.... I feel I have changed. When I wore [the shirt] recently I found I no longer liked it'. (Lisa).

She's convinced it is not her taste in clothes that has changed as such, she still likes her clothes 'bold' but 'beautiful' and most of all, 'timeless', but 'it doesn't suit me anymore'. She goes on to illustrate this changing self with the example of her purse, which she has bought some while ago for one euro thinking

'this is my best buy ever', and then when I had it out to pay for something not so long ago I suddenly thought to myself 'Hey liz, that can do no more''. 'Then all of a sudden I find it stupid'. (Lisa).

An illustrating case in point regarding changing selves is Adila. She is adding proof that changing selves is about more than simply a change of clothes by illustrating the reverse situation: the feeling of regret and unease when the self has not changed but one is forced to dress differently than one is used to. Since her marriage Adila is, as was mentioned earlier, wearing a headscarf. This despite the fact she finds it uncomfortable and inconvenient; she is trying to get used to it. Similarly, she finds it hard not being allowed to wear a bikini at the beach like she used to do before she got married. But, she says, 'I have chosen'. Furthermore, one could read her entire biography from the clothes hanging in her wardrobe. From the itchy-bitsy skirts and spaghetti strapped tops she used to wear when living with her parents and two younger sisters in Spain, to the Moroccan dresses that can also be divided in before and after marriage categories, with the dress she wore at the occasion of her brother's wedding, as an unmarried woman, having see-through fabric showing her arms and shoulders. Her wardrobe even caters for a future self: she keeps a wide blouse she doesn't like to wear right now because she plans to wear it in case she gets pregnant.

These changing selves are notably most prevalent in the younger respondents, Lisa and Adila – both in their early twenties. This could very well be because of the many and major life changes they are going through in their lives at this age. As Emma explained when you get older and somewhat more settled:

'I wear what I like'. (...). 'I think that has to do with age, but also with acceptance around you and because [between your twenties and thirties] you are in a phase in your life where you do

not meet so many new people like you do when you go to secondary school, and you don't have the feeling you have to prove anymore that you are thin because you are supposedly not eating. Now you are surrounded by people that know this is the way you are and that you do eat'. (Emma).

But life changing is not exclusive to the younger women. Ria, too, is evidence that changing circumstances are prone to influence changing clothing habits:

'[As you get older] the number of occasions [to dress up nicely for] gets less and less. Your circle of friends and acquaintances gets smaller and smaller and with that, the number of occasions to dress up nicely'. (Ria).

However, changes in clothing in the more mature respondents are more related to physical changes due to the natural aging process. Something that is met with a sense of regret, but also resignation. As Anette admits:

'It's really quite annoying that when you have always been super slim, and was able to wear everything, (...) and then all of a sudden you have this lump of fat [around your waist] that just won't shift, which you get when you are over forty-five, and yes, that's just the way it is, and whether you like it or not, you simply no longer have the figure of a young girl, and that I sometimes do find hard. And when I look into the mirror, and I don't feel any older than thirty or so, so then...'. (...) It bothers me particularly when buying clothes (...), when I'm standing in that cubicle, and it seems as though these days they make the light in there as unflattering as possible (...)you see every little flaw, that is awful'. (...) 'I have given up hope to fit into clothes that have become too small ever again. For years I have had in my closet a beige pair of trousers which I had bought a little too tight, in the hope that I was going to shed two kilos (...) but that doesn't work like that for me. The hope to lose ten kilos has evaporated, and I am fine with that now'. (...) These days I sometimes buy t-shirts in men's sizes because women's t-shirts are all narrow waisted '. (Anette).

And Ria, too, says,

'I can go sit around and cry all day over being too big but I will only hurt myself that way (...). I am like this and I will stay like this because I have to take [my medication]. There is no point in worrying about that, so I won't. I'm ready to believe that I could do with about ten kilos less but that is not going to happen. So I adapt my clothing, to ,like, camouflage my stomach (...) wearing certain clothes that have a slimming effect and that works fine'. (Ria).

Maria has also have had to deal with a changing body, starting from the time she had her two daughters, almost thirty years ago. Contrary to Anette and Ria, though, Maria is trying to lose weight. She has kept clothing that have become either too big or too small for her, having hung a beautiful cardigan on the door of the room where she keeps her clothes. 'For motivation'. In the meantime she sees herself as 'a fat woman, yes'. And this has implications for the way she dresses. Bottom and belly must always be covered:

'I would never wear anything that shows your entire build, your entire body (...) like for instance leggings without something longer[worn over it]. For people of a certain age, like sixty-three, my age, and [a bigger size]I think it doesn't look good. There are always exceptions of course but most of the time, it doesn't'. (Maria).

Body issues, however, are not the prerogative of the 'ladies of a certain age' among the respondents. They are prevalent amongst all women respondents, the younger respondents also testifying to having more and less favourite body features. Features they prefer to hide, and those they like to show. But they too, take them in their stride, refusing to dwell on them for too long. Like Lisa e-mailed to me:

'(...) almost everything about my body is not very agreeable. I am not saying ugly or weird, but representative I am not: really narrow feet, skinny legs with a low bottom, relatively wide hips, long torso, almost no breasts and shoulders, long neck and a small head. This makes that so little clothes have the right fit for me (...) and because it is so difficult to find clothes I want everything to go together, I think. It is funny to think that I compensate the non-representativeness of my body by wanting my clothes to be as representative as possible (...)'. (Lisa.)

Emma says she doesn't hide specific body features but does emphasise some more than others. She likes her back and has no problem showing it, but does wear push up bras,

'because otherwise there would be nothing left, so in a sense I am camouflaging but luckily, these days, that can be done [quite easily]'. (Emma).

And some things don't look good on her,

'because my neck is quite long (...) that is something, I guess. I have a long neck, and certain things [when I wear them], then my neck is sticking out above it, (...); so I prefer to wear it with the collar turned up. And I wear it less often because of that'. (Emma).

Carola thinks her hips leave something to be desired, saying:

'I must be careful not to emphasise my hips too much,... well, anyway, they are there, but, if I emphasise them too much they appear to be enormous'. (Carola).

She also pays attention to the colours she wear. She tries to incorporate green, blue or purple shades in her outfits as often as possible, knowing those are the colours that suit her best, and that she 'look[s] really well in dark shades of grey' but not so much in khaki colours:

'when I where khaki I tend to look as if I have the flu, it completely washes me out'. (Carola).

These body issues may be cause for insecurity or anxiety, but on the whole it is evident that the women are quite certain about what they feel they can or cannot wear, resulting in, to a certain extent, dressing by self applied rules that may, in turn, give a certain feeling of security.

Overall, the whole issue of getting dressed seems to take place at the crossroads of not only who we think we are and what we think others want us to be, but also, finally, who we would like to be. An 'aspired' self:

'You know, I would most like to dress in those pretty skirts, with a nice pair of boots and thick tights underneath; but always when I do wear clothes like that I get this 'I am going to the office feeling', (...). If I would work in an office, I would wear that, definitely'. (Anette).

The Clothes

In addition to others and the self there is a third party that influences the way we dress. From the research the clothes themselves emerge as having significant influence. This influence works in two ways that are closely connected and work on the level of how clothes can make us feel, both physically and mentally. Firstly there is the aspect of the clothes' materiality. How a piece of clothing feels on the skin: the softness of a favourite sweater, the feeling and smell of a particular leather jacket, the warmth of a winter coat, this, too, is important for women's decisions on what they will wear or not. Secondly, clothes exercise their own power, or agency, that is a 'socio-culturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahern quoted in Hoskins 2006: 74). It is recognised amongst the respondents that particular clothes are enabling in certain situations whereas others are not. These clothes allow them, or make it easier for them, to perform a task, which they normally would find daunting. Wearing the 'right' clothes then helps them to find the confidence to take on the task with more ease than when they had worn something less suitable for the situation. I, for example, always have had a preference

to wear high heels whenever I had to give a presentation in class, in front of my fellow students. This has nothing to do with a desire to look taller; being almost 6 ft. tall I hardly need the height. It has to do with how the higher heels make me feel. For some reason they make me feel more confident and up to the task at hand. Emma recalls how she, not so long ago, as a newly self-employed business owner, had a business meeting:

'Yesterday I had a [business meeting] and then you do stand in front of your closet thinking 'what will I put on'? I then put on a dress, not overdressed but just nice...the weather was also nice and when you are wearing a dress, then that makes you feel better wearing that at that moment. You know, that I wasn't sitting there in jeans and just a t-shirt, but instead [in something] to which I had given a little attention...that you not get there overdressed like 'well I put on a jacket and a this or a that' which then make you feel like you're no longer yourself'. (Emma).

Wearing clothes that made her look both 'presentable' and 'nice' and which were suitable for the occasion, made it possible for her to forget about how she looked and to focus on other matters.

'There, also, you compare, because you'll sit there and the person [I was meeting] was wearing jeans I think; so it would have been okay for me to wear them too, but I would have felt uncomfortable had I been the one sitting there in jeans and had that other person shown up well turned out. So now, I did not have to worry about that, I looked good, or, yes, like you said, you put something on, and you leave [the house] and it's all right. (..)'. 'Had I sat there in a super chic two piece suit and had she been wearing jeans I had felt super uncomfortable as well; while now I feel I had found something of a middle ground, not too over-the-top and not too casual, so I'm safe or something...in a secure range; so that if she had been [dressed very formal] I would not have felt uncomfortable because I could go along with that too, but I also did not feel uncomfortable now she was wearing jeans. Because I was wearing something that I normally could be wearing too. It couldn't have been just anywhere but it wasn't like 'this is for when I am attending a special occasion' either'. (Emma).

Carola also feels more confident that she is up to the job when she is dressed for the occasion:

'I feel comfortable [doing things that way] ...I feel good when I have the feeling of 'well, I look nice and well groomed, I'm wearing nice clothes, then I have a feeling ...well that...that gives a certain kind of strength. When, for example, I go to see a client, or [the other day] I had a presentation to give and that [always makes me] a little tense, and in that case I always give some extra attention to my appearance. And then I mean to complete package, because that

gives that power, yes, that extra bit of strength, ..., that I don't have to worry about that and that does give you a certain extra feeling'. (Carola).

And Lisa points out how she finds it 'bizarre' how clothing can make one feel and gives the example of when she was working, waitressing one day:

'(...)I was wearing my own jeans and a Heineken t-shirt and a big apron [all the way down from me waist to my ankles], and it was horrible, I felt scrawny and it seemed as if there was nothing left of me. Then, after I finished work, I took off the apron and then, all of a sudden, the t-shirt looked fine, then it 'clicked' again. It has to 'click''. (Lisa).

The experience of this ability of clothes to make someone feel a certain way is not restricted to professional environment. Carola is very susceptible to how certain clothes make her feel, also outside of the workplace:

'Maybe it's a bit heavy, but I really think...for example if you give me a fleece sweater, that would make me very unhappy (...). So as far as that is concerned I indeed think, yes, clothing holds a certain power or can give strength. (...). For me it sometimes is... clothing can make you feel really nice but it can also give you a really, well, not so nice feeling. (...). For example, pyjama-day, that would make me completely miserable (...). That would really make me feel like 'what a lousy day'. (...)I certainly would go to sleep with a bad feeling. Simply the fact of not having showered and...no. I just want to dress nicely every day. And it really doesn't have to be spectacular every day, but presentable, yes'. (Carola).

And that goes for Maria too, as she admits to being very insecure when it comes to clothing and her appearance. She often wears black, 'because it is more neutral', which makes her feel 'secure', despite acknowledging that when she sometimes wears something more colourful, like red, it does make her feel more 'cheerful'. For the same reason she prefers trousers to skirts:

'I feel safer or something. Yes, I feel better in trousers'. (Maria).

5.2 Getting dressed: about identity and authenticity

Now, having established and illustrated how others (real and imagined), a varying, changing and aspiring self, and clothes in their own right are pivotal to how women choose what to wear, in which wider context should this be seen?

What the above presented findings illustrate is that our clothing choices revolve around how we (want to) present the various aspects of our person, our different *identities*, to the outside world (the others), while at the same time trying to maintain a sense of *authenticity*, that is, the self; and what lies beneath the whole exercise of getting dressed is the way identities are formed and performed. Of course, in real life, a sharp demarcation between others and self, as it is made here for analytical purposes, cannot be made. The distinction between the self and real others is quite real and clear, but the line between the imagined other and the self is a thin one. Nonetheless, both others are fully implicated in this process of identity formation. No identity comes into existence in isolation. Identity formation, always takes place in social interaction, that is, between our self and others. So do our clothing choices. It is, I think, not a coincidence, that others and the self have emerged from the research as being central to clothing behaviour; the same parties are involved in the formation of identities. In addition, our sense of self, how we see ourselves and how others see us, in other words our identity, is entangled with the objects that we share our lives with, not least of all our clothes that we carry closer than any other object, on our skin. I do not mean to imply that getting dressed is the exact same process as forming an identity; obviously identity formation entails infinitely more than getting dressed. But getting dressed is, as we also saw in chapter two, for an important part about the communication of different identities. And with communicating an identity, this identity is formed.

It should be clear that identity is a complex and multi-faceted notion of which a complete treatise, or exhaustive explanation of its workings is far beyond the scope of this thesis. I therefore have had to content myself with focussing on a limited number of features of identity that emerged from the research as being relevant to how women come to make their clothing choices, and that subsequently can substantiate and clarify the findings presented above. On these aspects – the internal-external dialectic of identity formation, the (il)logic of being different and similar at the same time, the search for authenticity, the need for self presentation and – performance, and the workings of objects for identity formation – I will elaborate further in this final paragraph.

On identity

In the past two decades identity has become a much debated subject, both in social science and in everyday popular discourse. Not only has identity become a subject studied extensively in its own right; it has become a prism through which every other aspect of contemporary life can be examined (Bauman in Elliot & du Gay 2009: 1). However, it becomes clear quite rapidly to the unwitting student setting out on the subject, that this surge in studies on identity has done relatively little for the conceptual clarity of the subject. On the contrary, the extensive body of literature produced remains inconcise and the lack of agreement on the conceptualisation and definition of identity initially, possibly, only makes for more confusion. Amongst scholars on the subject this situation has led some to conclude ‘that identity is so elusive, slippery, and amorphous that it will never prove to be a useful variable for the social sciences’ (Abdelal *et al.*, 2009: 17-18). It even has been argued that it would be

best to do away with the concept as an analytical tool altogether (Brubaker & Cooper in Abdelal *et al.*, 2009: 17-18; in Jenkins 2004: 9), in favour of a more appropriate one. In fact, during the preparatory course to the writing of this thesis, my lecturer expressed his concerns over my bringing the very concept to the table, deeming it too ambiguous to be useful. Through the years however, whether one likes it or not, identity has become an indispensable part of the ‘sociological toolkit’ (Jenkins 2004: 9). And the psychological, the anthropological and many a toolkit more for that matter; even if only it were for lack of a better alternative. So I disagree, with my former teacher and all the other naysayers to identity both as an explanatory prism and as a concept in itself. But I do understand their concerns.

Often identity is seen as something petrified, unchangeable and unchanged through time. The concept has been presented and abused as the end-all to explain (and justify) various social phenomena, with identity being presented as something that simply *is*, always has been, and always will be, thus ignoring the fact that every identity is constructed socially (Jenkins 2004 :5; Abdelal *et al.* 2009; Woodward 2004). That is, in social interaction, in an ongoing, never-ending process. This is essential to the understanding of identity: it can only be understood as a process (Jenkins 2004:9); as something that *becomes* rather than *is*.

It would be impossible to live our lives without some sense of who we are and some means of knowing who others are. Identity is this means of knowing, it is our understanding of who we are and of who other people are. Upon meeting someone we rely upon appearances – not in the least clothing – and matters such as language, answers to questions, otherwise disclosed information and information from third parties to form an idea of whom and what we are dealing with. Consequently, identity is also other people’s understanding of themselves and others. And that is why, when interacting, we are not only sizing up others, but also make an effort to present ourselves to others so that they will work out who we are. Preferably along the lines that we would like them to. (Jenkins 2004: 6). Now, if identification, knowing who’s who, is a ‘necessary prerequisite’ (*op. cit.*: 18) for understanding and living our lives, the other side of the coin necessarily is that personal identity is a meaningful notion only in relation to other people (*ibid.*); if there were no others, there would be no (need for a sense of) self. Thus, every person may be unique in his or her selfhood, but this selfhood – or identity – is thoroughly socially constructed, i.e., constructed in relation to others, just like everyone else’s. In their initial socialisation and the after that ever ongoing social interaction with others, individuals continuously keep defining and redefining themselves and others (*ibid.*). Hence, identity is something we do but is never ‘done’.

Others, Self & Identity: the internal-external dialectic

Established in social interaction identity, like clothing choices, is the outcome of agreement and disagreement, negotiable (most of the time), and importantly: never fixed (Jenkins 2004: 5). Leaning on the work of Cooley (1962, 1964) and Mead (1934), and their understanding of selfhood as ‘as an ongoing and, in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external)

definitions of oneself offered by others', Jenkins (2004), in order to understand how identity works, is achieved and constituted, has come up with 'a template' for a basic model for understanding how the process whereby identities – all identities, individual and collective – work. He has named this process the *internal-external dialectic of identification* (Jenkins 2004: 18). Central to this process is the fact that identity is never unilateral. This means that what we think ourselves to be is not sufficient to create us an identity. What other people think about us is equally important as what we think of ourselves. Our identity must be acknowledged, 'validated', by those we come into contact with (*op. cit.*: 19-20). In other words, our self-image must be met by our public image. And this is achieved through the internal-external dialectic of identification. Or not; it is very well possible that our self-image is *not* validated by others. We have some control over the signals we want to send out to the outside world, but we cannot control whether or not they are received and interpreted by others in the way they were intended (*op. cit.*: 20). Jenkins points out that these processes are 'routine everyday practices' (*op. cit.*: 25). This means that not much thought will go into them when we go about our everyday hum-drum lives. We see this translated to the clothing behaviour of our respondents as well. On a regular day, without special events or suspected surprises, the women dress in a mostly habitual manner; not much thought goes into choosing the outfit for such a day. The imagined and real others, though certainly not absent, appear to have taken a back seat, and the self seems more relaxed. For the time being at least. This changes when the women are facing a less everyday situation, such as, as we have seen, a business meeting or an occasion that requires speaking in public. Then much more thought goes into the clothes the women choose to wear and the self, the real others and particularly the imagined others are out in force.

Difference and similarity

The notion of identity, with its others and selves, revolves around two criteria: similarity and difference (Jenkins 2004: 4; Lawley 2008: 2). We are identical with ourselves, meaning that we are the same being from birth to death; and others, in the sense that we have identities in common with other people. At the same time we are different from everyone else. Not one person is the same person as another. This leads to the somewhat illogical, but correct, understanding that people are simultaneously the same and different (Lawley 2008: 2). This also translates to clothing behaviour. It was Simmel who argued that fashion (and thus clothing) depends upon the conflict between 'adaptation to society and individual departure from its demands' (1957: 542). And according to Roach and Eicher 'the emotional survival of humans somehow depends upon their ability to strike a balance between conforming to society and preserving a sense of self-identity' (quoted in Barnard 2002: 61).

That getting dressed eventually is about identity was suggested already in chapter two in which it was explained that one of the most important functions of clothing, if not *the* most important function, was to communicate the various roles, i.e. identities, people perform in their everyday life.

Here it can also be read between the lines already that often, if not always, various and sometimes contradictory identities must be managed and acted out at the same time. No person has only one identity. People always identify with more than one group or collectivity. This is what we see emerging from the fieldwork, in the shape of the multiple selves that are being presented through our clothing behaviour and choices. These various identities influence each other. They are not just existing next to each other, together but separate, the one added to the other. Different identities are 'interactive and mutually constitutive' as well as 'dynamic', with the exception of a few identities that are understood to be 'mutually exclusive' and 'oppositional' (Lawley 2008: 3).

Following this line of thinking – identity simultaneously being about difference and similarity, the observed concern with the opinion of real and imagined others when it comes to clothing choices, seems to be rooted mostly in our need to identify with, and feel part of and accepted by, our social environment. The observed concern with clothes being 'me', appears to relate more to the need to feel oneself one's own unique person. But what is it, if we are at the same time different from and similar to all others, that makes us unique?

On authenticity: semblance and substance

The sense of uniqueness, of selfhood, we experience is often seen as, and experienced as, something intrinsic to the person in question, something contained deep inside. Although the outside world may impact upon it, it is not generally believed to make it (Guignon 2010: 1-11; Lawley 2008: 5). With this idea, that a part of a person is not produced by the social world, the notion that every human has an essence that makes him or her what he or she is, takes hold. This essence that is supposedly situated deep inside of us, is often seen as being 'deeper' or 'truer' than what is situated on the outside (Lawley 2008: 5). As such, *being* someone, an identity, is often counter posed against *doing* an identity. The first is generally seen as being 'authentic', as opposed to pretending to be something we are not. While the former is assumed to be an expression of 'who we are, really', the latter is seen as 'playing a part': a false expression, pretending to be someone other than 'who we are really'. This distinction suggest that it might be possible for one's 'true self' simply to emerge (*op. cit.*: 2008: 101).

When a gap is seen to exist between doing and being – or between *semblance* and *substance* – then the person is liable to be accused of pretension, inauthenticity or 'acting a role' (*ibid.*). We feel, therefore, that semblance and substance ought to coincide, not only when it comes to others, but for ourselves as well. The results emerging from the research makes clear that dressing, choosing what to wear, is centred on a preoccupation with this sense of authenticity. The entire act of dressing seems to revolve around trying to merge these two – doing and being, or semblance and substance – together into one persona, ourselves. The bigger picture of dressing as a process of identity formation goes mainly unnoticed by the women taking part in the research. Rather tellingly, though unsurprisingly, none of my acquaintances to whom I posed the question 'why do you wear clothes?' (see chapter two) answered along the line of 'Well, I want to constitute and express my identity to the world around me'.

The same is not true for this need for authenticity; this the women are very aware of, as we have seen. Although they do not use the exact word all women allude to being preoccupied with being authentic. For example Emma, in a personal conversation, once told me that she found it difficult to decide what to wear to a job interview, saying that she felt that if she would show up in a two-piece suite, it would be a 'lie', 'some form of deceit' because this would present an unrealistic image of who she really is, namely, someone who normally does not wear two-piece suits. And Anette mentioned that she is will not wear just anything she likes for fear of becoming 'a parody, a caricature' of herself.

The presentation of self and the need to perform identity

As was mentioned, it is not unthinkable that our self-image is not validated. In other words, our view of ourselves, and what we think ourselves to be, might not be shared by others. Since we can exert some control over the signals we send out, but very little, if any, over how these signals are received and interpreted, that what Goffman has called 'the presentation of self' (1958 [1956]) becomes all the more important when we interact. After all, the better our skills to present ourselves, the bigger the chance that our signals are received and perceived in the way they were intended.

But that is not the only way in which performing our identity is important. As we have seen identity comes into being through interaction between the self and others. We have also seen that it is a process, it is something we do rather than something that is, and that this process is necessarily continuous; we have to do it over and over again. This 'doing' identity, over and over, may seem rather straightforward but it is a key element in the understanding of the workings of identity formation. Identity is done through 'self-impersonation' (Lawley 2008: 103). By self-impersonation is meant the 'process by which we assume characteristics we claim as our own' (*op. cit.*: 103-104). This we do not just for the fun of it. It is 'through this process, [that] we become (social) persons, through performing our selves' (*op. cit.*: 104). Lawley admittedly has taken the concept from Doniger (2005), who uses the term 'masquerading' and explains that 'masquerading as ourselves reaffirms an enduring self (or network of selves) inside us, which does not change even if our masquerades, intentional or helpless, make us look different to others' (Doniger in Lawley 2008: 103). So, we build our identity by performing it. Or differently put: we can become and be ourselves (only) by performing ourselves.

Goffman (1958 [1956]) (famously) also uses 'dramaturgic metaphors' and references to the theatre and stage performance for analysing social interaction and social identity. For Goffman, too, identity is always something that is done; it is achieved. Not innate. Furthermore, identity is not something achieved in isolation; it is part of a social and collective endeavour, not an individual quest. Neither is it a matter of individual choice; we cannot simply choose to be one person rather than another (Lawley 2008: 105). The latter may mitigate the concerns some of us may have by the images this 'performing ourselves' may conjure up. Images of playing a role, of pretending, possible to be something we are not. We have grown used to understanding impersonation as meaning 'fraudulently or otherwise assuming the characteristics of another person' (*op. cit.*: 103) and indeed, as Doniger

says, ‘we assume that masquerades lie, and often they do, at least on the surface. But often masquerades tell a deeper truth (...)’ (Doniger in Lawley 2008: 103-104). The assertion that we cannot simply choose to be just any person (not truthfully anyway) should take away most concerns over deceit or false pretences. After all, when we are ‘self-impersonating’ we are playing ourselves. So the crux is not that we play different roles, rather, the performances, the roles we play, are what *make* us persons. They do not mask any ‘true’ person we might be harbouring inside, they constitute it (*op. cit.*: 106). And there is another reason why someone cannot simply decide to be one thing rather than another, at least not without consequences, and that is because all this is carried out within the framework of social relations that authorises or penalises their carrying out. (*op. cit.*: 114).

In order to play a role we have to dramatise it. There is no point in ‘doing identity’ when no one recognises what we are doing. The action must be made apparent (*op. cit.*: 106-107), and what better way than putting on the right costume? Differently put, to step away from the dramaturgical metaphors for a moment, identities are not just internalised but must be materialised as well, and that is something we do by means of (amongst other things) our clothing. Clothing must be one of the most convincing ‘props’ we have when it comes to putting on a convincing performance. Moreover, clothing serves as a double-edged sword. After all, it not only works to convince others; it also has the ability, as we have seen, to put us ‘into character’, to prepare and equip us for the role we need to play.

Objects and identity

The need to perform identity in order for it to materialise is an important notion onto itself but also in relation to the part that clothing plays in the formation process of our identities. For this performing of our selves would be impossible without the aid of clothing, or at least some form of physical adornment. But the role of clothing goes beyond that of an indispensable prop to help our ‘performance’. The relationship between a person’s material objects and the development of his or her identity (or rather identities) has been the topic of various studies⁶. Objects have been known to express qualities of the self, ethnic origins, social class and caste, religion, and more. But the role of objects goes beyond that of simply reflecting on the outside what lies deep inside; our ‘true’ identity. They are not just signs or symbols that represent us, a kind of ‘pseudo-language’ telling the outside world who we are. Clothes are not ‘merely servants’ whose task it is to represent the human inside, but in themselves worthless, ‘inanimate stuff’ (Miller 2010: 12-13).

When it comes to identity formation, the role of objects is not that much different from that of the others. Just like we are interacting with others (the internal-external dialectic), we are interacting with objects also. Through our interaction with them they become a building block for our identity. Through their interaction with us they gain their own ‘social life’ (Appadurai 1986). They become what Hoskins (1998) has called ‘biographical objects’. Leaning on the work of the French sociologist

⁶ See chapter 2 for examples.

Violette Morin (1969), Hoskins distinguishes these so-called biographical objects from ‘protocol objects’ (1998: 8). Both objects are produced for mass consumption, but contrary to the protocol objects, individuals develop a relationship with a biographical object which, in turn, gives this biographical object its own personality and identity. As such, the biographical object grows old, alongside its owner, it becomes worn and tattered and used up, in contrast to other non-biographical objects that remain ‘eternally youthful’ and are not used up but replaced. Biographical objects are linked, and link their owner, to a particular time and space and mark (and are marked by) personal experiences (*op. cit.*: 7-9). Our clothes do just that. We all have, including the women partaking in this research, pieces of clothing that transport us (back) to another time and place. The wedding dress, a suit that was worn to a mother’s funeral, a skirt that was worn often in the time one just started going out with one’s boyfriend or simply the soft sweater that makes us feel nice and relaxed. Sometimes these pieces are kept long after we stopped wearing them for what is generally called sentimental reasons. We simply cannot part with them; they share our lives, they have become biographical objects. And as such our clothes are not merely representative of the person we are, they are constitutive to it.

Conclusion

Why do women choose to wear the clothes they wear? Having thrown myself into the field with a very broad research question, no limitations to the potential research population other than the respondents having to be adult women, and the help of the guidelines of the constructivist grounded theory method; I went on to 'wardrobe interview' seven women and subsequently found an answer to this question that turned out to be quite different from what I had expected at the start of this research. As I mentioned at the beginning of chapter five, I expected to eventually come up with an extensive list of factors, persons and circumstances that influence the clothing choices women make. However, already quite early in the fieldwork period I was given a clue that getting dressed, choosing what to wear, was going to prove itself to be much more than a simple decision making process, based on a number of questions concerning practicalities such as the weather and the occasion, that takes place between the wardrobe and the mirror.

In theory, these days, in the absence of sumptuary laws dictating them what they can or cannot wear and an almost unlimited choice of mass produced consumer clothing items available, women can wear anything they want. In practice they do not. In practice, the clothing choices women make are part of a process in which what is possible and not possible is defined by 'others', 'the self' and the clothing itself. Real others are the people in our lives that voice their opinion about our clothes, which we then can take to heart or discard; they are the people we see in the street and whom we take as an example of how we want to look, or as a warning as to how we do not want to look, and they are the people from whom we receive clothes as gifts or hand-me-downs and in this manner find their way into our wardrobes. The imagined other is the person we have in mind when we dress, but whom we have not yet met. We may do so later, or we may not. The imagined other is the person on whom we want to make a certain expression. At the time of dressing, however, he or she only exists in our mind. By existing only in our mind, the imagined other is closely related to the self.

The self makes itself known mainly through the sense of something not being 'me'. The self is looking to fit the outside, the clothes we wear, with something 'inside' of us. The self is changeable, something that is illustrated by the pieces of clothing the women have in their wardrobes that they no longer wear. Because they no longer like them. Or because they are no longer fitting or suitable because the physical self has changed. It should be clear that the three notions overlap. As said, by existing in our minds the imagined other and the self are closely related and not easily distinguished. But real and imagined others are also intertwined. Imagined others go on to become real others should we eventually meet them and they start voicing their opinions. Similarly, real others may function as imagined others when they do not actually comment on the way we dress but we imagine their possible reaction nonetheless.

The third party emerging from the research as having influence on the way women dress are the clothes themselves. Firstly, there is the materiality of the clothes; the way something feels on the body

matters greatly for the decision to wear something or not. Secondly, clothes exercise their own power, or agency. Clothes not only have an effect on the body, they affect the mind as well. Some clothes have the ability to make people feel better, or worse when worn. They can give or take away confidence, they can make us feel lively or drab, or right at home or out of place. They do something to us.

The wider context in which the others, self and clothing should be seen is as part of a process of identity formation. I think that it's not a coincidence that the three parties that came out of this research as being central to clothing behaviour, are also involved in the formation of identities. What we choose to wear revolves around how we want to present ourselves, our identities, to the outside world (the others), and, at the same time, a search for authenticity, the sense self. And at the basis of this lies the forming and performing of identity.

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