

Preferences in leisure time book reading: A study on the social differentiation in book reading for the Netherlands[☆]

Gerbert Kraaykamp^{a,*}, Katinka Dijkstra^b

^a *Department of Sociology, University of Nijmegen,
P.O. Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands*

^b *College of Communication, Florida State University,
325 Regional Rehabilitation Center, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1200, USA*

Abstract

In this study, we addressed the question of social differentiation in book reading preferences. Two theoretical insights are examined that explain why readers from the higher social classes prefer complex and prestigious books more than readers from the lower social strata. At first, membership in the higher social classes is seen as an indication for a person's cultural competence, and second, it is expected that people from the society's elite are more eager to demonstrate their high status background through reading. In our analyses, using a Dutch nationwide survey of book readers, we first examined the usability of a ranking procedure in which book genres and literary books were classified on the dimensions of complexity and literary prestige. Our results indicated that a reliable classification could be established through the method of expert evaluation. We used this classification of genres and literary books to obtain a valid measurement of a respondent's book reading preferences. Second, we investigated to what extent aspects of readers could explain these preferences. Our findings showed that especially a higher educational level and the stimulation of literary reading in secondary school determined reading preferences for complex books. Furthermore, our analyses indicated that social motives of readers were of importance. Readers who emphasized the general value of literature, and readers with a high status best friend liked to read relatively complex books (even after factors of individual competence were taken into account). Our analyses gave rise to the more general conclusion that social differences in book reading were due to cultural competence factors, but also, and more surprisingly, to social status characteristics of readers. © 1999 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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* Corresponding author. E-mail: g.kraaykamp@maw.kun.nl

1. Introduction

In sociology, empirical research on social differences in leisure book reading is scarce. In an overview of the field, Griswold (1993) assumes that this lack of knowledge is partly due to the fact that the sociology of literature is not organized around key questions. In this article, it is advocated that inequality in book reading, both with respect to reader characteristics as well as with respect to the qualities of books, can be such a theme. So far, leading studies by Bourdieu (1984), and DiMaggio (1987), indicate that differentiation in taste with respect to cultural products is an often neglected, but relevant aspect of social inequality. Our expectation is that social inequality can be observed for leisure time book reading, as well. It is generally believed that large distinctions exist between readers who enjoy serious literature, and readers who prefer more popular authors. However, little is known about the exact features on which individual readers and specific books differ. Therefore, studying inequality in book reading can provide meaningful insights about differences in qualities of books, on the one hand, and about social distinctions among readers, on the other hand.

Empirical research on leisure reading has traditionally asked questions like how many people read books and how much leisure time is devoted to book reading (Robinson, 1980; Damon-Moore and Kaestle, 1991). Several studies in this tradition report declining popularity. For the Netherlands, Knulst and Kraaykamp (1998) showed that the time spent on book reading declined from 1.6 hours per week in 1975 to 1.2 hours in 1995. In the United States, a decline in reading has also been observed. Whereas in 1971 50% of Americans had read a book in the week prior to be questioned, in 1978 this proportion was only 38% (Damon-Moore and Kaestle, 1991). In 1983, no more than 50% had read a book in the previous year. In most Western countries, interest in book reading has not kept up with the rapid expansion of higher education (Cushman et al., 1996).

Thus far, studies of social inequality in book reading have almost solely focused on quantity in reading. In this respect, educational attainment is often regarded as the most important factor underlying the reading of books. Two prevalent reasons can be distinguished for a disproportionate representation of higher-educated individuals among book readers. First, education is considered to increase knowledge and deepen receptivity (Hyman et al., 1975). As a consequence, high-educated readers are believed to be better equipped for reading and enjoying books. Second, a college degree can be seen as a credential for the higher social classes (DiMaggio, 1987). Because leisure time reading is usually regarded as a high-status activity – the overt statement that one never reads books will be frowned upon by the higher classes – it is assumed that higher educated people read books more often than lower-educated individuals. Empirically, several studies confirm that book reading is favored by the higher-educated (Damon-Moore and Kaestle, 1991; Hendon and Hendon, 1993; Smith, 1996). However, no study is known in which the two distinct explanations for an over-representation of higher-educated individuals is dealt with. Do intellectual competencies account for the fact that higher-educated people prefer book reading, and/or are social motives the reason for this disproportionate distribution?

An additional shortcoming of the sociological research in the field of book reading is that it usually disregards that books vary in several respects. In this fashion, the research focuses on differences between people who do and people who don't read books. In these studies, the social differentiation among the book reading public remains underestimated, because people from all social categories can find attractive reading material in a well-established system of book stores and libraries. Hence, only minor expressions of social differentiation can be expected between readers and non-readers. Sociological research that does account for differences between book genres usually deals with pure description. In the United States, for instance, Smith (1996) found that fiction was most popular among the young, whereas religious books proved more popular among the elderly. Using the Euromonitor for the United Kingdom, Mann (1982) concluded that among book readers 37% preferred non-fiction. Among the fiction readers, women preferred romantic and historical novels most, whereas men indicated thrillers as the most popular book genre. Other research that acknowledged the diversity of book genres often concentrated on a single genre, like romantic fiction (Radway, 1984) or mystery novels (Cawelti, 1976), or was concerned with the apparent differences between book genres (Seegers and Verdaasdonk, 1987; Leemans and Stokmans, 1991). Very few empirical studies indicate that substantial differentiation can be observed by looking at the preferences of social categories for specific genres. Sharon (1974) found, for the U.S., that readers from higher socio-economic status groups preferred more complex and prestigious genres, like biographical and historical novels, whereas the lowest status groups were more interested in religious reading and romantic fiction. More recently, Bourdieu (1984) accentuated that taste in books differed for social classes. For France, Bourdieu's analyses showed that 'love stories' and 'thrillers' were relatively popular among working class people, whereas upper class readers preferred 'modern authors' and 'poetry'. In general, the descriptive and market-oriented approach in most empirical studies leads us to expect that relevant information on social differentiation among book readers will remain uncovered (Tötösy and Kreisel, 1992).

Although reception theories and reader-response theories (Iser, 1974; Holland, 1975; Jauss, 1982) have included the reader as an integral part of literary research, explaining social differentiation among book readers has never been a central topic in literary scholarship either (Defonso, 1986). Most of the theoretical approaches mentioned highlight the dynamic interplay between reader, text and context, in a process of interpretation and attribution of meaning, but seldom focus on empirical research into social inequality in reading (for an overview, see Hauptmeier et al., 1989). An exception in this respect is embodied by a group of researchers from the Netherlands which concentrates on the buying and borrowing of books as the result of a process of choice behavior (Seegers and Verdaasdonk, 1987; Duijckx et al., 1991; Leemans and Stokmans, 1991). Research in this tradition has primarily concentrated on attributes of books that people use for classification in the choice process. Also recently, an institutional approach to book reading has gained popularity among literary scholars. Based on the ideas of Bourdieu (1984) with respect to cultural elites, researchers focus on 'cultural systems as totalities' (DiMaggio, 1987).

These studies underscore that legitimization of literary works is a privilege of literary institutions (Van Rees, 1983; Verdaasdonk and Van Rees, 1991). It is assumed that books are externally defined as valuable – by literary critics or scholars – and thereby achieve literary prestige. Hence, these authors argue that the objective content of literary works cannot be determined (Verdaasdonk and Van Rees, 1991).

So far, few empirical studies have applied theoretical notions on social inequality to book reading research. As discussed, literary studies often did not address questions regarding social divisions between readers, whereas most sociological research has either focussed on quantity in leisure time reading or has been limited to a specific genre. Although interesting starting points for empirical research can be derived from these approaches they are limited in scope in explaining the over-representation of people from the higher social classes among readers of intellectually challenging and prestigious books. Our article aims to address the issue of social inequality in book reading, by assuming the interaction between ‘book’ and ‘reader’ is essential (Charlton et al., 1997).

In line with arguments made by Berlyne (1976) and Bourdieu (1984) on the aesthetic evaluation of art, it is supposed that social differences among the book reading public are to a large extent caused by the different qualities of books, such as complexity and literary prestige. In this study, accordingly, we endeavor to make progress on earlier empirical research, emphasizing the connection between book and reader characteristics. Our expectations with respect to social inequality will be derived from two theoretical insights. First, we think books are preferred, because of the cognitive stimulation readers find in them, and second because of the symbolic function of books in a social context. More specifically, we expect the higher social classes to be more attracted than the lower social strata by books that are intellectually challenging as well as to books that have literary prestige. By examining these two aspects of social inequality, it will be possible to address our general research problem, namely: *To what extent does cultural competence account for the fact that the higher classes prefer complex and prestigious books, and to what extent are social motives reason for this differentiation?*

To answer our general research question, the initial assumption is that books and genres hold unique characteristics. Based on the theoretical insights mentioned, two aspects are distinguished that we expect to be important for the attractiveness of books. First, the complexity of books could attract readers, because dealing with complex information can result in aesthetic pleasure. Second, books can differ in literary prestige attributed to them, and for readers valuing legitimized opinions these books probably are more attractive than books that are not (yet) included in the literary canon. Our first research question reads as follows: *How can a variety of book genres and literary book titles be classified according to complexity and literary prestige?*

Our second research problem deals directly with social inequality in book reading. Based on our two theoretical starting points, it is assumed that social differentiation in reading preferences is due to differences in literary and cultural competence of readers, on the one hand, and to differences with respect to their social status position, on the other. Because the higher social classes are associated with cultural com-

petence and with a society's cultural elite, it is expected that people from these classes will be more attracted to complex and prestigious books than people from the lower classes. Thus, our second research question reads: *How can reader characteristics provide an explanation for the social inequality in book reading preferences with respect to complexity and literary prestige?* In dealing with this issue, we will use both 'book' and 'reader' aspects.

Research into the question of how a decision to read books or genres with specific qualities is related to social characteristics of a reader is a promising research theme. In answering our research questions, we aim to expand current issues in reading research in two ways. Our first research question deals with variation in qualities of cultural objects. By addressing these differences between art objects, we aim to determine if and how, it is possible to classify books on a theoretical basis. Our second research question deals with social inequality, and can reveal meaningful information on how social differentiation of book reading is to be explained.

2. Theoretical insights: Connecting book and reader

In discussing the link between characteristics of books and readers, we will limit ourselves to insights that provide us with expectations on social inequality in book reading. In explaining an over-representation of the higher social classes among readers of complex and prestigious books, two theoretical traditions grounded in empirical research on high culture participation can be applied.

2.1. Cultural competence and complexity: On information processing

In order to explain social differences in leisure book reading, we will first consider the information processing theory which associates aesthetic appreciation with characteristics of art objects directly (Berlyne, 1971; Ganzeboom, 1982). In literary scholarship, this theory on information processing is a more often discussed notion (Cupchik, 1986; Martindale, 1986). Information theory has its roots in psychological insights and has been applied to the perception of art works, such as paintings, classical music, architecture and fiction (Moles, 1959; Berlyne, 1976; Tetlock, 1988). It is argued that contact with art leads to a change in arousal level of the recipients. As a result, persons experience feelings of pleasure. Works of art are assumed to possess a certain level of complexity that causes this arousal change. The level of complexity is composed of so-called collative properties of art objects, such as novelty, incongruity, irregularity, and asymmetry (Berlyne, 1976; Laszlo, 1996). Apart from qualities of the art object itself, experiencing pleasure is related to an individual's optimal arousal level (Berlyne, 1971; Kintsch, 1980). This optimal arousal level is believed to be associated with an individual's competence to process complex cultural information. Hence, the extent to which a person experiences pleasure when dealing with a work of art depends on both the complexity of the art object and the competence in information processing of the individual (Ganzeboom, 1982; Cupchik, 1986; Graesser et al., 1996).

For a reader to enjoy a book, in this line of reasoning, it is necessary that the complexity of preferred books matches an individual's cultural and literary competence (information processing capacity). If a book is too simple and elementary, readers will not be stimulated and will become bored, whereas if a book is too complicated and strenuous, overstimulation will occur because readers will not be able to understand and process the information. A maximum of pleasure in reading is obtained at that level of understanding when novel and familiar attributes in a book are in balance. It is important to underscore that readers with experience in processing complex information will have more competence to incorporate novel and surprising attributes of books into their existing knowledge structure and, consequently, will prefer a high level of book complexity to achieve the optimal arousal level. With respect to social inequality in leisure reading, it can be hypothesized that readers belonging to the higher social classes will more often read complex books than readers from the lower strata, because they possess more cultural and literary competence (Kraaykamp, 1993).

Complexity is believed to be a decisive motive for reading a book, or for disregarding it (Hauptmeier et al., 1989). As yet, however, psychologists, sociologists and literary scholars have not worked out a clear notion of complexity. Generally, two components of complexity can be distinguished: formal amount of information and semantic complexity of information. The formal complexity of books generally refers to an attribute, such as readability, which can be empirically measured by word length, syllables, and length of sentences. Subsequently, 'readable' books are believed to be the least complex (Kammann, 1966; Martindale, 1978; Kraaykamp, 1993). Although of potential importance in explaining differences in book reading, formal complexity does not account for aspects that are indirectly linked to books, such as genre, specific style and structure, and references to literary meanings. Therefore, formal qualities are only limited in scope in representing complexity (Tetlock, 1988).

Literary scholars generally consider semantic complexity the most meaningful component of complexity (Fokkema, 1988). Semantic complexity refers to a connected system of social, cognitive, and aesthetic codes (Wippler, 1990; Fokkema and Ibsch, 1995). Processing semantic information leads to aesthetic appreciation only if a reader is familiar with these codes. Thus far, literary theorists have not reached agreement on exactly what these social, cognitive and aesthetic codes are, and how they are implemented in aesthetic appreciation. However, recent theories in literature would support the assumption that books vary in semantic complexity, and that it is possible to specify this semantic complexity (Fokkema, 1988). First, it is believed that the difficulty of the content matters, such as innovative techniques in style and story structure, or the complexity of the character description (Kintsch, 1980; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). Second, the effort it takes to read and comprehend a book because of, for instance, its indirectness and openness seems relevant (Riffaterre, 1978; Eco, 1979). Third, it is presumed that the amount of prior knowledge on the author, genre, culture, and literary conventions is important, because this prior knowledge seems necessary to comprehend a book (Fokkema, 1988; Wippler, 1990).

As implied by the information processing theory, the aesthetic appreciation of a complex book increases when readers possess high levels of cultural competence. This cultural competence can be considered comparable to Bourdieu's 'aesthetic disposition', because it is designated as the capacity a person needs in order to elicit a work's intrinsic properties and particular stylistic traits. According to general principles of developmental psychology, this domain-specific competence is determined by two individual characteristics: general intellectual ability and accumulated cultural knowledge (Mockros, 1993). First, a reader's general intellectual and cognitive capabilities provide the ability necessary to process complex information. Although these capacities presumably are already present at birth, a person develops these talents at primary and secondary school. Therefore, the educational level is a proper approximation of a person's general ability to read and enjoy relatively complex books.

Second, it is believed that people accumulate specific competence during their lifetime (Mockros, 1993). It is generally held that prior knowledge of author, genre, time frame, culture, and field of language is essential to the enjoyment of reading (Fokkema, 1988). Knowledge of literature can be regarded as a part of a person's cultural competence, which is taught mainly at secondary school and in the parental home, but also expands with everyday reading. There are several routes open to readers in order to acquire cultural literacy. Three conditions can be distinguished. First, some people are stimulated by their parents to read books. Children can become accustomed to book reading, because they were read to, their parents themselves read and possessed books, and their parents took them to a library (Van Peer, 1991; Hendon and Hendon, 1993). Second, cultural and literary knowledge is acquired at school. In the Netherlands, most of the (general) secondary types of education devote special classes to literary history, the style and structure of specific literary books, and prominent literary authors. A third way to accumulate cultural knowledge is through the act of book reading itself. Book reading experiences then lead to an increase in cultural competence at an older age (Fokkema, 1988; Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1998).

Information processing theory hypothesizes by implication that a reader will only be satisfied with reading at an optimal level of stimulation. That is why each reader will prefer books and genres in which complexity and personal competence are properly connected. Following this line of reasoning, it is believed that competent readers will prefer complex genres and literary books, according to their intellectual capacities and accumulated cultural knowledge.

2.2. Status motivation and literary prestige: On social rewards

A second point of departure for the explanation of differentiation in leisure book reading can be found by looking at social rewards associated with reading. In sociology, several theoretical notions exist in which the social status of participants in cultural events is related to the prestige of the activities in question (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987). A fundamental argument in most of these concepts is that individuals from different social backgrounds distinguish themselves by their taste pref-

erences. Artistic tastes and participation in cultural activities are means of establishing social group membership and constructing social networks. On the one hand, commonly shared preferences provide members of a status group with an internal sense of solidarity (horizontal connection). On the other hand, tastes 'externally' reveal the social inequality between status groups in society (vertical distinction) (DiMaggio, 1994). Participation in prestigious high culture, such as attending the theatre or reading literature, is usually considered a demonstration of an elitist status position (Gans, 1974; DiMaggio, 1987). Following this line of reasoning, the extent to which an individual can obtain social rewards through participation in a cultural activity is determined by both the prestige of this activity and the social status of the person participating (Ganzeboom, 1982).

In literary studies, status based motivation for book reading is also being debated (Fish, 1980; Dorfman, 1996). It is presumed that preferences in book reading are affected by social rewards. In particular, the process of selecting books out of a corpus of books is likely to be influenced by status motives. Like DiMaggio (1994), we will look for social status motivation in two directions. First, a vertical stratification of status groups in society can be revealed by taste differences in book reading. Members of a society's cultural elite are likely to look for exclusive and prestigious forms of reading as a way of distinguishing themselves from lower status groups. Hence, prestigious book reading serves to proclaim a high status position. Readers from lower status positions will probably experience the gap between their status position and the prestige related to exclusive books as too vast, and will, therefore, disregard these kinds of reading. In other words, a person's objective status position limits the social rewards a reader can obtain by reading prestigious books.

Previous empirical studies on taste differences often applied both education and occupation as measures of a person's status position (Gans, 1974; DiMaggio and Useem, 1978; Bourdieu, 1984). In this article, educational level is used as an indicator of a reader's general intellectual capacity and, is therefore, less suited to also represent aspects of social status. We presume that readers who like to exhibit a high status position through their prestigious reading preferences also can be identified by their agreement on elitist cultural norms (Kraaykamp, 1993). Thus, it is hypothesized that readers underscoring normative statements on the universal value of reading and literature are more inclined to achieve high status through the reading of prestigious books than readers who disagree with these elitist cultural norms.

In a second theoretical notion on status motives, social networks are emphasized. It is presumed that group solidarity can be achieved through a sharing of tastes and preferences (Burch, 1969; DiMaggio, 1987). An analogy of this sociological notion can be found in reader-oriented literary theories, which assume reader responses to be a result of beliefs and agreements on reading material within identifiable communities of readers (Fish, 1980; Dorfman, 1996). For book readers, it is possible to reveal accommodation to group specific tastes, for instance, when people are discussing books, give books as a present or recommend books. Readers will get negative feedback for reading or recommending Joyce and Celine, if romantic novels are preferred in their circle of friends, and positive reactions for reading or recommending reading materials which coincide with the general group tastes. Because confor-

mation to group norms facilitates integration in a social network, it is likely that readers will share preferences within their network. Therefore, differentiation in book reading not only must be interpreted in terms of personal characteristics, but also in terms of characteristics of a reader's social network (Kraaykamp, 1993). We think this social pressure effect can be measured by characteristics of the social position of close friends.

Following these theoretical insights on social status motivation, a book's literary prestige and reputation would appear to be a decisive ground for an individual to read it. Books with literary prestige are those that are legitimized in a social context by influential authorities in the literary field (Griswold, 1987; DeVault, 1990). Prestige, then, is the result of a canonization process in which literary authorities (mainly critics and literary scholars) evaluate books through reviews, essays and inclusion in anthologies of literature (Van Rees, 1983; Martindale, 1995). Qualities that are highly valued in this canonization process are, for instance, norm breaking and controversial themes (such as promiscuity in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*), manipulation of literary devices (such as stream of consciousness in Joyce's *Ulysses*), importance of a particular writer in literary history (such as Joyce as a Modernist author), and unique distinctive characteristics (such as the shift of the focalization point in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*), (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983).

Social motivation theory suggests that individuals are inclined to select only those books to read that fit their social status, both with respect to their own position as well as the social position of their close friends. By reading these books, it is possible to gain social rewards. We, therefore, hypothesize that readers with a high status position, and coming from a high status network, will prefer prestigious book reading more than readers from the lower social strata.

3. Complexity and literary prestige: A classification of reading material

Our theoretical discussion leads us to believe that in the reader's perspective the attractiveness of books is closely related to complexity and literary prestige. In this section, the outline of a classification procedure of reading material is presented (first research question). Our main research topic, social inequality in leisure book reading, necessitates an empirical comparison of reading material, because it enables establishing measurable differences between readers regarding their book preferences. Furthermore, a classification method helps us to determine whether dissimilarities exist between a ranking of reading material based on complexity and a ranking according to literary prestige.

3.1. Research design: Selection of book genres and literary titles

Since it is impossible to include all available books in a comprehensive classification procedure, a selection was made among book genres and literary titles. By occupying the variation between a substantial number of book genres (23 genres), a broad mixture of reading preferences is represented. By studying a selection of literary

books (73 titles), sufficient detail is accomplished regarding the variation in complexity and literary prestige within the core segment of leisure book reading.

For book genres, we started off with 52 genres according to the standard classification (NUGI-code) which is current in the Dutch book trade. In the Netherlands, book stores and public libraries use this NUGI-classification to assign books to a genre. For reasons of manageability, we merged most of the non-fictional genres under broader categories, such as 'hobby books', 'reference books' and 'popular science'. Professional books and school materials were excluded from our selection, because the reading of these books is obligatory in an educational curriculum or occupational setting, and therefore has little to do with leisure reading. Finally, 23 representative book genres formed our definite selection.

In the case of literary books, we constructed a list of 73 titles, with the assistance of two Dutch literary scholars.¹ Two criteria were applied in the selection process. First, it was perceived to be important that there was sufficient variation among the literary books selected with respect to complexity and literary prestige. To deal with this criterion, we tried to represent books from the entire range of literary writing. Second, familiarity of a book among Dutch readers was considered to be essential for empirical reasons. In a population survey, a substantial part of the respondents would have to have read the book. To ensure this, we limited our selection to titles of well-known and good-selling authors. Our final selection consisted of 73 literary books of famous authors in the Netherlands, from a variety of literary genres.

3.2. Classification method: The semantic differential technique

Previous research concerning appreciation of art objects regularly applied a method of semantic contrasts (Osgood, 1957; Berlyne, 1976). In this method, a single quality of an artistic object is evaluated by experts as a position on a continuum between two semantic extremes (e.g., ugly versus beautiful). This method of semantic evaluation by expert judgements is also argued to be potentially valuable in classifying reading materials (Tetlock, 1988; Van Peer, 1990). For instance, Jakobovits and Osgood (1969) showed that the semantic differential technique was applicable in an evaluation of 20 journals in psychology, and Carroll's (1969) use of contrast pairs in evaluating prose style in 150 passages of English literature yielded results which could be interpreted clearly. In a more recent study, Nell (1988) obtained a classification on literary merit of 30 book extracts through expert judgements from different social groups. According to Nell (1988), the observed high intergroup consistency meant that all groups shared a common set of literary value judgements.

A drawback of these studies is their explorative design. There is hardly any link between the content of semantic adjectives and theoretical insights on what users of the reading materials evaluated prefer in reading. Consequently, these studies are rather descriptive and they are meager with respect to content validity. However, when contrasts are deduced from theoretical notions in order to ensure content validity, the

¹ We would like to thank D. Fokkema (University of Utrecht), and W. Van Peer (University of Utrecht) for their assistance in the construction of a list of 73 eloquent literary book titles.

semantic differential method can produce relevant information on reading materials. In addition, if statistical testing indicates that agreement exists among the expert judges, this can be considered to be securing reliability (Carroll, 1969; Carmines and Zeller, 1979). In other words, it is possible to obtain inter-subjective valid and reliable judgements for a classification of reading material, using semantic contrasts.

Table 1

Six semantic contrasts for the expert evaluation of book genres and literary book titles on complexity and literary prestige using a nine-point scale

Complexity		
difficult	1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9	easy
undemanding	1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9	demanding
prior knowledge necessary	1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9	directly accessible
Literary prestige		
important	1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9	unimportant
high literary value	1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9	low literary value
not canonized literature	1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 8 - 9	canonized literature

In our study, expert judges were invited to evaluate the 23 book genres and 73 literary books, according to complexity and literary prestige, as implied by the theoretical notions discussed in section 2. Table 1 presents the semantic contrasts constructed for this study. Complexity was evaluated, using the following three contrast pairs: (a) difficult vs. easy; (b) undemanding vs. demanding; and (c) prior knowledge necessary vs. directly accessible. It is assumed that complex genres and books were those that seemed relatively difficult, demanding, and inaccessible. Furthermore, literary prestige had to be judged between the contrasts: (a) important to read vs. unimportant to read; (b) high literary value vs. low literary value; and (c) not included in the literary canon vs. included in the literary canon. Prestigious genres and books were considered those important to read, of high literary value, and included in the literary canon.

The data collection phase of our classification procedure was carried out in 1992. Experts were selected on the basis of their profound knowledge and expertise in the literary field. We asked the entire faculty of the Departments of General and Comparative Literature in Utrecht, Amsterdam, and Nijmegen (The Netherlands) to cooperate. Seven graduate students of these departments and ten employees of the Public Library in Utrecht also evaluated our selection of reading material. On the whole, 60 expert judges were invited to participate (46 experts responded: 77%). We feel the strength of our design lies therein that by using the judgements of almost fifty experts, it can reasonably be assumed that inter-subjective validity is accomplished.²

² Earlier research classifying reading material (Jakobovits and Osgood, 1969; Carroll, 1969) often used only few experts (no more than 10), which makes this claim more doubtful.

All 46 expert judges were instructed in a questionnaire to evaluate the selection of 23 book genres and 73 literary books on two of the six semantic contrast pairs (on a nine-point scale). To formalize the evaluation by experts, one page in the questionnaire contained a standardized description of a book genre or literary title. In the case of book genres, we offered a description of the genre, together with three example book titles.³ For literary books, title, author, genre, publisher, publishing date, and a summary were listed. Selection of the two contrasts was carried out at random for each expert. Thus, an expert provided opinions on all reading materials for a semantic contrast representing complexity, as well as for a contrast representing prestige. For example, one of the judges was requested to classify genres and literary books between the contrasts difficult and easy, and also between the contrasts high and low literary value. Accordingly, approximately 15 expert evaluations resulted for each of the six semantic contrasts.⁴

Our procedure of expert evaluations resulted in two rankings of the selected reading material for every judge: one related to complexity and one related to prestige. Separately, per semantic differential, reliability analysis was applied to decide if experts positioned the genres and literary books similarly. To ensure internal homogeneity, expert rankings were removed from our analysis if negative inter-expert-correlations occurred. This applied to 6.5% of the rankings for book genres (6 expert evaluations), and for literary books to 2.1% of the rankings (2 expert evaluations).⁵

Table 2 shows that the level of agreement between experts was relatively high, using a commonly accepted reliability bottom line of .85 (Cronbach α). The lowest reliability for book genres was $\alpha = .93$, with respect to the contrast high literary value versus low literary value. For literary books, the lowest reliability is $\alpha = .90$, with respect to important versus unimportant. Calculating reliability scores provided information on the (in-)stability of a measurement over the experts pertained, due to random error variation (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). It can be concluded that the 46 experts with profound know-how on reading, agreed quite closely on the positioning of genres and literary titles within the contrasts formulated. This inter-subjective consensus among the expert judges leads to the conclusion that a reliable classification of reading material with expert evaluations is possible.

3.3. Results: A classification of book genres and literary titles

Our classification procedure resulted in scale values for 23 genres and 73 literary titles on two contrasts for each expert. The overall position of a genre or a literary

³ Three literary genres were not included in the classification procedure as a specific book genre, but are represented by actual book titles from our list of 73 books.

⁴ Because 46 experts participated and each evaluated two contrasts, on the whole 92 (two times 46) classifications resulted. These 92 rankings referred to six semantic adjectives. So, each contrast approximately holds 15 expert judgements (see also Table 2).

⁵ In the case of book genres two expert evaluations are removed from the analysis regarding the contrast easy versus difficult, and four expert rankings regarding the contrast included in the literary canon versus not included in the literary canon. For literary book titles one expert ranking is eliminated regarding the contrast easy versus difficult, and one regarding the contrast important versus unimportant to read.

Table 2

Reliability-analysis for the expert judgement of book genres and literary book titles, separately for each semantic contrast

	Reliability (cronbach's α)	
	Book genres*	Literary titles*
Contrasts referring to complexity		
difficult – easy	.96 (16)	.95 (17)
undemanding – demanding	.96 (14)	.92 (14)
prior knowledge necessary – directly accessible	.96 (14)	.93 (14)
# expert evaluations included for complexity	44	45
# expert evaluations excluded for complexity	2	1
Contrasts referring to literary prestige		
important – unimportant	.95 (14)	.90 (13)
high literary value – low literary value	.93 (14)	.92 (14)
not canonized literature – canonized literature	.95 (14)	.96 (18)
# expert evaluations included for literary prestige	42	45
# expert evaluations excluded for literary prestige	4	1

* Between brackets: the final number of experts per contrast after the exclusion of non-reliable expert evaluations.

book was obtained, calculating the average of scale values among the judges (about 15 per contrast pair). As a result, we obtained six scales for genres and six scales for literary books referring to the six semantic contrasts. As stated before, the scores between the contrast pairs indicate either the complexity level or the literary prestige level of reading materials. A point of criticism, regarding content validity, can arise in this respect. Does the semantic differential technique really measure what we want it to measure, namely complexity and literary prestige, or does systematic error variance affect the validity of the final classification? Usually, content validity refers to profound contemplation of researchers on exactly which empirical measure covers the content of a theoretical concept. Content validity, however, provides no method to determine the extent to which this goal is achieved in practice (Blalock and Blalock, 1969; Carmines and Zeller, 1979).⁶

Yet, a factor analysis can be used to test if the three contrasts represent to some extent a common underlying characteristic. This factor analysis, then, can be seen as a preliminary test with respect to the content validity of the definite scales for complexity and literary prestige. The results of our factor analysis indicated that for complexity the association between all three contrast scales was convincingly high.

⁶ Usually, validity is studied, looking at construct validity, i.e. the correlation between a measurement and determining characteristics (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). It, then, is hypothesized that a valid instrument has predicted relations with exogenous qualities, like in our study gender, age, educational attainment and parental socialization. In this article, construct validity is dealt with in the fourth section, where the association between characteristics of reading material and characteristics of readers is investigated.

For both book genres and literary book titles, all of the factor loadings for the three contrast scales exceeded $r = .95$. Also, the associations were satisfactory for literary prestige. The lowest factor loading was $r = .88$. These results demonstrate that both for book genres and specific literary titles the scales based on the semantic differential technique represent a common underlying factor, indicating that to some extent content validity is dealt with.

Table 3
Ordinal rank and scale values of 23 book genres

Book genres	Complexity		Literary prestige	
	Rank	Scale value	Rank	Scale value
Popular science	1	6.47	9	3.67
Translated literary novels	2	5.33	3	7.00
Dutch literature before 1945	3	5.00	1	7.69
Memoirs, literary diaries	4	4.63	6	4.49
Historical novels	5	4.61	5	4.78
Dutch literary novels	6	4.56	4	6.47
Reference books, encyclopaedias	7	4.33	11	3.33
War and resistance novels	8	3.35	7	4.01
Science fiction	9	2.98	10	3.40
Travel novels	10	2.94	12	3.31
Espionage novels	11	2.65	16	2.60
Hobby books	12	2.62	15	2.76
Fairy tales	13	2.55	2	7.19
Thrillers and adventure books	14	2.15	19	2.45
Humor	15	2.12	14	2.90
Horror books	16	2.07	18	2.52
Detectives	17	2.06	13	3.02
Comics	18	2.03	8	3.90
Erotic novels	19	1.81	17	2.57
Westerns	20	1.79	21	1.86
Family and regional novels	21	1.49	20	2.14
Women's and folk novels	22	1.28	23	1.61
Romance novels	23	1.14	22	1.62
Mean scale value		3.04		3.71
Standard deviation		1.47		1.80

A definite classification of the 23 book genres and the 73 literary book titles was obtained, calculating average scale values using the three relevant contrasts (separately for complexity and literary prestige). The ultimate ranking of book genres, as presented in Table 3, reflects common parlance with respect to ordinal differences in complexity and literary prestige, and, therefore, scores high on face validity. The classification of genres shows that literature and popular-science books were evaluated as the most complex genres, and westerns and romantic novels as the least complex. A striking result in Table 3 is that the expert judges did not rank literature as

being the most complex. Instead, popular-science books were perceived as the most inaccessible and demanding. A possible explanation is that popular-science books are inherently complex (due to their topics), whereas literature varies widely in this respect. A short story by Musil, for instance, can be more demanding to read because of its compactness and lack of linearity than a novel by Roald Dahl that can be comprehended by children. Surprisingly, fairy tales scored relatively high on the scale for literary prestige. The fact that fairy tales have a long-established position in the literary canon, and, therefore, have long been subjected to interpretation and comparison by literary experts might be an explanation. Furthermore, the ordinal scale values indicate a large gap in prestige between literary genres and light fiction, such as regional novels and romances. Apparently, light fiction is not considered to be important to read or of high literary value, and is certainly not included in the literary canon.

Table 4
Ordinal rank and scale values of 73 literary book titles.

Literary titles (in Dutch)	Complexity		Literary prestige	
	Rank	Scale value	Rank	Scale value
Joyce – Ulysses	1	8.51	2	8.70
Nietzsche – De anti-christ	2	7.92	36	6.69
Musil – Het posthume werk van een levende	3	6.98	14	7.78
Kousbroek – Anathema's	4	6.75	55	5.80
Celine – Dood op krediet	5	6.62	17	7.77
Sartre – Brieven aan Castor	6	6.62	45	6.35
Shakespeare – Hamlet	7	6.49	1	8.72
Kafka – Alle verhalen	8	6.42	3	8.48
Multatuli – Max Havelaar	9	6.40	4	8.48
Konrad – Het tuinfeest	10	6.32	21	7.61
Mulisch – Het stenen bruidsbed	11	6.31	26	7.34
Eco – In de naam van de roos	12	6.18	34	6.80
Goethe – Het lijden van de jonge Werther	13	6.08	7	8.28
Claus – Het verdriet van België	14	6.00	20	7.62
Toergenjev – Brieven	15	5.93	48	6.27
Blaman – Eenzaam avontuur	16	5.86	22	7.60
Tolstoi – Oorlog en vrede	17	5.73	5	8.45
De Goncourt – Dagboek	18	5.68	46	6.29
Magris – Donau	19	5.61	63	5.33
Cervantes – Don Quichote	20	5.53	9	8.19
Orwell – 1984	21	5.51	12	7.94
Komrij – Verwoest Arcadië	22	5.37	42	6.56
Flaubert – Madame Bovary	23	5.36	6	8.44
Tsjechov – Drie gezusters	24	5.32	16	7.77
Marquez – Kroniek van een aangekondigde dood	25	5.32	24	7.38
Falaci – Een man	26	5.24	51	6.11
Couperus – Eline Vere	27	5.18	10	8.14
Van der Heijden – Vallende ouders	28	5.16	29	7.19
Bukowski – Verhalen van alledaagse waanzin	29	5.13	39	6.58
Melville – Moby Dick	30	5.11	28	7.12

Table 4 continued

Literary titles (in Dutch)	Complexity		Literary prestige	
	Rank	Scale value	Rank	Scale value
Reve – De avonden	31	5.10	8	8.21
Vestdijk – Ivoren wachters	32	5.09	15	7.77
Brönte – Woeste hoogten	33	5.02	19	7.65
Hughes – Fatale kust	34	4.96	60	5.41
Allende – Eva Luna	35	4.93	50	6.16
Salinger – De vanger in het koren	36	4.93	23	7.58
Bordewijk – Karakter	37	4.90	18	7.68
Hildebrand – Camera Obscura	38	4.88	31	7.03
Böll – De verloren eer van K. Blum	39	4.87	32	7.00
Nescio – Dichtertje/De uitvreter/Titaantjes	40	4.87	11	8.04
De Jong – Opwaaiende zomerjurken	41	4.82	47	6.29
Pasternak – Dr. Zhivago	42	4.77	37	6.68
Kozinski – Aanwezig	43	4.66	40	6.58
Capote – Ontbijt bij Tiffany	44	4.61	53	6.04
Nooteboom – Voorbije passages	45	4.52	54	5.90
French – Ruimte voor vrouwen	46	4.42	56	5.71
Hermans – Au pair	47	4.38	44	6.41
Van Schendel – Het fregatschip Johanna Maria	48	4.38	41	6.57
Elsschot – Lijmen/Het been	49	4.36	13	7.85
Chatwin – In Patagonië	50	4.18	61	5.41
Heijermans – Op hoop van zegen	51	4.12	35	6.78
Irving – De wereld volgens Garp	52	4.10	43	6.45
Frank – Het achterhuis	53	4.07	30	7.06
Hemingway – De oude man en de zee	54	4.04	25	7.36
Minco – Het bittere kruid	55	3.98	33	6.90
Poe – Alle verhalen	56	3.96	27	7.31
Biesheuvel – In de bovenkooi	57	3.93	49	6.16
Bradley – Nevelen van Avalon	58	3.88	71	4.27
Wolkers – Terug naar Oegstgeest	59	3.86	38	6.66
Van Dis – Zilver	60	3.85	66	5.20
Van Dis – Een barbaar in China	61	3.75	67	5.07
't Hart – Een vlucht regenwulpen	62	3.57	59	5.46
Theroux – De grote spoorwegcarrousel	63	3.54	68	4.77
De Loo – De meisjes van de suikerwerkfabriek	64	3.43	57	5.68
Thijssen – Kees, de jongen	65	3.40	52	6.11
Höweler – Van geluk gesproken	66	3.29	69	4.60
Cremer – Ik, Jan Cremer	67	3.13	64	5.28
Dahl – M'n liefje, m'n duifje	68	2.98	65	5.26
De Hartog – Hollands glorie	69	2.78	73	3.91
Carmiggelt – Alle kroegverhalen	70	2.73	58	5.67
Van Kooten – Modernismen	71	2.58	62	5.35
Fabricius – De scheepsjongens van Bontekoe	72	2.45	70	4.46
De Boer – De vrouw in het maanlicht	73	2.26	72	3.93
Mean scale value		4.86		6.68
Standard deviation		1.26		1.21

Obviously, the reported ordinal differentiation between book genres is of a general nature. Although most books within a genre will vary to some extent in complexity and prestige, this is believed to be particularly true of literature. Therefore, literary books are evaluated in an independent ranking. Indeed, Table 4 depicts a high variance regarding complexity and prestige, within the literary segment ($sd = 1.26$). For instance, the average scale value for translated literary fiction is 5.33 (see Table 3), whereas Eco's *Name of the rose* is positioned at 6.18 on our complexity scale, and Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* at 3.88 (Table 4). This example indicates that an independent classification of literary books provides an indispensable extension of a less specified ranking of genres. Table 4 shows that the ranking of literary books corresponds with general connotations regarding the difficulty and esteem of these literary titles (i.e., scores high on face-validity). As expected, Joyce, Nietzsche, and Musil were considered to be the most complex, while Dahl, De Hartog, and Theroux were regarded as less difficult. Also, Joyce, Shakespeare, and Kafka were evaluated as deserving greater literary esteem than Hemingway, Falaci, and Bradley.

Our theoretical starting points implied that complexity and literary prestige are two distinctive dimensions on which book genres and literary books differ. Hence, a question that arises is whether our classification procedure results in different rankings for both qualities? The answer to this question offers an opportunity to examine if and how dissimilarities exist between a ranking of reading material based on a more intrinsic quality, such as complexity, and a ranking based on extrinsically defined characteristics, such as prestige or reputation.

Table 5
Correlational analysis for the ranking of genres and literary books

	Book genres		Literary book titles	
	Rank correlation	Pearson correlation	Rank correlation	Pearson correlation
Complexity – literary prestige	.80**	.66**	.66**	.67**
Variance explained	64.0%	43.6%	43.6%	44.9%
Number of cases (genres/books)	23	23	73	73

* Significance ($p < .01$)

** Significance ($p < .001$)

To test for differences between the two rankings, a correlation analysis was conducted, as presented in Table 5. It is indicated that a firm relation exists between the rankings. For book genres, the association between the scale values for complexity and literary prestige is $r = .66$. This means that 43.6% of the variance in the complexity of genres can be explained by looking at their literary prestige. Also, a substantial association between the scales for complexity and prestige can be observed for literary book titles ($r = .67$). The presence of a close relation between the rankings for literary book titles is not unexpected. It can be assumed that literary books will only be canonized and attributed literary esteem if they possess exclusive qual-

ities. Characteristics related to complexity, like story structure, style, or theme, are such qualities. Moreover, complex books are those that readers need to put in intellectual effort to understand and enjoy them. This intellectual challenge makes complex books of more interest to opinion leaders in the literary field.

Despite the high correlations between the rankings of complexity and prestige, they cannot be interpreted as identical from a statistical point of view. For both genres and literary titles more than 50% of the variance remains unexplained. Table 3 and 4 offer clear illustrations of this unexplained variation. For example, popular-science books were considered to be relatively complex, but low in literary esteem. On the other hand, fairy tales and comics were evaluated as simple relative to their prestige. Similar examples could be found among the literary books. Hemingway and Brönte had a relatively high prestige compared to their complexity, while Nietzsche and Sartre were evaluated as more complex than prestigious.

4. Leisure book reading: An explanation of social differences

The second part of our research addresses the question of social inequality in leisure book reading. More precisely, we want to explain why readers from the higher social strata prefer more complex and prestigious books than readers from the lower classes.

4.1. Data and measurement

Social inequality in book reading preferences was examined here using data from a 1991 nationwide postal survey on leisure time reading (Readers and Reading in the Netherlands, RRN–1991). The research was conducted in the Netherlands among a selected group of 724 book readers. Included in the survey was a set of questions on reading choices, social background, status position, and (parental) socialization. The survey was financed by the National Science Foundation (NWO) and could be seen as a random probability sample of the Dutch book reading population. In the sampling design, book readers were selected on the basis of their response to a telephone survey on leisure time reading (N = 2999). A questionnaire was sent to respondents who reported they read books. The response rate for this postal survey was 61%, which is fairly high compared to similar research designs in the Netherlands. Because our general interest here was on leisure time book reading, the sample was restricted to readers of eighteen years and over. Under this age, fairly everybody is obliged to read books as part of a secondary school curriculum. Although the RRN–1991 data are unique in providing information on social differences in reading, a limitation is that they focus only on characteristics which are potentially important in explaining reading preferences.

Differentiation of preferences in book reading has to be explained. To obtain a measurement of a respondent's *level of reading*, the classification of genres and literary books on complexity and literary prestige was used which is described in the previous section (see Tables 3 and 4). For each reader, an average of scale values

was calculated with respect to the genres a person indicated to read 'sometimes' or 'frequently' (of the 23 possible genres). For instance, if individuals reported they read fairy tales, travel novels and science fiction, an average complexity was calculated: $(2.55 + 2.94 + 2.98)/3 = 2.82$. For literary book reading an identical procedure was carried out. Respondents were assigned a literary reading level regarding complexity and literary prestige, based on an average of scale values reflecting the literary books a respondent (ever) read (of the 73 possible literary titles). Thus, if a reader once read the indicated titles of Kafka, Flaubert, Melville and Böll, the average complexity level was calculated: $(6.42 + 5.36 + 5.11 + 4.87)/4 = 5.44$. The major advantage to this procedure is that it makes the differences in reading preferences measurable on an interval level.

As indicated, a high level of cultural and literary competence is affected by two individual characteristics: general intellectual ability and accumulated cultural knowledge. *Education* was considered to represent the general ability of a person to process complex information in books. Here, education was measured in seven categories, from zero (for primary school) to six (for college degree).

Accumulation of cultural knowledge is believed to occur in at least three different ways. First, parental stimulation during a reader's childhood was considered. To exemplify parental socialization, an index for *socialization in reading* was constructed on the basis of six items (with five categories). All items were respondents' reports of parental behavior and attitudes during the respondents' childhood, and dealt with such aspects as reading performed to respondent, the giving of books as birthday presents, sibling book reading, parental encouragement to visit a library, parental advocacy of books, and specific parental encouragement. The average value of the unweighted scores on these six items was used as an index for parental reading socialization. Furthermore, the *number of books owned (by parents)* during a reader's upbringing illustrates a stimulating home environment. Parental book possession in the questionnaire consisted of six categories, ranging from zero (for no books at all) to five (for more than 2000 books).

Second, cultural and literary competence is acquired by the act of reading itself. Therefore, we considered people's reading habits and library use in early childhood to be relevant. *Reading habits in early childhood* were measured using a questionnaire including items on the age at which a respondent started to read books, average number of books read at the age of twelve (per month), and total of juvenile books read from a pre-given list of 18 selected titles. The standardized scores on these variables were combined into an index. *Library use in early childhood* was measured on the basis of two questions dealing with the age at which a reader became a library member, and the number of years a reader remained a library member between the ages of six and eighteen. Again, an index was obtained using the standardized scores on these items.

Third, a person enhances cultural knowledge at secondary school by the specific attention that is paid to literature in the curriculum for modern languages (Dutch, English, French). *School stimulating with regard to literature* can vary because of school differences for readers who reach a comparable educational level. Here, differences in stimulation by schools were measured through six questionnaire items

dealing with the amount of attention in the curriculum for reading literature, analysis of literature, literary history, writing literary texts, reading poetry, and writing poetry (possible answers: no, sometimes, often). We calculated an average value using the unweighted scores on these six items.

We also assumed that readers are inclined to read books that, in their opinion, fit their social status. Social motivation for leisure time reading is examined here in two different ways: the extent of conformation to high status attitudes on book reading, and the social status of a readers' closest friend. First, a scale for a high status *normative attitude on literature* was developed by examining respondent reactions to eight normative statements regarding book reading and literature, such as 'Literature is not really meant for people like me'. (24% agreed), and 'Reading literature is normal in my circle of friends'. (35% agreed). Some statements were selected because most book readers could agree on them, whereas others were selected because of their exclusive and elitist nature. An index was developed using the average of the unweighted scores on the eight attitude items.

Second, reading preferences can be considered a life-style element that is typical for a person's social environment. This information refers to respondent's reports on characteristics of their peer group. The *educational level of the closest friend* was applied to represent the social rank of a reader's network. Again, educational level was measured in terms of seven categories, ranging from zero (for primary school) to six (for college degree).

Social background characteristics included gender, age, net household income, domestic labor, and paid labor. We coded zero for men and one for *women*. Age was measured continuously (in years). The financial resources of a reader were represented by *net household income* per month. For respondents with missing information (5.2%), we generated estimated scores based on an OLS-regression of household income on educational attainment, age, hours worked in paid labor, and degree of urbanization. A low leisure-time budget might also affect reading preferences. Complex reading requires more concentration and time than popular reading. Time pressure was measured by the number of hours a reader spent on *domestic labor* and *paid labor* (per week). More detailed information on the distribution characteristics of the variables is presented in Appendix A.

4.2. Multivariate analyses

In examining social inequality in book reading, our analyses were guided by the question to what extent book reading preferences are affected by reader characteristics of cultural competence and/or social motivation. We hypothesized that competent readers, with respect to intellectual capacities and accumulated cultural knowledge, preferred more complex genres and literary books than readers with less cultural competence, and we predicted that readers with high status positions from high status social networks would read more prestigious books than readers from the lower strata. To examine this, we applied multivariate ordinary least squares regression (OLS). Multivariate regression makes it possible to determine the relative weights of several characteristics for explaining a person's level of reading. We

included the various explanatory aspects into our model in a step-wise fashion. Subsequently, it becomes more clear which effects of reader aspects are intermediated by explanatory features later in the causal chain. To deal with the relative weight of the various characteristics in explaining a person's level of book reading, only the full model (E) should be considered.

Table 6 displays five multivariate regression models regarding the preferred complexity and literary prestige level of book genres. In the analyses, results for the scale based on complexity and the scale based on literary prestige seemed quite similar. Only the variances explained (R^2) in the models applying to differentiation in complexity level were often slightly higher. Here, we only discuss the standardized effects (β) for the average complexity of the book genres an individual reads.

To start our analysis, in Model A background characteristics were introduced. It appears that women prefer genres of a somewhat lower complexity, compared to men ($\beta = -.145$). A plausible explanation for this finding is that typical female genres, like regional novels and romantic fiction, were evaluated as the least complex in our classification procedure. Apart from gender, financial and time budget restrictions affect the reading preferences. Readers from high income groups read significantly more complex book genres, as do readers who spent little time doing domestic tasks.

The Models B, C and D include, in a step-wise fashion, the three aspects believed to be important for the acquisition of cultural and literary competence. Following the life-cycle of readers, parental socialization comes first. Model B clearly shows that parental encouragement in book reading during childhood increases the complexity level of book genres read at the age of testing ($\beta = .183$). Yet, the presence of books in the parental home during childhood does not affect current level of reading. So, it is especially interactive parental stimulation that seems to be effective in enhancing children's reading level. Next, the reader's own adolescent reading experiences were added in Model C. Upon inspection it becomes clear that net of all other characteristics, library visiting in childhood and early experiences with leisure time reading do not lead to preferences for more complex genres later in life.

In Model D, cultural competence features linked to a reader's educational career are considered. It was found that educational level in particular contributes to the explanation of current reading level. Readers with a college degree more often favor complex book genres than readers with only primary school ($\beta = .335$). In addition to educational level, attention for literature in a curriculum for modern languages at secondary school seems relevant ($\beta = .178$). Regular participation in literature classes significantly increases current level of reading. This appears to be a noticeable result, because it underscores the role school plays in the promotion of book reading. As a consequence of the introduction of educational features in Model D, all other reader characteristics (except age and gender) are driven out of significance. More specifically, it can be concluded that parental socialization enlarges a reader's current book reading level only indirectly, through educational attainment.

Additionally, with Model E, we focus on characteristics that indicate that accommodation to status group norms explains social differentiation in book reading. Indeed, our analyses show that conformation to high brow attitudes on book reading

Table 6
Regression of book genre preferences (average complexity and literary prestige of genres read), on social background characteristics, cultural competence, and social motivation (N = 612).

Standardized regression coefficients												
Average complexity of book genres read												
	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E	Average (literary) prestige of book genres read	
Social background												
Age	.002	.039	.054	.163**	.083	-.038	.005	.013	.125**	.049		
Women	-.145**	-.182***	-.188***	-.169***	-.202***	-.047	-.084	-.086	-.070	-.102*		
Income (household)	.122**	.102*	.099*	-.014	-.005	.113**	.091*	.090*	-.021	-.014		
Hours of domestic labor	-.140**	-.114**	-.113*	-.043	-.025	-.135**	-.106*	-.105*	-.036	-.016		
Hours of payed labor	-.070	-.083	-.084	-.081	-.100*	-.081	-.093	-.093	-.090	-.110*		
Cultural competence												
Socialization in reading (by parents)		.183***	.166**	.068	-.005		.171***	.163**	.063	-.007		
Number of books owned (by parents)		.048	.048	-.015	-.038		.088*	.089*	.026	.001		
Library use in early childhood			.051	.002	.008			.032	-.017	-.011		
Reading habits in early childhood			.022	.001	-.010			.002	-.021	-.029		
Educational level				.335***	.192**				.323***	.163**		
School stimulation of literature				.178**	.145**				.193**	.159**		
Social motivation												
Normative attitude about literature					.242***					.229***		
Educational level of closest friend					.174***					.210***		
Adjusted variance explained	5.9%	9.4%	9.4%	23.5%	30.6%	2.5%	6.5%	6.3%	20.4%	28.0%		

* Significance ($p < .05$)

** Significance ($p < .01$)

*** Significance ($p < .001$)

Table 7
Regression of literary book preferences (average complexity and literary prestige of literary titles read), on social background characteristics, cultural competence, and social motivation (N = 590).

Standardized regression coefficients										
Average complexity of books read										
Average (literary) prestige of books read										
	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E
Social background										
Age	.069	.106*	.121*	.256***	.198***	-.099*	-.073	-.066	.067	.036
Women	.097*	.067	.060	.072	.051	.110*	.081	.078	.082	.070
Income (household)	.141**	.124**	.122**	-.000	.010	.115**	.101*	.100*	-.004	.002
Hours of domestic labor	-.129**	-.107*	-.106*	-.040	-.035	-.070	-.053	-.052	.004	.007
Hours of payed labor	.018	.011	.011	.025	.016	-.042	-.051	-.051	-.035	-.041
Cultural competence										
Socialization in reading (by parents)		.127**	.112*	.020	-.025		.138**	.130**	.043	.018
Number of books owned (by parents)		.092*	.093*	.027	.021		.031	.032	-.026	-.031
Library use in early childhood										
Reading habits in early childhood		.053	.021	.009	.009		.024	.012	-.015	-.014
Educational level										
School stimulation of literature				.314***	.291***			.234***	.210**	.249***
Social motivation										
Normative attitude about literature					.178***					.093*
Educational level of closest friend					-.017					.014
Adjusted variance explained	2.8%	5.5%	5.5%	21.0%	23.1%	2.2%	4.0%	3.7%	16.5%	17.0%

* Significance (p < .05)

** Significance (p < .01)

*** Significance (p < .001)

and literature is significantly related to a preference for complex genres ($\beta = .242$), even when cultural competence features are controlled for. Apparently, the reading of complex genres for these readers serves as an alternative way to gain social status. In addition, the characteristics of a reader's social network proved to be important ($\beta = .174$). A reader with a highly-educated friend favors complex genres significantly more than a reader with a best friend who is less educated. This result underscores the argument that preferred complexity in book reading is a life-style characteristic that is partly adjusted to group-specific tastes. Surprisingly, Model E also indicates that aspects of social motivation have more or less the same magnitude as cultural competence characteristics in the explanation of book genre preferences.

In Table 7 five regression models used to explain literary preferences are presented. Again, we will only discuss the results for average complexity level, because the models for complexity and literary prestige look quite similar. Superficial inspection of Table 7 reflects more limited explanatory power of the relevant predictors compared to the models that apply to book genres. This is not unexpected, because for literary reading only a limited segment of leisure book reading was analyzed. Consequently, variances within the literary domain are relatively low compared to variances for all reading material (see Appendix A).

To begin with, Model A displays a small effect of gender ($\beta = .097$). In the literary segment women tend to read more complex titles than men. Financial resources and time budget restrictions seem important factors for literary reading as well. Readers from households with high incomes read more complex books than readers from lower income groups ($\beta = .141$). Furthermore, the time pressure caused by domestic tasks has a negative effect on the level of literary reading ($\beta = -.129$).

Again, in Models B, C and D, three grounds for cultural and literary competence are introduced in a step-wise procedure. Model B displays a significant effect for parental socialization in reading ($\beta = .127$), and the number of books owned by a reader's parents during childhood also seems to be meaningful ($\beta = .092$). So, for literary book reading, it is not only direct parental encouragement that pays off in terms of preferred complexity of literature in later life, but also the opportunity structure in the parental home with respect to availability of books that is important. As was the case for book genres, learning by doing, represented by the aspects introduced in Model C, appeared of little relevance for preferred complexity level. In other words, early reading experiences in the parental home, and membership of a library during adolescence, do not lead to more complex literary reading in later life.

Model D shows that schooling assets are crucial for the explanation of complexity preferences in literary reading. A high level of education leads to a preference for relatively complex literature, when compared to people with a lower educational level ($\beta = .314$). In addition, special attention for literature in secondary school is meaningful ($\beta = .225$). Readers who were engaged in literature classes during the curriculum for modern languages prefer more complex literary books in later life than readers who did not share this experience. Yet, it can be stated that education in literary devices significantly contributes to an increase in the cultural and literary competencies of members of a society. The introduction of educational characteristics in Model D completely reduces the importance of other determinants (except

age). Subsequently, these characteristics affect a reader's level in literary reading only indirectly, through schooling assets.

Model E displays the importance of social motives for literary reading. Our analyses give rise to the conclusion that a preference for complex literature, is not only due to competence features. A reader who agrees on high-brow attitudes regarding book reading and literature, more often prefers complex literature than a reader who disregards these cultural norms ($\beta = .178$). Surprisingly, we found no association between the social status of a reader's best friend and the complexity of literary books read. Apparently, the norms on life-style symbols within a circle of friends do not necessarily include reading literary books of exactly the same complexity level. We feel that looking for differentiation in this respect is maybe too subtle a strategy, whereas for book genres, level of complexity is a more visible and manageable life-style symbol (see Table 6). Hence, Model E indicates that cultural competence aspects for literary reading are far more important for explaining level in reading than aspects representing social motivation.

Finally, Model E also shows an interesting effect of age ($\beta = .198$). Within our cross-sectional research design, two explanations for this effect are at hand. First, it could be that readers, when growing older increase the complexity of the literature they prefer because of life experience gained or added cultural competence. A second explanation, however, points to cohort differences. A reader born in the first half of the twentieth-century could acquire more cultural and literary resources, as a result of better schooling in reading and especially less audio-visual attraction than readers born after the 1950s (Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1998).

5. Conclusion and discussion

Book reading is a popular leisure activity among the inhabitants of the Netherlands, as it is in the rest of the world. In 1995, empirical research indicated that 38% of the Dutch population devoted time to books in the week prior to investigation (Knulst and Kraaykamp, 1998). At the same time, however, reading is marked by clear social differentiation in book preferences. So far, little empirical research had been done on this subject. In this study, we have tried to explain why the higher social classes are over-represented among the readers of literature, and the lower social classes prefer romantic fiction and regional novels.

Our first research question dealt with the topic of how genres and literary books are to be classified. Two aspects that are important for the attractiveness of books were examined. First, complexity in books was believed to attract readers, because dealing with complex information is a pleasurable activity. Second, books differ in literary prestige, and reading prestigious books was considered to provide social rewards. In classifying reading material, we applied the method of semantic evaluation by expert judges. This procedure resulted in reliable and valid measurements of the complexity and literary prestige of a list of selected reading materials. An advantage of this classification method over previous methods was that prevailing opinions on differences between genres and books were formalized. It must be made

clear, however, that this procedure is not a definitive answer to the issue of classifying reading material. It is meant to be a first step in classifying reading material empirically.

In the second part of our empirical research, we addressed the question of which individual characteristics are relevant in explaining social inequality in reading preferences. More precisely, we wanted to determine why readers from the higher social strata preferred more complex and prestigious books than others. Two theoretical notions to explain this were examined. Social inequality in book reading was studied as a consequence, first, of the individual preferences for cognitive stimulation in reading and, second, as a consequence of individual motives to use the symbolic functions of books in a social context. Both explanations considered the link between reading material and individual reader as crucial.

Our analysis showed that educational resources were important in explaining reading preferences. High-educated readers proved to be the ones who read relatively complex books. Next, the significance of reading stimulation at secondary school illustrated that teaching literary devices contributes to the growth of cultural literacy in society. Readers who had put in the effort and time to read complex literature at secondary school were more likely to enjoy complex books in later life. Both educational aspects give rise to the conclusion that our theoretical insight into cultural competence as a predictor of reading preferences is partially supported. Nevertheless, parental stimulation at home did not turn out to be important. Yet, parental socialization in reading does affect children with respect to level of education (De Graaf, 1986; Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 1996), and the choice for schools that offer intensive programs in cultural literacy (Aschaffenburg and Maas, 1997). Therefore, parental literary socialization is considered to be important for current book reading preferences only indirectly.

Book preferences proved not only to be affected by individual characteristics of cultural competence. Our analysis clearly showed that social motives were meaningful for book reading preferences as well. More specifically, an attitude that acknowledged the universal value of high-brow culture and literature led to a preference for complex and prestigious books. This indicated that reading these books serves as an alternative pathway used to gain social status. Moreover, a reader's social network seemed to be relevant for the preferences in book genres; readers among high-educated friends preferred complex genres to a greater extent than readers with less well-educated friends, even when individual factors such as educational level and socialization aspects were taken into account. Apparently, social networks are homogeneous when it comes to life-style features such as book reading preferences, as well as to socio-economic aspects such as education and social class (DiMaggio, 1987).

Our findings give rise to two more general conclusions. First, we conclude that our research strategy of using expert evaluations to develop a classification of reading material points to a fruitful direction in sociological research on reading preferences. Through the classification method of semantic contrasts a valid measure was established of the complexity and prestige of reading material. In empirical use the variation between the scale based on complexity and the scale based on literary pres-

tige, however, proved rather small. Future empirical research on social inequality in reading preferences, therefore, should elaborate on the question of whether there is only one dimension in the attractiveness of books that underlies the differentiation in reading preferences. A related question would be whether external attributes of reading material are relevant in explaining reading preferences, like author popularity, promotion activities, or literary criticism (Leemans and Stokmans, 1991), even when aspects of complexity and prestige are controlled for.

Second, we conclude that book reading preferences are marked by clear social differentiation. At the same time, it can be stated that compared to other high brow cultural activities, book reading is relatively popular. Subsequently, studying inequality in reading can reveal insights regarding status group differences with respect to cultural norms and behavior for a relatively large segment of the population, whereas for most other high-brow cultural activities only a small segment of participants is observed. Therefore, we consider the sociology of literature and reading as a promising field of research. The study, presented here, is limited to one country and one moment in time. It would be interesting to compare the results found here with empirical material from other countries, gathered over several decades. Are social motives in book reading more important in countries that never had a 'class society', such as the United States and Australia? Is educational level a more decisive factor in countries where education is not as accessible and available as in the Netherlands, and are there any changes over cohorts with regard to reading preferences?

Appendix A: Description of variables

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	N
Complexity of genres read (average)	3.08	.66	1.14	6.47	698
Prestige of genres read (average)	3.70	.75	1.61	7.19	698
Complexity of books read (average)	4.31	.47	2.45	5.64	666
Prestige of books read (average)	6.62	.54	3.91	7.89	666
Women	.61	.49	0	1.00	724
Age ^a	2.64	1.69	0	7.40	724
Income (household) ^b	2.89	1.06	1.00	4.25	723
Hours of domestic labor ^c	1.50	1.12	0	4.00	721
Hours of payed labor ^c	1.90	2.04	0	9.00	718
Number of books owned (by parents) ^d	1.23	2.56	0	20.00	724
Socialization in reading (by parents)	1.65	.63	0	3.00	718
Reading habits in early childhood	1.34	.41	0	2.67	724
Library use in early childhood	1.32	.75	0	3.00	724
Educational level ^e	3.00	1.87	0	6.00	722
School stimulation of literature	.93	.79	0	3.00	724
Normative attitude about literature	2.37	.38	1.25	3.00	697
Educational level of closest friend	3.21	1.84	0	6.00	633

^a Age is recoded by subtracting 18 and dividing the result by 10.

^b Real values were assigned to the categories and these were divided by 1000: (1 = 1000) (2 = 1750) (3 = 2250) (4 = 3000) (5 = 4250).

^c The number of hours divided by 10.

^d Real values were assigned to the categories and the result was divided by 100: (0 = 0)(1 to 50 = 25)(50 to 150 = 100) (150 to 500 = 325) (500 to 1000 = 750) (1000 + = 2000).

^e Education is recoded by subtracting 1.

For all other scales, items were limited to three categories, scores were summed and then divided by the number of items.

Appendix B.1: Correlation matrix applied to the reading of book genres (N = 612)

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Complexity of genres read	1.000														
Prestige of genres read	.844	1.000													
Women	-.200	-.091	1.000												
Age	.023	-.016	-.045	1.000											
Income (household)	.140	.112	-.200	-.123	1.000										
Hours of domestic labor	.074	.037	-.384	-.417	.315	1.000									
Hours of payed labor	-.183	-.134	.406	.000	-.082	.361	1.000								
Number of books owned (by parents)	.110	.152	.015	-.207	.088	.103	-.078	1.000							
Socialization in reading (by parents)	.181	.197	.100	.199	.104	.138	-.073	.349	1.000						
Reading habits in early childhood	.041	.039	.085	-.198	.064	.095	.028	.160	.200	1.000					
Library use in early childhood	.081	.080	.089	-.287	.082	.121	-.025	.109	.313	.176	1.000				
Educational level	.430	.417	-.170	-.283	.358	.305	-.249	.277	.314	.122	.236	1.000			
School stimulation of literature	.319	.343	.058	-.436	.202	.207	-.086	.288	.399	.248	.291	.639	1.000		
Normative attitude about literature	.364	.361	.078	.137	.036	-.003	-.080	.164	.348	.118	.084	.257	.222	1.000	
Educational level of closest friend	.403	.420	-.094	-.206	.236	.230	-.206	.258	.259	.071	.151	.628	.446	.295	1.000

Appendix B.2: Correlation matrix applied to the reading of literary books (N = 590)

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Complexity of genres read	1.000														
Prestige of genres read	.867	1.000													
Women	.006	.079	1.000												
Age	.040	-.100	-.047	1.000											
Income (household)	.129	.096	-.207	-.114	1.000										
Hours of domestic labor	.042	.018	-.383	-.417	.306	1.000									
Hours of payed labor	-.108	-.020	.402	.004	-.085	-.367	1.000								
Number of books owned (by parents)	.134	.103	.022	-.209	.084	.093	-.066	1.000							
Socialization in reading (by parents)	.165	.178	.123	-.188	.087	.116	-.053	.344	1.000						
Reading habits in early childhood	.050	.069	.118	-.212	.053	.081	.047	.155	.209	1.000					
Library use in early childhood	.079	.094	.117	-.275	.047	.090	-.012	.098	.286	.268	.084	1.000			
Educational level	.399	.350	-.156	-.283	.364	.280	-.226	.266	.276	.365	.237	.256	1.000		
School stimulation of literature	.335	.374	.075	-.442	.193	.187	-.065	.262	.365	.237	.256	.613	.198	1.000	
Normative attitude about literature	.303	.200	.104	.144	.012	-.027	-.056	.151	.326	.111	.073	.213	.189	1.000	
Educational level of closest friend	.262	.244	-.075	-.215	.227	.204	-.169	.250	.231	.041	.133	.610	.421	.270	1.000

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Data

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Gerbert Kraaykamp completed his Ph.D. thesis at the University of Utrecht (PhD-thesis: *Over lezen gesproken* [Speaking of reading]), and has worked since 1993 as Assistant Professor in Sociology at the University of Nijmegen. His main fields of interest and current work are in the areas of social stratification, life-style, and media consumption. He has published on these subjects in national and international journals.

Katinka Dijkstra received her Ph.D. in Language and Literature from the University of Utrecht in 1992. She is currently working as a project manager in the Department of Communication at Florida State University.