



Anna Buchner

University of Warsaw

ORCID: [0000-0001-6232-4316](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6232-4316)

Bogna Kietlińska

University of Warsaw

ORCID: [0000-0003-1957-9676](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1957-9676)

Bricolage as a Strategy of Pursuing Beauty in the Social Reality of the Polish People's Republic¹

“In those days, we used to long for beauty. During communism”².

Abstract

In 2013, the authors participated in the international research grant titled “Towards the Comparative Sociology of Beauty: The Transnational Modelling Industry and the Social Shaping of Beauty Standards in Six European Countries”, which was carried out in Amsterdam, at the Institute for Social Science of Research (University of Amsterdam), under the direction of Professor Giseline Kuipers. Some of the respondents in Poland were women, whose early adulthood took place in the times of the Polish People's Republic and the subsequent regime change. After the research had been concluded, the authors decided to devote more attention to them, and conducted additional interviews with women over fifty, with tertiary education, living in large or medium Polish cities. In this article, strategies of pursuing beauty in the context of the shortage economy of the Polish People's Republic are presented. Based on in-depth interviews, the analysis is framed in terms of *bricolage*, a term coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, as well as of *homo eligens* and *homo egens*, which are concepts developed by Polish sociologists. The aim of such applications is to systematise studies on lifestyles.

Keywords

bricolage, Polish People's Republic, *homo eligens*, *homo egens*, beauty standards

¹ The examples presented in the article are the illustrations of the selected strategies of *bricoleur*, which is also *homo egens*. It is important to note that in the times of the Polish People's Republic, the spectrum of clothing and physical practices was much wider as well as most of them were strongly dependent on the relationship between power and subordination.

² A quote from one of the interviews. The research was conducted in the Polish language; all the utterances of the respondents quoted in this article are the authors' own translation.

Introduction

In 2013, as developers of a part of the field research, we participated in the grant titled “Towards the Comparative Sociology of Beauty: The Transnational Modelling Industry and the Social Shaping of Beauty Standards in Six European Countries”³, which was carried out in Amsterdam at the Institute for Social Science Research (University of Amsterdam) under the supervision of Professor Giseline Kuipers. The research covered three countries that hold a central position in the global modelling industry – France, Italy, and the UK – as well as three with a more peripheral position, namely the Netherlands, Turkey, and Poland. Poland was chosen also because of its specific socio-political situation and the dynamic development of the country in the years after the political transformation. As the authors of the project write, “Poland was largely excluded from global cultural exchange from World War II until 1989. However, since then, the country has quickly become more oriented towards the international media culture”⁴. In fundamental research, the sample⁵ was constructed using the following criteria: gender (male, female), age (18-30, 31-50, >50), education (higher education, lower education), residence (capital city, small town). In each country, twenty four interviews were conducted. The theme of the systemic change and its influence on shaping the standards of beauty and beauty-related practices seemed so compelling that we decided it should be deepened with the use of additional interviews. As a result, twelve more interviews were carried out with women over 50, with tertiary education, and living in large or medium Polish cities. We wanted reflexive speakers, who remembered both the times of their early youth and the period of changes, i.e. the systemic transformation. To this end, we slightly modified the initial interview scenario and added questions about the historical aspects. What we wanted above all was to isolate the practices related to the respondents’ appearance that had been adopted in the light of various limitations and shortages. Moreover, we made a decision to talk only about women, which is why we did not use the collections of photographs that showed male faces and bodies. The photographs of women served as a trigger for narratives of different beauty criteria and the respondents’ experiences. Therefore, due to the small size of the sample, we did not use the quantitative potential of the Q-sort technique when analysing the material, meaning that we did not take into account the quantitative distribution of responses. We did

³ The project was funded with an ERC starting grant from the European Research Council. More information on the grant can be found at: <http://www.sociologyofbeauty.nl/> (accessed on: March 27, 2017).

⁴ See <http://aissr.uva.nl/research/externally-funded-projects/item/beauty-towards-a-comparative-sociology-of-beauty-the-transnational-modelling-industry-and-the-social-shaping-of-beauty-standard.html> (accessed on: March 27, 2017).

⁵ Detailed data is available in the table in Appendix 1.

use the qualitative content analysis: an ordinal one that uses the so-called Patient Forms⁶, and an in-depth one that takes semantics into account.

There are many biographical elements in the material that we gathered. With the introduction of questions about the past, a conversation about beauty constituted an excuse to talk about the respondents' lives, memories, experiences, and ways of dealing with the situation of shortage. This article follows the logic and specificity of the fieldwork material. It is primarily an ethnographic report from the area, which aims at bringing the reader closer to the realities of Poland at that time, the specificities of which are particularly significant against the background of other countries in the grant.

Homo eligens and homo egens

The concept of *homo eligens*, which was created by Andrzej Siciński, was our first theoretical framework for this study. It can be considered in two ways, namely either as an existential or a methodological thesis (Siciński 2002, p. 81). According to the author, "In the first case, it is the belief that an individual cannot be reduced to the sum of reactions to conditioning or stimuli; on the contrary, an individual's 'essence' is precisely the ability to make choices, to exceed one's conditioning [...]" (Siciński 2002, p. 81). The methodological version amounts to "the claim that it is impossible to understand social and psychological phenomena without looking at them from the point of view of choices made by people" (Siciński 2002, p. 81). On the one hand, the situation of shortage, which is of interest to us, narrows the area of potential choices significantly; on the other, "the limitations of the repertoire become an incentive to make fuller use of the opportunities still available" (Siciński 1988, p. 63). Paradoxically, long-term deficits may lead to the boundaries imposed top-down being crossed and other solutions being sought. This is why we implemented Barbara Fatyga's construct of *homo egens* as our second theoretical framework; it is a certain continuation of Siciński's proposal described above and, as Fatyga intended, it supplements the theory of lifestyles. *Homo egens* is an "individual in need – [...] suffering because of a lack, shortage and/or being poor"⁷. It means that the needs of an individual cannot be met in a given situation or under given circumstances⁸.

⁶ A method of analysis developed by Anna Buchner and Katarzyna Zaniewska, which – thus far – has been used for researching social networks and cultural institutions. Its name evokes "patient summary forms", but here it refers to the interview card.

⁷ Barbara Fatyga, *Homo egens*, the author's definition for Obserwatorium Żywej Kultury – Sieć Badawcza [Living Culture Observatory Foundation – Research Network], 2013. Source: <http://ozkultura.pl/wpis/387/5> (accessed on: March 27, 2017).

⁸ It is worth considering whether it applies only to the basic needs, or to the 'excessive' needs as well. It seems that needs can be considered on two levels, namely objective and subjective. In the latter case, needs that can be potentially seen as e.g. snobbish, when not fulfilled, can also be a source of suffering for an individual.

Memories of such a state appeared in every respondent's account. However, the situation of shortage served as a starting point for searching, processing and modifying various products (e.g. sewing, self-made cosmetics, creative use of social capital, etc.). More than anything else, time was the price to pay for crossing the boundaries, since such actions required stubbornness and perseverance. In this context, it is worth mentioning the following statement from one of our interviewees:

I often think about how everything that used to be harder for us demanded more from us, how a person had to focus and do something that required patience and concentration, how it also shapes other traits in this person; the ease of everything is how everything is now, I think that it somehow spoils us, as people, inside. [...] At that time, however, more attention was paid to different things; in spite of this terrible poverty and this absolute lack, we still recall different things with great sentiment and, to us, it comes across as something wonderful back then.

Ingenuity and imagination also played key roles. Especially in the context of sewing, the respondents talked about attributing new forms to used objects (e.g. old clothes) or creating things from scratch (e.g. self-made deodorant or shoes). Some of the ideas had been conceived at the very beginning, i.e. before the act of creation, and were a starting point for a given action; others appeared and were implemented during the process of creation. Therefore, the manufacturing process had its specific dynamics that resulted from a number of ideas and real possibilities of putting them into practice. As a result, the majority of objects created in such a way were unique. The imagination of the respondents and their ingenuity, understood as the ability to find something new, made it possible to see ways to counterbalance different shortages.

A Sewing Machine: The End of an Era

At the time of the Polish People's Republic, women had to cope with the situation of a restricted access, or even a complete lack of access, to good-quality clothes that they liked and that fit them (being figure-flattering or of a desired colouring). The best strategy to cope with that restriction was to sew independently or to modify the clothes. As one of the respondents stated,

At a time when it was not always possible to buy what you wanted in a store, I used to sew a lot of things myself, because I am an amateur seamstress. I learned to sew on my own, because I wanted my children to be well-dressed from the very beginning and I did the same for myself.

Naturally, it was possible to use the services of a seamstress, but due to financial reasons it was not accessible to many,

Nothing was available, so sewing was the only way. When I was a bit older, I figured I would also sew on my own, because a seamstress was expensive and some things are not rocket science. I had a sewing machine, an old Singer.

When talking about the times when she used to sew, knit, or even make buttons from straps and modelling clay, one of the respondents said that it had been a time when “dressing oneself was very labouring”. We believe that this expression perfectly captures the specificity of that time and the difficulties one had to overcome to look and feel nice or beautiful. Not only manual skills, but also imagination and creativity were held in high regard, resulting in the ability to see new potential in old things, e.g. those found in a mother's or grandmother's wardrobe. It was a time when clothes were not thrown away, because they were too valuable; they were either used or exchanged or sold in the so-called grey-market areas⁹ of a marketplace.

There were those marketplaces, where some grandmas sold off or sold their, you know, old things, sometimes very beautiful, and you could modify them, you would treat it as a sort of component, not a specific thing ready to wear. Well, all Polish women modified their old things back then, the ones they inherited from their own grandmas or families, or got at a marketplace.

Foreign aid packages were a really valuable source of original clothes and accessories. There was a large marketplace in the suburbs of Warsaw, the so-called ‘duds’ [pl. *ciuchy, lachy*], where saleswomen sold clothes from foreign packages. ‘Duds’ had a certain customer-friendly internal structure; saleswomen had specialised stalls.

Some had stalls with buttons, others with trousers, and so on. And these things were completely different from what you could buy in Poland. The assortment was naturally very different, for instance you would buy there something because the material was really pretty, so you could sew something with it, because it had a pretty pattern. It would be processed.

Independent designing and sewing of her own clothes proved to be an extremely valuable lesson for one of our respondents, who due to this fact eventually became a Broadway costume designer. In 1984, when she was about to return to Poland after a short stay in the USA, she was spotted by a gallery owner in New York and asked about the clothes she was wearing. Upon learning that she had sewed them herself, the owner

⁹ Grey market was about the illegal trade of legal services and products; it was often the only way to access certain services or goods in the Polish People's Republic.

offered her a quick display of her designs in the gallery, which resulted in orders and, very soon, led to the respondent's work being part of one of the Broadway ateliers.

A German magazine *Burda* played an important role in teaching women how to sew. Many women, by trial and error, perfected their tailoring skills using *Burda's* sewing patterns. A Polish magazine *Filipinka* played a similar role in training younger people.

Every week "Filipinka" would publish sewing patterns that were presented like, well, IKEA furniture, i.e. how to assemble them, how to do it step by step, the whole sequence, there was a drawing. The drawing was tiny, but done so well that you could deduce everything and I just made it all with "Filipinka". In high school I had a new outfit every week, because I just sat and made it, it was my passion.

Significantly, our respondents were able to derive inspiration from the West despite the Iron Curtain. Foreign trips were encouragement for those who sewed. "I looked at what was in the stores, how they dressed on the streets, men, women, and children. Trips to the West provided me with inspiration and then I was modifying and sewing". Foreign magazines played a similar role; if somebody got a chance to browse through a copy of French *Elle*, it kept them "on the edge of their seat".

From today's perspective, it is hard to imagine the emotions that accompanied the procurement and/or preparation of the desired dreamy outfit. It was a true feast, and the joy associated with it lasted for a very long time, making it an extremely memorable event.

I remember that I really wanted something to go out in. I did not have anything for special occasions. My mum went to the so-called 'shoddy clothes' and bought me a pink, pale pink sweater and I had a skirt sewed that went with it. I was very happy that I had something so great. I do not recall ever again wanting something so badly that I just had to have it, it would never be such a big deal to me again.

Procuring shoes that were the right size, style, and colour was very emotional. In most cases, it was practically impossible to find shoes that met all of these criteria. New shoes were bought with 'ration cards' [pl. *kartki*]¹⁰ and quite often they were not the desired size or style. Despite these inconveniences, they were worth buying for exchange or sale, and if they were just one or two sizes off, a cobbler would lengthen them. One of our respondents, who was getting married during the period of the martial law in Poland, despite numerous attempts to procure white or cream shoes, had to turn up on that special day in brown shoes, which were the only elegant shoes in her size that she had been able to obtain. Another respondent shared a hilarious, with hindsight, story about sewing her own shoes.

¹⁰ The usual name, '*kartki*', refers to the rationing of goods in the Polish People's Republic; it was a system of control of the distribution of goods, which was the result of severe shortages on the market, and included, among others, the issuance of cards that entitled a person to buy strictly specified quantities of goods.

I persuaded my friend that we should sew our own shoes, crakows that appeared in one of the books. And we bought somewhere, in the Różycki marketplace, this chamois leather, and we sewed our own shoes, boots that were this high, and they were great but we glued something wrong, but you could buy everything in that marketplace, even the soles for our shoes; we bought them there.

The financial benefits of sewing constitute an interesting theme that came up in the interviews. It is important in as much as all the respondents were university graduates who learned how to sew on their own. In those days, it was tailoring, not their learned profession, that was the lucrative option.

During the last stage of the 1980s life, I lived off sewing, because my job as a psychologist only covered the bills. So I kept on sewing until 1989, then I started to work in a large newspaper agency and I completely abandoned sewing.

In many homes, the beginning of capitalism in Poland translated into a radical break in sewing. "I was sewing from primary school to 1989, I used to sew everything myself, except for jeans". We are convinced that the anthropological and historical analysis of the meaning of the object that is a sewing machine would be a very interesting direction and a research challenge. The object that used to mean so much became practically useless in a matter of a couple years.

Worth the Effort

Another important theme, which is also connected with the previous one, involved the skilful use of the available resources, especially the non-financial kind of resources. Difficulties with accessing different products were addressed in various ways. The so-called "granny's methods" made a comeback with reference to e.g. homemade cosmetics.

In the old days there was no such thing as a deodorant. Back then I used something like this, I used to pour pure alcohol over amber and used it like a deodorant. That was my grandmother's method; she used oil, amber and talcum powder.

In order to buy many products, a person had to wait in line for hours, without any guarantee that it would be successful, despite the perseverance.

Back then you could not use any cosmetics consistently, because they were not there. It was always the question of procuring something and you had what you procured. I remember when, by accident, the first Palmolive shampoo popped up in stores. This shampoo was a gift from heaven.

Therefore, the choice was limited to what was available at the time.

Back then you just took everything that was there. Nivea cream was commonplace, if you were able to get it, and some basic cosmetics like a toothpaste or a shampoo, if it appeared in packages. It was hard to get used to a fragrance. There was “Być Może” perfume or “Pani Walewska”, a more expensive one.

Although it was possible to buy quality cosmetics from the West in Pewex stores¹¹, their price often exceeded an average remuneration.

All those years of communism [...] meant mostly Polish cosmetics. It was not “Helena Rubinstein” or “Dior”, although you could buy that in Pewex, but if your salary was 30 dollars and a cream cost 60 dollars, then it was hardly available.

The ability to use social capital and social connections was also very important. As Piotr Łukasiewicz writes, “The amount of time and effort devoted to obtain a certain distinct good was disproportionately high. The ability to procure or handle something and having appropriate connections – those were the most durable currencies at the time” (Łukasiewicz 1999, p. 47). It also applied to the access to hairdressing and beauty salons.

As for the accessibility of these salons, at a time when I needed it most, the accessibility was very limited. [...] You had to sign up for it, you needed connections. There was the status of a long-standing customer in place.

This is why the informal market of beauty services was successfully developed in parallel to the official market. It consisted of hairdressers and beauticians who visited their clients and performed services at the clients’ houses. In this case, connections and the word of mouth were also crucial, as they translated into mutual referrals and transferring contacts between satisfied customers.

Bricolage: Shaping the Reality

We believe that the metaphor of a *bricoleur*, coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, provides a valuable perspective and, simultaneously, a theoretical framing device to all the stories about sewing, modifying, and processing of clothes, or about making cosmetics at home. A *bricoleur* is somebody who uses their own hands and substitute resources (in contrast to professionals) in order to create a product. As Lévi-Strauss writes, “The *bricoleur* is capable of performing a wide variety of tasks but, by contrast with the engineer, does not subject any of these tasks to the availability of materials or tools conceived and procured specifically for the job. The instrumental world of the *bricoleur* is closed and the name of the game is always to make do with the ‘means at one’s disposal’”

¹¹ The full name was ‘Przedsiębiorstwo Eksportu Wewnętrznego’ [ang. ‘Internal Export Company’]. With headquarters in Warsaw, it was a chain of stores and currency shops in the Polish People’s Republic.

(Lévi-Strauss 2001, p. 24). By using and manipulating that which already exists, the *bricoleur* gives the items a new meaning.

As noted by Katarzyna Zajda, the relationship between the lack of certain resources and the need (if not necessity) to acquire them is important in *bricolage* (Zajda 2017, p. 119). This is why this approach has met with appreciation mostly from researchers dealing with the question of social entrepreneurship (Weick, 1993; Miner et al. 2001). *Bricolage* allows the use of available resources for the sake of broadly understood development, which can then serve as a “catalyst for creative behaviours or overall innovativeness” (Zajda 2017, p. 119). Zajda acknowledges significant applicability of Lévi-Strauss’ notion in utilising social resources of rural areas, both individual and collective (Zajda 2017). The ability to utilise them and build networks founded on trust and mutual experience of deprivation shows the social capital of people who inhabit these areas. However, analogous mechanisms can be seen in urban communities, which—as was the case in the communist Poland—are, for structural reasons, forced to locate and refine local resources so that the inhabitants can subsequently, in accordance with local competence, utilise them in daily activities. In such cases, social networks (knowledge about who and where needs to be reached out in each particular situation) are key, too.

We believe that self-made cosmetics, prepared by means of following a grandmother’s recipe, or modified clothes that appeared in our respondents’ stories, were indeed *bricolage*. Therefore, their creators can be called *bricoleurs*, whose only limitation when creating their products (clothes as well as cosmetics) was the availability of materials; they were able to combine everything with anything as needed, within the scope of their possibilities. A *bricoleur* gathers the elements on the basis of the principle that “this could come in handy some day” (Lévi-Strauss 2001, p. 33). Even now, many people who remember the times of communism in Poland still gather many things in their homes, cellars, and garages, following this very principle. Therefore, it can be said that the times of the Polish People’s Republic imposed a *bricolage* behaviour. Such an approach, however, triggered great creativity in many; either somebody processed something, or tried to find somebody who can process it for them.

As Lévi-Strauss writes, the *bricoleur* “does not confine her[self] to accomplishment and execution, [she/he] ‘speaks’ not only with things [...] but also through the medium of things: giving an account of [her/his] personality and life by the choices [she/he] makes between limited possibilities” (Lévi-Strauss 2001, p. 37). In this regard, the respondents were also *bricoleurs* many a time. They often conveyed a lot through their outfits, hairstyles, and accessories; it was not only about their personality or character, but also about their attitude to the reality and the political situation. It was enough to have a hairstyle different than anybody else and a clear signal was sent.

My black hair was my friend's idea, he was a musician and he was stylish, he looked like he came from London, not from the Eastern Bloc. And he just talked me into it, into dyeing my hair black and cutting it short. Nobody used to cut their hair like that back then. I had to do it myself, because it was not possible to go to a hairdresser during communism, the hairdressers had no idea what I wanted them to do.

From the perspective of our study, Luigi Pareyson's theory of formativity complements the concept of *bricolage*. While developed with reference to art, its area of application seems to be much wider. According to Pareyson, formativity means "a doing which does not confine itself to executing something already fixed [...], instead in the very act of doing it is also inventing 'the way of doing'" (Pareyson 2009, p. 71). It is a doing without a pre-arranged technique that simply needs to be applied to make everything work. One has to find that technique by doing and only by doing. Following the formativity principle, the respondents learned each and every element on their own.

The first time I modified something was in primary school, because I used to go to a seamstress with my mum and she was making me this sailor coat, and I was dreaming of one with gold buttons, but I looked like a deckhand in it. But I was too well-mannered to say anything bad about the seamstress, so I did not say anything. It was on our way home that I told my mum, with tears in my eyes, that I would not wear it and then my mum told me to simply modify the coat. Here you are, there, you have scissors, you have a sewing machine, just modify it. And I modified my coat and I wore it for many years. The coat was made of beautiful, navy wool that my uncle had brought me from abroad.

However, the first attempts were often unsuccessful. It was only because of perseverance and insistent "doing" that the subsequent attempts were satisfactory, which resulted in working out a certain, only seemingly universal, method of operation. It would quickly turn out that a strategy of modifying one object did not apply to another item; modifying a skirt is different from sewing children's clothes or accessorising a second-hand handbag.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that, in spite of the limitations described in this text, our respondents recalled their experiences from the times of the Polish People's Republic rather fondly. Undoubtedly, it was a difficult time in many respects and a lot of effort was required to improve the then state of affairs. The ability to persevere, persist, and skilfully use the limited resources was paramount. Practices related to pursuing beauty required a considerable effort. In their stories, our respondents often talked about the need to seek harmony, balance, proportion, and order. To them, beauty was equated with these traits. They sought balance also in the deeply chaotic reality, in which they had to live. Such considerations make it possible to ponder the nature of beauty. Does

beauty always have to be visible to the naked eye? Or does striving for beauty have a beautifying value and, therefore, the striving itself brings beauty into being?

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Appendix 1.

Research Sample in Poland

	Higher Education / Warsaw		Higher Education / Small town		Lower Education / Warsaw		Lower Education / Small town	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Age 18-30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age 31-50	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Age 50+	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24