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An eclectic eclecticism: Methodological and theoretical issues about the quantification of cultural omnivorism



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ABSTRACT

Cultural eclecticism has been the focus of most sociological debates pertaining to cultural practices since the publication of Richard Peterson's first articles on the topic. Underlying these debates surrounding results, the prevailing definitions and methods are particularly striking for their... eclecticism. And although it is not explicitly stated, it appears that sociologists disagree over the parameters of inquiry – how the object of study is constructed and all manner of methodologies, rather than over hypotheses and whether or not they are valid. In this paper, we shall extend and systematize assertions that appear in various works on omnivorism. Our aim is to determine the theoretical implications of the three groups of choices that seem critical in statistical methods of studying cultural eclecticism: choices concerning indicators of taste; methods of constructing a scale of cultural legitimacy; and indicators of cultural omnivorism.

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“Do not deny the classical approach, simply as a reaction, or you will have created another pattern and trapped yourself there.” (Bruce Lee)

“The answer is yes. But what is the question?” (Woody Allen)

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1. Introduction

Cultural eclecticism has been the focus of most sociological debates pertaining to cultural practices over the past twenty years, or since the publication of Richard Peterson's first articles on the topic (Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Simkus, 1992). Peterson's suggestion of substituting both Herbert Gans's opposition of lowbrow vs. highbrow (Gans, 1974) and Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between the legitimate and the illegitimate (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]) with an "omnivore-to-univore" opposition spurred the sociological imagination and gave rise to a body of literature that continues to proliferate to this day. At issue in these debates are the reality of this shift, the importance of its impact, its nature, its substance, and so forth. However, while reading these articles, one is sometimes left with a sense of confusion: What exactly are they talking about? Indeed, underlying the debates surrounding results, the prevailing definitions and methods are particularly striking for their . . . eclecticism. And although it is not explicitly stated, it appears that sociologists disagree over the parameters of inquiry – how the object of study is constructed and all manner of methodologies, rather than over hypotheses and whether or not they are valid. One lesson in these debates is therefore negative: they show the extent to which results are conditioned by methodological choices and the hypotheses they imply, and how when we speak exclusively of these results, we are often speaking of different, indeed incomparable objects – in short, what these debates teach us is that they do not actually occur!

1.1. Questions and limitations of the study

To show this, we shall extend and systematize assertions that appear in various works on omnivorousness (see for example Peterson, 2005; Prieur et al., 2008; Warde and Gayo-Cal, 2009; Duval, 2010; Savage and Gayo, 2011). Our aim is to determine the theoretical implications of the three groups of choices that seem critical in statistical methods of studying cultural eclecticism. First, we compare five types of taste indicators, and discuss how each of them deals with the dispositional hypothesis that underlies the concept of taste (part 1). Secondly, we test various methods of constructing a scale of cultural legitimacy, depending on the indicators of social position and on the statistical techniques. This leads us to investigate the issue of middlebrow tastes and how it also impacts the measurement of omnivorism (part 2). Finally, we discuss the issue of individual and collective indicators of omnivorism, and operationalize two contrasted definitions of omnivorism. We then show that the prevalence of omnivorism varies from 1.7% to 30.9% of the French population, depending on all the choices we discuss. We finish with a test of the hypothesis of a rise of omnivorism in France from 1973 to 2008 (part 3).

Due to the breadth of possible discussion points, we have limited our present study in several ways. First, we will only discuss statistical methods, since they constitute the bulk of the literature; moreover, the issue of eclecticism's *measure* – the importance of the phenomenon and its social distribution – is a prerequisite to any kind of questioning with respect to its form, causes, and effects. In fact, even the existence of a new sociological order known as eclecticism is a subject of debate. For example, Prieur et al. (2008) estimate that it only really concerns about 2.1% of residents in the city of Aalborg (Denmark).

Second, we shall not discuss one of the thornier topics of debate; namely, units of measurement for cultural taste. Most statistical inquiries dedicated to eclecticism draw their units of measurement from esthetic genres such as they are already defined in questionnaires. For example, in the case of music, which is what interests us here, one finds the following types of categories: "jazz"; "international pop"; "French songs"; "world music". However, in addition to the "polysemic" character of most genres (Coulangeon, 2010), some studies on the internal differences of these esthetic genres suggest that the rate of eclecticism might be quite different (and not necessarily higher) if we considered the combinations not simply of separate esthetic genres, but also of different styles within each genre,¹ as well as of the ways in which each genre is consumed (for example, Holt, 1997 or Prieur and Savage, 2011). The jazz esthete who listens to experimental jazz and goes to avant-garde festivals and the casual jazz listener who likes early jazz standards are both counted as jazz listeners even

¹ On associations between classical music and French pop, or classical music and jazz, see Donnat, 1994; on country music, see Holt, 1997; on jazz, see Lizé, 2010; on classical music, see Savage and Gayo, 2011.

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