



Ambivalence, indifference, distinction: A comparative netfield analysis of implicit musical boundaries



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ABSTRACT

This study offers a reconceptualization of social and symbolic boundaries around music by specifying combinations of inclusion, exclusion, and ambivalence in musical tastes, producing eight ideal-typical forms of musical boundaries. These forms are investigated using data from a survey of students at the University of Mississippi measuring implicit boundary processes through respondent genre classifications of favorite and least favorite artists. These data are analyzed using comparative netfield analysis, a combination of comparative and relational methods that provides a mixed methods framework for connecting interpretations of individual-level processes to a map of the socio-musical field. The main opposition found in this musical field is between divider and ambivalent boundary forms, i.e., those who draw boundaries between versus within genres. A secondary opposition is defined by those who are indifferent to major genres. Case studies suggest that musical boundaries are often organized around racialized and gendered genre categories. I draw implications for studies of omnivorousness, genre classification, and mixed methods analysis in cultural sociology.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary sociological studies of musical taste usually begin with an invocation of Bourdieu (1984), whose work forms the foundation of current thinking about cultural capital and social stratification. A second genuflection to Peterson (1992) and Peterson and Kern (1996) usually follows, specifically to his concept of “omnivores,” which is contrasted with Bourdieu’s supposed emphasis on exclusive class-based cultures. These two positions define much of the current research on musical preferences. Debate revolves around the problem of how cultural objects are used to make and mark social and symbolic boundaries. This topic is relevant for studies of social inequality, because symbolic distinctions are seen as necessary, if not sufficient, precursors to social boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). A key question for this literature has been (Roy & Dowd, 2010: 184), “How does music relate to broader social distinctions, especially class, race, and gender?”

In this study, I make three contributions to this literature, in theory, data, and methods. First, I use an intersectional approach to reconceptualize musical boundaries. This approach formally specifies the volume of musical tastes and redefines the common “snobs versus omnivores” debate toward one focused on ambivalence, indifference, and distinction. Second, I analyze implicit symbolic boundaries around music, measured by genre classifications generated by survey respondents for their favorite and least favorite artists. This data improves on standard fixed-choice ratings of genres by

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showing how respondents apply genre categories to their most salient relationships with musical artists. Third, I outline a mixed methods framework called comparative netfield analysis, which locates survey respondents within a socio-musical field and facilitates the selection of comparative case studies. This integration of comparative and relational methods brings together case-level theorizing about boundary processes with a formal model that identifies the most important connections and contrasts shaping the musical field.

2. What is a musical boundary?

In their canonical roles in the literature, Bourdieu (1984) is said to argue that the upper classes have exclusive cultural tastes, while Peterson (1992) argues that the new middle classes (i.e., younger cohorts) actually have inclusive tastes (i.e., “omnivores”). One element initially shared by Bourdieu and Peterson was the idea that highbrow culture serves as a marker for elite classes, with Peterson adding that today’s cultural elites consume both highbrow and popular culture. Peterson and others later expanded this argument to identify different types of omnivores, including highbrow and lowbrow (Peterson, 2005). Studies have often focused on musical tastes as markers of cultural boundaries, asking: How do the forms of musical boundaries relate to musical contents? How is musical inclusion and exclusion linked to social stratification?

Within the stream of research addressing this question, there has grown a problem of conceptualization. What exactly is an omnivore, and how do you recognize one? Studies building on Peterson’s concept have often questioned the relationship between volume and composition of tastes (Bennett et al., 2009; Coulangeon & Lemel, 2007; DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004; García-Álvarez, Katz-Gerro, & López-Sintas, 2007; Warde & Gayo-Cal, 2009) and have proposed multiple types of omnivores (Ollivier, 2008; van Eijck & Lievens, 2008). Others have used methodological innovations to better specify the omnivore concept (Goldberg, 2011; Lahire, 2008; Lizardo, 2014; Sonnett, 2004), and alternative concepts such as “eclecticism” (Ollivier, Gauthier, & Truong, 2009), “experts” (Savage & Gayo, 2011), “voraciousness” (Sullivan & Katz-Gerro, 2007), and “cosmopolitanism” (Cappeliez & Johnston, 2013; Cheyne & Binder, 2010) have been pursued. Some have challenged whether omnivores even exist (Atkinson, 2011; Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2007). Along the way, the concept of “omnivore” has become elastic, and the relationship between volume and composition of tastes remains an open question.

In this paper, I reconceptualize musical boundaries using eight ideal-typical boundary forms, derived from configurations of the processes of inclusion, exclusion, and ambivalence. These boundary forms systematically define the volume of musical evaluations, separating the question of breadth of tastes from the content or composition of tastes. How these forms relate to evaluations of specific genres is then a question for empirical study. In the following sections, I develop this typology and address two problems in the existing literature that this reconceptualization addresses: (1) boundary forms cannot be adequately expressed by a single ordinal or linear measure, and (2) implicit evaluations are an important but often overlooked aspect of cultural tastes that are best studied inductively.

2.1. Boundary processes and boundary forms

In theories of social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002), processes of inclusion and exclusion, what Bourdieu (1984) might call “Distinction,” are assumed to be elemental. However, psychologists have long critiqued the assumption that positive and negative attitudes are bipolar, calling for more attention to ambivalence and indifference (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997; Kaplan, 1972). Recent studies have applied these concepts to a range of phenomena, from political attitudes (Baek, 2010; Thornton, 2013), to workplace crimes (Vadera and Pratt, 2012), to music perception (Hunter, Schellenberg, & Schimmack, 2010). Moving beyond balance theory, which focuses on explicit attitude contradictions (Jonas, Diehl, & Brömer, 1997), researchers have suggested that “implicit ambivalence” is also an important aspect of attitude structure (Petty, Briñol, & Johnson, 2012).

In the sociological literature on musical evaluations, the contradictory state of ambivalence is often ignored (but see Negus & Velázquez, 2002; Sonnett, 2004) and indifference is rarely studied explicitly (Bennett et al., 2009; Glévarec & Pinet, 2012). Standard questions in survey research tend to measure attitudes on a single scale running from inclusion (e.g., “like”) to exclusion (e.g., “dislike”). The closest measure of ambivalence is “mixed feelings,” located midway between liking and disliking. A problem with this measure of ambivalence is the well-known bias toward middle responses on survey questions (Krosnick, 1999). The mixed feelings response might represent ambivalence, or indifference, or may even mask feelings of inclusion or exclusion. Similarly, “don’t know” responses cannot effectively distinguish these evaluative processes.

To clarify these processes, I reconceptualize boundaries from a comparative perspective (Ragin, 2008), emphasizing combinations of conditions rather than single metrics. In this perspective, inclusion and exclusion are not mutually exclusive, they might be combined, or neither might be relevant. Configurations of these two processes define ambivalence and indifference (see Table 1). Ambivalence is a distinct cognitive process where both positive and negative evaluations are salient at the same time, while indifference implies neither is salient.

This simple 2×2 model can be applied to the evaluation of a single cultural object, but musical tastes are concerned with multiple objects. In this sense, musical tastes can be described as a field of musical meanings (Savage & Silva, 2013). The conceptualization of boundary processes takes on another level of complexity when considering how evaluations are made across a range of cultural objects, for example, twenty musical genres. A person’s musical tastes might include a mix of positive, negative, and ambivalent evaluations, with indifference as an unmarked residual category. Using a configurational

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