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Musical taste and patterns of symbolic exclusion in the United States 1993–2012: Generational dynamics of differentiation and continuity



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ABSTRACT

Most research in the sociology of taste has focused primarily on the role of socioeconomic status (SES) in modulating patterns of cultural choice. This has led to a general neglect of the role of age as a structuring factor in its own right. In this paper, we turn our attention to cross-sectional and over-time differences in expressions of cultural taste across age groups. We concentrate on the phenomenon that Bryson (1996) has referred to as “symbolic exclusion”: namely, the (differential) propensity of persons to express dislike for certain cultural styles. Comparing musical dislikes from the 1993 General Social Survey data to a replication of the same instrument in 2012, we find that, overall, Americans are less likely to express dislikes across most musical categories, with the most substantial declines observed for Rap and Heavy Metal, especially among college-educated young adults. The exceptions to this pattern are the Country, Folk, and Religious styles, all of which are more likely to be disliked in 2012 than they were in 1993, and Rock and Classical music, both of which are increasingly rejected by high-status young people at the same time that they are less likely to be rejected by their same-status older counterparts.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The neglect of age as a structuring factor in the sociology of taste

The focus in the majority of sociology of taste research has been the role of socioeconomic status (SES), education, and gender in modulating patterns of cultural choice, to the general neglect of the role of age and generational dynamics as a structuring factor.¹ In Richard Peterson’s classic work on the omnivore phenomenon and in the (still growing) sub-field of empirical research that this work has inspired, age figures primarily either in its dynamic, cross-generational aspect – e.g. omnivorousness as the result of a cohort-replacement process (Peterson & Kern, 1996) – or simply as a “control” variable used to adjust for differential levels of education or status attainment across age groups, in particular when the interest is estimating cross-class differences in the range of cultural tastes.

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¹ Exceptions to this pattern can be found *inter alia* in Turner and Edmunds (2002), Bennett, Emmison, and Frow (1999), Van Eijck (2001), Van Eijck and Knulst (2005), Savage and Gayo (2011), Purhonen, Gronow, and Rahkonen (2009, 2011), and Tampubolon (2008).

In this paper, we turn our attention to cross-sectional and over-time differences in expressions of cultural taste across age groups as a substantive topic in its own regard. We concentrate on the phenomenon that Bryson (1996) has termed “symbolic exclusion”: namely, the (differential) propensity of persons to direct dislikes at clusters of cultural forms identified at the style or “genre” category level.² This phenomenon is of substantive importance because it has the potential to make evident the (possibly changing) principles that govern symbolic differentiation practices in social space at a given time. This is the case insofar as there exists a *duality* between rejection of cultural forms at the level of musical style and boundary-drawing (and boundary-making) in relation to the (presumed) audiences of those forms (Bourdieu, 1984).

1.2. Musical dislikes as symbolic exclusion

In her (now) classic study on the subject, Bryson (1996) focused on education as the focal differentiating factor across persons in modulating the propensity toward symbolic exclusion. She found that, consistent with research showing that the educated tend to adopt more “tolerant” attitudes in the socio-political realm, highly educated respondents were also more likely to express tolerance in the cultural domain (fewer dislikes) than their less-educated counterparts. Bryson argued that this tolerance was patterned in the following sense: while it was true that the less educated expressed fewer dislikes, conditional on expressing a dislike, educated respondents were disproportionately more likely to dislike style categories that less-educated persons liked (Bryson, 1996: 892–893). In this sense, while the educated were keen to display what she referred to as multicultural capital (cultural tolerance), they did so in a way that still allowed for the drawing of symbolic boundaries in relation to less-privileged groups (Ollivier, 2008).

1.3. Horizontal differentiation in generational space

We suggest that diachronic changes in symbolic exclusion behavior may also be modulated by synchronic partitions in the class structure premised on age. Overall, we see age as a key component of a “field theoretic” conceptualization of the dynamics of change in social space, separating “newcomers” (younger persons) from “incumbents” or “senior members” in a given class stratum (Lizardo & Skiles, 2012: 276–277). As (Bourdieu, 1984: 295ff) noted, each class stratum (but in particular the “dominant” class) is characterized by an “opposition between the young and the old and between the senior members of the class and the newcomers.” Within and cross-class generational differences become more salient the more structural changes have occurred across generations in the mechanisms that determine life chances.

Our basic argument is that refusal to reject the same musical styles as their older (e.g. same-education) counterparts (or conversely a higher propensity to reject the musical styles that are not rejected by their elders) may be driven by attempts - on the part of younger entrants into the realm of the culturally privileged - to exploit their command of the esthetic disposition in a way that accrues “optimal distinctiveness” in relation to established incumbents (Brewer, 1991; Simmel, 1957). By optimal distinctiveness, we refer to the tendency of newcomers to attempt to maximize countervailing criteria of differentiation and commonality in relation to status-proximate incumbents. This allows newcomers to simultaneously demonstrate allegiance to required criteria for membership in the class stratum and stake their own distinctive claim to esthetic uniqueness.

Drawing on a dispositional action theory of esthetic choice (Allen, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984; Lizardo et al., 2012; Warde, 2005, 2008), we suggest that the pattern of esthetic refusals of younger entrants into the educated class should exhibit tendencies to both reaffirm acquired dispositional skills (which lead them to refuse to reject styles that their elders refuse to reject), while at the same time differentiating from the older incumbents in that stratum (which lead them to refuse to reject styles that their elders reject or reject styles that their elders refuse to reject).

1.4. Organization of the paper

In Section 2 we review recent research and theory in the sociology of taste that is consistent with this broad set of propositions. We argue that insights from this literature (centered primarily on the realm of culture consumption and the “omnivorousness” phenomenon) can be extended to the topic of the age dynamics of symbolic exclusion. We go on to introduce a new data set (Section 3) containing information on the symbolic exclusion behavior of a representative sample of Americans. Following this, we contrast (Section 4) the pattern of cultural refusals (in the domain of musical taste) of Americans who belong to different age (and later age-education groups) in 2012 (using recently collected data), with those of Americans in the same social categories in 1993 (using General Social Survey data). Section 5 summarizes the results and points to their theoretical and substantive implications for future work on the subject.

² A note on terminology: here we follow Lena (2012: 6) in using the term “style” or “musical style” (rather than “genre”) to refer to the types of musicalological “genre” categories typically included in surveys (e.g. Rock, Reggae, Classical, etc.). We reserve the term “genre” for more encompassing characterization of cultural products that include the manner, site, and technologies of production. Genre categories can crosscut standard musical style categories.

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