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Modes of consumption: From ‘what’ to ‘how’ in cultural stratification research



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ABSTRACT

In sociological debates about cultural stratification, a matter of dispute is whether Bourdieu's model of class-structured lifestyle differences has relevance for understanding contemporary social inequalities. According to Bourdieu's critics, the emergence and increasing pervasiveness of the cultural omnivore have made this model outdated. This article argues that the notion of the cultural omnivore has led stratification research into an unfortunate cul-de-sac, characterised typically by unfruitful discussions about whether simplistic recasts of old maps fit current cultural terrains. The article makes the point that empirically investigating *how* people appropriate goods is at least as important as investigating *what* they prefer, consume or engage in. More specifically, liking the same things does *not* necessarily indicate similar tastes, as a given object can be appropriated in different ways. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 46 individuals located within different positions in the local class structure of the city of Stavanger in Norway, the analysis points to clear differences between ways of appropriating goods. Four distinct modes of consumption are identified: the intellectual mode, the luxurious mode, the educational mode and the practical mode. These modes of consumption are structured along class lines, i.e. consistent with the homology thesis.

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1. Introduction

Are lifestyle differences structured along class lines; and if so, in what ways? One of the most vigorously contested issues in contemporary debates about cultural stratification pertains to [Pierre Bourdieu's \(1984\)](#) proposed model of the social distribution of lifestyle properties, especially those regarding cultural knowledge, participation and tastes. The crux of this model is that a system of class differences corresponds to a system of lifestyle differences and that this structurally homologous relationship is linked to social exclusion and the monopolisation of advantages and opportunities. Although still highly influential within the research field, Bourdieu's proposals have caused controversy regarding the role of lifestyle differences in contemporary society. Proponents of the so-called omnivore thesis constitute the most persistent challengers in this regard. What cultural omnivorousness actually means, how it should be measured and what a rise in it actually entails with regards to processes of exclusion and monopolisation processes is, however, highly contested (see e.g. [Ollivier, 2008](#); [Peterson, 2005](#); [Robette & Roueff, 2014](#); [Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2007](#)). In its original formulation, omnivorousness refers to a tendency by the upper strata of society to like and engage in a wide range of cultural goods and activities ([Peterson, 1992](#); [Peterson & Kern, 1996](#); [Peterson & Simkus, 1992](#)). Unlike univores, who adhere strictly to high-brow cultural forms,

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omnivores have supposedly developed ‘an openness to appreciating everything’. This, Peterson and colleagues argue, indicates a marked historical shift. Even though both the notion of omnivorousness and its related methodological approach to mapping cultural tastes have increasingly been subject to critical scrutiny (e.g. Atkinson, 2011; Friedman, 2012; Savage & Gayo, 2011), the prevalence of broad, eclectic and hybrid tastes in the upper strata of society is typically seen as an anomaly compared to Bourdieu’s proposed model, which is then deemed outdated (e.g. Chan & Goldthorpe, 2010; Roose, van Eijck, & Lievens, 2012). Although the champions of the omnivore thesis do differ in their views of the consequences of the supposed rise of the cultural omnivore, consensus seems to exist that we are witnessing a process whereby traditional cultural hierarchies are changing.

In this article I will engage critically in this debate. First of all, I take stock of the theoretical–methodological controversy associated with the notion of the cultural omnivore. I propose a reorientation back to Bourdieu’s initial analytical interest in the *modus operandi*, the *hows* of cultural consumption. Secondly, I use this approach to map empirically class-structured taste differentials in the city of Stavanger in Norway; this is based on qualitative interviews with 46 individuals located in different class positions. Finally, I discuss the implications of this theoretical–methodological reorientation, and relate my findings to current scholarly debates about cultural change and new forms of distinctions.

2. From omnivorousness to modes of consumption

Bourdieu’s (1984, 1989) account of structural affinities between class relations and a differential distribution of lifestyles rests upon three key concepts: the social space, the symbolic space and habitus. The multidimensional social space objectifies the system of relationships between different social positions. The structure of the social space is shaped by the social distribution of multiple forms of capital and the relative strength between them. The symbolic space depicts distributional oppositions between individuals’ properties in terms of cultural practices and lifestyles. Bourdieu asserts that the symbolic space is homologous to the social space, meaning that the two are structured in similar ways, and that clusters of positions within the social space correspond to distinct lifestyles.

As regards the assessment of the model in other empirical cases, Bourdieu warns against what he calls a substantialist or naively realist reading of his analyses. This type of reading, he argues, reifies the state of the symbolic struggle at the time and place of his empirical inquiries (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 1ff; 1998, p. 4ff). To break with this tendency, he insists on a relational or structural reading, which is only possible by comparing system to system. Thus, Bourdieu’s notion of homology does *not* imply, as some detractors would have it (e.g. Chan & Goldthorpe, 2010), that people located in the upper strata of society exclusively appropriate a fixed set of high-brow forms of culture (e.g. classical music, ballet and opera), while shunning all things low-brow (e.g. country and western music, blues and gospel). What it *does* imply, however, is that the system of differences in the symbolic space has structural affinities with the system of differences in the social space.

The third component of Bourdieu’s model is the notion of habitus, held to be the mediating factor between the social space and the symbolic space. Habitus refers to socially structured, generative schemes of perception and appreciation underlying practice and thought, i.e. durable dispositions inscribed in the body and mind (Bourdieu, 1984, chap. 3, 1990, chap. 3). The notion of habitus implies a further break with a substantialist type of sociological analysis. More specifically, Bourdieu distinguishes between the *modus operandi* and the *opus operatum* – between different modes of practices on the one hand and the observable outcomes of these practices on the other (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1984, p. 573, 1990, p. 12). Since a social actor’s *modus operandi* (i.e. his or her mode of practice as generated by the habitus) cannot be directly observed, much of Bourdieu’s analyses are geared towards the qualitative scrutiny of the various preferences and practices which cluster in the different regions of the social space, in order to identify the particular modes of appropriation underlying them (Weininger, 2005, p. 93).¹ Bourdieu maintains that a given cultural good can be perceived, appreciated and appropriated in qualitatively different ways, implying an analytical decoupling of the *whats* and *hows* of cultural consumption. This point is clearly evident in his depiction of the tastes and practices common in class fractions endowed with a preponderance of cultural capital:

[I]n the absence of the conditions of material possession, the pursuit of exclusiveness has to be content with developing a unique mode of appropriation. *Liking the same things differently, liking different things, less obviously marked out for admiration* – these are some of the strategies for outflanking, overtaking and displacing which, by maintaining a permanent revolution in tastes, enable the dominated, less wealthy fractions, whose appropriations must, in the main, be exclusively symbolic, to secure exclusive possessions at every moment. Intellectuals and artists have a special predilection for the most risky but also most profitable strategies of distinction, those which consist in asserting the power, which is peculiarly theirs, to constitute insignificant objects as works of art or, more subtly, to give aesthetic redefinition to objects already defined as art, *but in another mode*, by other classes or class fractions (e.g., kitsch). In this case, *it is the manner of consuming which creates the object of consumption*, and a second-degree delight which transforms the ‘vulgar’ artefacts abandoned to common consumption, Westerns, strip cartoons, family snapshots, graffiti, into distinguished and distinctive works of culture. (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 282–283, emphasis added)

¹ Bourdieu alternately uses the terms ‘mode of appropriation’ (1984, p. 1), ‘mode of perception’ (1984, p. 50), ‘mode of acquisition’ (1984, p. 68), ‘mode of utilisation’ (1984, p. 65), ‘mode of apprehension’ (1990, p. 88), and ‘mode of consumption’ (1990, p. 54).

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