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## Cultural resources and cultural distinction in networks



Achim Edelmann\*, Stephen Vaisey

Duke University, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Though both cultural tastes and social networks have been of interest to sociologists for more than 25 years, investigations of the role that tastes play in shaping networks are relatively new. This paper follows recent research that considers the relationship between culture and social structure by focusing on the mechanism at work in the cultural matching process. We use the Cambridge College Network Dataset, a panel study of all graduate students who enrolled in one of the colleges at the University of Cambridge in the 2008–2009 academic year, to investigate how musical tastes influence relationship development. Our analyses yield two major findings: first, the shared non-consumption of musical genres is as important as the shared consumption of musical genres; and second, musical tastes are only associated with the formation and maintenance of strong relationships rather than of relationships in general. These findings suggest that an understanding of cultural tastes as “skills” is incomplete and that an understanding of cultural tastes as a “system of distinctions” matters for understanding the development of social relationships.

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What role do cultural tastes play in formation and maintenance of social networks? Though both cultural tastes and social networks have been of interest to sociologists for more than 25 years, investigations of the role that taste plays in shaping networks are relatively new. This paper follows recent research that reconsiders the relationship between cultural forms and social relationships. In

\* Corresponding author at: Duke Network Analysis Center, Duke University, Box 90420, Durham, NC 27708, USA.  
E-mail addresses: [achim.edelmann@gmail.com](mailto:achim.edelmann@gmail.com), [ae82@duke.edu](mailto:ae82@duke.edu) (A. Edelmann).

particular, it builds upon work that seeks to unravel how cultural tastes shape social networks (Lizardo, 2006; Vaisey and Lizardo, 2010). Theoretically, this work has argued against simplifying the role of culture to “post hoc rationalizations,” disembodied “scripts” or “vocabularies of motives,” and emphasized the need for conceptualizing culture as “schemes of perception, appreciation and action” with locally independent causal autonomy. Empirically, it has shown that cultural tastes matter for building personal relationships and structuring personal networks via a process of cultural matching.

This paper seeks to extend this work in two ways. First, the most important studies in this domain rely on cross-sectional personal network data (Lizardo, 2006), data on online networks (Baym and Ledbetter, 2009; Lewis et al., 2012), and data with longitudinal time lags that are longer than ideal for the theorized processes to operate (Selfhout et al., 2009; Vaisey and Lizardo, 2010; Lewis et al., 2012). Few studies have been able to explore these processes on face-to-face networks in bounded communities using short time lags. In this study we use a new data set that is well suited for exploring the role of cultural tastes in network formation at this level of detail. The Cambridge College Network Dataset is a panel data set of all graduate students who enrolled in one of the colleges at the University of Cambridge in the 2008–2009 academic year. Monitoring how the face-to-face relationships in this community unfold over the period of a year not only allows us to zoom in on the short-term processes underlying the development of personal relationships, but also to control for relationships that were possible, but not realized. Though not without limitations, the data provide an opportunity for conducting tests of some of the mechanisms at work in the cultural matching process.

Second, we conceptually and methodologically expand upon previous work by considering different understandings of how cultural tastes influence the development of personal relationships. In demonstrating that cultural tastes can affect network structures, previous work operationalized cultural matching by accounting for the shared consumption of cultural goods or the shared expression of values (e.g., Lizardo, 2006; Vaisey and Lizardo, 2010; Lewis et al., 2012). While this is appropriate for an understanding of culture as “conversational resources” (Collins, 1981) or “skills” (Swidler, 1986, 2001), it does not fully capture the notion of culture as a system of distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979], 1990 [1980]). If cultural tastes are differentiating schemas that operate as systems of distinctions, then capturing actors’ shared consumption of cultural forms may be insufficient for accounting for their role in the cultural matching process; instead, it is equally important whether actors share in the non-consumption of certain cultural forms, and how they systematically combine both consumption and non-consumption.

As with much previous research, we focus on musical tastes because of data availability and because, unlike in many other areas of cultural consumption, satisfying one type of musical taste is not more expensive than satisfying others. Of course, cultural tastes related to other practices, activities, and objects might work differently; the extent to which this is the case is an important question, but one that is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, we focus our investigation on two understandings of how musical tastes function in the cultural matching process—tastes as skills and tastes as *systems* of distinctions. We also explore how these processes vary with relationship strength. While some relationships among a set of people grow strong, others remain weak, or never develop at all. Processes that might operate in the development of relationships thus might depend on relationship strength. Accounting for these possibilities empirically, we therefore analyze how cultural matching matters for strong ties and for relationships in general while controlling for important structural features of social networks, prior acquaintanceship, socio-economic and demographic characteristics as well as other potentially important characteristics of students’ academic background.

Two significant findings result from our analysis. First, although we find evidence for the importance of shared consumption in the cultural matching process, we also find that the “tastes as resources” view is not enough by itself. Instead we find that shared non-consumption matters as much or more than shared consumption and that the effects of both are only revealed when they are modeled at the same time. This indicates the importance of considering an understanding of cultural tastes as both systems of distinctions and “conversational resources.” Second, what seems to matter for strong relationships does not necessarily matter for relationships in general and vice versa. Whereas structural factors influence strong relationships as well as relationships in general, we only find evidence that cultural tastes matter for the development of strong relationships.

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