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Three chords & [somebody's] truth: Trajectories of experience and taste among hard country fans

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ABSTRACT

To date, much social scientific work on taste has relied on Bourdieu's concept of habitus to account for changes in tastes across the life course. But little empirical work has explored the dynamics of taste formation implied but not explicitly theorized by the concept. Dewey enriches Bourdieu's work by providing a vocabulary to theorize processes of re-socialization. This paper demonstrates Dewey's utility for understanding taste development by considering a weekly country event where no taste-class homology exists. The analysis centers on taste trajectories, or paths to appreciation taken by patrons who acquired the ability to appreciate country later-in-life. Data point to three types of regulars (Listeners, Players, Dancers); trajectories produce structured variations in experience, indicating prior engagement shapes present experience of music. Taste and experience are shown to be tightly bound; experience shapes perception and makes individuals into persons capable of having particular tastes.

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1. Introduction

One of the most theoretically exciting and generative issues in the contemporary sociology of culture regards the processes whereby tastes are formed. Most notably, [Bourdieu \(1984\)](#) posits that people develop capacities to appreciate some but not other aspects of culture via primary socialization in childhood. Specifically, tastes develop out of classed experiences so that those sharing similar social positions will have similar tastes. In addition to functioning as symbolic boundaries, tastes are expressions of capacities: the ability to recognize a cultural good means being able to appreciate it. People thus enjoy things they can recognize, and competencies are shaped by context. This theory turns on the concept of habitus; generated by experience and a generator of experience, habitus is an embodied and pre-reflective matrix of dispositions. It informs action, judgment, and perception, and accounts for socially patterned differences in taste.

Many have followed [Bourdieu \(1984\)](#), quantitatively and qualitatively assessing the degree of homology between class position and taste (e.g., [Atkinson, 2011](#); [Alderson, Junisbai, & Heacock, 2007](#); [Bellavance, 2008](#); [López-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005](#); [Savage & Gayo-Cal, 2011](#)), and the stability of preferences and consumption trends over the life course and across generations (e.g., [DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004](#); [Friedman, 2012](#); [Lizardo & Skiles, 2015](#); [Mohr & DiMaggio, 1995](#); [Rossman & Peterson, 2015](#); [Van Eijck, 1999](#)). Of course, the degree to which patterns outlined by Bourdieu characterize contemporary first-world societies is debated (e.g., [Bryson, 1996](#); [Coulangeon & Lemel, 2007](#); [DiMaggio, 1987](#); [Gripsrud, Hovden, & Moe, 2011](#); [Hanquinet, Roose, & Savage, 2013](#); [Peterson & Kern, 1996](#); [Prieur & Savage, 2011](#); [Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2008](#)). But these studies raise a second issue: whether the most general aspects of habitus acquired via primary socialization can

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account for taste development across the life course and if not, how secondary socialization leads to the acquisition of new tastes. Certainly, many preferences persist into adulthood. But as Bourdieu (1984) himself acknowledged, tastes are far from “locked in”; aesthetic development continues across the life course, sometimes steering people to tastes social position would not predict. But studying the process of taste development requires an approach different from that typically used to establish more general class differences in aesthetic appreciation. Specifically, this effort requires a shift from considering homology to the micro-dynamics, observable at the individual-level, via which tastes *form*.

Sociologists (e.g., Benzecry, 2011; Friedman, 2012) are beginning to do such work, and it is no accident that they do so by considering tastes acquired relatively *late* in life, rendering the taste formation process available for empirical exploration via interview and ethnography. But these studies draw attention to the potential *limits* of the tool most commonly used to account for taste—habitus—to studying the nature of secondary socialization, or re-habituating. In what follows, I propose that John Dewey’s concept of “experience” can enrich the understanding of taste Bourdieu provides. I then demonstrate the utility of “experience” for studying re-socialization by considering a particularly clear-cut case of class discrepant, later-in-life acquired taste: Honky Tonk Night.

2. From habitus to experience: a Deweyan take on taste

2.1. The analytic limits of habitus

A key difficulty facing researchers using the notion of habitus to explain taste development is that habitus arrives “at the scene” as a conceptual totality; it is a perceptual-evaluative matrix that accounts for taste with reference to itself. So, people like the things they like because these are the things *they are able to like*, and their choices “correspond to the condition of which [habitus] is the product” (Bourdieu, 1984:175). Because habitus is a “structuring structure” and a “structured structure” (170), it, *by definition*, already exists, embodied in actors, as a mirror of social conditions; it captures a state of synchrony with the environment and thus *presumes* “body/world isomorphism” (Engman & Cranford, 2016:30). Hence, it is the result of a [re-]socialization process implied, but not explicitly theorized, by it.

This becomes problematic in light of Bourdieu’s account of how tastes change: beyond primary socialization, moments of disjuncture—when actors’ practices and knowledge fall out of sync with the environment—are critical for transforming habitus. In “crises” (Bourdieu, 1977), habitus integrity is threatened as it “cease[s] to suffice as a basis for action” (Crossley, 2013:151). Resolution in the form of re-habituating comes from the acquisition of new competencies acquired via secondary socialization and embodied in specific habitus. But Bourdieu was primarily interested in accounting for stability; in general, “practices are adjusted to the regularities inherent in a condition” (1984:175). The focus on reproduction makes it difficult to theorize actors’ experiences when habits fail and *there is not yet* “spontaneity without consciousness or will” (1990:56)—the very situations his theory suggests precipitate re-socialization.

The concern I raise with using habitus to explain taste development later-in-life is *not* over whether researchers can account for primary habitus-discrepant tastes in adulthood with specific habitus (they can), but rather whether with it, researchers can grasp re-socialization dynamics. Habitus is not ideal for theorizing what happens between moments of disjuncture and re-habituating because it is, by definition, a structure attuned to the environment, embodied in actors, and already regulating action; it captures an *achieved state* of harmony, rather than the *process* of reorientation leading to it. Using habitus to grasp the dynamics of re-socialization may thus obscure the “enskillment” processes that precede perfect adjustment and render it possible (Lizardo, 2014:360). These processes pertain not only to action—say, for example, a ballet dancer learning to swing dance—but also to appreciation. While Bourdieu’s theoretical tools are powerful for capturing the *completed state* of internalization of external conditions as capacities for aesthetic response, they are less adept at dissecting re-socialization dynamics. This is unfortunate because, as Dewey [1922](2002) suggests, “what happens” in “pre-practical” phases may be important for shaping some tastes: in his words, sometimes “Desire for flowers comes after actual enjoyment of flowers” (22).

2.2. Theorizing the gap with “experience”

Dewey’s ([1922] 2002; [1925] 1958; [1934] 2005) work provides a means of theorizing moments “in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things” ([1934] 2005:12) by providing a vocabulary that makes grasping dynamics of re-habituating easy. His writings on aesthetics and human growth more broadly center on “experience,” defined as a transaction between humans and nature: “things and events belonging to the world, physical and social, are transformed through the human context they enter, while the live creature is changed and developed through its intercourse with things previously external to it” ([1934] 2005:257). Experience cultivates habits. Like Bourdieu’s “dispositions,” these are achieved competencies that manifest as ways of perceiving and evaluating. Thus, tastes too are habits; they are ways of sensing and responding, cultivated in experience, which make particular aesthetic experiences possible (see, e.g., Dewey, [1922] 2002:31). Important for the study of taste formation, Dewey posits a reciprocal relation between habit and reflection, such that their interaction enables actors to overcome resistance, or instances when habits fall out of sync with the environment. Indeed, it is from their interaction that actors develop novel capacities for perception and response. Critically, reflection itself draws on and depends on habits; the latter are the “sole agents of observation, recollection, foresight and judgment” (Dewey,

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