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# On the structure of dispositions. Transposability of and oppositions between aesthetic dispositions

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural sociology has reached conclusions about the properties of dispositions based on analyses of aesthetic principles external to the individual. I challenge this approach, and I reflect on two assumptions regarding the structure of dispositions prevalent in cultural sociology that ensue from this approach: (1) Dispositions are transposable across aesthetic domains (e.g., music, literature, visual arts), and (2) there exists one hegemonic configuration of dispositions which can be derived from the structure of the cultural field. I use data from an audience survey in two art museums in Flanders (Belgium) ( $n = 1448$ ) and analyse aesthetic dispositions towards visual arts and towards music. Applying Relational Class Analysis, I find different dispositional configurations. These configurations are characterised by oppositions between aesthetic principles that do not coincide with the oppositions between aesthetic principles in the cultural field. Moreover, these configurations suggest that dispositions vary to the extent that they are transposable across aesthetic domains.

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*'Studies who write about the ways that culture enters into everyday life necessarily make assumptions about cognitive processes'* (DiMaggio, 1997: 266).

## 1. Internal and external systems of aesthetic principles

Schemes of perception and appreciation are unequally distributed in society. This has been argued by numerous scholars of culture, most notably Bourdieu (e.g., 1984). In his aesthetic theory, Bourdieu explains the social patterning of cultural practices by arguing that the capacity for symbolic appropriation of cultural products is acquired through processes of socialisation. These schemes of perception and appreciation are historical products. For example, the emergence of the aesthetic disposition—a capacity to appreciate form rather than function of cultural products—is related to the autonomization of the field of cultural production in nineteenth-century Europe. This autonomization is central to the development of a cultural field 'capable of formulating and imposing its own ends against external demands' (Bourdieu, 1987: 202; see also: Lizardo, 2008). So, schemes of perception and appreciation have a twofold existence (Bourdieu, 1987): They exist in internal systems of aesthetic principles (i.e., in the form of dispositions embodied by individuals) and they exist in the external system of aesthetic principles (i.e., in the form of governing aesthetic criteria in the cultural field).

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While Bourdieu's account on the historical genesis of schemes of appreciation is vastly illuminating, it ensues from an approach where conclusions on properties of dispositions are deduced from analyses on aggregate cultural practices (Lahire, 2011). Martin (2000) criticises research that draws conclusions on the interconnectedness of cognitive elements by studying interconnectedness at the aggregate level. He argues that this 'associationist' approach assumes 'a property on the *global* level (i.e. association) [ . . . ] to be indicative of an *individual-level* psychic phenomenon' (Martin, 2000: 10) and thus challenges research that assumes that the structure of external culture coincides with the structure of culture internalised by individuals. Martin's critique extends to other individual characteristics, but is especially poignant for the study of cognitions, because the notion that external culture is 'copied' or 'reproduced' within the individual has been challenged (e.g., DiMaggio, 1997; Ignatow, 2004, 2009; Lizardo & Strand, 2010). As powerfully argued by Swidler (2001: 16), 'we cannot study culture by studying the publicly available repertoire of expressive symbols if we do not know when and how these are used'. If external culture can take on different representations on the cognitive level, it is plausible that individuals differ systematically in the configuration of their cognitive resources for aesthetic appreciation. Therefore, the structure of aesthetic principles external to the individual may be a very bad indicator for the way these aesthetic principles are cognitively structured and the way they are deployed in contexts by individuals.

In this article, I challenge the approach of drawing conclusions on aesthetic dispositions by analysing aesthetic principles external to the individual. I reflect on two assumptions regarding the structure of dispositions prevalent in cultural sociology that ensue from this approach: (1) The *assumption of transposability* argues that the way individuals appropriate cultural products transcends aesthetic domains and thus that individuals apply the same mode of appropriating culture in each and every aesthetic domain (e.g., music, literature, visual arts). (2) The *assumption of opposition* argues that the oppositions between different dispositional tools to appreciate art coincide with the oppositions between aesthetic principles in the global cultural field and thus, that a paramount dispositional configuration can be defined. I reflect on both assumptions, and offer an exploratory analysis to further clarify these issues.

## 2. Assumptions on the structure of dispositions

### 2.1. Transposability of dispositions

At the heart of Bourdieu's aesthetic theory lies the concept of the aesthetic disposition that introduces—in line with Kantian aesthetics—the opposition between form and function of cultural products. In contrast to claiming a universal aesthetic, Bourdieu uncovers social inequalities in the aesthetic experience. Individuals possessing the aesthetic disposition approach art from an 'art-for-art's sake' perspective. They are able to perceive art in a truly aesthetic manner, that is, 'as a signifier which signifies nothing other than itself' (Bourdieu, 1968: 596). According to Bourdieu, this approach is only accessible to individuals who have acquired the aesthetic disposition through processes of socialisation and thus possess other schemes than the ones used for everyday perception. The aesthetic disposition disposes individuals in encounters with cultural objects to note '*distinctive stylistic features* by relating it to the ensemble of the world forming the class to which it belongs' (Bourdieu, 1968: 596). Similarly, 'a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (Bourdieu, 1984: 2). This aligns with Zerubavel's concept of thought communities: Different cognitive subcultures within the same society have different styles of mental focusing. This relates to acquiring different intuitive ways to perceive (or *imperceive*) aspects of reality deemed relevant (or irrelevant) by these communities (Zerubavel, 1997).

Dispositions take on a central role in Bourdieu's work. Based on his empirical analyses, Bourdieu argues that cultural practices are coherent (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). That is, individuals who have a legitimate taste in one aesthetic domain (e.g., literature, music) tend to have legitimate tastes in other aesthetic domains. To explain this theoretically, Bourdieu (1984, 1990) relies on dispositions: Individuals have acquired a way of looking at cultural products, and this cultural competence transcends aesthetic domains, thus manifesting itself in relation to different cultural products. As argued by Lizardo and Skiles (2012: 267), the aesthetic disposition entails—next to the capacity to appreciate form rather than function—the capacity to 'constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even "common"' by applying the 'principles of a "pure" aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life' (Bourdieu, 1984: 40). Here we see how deeply entrenched the assumption of transposability is in Bourdieu's aesthetic theory: The schemes of appreciation—embedded in the aesthetic disposition—are considered to shape encounters with and evaluations of every cultural object.

Bourdieu's thinking on dispositions as generative structures of practical action is deeply influenced by the genetic structuralism of Piaget, 1971; Lizardo, 2004. Piaget argues that individuals acquire knowledge by drawing information from their environment, transforming it and cognitively assimilating it in previously stored information. Once information is cognitively available in the shape of abstract representations, it can be transposed/generalised to other situations than the one in which it was acquired.<sup>1</sup> 'We shall apply the term "action schemata" to whatever, in an action, can thus be transposed, generalized, or differentiated from one situation to another [ . . . ]' (Piaget, 1971: 7). Piaget subsequently differentiates types of action schemata and argues that 'other action schemata are much less general, and their completion does not involve such

<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu uses the term 'transposable'; Giddens uses the term 'generalizable' (cf. Sewell, 1992: 17). Because I rely strongly on Bourdieu's work in this article, I consistently use 'transposable' and 'transposability'.

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