



Everyday distinction and omnivorous orientation: An analysis of food choice, attitudinal dispositions and social background



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ABSTRACT

In recent years studies on cultural consumption have experienced a Bourdieusian renaissance. This is indicated by a growing body of research analysing distinctions in different areas of culture, and numerous studies on the homology thesis applying the concepts of distinction, field and capital. Concurrently, however, it has been argued that instead of distinctive tastes, distinction and class status are increasingly manifested by cultural omnivorousness. For a good part studies focussing on distinction in food have analysed eating out and stylization through restaurant preferences, rather than everyday food choices. In this article we investigate everyday food choices from the perspective of distinction and omnivorousness. Our analysis draws on cross-sectional quantitative data collected in 2012 among 15–64-year-old Finns (N = 2601). The article maps out the relationship between food choice frequencies, dispositions and social background with Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA). The results show that the consumption of fruit and vegetables, ready-meals and convenience foods were among the most divisive food choices. The first structuring dimension juxtaposed processed, fatty and sugared foods with unprocessed foods and fresh ingredients. This dimension was associated with healthiness and weight control as dispositions. On the second structuring dimension there were differences in the valuation of taste, pleasure and sociability, and a contrast between moderate and restrictive choices. Particularly the first dimension was associated with educational, occupational, and gender differences. Distinction within everyday food choices was manifested in the use of healthy and unprocessed foods and 'moderate hedonism' in contrast to more restrictive tastes.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of distinction has become central in lifestyle research, including research on food and eating. By Bourdieusian definition, the term refers to differences in tastes and lifestyles that resonate with social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984). The value of cultural preferences is relative and can be defined using binary oppositions such as high/low, pure/impure, distinguished/vulgar and aesthetic/practical (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 (1970): 245; Lamont, Pendergrass, & Pachucki, 2015). Evidently, the former qualities characterize legitimate culture, which is being used by the dominating groups to mark cultural distance and proximity, to monopolize privileges, and to exclude those with lower status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 (1970): 31).

Since the 1970s the supply of foods in supermarkets has multiplied, there has been an abundance of various dietary fashions, and travelling and interest in ethnic cuisines have increased (Epstein, 2002: 217). These developments are reflected in recent research on food and distinction, in which distinctions have been examined in the context of culinary snobbery and prestige foods (Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012: 4–7) as well as authenticity and exoticism in showing off social status through culinary practices and the adoption of new foods (Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Lindblom & Mustonen, 2015; Roose, Van Eijck, & Lievens, 2012).

According to qualitative studies, in the choice of everyday foods distinction is still manifested not only in access to gourmet foods and the choice of restaurants, but on a basic level of choosing particular goods over others while at the same time avoiding the 'wrong' kind of foods in order to maintain and reproduce status. For instance, 'alternative' foods such as organic or local foods (see Paddock, 2015) can operate as markers of good taste and means for displaying status. In a study by Mellor, Blake, and Crane (2010)

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distinction was expressed through purchasing foods from small local specialist stores instead of large supermarkets, in other words by displaying authenticity, but not doing so in an apparently snobbish manner (see also Johnston & Baumann, 2010).

In the theory of distinction, the concept of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic – plays a central role. Various forms of capital can be used as a means to display status. A field is a metaphor for the social space, where distinctions are made through the appropriation of different forms of capital. According to Bourdieu, food choices, too, are associated with social hierarchies through different forms of capital (economic and cultural capital). Bourdieu stressed the importance of meal settings as well as the form of meals, and argued that each class has a specific taste for foods: working-class meals are simple and characterized by heavy, fatty and strong-flavoured foods (such as pasta, potatoes, pork), whereas the light, insufficiently filling and bland meals (such as fish and salads) of the bourgeoisie portray as an opposition to the working class foods (Bourdieu, 1984: 190–199). Hence, one could say that whereas the working class is characterized by indulgence and excess the bourgeoisie is characterized by dietary control (see also Warde, 1997: 94–96).

Although Bourdieu studied everyday food choices (Bourdieu, 1984: 190–199), others have argued that the idea of distinction adapts better to the consumption of prestige items than to everyday choices (Gronow & Warde, 2001). It can also be suggested that in the developed world in the 21st century, the industrial scheme and supermarketization have made a range of inexpensive foods readily available for everyone (Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Rozin, Fischler, Shields, & Masson, 2006), with the potential of making food choices more similar and more democratic across social groups (Kahma, Mäkelä, Niva, & Lund, 2014; Purhonen, Gronow, & Rahkonen, 2010; Van Eijck & Knulst, 2005). Moreover, due to the growing availability of a variety of foods on the market, interest in cultural knowledge about food, or more specifically in 'culinary capital', has grown in research, too (Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012). The concept of culinary capital, taking into account the level of cultural knowledge on food and the ways of preparing meals, could be useful from the viewpoint of everyday distinction. The concept can be considered as a subcategory of the more general Bourdieusian concept of cultural capital, and can be thought to be associated with dispositions towards food choice, such as considering the sociability of eating and the healthiness of food important (cf. Tivadar & Luthar, 2005).

In this study, we start from the hypothesis that by looking at the choice of everyday foods that are widely available for all, we can find patterns of distinction without referring to specific product categories or cuisines. The food choices we study are general categories of food available in supermarkets across the country. We are especially interested in stratification in terms of food choices based on the level of education and occupational status.

2. Distinction, omnivore consumption and social differences in food choices

As a response to growing variety in markets, the omnivore thesis (Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Kern, 1996) has in recent years become a major paradigm in the sociology of taste. It has sometimes been seen as a competitor to the theory of distinction. Omnivorousness can be defined simply as having broad cultural tastes that involve both high status and popular elements, which is distinctive for high-status groups (see Lizardo & Skiles, 2012; Peterson & Kern, 1996). The concept of the omnivore was first introduced in studies of cultural stratification in the mid-1990s, the figure of the cultural omnivore representing a specific kind of outlook on cultural choices among the dominant groups (Peterson & Kern, 1996).

In cultural consumption omnivorousness has been analysed by examining consumption volumes and the composition of choices (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2008).

According to Lizardo and Skiles (2016), it is a general misunderstanding to regard high-status groups as univore snobs with exclusive elitist tastes. They stress that Bourdieu considered late modern societies to be divided by both horizontal boundaries within and vertical boundaries between social classes (cf. Bourdieu, 1990, 1996: 122–134; Wacquant, 2005). Although it is often thought that groups with higher social status reject the most routinized and mass-produced products (see Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2007), in recent research it has been suggested that omnivorousness as regards cultural participation and knowledge is a norm for the educated middle class (Warde et al., 2007). According to Lizardo and Skiles (2016; Bourdieu, 1984: 40), belonging to high-status groups makes it possible to consume any and all objects – including common and less legitimate ones. The difference between the high and the low status groups can therefore be seen as a tendency to select from a larger number of cultural objects versus having a restricted capacity to consume.

However, it has also been suggested that snobbery and omnivorousness as consumption strategies exist side by side. In her qualitative study on omnivores, Ollivier (2008) built a four-class typology of cultural consumers; first, *exclusive highbrows*, whose tastes centre on legitimate or highbrow forms of culture; second, *inclusive or omnivore highbrows*, whose tastes include both high culture and other types of choices; third, *more or less inclusive non-highbrows*, whose tastes may be broad, consisting of mostly middle and lowbrow cultural items; and finally, the only category consisting of non-omnivores, namely *exclusive lowbrows and non-consumers*, whose cultural repertoires are very limited. Some studies suggest that the two 'middle groups' suggested by Ollivier may be gaining more prevalence: Van Eijck and Knulst (2005: 527) found that in the Netherlands the importance of snobbery has diminished in cultural tastes. Based on Finnish evidence, Purhonen et al., (2010: 270–271) suggest that taste democracy is demonstrated in the absence of high-status groups with exclusive cultural tastes.

In the UK, Bennett et al. (2009: 164–167) found that although eating in restaurants had become more common in all social groups, the groups were differentiated by the frequency of eating out, the use of resources, as well as by their restaurant preferences. French restaurants preferred by high-status groups and fish-and-chip restaurants/shops favoured by working class respondents formed the two extremes. The intermediate groups ate at a wide range of restaurants. Earlier, Warde, Martens, and Olsen (1999) found that experience of variety in dining out was not simply a function of the frequency of eating out, but also of familiarity with a range of sites of eating out and connoisseurship of foreign cuisines. In their study on young foodies in the Helsinki area Lindblom and Mustonen (2015) found that French cuisine and in the Finnish context less familiar food cultures, such as Middle Eastern and Japanese cuisines, were among the most valued cuisines among young city-dwellers. In contrast, fast food restaurants serving, for instance, pizza and kebab, carried a negative stigma. Furthermore, Purhonen and Gronow (2014) found a contrast related to social status between modern (light/ethnic) and traditional (heavy/meat) eating patterns. While the first pattern was typical for women and the highly educated, the second pattern was associated with old age and low level of education.

Health behaviour studies typically focus on food choices reflecting current nutrition recommendations and related socioeconomic differences, and hence, are not interested in distinction in a Bourdieusian sense. However, in health behaviour studies, too, differences that have been found between social classes resemble those in studies inspired by Bourdieu. For example, compared to

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