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Categorical ambiguity in cultural fields: The effects of genre fuzziness in popular music

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies find that objects that do not clearly fit within the categories of their field are penalized by relevant audiences. We examine whether this ‘categorical imperative’ is dependent on the symbolic and institutional structure of fields by comparing the effects of genre ambiguity across two popular music subfields. The results show that genre ambiguity has a negative effect within the commercial subfield, but not in the artistic subfield. The effects of genre fuzziness on the reception of popular music are also contingent on the producing organization (major vs. independent) and the types of media outlets that review an album. We find that certain forms of ambiguity can enhance the critical reception of a popular music album. In general, our findings support DiMaggio’s theory regarding variation in the boundary strength of classification systems.

1. Introduction

The classification of social objects represents an important research problem at the intersection of cognitive psychology, organizational sociology and the sociology of culture (DiMaggio, 1987; Hannan, 2010). A central finding in this burgeoning literature is that objects that fail to clearly fit into one category of their relevant social and cultural classification systems suffer a penalty (Zuckerman, 1999). The ambiguity – or “fuzziness” – of such objects impedes their legitimacy, leading them to be misunderstood, ignored or otherwise devalued. Yet as this line of research has developed, primarily among organizational scholars, studies have shown that the consequences of fuzziness are contingent on a variety of factors, such as the identities of individual or organizational producers (Rao et al., 2005, Smith, 2011), characteristics of the audience (Kim & Jensen, 2011; Pontikes, 2012; Zuckerman & Kim, 2003), or features of the classification system itself (Kovács & Hannan, 2010; Ruef & Patterson, 2009). To further explore the conditions under which categorical fuzziness can be a liability, an inconsequential feature, or even an asset, we argue that there is much to gain from bringing organizational scholarship on market categories into more explicit dialog with cultural scholarship on fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993) and artistic classification systems (DiMaggio, 1987).

In this paper, we compare the consequences of categorical ambiguity in two (sub)fields of cultural production to understand how and why the effects of categorical fuzziness can be contingent on institutional and field level differences. Following Bourdieu (1993) and DiMaggio (1987) we argue that, for different reasons, (sub)fields of cultural production can vary in the institutional strength of their classification systems and therefore respond to categorical ambiguity differently. Commercial, large-scale subfields, we argue, tend towards more strongly institutionalized categories, in which categorical ambiguity can be a liability, whereas in more artistic, restricted subfields with more dynamic and emergent classification systems, categorical ambiguity does not lead to devaluation and could be an asset. While the negative effects of fuzziness have indeed mostly been found in mature fields with well-established and

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stable categories, in emerging classification systems that lack well-developed categorical schemas or are in flux due to incessant boundary crossing, fuzziness may not carry the same negative penalties (Ruef & Patterson, 2009).

To allow for the comparison of the effects of categorical ambiguity in fields with more or less strongly institutionalized classification systems we need different measures of categorical ambiguity. Previous studies have tended to measure the fit of objects within institutional classification systems, often used by central, semi-official institutions, which consist of relatively “established” categories. These institutional categories might, however, not capture the pertinent categorical boundaries of less strongly institutionalized, emergent classification systems. We will therefore measure categorical ambiguity using the actual classificatory discourse of evaluators, i.e. the *practical* classifications, rather than rely on institutional, formal classification systems. These practical or ‘folk’ classification systems emerge from habitual and routine practices of myriad field participants, which can also consist of emerging, not-yet-institutionalized categories (Bourdieu, 1990; Hannan, 2010; Rosch, 1978). This measurement of practical classifications enables the measurement of categorical ambiguity in more fluid and dynamic classification systems, necessary for comparing the contingent effects of ambiguity across fields that vary in the strength of their respective classification systems.

We focus on the field of popular music as our empirical setting. We do this for several reasons. First, genres play an important classificatory role in many aspects of the field (Lena & Peterson, 2008). Genre categories facilitate interactions among musicians (Faulkner & Becker, 2009), allow recording firms to identify and delineate markets (Dowd, 2011; Hitters & van de Kamp, 2010; Negus, 1999), enable critics to compare and evaluate cultural objects (Schmutz, 2009; Van Venrooij, 2009), and structure the taste patterns of consumers (Savage, 2006; Van Eijck, 2001). While qualitative studies are suggestive of the “uses of genre” in (subfields of) popular music (Brennan, 2006; Negus, 1999), systematic quantitative analyses of the categorical imperative in popular music are, however, lacking (cf. Rossman, 2012 for an exception). Second, popular music has a dynamic classification system as categories are often mixed, new categories frequently emerge (Lena & Peterson, 2008) and boundaries between categories are relatively fluid (Van Venrooij, 2009). The categorical imperative implies that existing categories are reproduced, yet the dynamic character of classification in popular music suggests the coexistence of an “anti-categorical imperative” in which mechanisms of categorical bounding and bridging are simultaneously at play (Roy & Dowd, 2010). Third, the popular music field allows for comparative analysis of the consequences of categorical ambiguity across subfields. Like many cultural fields, popular music shows a division between two subfields – the large-scale and the small-scale (i.e. “restricted”) fields of production (Bourdieu, 1993; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). These two subfields, generally associated with major and independent record labels, respectively, operate according to divergent institutional logics (Dowd, 2011; Thornton et al., 2012) that imply different responses to categorical ambiguity, thereby providing an excellent comparative case for testing whether the effects of fuzziness depend on contextual differences in classification systems.

For our data, we make use of an online archive of music reviews (i.e., Metacritic) to generate a sample of albums and the genre classifications assigned to them by critics. Our dataset contains information on the commercial and critical success of 248 popular music albums released in 2004 and tracks their genre classification among 57 popular music publications in 961 reviews. Based on the practical classifications employed by critics, we find that categorical ambiguity, or genre fuzziness, hampers commercial success but does not necessarily reduce critical appeal. However, albums reviewed in publications that focus primarily on mainstream (i.e., major label) releases see an additional reduction in commercial success as well as lower ratings from being fuzzy. By contrast, albums reviewed in publications that focus on independent releases receive a boost in their critical appeal for categorical fuzziness. We address the implications of these findings for cultural and organizational scholarship and explore the potential appeal ambiguity lends to cultural objects.

2. Categories and legitimacy

Sociologists have long studied the consequences of classification systems, but the recent surge in attention to the categorical ambiguity of social objects is especially evident in organizational sociology. This interest stems from key issues and concepts associated with ecological and neoinstitutional approaches to organizational scholarship (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hannan & Freeman, 1977). From an ecological perspective, the interest in categories stems from the recurring problem of how to define an organizational population (Hannan, 2010) and a longstanding concern with how organizations position themselves, with regard to niche width, as either generalists or specialists (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). Researchers in this tradition have often relied on commonsense definitions of organizational forms, basing operational definitions on available data sources or using ‘crisp’ coding procedures in categorizing organizations as members or non-members of a category (Carroll & Hannan, 2000).

More recently, organizational ecologists have drawn on cultural sociology and cognitive psychology to consider the meaning-making processes by which audiences define and demarcate organizational identities (Hsu & Hannan, 2005). By reconceptualizing niches as fuzzy sets (Hsu et al., 2009), organizational ecologists acknowledge that categorical boundaries, which appear sharp in theory, are often fuzzy or vague in practice (Hannan, 2010). An important inspiration comes from cognitive psychologist Rosch (1978), who found that people classify objects to the extent to which they are ‘typical’ of a category. ‘Prototypical’ objects are clearly typical of a given category while other objects are considered only partial members of a category. Thus, rather than being straightforward members or nonmembers of a class, objects are often seen as varying in their “grade-of-membership”. The demarcation of a category is, therefore, always drawn at an arbitrary point on a continuum (Zerubavel, 1991). The ambiguity of categories has thus been transformed from a technical to a substantive problem. By studying the effects of more or less clearly defined categories on the growth and mortality of populations (Bogaert et al., 2010; Boone et al., 2012) or how multiple category membership influences the success of organizations (Hsu et al., 2009), the consequences of categorical ambiguity have become part of the organizational sociology agenda. Organizational ecologists have thereby also provided new ways to address the neoinstitutional concept of cultural legitimacy.

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