Bourdieu, Distinction, and Aesthetic Consumption

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The Oxford Handbook of Consumption

Edited by Frederick F. Wherry and Ian Woodward

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter argues that rather than being focused on the higher levels of consumption of aesthetic goods on the part of the educated class, Pierre Bourdieu’s main hypothesis in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* was concerned with how differences in class fractions as defined by total educational endowment (parental and individual) predict the extent to which individuals consume more artistically legitimate versus less artistically legitimate cultural forms. This argument leads naturally to Bourdieu’s understanding of the difference between the consumption styles of the educated (and less educated) classes as built from his understanding of differences in the formative experiences of different classes. The chapter develops the implications of this for contemporary debates regarding a more illuminating explanation of the omnivore taste phenomenon and other forms of aestheticized consumption.

Keywords: Bourdieu, distinction, consumption, education, aesthetic goods

THAT persons of high education are also the most avid consumers of the arts—especially those accorded the elevated status of being classified as “fine arts” or “legitimate culture”—is one of the most robust and consistent findings in the sociology of consumption (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Holbrook, Weiss, and Habich 2002). In most empirical studies, education emerges as one of the best predictors of aesthetic consumption even after controlling for other socio-demographics characteristics including age, income, or occupational status (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Ganzeboom 1982). Recent evidence even suggests that the importance of education in shaping aesthetic consumption patterns has increased in more recent cohorts (van Eijck and Bargeman 2004).

There is no questions that the positive association between higher levels of education and increasing rates of aesthetic consumption has the status as a well-established empirical generalization. The theoretical importance of this empirical finding for the explanatory role of status-based stratification in late modern societies was first emphasized in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984). For Bourdieu, schools—working in tandem with and adding to the primary effects of the specific material conditions provided by the middle-
class household—functioned as the main site where the “aesthetic disposition” necessary for the appreciation and appropriation of legitimate cultural works was first honed and developed. For Bourdieu, aesthetic objects are, per se, not necessarily scarce or rare. Instead, the propensity to consume them is what is actually in relatively low supply (Turner 2001:19).

The “need” to engage in aesthetic consumption by cultivated strata can be thought of as being “the result of education.” This means that “…inequalities with regard to cultural works are [therefore] only one aspect of inequalities in school[ing]” (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991:37). This is the reason most surveys show a close link between “all cultural practices” such as “museum visits, concert-going, reading, etc.” and years of schooling (p. 180) (Bourdieu 1984:1): “the higher one rises in the social hierarchy, the more one’s tastes are shaped by the organization and operation of the educational system, which inculcates the “programme” (syllabus and intellectual schemes) which governs ‘cultivated minds’” (Bourdieu 1984:67).

In this chapter, I argue that even though the work of Bourdieu—especially as laid out in his classic Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste—has served as the primary inspiration in providing a theoretical rationale for the empirical link between education and aesthetic consumption, one of the main propositions that Bourdieu introduced in that work has received little conceptual attention by researchers in the sociology of the consumption. Most analysts interpret the Bourdieu model of the linkage between schooling and aesthetic consumption as a “status-seeking” model (Ganzeboom 1982) in which arts consumption is a “status-pursuit” of the most culturally privileged segments. According to this perspective, showing that there exist direct effects of educational attainment or indirect effects of parental education on arts consumption supports the hypothesis that aesthetic consumption is a marker of social status. In what follows, I show that this was not Bourdieu’s primary empirical expectation.

Instead, I argue that Bourdieu’s model (see 1984:88, Figure 3) is concerned with the relative weight that should be given to the two components of what he referred to as total cultural capital (indicated by parent’s education in relation to the individual’s own education) in the production of aesthetic choices. This model allows us not only to predict that we should observe a relatively higher likelihood by the educated to consume those aesthetic goods that have received legitimate “consecration” on the parts of established cultural authorities but also to delineate the conditions under which individuals will deviate from this pattern. These deviations take the form of the consumption of aesthetic goods that have not yet received this institutional legitimation.

According to the model, the key axis of differentiation among educated strata (producing variation in relative patterns of conformity and deviance) is the “trajectory” individuals have followed into that stratum. These divergent pathways separate the “stayers”—that is, those individuals whose parents are also highly educated—from two types of “movers”: (1) the newcomers, that is, recent entrants into the ranks of the formally educated coming from less educated backgrounds; and (2) those who have “exited” the rank of the for-
mally educated by accumulating less educational qualifications than their parents. These different strata among the educated classes should show different rates of consumption of more traditionally consecrated cultural goods, depending on whether they have experienced direct transmission of cultural capital in the household or have acquired most of their cultural capital in the school system.

Addressing the relative neglect of this last facet of Bourdieu’s model has important implications for recent debates in the sociology of consumption. This is because a proper interpretation of Bourdieu’s model of the connection between education and aesthetic consumption obviates the primary “weakness” that many analysts perceive in Bourdieu’s formulation: its apparent inability to account for the fact that in late modern societies, the highly educated are as likely to incorporate not yet legitimated aesthetic cultural goods (e.g., popular and folk genres) into their consumption repertoire as they are to engage the institutionally consecrated fine arts (Holbrook, Weiss, and Habich 2002; Peterson 1992). We will see that Bourdieu’s model allows one to specify which fractions of the formally (and informally) educated class is more likely to engage in this “deviation” from the expected pattern and which fraction is less likely to do so.

Bourdieu and Other Approaches to Aesthetic Consumption

I begin by noting that Bourdieu did much more than note the commonplace finding that education is the primary predictor of aesthetic consumption. He also proposed some theoretical explanations for this phenomenon. One important aspect of Bourdieu’s theoretical model is that it is not easily classified according to Ganzeboom’s (1982) distinction—recently revived in a rather uncritical manner by Chan and Goldthorpe (2007)—between “status-seeking” versus “information” effects of socio-demographic variables on aesthetic consumption.

In my exposition of Bourdieu’s formulation, I will not try to force Bourdieu’s more nuanced and complex account into this somewhat procrustean framework. I will, however, attempt to point out along the way which facets of Bourdieu’s framework could be thought of as leading to empirical implications similar to those entailed by the “information” or “status-seeking” theories. My aim is to show that Bourdieu’s model of the education/aesthetic consumption link goes beyond the limitation of either a “pure” information or a “pure” status-seeking model. It does this because it not only accounts for the empirical phenomena that these models explain, but it also goes beyond these models in accounting for an entirely new range of phenomena that neither the status-seeking or information model can handle on their own.

The main thing to notice here is that, in contrast to some interpretations of his work, Bourdieu is very clear in noting that social origin (e.g., parental education) is only secondarily related to aesthetic consumption. In terms of path-analysis, what Bourdieu is saying is that he believes that the direct effect of a respondent’s own education is larger...
than the direct effect of their parent’s education, or that a lot of the effect of parent’s education on arts consumption is mediated by the respondent’s education. This is like what is found in most of the research that looks at the joint effect of the respondent’s and parent’s education on arts participation (Ganzeboom 1982). Bourdieu’s “reproduction” hypothesis is not that “parental education should trump respondent’s education” in determining aesthetic consumption.

This last hypothesis is usually thought of as an implication of an “information” model and as disconfirmation of the status-seeking model (Ganzeboom 1982). Thus, finding that those who are “mobile” in terms of education are also avid consumers of the arts is not a disconfirmation of Bourdieu’s model. Bourdieu acknowledges that different paths to the accumulation of scholastic capital will cause the same overall effect: greater levels of participation in the arts. However, “stayers” in the educated class will have a very different approach to the consumption of cultural goods than those who are movers (or newcomers) into the high-education stratum (Bourdieu 1984:13). Bourdieu’s model is therefore as much concerned with ascertaining the difference in the consumption styles between these two different fractions of the educated class as it is with noting the relative aesthetic consumption advantage of the educated in relation to the less educated (Bourdieu 1984:13, 66–70).

It is possible to conclude that Bourdieu subscribed to some tenets of an “information-based” model of arts consumption (see the discussion of codes and competence in Bourdieu 1984:2–4), whereby “the arts lover’s pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code” (1984:3).

As Bourdieu and Darbel (1991:38–39) noted,

Each individual possesses a defined and limited capacity for apprehending the “information” proposed by the work, this capacity being a function of his or her overall knowledge (itself a function of education and background) of the generic code of the type of message under consideration, be it painting whole, or the paintings of a certain period, school or painter.... When the message exceeds the limits of the observer’s apprehension he or she does not grasp the “intention” and loses interest in what he or she sees as a riot of colors without rhyme or reason, a play to useless patches of color. In other words, faced with a message which is too rich, or as information theory says, “overwhelming”, the visitor feels “drowned” and does not linger.

However, Bourdieu’s model is still a status-based model of arts consumption precisely because he emphasizes that the material conditions for the production of this code-linked competence to be unequally distributed across status groups (Holt 1998). While Bourdieu is not a status-seeking theorist (if seeking is interpreted in the traditional Thorstein Veblen manner as implying a conscious attempt at “distinction”), his theory is one that attempts to connect the basic tenets of the status-based model (centered on stratification of
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arts audiences) with the emphasis on the production of schemes of perception and appreciation necessary to decode complex cultural works of the information model.

Bourdieu’s Model of the Education/Aesthetic Consumption Link

What is Bourdieu’s model of the education/aesthetic consumption linkage? Like “cultural information” and “status-seeking theories” of aesthetic consumption (Ganzeboom 1982), Bourdieu’s model departs from the often noted correlation between education and the intensity and extensiveness of consumption of aesthetic goods associated with the fine arts. Before I get into the details of Bourdieu’s theoretical account, I think it is instructive to start with Bourdieu’s own summary of the two main findings regarding arts consumption that he reports in the first chapter of Distinction:

Two basic facts were thus established: on the one hand, the very close relationship linking cultural practices (or the corresponding opinions) to educational capital (measured by qualifications) and, secondarily, to social origin (measured by father’s occupation); and, on the other hand, the fact that, at equivalent levels of educational capital, the weight of social origin in the practice and preference-explaining system increases as one moves away from the most legitimate areas of culture.”

(p. 183)

(13, emphasis added)

Notice that Bourdieu’s report of his main findings regarding aesthetic consumption in Distinction are incongruous with subsequent interpretations of his work. First, Bourdieu thinks there are two primary findings, not just the one that is usually emphasized by most researchers in the sociology of consumption (e.g., that there are education-related differences in cultural competence that translate into education-related differences in engagement in the arts). In a certain sense, and despite the centrality of this proposition in empirical studies of artistic consumption, showing that aesthetic consumption increases with education is actually somewhat secondary to the overall theoretical project of Distinction. The reason for this is that this first “basic fact” that Bourdieu sees as having been established in his study is a replication of what Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) had already found in their earlier study of museums, and what Bourdieu had already argued and provided empirical evidence for in his previous study on photography.

Relative Weight of Domestic versus Scholastic Capital

The second basic fact that Bourdieu sees as having been established by his investigation is related to how “the weight of social origin in the practice and preference-explaining system increases as one moves away from the most legitimate areas of culture.” I argue
that this, and not the positive correlation between educational capital and aesthetic consumption, is the key to understanding overall Bourdieu’s theoretical model and its relevance for present work in consumption studies. It is also a proposition that has received virtually no theoretical or empirical attention by researchers in the sociology of consumption to date, despite its obvious relevance to key debates in the field especially regarding the question of “omnivore” consumption (Lizardo and Skiles 2012).

Notice in particular that this second proposition is not about the “effect” of or the correlation between the different components of what Bourdieu referred to as (total) educational capital on the expected levels of aesthetic consumption but of the relative weight of the two different components of this overall scholastic capital (respondent’s and parent’s education) in producing different patterns of cultural choice.

(p. 184) Maybe one reason this key proposition has been ignored so far is that its main thrust goes against the grain of the usual interpretations of Bourdieu’s theory of taste prevalent in the literature. Contrary to suggesting that those raised in high cultural capital backgrounds will have more “conservative” taste for the most legitimate culture (Bennett et al. 2009; van Eijck 1999), Bourdieu instead notes that the weight of parent’s education (i.e., social background) will increase for predicting the consumption of those cultural goods that are more removed from traditional institutional sources of consecration (e.g., less legitimate forms). The weight of respondent’s own formal education in contrast should be highest for those symbolic goods that have received more institutional legitimation.

Following this line of reasoning, Bourdieu suggests that “[t]he differences linked to social origin tend to increase as one moves away from the academic curriculum.” What is the direction of these differences? As Bourdieu notes, “[t]hose who have acquired the bulk of their cultural capital in and for school have more ‘classical’, safer cultural investments than those who have received a large cultural inheritance” (1984:65). Thus, those whose overall educational endowment is primarily due to formal educational instruction (e.g., children of low-education parents who achieve high educational status) are more likely to invest in the most academically consecrated forms of aesthetic consumption, such as the most explicitly legitimated arts (e.g., painting, classical music, canonical literature).

Conversely, those whose total educational endowment either combines explicit formal instruction with exposure to the educated habitus at home (educated children of educated parents) or for whom the bulk of their educational capital is composed of this parental inheritance (relatively less-educated children of educated parents) are expected to be less likely to make these types of “safe” cultural investment and to extend their aesthetic disposition toward relatively less legitimate and less consecrated cultural pursuits (i.e., relatively “riskier” cultural investments). Bourdieu thus concludes by arguing that

While variations in educational capital are always very closely related to variations in competence, even in areas, like cinema or jazz, which are neither taught nor directly assessed by the educational system, the fact remains that, at equivalent levels of educational capital, differences in social origin (whose effects are al-
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ready expressed in differences in educational capital) are associated with important differences in competence. These differences become all the more striking . . . firstly, then one appeals less to a strict, and strictly assessable competence and more to a sort of familiarity with culture; and secondly, as one moves from the most “scholastic” and “classical” areas of culture to less legitimate and more “outlandish” areas of the “extra-curricular” culture, which is not taught in schools but is valued in the academic market and can often yield high symbolic profit.

(1984:63, emphasis added)

Given this, Bourdieu’s conception of the link between education and aesthetic consumption is not a “more-more” model (e.g., the more educational capital, the more aesthetic consumption) and not only a “who-what” model that ignores the “how” (e.g., the educated are more likely to select prestigious aesthetic goods) of consumption, although it incorporates aspects of both types of formulation.

Bourdieu accepts the basic postulate of the more-more model but also develops a more nuanced understanding of the how of consumption precisely by focusing on the interplay between the two components of the total scholastic endowment of individuals: that which comes from having been raised by educated parents (domestic capital) and that which comes from having succeeded in the formal educational system (scholastic capital). For Bourdieu, looking at the differences in consumption patterns for individuals in the different “quadrants” of the space (1984:88, Figure 3) produced by a cross-classification of these two dimensions of educational capital allows the analyst to indirectly get at the “how” of consumption:

Hidden behind the statistical relationships between educational capital and social origin and this or that type of knowledge or way of applying it, there are relationships between groups maintaining different, and even antagonistic relationships to culture depending on the conditions in which they acquired their cultural capital and the markets in which they can derive most profit from it.

(Bourdieu 1984:12)

In sum, Bourdieu’s account of the linkage between education and cultural practice is more nuanced than has so far been acknowledged. Besides positing the now well-established association between increasing educational attainment and increasing levels of aesthetic consumption (an expectation shared by information and status-seeking models), Bourdieu also connects different pathways via which the educated come to be educated to the cultural investments they make and to the relative intensity they will engage cultural products that have achieved legitimation and those that have yet to receive full legitimation. This hypothesis thus concerns the weight of parental education compared to respondent’s own education in inducing attraction to aesthetically defined cultural works.

Thus, the key empirical implication of Bourdieu’s model can be summarized:
Proposition 1: The weight of the parent’s (respondent’s) education in predicting aesthetic consumption is larger for less (more) legitimate cultural forms.

This empirical expectation of Bourdieu’s model is critical, since it helps us gain theoretical leverage on empirically ascertainable differences in the probability of the educated to “extend” their aesthetic disposition to objects not yet considered by those in positions of cultural authority to be “legitimate art.” This is important, since it is the observation that some segments of the educated class—which Richard Peterson (1992) refers to as “omnivores”—do routinely consume cultural forms not yet thought of as legitimate art that has been taken as a “refutation” of or a key limitation of Bourdieu’s model (Lizardo and Skiles 2015). If Bourdieu’s theoretical formulation is correct, however, this propensity is not a surprise but in fact a direct inference from the model proposed in Distinction (Holt 1998). Bourdieu’s analysis allows us to specify which segments of the educated (p. 186) class will be more likely to engage in this “omnivorous” consumption. I will revisit this theme in the last section.

The Aesthetic Disposition as a (More or Less) Transposable Scheme

What is the theoretical justification for Bourdieu’s expectation that educational capital gained from the family of origin would have a greater share of explanatory power in predicting the consumption of cultural goods that have been accorded less legitimation? I believe this is where the piecemeal interpretation of Bourdieu’s framework has done the most to prevent a proper understanding of the model laid out in Distinction. Thus, clarifying the theoretical justification for this hypothesis also requires laying bare the socio-cognitive roots of Bourdieu’s model of aesthetic appreciation.

According to Bourdieu, aesthetic experiences are practical and emotive (Lizardo 2014); they are not analytical or theoretical in the “scholastic” sense suggested by traditional aesthetic theory (with the work of philosopher John Dewey [1934] and the pragmatists being a key exception). The perception of cultural works can best be thought of as “a practical execution of quasi-corporeal schemata that operate beneath the level of the concept” (Bourdieu 1992:160). It is precisely because the appreciation of cultural works require the deployment of schemes of perception and appreciation, whose conditions of acquisition are marked by class and status-group differences, that we are able to observe “direct” effects of education on aesthetic consumption and the “net-effects” of parental background after controlling for education (Mohr and DiMaggio 1995).

However, for Bourdieu, the extension of this scheme toward cultural works that have yet to gain collective definition as “fine arts” require what he refers to as a transposition of this set of schemes to new objects (Bourdieu 1984:29). This transposition explains why it is that we can observe a “more-more” effect of education on arts consumption that cannot be explained by simple “status-seeking” theories. This is because these theories presume that only those forms of aesthetic consumption publicly defined as prestigious, such as
opera and classical music performances, but not solitary reading, will be more likely to be engaged in by the educated (Ganzeboom 1982). However, the evidence shows that the educated are more likely to engage in all forms of cultural practice, whether or not publicly defined as prestigious, and regardless of how “conspicuous” their consumption is. That aesthetic competence appears to be a fairly generalized capacity also explains why there is little segmentation in arts consumption across the different fine art domains (e.g., lovers of the plastic arts also engage with literature and music, etc.) as was initially noted by DiMaggio and Useem (1978).

For Bourdieu, both effects appear because aesthetic consumption is made possible by a specific form of socio-cognitive competence. This set of competences (which he referred to as “the aesthetic disposition”) is produced and enhanced through

(p. 187)

the unintentional learning made possible by a disposition gained through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture. This transposable disposition, armed with a set of perceptual and evaluative schemes available for general application, inclines its owner towards other cultural experiences and enables him to perceive, classify and memorize them differently.

(1984:28, italics added)

For Bourdieu, this implies that earlier familiarity with this scheme facilitates a more thorough mastery of it (Lizardo and Skiles 2012). This more supple command in its turn allows for a more generalized capacity to transpose this scheme to “non-standard” art objects. Thus, it is precisely because of the “head start” that is acquired by those who are raised by educated parents we should find that parental background matters more for explaining the effects of education for the consumption of cultural goods not yet fully legitimated. This is also the reason Bourdieu uses the same framework to explain why parental education should be more important in explaining the production of art compared to the consumption of art:

[D]ifference[s] linked to social origin are no doubt most marked in personal production of visual art or the playing of a musical instrument, aptitudes, which both in their acquisition and in their performance, presuppose . . . dispositions associated with long establishment in the world of art.... At equal educational levels they vary strongly by social origin.

(1984:75, italics added)

This is an important prediction of the model since it is an indirect test of Bourdieu’s proposition that the parental component of total educational capital matters more for those competences that are acquired in the family environment. Thus, if we find the same asymmetry in the weight of the parental component when looking at the difference between arts consumption and arts production, this would bolster our confidence in the suggestion that the same mechanism that explains this variation in the relative weight of the
effect of parental education also accounts for the same effect in the case of the consump-
tion of genres less likely to be classified as “art” versus those that are routinely classified
as such. This is because the ability to extend the aesthetic disposition to less legitimate
genres—Bourdieu’s schema transposition mechanism—is analogous to the embodied
skills necessary for the production of art (since both are more likely to be gained in the
family environment).

If it is the case that early immersion in a high cultural capital environment is the reason
parental cultural capital matters more in explaining the consumption of less legitimate
cultural forms, then we should find that a similar effect emerges when predicting aesthet-
ic production in relation to consumption. The reason for this is that the production of cul-
tural works is assumed to be more likely to rely on embodied schemes that cannot be eas-
ily acquired in an exclusive scholastic environment but that require at least some expo-
sure to the informal pedagogy of the middle-class home:

Proposition 2:  *The weight of the parent’s education in relation to the
respondent’s education is larger in predicting artistic performance compared to
predicting arts consumption or the direct acquisition of art objects.*

(p. 188) **Bourdieu’s Model of Aesthetic Consumption and “Omnivorousness”**

In this chapter, I have argued that the scholarly appropriation of Bourdieu’s theory of the
connection between education and aesthetic consumption has only focused on one half of
his model (the “more-more” part). While analysts have been keen to establish the strong
connection that exists between increasing levels of objectified cultural capital and in-
creasing levels of aesthetic consumption, they have failed to address the other—and ar-
guably more important and inherently counter-intuitive—aspect of Bourdieu’s account:
his contention that the relative weight of each of the two different components of an
individual’s total cultural capital endowment (the achieved and the inherited) would re-
sult in systematically different patterns of aesthetic choices. Contemporary research in
the sociology of consumption has also ignored his prediction that certain forms of cultural
activity (e.g., the direct production of cultural works) are relatively likely to be impacted
by parental cultural inheritance than other forms (e.g., indirect consumption of artistic
works or direct appropriation through purchase).

The relative neglect of Bourdieu’s thesis is an important oversight, since Bourdieu’s pri-
mary argument is that members of the educated class do not form a monolithic block but
are instead composed of competing fractions (1984:87–89). For Bourdieu, educated strata
are best conceptualized as being partitioned between “stayers” and “movers.” That is,
those who are educated and come from educated backgrounds are likely to engage in dif-
f erent patterns of cultural choice compared to those who are newly arrived to the educat-
ed stratum (Coulangeon 2015). In a similar way, members of less-educated strata are
composed of two antithetical populations: the uneducated that come from uneducated backgrounds (“stayers” in the low education stratum) and the non-negligible minority of the “uneducated” who enjoy a substantial “cultural inheritance” because their parents are educated (“movers” into low-education strata). For Bourdieu, these four different groups are expected to have very different orientations to the consumption of legitimate cultural works and cultural works that have yet to achieve cultural legitimacy (1984:88).

Bourdieu’s model of the relative increase in importance of parental education in the making “risky” cultural choices in comparison with making “safer” choices has important implications in bringing some theoretical substance to the debate surrounding the empirical generalization of “omnivorous” patterns of cultural taste among educated elites (Peterson 2005).

If Bourdieu is correct, omnivorousness among the most educated stratum is not produced because the less educated bring with them a taste for less legitimate cultural goods into the educated class, as is suggested by standard “cultural socialization” models. For instance van Eijck (1999:313) has previously argued that “socially mobile individuals do display a somewhat more varied pattern of cultural consumption than those who have not experienced mobility.” For van Eijck, social mobility increases the (p. 189) cultural heterogeneity of elite strata because having experienced early socialization into low-status culture, “upwardly mobile individuals carry popular culture upwards along the social ladder” (1999:326). Yet, if the Bourdieuan account is correct, we should expect to observe a very different pattern of cultural choices among mobile and non-mobile members of different educational groups.

In contrast to the “cultural socialization” thesis, for Bourdieu (1984:88), “movers” into the educated stratum from lower educated groups should be more likely to display a more “conservative” predilection for traditionally legitimated culture and not the “omnivorous” mixing of elite and non-elite forms. It is rather those who have gained scholastic capital through direct exposure in the family environment who should be more likely to “transpose” their aesthetic disposition toward cultural goods that have yet to gain full artistic legitimacy (because they have a better established command of this practical scheme).

This means that if we were to divide the population into four groups—(1) stayers in the high education stratum, (2) movers from the high education stratum to the less educated stratum, (3) movers into the high education stratum from the low education stratum, and (4) stayers in the low education stratum—we should find that it is those who have had the experience of having been raised by high-education parents that should be the most “omnivorous.” Those who have acquired the bulk of their total educational capital through the formal educational system (e.g., sons and daughters of low-education parents who have achieved high levels of education), should be more omnivorous than those who have little educational capital, but they should be less omnivorous than groups who may have less formal education but were raised by high-education parents: these are the groups for whom the bulk of their total educational capital comes from the family environment and not the formal educational system.
In this respect, the argument presented here has important implications for our understanding of the phenomenon of cultural omnivorousness by the educated elite. Contrary to the unqualified conclusions drawn from the zero-order correlation between education and cultural omnivorousness (or multivariate models in which parental education is omitted from the specification), the relative likelihood of the “educated” to consume non-elite cultural forms is restricted to those respondents who have “inherited” cultural capital directly by virtue of having been raised by high-education parents.

In the same way, cultural omnivorousness among the less-educated strata appears to be restricted to that minority of respondents that experiences intergenerational downward mobility from relatively high-education to less-educated strata. The “type” of omnivorousness displayed by these two groups is qualitatively different, however. While “stayers” in high-education strata are likely to command both legitimate and yet to be legitimated cultural forms, “déclassé” movers into low-education strata are more likely to display a “popular culture” omnivorousness that attempts to “recuperate” low-status cultures by endowing them with the trappings of artistically legitimate forms. This would be consistent with Bourdieu’s claim that “[t]hose who have acquired the bulk of their cultural capital in and for school have more ‘classical’, safer cultural investments than [those who have received a large cultural inheritance],” than those “déclassé” respondents who have experienced downward educational mobility. This last group (along with those stayers in the high educational stratum) should be more likely to make riskier cultural investments, by, for instance, being drawn to less-legitimate cultural forms.

Instead of leading to “cultural heterogeneity” for those who experience “upward” mobility, scholastic capital gained in the more formal environment provided by institutions of higher education seems to partially move individuals away from investments in non-elite cultural forms and toward investment in those aesthetic pursuits that have already acquired substantial levels of artistic legitimacy. Thus, omnivorousness does not appear to be only a product of “education” but is better thought of as being an effect of having been raised by an educated parent. Because there is a strong intergenerational transmission of educational status (Roksa and Potter 2011), it is not surprising that the empirical association between schooling and omnivore taste has been attributed to a “direct” effect of formal instruction, when it is best thought of as an “indirect” effect of parental education. Taste for legitimate cultural goods appears to be a direct effect of experience in the formal educational system.

**Broader Implications for Studies of Cultural Consumption**

In terms of broader theoretical implications, the results reported in this essay show that Bourdieu’s socio-cognitive theory of aesthetic engagement rests on theoretical foundations distinct from traditional understandings of the process of cultural socialization (e.g., Mohr and DiMaggio 1995; van Eijck 1999) and from standard “status-seeking” models of cultural engagement. The cultural socialization model cannot accommodate what is for
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Bourdieu the key mechanism that accounts for different patterns of cultural choice among movers and stayers into different elite and non-elite strata: the notion that the extension of the “taste-repertoire” of educated individuals can only occur through a process of schematic transposition. This transposition is more likely to be accomplished by those individuals who are directly exposed to the educated habitus in the family environment. This is why the parental education component carries more weight in predicting aesthetic consumption of non-elite genres, and why individuals who have been raised by high-education parents appear to be more omnivorous than individuals with higher levels of education but who have been raised by low-education parents.

As I have argued, Bourdieu (1984) offers at least two heretofore ignored suggestions as to the socio-cognitive origins of the propensity to extend the original aestheticizing scheme developed in the high cultural capital domestic environment from its original “source domain” in the legitimate arts to new “target domains” in the less legitimate (p. 191) (e.g., popular and folk) arts. Bourdieu’s first model of how less-legitimate forms of art come to be incorporated into the artistic schema is an accumulated cultural capital model in which he suggests that the timing and length of exposure to a culturally privileged environment increases the individual’s habitualized familiarity with the aestheticizing scheme and thus the likelihood that this disposition will be extended to less-legitimate symbolic goods.

Bourdieu thus hypothesizes that those who are exposed to this disposition early in life (e.g., by being raised by high-education parents) will be more likely to exhibit a greater likelihood of extending the aestheticizing scheme toward symbolic goods not traditionally defined as art than those who gain the disposition late—for example, by being exposed to it mainly in the school system but not at home (1984:65). This is why he reports—as noted previously—that one of the two main findings in the study is precisely that “the weight of social origin in the practice and preference-explaining system increases as one moves away from the most legitimate areas of culture” (1984:13).

Second, Bourdieu proposes that an extension of the aesthetic disposition to less legitimate culture can be explained by a conflict model between two modes of aesthetic appropriation. He suggests that the inability to translate embodied schemes of perception and appreciation for traditional cultural works into the direct acquisition of such works (a situation to which those class fractions whose endowment of cultural capital exceeds their endowment of economic capital are chronically exposed) serves as a “socio-logical” impetus to extend this embodied scheme to objects that have yet to be defined as “artistic” by the relevant cultural authorities in the more legitimate art worlds, and which thus do not require extensive economic capital to appropriate. This is why he notes that, in “. . . the absence of the conditions of material possession, the pursuit of exclusiveness has to be content with developing a unique mode of appropriation” (1984:282).

What are the characteristics of this unique mode of appropriation? It consists precisely of the aforementioned extension of the aesthetic scheme toward non-standard art objects that is the basis of omnivore tastes. This involves “[l]iking the same things differently, [or]
liking different things, less obviously marked out for admiration” (1984). The reason for this is that this last form of (indirect or embodied) appropriation highlights the how of aesthetic consumption over the presumed qualities of the object that is appropriated (Holt 1998). This allows those who cannot afford to acquire traditionally defined aesthetic objects directly to derive “profit” from their specific form of embodied expertise. This implies at least two empirically verifiable hypotheses: (1) cultural omnivorousness should be most likely observed among those class fractions that are the most “cultured” in the traditional sense but who are least able to translate this aesthetic disposition into the direct acquisition of institutionally consecrated aesthetic objects; and (2) compared with these cultural specialists, we should be less likely to observe such recuperation of non-traditional aesthetic goods among class fractions who can directly translate their cultural expertise into direct acquisitions of institutionally defined artworks.

Aestheticism in Everyday Consumption Choices

It is argued that the framework outlined previously can help us gain a better foothold on the phenomenon of cultural omnivorousness by allowing us to characterize it in a more explicit and sharper way. It can do this by helping us to differentiate it from other cognate phenomena that are generated by similar underlying mechanisms. In this respect, it is important to note that there are in fact two empirical phenomena that Bourdieu sees as being generated by the same socio-cognitive mechanism. First, those with a greater command of the aesthetic disposition have a higher likelihood of extending toward aesthetic objects and performances produced in not yet legitimized fields of production (e.g., music produced in “urban” culture worlds) the same modes of appreciation and classification that were initially developed with the aesthetic goods produced in traditionally “consecrated” types of culture production fields in mind. This has received the bulk of the attention in the sociological literature on taste and arts consumption under the heading of “omnivorousness.”

Second, the aestheticizing scheme can be extended to everyday consumption choices in clothing, interior decoration, and the purchase of household items (Bourdieu 1984). In contrast to omnivorousness, this last phenomenon has been regularly studied in marketing and consumption studies (Szmigin 2006), but seldom linked to class-based socialization and the study of the consumption of aesthetic goods and experiences typical of sociological studies (Bennett et al. 2009; Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal 2008).

One reason for this is that sociology of consumption has been less likely to pay attention to the consumption of material culture rather than the consumption of aesthetic goods, a focus that is more prevalent in the anthropology of consumption and consumer culture studies (Hurdley 2006; e.g., Woodward 2007; Woodward and Greasley 2017). This research suggests that the deployment of aesthetic considerations during everyday consumption choices—for example, judging consumer goods, appliances, furniture, domestic interiors, and so forth to be more appealing when they satisfy both aesthetic and func-
tional criteria—is a pervasive but so far understudied phenomenon (Charters 2006). This research also suggests that, as Bourdieu (1984) would predict, early experience with the arts (e.g., visiting museums with parents, playing a musical instrument) increases the chances that, as adults, individuals will rank aesthetic criteria high on their list of considerations when engaging in material consumption (Venkatesh and Meamber 2008). The framework outlined here suggests new ways in which aesthetic and material goods consumption can be theoretically linked.

References


Bourdieu, Distinction, and Aesthetic Consumption


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