

# Reconceptualizing and theorizing ‘omnivorousness’: Genetic and Relational Mechanisms

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Last Revised: August 3, 2012

Words: 11,018

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## Abstract

Scores of sociological studies have provided evidence for the association between broad cultural taste, or omnivorousness, and various status characteristics, such as education, occupation, and age. Nevertheless, the literature lacks a consistent theoretical foundation with which to understand and organize these empirical findings. In this paper, we offer such a framework, suggesting that a mechanism-based approach is helpful for the examination of the origins of the omnivore-univore taste pattern as well as its class-based distribution. We re-ground the discussion of this phenomenon in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), conceptualizing omnivorous taste as a transposable form of the aesthetic disposition available most readily to individuals who convert early aesthetic training into high cultural capital occupational trajectories. After outlining the *genetic* mechanisms that link the aesthetic disposition to early socialization trajectories, we identify two *relational* mechanisms that modulate its manifestation (either enhancing or inhibiting it) after early socialization.

**Keywords:** Omnivore, Bourdieu, Taste, Status, Mechanisms, Disposition, Consumption, Aesthetics.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The proposition that cultural choices are patterned by social position is one of the most fundamental insights of the sociology of taste (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1987; Gans 1999; Peterson 1992). Yet, the questions of exactly how structural location shapes lay aesthetic choices, and which specific axes of social differentiation are most relevant to explaining different patterns of taste continue to be highly debated issues (Bihagen and Katz-Gerro 2000; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007a; Katz-Gerro 2002; Peterson 2005; Tomlinson 2003; van Eijck 2001).

The bulk of the contemporary debate is taking place under a profound alteration of our understanding of the relationship between social position and aesthetic dispositions brought about by Richard Peterson's work on the subject of cultural "omnivorousness" (Peterson 1992, 1997, 2005; Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992). The basic empirical observation is that the stratification of tastes in modern societies resembles an inverted pyramid separating high status classes with broad tastes cutting across the fine and popular arts divides at the top from low status classes with narrow tastes at the bottom (Peterson 1992). This model of the cultural stratification system of late modern societies flies in the face of the received picture bequeathed to us by mass culture theory (e.g. Macdonald 1953; Shils 1998[1961]) which rested on the assumption of a clear-cut differentiation in the aesthetic worth (and therefore the expected audiences) of the fine and the popular arts. From this perspective, the divide between "high" and "mass" culture would neatly mirror the traditional status differences of their respective constituencies (DiMaggio 1987). A flurry of recent research has instead repeatedly confirmed the predominance of the omnivore-univore over the elite-to-mass pattern in a wide variety of contemporary

national contexts.<sup>2</sup>

The now commonplace acknowledgement of the empirical adequacy of the omnivore-univore distinction has resulted in a rapidly evolving literature connecting omnivorousness to various socio-demographic characteristics, lifestyle choices and even values and attitudes. In spite of the continued vibrancy of this line of research, very few theoretical efforts have been up to the task of integrating these emergent series of empirical phenomena into a more encompassing conceptual framework. In this paper, we contribute to contemporary work in the sociology of culture and stratification and the sociology of taste by developing a theoretical framework that we believe is useful in understanding the origins and sources of the omnivore-univore taste pattern as well as its current distribution in the class structure of post-industrial societies.

### **1.1 Theorizing Omnivorousness a Mechanisms-Based Approach**

The bulk of the quantitative literature on omnivorousness reveals an overly-empirical (even empiricist) concern with “operationalization” at the expense of the specification of the nature of the phenomenon. Qualitative studies of omnivorousness (see e.g. Carrabine and Longhurst 1999; Warde et al 2008; Ollivier 2008; Bellavance 2008; Atkinson 2011; Rimmer 2011) that have generated “causal-process observations” (Brady et al 2010:24) provide invaluable insights, but are limited by a crass exaggeration of the capacity of qualitative data to generate conceptual insight, and the invidious juxtaposition of what some analysts perceive to be the advantages of qualitative methodologies against the presumed limitations of

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<sup>2</sup> See Peterson (2005) and Katz-Gerro (2004) for recent reviews.

quantitative strategies.<sup>3</sup> In addition, this literature tends to use qualitative data in a way that is no less prone to empiricism than their quantitative counterparts are. Cases are seldom conceived as causal process observations useful for theorizing generative mechanisms; instead, they are seen mainly as a means to generate inductive typologies.<sup>4</sup> The main aim is to “complexify” the phenomenon by, for instance, uncovering “different forms” of omnivorousness that go beyond what can be established with survey-based evidence.

To bring order to the findings of empirically-driven quantitative omnivorousness research, and to avoid the problem of over complexifying omnivorousness, which can confuse a superficial empirical manifestation of the phenomenon for the generative mechanism that generates that manifestation in the first place, we propose a mechanisms-based approach (Gross 2009; Machamer et al 2000; Hedstrom and Ylikoski 2010; Morgan and Winship 2007). This approach is particularly well suited for uncovering the *generative mechanisms* that lie behind empirically observed regularities (e.g. the oft-noted association between education and omnivorousness). This is especially the case if we desire to speak of more robust forms of social causation and more enlightening ways in which the phenomenon of omnivorousness is systematically generated by recurrent social processes (Atkinson 2011: 171). In our view, the theorizing of mechanisms should be kept separate from empirical investigation, whether qualitative or survey based, for the simple reason that an underlying mechanism may be present as a *structural potential* even if it is not empirically manifested; furthermore the same mechanism may result in distinct empirical manifestations (and vice versa). In this regard, empirically-based *descriptive* typologies (whether based on qualitative or quantitative data) *select on the*

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<sup>3</sup> This is most evident in Atkinson (2011), Rimmer (2011) and Bellavance (2008).

*manifestation* of mechanism, which makes their analytic utility suspect.<sup>5</sup> Empirical evidence can only be useful for mechanistic inference if this “selection” is properly handled. That is, the analyst should understand that *given* a specific manifestation of an underlying mechanism then empirical data can (after the fact) shed light on the processes that produce this one particular manifestation as opposed to another. The data must not be confused with the phenomenon (Bogen and Woodward 1988), and the phenomenon must be kept distinct from the mechanism that generates it (Machamer et al 2000).

Accordingly, we believe that empirical data provide a window to *distinct* manifestations of the omnivorousness phenomenon, but are insufficient for properly theorizing the *underlying* mechanisms that generate systematic empirical regularities. Survey-based evidence allows for the establishment of systematic associations between socio-demographic markers and patterns, establishing a phenomenon and revealing that a mechanism is surely operative, although it cannot cast light on the specifics of its operation. Qualitative data provide access to both personal and institutionalized discourse through which persons make sense of their experience and to causal process observations embedded in individual life histories (Atkinson 2011; Bellavance 2008), illuminating the correlational patterns established by survey-based research and for establishing the operation of a given mechanism within a given case. Qualitative evidence must be handled with care, however, since it is unlikely that we can infer anything about the unobserved mechanisms that generate a phenomenon from an analysis of interview-based transcripts alone. The proper use of empirical

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<sup>4</sup> This is most evident in Ollivier (2008), Warde et al (2007) and Bellavance (2008). Atkinson (2011) is a notable exception in this regard.

<sup>5</sup> This applies to Peterson’s (2005) proposed four-fold qualitative typology cross-tabulating a “brow-level” dichotomy against a “range” dichotomy, or quantitative typologies based on

evidence, when the aim is to use it to theorize about the structure of underlying mechanisms, requires the recognition that these are explicit manifestations of underlying propensities, but the latter are not *reducible* to these manifestations.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, we first reconceptualize the notion of omnivorousness to make it amenable to a form of mechanisms-based characterization consistent with a practice-based approach that emphasizes the *habitual* nature of action (Bourdieu 1990; Joas 1996; Gross 2009; Wood and Neal 2007). This is an important preliminary step, since more naïve conceptualizations of the omnivore phenomenon have the risk of collapsing into unsatisfactory versions of action theory (e.g. omnivorousness as a “conscious” strategy of advancement in the mold of rational choice), which trivialize its more general implications and obfuscate our ability to ascertain its sociological correlates and origins. Second, we outline two generative relational mechanisms that in our view help to activate our proposed mechanism, taking omnivorousness from a potential tendency to an actualized, observable phenomenon. These two relational-processes shed light on most of the stylized correlational findings in the literature and are consistent with our characterization of omnivorousness as a habitual-dispositional phenomenon. Our treatment also suggests novel (and in some cases counter-intuitive) empirical implications for further research on the subject.

## 2 RE-SPECIFYING THE OMNIVOROUSNESS PHENOMENON

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cluster and factor analysis (e.g. Warde et al 2009). This is different from the use of *explanatory* typologies, which perforce rely on pre-existing theory (Elman 2006).

<sup>6</sup> The more advantageous strategies, in our view, are those that use quantitative data for preliminary classification of individual cases, and subsequently pursue more in-depth qualitative exploration of selected cases (e.g. Warde et al 2008; Ollivier 2008). This approach is best able to make use of the qualitative data to uncover discursive and cognitive mechanisms that are left obscure by a survey-only approach.

## 2.1 Omnivorousness as a Disposition

We suggest that the best way to conceptualize this phenomenon is as a *disposition*. At the most general level, this entails five interrelated claims. First, we suggest that the bases of the omnivorousness phenomenon are *habitual* and tied to routine *practice*. Like all dispositions, omnivorousness has a particular “ontogenetic” history tied to early development, acquisition and refinement (Bourdieu 1990). Second, this implies viewing omnivorousness as rooted in a set of *abilities* or *capacities* generated by a specific enculturation history (Bourdieu 1984, 1990). Thinking of omnivorousness as a capacity or an ability is already implicit in the literature. Our characterization just makes it explicit. Thus, Peterson and Simkus are clear in characterizing omnivorousness as “the *ability* to appreciate the distinctive aesthetic of a wide range of cultural forms, including not only the fine arts but a range of popular and folk expressions as well” (Peterson and Simkus 1992: 260, italics ours). Third, this implies that omnivorousness is based *primarily* on the (early) acquisition of *practical schemes* of perception, appreciation and action, and *secondarily* on the application of conscious rules or the deployment of explicit discourses (Bourdieu 1990; Lizardo and Strand 2010; Atkinson 2011). Fourth, omnivorousness, as a practical scheme, can be *transposed* across domains (Bourdieu 1990; Sewell 1992), and within a particular aesthetic domain, it can be transposed across genres and sub-genres. In this respect, omnivorousness as a disposition can be (at least partially) decoupled from the contents on which the disposition operates. Finally, omnivorousness, as a disposition, will generally take the form of a *skill* (Swidler 2001), subject to predictable dynamics of accumulation and the development of expertise which will generate systematic differences across persons in terms of proficiency and ease of deployment. For instance, we can expect the omnivorous disposition to be subject to processes of *cumulative advantage* (DiPrete and Eirich 2006) keyed to *early acquisition* and *iterative deployment* across the life-course.

In sum, we advocate for a conception of omnivorousness as a phenomenon generated by the iterative application of a habitual disposition by members of those class fractions most likely to have developed and perfected it as a skill (e.g. members of cultural-capital rich occupational groups who come from similar backgrounds). As we will show, such a conceptualization allows for the development of a more theoretically satisfying account of the socio-demographic correlates of omnivorousness by elucidating the genetic and relational mechanisms that account for the observed association between (empirical indicators of) social position and (empirical manifestations of) the omnivorous disposition. In addition to allowing for a partial separation of questions of operationalization and measurement from questions of conceptualization, our formulation further allows for the further separation of the task of accounting for the disposition's *genesis* from accounts of its status-linked *consequences* and *functions*.<sup>7</sup> In other words, providing an answer to the question: “*where does the capacity to display good taste come from?*” is an analytically distinct endeavor to providing an answer to the question “*what is good taste good for?*” (Erickson 1991). Relying on a mechanisms-based perspective can help us to analytically separate these questions.

## **2.2 Omnivorousness as a Variant of the Aesthetic Disposition**

The generic characterization of omnivorousness as a disposition leaves us in the dark as to what sort of capacity the omnivorous disposition is. In this section, we wish to defend the claim that the bulk of the evidence points in one primary direction. The

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<sup>7</sup> Such “functions” include the increased ability of omnivores to navigate complex social circles (Lizardo 2006), its status as a socially-scarce aptitude useful in contexts that emphasize flexibility and geographic mobility (van Eijck 2000: 221; Ollivier 2004) or its elective affinity with broad, increasingly institutionalized discourses associated with the value of cosmopolitanism and cultural openness (Ollivier 2008).

most unambiguous empirical manifestations of omnivorousness indicate that its dispositional basis is a contemporary variant—under “post-modern” conditions of so-called “cultural abundance (Wright 2010; Holt 1998)—of the *aesthetic disposition* described by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984). This will be our main substantive proposal in what follows. We suggest that this characterization makes sense of most of the empirical evidence.

The standard textbook line in the omnivorousness literature is that Peterson’s “omnivore thesis” invalidates the “snob thesis” (at other times referred to as the so-called “homology” thesis) proposed by Bourdieu in *Distinction*. Subjecting this simplistic (and fundamentally invalid) argument to critique would take us too far afield.<sup>8</sup> The first general point that we want to establish is that the aesthetic disposition as defined by Bourdieu in *Distinction* is compatible with empirical manifestations of cultural omnivorousness found in the literature. In this respect, the inference that omnivorousness represents a *fundamental* break with the principles that define a “pure aesthetic” is empirically indefensible. This represents a clear instance of the fallacy of inferring that fundamentally *distinct* underlying mechanisms are at work from the observation of different empirical manifestations of *analogous* generative mechanisms. We will argue that the burden of proof is actually on those who would like to propose that contemporary manifestations of omnivorousness are *not* generated by the habitual application of something fairly close to the aesthetic disposition. In what follows, we begin with a quick review of the aesthetic disposition as it appears in Bourdieu’s work, and then follow by noting which

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<sup>8</sup> To put it briefly, Peterson coined the term “omnivorousness” not refer to a “thesis” but to an empirical generalization. Second, there is not a “homology” thesis (as usually characterized in the literature) to be found anywhere in *Distinction*. See Holt (1997), Lizardo and Skiles (2008), Atkinson (2011) and Tampubolon (2008b) for relevant critiques of this standard misinterpretation of Bourdieu’s argument.

elements of this disposition we see operating in the contemporary generation of the patterns of cultural choice that has been characterized as “omnivorous.”

The tradition of (Western) aesthetics conceptualizes the “autonomy” of art and the aesthetic experience by pointing to a key requirement: we know that an object or experience is truly “aesthetic” when the pleasure that it generates does not originate from a consideration of its more practical (which included, for Kant, its more hedonistic) attributes. This implies that aesthetic experiences must occur outside of more routine (everyday) contexts of reception and use, suggesting that true aesthetic experiences are removed from everyday life. Suggesting otherwise—that aesthetic experiences can be reliably produced in everyday contexts—continues to be a heterodox position in modern aesthetic theory (e.g. Saito 2007).

Bourdieu (1984) sociologizes the traditional (Kantian) account by drawing three inter-related inferences from his dispositional action theory. First, if the autonomy of the aesthetic experience exists, then it does so not only as an abstract philosophical generalization about the nature of art and aesthetics, or even as an institutionalized set of discourses located in the artworld. The disposition must also exist *embodied* in persons and must therefore be subject to a specific history of ontogenetic development in specific class-inflected environments. This last claim implies that the aesthetic disposition can only be generated within those status situations in which the quality of everyday experience afforded by the relevant material conditions (the privileged ability to avoid concern with the practical and the functional) matches what is implied by the philosophical characterization.<sup>9</sup> By implication, members of groups whose status situations thrust on them a non-negotiable concern with the practical necessities of everyday life will be less relatively less likely to develop the

capacity to separate the purely formal from the purely functional. Both of these claims jointly imply the existence of *structured heterogeneity* in the extent to which the aesthetic disposition manifests itself across individuals (Holt 1998; Warde et al 2008; Atkinson 2011). This is in fact the core (empirical) argument of *Distinction*.

Following this line of argument, we propose that the aesthetic disposition is an amalgam of two distinct capacities.<sup>10</sup> The first has to do with the ability to “consider, in and for themselves, as *form* rather than *function*, not only the works designated for such apprehension, i.e., legitimate works of art, *but everything in the world, including cultural objects which are not yet consecrated*” (Bourdieu 1984:3, italics added). The second one is the capacity to “constitute *aesthetically* objects that are ordinary or even ‘common’” (Bourdieu 1984:40, italics added). Note that these are two distinct capacities; neither (on their own) is sufficient to generate manifestations consistent with omnivorousness at the empirical level, but both are necessary for it. Further, the relationship between these capacities is *asymmetrical*; the second capacity builds on (and thus implies the prior existence of) the first, but not the reverse. That is, the aestheticization of common objects relies on the capacity to appreciate form in separation from function. This characterization implies certain (falsifiable) empirical implications which we discuss further below.

First, consider the ability to appreciate *form* in partial separation from *function/content*. The notion of form is notoriously ambiguous (an ambiguity that

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<sup>9</sup> In fact Bourdieu’s “impure” critique of the pure aesthetic is simply that the philosophical account is just a second-order gloss on this primordial set of experiences.

<sup>10</sup> In this respect—and following the substantive implications of taking a dispositional perspective on the subject—the aesthetic disposition must be kept separate from more discursive manifestations of allegiance to institutionalized principles of aesthetic appreciation, such as the “art discourse” described by Frith, which emphasizes the capacity to use aesthetic consumption experiences to “transcend” everyday concerns (1998).

may have seeped into Bourdieu's argument in *Distinction*). Here we would like to be a bit more specific. As we see it, this capacity is composed of two inter-related abilities (see e.g. Bourdieu 1984: 44). The first is the propensity to *selectively attend* to and bring to *cognitive focus* the *manner or style* in which a given object or experience is (re)presented. This helps to produce the conditions for evocation of affective reactions to the object or experience that are "purely" aesthetic. Pure here means evoked by the aesthetically-relevant features of the object or experience only. The other ability that makes possible the separation of form from function is the simultaneous *selective disregard of background* features of the object that are incidental to its mode of presentation. This helps to *suppress* affective reactions that may be evoked by these aesthetically "irrelevant" features.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the separation of form from content emerges from the simultaneous profiling and backgrounding of certain features of the object or experience in question.

We argue that a related capacity to selectively suppress functional and practical considerations and profile stylistic features during the appropriation of aesthetic objects and experiences is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to manifest "omnivorous" taste in the contemporary context (Holt 1998). Our reasons for putting forth this more specific claim are mainly empirical. First, it is unlikely that the conditions of possibility for the development of the aesthetic disposition in culturally privileged environments have been so thoroughly transformed as to make Bourdieu's original characterization of its origins and development inapplicable. This is especially unlikely given the generic nature of the mechanism originally proposed. Instead, it is more reasonable to suppose that the status situations in which the

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<sup>11</sup> What is aesthetic "relevant" or "irrelevant" is of course subject to its own history of institutional definition, constestation and change (Bourdieu 1993).

functional is practically (e.g. experientially) “negated” should still reliably produce the systematic capacity to “rise above” these considerations during routine aesthetic judgments (Atkinson 2011). Second, we argue that selective attention to the formal or stylistic qualities of an object or performance and selective disregard of features only incidentally connected to style decreases the chances of rejecting it for non-aesthetic reasons. This means that possession of the capacity to consider form in isolation from function or content should result in a broadening of the *potential* number of objects that could be found to have aesthetic appeal.<sup>12</sup>

Consider, for instance, the capacity to appreciate Eminem and Dido’s performance of the song *Stan* (Warde et al 2007: 151) for the interplay between the virtuoso spoken-voice delivery and vocal harmonies in spite of the putatively offensive nature of the Rap lyrics. Substantively, this is no different from the capacity to appreciate the visual aesthetics in Christopher Offili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) in spite of the morally offensive nature of its mode of representation of a religious icon; both depend on deploying the aesthetic disposition for purposes of cultural appropriation. In contrast, when attention is fixed on content or function rather than form, the potential reasons for rejection and disagreeableness increase. Accordingly, the object or experience may be rejected because it is considered morally offensive, not immediately gratifying, cognitively challenging or taxing, or disconnected from a person’s biographical experience or contemporary concerns. In essence, Absent the disposition, appropriation fails and the object is rejected as inappropriate (for aesthetically orthogonal reasons). In this way, the absence of the aesthetic disposition may have the consequence of *narrowing* the potential number of objects or

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<sup>12</sup> Note our use of the word “potential” in this context. As we argue further below, the existence of a disposition does not necessitate its full manifestation. We simply predict an increased probability of observing an empirical manifestation of the disposition, presuming that the conditions for triggering it are appropriate.

experiences that can be found appealing (Bryson 1997).

Second, consider the capacity to constitute “common” objects or experiences in an aesthetic way. This implies that when the aesthetic disposition is at work, the criteria which govern aesthetic judgments of canonical objects can also govern aesthetic judgments of *non-canonical aesthetic objects*, resulting in the “aestheticization” of cultural forms that are not originally produced with an explicit aesthetic intention. We argue that this capacity allows for the incorporation of so-called popular culture into the omnivore’s taste repertoire.<sup>13</sup> The main empirical hypothesis is that early acquisition of the aesthetic disposition is *first* honed by exposure to and repeated experiences with canonical objects, and later, it is extended to non-canonical objects. We follow practice theory in holding these early experiences to be of fundamental importance (Bourdieu 1990), such that the lack of early experiences with canonical art objects precludes the full development of the aesthetic disposition.

Our basic argument is that omnivorousness emerges as an empirical manifestation of the operation of the aesthetic disposition under contemporary macro-level conditions. The disposition is analytically and empirically separable from the conditions under which it is deployed (although it is not quite separable from the conditions under which it is most likely to be developed). Empirical manifestations of the disposition may be altered when conditions change, even if the underlying nature of the disposition (e.g. the package of abilities and skills that define it) remains relatively unchanged across historical periods. The contemporary conditions in

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<sup>13</sup> A quick word on our use of the terms “canonical” and “non-canonical” in this context: we propose that, like all natural categories, the category of the “aesthetic” possesses center-periphery structure organized around certain “prototypes” systematically fixed by experience (Rosch 1978; Lakoff 1987). When we use the phrase “canonical aesthetic objects” we are thus referring to the prototypical aesthetic objects (e.g. those likely to be encountered in a museum).

question have been referred to in the literature as those characteristic of “cultural abundance” (Wright 2011); the post-modern proliferation of signs and symbols coupled with a breakdown of traditional classificatory hierarchies (Holt 1998: 5; DiMaggio 1987; Peterson and Kern 1996) and even the “bohemianization of mass culture” (Wilson 1999). All of this implies a relative democratization of access to consumption objects, and a relative weakening of boundaries separating “art” from commerce and “mass culture.” The decline in the power of objects to “signify” inherent aptitudes results in a counter-intuitive effect: the “autonomization” of the *mode* of appropriation from the object appropriated (Holt 1998; Bourdieu 1984). Ironically, precisely because now the disposition is predictably generalized (within limits, as we will see below) outside of canonical domains, we can more easily see it in action.

We argue that the propensity towards *transposability* gives omnivorousness its *quantitative* character, both within and across traditionally defined genres. The *qualitative* character of omnivorousness (the particular features that give this mode of consumption its distinctive mark) is set by the genetic conditions that give rise to the aesthetic disposition. That is, *aestheticization as a concern with formal or abstract qualities of objects and an “intellectualized” appreciation of cultural goods goes hand in hand with the quantitative extension of the disposition across a wider range of objects and experiences.* This characterization makes a clear empirical prediction: quality and quantity should be linked. *That is, we should find that the most avid consumers of a large quantity of cultural goods should also be the ones most likely to attempt to constitute those goods as aesthetic goods in the formal sense.*

### **2.3 Omnivorousness as a Transposable Disposition**

We have argued that omnivorousness is an empirical manifestation of the aesthetic

disposition is generated by the *iterative deployment* of a “transposable scheme” (Bourdieu 1984:28), analytically distinguishable from the objects or experiences so appropriated. It is the propensity to transpose the aesthetic disposition toward new objects and *not* the propensity to *fix* the scheme on its initial prototypical objects (e.g. fine art) that is the key marker of the potential for so-called “distinction” afforded by the aesthetic disposition (Tampubolon 2008b: 410; Bourdieu 1984: 13; Holt 1998). Under this formulation, omnivorousness as an empirical phenomenon emerges from the iterative transposition of the aesthetic disposition across aesthetic domains on the part of those groups more likely to have acquired it and mastered it. When culturally privileged persons appropriate cultural goods not traditionally designated as having aesthetic value, they do so by assimilating the content of the work into the already mastered “schema” of art, thus consuming the “same” good under a different “mode” (Tampubolon 2008b: 413; Holt 1998).

We argue that this account makes sense of the relevant empirical evidence. First, the capacity for permanent extension of the aesthetic disposition (e.g. its constant redeployment aimed toward the “assimilation” of new cultural objects, performances and experiences) partially explains recurrently observed status and education-related differences in both the *quality* (expressed in discourse) and *quantity* of cultural choices (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro 2007; Warde et al 2008). This explains why we seldom observe arts consumption limiting itself to any one particular genre or style, especially among members of some occupational groups, such as primary and secondary education teachers and other cultural and symbolic producers. Instead, we observe patterns of engagement in the arts that range across the entire spectrum of offerings; one form of consumption (e.g. visual arts) tends to be highly correlated with other forms (live musical performances) (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio and Useem 1978:188). This also explains why omnivorousness tends to be highly correlated with the same socio-demographic markers (e.g. high occupational “status” and higher levels of educational attainment) and markers of privilege in the family environment

(e.g. parental education, early training in the arts, having played a musical instrument in childhood) as is the “traditional” disposition towards fine arts (Tampubolon 2010; Warde et al 2008).

Further, this account accommodates the fact that the groups who are most likely to heavily patronize the traditionally-legitimated arts are also the ones most likely to display the attitudinal and discursive markers (e.g. aesthetic and political cosmopolitanism) that seem to underlie (highly institutionalized discursive manifestations of) omnivorousness as a form of “cultural tolerance” (Bryson 1996; DiMaggio 1996; Ollivier 2008; Tampubolon 2008b). This is also why the *same* socio-demographic predictors—in particular education—that account for “omnivorousness” *across* (institutionally defined) types of cultural genres also account for “voraciousness” (sheer quantity of choices) *within* genres (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro 2007; Warde et al 2008; Bennett et al 2008). Finally, this account is consistent with the “reverse pyramid” distribution of breadth of tastes across different status groups that Peterson (1992) argues characterizes the current cultural stratification regime, *especially* when the status dimension used is correlated with cultural capital endowments.

The most obvious source of evidence supporting the contention that omnivorousness is characterized by the iterative application of an aestheticizing scheme comes from studies that explore the manifested preferences of the cultural omnivores. These studies all reveal the same pattern: rather than liking everything, omnivores—especially those endowed with “objectified” and “institutionalized” markers of cultural capital, such as educational qualifications—tend to be disproportionately attracted to *traditionally consecrated* forms of culture and the arts. This pattern has been most strongly confirmed in a recent mixed-methods study of cultural taste in the United Kingdom (Warde et al 2008: 158). The basic finding here is that “alongside a relative openness to popular culture evidenced by their volume of likes,

omnivores disproportionately favoured [sic] legitimate items.” In an interview-based study, Atkinson (2011) uncovers a similar pattern. While initially describing their tastes as “eclectic,” “diverse” and “varied,” an overwhelming majority of informants endowed with high levels of education, wealth and income (70%) “ reported a taste for classical music and opera” (174).

Additional evidence that omnivorousness is derived from the application of an aestheticizing scheme comes from research detailing typical patterns of dislikes and rejections, which shows that while omnivores are certainly tolerant of a wide swath of so-called popular culture, generally expressing “fewer dislikes than the rest of the population” (Warde et al 2008: 158; see also Bryson 1996; Tampubolon 2008), they are not tolerant of everything. Instead, they consistently reject those forms of popular culture that are most obviously routinized and mass-produced such as romance novels and reality television (Warde et al 2007, 2008; Atkinson 2011; Ollivier 2008). We suggest that the reason for this is precisely that these are the forms of popular culture that are most resistant to aestheticizing and ironic recuperation (Ollivier 2008: 133). The manifested preference is the outward manifestation of the inability—experienced phenomenally as qualities such as “difficulty,” “boredom/tedium” or incomprehension (keywords taken from the interview discourse data presented by Warde et al 2008: 160-163)—to assimilate these objects to the aestheticizing scheme. In these highly-commercialized domains (such as television in some national settings), omnivores behave much like so-called “snobs” (Lizardo and Skiles 2009). Thus, “the strong condemnation of mass culture,” (Ollivier 2008: 130) that can be detected among respondents classified as omnivores, rather than being a surprising deviation from expectations, follows from a characterization of omnivorousness as a contemporary variant of the aesthetic disposition.

#### **2.4 The Genesis of the Omnivorous Disposition: Cumulative Advantage**

So far, we have characterized omnivorousness as a transposable variant of the aesthetic disposition whose capacity to be transposed into increasingly less canonical experiences and objects increases with practice. We argue that this explains the social rarity (Peterson and Rossman 2008; Olliver 2008:134; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007a) of *restricting* the aesthetic disposition *only* to the domain of institutionally-prescribed aesthetic goods (what Peterson has referred to as the “snob” ideal type). *Empirically, this implies that the more self-assured a person is in his or her command of the aesthetic disposition, the more likely it is that he or she will attempt to extend it to non-canonical aesthetic objects* (Bourdieu 1984: 63). That is, persons classified as omnivores from their pattern of cultural choices should exhibit more confidence in their cultural competence than non-omnivores, a proposition that is consistent with the empirical evidence (Warde et al 2008: 153). Under this account, “snobbery,” traditionally defined in the sociology of taste as liking only institutionally-prescribed cultural goods, or what in Ollivier’s (2008:124) descriptive typology is referred to as “exclusive highbrow” consumption, rather than being a marker of the highest form of aesthetic appreciation, is in fact a clear signal of the *late acquisition* of the aesthetic disposition in the educational system, in contrast to *early acquisition* in the home environment (Bourdieu 1984: 63-65). Sole consumption of the fine arts to the exclusion of less legitimate forms is thus characteristic of the “safe” investments made by those who enter the rank of the cultured classes from less-privileged backgrounds, and whose primary exposure to the aesthetic disposition happens through formal schooling (Bourdieu 1984: 65).

Note that our reconceptualization of omnivorousness as a habitual disposition also imposes a fairly strong (and thus verifiable) empirical constraint on the expected “trajectory” in which the strongest manifestations of cultural omnivorousness typically develop across the life-course. If a process of scheme transfer is indeed at work, and this transfer tends to be directed or *asymmetric*, originating in traditionally

anesthetized realms toward cultural domains less subject to traditional aestheticism, then we should find that the “class” of omnivores increasingly comes to be populated by persons with early exposure to the fine-arts scheme. These individuals become more likely to include less artistically-legitimate (“popular”) culture into their repertoire than are persons with very little early exposure to the fine arts who later come to adopt them. Peterson and Rossman (2008: 313) provide evidence consistent with this prediction: “...the change [towards omnivorousness] is the result more of high-status people embracing the popular arts than of working-class people embracing what were called the fine arts.” This is also consistent with Warde et al’s (2008:164) findings using a sample of British respondents. They show that the omnivorous orientation towards less legitimate culture goes hand in hand with the higher likelihood of engaging more intensively in traditionally legitimated cultural pursuits, a result that replicates Peterson and Kern’s original finding of “highbrow” omnivorousness in a different cultural context (see also Lizardo and Skiles 2009).

Early and lengthy exposure to a culturally-privileged environment increases one’s habitualized application of the aesthetic disposition to prototypical cultural goods and thus the likelihood that this disposition will be extended to symbolic goods that are less prototypically defined as art. Following this line of reasoning, we propose that those who are able to begin to develop this disposition early in life (e.g. by being raised in a culturally-privileged environment) will be more likely to exhibit a greater likelihood of transposing it in the direction of symbolic goods not traditionally defined as art than those who acquire the disposition late—e.g. by being exposed to it mainly in the school system but not at home (1984: 65). Empirically *this implies a link between empirical markers of omnivorousness in adulthood and markers of cultural privilege in early life*. Those who grow up in culturally privileged environments are more likely to have been the recipient of systematic efforts at “concerted cultivation” in Lareau’s (2003) sense, and should be likely to extend the schema of arts towards objects, performances and experiences most apparently removed from the prototypical forms

of art (Bourdieu 1984:13). In accord with this claim, Bellavance (2008: 192) finds that professionals who self-describe as avid consumers of culture and the arts tend to be disproportionately more likely to have received early (before the age of 12) training and exposure to the arts. Atkinson (2011) and Rimmer (2011) report similar results.

A key empirical implication of this cumulative advantage mechanism is that features of the socializing environment that facilitate the early acquisition of the aesthetic disposition (e.g. after-school training in the arts, growing up in a culturally-privileged household) should predict cultural omnivorousness in adulthood. Explaining why cultural omnivorousness is associated with markers of elite status (such as years of schooling or parental education) thus becomes tantamount to explaining how and why is it that schools—and “schooled” home and extra-curricular environments—come to function as the primary sites where dispositions favorable to the consumption of aesthetic goods are defined and honed. The primary socio-cognitive function of formal schooling in regards to omnivorousness is thus to reinforce and further hone (in a reflexive, discursive way) the initial capacity to apply the implicit aesthetic scheme to a wide variety of objects. This is consistent with DiMaggio’s (1991:144) observation that “[t]he role of formal education in...[the contemporary] social structure is...to inculcate *not tastes per se* but a capacity for aesthetic adaptation” (italics added). This is a capacity (or competence) that has become even more crucial for the culturally privileged in the context of increasing geographic mobility (Griswold and Wright 2004; van Eijck 2000:221). This socio-cognitive mechanism is behind the often-noted association between education and omnivorousness, the most systematic correlational finding in the literature.

We propose that liking a wider range of less legitimate forms of culture (even those usually thought of as “popular” or “commercial” is the primary way in which this form of scheme-transfer appears in adulthood. Accordingly, we should find that fine-

arts appreciation and aesthetic training in childhood and adolescence should predict consumption of cultural goods that have yet to receive full institutional legitimation in adulthood. In accord with this claim Graham (2009), in a study of the relationship between music education and omnivorousness, finds that adults who report liking a wide range of musical genres are more likely to have had extra-curricular musical training as children or adolescents (even after adjusting for educational attainment). Accordingly, persons who come from culturally privileged environments should experience the more explicit inculcation of aesthetic principles in the context of formal schooling as a natural extension of their already-cumulated set of competences in this domain. Consistent with the cumulative advantage process, those who advance through levels of formal schooling should be more likely to apply the aestheticizing scheme in different settings to different objects, which in turn should further cement their competence, and so on.

According to this mechanism sketch, any characteristic of the socializing environment that serves to give the individual a more habitual command of the relevant schemes that facilitate generalized aesthetic appreciation (e.g. after-school training in the arts, growing up in a culturally-privileged household), should show up as an empirical correlate of (realized) omnivorousness in adulthood. This has a counter-intuitive empirical implication: *within* the highly-educated stratum, omnivorousness should be more likely to be manifested among those from culturally-privileged households than among those from more modest backgrounds. That this tendency to “stretch” the aestheticizing scheme to non-standard objects is less likely for those who have experienced “upward” educational mobility has empirical implications that are precisely the opposite of the cultural mobility hypothesis

suggested by van Eijck (1999).<sup>14</sup> The reason for this is that the first group, ensured of a strong command of the aesthetic disposition, should be more likely to make “risky” aesthetic choices and extend the aestheticizing scheme outside of its traditionally prescribed domain, while the latter should make more “conservative” aesthetic choices and be less likely to extend this scheme toward less legitimate aesthetic goods and performances (Bourdieu 1984: 65).

### 3 VARIATIONS IN THE EXPRESSION OF OMNIVOROUSNESS: TWO RELATIONAL MECHANISMS

A key proposal in the literature on social mechanisms concerns the difference between the existence of the *potential* of observing the empirical manifestation of an underlying process subserved by the mechanism, and *actually* observing the empirical manifestation of its operation (Gross 2009; Hedstrom and Ylikoski 2010). The key claim is that mechanisms can only exercise their capacity to generate a given empirical phenomenon in concert or in coordination with other environmental circumstances (which may include the existence of countervailing or reinforcing mechanisms) that may serve to either enhance or sometimes subvert or suppress their functioning. Above, we have dealt with the issue of the social conditions that generate omnivorousness as a form of the aesthetic disposition. Therefore, omnivorousness can be thought of as relying on a set of cognitive, developmental, social and emotive mechanisms which, if allowed to run unimpeded, will result in an observable and measurable empirical manifestation of the phenomenon, such as the

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<sup>14</sup> The cultural mobility hypothesis is the claim that omnivorousness is more likely to occur via a life-course process in which persons who grow up in working-class backgrounds *first* acquire a taste for popular culture, and only later (via educational mobility) acquire a taste for legitimate culture.

selection of a large number of musical genres as being “liked” in a traditional arts participation survey.

In what follows we discuss two relational (Tilly 2002; Gross 2009) social mechanisms that in our view serve to enhance the chances of observing omnivorousness at work, and which explain why is it that, among social groups with comparable command of the aesthetic disposition, we may observe a differential distribution of the probability of actually employing the disposition. In essence, we argue that certain groups are socially induced to deploy their capacity to extend the aesthetic disposition to a wide number of objects due to their positioning in social space—a “field”—in relation to other groups (Martin 2003; Fligstein 2001). We argue that this accounts for a wide range of empirical associations between social position and omnivorousness that have been observed in the current literature.

### **3.1 Horizontal Boundary-Drawing Mechanism**

Most accounts regarding the “omnivore thesis” suggest that omnivorousness plays some role as a practical strategy of differentiation between high and low-status individuals. This *vertical boundary-drawing mechanism* (e.g. Chan and Goldthorpe 2005, 2007a) is consistent with the positive “status gradient” that has been observed in the literature, where the probability of observing an empirical manifestation of omnivorousness (however operationalized) increases with markers of social standing, such as indices of occupational status (statistically adjusting for education). Most contemporary research on culture consumption that has post-dated *Distinction* has either (1) remained stuck with one-dimensional conceptions of social position (i.e. single indicators of education or income), or (2) partially given up on the class bases of cultural taste in search of other “axes of difference” partially orthogonal to class (i.e. race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc.). The results of this last line of research

have been ultimately disappointing, as the bulk of the evidence continues to point to cultural and educational capital as the primary drivers of differences in tastes and culture consumption in all contemporary national contexts. After this exhaustion of the theoretical and empirical leverage of unidimensional conceptions of social position in the sociology of taste, we suggest that moving away from exclusive reliance on this vertical boundary drawing mechanism may help to shed light on the conditions under which we may be most likely to observe the omnivore phenomenon

We suggest that omnivorousness is instead primarily activated via a *horizontal boundary-drawing mechanism* (Bourdieu 1984: 176, 258; Lamont 1992), distinct from the traditional notion of vertical boundary drawing. Here the iterative deployment of the disposition differentiates those occupational groups whose relative asset structure is tilted towards cultural capital from those closer to the economic capital pole (Lamont 1992; Bourdieu 1984: 265). This horizontal boundary-drawing mechanism links naturally to the “socio-genetic” mechanisms alluded to above. In particular, members of cultural-capital heavy groups are more likely to have acquired the aesthetic disposition early in life, and are also more likely: (1) to extend the aesthetic disposition to non-conventional objects and (2) to have acquired an assured command of the formalist aestheticism that makes this possible in the first place. This conceptualization of a horizontal boundary-drawing mechanism relies on a “field theoretic” (Bourdieu 1984:94, 226-229) notion of status-group differentiation defined by competition among the class fractions over what the “dominant” ranking principle (the generators of symbolic capital) should be (i.e. socioeconomic status and politico-economic power versus cultural competence, educational capital and symbolic power). This proposal is consistent with well-established findings in the study of social boundaries, suggesting that actors tend to use whatever competences and resources they command best as boundary-drawing resources (Lamont 1992).

We suggest as a starting guide the general principle that competition and

oppositional lifestyle differentiation is more intense among those who are socially proximate (Bourdieu 1984: 262). Recent sociology of taste literature has likewise posed the question of whether high-status people dislike low-status cultures, since “one could equally ask the question whether high-status people dislike *each other’s cultures*” (Tampubolon 2008a:260). In particular, we suggest that one empirical implication of the operation of this horizontal boundary-drawing mechanism is that distinct empirical manifestations of omnivorousness should be distributed in social space in a manner that largely mirrors the expected *relative* distribution of aesthetic competence and skill among elite fractions. Thus, omnivorousness should be the purview not only of high-status classes, but within the more economically and culturally-advantaged groups, it should be a style of aesthetic appreciation more likely to be deployed by those occupational groups characterized by the possession of high levels of cultural capital (e.g. artists, higher-education professionals), which serves to differentiate them from groups more closely connected to the economic sphere. Thus, the same differentiation between two segments of the upper-middle class identified by Lamont (1992; see also Brint [1984]) should be linked to the extent to which command of the aesthetic disposition is translated into omnivore patterns of cultural choice.

Consistent with this hypothesis, van Eijck (2001:1178) characterizes musical tastes in the Dutch population with a two-by-two partitioning, including a division among the highly-educated into two taste clusters. The first cluster “represents a liking for classical legitimate genres (the dominant fraction of the dominant class) and the other is broad and built around genres (jazz, blues) that have gained legitimacy over the last few decades without having become chic or classy (the dominated fraction of the dominant class or the new middle class)” (2001: 1179). These results bear a striking resemblance to Peterson and Simkus’s (1992) seminal study, which also found that artists and cultural professionals were more likely to choose genres that had yet to acquire full artistic legitimacy (1993: 161).

The propensity of the dominated fraction of the dominant class—e.g. artists, intellectuals, and other “cultural specialists” (Lamont 1992)—to consume culturally mobile genres that have yet to attain full artistic legitimacy makes them prime candidates for the title of “omnivores,” a claim that is in fact supported by the relevant evidence (van Eijck 2001:1181). Recent mixed-methods studies in Canada (Ollivier 2008) and the United Kingdom (Warde et al 2008) also confirm the expectation that omnivorousness is most clearly appreciated among those segments of the elite that Bourdieu (1984) referred to as “cultural intermediaries.” Note however that the operation of this mechanism is contingent on the structure of the “social space,” in a given setting. Where the social space is not structured by an opposition between cultural and economic capital, we are not likely to see this mechanism at work. Some recent studies suggest that Bourdieu’s scheme is certainly applicable outside of France (e.g. Prieur et al. 2008); however, it is unlikely that we will observe the same oppositional structuring of social space across all settings.

Different realized propensities within the upper-middle class to extend the aesthetic disposition to less legitimate culture, generative of the omnivore phenomenon, can be explained by a *conflict model* between two different modes of aesthetic appropriation: direct and indirect (Bourdieu 1984: 282-284; Lizardo 2008: 4-5). The inability to translate embodied schemes of aesthetic perception and *appreciation* for traditionally legitimated cultural works into the direct *acquisition* of such works (an experience to which most cultural specialists are chronically exposed) may serve as an 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 artworlds. These objects are “chosen” (following our conceptualization of omnivorousness as a practical disposition, there is no implication here that this is a “rational” or even conscious choice) as targets for the extension of the scheme because they do not require extensive economic capital to appropriate.

In other words, when direct material possession of art objects is precluded, one way to generate an exclusive mode of appropriation is by emphasizing the embodied, implicit quality of appreciation and “consumption” that *maximizes* the contrast between the manner of consumption and the object so assimilated (Bourdieu 1984:282). We suggest that omnivorousness may constitute such a unique mode of appreciation for the members of the (relatively) economically-deprived but culturally-privileged fractions, and that objects that stand in a relational contrast to traditionally consecrated art objects (e.g. “kitsch”) are ideal candidates for assimilation into the aestheticizing scheme (Holt 1998).

The aesthetic scheme toward non-standard art objects (this is, we have argued, the basis of the omnivore phenomenon) may involve “[l]iking the same things differently, [or] *liking different things, less obviously marked out for admiration*” (Bourdieu 1984:282, italics added), since appropriation (indirect or embodied) premised on access but not ownership necessarily highlights the *how* of aesthetic consumption over the exogenously determined qualities of the appropriated object (e.g. its price, scale or the materials that went into its construction, as well as any particularistic attachment that the consumer may have with the art object). This emphasis on what the consumer brings to the object (rather than what the object can “say” about the him/her) allows those who cannot afford to directly acquire aesthetic objects to derive “profit” from the specific form of embodied expertise that they apply to their consumption.

### **3.2. Intergenerational differentiation mechanism**

In research focusing on the phenomenon of cultural omnivorousness, age plays a central role when omnivorousness is examined as the result of a cohort-replacement process (Peterson and Kern 1996; López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro 2005). More often,

however, age is considered only as a “control” variable used to adjust for differential levels of education or status attainment (when the interest is estimate cross-class differences in cultural range) across generations. Here we suggest that omnivorousness may also be the result of *synchronic* partitions in the class structure premised on age (Tampubolon 2010). This separates “newcomers” from “incumbents” or “senior members” in a given class stratum, generating predictable field-theoretic positional struggles (Bourdieu 1984: 295). These conflict dynamics have an equally predictable homologue in the field of cultural production separating “new” from “established” styles (Bourdieu 1984; Bellavance 2008; Bennett et al 2008; Tampubolon 2008a).

Our main claim is that extensions of aesthetic appreciation towards less prototypical cultural goods—as these are institutionally defined at a given time—result from the attempt of younger entrants into the culturally-privileged realm to exploit their command of the aesthetic disposition in a way that simultaneously serves as a reaffirmation of this dispositional skill, while at the same time maximally differentiating from the older incumbents in that stratum. This may lead to a cross-generational *aestheticized extension contest*---and a related process of *aesthetic inflation*---with each new cohort of incumbents being induced to apply the aesthetic disposition to a set of cultural goods that is increasingly distinct from those chosen by the more senior members of the class. This dynamic is less likely to be useful as an explanation of the origins of the search for cultural breadth definitional of the omnivore phenomenon. However, a cross-generational distinction mechanism may be useful in bringing conceptual order to recent discussions of the social distribution of *types* of omnivorousness, as well as providing a process-based account of the consumption-side bases of the genre-mobility phenomenon.

There is suggestive evidence to this last effect. In particular, we have reason to believe that the institutionalized division between the commercial (so called “popular

culture”) and the traditionally legitimated non-profit arts (the site where the aesthetic disposition is first developed) may be a cross-generational marker within culturally-privileged strata. For instance, Tampubolon (2008a) finds—using data from the United States—that as early as the late 1990s, a division between more “traditional” omnivores (who exploit extensions within prescribed domains) and those more open to commercial arts was already evident. This distinction—within educated strata—is largely marked by age. Both Bellavance (2008) and Berghman and van Eijck (2009) inductively derive a descriptive typology separating tastes for “old” and “new” styles—or classic and contemporary—that cross-cuts the standard classification between “high” and “low” forms of art. Berghman and van Eijck (2009) analyze data from a Flemish survey of cultural consumption, and find two types of omnivores: “passing knowledge” and “multiple experts.” The passing knowledge omnivores prefer contemporary and pop culture, while multiple expert omnivores like a broad range of legitimate culture (both classic and contemporary) and some lowbrow culture. The former are younger, more enthusiastic about commercial and so-called “popular” culture, and less enthusiastic about traditionally legitimated culture than the latter. Consistent with the cross-generational distinction mechanism, Berghman and van Eijck suggest that this difference is a young generation of passing knowledge omnivores (who tend to have higher education than the multiple experts) attempting to distinguish themselves from the older generation. Finally, Bennett et al (2008) in a recent major study of taste and lifestyle consumption in England, find that age is a primary marker of differentiation across musical taste groups and that the divide is clearly drawn at the point in which more recently commercialized genres are separated from older genres that received institutional legitimation outside of the commercial realm.

The results we have considered here suggest that younger omnivores find ways to extend their aesthetic gaze towards objects that older generations may have considered out of bounds. Bellavance (2008) hints at this process, suggesting that

consuming popular culture as well as legitimate art allows one segment of the elite to creatively and flexibly diversify their cultural repertoire. Taylor (2009), a musicologist, comes to what seems to be a fairly similar conclusion. He suggests that more attention should be paid to the notion of “trends” (and the power to serve as a trend-setter). He argues that the new petit bourgeoisie have non-negligible levels of institutional control over which cultural materials get attention (gatekeepers, cultural intermediaries), giving them the opportunity to redefine what is ‘legitimate’ at the level of content, even as they preserve many of the more general criteria inherited from their senior counterparts (consonant with Ollivier et al 2009: 459).

As already noted, this cross-generational distinction mechanism is substantively important, since it should be implicated in processes of “cultural mobility” and “legitimation sequence” (Baumann 2001) through which “not-art” (or not yet legitimated art) becomes “art” at the genre level. By being induced to extend the aesthetic disposition away from the prototype inherited from senior members, newcomers to culturally privileged class fractions may then attempt to legitimate this prototype extension by marking the new genres as being *consistent* with the more general qualities older prototype. Such efficacy in the redefinition of what was previously “popular” as *art* (Lopes 2002; Baumann 2003) is more likely to happen if newcomers into culturally-privileged class fractions acquire positions of cultural authority (e.g. critics, intermediaries, trend-setter, etc.). This suggests that the content of omnivorous cultural consumption is likely to change continuously over time, even as we observe continuity at the level of the relevant dispositions. This joins research on the dynamics of taste change at the level of consumer publics, having to do with reception and appropriation, with research on the dynamics of cultural mobility on the production side of the equation (Lopes 2002; Baumann 2001). Because the deployment of the aesthetic disposition by members of certain culture-producing and culture-consuming communities is partially premised on the separation of formal from substantive qualities of symbolic goods, cultural objects

produced by members of subaltern groups or by for-profit cultural industries can now be routinely “upscaled” if they are incorporated into the “artistic” schema. We may thus expect legitimation contests keyed around what counts as “artistic” or “authentic” to be the dynamic rule rather than the exception (Johnston and Baumann 2007).

#### 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have argued that omnivorousness can be most profitably thought of as a form of skillful cultural competence, accumulated via early experiences in the family environment and enhanced by formal and extra-curricular education and occupational experiences. This enables omnivores to make innovative and “risky” aesthetic choices, extending the disposition towards non-prototypical objects and experiences. We argued that any theory not concerned with providing a dispositional account of the phenomenon would leave itself at risk of interpreting it as involving conscious or rational attempts to gain social status. This ambiguous characterization runs through many studies in the sociology of taste. Our dispositional account instead identifies omnivorousness as generated by a sort of practical sense, rather than by conscious anticipations of social rewards. This separates the consequences of the operation of the mechanism (e.g. a distinctive pattern of taste characteristic of a status group) from its genesis.

We have also shown that a characterization of omnivorousness as a practical disposition enhanced by certain relational mechanisms naturally accommodates many of the empirical findings concerning correlates of omnivorous taste that have been reported since Peterson (1992) first coined the term. In this respect, we endeavored to specify not only where omnivorousness comes from, but also what types of recurrent social oppositions facilitate its expression and deployment. We

argued that omnivorousness is likely to be most unambiguously manifested as a horizontal boundary-drawing resource distinguishing the culturally advantaged from other proximate but distinct class fractions. These are status situations that lead individuals to emphasize the mode of appropriation over the substantive characteristics of what is consumed. The framework outlined in this paper makes theoretical sense of previous findings of age/cohort effects on aesthetic choice (e.g. Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Rossman 2008). We predict that new cohorts of omnivores will seek to extend the omnivorous dispositions towards objects and experiences not yet appropriated by older cohorts, generating inter-generational contests accounting for the upward and downward mobility of certain cultural goods (e.g. Lopes 2002; Baumann 2003).

We can surmise that omnivorousness can become a resource in struggles for institutional influence and cultural authority among different groups (Ollivier 2008). This may happen if members of different class fractions attempt to secure the institutionalization of their own competence and expertise, thus recurrently reproducing an intergenerational contest for cultural hegemony. Accordingly, our analysis suggests that the dependence of the current cultural stratification regime on socio-cognitive tools acquired in culturally-privileged households and reinforced in higher education institutions systematically preserve a familiar form of status-based rank, even in the wake of deep transformations in the “artistic classification system” (DiMaggio 1987) of most Western societies. This ranking is no longer primarily “visible” but—like other cultural advantages traceable to middle-class socialization and educational attainment (Lareau 2003)—has come to increasingly depend on habitualized systems of perception, categorization and action.

In this last respect, even if the phenomenon of omnivorousness entails a partial “deinstitutionalization” of the system of cultural valuation that separated the fine arts from popular culture (Peterson 1992), then this has occurred in tandem with the

increasing institutionalization of the abstract scheme of perception and appreciation of symbolic goods generative of omnivorousness as the most legitimate orientation across a wide range of fields (Lizardo 2008). This dynamic results—for instance—in specifiable institutional penalties for those who cannot produce this flexible deployment of the aestheticizing scheme, and thus appear as “intolerant” and “exclusionary” of other cultures and styles, producing a systematic coordination between particular dispositions and institutional opportunities (Ollivier 2008). We may thus expect an increasing alignment between orientation and dispositions directed towards cultural goods and those “value” and “attitudinal” orientations in the realms of family, society and politics usually analyzed under a separate set of theoretical commitments, thus clarifying the cultural and social cleavages that should play a significant role in the foreseeable future.

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