Distinction in America?
Recovering Bourdieu’s theory of tastes from its critics

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Abstract

This essay critically examines the North American sociological literature that has developed in response to Pierre Bourdieu’s Distinction, his tour-de-force study of consumer taste and social reproduction. I argue that theoretical and empirical challenges often misread Bourdieu, recasting the theory as a variant of Lloyd Warner’s social class theory. I use this evaluation to reformulate the theory to reflect socio-historical circumstances particular to the contemporary United States. In an interpretive study of cultural capital and patterns of taste motivated by this reformulation, briefly summarized here, I find six dimensions of taste that vary across cultural capital resources. Finally, I consider the implications of this interpretation of Bourdieu’s theory for survey research concerned with patterns of taste and social reproduction.

1. Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu’s Distinction (1984) develops a potent analytic tool to plumb the structuring of social class increasingly occluded by the heterogeneity, cultural fragmentation, and boundary transgression of postmodern social life. Since its publication in English, cultural sociologists have debated vigorously the applicability to the United States of Bourdieu’s theory explaining how the deployment of tastes in everyday life helps to reproduce social class boundaries (what I will refer to as Bourdieu’s theory of tastes or BTT). While early studies by Paul DiMaggio and his colleagues (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990) offered support for BTT, more recently a spate of influential articles and books have challenged the theory’s usefulness for explaining how social repro-
duction works in the United States (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Hall, 1992; Lamont, 1992; Halle, 1993; Biesel, 1993; Erickson, 1996; Bryson, 1996).

In this essay, I seek to recover Bourdieu’s theory of tastes from its North American critics. I argue that theoretical challenges either misread Bourdieu or do little damage to the theory. Likewise, empirical researchers often recast the theory in such a way as to eviscerate its most innovative elements. These interpretive confusions appear to have stemmed from a rocky translation of a theory grounded in the continental-humanist tradition into terms suitable for North American social scientific methodological and theoretical predilections. These translation problems are exacerbated because neither Bourdieu nor his American critics situate BTT with respect to its most influential precursor: the community studies of social class conducted by the American anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner and his colleagues (Warner, 1949; Rainwater et al., 1959; Coleman and Rainwater, 1978). Notwithstanding a variety of compelling critiques (Pfauz and Duncan, 1950; Bendix and Lipset, 1951; Gordon, 1963), the Warnerian approach offers methodological innovations and incipient theoretical insights that are foundational for understanding the advances made by BTT. Yet BTT’s advantages relative to Warner have never been foregrounded, likely because Warner’s social Darwinist axiology is directly at odds with Bourdieu’s critical view of consumption patterns as a consequential site of class reproduction. And so – perhaps because American sociological presuppositions are more congruent with Warnerian structural functionalism than with Bourdieu’s synthesis of French structuralism, conflict theory, and phenomenology – many of the American studies that I review below unwittingly metamorphose BTT into a reincarnated variant of Warner’s social class theory.

I begin by evaluating the major criticisms of BTT, examining the persuasiveness of both conceptual critiques and empirical refutations. In so doing, I specify the theory to reflect socio-historical circumstances particular to the contemporary United States. I use this reformulated version of BTT to motivate an interpretive study of cultural capital and patterns of taste. The findings, briefly summarized here, offer support for the descriptive power of BTT when the theory is satisfactorily operationalized. Finally, I consider the implications of this interpretation of BTT for survey research concerned with patterns of taste and social reproduction.

2. Conceptualizing cultural capital and taste

2.1. Taste and social reproduction

Consistent with post-structuralist theorists like Michel Foucault who argue that social discourses and practices are inexorably linked to hegemonic social relations, Bourdieu claims that class differences in tastes lead necessarily, through the unintended consequences of everyday interaction, to social reproduction. Bourdieu’s critics counter that unacknowledged social exclusion is not inherent to heterogeneous tastes. Rather, the effectiveness of tastes as a resource for social stratification hinges upon their particular structural properties such as differentiation, hierarchy, univer-
sality, and symbolic potency (DiMaggio, 1987, 1991). For tastes to operate as an exclusionary resource, the superiority of elite tastes must be acknowledged widely across classes, and elites must actively defend this symbolic hierarchy (Lamont, 1992). The well-documented existence of tastes and styles of dominated classes that pay no heed to dominant tastes—which, for example, Birmingham School findings that working class youth often develop distinctive subcultures that valorize oppositional tastes—is offered as evidence countering the plausibility of this reading of BTT (Lamont and Lareau, 1988).

These criticisms interpret BTT as an emulationist theory of status signaled through consensus status goods similar to that expounded by Lloyd Warner (as well as Veblen and Simmel). Class boundaries are posited to operate only to the degree that the tastes of cultural elites are recognized and accorded respect by those classes below. But Bourdieu (1984: 172–173) explicitly positions his theory to rebut the emulationist approach, arguing that exclusionary consumption practices typically occur through the disinterested pursuit of tastes rather than strategic maneuvering. Tastes exist predominantly as part of the habitus, as practical not discursive knowledge. They serve as a potent resource for social reproduction precisely because their political consequences are routinely misrecognized as disinterested practice. Rather than an emulative “competition” for high status tastes, class hierarchies of taste are an unintended consequence of the rational cultivation of those tastes that are readily acquired and have purchase in one’s social class milieu.

Awareness of class differences in taste at the grounded level of preferences for and distaste toward particular cultural objects and practices need not take the form of lower class deference nor upper class disdain (Holt, 1997). In fact, it is more typical that those with lesser cultural capital resources are dismissive of, or antagonistic towards, the objects and practices of those with greater cultural capital resources. Bourdieu (1984: 468–469) argues that the binary oppositions that organize hierarchical tastes (e.g., between rare and common, brilliant and dull, light and heavy) are inflected by each class habitus to elevate its position within these relationships. So, for example, films favored by cultural elites are understood as pretentious and unnecessarily oblique by lower classes. While many ethnographic studies demonstrate that the working class and the poor often show contempt for the pretentiousness and coldness of those above, there is little evidence supporting the contention that the reproductive consequences of culture are weakened when dominated tastes oppose the dominant. Quite the opposite. Defiant tastes of dominated classes efficiently reproduce social position while maintaining the ideology that tastes are elective and socially inconsequential.

Rather than emulation, the social reproductive mechanisms in BTT parallel Gramsci’s conception of hegemony. Cultural domination accrues through the always contested naturalization of common sense. In this view, dominant social classes reproduce the social structure in accord with their interests not because they impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but because they are able to articulate commonsensical ways of understanding class differences such that their potential antagonism is neutralized (Laclau, 1977: 161). Elites have the power to set the terms through which tastes are assigned moral and social value. Tastes, then,
serve as an effective exclusionary resource as long as tastes vary systematically with social position; those with high cultural capital tastes tend to prefer colleagues, friends, and acquaintances who share their tastes; and those with low cultural capital resources, while they may express hostility toward elite practices, are relatively unaware of their social reproductive implications.

2.2. Cultural capital(s) and commensurability

Typical of a modernist social theory, BTT strips away a great deal of context in order to reveal the underlying social mechanisms that are presumed to operate across a wide variety of social milieux. Bourdieu’s critics take aim at this reductionism: Is it possible that the extraordinary diversity of tastes observed in the world can aggregate into the single objective symbolic currency that Bourdieu terms cultural capital (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Hall, 1992)? For example, Lamont and Lareau (1988) argue that Bourdieu posits an implausible “zero sum game” relational model in which all cultural practices are comparable and classifiable using a single hierarchical scale.

This critique is based on an interpretation of cultural capital as a nomothetic construct – one that maintains the same conceptual content across different institutional applications and socio-historical configurations. The authors argue that Bourdieu’s varied uses of cultural capital – as informal academic standards, tastes, educational certification, and technical expertise – leads to theoretical confusion. Thus they propose, instead, that cultural capital refer to “institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (Lamont and Lareau, 1988: 156). Similarly, DiMaggio (1991) proposes delimiting cultural capital to reference “... the consumption of and discourse about generally prestigious – that is, institutionally screened and validated – cultural goods”. While Lamont and Lareau argue that they are providing coherence to what otherwise are competing and contradictory definitions of cultural capital, I suggest that this revised definition actually sacrifices much of the term’s theoretical power.

As I read Bourdieu (mediated through Sewell, 1992), cultural capital exists both as a single abstracted form that has only a virtual existence, and as many different realized particular forms as the abstracted form becomes instantiated in social life. In its abstracted virtual form, cultural capital is a set of generic transposable characteristics – dispositions, skills, sensibilities, embodied knowledges concerning the body, beauty, creativity, individuality, achievement, and so on – that together compose the habitus of cultural elites. Virtual cultural capital is fostered systematically through upbringing in families with well-educated parents whose occupations require cultural skills, interaction with peers from similar families, high levels of formal education at challenging elite institutions studying areas that emphasize critical, abstracted, metaphoric thinking over the acquisition of particularized trade skills and knowledges, and then the refinement and reinforcement of this habitus in occupations that emphasize symbolic production. In this form, cultural capital exists as a universal, fungible, and transposable resource.
But these general cultural resources take concrete form – that is, can be said to exist in the world – only as they are articulated in particular institutional projects. While always drawing upon the same virtual cultural capital as a basic resource, this meso-articulation of cultural capital necessarily requires that it take on specific characteristics that reflect the particularities of status competition in a given social field: ¹

"It is the specific logic of the field, of what is at stake and of the type of capital needed to play for it, which governs those properties through which the relationship between class and practice is established ... Capital is an energy which only exists and only produces its effects in the field in which it is produced and reproduced, each of the properties attached to class is given its value and efficacy by the specific laws of each field." (Bourdieu, 1984: 112-113)

In order to reap the benefits of their accumulated virtual cultural capital, then, cultural elites must transform this asset into various particularized forms, which require accumulating what might be termed – to extend Bourdieu’s socioeconomic metaphor – field-specific cultural capital. While the virtual form of cultural capital may be a more or less universal currency, it is this field-specific form of cultural capital for which aggregation becomes problematic. Since cultural capital is socially consequential only when converted into particularized field-specific forms, it is necessary to consider how particularized forms of cultural capital, which have little purchase outside of the fields of which they are a part, can be aggregated into a single symbolic currency that functions as a status resource.

This apparent problem is in many instances a non-issue since the fields of consumption that are most consequential in social reproduction are typically those in which the vast majority participate – food, housing, fashion, art, vacations, entertainment, and so on. Since these fields garner near-universal participation, particularized forms of cultural capital do not need to be converted back to the abstracted form in order to be an effective resource for social reproduction. However, to the extent that people devote their leisure time and energies to fragmented, subcultural lifestyle enclaves, the aggregation question has merit. In these instances, class boundaries are formed only to the extent that there exist social interactional processes through which otherwise incommensurate field-specific cultural capitals are aggregated into meta-field attributions of status. For example, does one, as a non-participant in the consumption field of leisure reading, acknowledge and grant status to friends and acquaintances who have highly developed tastes for prose? I believe that this conversion of field-specific to abstracted cultural capital – while a problematic iterative process – is a pervasive feature of contemporary social interaction. People constantly make such judgments to assess their affinities with others’ tastes in the process of choosing friends, lovers, and business acquaintances. If this process is significant, it suggests that in an increasingly fragmented cultural world, status judgments based on shared interests are less important than those based upon similar styles of consuming, which can be applied to any cultural category.

¹ This argument implies that, in contrast to most American studies of cultural capital, it is impossible to study empirically cultural capital as a single abstracted concept. One can only study the particular instantiation of cultural capital within a social field – such as tastes, learning skills, managerial talents, intellectual brilliance, and so on.
3. Operationalizing cultural capital and taste

3.1. Isolating cultural capital and consumption fields

A key contribution of *Distinction* – particularly compared to Lloyd Warner’s conflation of both the different bases of social class and the different social fields in which class is expressed and reproduced – is that it effectively isolates taste and explains its unique contribution to social reproduction (see Holt, 1998). While cultural capital is articulated in all social fields as an important status resource, it operates in consumption fields through a particular conversion into tastes and consumption practices. Further, Bourdieu disaggregates the tastes that arise from economic versus cultural capital: whereas economic capital is expressed through consuming goods and activities of material scarcity, cultural capital is expressed through consuming via scarce aesthetic and interactional styles that are consecrated by cultural elites.

To study empirically how tastes are implicated in social reproduction, then, requires isolating and operationalizing the social fields of consumption and the composition of cultural capital within these fields. But, instead, empirical studies often use measures similar to Warnerian social class that combine all types of capital and fail to isolate consumption from other fields.² For example, in *Inside Culture* David Halle constructs comparative class groupings based upon residential location. But, excepting Bohemian arts districts perhaps, patterns of residence are influenced more by economic and social capital rather than cultural capital. Thus, Halle’s finding that there are negligible differences between these groups in arts consumption is difficult to interpret since the lack of a formal aesthetic amongst the upper-middle class group is, according to BTT, to be expected for those whose social position is derived predominantly from economic capital.

Similarly, in Bonnie Erickson’s (1996) recent study challenging BTT, she selects a single industry to study – private security. She does not report demographics, but, from her description of this industry as a highly competitive peripheral industry that is more entrepreneurial than credentialed, it is likely that there are relatively small differences in cultural capital resources between owners, managers, and workers.

² Bourdieu contributes to this problem by introducing terminology that is easily misinterpreted. He refers to the social fields he studies in *Distinction* as fields of culture. This leads to two misleading interpretations: that fields of culture are equivalent to fields where cultural capital operates (i.e., all fields), or that fields of culture are the only fields in which one finds cultural capital. The first interpretation elides the organizing principle of these fields developed in *Distinction*: in these particular fields, cultural capital exists as tastes and consumption practices. The second interpretation obfuscates that all forms of capital are found in all social fields (though differentially configured). To clarify terminology, then, I suggest that the fields that Bourdieu describes in *Distinction* – art, sports, food, decor, hobbies, vacations, and so on – be termed *fields of consumption*. In addition to terminological clarification, this move also helps to illuminate a feature of Bourdieu’s model that often goes unnoticed: a given social action often is implicated in more than one field. For example, political activities not only operate within a field of politics structured by the acquisition and use of power. These same activities also increasingly serve – as Bourdieu shows and cultural critics regularly lament – as a field of consumption organized by an institutional logic of taste homologous with other consumption fields.
Further, she constructs comparative groups based upon economic power rather than cultural hierarchy. Thus, this research design introduces a bias in the same direction as her findings of negligible differences in taste. While the study reports weak support for differences in consumption using this class measure as an independent variable, it is striking to note that Erickson finds significant effects for both family upbringing and education, the two most potent resources fostering cultural capital accumulation according to Bourdieu. Thus, rather than challenging BTT, her findings can be interpreted as offering support.

This definitional confusion impacts not only construct operationalization but also interpretations. For example, in her fascinating account of Roland Comstock's turn-of-the-century art censorship efforts as a class-building mechanism, Nicki Beisel (1993) argues that conflicts between Comstock and gallery owner Roland Knoedler over the censorship of nude paintings challenges BTT. She claims BTT can't explain this conflict because both men were from the same social class yet they apply a very different aesthetic to the art. But this interpretation is not persuasive since her data suggest that they represent opposite poles in terms of capital composition: Comstock's anti-vice group received wide support from the economically-endowed while art gallery owner Knoedler was a member in good standing of New York's avant-garde, the dominated fraction whose capital consists primarily of cultural resources. The censorship debate she describes, then, nicely supports Bourdieu's argument concerning the inherent conflicts of interest between these two fractions that become represented in differences in tastes.

Empirical studies also sometimes fail to isolate the social fields in which BTT is hypothesized to operate. While cultural capital operates in all fields, its instantiation as valorized tastes and consumption practices is conceived by Bourdieu to be a property specifically of fields of consumption. Consumption fields are extremely diffuse: they are enacted not only when consuming a particular good or engaging in a particular leisure activity, but also when communicating about such cultural objects which is a routine aspect of conversation at home, parties, the workplace, schools, churches, and so on. These extraordinarily numerous and diverse interactional encounters in which tastes are expressed are the forum for the micro-political acts of attraction and distancing that Bourdieu and others have documented. In contrast, Erickson (1996) makes the implausible claim that tastes are important for social reproduction only when they are deployed in the workplace. In terms of operationalization, her analysis becomes, de facto, a study of cultural capital articulated in a work field rather than in fields of consumption. Thus, it is not surprising that she finds that cultural capital takes the form of specialized knowledge found in business magazines and trade journals.

3.2. Contents of taste

While not always clear in Distinction, it appears that Bourdieu and his interpreters now agree that it is the institutional logic particular to a consumption field located in a particular socio-historical setting that invests objects and activities with cultural capital (Calhoun, 1993; Joppke, 1986; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lamont,
1992). BTT is a set of sensitizing propositions concerning the relations between social conditions, taste, fields of consumption and social reproduction that must be specified in each application to account for the particular configuration of these constructs.

Instead of following these guidelines, many American studies of BTT have operationalized the tastes of cultural elites as exclusive tastes for the fine arts. For example, Halle (1993: 8) summarizes BTT as claiming that family upbringing and formal education instill "...two fundamental tastes in modern society – the taste for high culture, which is associated with the dominant classes, and the taste for popular culture, which is associated with the dominated classes". Similarly, Bryson (1996: 886) represents BTT as a theory of cultural exclusiveness whereby elites know about and consume the high arts and dismiss the consumption of popular cultural objects. So, de facto, these studies evaluate whether the particular articulation of cultural capital in French society of the 1960s – objectified primarily in the legitimate arts and embodied in formal aesthetic appreciation – applies to the contemporary United States.

To explain weak correlations between cultural capital and these culture measures, North American critics note that legitimate genres of culture are much less popular amongst cultural elites in the United States than in France (Lamont, 1992; Halle, 1993; Hall, 1992; Erickson, 1996). Thus, these critics conclude that since the high arts play only a peripheral role in the lives of cultural elites, BTT has little explanatory value in the contemporary United States. Certainly, this claim that the legitimate

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3 Bourdieu’s broad theoretical statements support the contemporary interpretation, yet he sometimes makes ahistorical generalizations about the superordinate status of the high arts as a locus for high cultural capital consumption. In Distinction Bourdieu encourages the latter reading because, in his intensive effort to isolate and describe synchronic differences in characteristics of taste that vary with cultural capital, he does not execute a fully cultural analysis in which social differences in meanings of those objects consumed, and their socio-historical genesis, also become a focus of investigation (Gartman, 1991; Calhoun et al., 1993). The term “socio-historical setting” used here is necessarily vague and begs important questions: What are the spatial and temporal boundaries of these settings? And what social processes and structures allow for their presumed homogeneity? While, for the moment, I allow for the simplification that cultural capital is configured within nation-states in the “ethnographic present”, I problematize this assumption in the discussion section.

4 To support this interpretation, Bryson cites Bourdieu’s (1984: 35) interesting study of photographs in which he measures aesthetic responses across class to photographs popularly constructed as beautiful (e.g., a sunset over the sea) with their opposite (e.g., a butcher’s stall). Bryson selects one passage from this section that supports her interpretation. But Bourdieu’s data, and his interpretation of it, actually makes a much more subtle point. Rather than a linear relationship between education and distaste for the popular, Bourdieu (1984, 39) finds that this relationship is nonmonotonic: rejection of the popular increases up to the “license” degree and then reverses amongst the educated elites because “the highest qualified subjects assert their aesthetic disposition by declaring that any object can be perceived aesthetically”. This finding supports Bourdieu’s (1984: 40) claim that the rarest and, hence, most distinguishing style of consumption is “the capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even ‘common’ (because they are appropriated, aesthetically or otherwise, by the ‘common people’) or to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life, in cooking, dress or decoration, for example”. Thus, in contrast to claims by Bryson and others, BTT should not be reduced to a simplistic theory of high status symbols in which elite boundaries are constructed through tastes for the high and aversion toward the popular.
3.3. Objectified tastes

Contrasting the causal processes posited in BTT with the Warnerian tradition illuminates another measurement problem in recent empirical studies. Warner and Bourdieu both argue that status is expressed and reproduced through implicit evaluations in everyday social interactions. However, for Warner, these interactions occur within heavily sedimented social networks and formal organizations such as leisure and service clubs and religious groups. This allowed him to assume, like Simmel, that elites develop a distinctive set of consumption objects that serve to express their status position. Public signaling of these consensus status goods affirms social position.

BTT, in contrast, offers a theory of signifying practice rather than of signifying objects (DiMaggio, 1987; Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Downplaying public displays of status symbols, Bourdieu emphasizes that status is continually reproduced as an unintended consequence of social interaction because all interactions are necessarily, in addition to their other dimensions, classifying practices – micro-political acts of status-claiming in which individuals constantly negotiate their reputational positions (Goffman, 1967; Collins, 1981). Crucial to this process is the expression of cultural capital embodied in consumer actions. Rather than accruing distinction from pecuniary rarity (Veblen) or from elite consensus (Warner), Bourdieu argues that cultural capital secures the respect and esteem of others through the consumption of objects that are “difficult” and so can only be consumed by those few who have acquired the ability to do so. To take an example that Bourdieu might use were he to study the contemporary United States, when someone details Milos Forman’s directorial
prowess in *The People vs. Larry Flynt* to a friend over dinner (or, conversely, offers a damming harangue of Forman as an unrepentant proselytizer of the dominant gender ideology), this discussion not only recreates the experiential delight that the movie provided, but also serves as a claim to particular resources (here, knowledge of directorial styles in movies, and the ability to carefully analyze these characteristics) that act as reputational currency. Such actions are perceived not as explicit class markers but as bases for whom one is attracted to and admires, whom one finds uninteresting or doesn’t understand, and whom one finds unimpressive and so seeks to avoid. Thus, status boundaries are reproduced simply through expressing ones tastes.

In addition to this embodied form, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital also becomes objectified in consumption objects. At first blush, this idea appears to parallel the status goods approach since consumption objects serve as signals of status in both. However, with objectified cultural capital, the stratificatory power of cultural objects results, not from group consensus or economic scarcity, but from the inferred cultural aptitude of the consumers of the object. Cultural objects, such as the high arts that require significant cultural capital to properly understand and appreciate, imply that their consumers apply distinctive practices, and so, serve as surrogate representations of these practices. A foundational premise of BTT, then, is that different categories of cultural goods and activities require differing levels of cultural capital in order to consume them successfully.\(^5\)

Most studies of BTT, particularly quantitative studies using survey data, operationalize tastes only in their objectified form – preferences for particular categories, genres, or types of cultural objects. Exemplary studies of this type such as those by conducted by Paul DiMaggio, Richard Peterson and their colleagues use large-scale surveys that are analyzed through regression and factor analyses (Peterson and DiMaggio, 1975; DiMaggio and Useem, 1978; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985; DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990; Bryson, 1996; Hughes and Peterson, 1983; Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996). The obvious advantage to measuring only objectified tastes is that there are large data bases available, and this type of data allows for sophisticated statistical analyses.

But operationalizing BTT in terms of preferences for cultural objects has become problematic, regardless of whether these objects are conceived as Warnerian consensus goods or as Bourdieuan objectified cultural capital. The utility of goods as consensus class markers has weakened substantially due to a variety of widely noted historical shifts (see DiMaggio, 1991). Technological advances have led to the wide accessibility of goods, travel, and media by all but the poor (Bell, 1976). Innovative styles and designs now diffuse rapidly between haute and mass markets, and between core and periphery states, dissolving lags that once allowed for stylistic leadership. From a different vantage point, theorists of postmodernity such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, and Fredric Jameson have argued that a defining

\(^5\) Bourdieu also considers an institutionalized form of cultural capital, but this form is less important for the dispersed and relatively less institutionalized fields of consumption than it is in other fields such as education, the professions, and religion.
characteristic of advanced capitalist societies is the massive overproduction of commodity-signs. This proliferation of signs leads to a pluralized pastiche of consumer symbolism that is not readily assimilated by social groups in any coherent way. This argument is supported by sociological research demonstrating a high degree of overlap in consumer preferences across social categories (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Peterson and Kern, 1996). In postmodern cultures, it is increasingly difficult to infer status directly from consumption objects, as the status goods approach requires (Holt, 1997).

Historical changes have also drained the symbolic potency of objectified cultural capital. The crux of the postmodern condition is the breakdown of the hierarchy distinguishing legitimate “high” culture from mass “low” culture (Huysssen, 1986; Jameson, 1991; Foster, 1985), as well as the direct relationship between these classifications and social categories such as class (Baudrillard, 1988; Bell, 1976; DiMaggio, 1987, 1991; Frow, 1995). Many of the distinguishing traits of mass culture, such as seriality and mass reproduction, have now become central concerns of the artworld, and many popular cultural forms from comic books to rock music to celebrities to television programs are produced and consumed using increasingly complex and esoteric formal lexicons that parallel modern art (e.g., see Jenkins, 1994; Gamson, 1994). The objectified form of cultural capital – because it requires a stable cultural hierarchy constituted by categories and genres for which necessary levels of cultural competence are immanent and vary significantly – loses efficacy in these cultural conditions. As cultural hierarchies have blurred dramatically in advanced capitalist societies, objectified cultural capital has become a relatively weak mechanism for exclusionary class boundaries. But, that cultural objects no longer unproblematically signal the cultural capital invested in consumption does not mean that cultural capital differences in consumption no longer have social classificatory power. Rather, objects no longer serve as accurate representations of consumer practices.

3.4. Embodied tastes

As popular cultural objects become aestheticized and as elite objects become popularized, the objectified form of cultural capital has in large part been supplanted by the embodied form. Class differences in American consumption have gone underground: no longer easily identified with the goods consumed, distinction is becoming more and more a matter of practice. Emphasizing embodied tastes leads to a different style of consuming than in previous eras. In fields organized by a hierarchy of objectified tastes, consumption practices emphasize knowing about and consuming the appropriate goods (e.g., Bourdieu uses Mondrian paintings and Bach concertos as measures). However, in fields where there is great overlap in the objects consumed, to consume in a “rare” distinguished manner requires that one consume the same categories in a manner inaccessible to those with less cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984: 40; see also Bourdieu’s description of the lifestyles of cultural producers (1984: 282)). In other words, to express distinction through embodied tastes leads cultural elites to emphasize the distinctiveness of consumption practices them-
selves, apart from the cultural contents to which they are applied. While few empirical studies focus on embodied tastes because they are much more difficult to measure than objectified tastes, a handful of noteworthy studies have attempted to do so.

As cultural information. In rough accord with Lamont and Lareau’s (1988) recommendations, Erickson (1996) operationalizes embodied tastes as knowledge of specific cultural objects within five categories—popular restaurants, books, magazines, professional athletes, and artists—which are divided into mainstream and esoteric genres. The rationale for these measures is that, to participate successfully in workplace conversations “the most useful cultural resource is a little working knowledge of a lot of cultural genres combined with a good understanding of which culture to use in which context” (1996: 224).

There are two conceptual problems with Erickson’s measures. First, identification of mass cultural objects is a weak conduit of cultural capital because these practices are not inherently difficult to acquire. (Even the so-called “esoteric” objects are reviewed and reported in the mass media.) The successful expression of cultural capital requires rarity. But Erickson provides evidence that cultural information such as the names of specific restaurants, sports stars, and books are easily acquired by those less culturally endowed. Bourdieu demonstrates that cultural elites discern and discriminate against this form of book-learned taste due to its dilettantism and overly-eager formalistic expression. Such knowledge is favored by the petit-bourgeois middle-brow habitus: conscientious “followers of fashion”, as the Kinks once sang, who are quick to learn new gourmet recipes from Bon Apetit, or entertainment ideas from Martha Stewart, and, in so doing, express a very studied approach to style. In contrast, cultural elites engage in consumption practices that reflect an ineffable sense of what is right, appropriate, and tasteful, that is disdainful of fashion mimicry and so requires asserting idiosyncrasies in relation to it.

Second, as argued above, in contemporary consumer societies there are simply too many alternative goods and activities with multivalent and dynamic meanings for particular pieces of cultural information to serve as a stable indicators of class boundaries. Instead, conceiving of embodied tastes as general styles of consuming that can be deployed to any cultural object allows for the maintenance of rarity, consensus, and ease of recognition required for the expression of class boundaries in a postmodern era. For example, Erickson uses familiarity with well-known restaurants as a measure of embodied tastes. Instead, I would suggest that cultural elites’ embodied tastes for dining in urban areas such as Toronto are expressed through a specialized food aesthetic that valorizes new syncretic cuisines, exotic preparations, and the reappropriation of downtrodden peasant foods. The particular cultural objects (e.g., restaurants, chefs, dishes) are less important, since they are constantly changing, than participating and having conversational competence in this specialized, esoteric, and dynamic aesthetic.

Erickson is certainly right that superficial knowledge of topics of universal interest—what DiMaggio (1987: 443) calls least-common-denominator talk—are prerequisites to everyday cordial workplace interaction. But class reproduction operates according to social processes distinct from this weak form of Durkheimian solidarity. Cultural practices are much more subtle than mere familiarity with popular cul-
tural objects. Elites seldom choose friends and marriage partners, nor promote or give favors to work colleagues, based upon whether they have heard of a particular baseball player, movie, or restaurant. Rather theorists such as Goffman, Collins, Bourdieu, and DiMaggio all argue that these more intensive affiliative bonds and hierarchical boundaries are sustained through fine-grained tastes, styles of interaction, protean sensibilities. Cultural elites may have regular chats around the coffee machine with fellow employees of varied social backgrounds based upon “sharing names” (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979: 75) of popular cultural objects such as recent movies and new restaurants. But these same elites will only engage in detailed discussions about a movie or eat at a new restaurant with particular friends who share their favored interactional style and aesthetic.

Erickson’s measures appear to be influenced by a confusion between the variables used in the survey instrument in Distinction, and the constructs these variables were intended to capture. Although Bourdieu measures familiarity with high cultural objects such as Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier, he is not hypothesizing that this familiarity is the social mechanism at work in reproduction. Rather, cultural elites’ ability to enjoy (i.e., decode) “difficult” music leads to familiarity with particular cultural objects as a necessary artifact. Thus, Bourdieu uses familiarity as a surrogate measure that is assumed to covary with the ability to appreciate, because it is a consequence of a particular style of consuming. Measuring consumption practices indirectly through cultural objects is already problematic in 1960s France. With the increasingly blurred and dynamic cultural categories of postmodernity, familiarity with particular objects has become an even more unsatisfactory measure of embodied tastes.

As reputational criteria. Michele Lamont’s Money, Morals, and Manners (1992) is a direct descendent of Warnerian social class research in both its methodology and findings, though interpreted from a Weberian rather than functionalist perspective. In order to document the various resources used by upper-middle class men to produce social class boundaries in both France and the United States, she requests of her informants the criteria they use for evaluating others, examining the personal characteristics that informants admire and despise, leading them to seek out or avoid interaction. Lamont operationalizes embodied tastes, then, as those tastes that people voice as the basis for their hierarchical judgments of others. This measurement strategy is virtually identical to Lloyd Warner’s (1949) Evaluated Participation method, in which his research assistants conducted ethnographic interviews asking questions which allowed informants to express the specific criteria they use to judge the reputation of fellow townspeople.

An important finding of Lamont’s study is that American tastes are more diffuse than the French, and Americans are less scornful toward the tastes of those in lower social strata. Thus Lamont argues that cultural boundaries have less ritual strength in the United States, and so do not have the stratifying impact that Bourdieu finds in France. To reach this conclusion, she implicitly assumes that the assertiveness with

6 The bachelor who gives his fiancee a sports quiz to determine if he will marry her in movie Diner offers a humorous exception that demonstrates the implausibility of these criteria.
which her informants invoke a cultural hierarchy in the interviews reflects directly the strength of the cultural boundaries that they draw in everyday social interaction. Because upper-middle class American men do not talk about lower class tastes in as derogatory a fashion as the French and profess more catholic tastes, they are less prone to exclude lower class people from their work, leisure, and romantic lives based on taste criteria.

Lamont's approach leads to a description of informants' status ideologies, which are not necessarily congruent with their embodied tastes. Lamont (1992; Lamont and Lareau, 1988) argues that class boundaries are revealed through their explicit defense, such as in the "class racism" of the French. But, if one accepts (as Lamont does) the premise that boundaries are sustained through the micro-politics of social interaction, then the work of Goffman, Cicourel, Bourdieu, and Willis demonstrates that knowledge of and strategic defense of boundaries is not a necessary precondition for their successful enactment. In fact, this sort of explicit ideological struggle to defend boundaries is actually a sign that boundaries are under siege, or, in Bourdieu's terminology, they have moved from the common sense acceptance of doxa to orthodoxy and heterodoxy (see also Berger, 1995).

A central premise of BTT is that tastes are embedded in the presuppositional interpretive frameworks of the habitus, and so exist typically as implicit, practical knowledge rather than as explicit ends-oriented statements of ideology or values. Thus, the relationship between valuative statements of tastes and tastes expressed in social interaction is problematic. Americans' catholic evaluations of others' tastes do not necessarily imply that enacted tastes have less hierarchical import. For example, though I may be unwilling to represent my tastes for foreign and independent "experimental" movies as superior to others' tastes for action-adventure films due to cultural relativist proclivities, my movie viewing practices still serve to draw strong boundaries: I seek out the former, I particularly enjoy the company of others who also enjoy such films, conversations with friends tend to center on these films rather than others, action-adventure films are enjoyed primarily as camp which tends to exclude those who read them straight.

Further, it is important to situate Lamont's findings in their socio-historical context. While she makes similar admonitions, her interpretation assumes a nomothetic conception of tastes as symbolic boundaries: tastes are assumed to take the same form and to be expressed in the same manner in the United States of the 1990s as in 1960s France. Cross-cultural differences in self-representation need to be considered. Since discursive self-understandings of social practices vary cross-culturally (Levine, 1984), the historic importance of social class hierarchies expressed through humanist abilities in France and the opposite populist, egalitarian ideology of the United States may well result in hierarchical tastes that are more explicit and socially perceived in the former and implicit and psychologized in the latter. Lamont's American responses -- as well as those of omnivore-univore studies -- are exactly what one would expect in a country that has been the most susceptible to the postmodern leveling of high and mass culture due to the cultural dominance of these populist, egalitarian ideals. In fact, rather than an indicator of weak boundaries, I find in the study reported below that catholic tastes are actually a potent form of
embodied cultural capital. Because egalitarian values are held in such esteem in the United States, to harshly scorn the tastes of others is considered a vulgar practice (declassé), a parochial attitude of the less cultured as opposed to the cultural relativism that signifies American elites. Likewise, it is no surprise that, amongst European-descended Americans, multiculturalism receives its greatest support from cultural elites (see Bryson, 1996).

As styles of appreciation. David Halle’s (1993) study of household art is the only major American empirical study of BTT that provides a direct operationalization of embodied tastes. Halle conducts ethnographic tours of homes in which he documents all of the displayed artwork and asks numerous open-ended questions about these pieces. His interest is not only to document the types of art displayed but, more importantly, to understand the different ways that people appreciate this art. Rather than probing for meta-interpretations of tastes, Halle discusses the artworks with his informants to extract specific grounded expressions of taste that reasonably approximate how such tastes are deployed in everyday social situations.

While embodied tastes are persuasively operationalized, Halle’s interpretations of these data reveal, I believe, a fundamental misreading of BTT. To reach his conclusion that ... “the areas of overlap between the working class and the upper and upper-middle class undermine the idea of a gulf between popular and ‘high’ taste”, Halle argues that differences between classes in the genres of art they display are superficial. The upper classes have more abstract art, he argues, but they share with the lower classes a similar urge to decorate plain walls. And while the upper classes tend to display primitive art while the lower classes display religious iconography, in both cases symbolic meaning is conveyed by these objects that pertains to the social world of the residents. In addition, there are shared tastes across class in the contents of the artworks, particularly for depopulated landscapes.

To reach these conclusions Halle uses his own etic interpretive categories, which emphasize comparisons that reveal between-class similarities while shying away from interpretive categories that could reveal significant class-marking boundaries. These categories serve Halle’s purpose of drawing out similarities across class, but his research never allows his informants to provide their own emic classifying scheme for discriminating differences in artworks (see Peterson and Simkus, 1992). While it is true that most of his informants prefer landscapes, we need to know further: What particular types of landscapes? Why do they like them? How do they appreciate them? Why is it that watercolors of depopulated landscapes such as those often sold at craft fairs are viewed by the upper middle class as tacky — something that violates their aesthetic sensibilities — while landscapes painted in modernist idioms are perceived as desirable? Why is it that the working class finds these same watercolors to be beautiful and the more abstract landscapes to be “too complex to understand” and “a waste of money”? Such differences are critical to a theory based upon relational differences in taste.

Another part of Halle’s argument is that upper, upper-middle, and working class styles of appreciation are very similar. This claim allows Halle to reduce art to a Warnerian status good that is an ineffective exclusionary class barrier because it is easily copied:
“Even if there is a dominant culture that is used to filter out candidates for entry into elite positions, then certain parts of it are easily adopted by those of humble origins who wish to move upward. How hard is it to take down the reproduction of the Last Supper in the dining room and replace it with a reproduction of a Picasso, Matisse, or Mondrian?” (1993: 197–198)

Halle arrives at this interpretation by once again generalizing to generic themes that gloss over class differences in his data that are congenial to BTT. Take, for instance, Halle’s interpretation of his respondents’ preferences for abstract art. His statistics on displayed art fit well an interpretation that preferences are based upon an upper-middle class formal aesthetic versus the pragmatic aesthetic of the working class: abstract art is displayed by 55% of the upper class, 32% of upper-middle class, and 2.5% of the working class informants, and a much higher percentage of upper and upper-middle class households like abstract art than do working class households (53% to 29%). In order to support his conclusion that the abstract/non-abstract genre distinction is superficial, then, he must argue that modes of appreciation are similar across these genres. To accomplish this interpretive feat, Halle constructs highly-abstracted etic categories defined broadly enough to collapse the variety of responses into a single category. He argues that, for all classes, abstract art is viewed as “decorative”, and that those who dislike abstract art do so because the artists are talentless frauds (Halle, 1993: 128–136).

But Halle’s data reveal that this interpretation is implausible. Instead, the “purely decorative attitude” of upper and upper-middle class informants toward abstract art bears a striking resemblance to Bourdieu’s description of the distanced, playful, abstracted gaze of high cultural capital consumers:

“To me, abstract art is basically design – pure design and decorative design. My favorite is Klee – it’s the design that I like.”

“Being a mathematician, I love Mondrian. I see balance and color in the paintings. I feel comfortable with them.”

“I love abstract art. It’s so clear, everything else seems so fuzzy. It seems to come down to the central forms and shapes. I think it’s very beautiful.”

“I like some abstract art. I like some Picasso and I very much like Mondrian’s paintings. What I like about it are the lines. [probe] Well, I like the way they go. I have a precise sense of how I like things to look. For example, these eggs [painted Russian Easter eggs]; it’s important to me in what position they are arranged. If someone rearranges them, I can tell. That’s what I like about Mondrian, the arrangement of the lines.”

Notice that the informants have well-formulated preferences regarding abstract art, that they like abstract art because of its formal properties rather than specific contents, that they are easily able to give specific references of artists they enjoy, that none describes the ability of the painting to represent reality, and, in the last case, that the taste is abstracted enough to transfer to something other than a painting. Each of these aspects of abstract art appreciation supports BTT’s description of cultural elites. Much of the rest of Halle’s data is susceptible to similar revisionist interpretations.
4. Cultural capital and taste in the United States

Foundational to my rebuttal of Bourdieu’s critics is the idea that a compelling empirical investigation of BTT must begin by specifying the theory with respect to the socio-historical particularities of the population of interest. This specification requires explicating both the particular tastes and consumption practices through which cultural capital is articulated in fields of consumption, and the particular set of consumption fields that serve as the predominant domains for social interaction amongst cultural elites. I argue that, in the contemporary United States, operationalizing BTT requires emphasizing measures of tastes and consumption practices (embodied cultural capital) over preferences for categories of consumption objects (objectified cultural capital). And it requires measures that emphasize the consumption of mass rather than high culture categories. Systematic differences across cultural capital volumes in tastes and consumption practices within these fields that can be linked to antecedent social conditions that structure the habitus offer support for BTT.

I summarize briefly findings from an ethnographic study conducted in a rural American college community using this approach. In this study, I conducted in-home unstructured interviews in which we discussed the most involving consumption fields in the contemporary United States: clothing, home and decor, travel, music, television and movies, reading, hobbies, food, and socializing. A group of ten informants were selected from both the top and bottom quintiles of cultural capital resources in the county, using father’s occupation and education, informant education, and informant occupation as measures. The analysis describes six systematic differences in tastes and consumption practices between those informants with high cultural capital resources (HCCs) and those with low cultural capital resources (LCCs) and draws linkages to differences in social conditions between these two groups. A detailed account of this study can be found in Holt (1998).

4.1. Materiality and taste

A central contention of BTT is that tastes are structured through continuities in interactions with material culture. LCCs are acculturated in a social milieu in which they engage continually the material rigors of everyday life (e.g., paying monthly utility bills, keeping the car running, saving money to visit relatives) and so the ability to manage these material constraints becomes a primary value. LCC tastes are organized to appreciate that which is functional or practical – the taste of necessity (Bourdieu, 1984: 177). Goods and activities are valued for their embodiment of the practical: virtuoso skills that achieve utilitarian ends evoke praise, cultural texts that realistically capture personal experiences are appreciated, sensual pleasures take precedence.

In contrast, HCCs are acculturated in a social milieu in which they seldom encounter material constraints, and which emphasizes abstracted discussion of ideas and pleasures removed from the material world. For HCCs the material value of cultural objects is taken for granted: instead taste becomes a realm of self-expression, a
means of constructing subjectivity. HCC tastes express this distance from necessity – a formal gaze and a playful attitude that often takes the material value of cultural objects for granted. This fundamental distinction in relationship to material culture underlies three important dimensions of taste and consumption practice that distinguish LCC and HCC informants across many of the categories discussed in the interviews: materialism versus idealism, material versus formal aesthetics, and referential versus critical appreciation.

**Materialism versus idealism.** Because day-to-day living for LCCs has been materially constrained, the good life is usually cast in terms of having an abundance of the things that one likes, and having things that are popularly understood as scarce and luxurious. Many LCCs grew up and currently live in relatively small living spaces – apartments, trailers, and bungalows. So these informants uniformly value a large living space and large yards and have pursued these goals to the limits of their financial resources. LCCs with higher incomes consume and express preferences for consumption objects commonly understood as symbols of material abundance: expensive cars such as Mercedes and BMWs, expensive restaurants, even a yacht. Three LCCs mention cruises as an ideal vacation, describing the great abundance and variety of dining and social activities. Other LCC informants have lower incomes so can’t afford such clearly designated signs of abundance, yet they too express a yearning for abundance and luxury within the universe of consumption objects that is economically feasible. Amongst LCCs, restaurants that serve buffet-style are consensus favorites – the contemporary American equivalent of the French working class meals characterized by “plenty” and “freedom” (Bourdieu, 1984: 194).

In contrast, through informal and formal humanistic education, HCCs learn to value metaphysical as opposed to material aspects of life. Material abundance and luxury are debased, crass forms of consumption because they are antithetic to the life of the mind. HCC tastes can be characterized as anti-materialist because they are very sensitive to, and desire to absolve themselves from, ascriptions of materialism. While they tend to have higher incomes, HCCs live in smaller houses than the economically secure LCCs, are interested in ethnic rather than fine dining, and have furniture that is more worn and less valuable. HCCs have been raised with few material constraints and so experience material deprivation quite differently. Idealism can take on a positive cast: like functionalist design, material paucity (i.e., ascetism) is often an aesthetic for HCCs (cf. Bourdieu, 1984: 196). This said, it should also be noted that HCCs are at least as willing to make material acquisitions, often spending large amounts of money in so doing, as long as these acquisitions can be rationalized as instrumental to desired experiences. That is, it’s not the material characteristics of consumption that are of consequence, but, rather, the cultural understandings that are inscribed in the tastes and consumption practices of each group: HCCs seek to negate connotations of waste, ostentation, and extravagance by constructing their tastes for fine goods in terms of experiential value of the object, whereas for LCCs value in excess of experiential “uses” is valued as indicative of luxury, of distance from material needs.

**Material versus formal aesthetics.** For durable goods such as furniture and clothing, LCC tastes are organized by a desire for pragmatic solutions to everyday needs.
LCC informants express concern for the utilitarian characteristics of their house and its furnishings – they must be comfortable, functional, durable, and easy to care for. For example, one informant talks at length about acquiring furniture that has hardwood in places where furniture usually wears, such as chair and sofa arms. HCCs often share LCC material requirements for home interiors. Comfort and durability are still important. But rather than dominant dimensions of their taste, material characteristics are baseline criteria; choices between materially satisfactory options are based upon formal aesthetic qualities. HCCs view their homes as canvasses upon which they express their aesthetic sensibilities. Interiors need to be visually appealing, to provide the appropriate experiential properties. Decorating is a highly personalized and personalizing activity that is an aesthetic expression of the cultivated sensibilities of the decorator. Similar differences in aesthetics were found for clothing as well.

Critical versus referential appreciation. HCCs and LCCs apply distinctive styles of interpretation in their consumption of entertainment categories such as books, television, film, and music. HCCs favor critical interpretations of cultural texts. Applying a formal interpretive scheme, HCCs read popular entertainment as entertaining fictions that are potentially edifying but that do not reflect directly the empirical world. They show more interest in the qualities of the writing and acting, and less concern about the relevance of the content that is being represented. LCCs, in contrast, tend to interpret cultural texts from a referential perspective: they read these texts in terms of whether they are realistic depictions of the world relevant to their own lives. Because LCCs tend to apply the classificatory system used in everyday life to cultural texts, they are attracted to programs, movies, and music that feel "real", that reflect their ideals and values or that speak directly to their current life situation, while they actively avoid texts that contain unpleasant truths that remind them of personal problems or that convey values opposed to their own.

4.2. Work and taste

Another central premise of BTT is that class reproduction occurs through acculturation in particular skills and dispositions required for occupational success through an overdetermined variety of everyday interactions with parents, peers, and teachers. Importantly, these cultural capital assets not only allow for occupational success, but also become valorized as ends in themselves and, so, serve as a currency to accrue status in the parallel symbolic economy of consumption. HCC careers are characterized by an emphasis on symbolic analysis – the necessity to synthesize and manipulate information, to understand and respond to new situations, to innovate rather than follow rote instructions. Structured by an ideology of meritocracy and entrepreneurialism, these knowledge-driven occupations place a premium on professional autonomy, peer competition, and the pursuit of an ever-changing knowledge base needed to maintain leverage in the labor market. Further, in the contemporary United States HCC employment is characterized by a highly mobile national labor market for professional positions which requires frequent integration into new social networks with heterogeneous interests and values, structuring a cosmopolitan sensi-
bility amongst HCCs. In sum, the labor market conditions experienced by contemporary American HCCs structure their tastes, through the habitus, to emphasize self-actualization, individuality, and cosmopolitanism.

In contrast, LCCs participate in a local labor market for highly routinized jobs. Work is a job, rarely a career. While many LCC informants like their job, particularly because of the social outlet it provides, and express pride in what they do, they also describe the tasks they are asked to perform as mundane, providing little intellectual or creative challenge. Instead, working class jobs are characterized by rote application of technique, high levels of surveillance, and negligible demand for creativity and problem-solving. LCC consumption, then, is often constructed in opposition to rather than contiguous with work – pursuing experiences more exciting and fulfilling than work provides. This orientation results in consumption practices that have a more autotelic cast compared to the instrumental, achievement orientation of HCCs. There is little sense of a competitive job market in which improving skills is critical for maintaining labor market leverage. Rather than individual achievement, working class positions emphasize communal mores. For LCCs, then, tastes are structured by a habitus valuing locality, autotelic experience, and community.

_Cosmopolitan versus local_. HCCs understand their social world to be much more expansive than do LCCs. Of the 10 HCC informants, all have lived in other states and five in other countries. They regularly travel around the United States and to other countries to visit friends and family, for business, and for vacations. In contrast, only two of the LCC informants have lived outside the state in which they currently reside, they rarely travel outside of the mid-Eastern states, and only one talks about the importance of friends outside the immediate vicinity. So LCC tastes are focused on local cultural resources because their social world is dominated by the local community.

I find that that this distinction, longstanding in sociology, has a pervasive influence on tastes. The most powerful expression of cosmopolitan versus local tastes is through perceptions of and desires for the exotic – consumption objects far removed conceptually from what is considered to be normative within a category. Both HCCs and LCCs enjoy variety in their consumption to a greater or lesser extent, but they differ in their subjective understandings of what constitutes variety. What is exotic for LCCs tends to be mundane for HCCs, and what is exotic for HCCs is unfathomable, unknown, or repugnant for LCCs. And, while LCCs tend to find comfort in objects that are familiar, HCCs tend to seek out and desire exotic consumption objects.

These exotic tastes are pronounced in categories such as food and entertainment in which normative choices are widely followed so that the potential for ones consumption to be understood as orthodox is high. Discussing food, LCCs offer conventional choices as their favorites for both home-cooked meals and restaurant meals, voicing uncertainty about or disdain toward more exotic choices, while HCCs frequently emphasize preferences for the exotic. Similar differences were evident in entertainment choices as well. For whites who live outside of urban areas, the most distant and exotic group in their cultural imagination are African American inner city poor people. How informants position their tastes in regard to urban African Ameri-
can cultural forms such as rap music, then, is revealing. LCCs’ adamant dislike for or bewilderment about rap affirms the homogeneous ideals of the local community, while HCCs’ respect for and interest in rap is an insistent marker of tastes proclaiming a social world that is not only geographically but also racially and economically inclusive.

**Consumer subjectivity as individuality versus local identity.** Cultural historians and critics argue persuasively that the pursuit of individuality through consumption is a central characteristic of advanced capitalist (often “consumer”) societies, the United States in particular (Jameson, 1991; Baudrillard, 1988; Lears, 1994). This characterization aptly describes HCCs, but is inaccurate for LCCs. Daniel Miller’s (1987) conception of the relationship between consumption and subjectivity provides a framework that can be used to explain this difference. According to Miller (following Simmel), consumption is the process through which persons reappropriate cultural meanings that, through mass production, have become objectified in consumption objects. In highly-differentiated, monetized societies dominated by the proliferation and fragmentation of objectified culture (i.e., meanings represented by material goods and services), this process of appropriation becomes increasingly problematic. So practical strategies evolve to allow for the construction of subjectivity through consumption.

While consumer subjectivity is a problematic goal for both HCCs and LCCs, they pursue different strategies to overcome this tension. Given their cosmopolitan social milieu and their equation of subjectivity with individuality, consumer subjectivity for HCCs requires constructing what they perceive to be a unique, original style through consumption objects. Thus, HCCs experience the homogenizing potential of commodity goods to a far greater extent than do LCCs, and, so, are more energetic in their attempts to individuate their consumption. To express an individualistic sense of subjectivity through consumption is inherently contradictory in an era in which most goods are mass produced and experiences are mass consumed, yet HCCs attempt to produce individual subjectivity through authenticity and connoisseurship.

HCCs locate subjectivity in what they perceive to be authentic – goods that are artisanal rather than mass produced, and experiences that they perceive to be removed from, and so minimally contaminated by, the commodity form. HCCs tend to disavow mass culture even when mass-produced goods are of high quality, and they camouflage their use of mass-produced goods when using them is unavoidable. For example, compare LCC and HCC vacation preferences. Those LCCs who can afford to take a vacation uniformly favor popular destinations such as Disney World, Sea World, the Pocono mountains, and the beaches of New Jersey and Delaware. They also tend to prefer trips where the activities are planned by others and highly routinized (ocean cruises, “all-in-one” bus and plane tours, theme parks). In contrast, HCCs dislike and so tend to avoid what they perceive to be mass-produced (and, so, artificial) tourist activities, and, instead, wherever they are, engage in a tourist style that seeks the “authentic” experience which is found through exploration and happenstance rather than routinized and popular activities. The authentic is achieved when one actually enters the “world” of a different social milieu, rather than gazing at it from outside.
HCC subjectivity is also achieved through connoisseurship, which acts to reconfigure mass cultural objects to construct an individual style. Applying nuanced, often idiosyncratic approaches to evaluate and appreciate consumption objects, connoisseurs accentuate aspects of the consumption object that are relatively ignored by other consumers. Thus, personal style is expressed through consumption practice even if the object itself is widely consumed. This stylistic practice necessitates the development of finely-grained vocabularies to tease out ever more detailed nuances within a category, the expression of opinionated and often eclectic evaluations of alternatives, and the ability to engage in passionate appreciation of consumption objects meeting one’s calculus of “quality” within a category.

In contrast, because LCC subjectivity is local and collective, consumer subjectivity depends upon community acknowledgment of particular tastes and practices. In other words, rather than seeking out authentic de commodified goods and applying idiosyncratic tastes to mass goods, LCC subjectivity parallels the role of insiders within consumer subcultures: they develop the requisite knowledge, skills, and social capital within a particular activity which, then, become key resources for the construction of subjectivity by self and others. Because for LCCs subjectivity does not require asserting individuality in relation to mass culture or normative local tastes, there is no contradiction between subjectivity, mass consumer goods, and the conventions of mass culture. In fact, mass goods and conventions often provide useful resources from which a local identity is constructed. Since LCCs do not participate in social worlds in which subjectivity is constructed through distinctive consumption, they seldom use the connoisseur’s vocabulary of expertise and passion to talk about their preferences. Interview questions that HCCs use as opportunities to express fine-grained sensibilities provoke terse responses from LCCs who understand these questions to ask for trivial expressions of preference rather than as an invitation for a consumerist performance.

Leisure as self actualization versus autotelic sociality. HCCs place tremendous stock in self-actualizing experiences. So, while opposed to material abundance, they desire a bounty of these types of experiences. HCCs evince an orientation toward leisure that mirrors their approach to work. They yearn for and seek out diverse, educational, informative experiences that allow them to achieve competence and acquire knowledge, and they participate in hobbies that emphasize developing competences and creative expression (see Lamont (1992) on self actualization and consumption). This is not to argue that HCCs understand leisure as an instrumental pursuit, but, rather, that the intrinsic satisfactions of leisure accrue from learning, achieving, and creating. Like HCCs, LCCs also participate in many hobbies in which they apply skills they have learned and further hone these skills. Yet, whereas HCCs understand these hobbies as reflections of and means to accumulate valued skills and knowledge, and as site for achievement, LCCs emphasize their autotelic aspects—the intrinsic enjoyment that results from the knowledgeable application of skills and talents with others who also enjoy the activity.

The distinctiveness of HCC and LCC leisure practices is evidenced in the consumption of nature. Due in part to the locale of the study, both HCCs and LCCs engage in extensive consumption of nature—participating in activities such as gar-
Denning, hunting, fishing, and hiking. However, HCC and LCC nature consumption differ considerably. HCCs use nature as a resource that allows them to express their creative abilities. For example, several HCCs describe their gardening much as an artist describes painting, playing with the variety of colors and shapes of perennials as a means of self-expression. In contrast, LCCs tend to commune with rather than express themselves through nature, often with others. HCCs and LCCs consume nature differently because they value different dimensions of the experience. For LCCs the value of leisure inheres primarily in the experience itself and the use of this experience as a social resource; while for HCCs leisure is valued, like other commodities, primarily as a resource that allows for individual expression and personal achievement.

5. Discussion

Given the complexity of consumption patterns in advanced capitalist societies, it is not surprising that measuring social patterns of tastes has become one of the most vexing issues in cultural sociology. In this essay, I argue that accurate descriptions of such patterns require a more nuanced conception of taste than what is currently used in most empirical studies. Because tastes are theorized to operate as class boundaries through the micropolitics of everyday social interaction, documenting expressions of taste in their natural settings in the style of Goffman or ethnomethodological studies of science and education would be ideal. Assuming that the dispersion of settings for these interactions makes them too difficult to track, ethnographic interviews in the style of David Halle’s study of household art that culled detailed, grounded accounts of tastes is a viable alternative method. However, neither of these techniques is well suited to describe the macroscopic distribution of tastes across social collectivities. For research questions of this type, most studies of consumption patterns use surveys. Thus, for many cultural sociologists, the pragmatic question raised by this critique is: How can researchers infer patterns of embodied tastes — which are configured within particular socio-historical fields and are seldom correlated directly with cultural objects — from questions that are amenable to survey collection?

Constructing survey questions that measure directly embodied tastes is one potential solution. But this approach raises a fundamental epistemological problem, one that frequently undermines values and attitude surveys. Bourdieu and most other influential cultural theorists argue that, in its subjective form, culture exists largely as presuppositional understandings, knowledges and embodied skills (i.e., existing at a practical rather than discursive level of consciousness, in Giddens’ terms). If this is so, then asking people directly about their styles of consumption is theoretically suspect. Informants’ responses to these questions are best understood as ideological accounts constructed for the rhetorical purposes of the survey situation rather than as unmediated representations of habitus. Instead, because people’s self-understandings are grounded in the specificities of everyday life, questions need to attend to these specific contexts.
Most surveys of consumption in both marketing and sociology err in the opposite direction. They measure preferences for and ownership of consumption objects, and preferences for and participation in consumption activities, but seldom rise above this variable level of analysis to examine patterns of embodied tastes. Statistical analyses are confined to searching for patterns of preferences, ownership, and uses. This type of analysis assumes implicitly that social class is reproduced either through status objects or objectified cultural capital. Instead, analyses of survey data need to interpret the embodied tastes — presuppositional interpretive frameworks of tastes and the consumption practices that result from their application — which lead to these consumption patterns. How then to construct a survey that best allows one to make this inferential leap from these grounded preferences to patterns of embodied taste?\(^7\)

Recent research has sought to overcome the limitations of object-centered analyses by abstracting away from the cultural contents of preferences to search for formal patterns of taste. A robust finding in these American studies is that groups with plentiful cultural capital resources tend to have omnivorous tastes as compared to the univore tastes of those with fewer cultural capital resources (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978; Hughes and Peterson, 1983; Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996). While this finding is certainly illuminating, the limitation of this approach is that very few aspects of taste can be operationalized strictly in terms of formal patterns, abstracting away cultural content. It is no accident that the omnivore-univore pattern has dominated American empirical studies of taste for many years, while other important differences in taste that are not readily susceptible to formal analysis, such as those considered above, have been ignored in survey research. To measure these other embodied tastes requires inferring the cultural meanings of preferences, participation, and ownership, a complicated interpretive endeavor requiring a precarious series of inferences.

To illuminate the difficulties in inferring the meanings of cultural objects, I use findings from my study to problematize the interpretations offered in Bethany Bryson’s (1996) recent study of musical tastes. Bryson uses the new battery of culture questions in the American General Social Survey to describe patterns of dislikes for different musical genres. For example, Bryson finds that HCCs tend to dislike country music which, she argues, is due to its associations with LCCs. My data suggest an alternative interpretation. Informants in my study divide country music into two ritually potent sub-genres: “contemporary” and “traditional” (see Peterson, 1978, 1995). The most popular radio station in the area plays contemporary country, while the traditional variant (which is usually understood to include bluegrass, West-

\(^7\) Influential cultural sociologists seeking to understand the social patterning of tastes have concluded that satisfactory survey measurement requires attending to “context”. At the 1995 Meaning and Measurement Workshop, sponsored by the Culture Section of the American Sociological Association, most of the position papers emphasized building the context of cultural patterns into surveys. This is another way of saying, I think, that studies need to focus on embodied rather than objectified cultural capital: rather than cultural objects alone, we need to understand the meanings and uses of cultural objects ascribed by particular groups in particular situations. But, at the workbench level, how are such subjective contexts to be incorporated?
ern swing, and Appalachian "old time" music as well as the "hard" country music of the 1950s-70s exemplified by Hank Williams, George Jones, and Merle Haggard) is much less popular, played occasionally on the local public radio station and in live performances at a handful of clubs in the area. For LCCs, traditional country music is the music they grew up with, a style that they view as backward. All but one who likes country, then, invokes the distinction between this style of country – often describing it as "twangy" and critically stereotyping the lyrical content (e.g., "The guy talks about his dog dying"). LCCs strongly prefer contemporary country because its lyrics speak to their current lives and aspirations, whereas traditional evokes an old-fashioned and deprived past. HCCs interpret the term "country" to refer to what is by far the most popular genre within this broad category – contemporary country – and distance themselves from it. But this does not mean that they dislike all country music. Many HCCs like country music, but their interests are focused entirely on non-commercial genres such as traditional, bluegrass, and Western swing. These are described as authentic species of American music, rather than as a genre whose lyrics relate to their lives. In this case, then, country music is a relatively impotent cultural category compared to more nuanced within-category distinctions between different genres.

To take another example, in contrast to my findings that rap music is differentially favored by HCCs to reflect global and exotic tastes, Bryson reports that rap is typically disliked by HCCs. These apparently contradictory findings can be explained by situating the tastes of informants in their appropriate socio-historical context rather than assuming that musical genres have immanent social meanings. The informants in my study are white and live in an ethnically homogeneous setting far removed from urban life. In this locale, rap is a cosmopolitan badge for HCCs and a foreign conundrum for LCCs. However, in urban areas where, presumably, many GSS subjects live, rap is the lingua franca of youth culture. It is popular amongst LCCs because it resonates directly with their current life circumstances (much as contemporary country does for the rural LCCs in my study). In this locale, rap cannot be used by HCCs as an exotic object to express cosmopolitanism. Thus, rather than a stable cultural category, rap music is better conceived as a multivocal symbolic resource. Analyses that assume that genre categories have a single invariant meaning conflate the different meanings of musical categories such as rap that are constructed when different interpretive communities use these cultural resources in distinctive ways.

From these examples, one can draw the following implications to improve measurement of consumption patterns using survey data:

(1) Measure cultural objects at a level of specificity that allows for inferences regarding embodied tastes. In the country music example, gross measures of cate-

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8 Along these lines, it is interesting to note that one of the most trendy and influential movements in the alternative college music scene in the United States is a revival of hard edged country music in the traditional style, which is becoming institutionalized and marketed under names such as "no depression" country (named after the title of an influential early record by the now-defunct band Uncle Tupelo) and "insurgent country".
gory preference obscure the contextual specificity of particular genres within the category that are indicative of systematic class differences in embodied tastes. The GSS questions ignore and so conflate an important genre distinction within country music that illuminates how HCCs construct an authentic indigenous musical form within the mostly mass cultural category of country music. This patterning can be recovered by using more fine-grained measures of country music tastes that compare preferences for commercially successful country artists (e.g., Garth Brooks, The Judds, Vince Gill) with those who work in more obscure veins of this genre (e.g., the “Austin” sound of Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Townes Van Zandt).

(2) Ascribe object meanings only with respect to interpretive communities. Most survey research implicitly adopts the widely debunked classical anthropological assumption that nation-states have homogeneous cultures. Instead, as the rap example illustrates, it is critical to understand the cultural frameworks that are applied by different collectivities within a consumption field. The social classificatory consequences of a 55 year-old Anglo-Saxon woman declaring her appreciation for rap and rattling off several favorite artists has entirely different semiotic value from Mexican- or African-American youth doing the same.

(3) Triangulate across consumption fields. Researchers can further improve the odds of properly interpreting tastes by expanding the unit of analysis to bundles of preferences across disparate consumption fields, as Bourdieu does in Distinction and as marketers typically do in lifestyle analyses. Even though one has taken pains to specify narrowly the cultural objects used in survey questions, because of the inherent polysemy of these objects they can still be consumed by different groups in many different ways. But these alternative interpretations can be narrowed considerably by constructing taste clusters based upon the covariation of cultural object preferences across fields. For example, a researcher can make more specific and credible inferences about embodied tastes if one knows that a fan of Jimmie Dale Gilmore also shops for clothing at thrift stores, eats several times a week at Asian storefront restaurants, thinks the television sitcom Roseanne is an excellent social satire, and is learning to play jazz saxophone.

(4) Construct questions based upon ethnographic description. Implications (1), (2), and (3) necessarily require a detailed knowledge of the understandings and uses of cultural objects by particular collectivities within particular consumption fields. To explicate these varied meanings across interpretive communities requires detailed emic knowledge that is best acquired through ethnographic investigation situated in a socio-historical understanding of the macro-structural constituents of these patterns (see Lamont, 1992). Alternatively, it may be possible to cull these meanings through close readings of popular cultural artifacts (e.g., magazines, talk shows, books, movies) in conjunction with cultural critics or insiders who have expert knowledge on these topics. Finally, because object meanings and uses are dynamic, it may be necessary to treat such surveys as ideographic instruments that must be routinely reconfigured – a conclusion that is pragmatically undesirable but theoretically irresistible.
References


