

## Problems in comparative research: The example of omnivorousness

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### Abstract

Comparison is one of the most powerful tools used in intellectual inquiry, since an observation made repeatedly is given more credence than is a single observation. In disciplines such as sociology and astronomy, that usually rely on observation rather than experimentation, the researcher has no control over any of the variables in play, so special attention must be paid to all the possible sorts of intended and unintended discrepancies between the cases that are being compared. Here we use the line of studies on the link between omnivorous taste and consumption and social status. First, we examine the role of comparative research on omnivorousness taste from its serendipitous discovery and its evolving conceptualization to questions about its passing. Second, we review six problems of conceptualization, operationalization and measurement encountered in comparative research. Third, we point to six sources of erroneous findings that are due to artifacts introduced by the methodology. Fourth, we show the importance of using alternative methods in comparative research. And finally, we explore the possibility that discrepant findings may be due to changes in the socio-cultural world.

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Comparison is one of the most powerful tools used in intellectual inquiry, since an observation made repeatedly is given more credence than is a single observation. In disciplines such as sociology and astronomy, that usually rely on observation rather than experimentation, the researcher has no control over any of the variables in play,<sup>1</sup> so special attention must be paid to all the possible sorts of intended and unintended discrepancies between the cases that are being compared. Researchers most often compare a single population at several points in time, or compare across several populations at the same point in time, or use different methods to observe

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<sup>1</sup> Observational studies, do, of course, attempt to eliminate the effect of variables, other than the independent variables, by statistically controlling for their influence. Though common, this practice of using “control variables” is some times suspect because the measurements of variables do not satisfy the assumptions of the statistical tests being used.

a single population. While these and other strategies of comparison are very important, they face serious pitfalls because of the many unintended differences between the cases being compared. The common hazards of comparative research are illustrated here by looking at the studies that have since the early 1990s tested for omnivorous tastes and consumption patterns.

This exploration of the strengths and pitfalls of comparative research is divided into five parts. First, we look at the role of comparative research in the development of the idea of omnivorousness taste from its serendipitous discovery and its evolving conceptualization to questions about its passing. Second, we review six problems of conceptualization, operationalization and measurement encountered in comparative research. Third, we point to six sources of erroneous findings that are due to artifacts introduced by the methodology. Fourth, we show the importance of using alternative methods in comparative research. And finally, we explore the possibility that discrepant findings may be due to changes in the socio-cultural world.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Omnivorousness born of comparative research

### 1.1. *The creation of distinction*

Pierre Bourdieu in 1979 published a path-breaking monograph *La Distinction: Critique Social du Judgment* that appeared in English in 1984.<sup>3</sup> *Distinction*, together with the other works by Bourdieu and his colleagues,<sup>4</sup> was singularly important for two reasons. For the first time it provided a theoretically grounded way to conceptualize the links between taste, status, and social class. Second, the work was based not on speculation or on the observation of small formations, but on a sophisticated survey questionnaire administered between 1963 and 1968 to 1217 respondents in and around Paris (1984, 503). Bourdieu's carefully documented survey design has greatly facilitated replications of the study.

The results Bourdieu obtained largely confirmed the view widely held in the first half of the 20th century that people make significant distinctions along a continuum between those of high taste and those with brutish tastes, known in North America as a differentiation between “highbrow snobs”<sup>5</sup> who patronized the fine arts and avoided contact with popular entertainment, and “lowbrows” who enjoyed what was often called “debased” or “brutish” popular

<sup>2</sup> Buraway (2003) discusses the importance of “revisits” in ethnographic research noting four causes of discrepancies found between the two sets of observations. We find in the population survey studies reviewed here roughly analogous examples of all four types of discrepancies he describes, and we find one he does not mention, discrepancies due to differences in the methodologies used.

<sup>3</sup> Of course over half a century ago Riesman (1950) published his remarkable study that contrasted an older middle-class way of organizing values, status, and behavior that he called “inner direction” with the emerging style he termed “other direction.” While his work won him wide popular acclaim in North America, including a cover story in *Time* magazine, other sociologists ignored his largely speculative work.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Bourdieu (1968, 1984, 1985), Bourdieu and Darbel (1990), and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977).

<sup>5</sup> The word “snob” is here used as the equivalent of highbrow in Bourdieu's sense of the word. Bourdieu, however, would distinguish between taste based on a subtle appreciation of the fine things in life and the more middle-brow acquisition of art experiences and objects because they are status-giving and expensive. While there have been calls for studies that focus not on what is consumed but on how it is consumed (Frith, 1996; Holt, 1997; Han, 2003), survey studies to date do not operationally distinguish the highbrow aesthete from the status-driven snob. It is not possible therefore to distinguish these two quite different orientations from the tastes they claim and what they consume. On this point see Bennett et al. (2005).

entertainment (Elliot, 1949; Lynes, 1954; Shils, 1958).<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu's book has been so influential for over 20 years for two quite different reasons. First, it served as a model and point of departure for later researchers, and second, following Weber's (1968) distinction between class and status, he went beyond the data to theorize the distinction between economic capital and cultural capital. This allowed him to identify an upper-class fraction with a great deal of cultural capital (snobbish highbrow tastes) but not much wealth and an upper-class fraction which had great wealth (economic capital) and middle-brow tastes.

### 1.2. Finding omnivorousness

At first Bourdieu's formulation was hotly debated, but in the last two decades it has been put to the test in comparative research by a number of researchers working in different countries to test its relevance beyond France of the late 1960s. For example, based on detailed interviews with a number of upper-middle class men, Lamont (1992) found that Parisians did indeed tend to select friends with highbrow tastes. Because her methods and measures were so different from Bourdieu's, her findings suggested the existence of the highbrow pattern even when a data collection quite different from Bourdieu's was used. Not content, however, simply to collect interviews at the site where Bourdieu had worked, Lamont wished to make hers a comparative study by testing the strength of the highbrow orientation in places other than Paris, so she made comparable interviews in a North American metropolitan center, New York, and to see whether small city elites choose friends on the same basis, she also interviewed in two regional cities, one in France and the other in the US. She found that highbrow snobbery was to be found in all four cities but it was not the predominant pattern anywhere but in Paris. New Yorkers more often than the others tended to choose friends on the basis of their economic capital, and the provincial elites of both countries more often chose friends on the basis of their honesty. Lamont's findings brought into question the assumption made by Bourdieu and many others that the highbrow pattern of taste was a class-based attribute and therefore to be found in all advanced capitalist societies.

In another study published in 1992 Albert Simkus and I reported on the results of a survey using data more comparable with those of Bourdieu. We expected to replicate Bourdieu's earlier findings on the way to focusing on other questions. Using data representative of the US population, from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) collected by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1982, we found, as expected, that a sample of persons in the higher cultural professions were most likely to express a taste for the fine arts and more likely than others to participate in fine arts activities. These highbrows also had the other attributes found by Bourdieu, a higher education, substantial income, and large city residence. To our great surprise, however, those in high-status occupations were also more likely than others to report being involved in a wide range of low-status activities, while respondents in the lowest status occupations were most limited in their range of cultural activities (Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Peterson, 1992). Given the Bourdieu (1984) findings, this was surprising because these 1982

<sup>6</sup> In his wide-ranging study, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Levine (1988) traced in great detail how highbrow standards were established in the latter part of the 19th century. See also Peterson (1997a). Tracing the efforts of cultural entrepreneurs in Boston's elite, DiMaggio (1982) provides a detailed case study describing the means by which the hegemony of the highbrow snob was established in the US. By the 1950s, commentators in North America such as Lynes (1954) regularly noted a third distinct "middlebrow" taste group that imitated highbrow conventions but did so without discernment. Significantly, in addition to identifying a highbrow elite and working class lowbrows, Bourdieu also found this intermediate middlebrow taste group in his data from the Paris of the early 1960s.

findings suggest to us that cultural capital was seen by many high-status US respondents 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. Noting that the findings contradicted the usual contrast between the exclusive highbrow snob and the indiscriminating lowbrow slob, we suggested that high status respondents seemed more nearly “omnivorous”<sup>7</sup> in their tastes, while those near the bottom of the status hierarchy were more nearly “univorous.”<sup>8</sup> It would have been possible to have concluded that these findings simply contradicted those Bourdieu had found, but based on the lead provided by Lamont (1992), that the relationship between status was not everywhere the same, we chose to suggest that, in the US at least, the pattern of highbrow snobbery was being replaced by highbrow omnivorousness.

Having found evidence for omnivorousness among those who are well educated and have high status jobs in the United States, and given the dramatic difference from the earlier findings of Pierre Bourdieu in France, it was interesting to ask whether patterns akin to omnivorousness were being found independently by researchers in other countries in the 1980s and early 1990s. In fact studies by Gripsrud (1989) and Blewitt (1993) working in the United Kingdom; Donnat (1994) working in France, and Schulze (1992) working in Germany all documented the presence of eclectic tastes among high status individuals.

Replication of the SPPA national survey in 1992 made it possible for Roger Kern and me to compare the findings of the earlier study and to take advantage of having comparable data collected using (largely) the same questions and administered in (largely) the same way to samples of persons drawn from the same population at two points of time 10 years apart (Peterson and Kern, 1996).<sup>9</sup> Omnivorousness was found, confirming the earlier findings, and it was found to be more prevalent among high-status individuals in 1992 than it had been in 1982. What accounted for this increase in omnivorousness? We tested two competing ideas: the possibility that high-status people were generally becoming more omnivorous, and alternatively, the possibility that younger more omnivorous age cohorts of high-status people were replacing older cohorts who were more likely to have the snobbish orientation. The statistical comparison showed that both these processes were taking place because the older cohorts were both more omnivorous than they had been, and also the younger age cohorts born after the Second World War were distinctly more omnivorous than the cohorts of high-status people born before 1945.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the term “omnivore” we considered several other possibilities. One was “dilettante.” The definition for dilettante given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “a lover of the fine arts; originally, one who cultivates art for the love of doing so rather than professionally, and so equals *amateur* as opposed to *professional*; but in later use it is generally applied more or less depreciatively to one who interests himself in an art or science merely as a pastime and without serious aim or study.”

This word is inappropriate both because what is focal here denotes people whose tastes range across numerous genres high and/or low, and omnivore does not have the negative connotations of dilettantism. Perhaps a more useful alternative term is “cosmopolitanism.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives two related definitions of “cosmopolitan.” First: “Belonging to all parts of the world; not restricted to any one country or its inhabitants.” And second: “Having the characteristics which arise from, or are suited to, a range over many different countries; free from national limitations or attachments.” The idea of unbounded taste fits the situations we have described, but while cosmopolitanism connotes tastes that cross national boundaries, omnivorousness seems more appropriate in that it connotes tastes that cross class, gender, ethnic, religious, age, and similar boundaries.

<sup>8</sup> These findings had been presaged by DiMaggio (1987) discussion of “classification in art” and in the empirical findings of Robinson et al. (1985) using the same SPPA data set.

<sup>9</sup> Status had been measured in a different way by Peterson and Simkus (1992) than it was by Peterson and Kern (1996), but the latter recalculated the findings for the 1982 data where new measure of status were introduced (using music tastes rather than occupation) to make the results of the two studies comparable.

### 1.3. Measuring the geographic distribution

In the years since 1992, a number of people working in the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Australia help test the veracity of the shift from highbrow snob to inclusive omnivore. These numerous comparative studies have greatly expanded our understanding of the reasons for and implications of this shift. A search found empirical articles and books based on data from eleven countries of North America, Australia, and Europe.<sup>10</sup> Most, but not all, explicitly use the highbrow snob versus omnivore formulation.

These studies include: *Australia* Bennett et al. (1999), Emmison (2003). *Austria* Gebesmair (1998). *Belgium* Vander Stichele and Laermans (2003, 2004). *Canada* Erickson (1996), Fisher and Preece (2003), Friedman and Ollivier (2004). *France* Hennion et al. (2000), Coulangeon (2003, 2005), Bellevance et al. (2004), Lahire (2004). *Germany* Kirchberg and Westphal (1997), Hartmann (1999), Gebesmair (2003, 2005). *The Netherlands* Van Rees et al. (1999), Van Eijck (1999, 2000, 2001), Van Eijck and Bargeman (2004), Van Eijck and Knulst (2005). *Israel* Katz-Gerro and Shavit (1998). *Spain* López-Sintas and García-Álvarez (2002a, 2002b, 2004). *Sweden* Bihagen and Katz-Garro (2000). *United Kingdom* Longhurst and Mike (1996), Carrabine and Longhurst (1999), Warde et al. (1999), Olsen et al. (1998), Warde and Martens (2000), Tally Katz-Gerro and Sullivan (2004), Bennett et al. (2005), Savage et al. (2005), Chan and Goldthorp (2005). *United States* (in addition to those that I have authored or co-authored) Bryson (1996, 1997), DiMaggio (1996), Holt (1997), Kern (1997), Relish (1997), Roberts (1999), Barnett and Allen (2000), Weiss et al. (2001), Holbrook et al. (2002), Sonnett (2004), DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004), López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro (2005).<sup>11</sup>

Omnivorousness as a standard for good taste has come into vogue at a discreet period of time, and if it is like earlier standards of taste, will gradually spread across geographic boundaries before it atrophies (Levine, 1988; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Peterson, 1997a). As shown above, to date all the studies that identify the pattern have been made in Europe, Australia, and North America. Is this apparent distribution real or is it due to the fact that arts-participation surveys have been conducted primarily in these geographic areas and not elsewhere?<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, it might be that the pattern can take hold only in “Western” countries where snobbish cultural exclusion had been the standard of good taste. Nations beyond the western sphere have had their own art-music traditions. Are they held apart from popular culture or do patterns emerge much like highbrow omnivorousness? Alternatively, it may be that cosmopolitan omnivorism is found everywhere and its prevalence in a country is a function of the size of the cosmopolitan elite, but there are many other possible patterns of distribution. It is important to have studies that report on surveys conducted in the countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Islamic world.

<sup>10</sup> The enumeration does not include review works such as those by Gebesmair (2001, 2004), Muller (2002), Lamont and Molnár (2002), Katz-Gerro (2004), Peterson and Anand (2004), Skrbis et al. (2004), or Prior (2005) that discuss omnivorousness without introducing new data. It does not include the pop-sociology pieces that echo the changes in the basis of taste. See in particular the books by Castells (1996), Rifkin (2000), Brooks (2002), and Florida (2002). Nor does it include books for executives on how to interact successfully in a diverse range of societies, an ability that Earely and Ang (2003) call “cultural intelligence.” See also Hooker (2003).

<sup>11</sup> This list is surely incomplete, and I would greatly appreciate it if you would send me citations to or copies of other articles. Thanks in advance.

<sup>12</sup> It is suggestive that Asian-born immigrants to the US – a group that is disproportionately drawn from the urban elite – are much more likely to be highbrow univores than are any other ethnic group in the US (Gabriel Rossman, personal communication).

1.4. The replication that doesn't replicate

Asserting that the differences between two samples is due to an increase (or decrease) in omnivorosity, as Peterson and Kern (1996) do, is hazardous because the observed differences may be due to any number of other factors. This is amply illustrated by the replication in 2002 of the SPPA national survey, which was again administered to a representative sample of the US population. The prospect of having three data points spanning 20 years, 1982, 1992, and 2002 is very exciting because it makes it possible to test for the presumed linear increase in omnivorosity. Both Gabriel Rossman and I (2005, 2006) and López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro (2005) have taken advantage of this opportunity. Both pairs of researchers find the pattern of high-status omnivorosity but not as predicted by the earlier studies.

It is useful to briefly review the development of the omnivore idea because it has changed significantly over the years. Albert Simkus and I (1992) found omnivorosity among the highest-status occupations and something close to univorosity among those low in the occupational status hierarchy. This can be conceptualized as a two-cell matrix as depicted in Panel A of Fig. 1. In effect time was put into each cell, and there was the implication that omnivorosity had completely displaced the highbrow snob. In addition it implied that all univores were lowbrows, thus obscuring the fact that, in rejecting all popular culture, the highbrow snobs were, in effect, univores too.

The structure of the study by Roger Kern and me (1996), depicted in Panel B of Fig. 1, explicitly recognized that the population still included highbrow snobs as well as omnivores, but we did not focus on the lowbrow omnivores, thus implying that all omnivores are highbrows.

Panel A The Conception of Peterson and Simkus 1982 data

	Taste
Highbrow	Snob to Omnivore
Lowbrow	Slob to Univore

Panel B The Conception of Peterson and Kern 1982-1992 data

		Breadth of Taste	
		Narrow	Wide
Taste	Highbrow	Snob 1	Omnivore 2
Level	Lowbrow	Univore 3	unexamined 4

Panel C The conception of Peterson and Rossman 1982-1992-2002 data

		Breadth of Taste	
		Narrow	Wide
Taste	Highbrow	Highbrow Univore 1	Highbrow Omnivore 2
Level	Lowbrow	Lowbrow Univore 3	Lowbrow Omnivore 4

Fig. 1. The changing conception of omnivorosity.

The key finding was that between 1982 and 1992 the proportion of respondents in cell 1 went down while the proportion in cell 2 went up.

The current work by Rossman and me (2005, 2006) is represented in Panel C of Fig. 1. It explicitly represents the recognition that should have been clear all along, that the cross tabulation of two dichotomous variables results in four, not two or three, cells. We expected to find that the transfer of respondents from cell 1 to cell 2 had continued, as omnivorous highbrow-age cohorts continued to displace more snobbish univorous ones. We also predicted that the numbers in cell 3 would go down, and those in cell 4 would go up as omnivorousness diffused out into lower status levels of the population. The most dramatic change we found was the atrophying of highbrows. This process that could be traced in the decade between 1982 and 1992 had greatly accelerated between 1992 and 2002. This reflected the fact that younger cohorts, who are much less likely to be highbrows, replaced their elders who were more likely to be highbrows (Peterson et al., 2000; DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004). Looking at Panel C of Fig. 1, this means a flow of people from cells 1 and 2 to cells 3 and 4. At the same time, contrary to predictions based on Peterson and Kern (1996), the proportion of the 2002 sample that was defined as omnivore was lower than it had been in 1992, falling almost to the proportion observed in 1982.

The 2002 SPPA findings may signal the coming of a post-omnivore period in the expression of status-signaling tastes and consumption. Yet there have been a number of other recent studies made in the US and other countries that show omnivorousness among elites, and none of the few with data from several points in time suggest that the level of elite omnivorousness is falling. That said, omnivorousness became an increasingly common measure of high status over the second half of the 20th century in North America, Europe and beyond, and just like the criterion of high-status snobbery before it, it will eventually pass. This is not the place to assert that the US is moving toward some post-omnivorous criterion for measuring status through taste, but the findings of the three waves of the SPPA survey provide a fortuitous opening for exploring the hazards inherent in comparative studies.

## 2. Conceptualization and measurement in comparative research

In recent years, omnivorousness has been operationalized and measured in a number of distinct ways, and each of these has implications for the results obtained and complicates comparisons across studies.

### 2.1. Questions of conceptualization

At its root, omnivorousness refers to choosing a large number of distinctive tastes or activities. Strictly “omni” means “all,” but in practice as operationalized, a respondent may choose considerably fewer than all the choices available within a survey questionnaire or interview protocol and still be counted as an omnivore.<sup>13</sup> In its earliest formulation, omnivorousness was contrasted with highbrow snobbery and to be counted as an omnivore one had to like classical

<sup>13</sup> Achterberg and Houtman (2005) have developed a measure that they call omnivorousness. It is operationalized as the status distance between the highest- and lowest-status musics chosen by an individual without reference to the number of musics chosen. Thus, a person who chooses just New Age music and Rap, the highest and lowest status musics according to their measure, is counted as highly omnivorous, while a person who chooses Reggae, Pop/Rock, Jazz, Blues, Swing, and Oldies, musics with essentially the same status score, is counted as univorous. This measure of the status-spread of music choices is interesting, but it violates the root idea of *omnivorousness*.

music and opera (Peterson and Simkus, 1992). The focus was on those who participated in and had a taste for the fine arts who also consumed all sorts of non-elite goods and activities (Peterson and Simkus, 1992), or at least showed an openness to appreciating all (Peterson and Kern, 1996). But as we have seen in our review of Peterson and Rossman (2006), this confounds the omnivorousness of tastes with the taste for highbrow forms, and, following the lead of Bryson (1996) and others since, it seems wisest not to bind breadth and brow-level together by definition, but to see omnivorousness as a measure of the breadth of taste and cultural consumption, allowing its link to status to be definitionally open. Increasingly researchers operationally define omnivorousness simply by counting the number of activities chosen by a respondent and identifying as omnivorous everyone who scores above a given level on the scale or treat omnivorousness as a continuous variable in regression analyses. Rossman and Peterson's (2005) apply this criterion to all three waves of the SPPA data to make them more strictly comparable.

As Bryson (1996) has shown in her study of music tastes, heavy metal, rap and country music are much more likely to be avoided by those who chose a large number of the other genres. This suggests the possibility that there may be several distinct patterns of omnivorous inclusion and exclusion. A number of other authors have suggested that there are several distinct types of omnivores (Carrabine and Longhurst, 1999; López-Sintas and García-Álvarez, 2002b; Ter Bogt et al., 2003; Emmison, 2003; Belleavance et al., 2004), but looking across the studies published to date, the proposed subtypes are diverse and fall into no recurrent pattern.

As stated, omnivorousness has to do with the number of different activities or tastes chosen, but it has nothing to do with the number of times (or the amount of time) a respondent is involved in activities. Breadth and volume of activity may be correlated but they need not be. For the lack of a better term, we follow Katz-Gerro and Sullivan (2005) in identifying this later measure of the volume of activity as “voraciousness.” Vander Stichele and Laermans (2003, 2004), working in Flanders, also look at the breadth and frequency of participation. The possible relationships between voraciousness and omnivorousness are represented in Fig. 2. Numerous studies have noted the differences in the volume of respondent's activities, but little is yet known about the relationship between voraciousness and omnivorousness or about the differences between active and relatively inactive omnivores.

## 2.2. *Measuring likes or dislikes*

Many studies of taste have used scales that ask respondents to say how positive they feel about some object or activity, but following Bourdieu's admonition that “In matters of taste . . . all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes” (1984, p. 56), Bryson (1996) has taken advantage of a data set that asked for responses that can vary from “like very much” to “dislike very much,” and focused on what activities or tastes respondents report

	Frequency of Voracious	Participation ness
Breadth of Participation	frequent	infrequent
Omnivore	Active Omnivore	Inactive Omnivore
Univore	Active Univore	Inactive

Fig. 2. The relationship between omnivorousness and voraciousness.



disliking. Thus for her, highbrow snobbery consists of disliking all forms of popular culture, and omnivorousness consists of having distaste for none. Bryson's operationalization made it possible for her to show that omnivores in the U.S. tend to reject music genres whose fans have the least education. This finding is presaged in the article's subtitle, "Anything but Heavy Metal." Given Bourdieu's original observation and Bryson's rich findings, it is too bad that subsequent studies have not asked about dislikes as well as likes. One exception to this rule is Carrabine and Longhurst's (1999) excellent study of the musical likes and dislikes of English highschool-age volunteers participating in focus-group sessions.

### 2.3. *Measuring tastes or behavior*

The first studies measured highbrow snobbery and omnivorousness by looking at the stated preferences for highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow cultural forms. Relying on answers to questions about activities liked seemed to be a valid measure because it directly tapped peoples' tastes, and it seemed reliable because peoples' arts-going activity generally followed the pattern of their expressed preferences (Peterson and Simkus 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996). A number of subsequent studies have also relied on measures of taste preferences, but others have relied on attendance at live events or, reading specific newspapers, and the like, and, in one instance, the focus was on the composition of personal record collections.

Van Rees et al. (1999) and López-Sintas and García-Álvarez (2002a) have strongly advocated the measurement of what people (report) doing rather than relying on their self-reported tastes for cultural activity. They argue that since concert attendance, for example, takes time and money, it is more accurate to measure respondents' behavior than to measure respondents' stated preferences that are subject to no reality check. But of course attendance does not necessarily reflect the desire to attend because of the differential opportunities associated with each of the demographic variables. For example, those living outside urban areas, those with dependent children or parents at home, and those in tight financial circumstances are all less likely to attend irrespective of their tastes (Robinson, 1993). Age is perhaps the clearest in showing the difference between measures of attendance and preferences. As they age people generally attend the arts less frequently but, given their decades of experience, keep their taste for the arts (Peterson et al., 1996). At the same time, self-reports of attendance are unreliable when the reference period is a year long. Not only are people liable to misremember what they have done, but they are also prone to stretch the duration of the year, so that, in effect, reports of behavior reflect intentions and not just behavior. This said, if one were trying to predict future attendance, current attendance seems to be the better measure, but if one is interested in measuring taste as we are here, respondents' self-reports of their preferences seem a more direct measure of the way they use art in shaping identity and symbolically announcing their place in the world.

Debating the relative veracity of taste and behavior is a bit of a tempest in a tea-pot if one remembers that both measures are based on respondent responses that may, to a considerable degree, reflect what the respondent thinks is the socially appropriate response to a middle-class investigator's questions. In this view respondents base their answers to a significant degree on what they think is normatively correct. In this view, middle-class respondents in the 1950s knew it was conventional to report an exclusive involvement with the traditional high arts, so their responses reflected not so much what they liked or did but their understanding of what was the correct response. Correspondingly, respondents today know that is more fashionable to express a involvement with a much wider range of cultural forms. A researcher may legitimately be

interested in such responses whether they are true for the individual or only conventional within a group at a particular time.<sup>14</sup> One way to circumvent such conventional response bias is to ask questions, as Bourdieu (1984) did to get at what cultural forms respondents are actually familiar with. As Bonnie Erickson has pointed out in private conversation, one can gain status merit by knowing what is fashionable to know about specific arts and popular entertainments. Such knowledge does not require, though it may often be associated with, a taste for the form or active participation in it. Clearly, there is a need for studies that probe the relationship among knowledge, taste, and behavior.

#### 2.4. *Is music still an adequate index of status?*

In 1984 Pierre Bourdieu asserted that “Nothing more clearly affirms ones ‘class,’ nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music.” He continued “This is of course because, by virtue of the rarity of the conditions of acquiring the corresponding dispositions, there is no more ‘classificatory’ practice than concert-going or playing a ‘noble’ instrument (1984, p. 18). And yet as noted above, Gabriel Rossman and I have shown that according to the SPPA of 2002 the measure of omnivorousness based in music taste has gone down between 1992 and 2002. Could it be that this is because a passing acquaintance with all genres of music, high, low, and exotic is increasingly easy to acquire?

Certainly there were dramatic increases in the availability of all kinds of music between 1992 and 2002. There was a flood of CD reissues of all kinds of music from the entire 20th century, and the proliferation of on-line stores, and second-hand CD record stores guaranteed that they had wide distribution. In the latter years of the decade peer-to-peer music file-sharing also became common. These developments meant that the “the conditions of acquiring” music tastes were radically changed (Peterson and Ryan, 2003). This process of cheapening the status value of music has only accelerated in the years since 2002 with the introduction of iTunes and other devices that make it possible to acquire many hours of “rare” music in just a few moments (Crowley, 2005). The status-giving value of all kinds of musical tastes has been deflated by music’s increasingly widespread use in commercial advertisements, movie soundtracks, and as ambient sound to control mood in public spaces. The appreciation of classical music, rock, techno, and country can hardly be expected to retain their status-making value if they are increasingly commodified and easy to acquire.

#### 2.5. *Potential indexes of status*

Music genre choices were chosen as the best single measure of status-ranked taste in the United States because, in line with Bourdieu’s (1994) prediction, they showed the greatest inter-rater reliability and stability over time (Peterson, 1980). But if music is losing some of its predictive power, what other variables might serve? In fact Bourdieu’s (1984, pp. 512–517) assessment of status was based on a number of different cultural forms in addition to music. These ranged from visual art and books to dance, types of television, leisure activities, food, movies, clothes and home furnishings, and, in fact, these all have been used subsequently by one researcher or another. What is more, there is no good reason why reasonably stable hierarchies could not be found by ranking any of the following that Bourdieu had not chosen: sports,

<sup>14</sup> I appreciate Jennifer Lena for bringing this perspective to my attention.

magazines, toys, wine and alcohol, automobiles, hunting and fishing, gardening, food preparation, homes, and more.

It is understandable that the early studies funded by government Arts and Culture ministries assessed activity in the primarily elite art activities that they most heavily subsidized. One serious consequence of this selective attention, however, has been that people near the bottom of the status hierarchy do not seem to participate in much leisure activity (Peterson and Simkus, 1992), but this may simply be a function of the upwardly biased range of activities that have been surveyed. In forming inventories of questions, researchers should be sensitive to lower-status pursuits in the particular domain of activity. In the case of sports, attention should be paid to motor-car racing, wrestling, rugby, cock fighting, amateur ball games like bocce, extreme sports, and the like. Attention should also be paid to the wide range of affiliative activities. These include church, fraternal and ethnic organizations, self-improvement groups (such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Weight-Watchers), and extended family affiliations.

Perhaps the reason that none of these activities by itself is as good a measure of taste as music has been is because the specific indicators so far developed are less stable over time and across countries. Take sports for example. Because it has been widely promoted in elite private secondary schools, soccer football seems to have a higher social status in the United States than it does in most other countries where it is, at root, a sport of the working class. Sports have also been considered the domain of men, and accordingly some researchers have resisted the development of a scale for sports, but many leisure activities are gendered, and this has not reduced their utility in formulating research-based patterns of culture choice (Mitchell, 1983).

Echoing the cogent arguments of Van Rees et al. (1999), the time is ripe for testing the omnivore idea across the full range of style choices. This effort is moving forward most systematically in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands. In the former Chan and Goldthorp (2005) look at respondent's cultural consumption in the fields of theater, cinema, the visual arts and reading, while the research group at the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (Bennett et al., 2005; Savage et al., 2005) is studying the status rankings of genres within and between the domains of art, music, literary and television. See also Lambert et al. (2005). In the Netherlands Van Rees and Van Eijck (2003) focus on choices that people make among nineteen diverse types of media. They report that the consumption patterns they find cannot be ranked by status, but neither are any omnivorous. See also Van Eijck and Van Rees (2000).

There is of course a long tradition of research that has focused on patterns of cultural choice that are only partially status ranked. Market researchers, who in the early 1980s were content to divide US families into nine categories (Mitchell, 1983), in the late 1990s found themselves, thanks to better data and vastly increased computer power, able to identify 62 distinct life-style clusters based on residence groupings consisting of approximately 22 households on average (Weiss, 2000). With this data in hand, the media, merchandisers and political strategists have relentlessly divided markets for audiences, consumers, and voters into ever more narrowly defined niches. Their niche-marketing means that people are increasingly presented only with information and products they are likely to want and political predilections they already share. Moving forward, it will be interesting to see how these strategies of segregation affect the status hierarchy, or whether it will prove wise to focus more attention on clustered patterns of cultural choice forming partially ordered life-styles (Mitchell, 1983; Hughes and Peterson, 1983, 1984; Van Eijck, 1999; Weiss, 2000).

Comparative research faces a special challenge because the set of indicators that fit well in one country at one time probably will not serve well across countries and over time. The problems of generating research instruments that can serve in a range of countries is a persistent problem, but

thanks to financial support from the European Union, a number of research teams are now addressing this problem of comparison. Perhaps the most ambitious cross-national effort is the confederation of researchers from the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, the United States, Hungary, Chile, and Israel.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.6. *Univore as artifact*

As noted above, univores display a taste for one narrow range of activities or objects and do not sample widely. This taste is usually thought of as a result of poverty and the restrictive habitus associated with poverty (Bourdieu, 1984). In surveys they show up as the considerable number of respondents who don't seem to take part in any activities. This apparent indifference to taste may be an artifact of the questions asked, or rather, the questions not asked. All too often surveys did not ask about the activities in which some kinds of people regularly participate. Such "invisible" activities include low status sports as well as recreational and leisure activities that take place in the family, religious service attendance and television watching (Peterson and Lee, 2000). López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro (2005) report that between 50 and 55% of the respondents to the three waves of the SPPA survey report engaging in none of the high- and middlebrow activities. Who are these folks, and are they all more or less alike, or do they fall into a number of discreet social status groups?

To answer such questions, there needs to be concerted effort to find the best ways to measure univores. While conventionally seen in terms of poverty and low education, this is not necessarily true in this age of general wealth, geographic mixing, and multiple media. Today many people choose to limit their patterns of consumption in line with a set of strongly felt religious or moral convictions. Such conscious narrowing is widely seen around the world among the millions following the precepts of fundamentalist Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It is also seen among many secular people such as the "green world" activists who, out of conviction, resist the consumerism of our age in order to get back to a more *Gemeinschaftliche* existence. Since univores by choice consciously limit their consumption, the focus on what such people "dislike," (Bourdieu, 1984; Bryson, 1996) seems like a good place to begin.

While it has often proved convenient to differentiate the univore from the omnivore by counting the number of recreational choices they make, it is important to recall, as Holt (1997) reminds us, that from the outset Bourdieu put the accent not on what people consume but on differences in the way they consume. The attitude of the univore is to make choices from a set of fixed particular principles that are illustrated by concrete examples. Bernstein (1971) and Bourdieu (1984) put the emphasis on lower class univorism, but as we have just suggested, the orientation is not restricted to the poor. Those who are univores out of conviction generally look to a founding text containing behavioral mandates and a set of illustrative stories that is interpreted and elaborated by a set of self-perpetuating scholars or priests. While it is conventional to think of these univorous systems in religious terms, and the most long lasting have been religious in origin, parallels can be found in ways of organizing taste among the extreme forms of left- and right-wing politics as well. What is more, in limiting the range of

<sup>15</sup> The confederation of researchers include from the United Kingdom, Tak Wing Chan and John Goldthorpe, from France, Philippe Coulangeon and Yannick Lemel, from the Netherlands, Koen van Eijck, Gerbert Kraaykamp, Kees van Rees, and Wout Ultee, from the United States, Arthur Alderson, from Hungary, Erzsebet Bukodi, from Chile, Florencia Torche, and from Israel, Tally Katz-Gerro.

aesthetic choices on the basis of an idea of “truth and beauty” (Arnold, 1875; Horkheimer, 1986; Bloom, 1987; Adorno, 1991), the highbrow snob is a kind of univore as well.

### 3. The methodological artifact in comparative research

Research results are necessarily a vast simplification of the flow of human activity, and decisions about research methodology, the means of data collection, and the coding of observations influence the findings obtained. These are most pernicious when they are not reported by researchers and when, as is often the case in secondary analysis, the researchers themselves are unaware of key coding and data management decisions to which the data has been subjected. Unfortunately such artifacts are magnified in the case of comparative studies. We will examine sources of methodological artifacts faced in comparative research.

The most obvious source of methodological artifacts in comparative research results from the choice of particular words and phrases in the research instrument itself. Researchers comparing across populations face difficulties because it is often hard to find equivalent phrases in each language. What is more researchers face this problem even when a single language is used. For example, there are numerous terms that vary between British, American and Indian English, and the problem is only exacerbated in cross-national surveys between Spain and the various countries of Latin America. The categories used in a number of demographic variables also vary from country to country. For example, educational attainment is often measured by the level of certifications achieved, and these vary from country to country. The US baccalaureate (BA) certificate, for example, denotes a lower level of academic achievement than does a University degree in most European countries. Think also of the differing categorizations used in classifying occupation, race/ethnicity, marital status, and employment status. The periodic SPPA surveys, on which our publications have been based, is sponsored by the US Government’s National Endowment for the Arts. The data have been collected by the US Bureau of the Census.<sup>16</sup> In 2002 it used much the same procedures employed in 1982 and 1992, nonetheless a number of changes were made that might account for some if not all the apparent decline in omnivorousness observed in this time frame. The subsequent waves were meant to replicate the 1982 survey and, although the wording of few questions were changed, there were a number of changes made in response categories. For example the reference period for some questions was changed from “the last year” to “the last month.” This could account for a big difference when, as was the case in 2002, all of the surveys were administered in August (NEA, 2004), the month when, in the United States, there are the fewest concerts and performances.

There is a range of artifacts beyond those of research-instrument wording that is perhaps even more pernicious because it is not as self-evident. These include the way that samples of respondents are chosen, how the data collection is administered, and how the data is coded. Such problems may be present in cross-national research, but they can also bedevil surveys that are repeated over time, as Gabriel Rossman and I have seen in our research on status and taste. As noted above, contrary to redictions, the proportion of omnivores as measured by music taste in

<sup>16</sup> The exception to this rule is that the 1997 survey was fielded by a private firm, and its methods of sampling and data collection proved so different that any time-series comparisons with other waves is problematic. A NEA technical report cautioned, “Differences between the 1997 SPPA and prior survey methodologies prevent us from comparing 1997 arts participation rates with rates reported from earlier SPPAs” (NEA, 1999, p. 1).

For more details on the issues, see Loomis and Collins (1998).

The US, did not grow between 1992 and 2002, rather it dropped considerably. Was this a real change in the trend toward omnivorousness, or was it due to one or more methodological artifacts? We found that there were a number of changes made over the decades in the construction, administration and coding of the survey that may have contributed to the differences obtained.<sup>17</sup> Five of these will be used to illustrate the sorts of methodological artifacts that may be introduced in the course of research.

First, there were significant changes in the way the survey instrument was administered. The 1982 and 1992 surveys were administered as a supplement to the periodic national Crime Victimization Survey (CVS), but in 2002 the SPPA was administered as a supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS). Unless they had been involved in a serious crime incident, respondents moved rapidly through the CVS saying no to all questions, and they reported enjoying the music questions in the SPPA supplement because they could respond affirmatively on a number of questions.<sup>18</sup> The CPS, in contrast, includes a large number of detailed questions about a person's employment status, hours worked, government benefits received, job seeking, and the like. Given such questions, one can well imagine the interview fatigue felt in 2002 by the interviewee and the interviewer alike. On this point see [Loomis and Collins \(1998, p. 71\)](#). Interviewee fatigue was reportedly greater with the Current Pop Survey than with the Crime Victimization Study,<sup>19</sup> and this may have affected how key questions were answered by interviewees and coded by interviewers on the 2002 electronic answer forms. It is plausible that respondents in 2002 said “no” to questions in order to avoid triggering follow-up questions that would further lengthen a fatiguing interview. What is more there is circumstantial evidence to this effect because in 2002 a goodly number of interviewees responded positively to one or more of the first several genres on the “music genres liked” question and then were marked “All of the above” by the interviewer.

Second, in the first two waves, most respondents were interviewed in person and some were contacted by phone. In 2002 respondents were reached via telephone. This may have had an influence on the results obtained. In 1982 all but the poorest households had telephones. By 2002 there was widespread solicitation and advertising via the telephone, and phone companies offered an array of caller-censoring devices to filter incoming phone calls, including phone number blocking, caller identification, and voice mail. In addition an increasing number of households became invisible to the tactic of sampling by phone number as a rapidly increasing number of people got unlisted phone numbers or gave up their land-line phones to use a cellular phone that is unlisted. It stands to reason that the most active urban people would be most likely to employ these call-filtering tactics and that the representativeness of samples suffer accordingly, as those likely to answer the phone are also mostly likely to not be otherwise engaged in activities.

Third, there were differences in sampling procedures. In all the waves another member of the household was allowed to complete questionnaires for the named respondent. So an older person most likely to be home during interviewing hours, could give the responses they thought their more active housemate would give. But how accurately could a proxy respondent be in reporting

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<sup>17</sup> Period effects (exogenous effects occurring just before the 2002 survey was fielded), including the catastrophic destruction of the New York World Trade Center just a few months before the survey was fielded, were considered and discounted ([Rossman and Peterson, 2005](#)).

<sup>18</sup> Reported by the Survey Supervisor of the Census Bureau to the staff of the Research Division on which I served as a consultant.

<sup>19</sup> Conversation with Tom Bradshaw, Director of the Research Division of the NEA June, 2005.

the musical tastes and activities of younger and more active housemates? The proxy respondent was a major factor in the 2002 survey because 40% of all the questionnaires were filled out by proxy respondents (NEA, 2004, p. 61). It is reasonable to hypothesize that such proxies underestimate the range of musical tastes. In addition young persons were under represented in 1992. Finally, in other waves, respondents were contacted throughout the year, but the 2002 data were all collected in the August dog days of summer (NEA, 2004, p. 7), this is a time when active people are most likely to be away from their home phones.

Fourth, researcher decisions about recoding of data may also affect the findings in ways that are not apparent unless they are carefully explained. For example we eliminated from the sample respondents for whom “All of the above” was marked as the response to the “Music genres liked” question. We did so because of the apparent interview fatigue noted above and because most of these respondents did not have the socio-demographic characteristics of highly omnivorous respondents. Since the “Alls” were removed from all three data waves this should not influence the findings. However, as we later learned “Alls” were far more numerous in the 2002 wave, and their loss clearly influenced the proportion of the sample defined as omnivorous. This treatment of the data also eliminated from the final sample those possibly omnivorous persons likely to have less than elite status, thus eliminating from the sample a number of possible low-brow omnivores, a group we had predicted to grow in number between 1992 and 2002.

Finally, another notable form of methodological artifact is introduced when the raw data is “weighted” to compensate for the fact that some parts of the population are less likely to answer surveys than are others (CPS, 2002, pp. 14:7–14:9). Males, for example, are less likely to be surveyed than are females. One major element of the population unlikely to be interviewed is young black males. Therefore, the young black males who were found by a Census Bureau interviewer were quite unusual, and, very likely, their art and cultural tastes are not like that of their invisible peers. The weighting procedure means, in effect, that the scores of each young black male who does respond counts much more than do those of an older white female, for example. For this reason, I have never used a response-weighting procedure.

#### **4. Triangulation with alternative research methods**

The most import reason for mentioning alternative methods in a discussion focusing on comparative analysis is that any result (such as finding omnivorous taste) that is found by two or more different methods helps to validate the results obtained by one method alone. Following a standard trigonometric technique used in geography, this valuable sort of comparison is termed “triangulation.”

To this point the focus has been on comparisons among studies based on random samples drawn from populations, but such sample surveys are by no means the only possible research method available. One very effective strategy is to interview or survey carefully selected respondents chosen because they have specific characteristics of interest. For example, as noted above, Lamont (1992) interviewed small samples of carefully selected upper-middle class men in four comparable French and U.S. cities. Likewise Holt (1997) interviewed two distinct fractions of the upper-middle class in a small city about their cultural tastes. Taking a somewhat different tack by focusing on material culture rather than activities, Halle (1993) asked the residents of apartments in four different upper-middle class districts of New York City to describe the meaning of the objects on display in their homes. Annemarie Money has used this same strategy in studying the meanings given by Manchester residents to prized objects in their homes (Money, 2004). Carrabine and Longhurst (1999) obtained their information from school age volunteers

participating in focus-group sessions who were asked about their music likes and dislikes. The authors interpreted the expressed omnivorousness they found to be caused in part by the group members' attempts not to get out of step with the tastes being expressed by others in the focus group.

Like these other researchers, [Neuhoff \(2001\)](#) surveyed a ready-made segment of the population tailored to his research interests, but he selected respondents by surveying attendees at classical music concerts, and among other things asked them whether they also attended performances of other types of music. His research design was nicely structured to determine if the classical music concert attendees of Berlin are actually a mix of highbrow snobs and omnivores. At the same time, the self-selected nature of the sample made it inappropriate for making generalizations dealing with issues that assume that a random sample of a population has been obtained. On this problem see also [Vander Stichele and Laermans \(2004\)](#).

Like the sample survey method, all of the other research designs just mentioned invade the space of the respondents to ask them a focused set of questions about pre-determined taste measures and activities. Rather than asking people what they like and what they do, it would seem preferable to unobtrusively observe people as they make consequential everyday choices that are open and publicly available. One such study conducted by [Kern \(1997\)](#) uses the personal ads published in the *New York Review of Books*, an upper middle class journal of reviews and commentary. Kern studied the ways in which cultural capital was displayed in the personal-ad writers' own descriptions of themselves, the persons they want to meet, and the sorts of activities in which they hope to engage. Most of the ad writers exhibited omnivorous tastes and expected the same from a partner. This study provides a provocative beginning, but an entire class of such unobtrusive measures of taste and activity choices needs to be developed.

## 5. Socio-cultural world differences<sup>20</sup>

Having found unexpected results in comparative research, it is tempting to immediately attribute the obtained difference to causes in the real world, but as we have shown, such differences may be due to a host of other factors having to do with the conceptualization and measurement of key variables or due to artifacts deriving from the methodology used. Having considered and tentatively ruled out all of these, it is appropriate to ask what changes in the world at large may have caused the observed differences. Again, it is easy to single out one factor as the cause, but a wide range of candidates should be considered. The array of causal factors will vary from one research focus to another, but they can be divided into two broad categories familiar to sociologists: social structural changes and cultural changes. To illustrate the range and diversity of factors that make for the changes observed in comparative research, we will focus on the set of causal factors mentioned in connection with the rise and eventual fall of omnivorous taste as a marker of high social status.<sup>21</sup>

### 5.1. Social structural change

Bourdieu and his associates ([Bourdieu, 1984, 1985](#); [Bourdieu and Darbel, 1990](#); [Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977](#)) argued that highbrow tastes were largely the product of "habitus," the early life

<sup>20</sup> This set of explanations for the rise of omnivorousness builds on foundations enumerated by [Peterson and Kern, 1996](#).

<sup>21</sup> No claim is made that this list is complete or that every factor mentioned is involved in the making and unmaking of omnivorousness taste.



experiences in the home, neighborhood, and school that inculcated the growing person with cultural capital. Changes in fashion are often ephemeral (Davis, 1992), but shifts in the *basis* of taste such as that from highbrow snobbery to omnivorousness and beyond suggest that significant alterations in social power relationships are taking place (Williams, 1961). Looking forward, it is impossible to say what general criterion will displace omnivorousness, but it is logical to predict that the pendulum swing will be back toward some sort of exclusion. The criterion might revert to 20th century highbrow snobbery, but given the evolving ways in which culture is produced, delivered and consumed, it seems much more likely that the new criterion will be based on the production of narrow market niches that, unlike the class-linked status hierarchy of the 20th century, are not rankable into any single-dimension status hierarchy. The forces at play over the last century that are likely to have continuing importance include among others the six discussed here.

### 5.1.1. *Status group politics*

Dominant status groups regularly define “popular culture” in ways that fit their own interests and have worked to render harmless subordinate status-group cultures (Sennett and Cobb, 1972; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984, 1995; Levine, 1988). One recurrent strategy is to define popular culture as brutish and thus to be suppressed or avoided (Arnold, 1875; Elliot, 1949; Shils, 1958; Bloom, 1987). Another strategy is to gentrify elements of popular culture and incorporate them into the dominant status-group culture (Tichi, 1994). The move from highbrow snobbery to cosmopolitan omnivorousness suggests a major shift from the former to the latter strategy of status-group politics. But why should this have taken place? Snobbish exclusion was an effective marker of status in a relatively homogeneous and circumscribed WASP class, which asserted that it was the “white man’s burden to bring civilization to the rest of the world” and enforced its dominance by force if necessary. Omnivorous inclusion seems better adapted to an increasingly global world culture managed by those who make their way, in part, by showing respect for the cultural expressions of others (Peterson, 1997a). As highbrow snobbishness fits the needs of the turn of the 20th-century entrepreneurial upper-middle class, there also seems to be an elective affinity between today’s business-administrative class and omnivorousness. See Riesman (1950), Peterson and Simkus (1992), Hooker (2003), and Earley and Ang (2003).

### 5.1.2. *Social class mobility*

In his study of highbrow tastes in the Netherlands, Van Eijck (1999, 2001) has shown that first-generation high-status people are much more likely to be omnivorous than are those whose parents’ generation were high status, and since the proportion of the population with higher education and high-status occupations has increased rapidly in the last half century, the proportion of those who bring from their youth tastes for elements of popular culture has risen accordingly. Thus, in effect, the growth of omnivorousness is at least in part due to the high rates of social class mobility of the population, and, as Trienekens (2002) and Stuber (2005) show, upwardly mobile workers use their working-class culture in combination with elite culture to enhance their mobility. See also Emmison (2003).

### 5.1.3. *Changes in the ethnic composition of the population*

Since ethnic and religious groups often have somewhat distinctive values and tastes, the in-migration of such groups should influence the balance of taste patterns in an entire country. This can be seen currently in Western Europe and the United States. Over the past 20 years there has been a massive in-migration to the US from Mexico and to a lesser degree from all Latin

American countries. Data from the SPPA clearly shows that these primarily young new migrants are much more likely than others in the population to be univorous in their tastes. While there have been fewer migrants from Asia, their influence on the distribution of tastes in the population as a whole has been significant as well. Persons of Asian ancestry are much more likely to have highbrow tastes than any other element of the population, and they are also much more likely to be univorous (Peterson and Rossman, 2006). In addition Asian immigrants also tend to be young and they are much more likely to give their children classical music training. This infusion of younger, more highbrow, and more univorous migrants help to dampen the displacement of highbrow univores by omnivores (Rossman and Peterson, 2005).

#### 5.1.4. *Network complexity and scope*

Mark (1998) shows that people in the same network are likely to share music tastes, and Relish (1997) has suggested that omnivorous tastes result from the composition of social networks of those with an extensive education. He finds that respondents with wider social networks are more omnivorous in their tastes. In so far as this is true, omnivorousness is part of the same constellation of attributes identified by Granovetter (1973) in his classic study of the strength of weak ties. Erickson (1996) has also shown the importance of network scope in predicting omnivorousness. As she suggests, in today's world people of high status must interact with people who are at all levels of numerous distinct status hierarchies, and this seems to both require and generate omnivorous tastes (Hooker, 2003). In so far as niche-marketing makes for taste groups that are distinct and self-sufficient, omnivorous tastes will only be valuable to those people who regularly bridge a number of culturally diverse niches.

#### 5.1.5. *The increasing difficulties of exclusion*

Rising socio-economic levels of living, broader education, and the wide diffusion of the elite arts via the media have made elite aesthetic tastes more accessible to wider segments of the population. This makes exclusion increasingly difficult to maintain and devalues it as a marker of exclusion. At the same time geographic migration has made for the mixing of people of differing tastes, and the increasingly ubiquitous mass media have introduced high-status people to the aesthetic tastes of cultures around the world. Thus, the diverse folkways of the rest of the world's population are ever more difficult to exclude, and at the same time, they are increasingly available for appropriation by elite tastemakers (Lipsitz, 1990; Brooks, 2002; Florida, 2002; Friedman and Ollivier, 2002). Of course to the degree that targeted niche marketing becomes the rule, a new kind of exclusion may become the rule.

#### 5.1.6. *Competition from popular entertainment*

Heilbrun (2001) has suggested that the welter of pop attractions available live, via TV, the Internet, and DVD compete for people's attention and in effect crowd out art. His evidence is that "the public's taste for popular culture is indeed increasing at the expense of the traditional high arts." Kirchberg (1999) also sees high and pop culture in direct competition. At the same time López-Sintas and García-Álvarez (2002a, 2002b) have found that high-status people who are omnivorous attend the fine arts more often than do the highbrow snobs, so their participation in popular entertainments does not prevent them from engaging actively in the fine arts. As a result, Spanish omnivores are likely to be voracious as well. Arnold (1875) and Adorno (1991) both believed that the mindlessness, violence and sex of popular entertainments tempted even the cultured people of earlier eras. If so, why is it only now that popular entertainments have become a regular part of the high-status person's taste and leisure activities? If in the future niche-marketing

becomes more the rule, it seems likely that the popular culture consumed by each niche will become more narrow, and in so far as individuals have diverse tastes it will be because they are able to express the tastes of several distinct niches in which they operate.

## 5.2. Cultural change

Changes in culture are due to a mix of endogenous and exogenous factors. Both forces are illustrated in Lieberman's (2000) study of the ebb and flow of popularity in given names. Endogenous cultural drift constantly makes for change in cultural expressions. This drift is fueled by the fact that any taste element that is embraced by taste leaders is over time imitated by others, thus losing its status-bearing novelty and going out of fashion. Lieberman illustrates this by tracing the changing relative popularity of specific names across the years. The rapid spike of popularity of specific names is an illustration of exogenous forces. For example he finds there is a sharp increase in American children given a name that corresponds with a newly elected US President. Names can go out of favor as rapidly. The most dramatic case is that of Adolph. It was in the lower half of the top 200 most popular male names until 1932, the year that Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany, and it has not returned. Here we examine the effects on taste of five sorts of cultural change.

### 5.2.1. Value change

Group prejudice was widely sanctified by scientific theory and expressed in the laws of exclusion of the 19th and early 20th century. The Nazi brutalities of the Second World War, however, gave "racism" of all sorts such a bad name that most discriminatory laws were abolished in the latter half of the 20th century. It is now increasingly rare for persons in authority publicly to espouse theories of essential ethnic and racial group differences, although essentialist arguments are still made concerning gender differences and homosexuality (Takaki, 1993). The change from exclusionist snob to inclusionist omnivore can thus be seen as a part of the historical trend toward greater tolerance of those with different values (Abramson and Inglehart, 1993; Earley and Ang, 2003; Hooker, 2003). Looking forward, a greater segregation of the population into distinct taste niches would seem to make omnivorousness obsolete.

### 5.2.2. Linguistic codes

Based on their English data, Warde et al. (1999) argue that high status people are universalistic, while the orientations of lower status people are based in the characteristics of their class fraction. This work mirrors the early formulation of Bernstein (1964, 1971), also working in the United Kingdom, who found that higher status people had what he termed "elaborated linguistic codes," so that they are able to reason from one situation to a wide range of others, while working class people had "restricted" linguistic codes, so they could only comprehend a new situation in so far as it corresponds to their prior experience. Bernstein's formulation corresponds closely with Bourdieu's distinction between elite and mass appreciation of symbolic objects. In spite of the importance of this classifying distinction, and evidence that it exists, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the importance of the distinction-generating element in such concrete and abstract thoughtway patterns.

### 5.2.3. Aesthetic unity to diversity

The elitist theorists of the early 19th-century European Royal Academies of music, painting, drama, and dance argued among themselves, but they stood united in their belief that there was

one standard and that all other expressions were vulgarities (White and White, 1965) thus creating an aesthetic and moral environment in which highbrow snobbery flourished (Arnold, 1875, pp. 44–47; Levine, 1988, pp. 171–241). The market forces that swept through all the art worlds starting in the late 19th century brought in their wake new aesthetic entrepreneurs who propounded avant-gardist theories that placed positive value on seeking new and ever more exotic modes of expression (White and White, 1965). In the latter half of the 20th century, however, the candidates being championed for inclusion were so numerous, and their aesthetic range so great, that the old criterion of a single standard became stretched beyond the point of credibility, and it became increasingly obvious that the quality of art did not inhere in the work itself but in the evaluations made by the art world (Zolberg, 1990, pp. 53–106). This meant that expressions of all sorts from around the world are open to aesthetic appropriation (Becker, 1982), and the shift from the elitist exclusive snob to the elitist inclusive omnivore was sanctified in aesthetic theory (Peterson, 2002). Such mixing and matching of aesthetic elements from several different aesthetic and cultural traditions to create novel combinations, is, of course, central to the post-modernist project. See especially Baudrillard (1983), Lyotard (1984), Bauman (1988), Giddens (1991), Meyer (2000), and Strom (2002).

#### 5.2.4. *Aesthetizing popular culture*

Omnivorism can be seen as a product of aesthetizing elements of popular culture (Shrum, 1996). Such “aesthetic mobility” was suggested by Peterson (1972), who pointed to the evolution of jazz from a folk-communal, to pop cultural, to a fine art form over the first three quarters of the 20th century. Using these same three distinctions, Frith (1996) has shown that at any one time every cultural form may be appreciated by different groups of fans through a discourse that sees it as folk-communal, or pop cultural, or fine art. Indeed John Blewitt (1993) has argued that as much complex cultural competence is required to decode a mainstream film as to decode an art film. See also Frith (1996) and Florida (2002). As a case in point some now evaluate country music as a folk form, while for many it is popular culture, and some interpret it in terms of the criteria appropriate to fine art. Contrast for example Tichi (1994) and Peterson (1997b).

#### 5.2.5. *Valorizing youth culture*

In the era of highbrow snobbery young people were expected to like “popular” music and culture, but they were also expected to move on to more “serious” adult fare as they matured. Beginning in the 1950s, however, young North American white people of all classes embraced popular African American dance music styles as their own under the rubric of rock ‘n’ roll (Ennis, 1992). And by the late 1960s what was identified as the “Woodstock Nation” saw its own variegated youth culture not so much as a “stage” to go through in growing up, but as a viable alternative to established elite culture (Lipsitz, 1990; Aronowitz, 1993) thus, in effect, discrediting highbrow exclusion and valorizing inclusion. One of the lasting impacts of this view is that not as many well-educated and well-to-do Americans born since World War 2 patronize the elite arts as did their elders (Robinson, 1993; Peterson et al., 2000), and many of their number say they like a wide array of musical forms (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Carrabine and Longhurst, 1999; Peterson, 2002; Ter Bogt et al., 2003).

## 6. Coda

Having taken a long journey through the pitfalls of comparative research, it seems appropriate to conclude by recalling the purpose of the trip. We have explored a line of recent research,

observation and theorizing about the links between social status, taste and consumption. These comparisons among studies have been made in order to illustrate the possibility that the observed results, whether the same or different, are due to differences in conceptualization, measurement, or method, rather than to differences in the observable world. The beauty of comparison is that well and fairly done it is a powerful tool of intellectual inquiry, since an observation made repeatedly is given more credence than a single observation is, and changes can be interpreted with greater confidence.

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