MSB Final Project: The Genetics of Music

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Introduction

One of Tinbergen's four causes of behavior is development, or ontogeny: the question of how a behavior came to an organism in the first place.[1] While this subject can delve deep into Mendellian inheritance and meiosis, or different forms of learning and different classifications of innate behaviors, the most basic and central question asked during the study of development is that of nature versus nurture: is the trait genetically inherited or environmentally acquired? Of course, traits are often not one or the other but will rather fall on a spectrum between the two; the purpose of this project is to study one such trait in hopes of determining whether it is influenced more by genes or environment. This trait is musical taste: what kinds of music do people like to listen to?

It is surprisingly common, in the researcher's own (anecdotal) experience, to find two friends who have vastly different music tastes, and the same applies to family members. This leads into the question of who makes more of an impact on your music tastes — friends will often attest to have virtually identical music taste, but the same could apply to family members; it only seems to vary from person to person and family to family. By gathering a large sample of data, however, it could be determined whether there is actually some sort of trend: an association between a person's music tastes and their friends'/family's.

It was expected that both family members and friends would have a significant impact on a person's music choices, although one might not necessarily outweigh the other: that is, there may not be a significant difference between the family's impact and the friends'. This is because people have very strong reasons to like similar music to both a family member and a friend, so that one relationship type should not be significantly closer than the other.

[1]Special thanks to Lincoln Auster and Thomas Morford for code review, bug fixes and formatting advice.

Materials and Methods

A Google Forms survey was used to gather data for this study, and a Python script was used to analyze it (included in Appendix I). Each respondent was asked to select the musical genres that they enjoy out of 6 options: pop, jazz/blues, rock, country/folk, rap/hip hop, and classical. The respondent was then asked to decide whether they like or dislike each of 12 musical clips, out of which each genre was represented by two clips: Uptown Funk and Dead Girl in the Pool (pop), What a Wonderful World and The Thrill is Gone (jazz and blues), Bohemian Rhapsody and Hurt (rock), Old Town Road and I Walk the Line (country and folk), Rap God and Gangsta's Paradise (rap and hip hop), and finally Eine Kleine Nachtmusik and Duel of the Fates (classical).

For the purposes of this study, it was useful to be able to identify whether there were some genres that the respondent did not necessarily dislike, even if it was not something they thought they actively listen to. So, while the first part of the survey asked for what they thought they like, the second part of the survey was in an attempt to see what they might actually like. However, it's possible that somebody who generally likes a certain genre did not like the specific two clips that they had been asked about from that genre. So, the question about categories needed to be weighted more heavily than the questions about specific songs. Further, an overall system was needed for condensing the 2-part data that would be gathered — genre and music preference, both on nominal scales — into one number that could be used in statistical testing. Hence, the following scoring system was created, as seen in Figure 1.

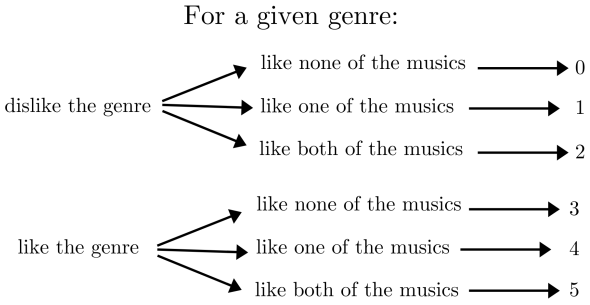

Figure 1: The procedure used to generate ordinal-scale scores for each respondent, for each genre.

This means that if a respondent says they enjoy a particular genre but doesn't like any of the musics, they can still walk away with a score of 3, whereas if they liked both musics but said they disliked the genre in general, they would only get a 2. These rankings are on

an ordinal scale, from 0 to 5 (where there are no defined intervals between ranks).

Each respondent was requested to provide the names of two friends and two family members. The family members were sent a slightly different survey, which was identical to the one for students except that it did not ask them for the names of their friends or family members. At the end of data collection, each respondent was matched up to their two family members and two friends to perform statistical analysis. If not all of the family members and friends listed had responded to the survey, only the ones whose responses were present were tested against the student.