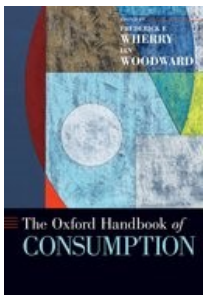

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CHAPTER

18 Omnivorousness, Distinction, or Both?

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the evolution and debate surrounding the legacy of Bourdieu's ideas about culture and class inequality. It charts the development of the sociological concepts of distinction and omnivorousness, making note of important points of consensus, while considering gaps and puzzles that continue to trouble the field. The chapter argues that cultural consumption remains a central framework for understanding the perpetuation and cultural rationalization of inequality. Over three decades of research in the sociology of culture highlights the contemporary infusion of elements of democratic inclusion into cultural omnivorousness, yet also how it operates ideologically to obfuscate the deep, disturbing divisions that still exist between rich and poor on a national and global scale. During a period in which wealth disparities are on the rise, the result is more likely an obfuscation of inequality, rather than meaningful social change to reduce it.

Keywords: omnivorousness, distinction, cultural consumption, aesthetics, cultural hierarchy

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IMAGINE a cultural elite living in early twentieth-century New York. You might picture a debutante who regularly attends the opera and wears couture fashion, or a monocled gentleman with a regular table at an exclusive French restaurant. For at least the first half of the twentieth century, the idea of "snob" consumption was relatively clear and identifiable, but today, the notion of high-status culture is far more complex. We live in a world of high-priced sneakers, accessible street art, museum exhibitions that feature household objects, and food trends that draw from global cuisines. In this context, how do consumers figure out who is a snob, what is a status symbol, and what goods are passé? More broadly, how do sociologists recognize and study cultural distinction in a context where status symbols shift fluidly across class, cultural, and geographic boundaries? This chapter grapples with precisely this issue.

On the one hand, we know that many cultural signals of high socioeconomic status (SES)—such as designer handbag brands—are broadly recognized across class hierarchies. On the other hand, cultural hierarchies still clearly exist. Some cultural signals are only valued within limited class contexts. Eating at a fashionable restaurant might not hold value among lower SES groups, while some musical tastes that are highly valued among lower SES groups might be devalued by those with more cultural resources. Additionally, we know that economic resources matter when it comes to cultural distinction. High-status trends can emerge from the "bottom" of the socioeconomic hierarchy, but having access to both money and education gives some consumers more power to appreciate and purchase high-status goods and experiences. Street food and hip-hop may now have a kind of cultural caché, but classical goods of luxury—expensive watches, costly cars, champagne, and couture fashion—persist as markers of cultural sophistication and (misrecognized) economic power.

Before proceeding to our analysis of the changing face of cultural distinction, it is important to define the
p. 362 key terms at stake in this chapter: distinction and omnivorousness. ↳ The term *distinction* is used by sociologists to describe goods, people, or experiences that are culturally worthy or high status. Notably, the term was used as the title of Bourdieu's seminal text, *Distinction* (1984), where he drew from consumer data from French society and argued that class inequalities were shaped and reproduced by cultural hierarchies that manifested in stratified consumption patterns. Bourdieu's writing had important implications for inequality, suggesting that when elites consume, accumulate, and display a culture of distinction, their wealth and privilege can come to feel more natural and normal. On the other hand, when marginalized groups are seen as culturally "tacky" and as unsophisticated consumers, their economic marginalization may be taken for granted or rationalized. Some argue that today's blurred and shifting cultural boundaries have moved us beyond distinction processes. Next we will show why the term *distinction*—and Bourdieu's argument about consumption and cultural inequality—remain highly relevant today.

Sociologists developed the term *omnivorousness* to contend with the emergence of a cultural landscape where high-status people consume low-status things. In the later nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth century, cultural distinction was clearly signaled by a "highbrow" appreciation of the fine arts—ballet, classical music, museums, Shakespeare, and opera. As Peterson and Simkus write, "the idea of fine art as *high culture* was propagated by nineteenth-century moral entrepreneurs to serve as a basis for marking social class position" (1992:152). High-culture consumption habits worked as a symbolic boundary demarcating elite white consumers from immigrant and/or racialized "lowbrows" and their denigrated popular forms of entertainment (Levine 1988). This was the era of classic univore snobbery, and it began to change significantly in the last decades of the twentieth century. American cultural sociologist Richard Peterson (Peterson 1992; Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992) was the first to make note of a shift from snobbish exclusivity to omnivorous cultural breadth—a shift that arguably continues until the present day. In the age of omnivorousness, high-status people are not simple snobs consuming highbrow things. Instead, high-status people are cultural "omnivores" with eclectic, diverse consumption patterns that include high culture activities but also embrace key aspects of "popular" culture. Omnivores like a variety of different kinds of music (Bryson 1996), praise many different kinds of food (Johnston and Baumann 2007), enjoy wines from diverse regions of the world (Smith Maguire 2016), and might enjoy watching television as much as going to an art gallery. In contrast to the omnivorous cultural diversity observed in high-status groups, lower-status groups tend to consume much less diversely—ironically, lower-status people become the univores who consume just one or two aesthetic forms (Peterson and Simkus 1992:170). The concept of omnivorousness is sociologically important for capturing the eclecticism of contemporary high-status consumption, but it leaves open the question of how distinction operates in this new, more complex cultural landscape. While omnivores consume broadly, there are clearly still hierarchies of distinction, types of consumption that are more and less desirable.

In this chapter we begin by charting how omnivorousness and distinction have been studied by sociologists.
p. 363 After making note of important points of consensus, we then lay ↳ out gaps and puzzles that continue to trouble the field and wrestle with the legacy of Bourdieu's ideas about culture and class inequality. We end by arguing that cultural consumption remains a central topic for understanding the perpetuation and cultural rationalization of inequality. More broadly, we suggest that cultural omnivorousness has an element of democratic inclusion but also operates ideologically to obfuscate the deep, disturbing divisions that exist between rich and poor on a national and global scale.

Studies of Omnivorousness and Distinction: What We Know

A foundational idea underlying sociological studies of culture and taste is that social position impacts cultural consumption, and that cultural consumption, in turn, is a means to distinguish and reproduce social groupings. Arts consumption—and high-status cultural consumption more broadly—demarcates social class distinctions. Both *what* and *how* you consume will vary depending on your social class, education, upbringing, and social location. Bourdieu's *Distinction* remarked on the "what" and the "how" of consumption. Looking at empirical data of the consumption habits of 1970s France, Bourdieu observed that social status led to different consumption habits. For example, he found that working-class groups were more likely to prefer foods that are hearty and cheap, whereas professional groups preferred foods that are "tasty, health-giving, light and not fattening" (1984:190). Understanding what different groups consume was an important part of Bourdieu's research, he also theorized about how consumption varies by social class. In other words, Bourdieu believed it was important to consider not just *what* elites and non-elites consume—but also consider *how* they consume. A key Bourdieusean concept here is the *aesthetic disposition*, which refers to a mode of consumption—a "bourgeois experience of the world"—that develops when groups move beyond concerns about material sufficiency and come to see consumption through an aesthetic lens that is marked by deliberation, contemplation and distance from necessity (1984:54–55). An aesthetic consideration of a consumer good involves the form of the object (e.g., the design of a teapot), not just its function (e.g., how well does it pour tea?). Elites will have more access to consuming with an aesthetic disposition, because they will be less closely tied to lifestyles and consumption choices based on necessity.

The aesthetic disposition can apply to traditional highbrow goods like the ballet or opera, but it can also be brought to bear on populist forms of culture such as television, furniture, and meals, and it can even appropriate lowbrow items like street food, fast food, and carnival fare (see Johnston and Baumann 2015; Naccarato and LeBesco 2012). When consuming with an aesthetic disposition, one is detached from consuming to satisfy a basic need, such as hunger, and is instead applying an aesthetic lens toward
p. 364 evaluating and appreciating a cultural object or experience—whether that be a meal prepared ↳ by a Michelin-starred chef or a Krispy Kreme donut. Having an aesthetic disposition is not an abstract philosophy but is a "habitual disposition," a skill that is part of an embodied predisposition best developed by people who experience distance from material necessity (Lizardo and Skiles 2012:267). While an aesthetic disposition can be applied to certain lowbrow or mass-produced goods, like hamburgers, it is less likely to turn toward accessible forms of mass consumption (e.g., eating at chain restaurants, watching reality television) that are less amenable to the application of these aesthetic norms, and which don't allow consumers to demarcate themselves as distinct from others (Lizardo and Skiles 2012:270). For example, in our own research, we found that foodies frequently insist that they would never eat at middle-brow chain restaurants, such as the Olive Garden, even though they were often enthusiastic connoisseurs of street foods and hard-to-find, inexpensive ethno-cultural cuisines (Johnston and Baumann 2015:173).

Possessing an aesthetic disposition is a key trademark of cultural omnivores. As noted earlier, the concept of cultural omnivorousness was first noted by Richard Peterson (Peterson 1992, 1997; Peterson and Kern 1996;

Peterson and Simkus 1992) in the context of US consumption data, but it is now widely observed to exist in a variety of national contexts (see, e.g., Katz-Gerro 2002). Omnivorous culture can be understood as a contrast to a mass-culture or "homology" theory that posits a clear correspondence between high-culture for elites and low-status, mass culture for non-elites. In contrast, omnivorousness involves the following taste pattern: high-status classes consume broadly across high culture and popular culture, whereas low-status people have a minimal range of low-status tastes. Omnivores are higher-status groups who have a greater breadth of cultural engagement, and also cross boundaries of highbrow and popular culture.

The omnivorous capacity to like myriad cultural forms, and cultural forms that span low-brow/high-brow boundaries, lends itself to cultural consumption that makes connections across social space. Previously low-status forms of culture (e.g., street food, rap music, comics) can become incorporated into high-status consumption habits, a trend that Johnston and Baumann (2007) referred to (in an article titled "Democracy versus Distinction") as a kind of cultural "democratization." Since then, multiple scholars have used the term "democratization" to refer to the broadening of cultural tastes within omnivorous culture (e.g., Lizardo and Skiles 2012; Smith Maguire 2016). Paradoxically, the democratizing tendency of omnivorous culture has a kind of built-in exclusivity. As noted in early literature on omnivorousness as well as in more recent studies, high-status groups (i.e., people with high levels of education, high occupational status) are more likely to embody omnivorous practices (e.g., Peterson and Simkus 1992; Smith Maguire 2016; Warde and Gayo-Cal 2009:121). The cultural omnivore is reliant on the habitual deployment of an aesthetic disposition, and this disposition is more likely to develop among consumers with high levels of education and material privilege. In an article detailing the mechanism for how one develops an aesthetic disposition, Lizardo and Skiles argue that omnivorousness can be seen as a "transposable" asset that develops most successfully among individuals who have early exposure to "canonical objects" (e.g., fine art), and who later extend their confident aesthetic disposition to appreciate culture that is "not traditionally designated as having aesthetic value" (2012:268–269).

p. 365 Besides the fact that omnivores tend to be rooted in privilege, education, capital, and exposure to "canonical" art, the omnivorous cultural field is restricted by the types of cultural objects and experiences that tend to be aesthetically appreciated. Put differently, not all items of popular culture can or will be consumed or legitimated by omnivores. As noted by Johnston and Baumann (2007), the omnivorous impulse toward cultural democratization exists in tension with the continued drive toward distinction. Warde and Gayo-Cal similarly write that omnivorous "cultural consumption provides both distinguishing and integrating features" (2009:140). Not all cultural goods are equally legitimate (Bryson 1996). Omnivores are more likely to take up cultural forms that lend themselves to appreciation via an aesthetic disposition. Lizardo and Skiles (2012:270) write, "they consistently reject those forms of popular culture that are most obviously routinized and mass produced such as romance novels and reality television." Similarly, using a case study of the wine world, Smith Maguire notes that there is no longer a clear hierarchical distinction between Old World and New World wines—a clear and important sign of cultural democratization. At the same time, Smith Maguire writes, "democratization may change the stakes and strategies, but not the game of distinction: the need for logics of discernment persist" (2016:2). Analyzing wine magazines, Smith Maguire finds that the cultural logic legitimizing wine's provenance—terroir—has been democratized to give legitimacy to New World wines, yet status distinctions remain with the privileging of "the Old World and especially France as referent" (2016:14).

Gaps, Puzzles, and Questions

While cultural sociology has made important gains in the study of omnivorousness, certain dimensions of the phenomenon have been more puzzling than others. These dimensions entertain some unresolved issues, and we focus on three of them here.

How to "Measure" and Study Omnivorousness

Although the basic pattern of omnivorousness has been replicated across many studies that span time and place, the degree of omnivorousness and its precise dimensions vary with the methodological decisions that researchers make for measuring it (Warde and Gayo-Cal 2009:140). We outline five key methodological questions that have animated the omnivorousness literature.

Should We Measure Taste, Knowledge, and/or Practices?

Peterson's (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992) original research that revealed omnivorous patterns of consumption relied on measures from the Survey on Public Participation in the Arts on musical tastes. It used survey questions on genres of music "liked" by the respondent, with survey questions
p. 366 offering the options of "yes" and ↳ "no" regarding liking each genre, and also with the opportunity to identify a favorite genre. Since that original research, much subsequent research has employed measures of taste to operationalize the omnivorous disposition. However, the theory of omnivorousness is not clear in its scope of cultural consumption. Although the theory was originally formulated as identifying a high-status cultural consumption strategy, tastes are aesthetic preferences, not consumption per se. Should omnivorousness therefore be measured according to patterns of cultural consumption, rather than tastes? Those who argue in favor of measuring tastes argue that tastes are preferable because of their link to identity, because they tap into the kinds of cultural legitimation issues that cultural consumption theories are based on (Coulangeon and Lemel 2007), and also because they are less constrained or shaped by networks, material circumstances, and participation opportunities (van Eijck and Lievens 2008). Some researchers have taken the focus on consumption seriously and measured behaviors rather than preferences (Alderson, Junisbai, and Heacock 2007). This tactic has advantages, such as a clear connection to the theory as formulated as about consumption. By measuring what people are doing, it promotes a focus on behavior that can more clearly have social meaning (it is easier to be aware of others' behaviors than their preferences). It is, however, extremely difficult to acquire data on actual consumption, and researchers often are forced to rely on self-reported consumption. There is a risk of social desirability when measuring consumption through self-reports, although the same social desirability arises from requesting reports of preferences. Other research has held that knowledge of culture is relevant to omnivorousness. In these studies, familiarity is prioritized above preference. This decision is justified in part through the argument that omnivorousness works as a high-status consumption strategy because of the breadth of knowledge and competence that it demonstrates.

Relatedly, the most common method for measuring tastes, knowledge, and consumption has been self-reports via survey questions. Survey measures of tastes, knowledge, and consumption hold the same advantages and disadvantages present in other kinds of survey measures, although risk of social desirability is on the high end relative to many other topics. Some researchers have turned this risk into a virtue, arguing that it is the presentation of aesthetic preferences, knowledge, and practice that omnivorousness is actually interested in. These are only connected to high status as they are presented to others. If a respondent knows what answer is socially desirable, then that is what matters, more so than "true" preference, knowledge, or practice. A few studies have been based on interviews about tastes, which offer more validity and less reliability (Jarness and Friedman 2017; Ollivier 2008). More significantly, interview measures of consumption and consumption preferences offer the ability to measure better modes of consumption, or the *how* of consumption in addition to the *what* of consumption (Jarness 2015). This concern resonates with a Bourdieusian analysis of cultural consumption. However, with the aim of generalizability and SES group comparisons, most of the research has employed quantitative analysis of survey data on probability samples in a variety of national contexts.

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Should the Measurement of Omnivorousness Focus on Genres or on Artists and Artworks?

Peterson's pioneering work focused on breadth of taste across musical genres. A great deal of subsequent work has adopted the use of genre breadth as a measure of omnivorousness. However, as an alternative to Bourdieusian homological analysis, there is a mismatch between the focus on genres and Bourdieu's analysis of specific artworks and artists, as well as specific cultural goods in the realm of food and home décor. More significantly, the theory of omnivorousness holds that breadth of knowledge/consumption is a marker of contemporary status and capital. But at the same time, omnivores don't like everything *indiscriminately* (Bryson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996). This finding and insight focuses our attention on where taste boundaries lie for omnivores. Is omnivorousness best measured according to genres that are acceptable versus denigrated? Or does accurate measurement of omnivorousness require a more fine-grained measurement of taste and consumption at the level of individual works/artists within genres? This measurement issue is linked to theoretical concerns with what omnivorousness represents. Some scholars (Johnston and Baumann 2007; Lizardo and Skiles 2012) argue that if we measure omnivorous taste at the level of the individual cultural good or artist, we will see *within-genre* patterns in omnivorous tastes. The dividing line between what omnivores like and do not like then becomes not a matter of traditional highbrow and lowbrow genre distinctions or a matter of volume, but instead a matter of the dividing line between what and who holds symbolic capital or legitimacy within each genre (e.g., critically acclaimed hip-hop vs. mainstream hip-hop). Measuring omnivorousness at this level potentially facilitates a rapprochement between the homology thesis and the omnivore thesis. Warde and Gayo-Cal find through studying fine-grained preferences that "boundaries, hierarchy and connections remain" for omnivores, and that "omnivores have cultural portfolios weighted towards preferences for more legitimate items, and the orientation that they bring to their consumption is itself a contemporary mark of refinement" (Warde and Gayo-Cal 2009:143).

Should the Measurement of Omnivorousness Focus on Boundary Crossing (Highbrow versus Lowbrow) or the Number of Genres a Person Consumes?

Peterson's early analysis of omnivorousness relied on the number of lowbrow music genres that "highbrows" (respondents who reported liking both classical and opera and also reporting that one of them was their favorite genre) reported liking (Peterson and Kern 1996). This operationalization incorporates consideration of both traditional brow (liking both high and low) and the number of genres. In subsequent research, different authors have focused to different extents on brow spanning or on the breadth of taste or consumption irrespective of genres (e.g., Rossman and Peterson 2015). Theoretically, omnivorousness was conceptualized as founded on "openness" toward traditionally denigrated genres, which demonstrated a shift away from snobbishness. As research on omnivorousness developed and evolved, the focus on
p. 368 openness was supplemented with ↳ concerns for cosmopolitanism and eclecticism. These concepts can be interpreted as privileging breadth, or "volume," above brow spanning, or "composition," as a way to identify high-status cultural tastes and consumption (Warde and Gayo-Cal 2009). Warde and Gayo-Cal's (2009) research on British consumers finds that omnivores not only like more items (volume), but they also like a more heterogeneous combination of items combining legitimate and common items (composition). The focus on volume ties into studies outside of the study of omnivorousness which consistently find that high-SES people consume more culture overall than low-SES people. Sullivan and Katz-Gerro (2006) propose the term "voraciousness" to measure both the breadth and the frequency of cultural consumption, which presupposes the measurement of actual consumption, not just tastes. This concept better represents the notion of volume of cultural consumption, as it takes into account both the range of kinds of culture and the number of cultural consumption experiences.

Should the Classification of Items Be Determined A Priori or Constructed from the Data?

Peterson's first published research on omnivorousness relied on a method that simultaneously ranked respondents' occupation and musical genres hierarchically (Peterson 1992). However, he also published a study that relied instead on a priori genre rankings, using the traditional divide between highbrow and lowbrow music genres (Peterson and Kern 1996). Some of the omnivorousness research has relied on a priori genre hierarchies or other distinctions (e.g., Bryson 1996). However, a great deal of the more recent research has relied on a variety of methods for allowing clusters and boundaries between genres to be identified within the data. Purhonen, Gronow, and Rahkonen (2010), following Warde and Gayo-Cal (2009) and Warde, David, and Modesto. (2008), create scales to rank genres based on proportions of respondents of different education levels liking those genres. Lizardo and Skiles (2009) employ factor analysis, and Alderson, Junisbai, and Heacock (2007) employ latent class cluster analysis to identify patterns in the types of genres that are co-consumed, a strategy also employed by Coulangeon (2015). Goldberg's (2011) technique of relational class analysis further leverages relationships between and within respondents' clusters of preferences in order to identify perceived differences between cultural forms. This general move away from a priori classifications has the added virtue of avoiding the unfortunate implication embedded in traditional notions of brow differences that lowbrow tastes are culturally inferior or defined by lack (Olivier 2008; Skeggs 2004). These classificatory techniques are also able to identify other important axes of difference, such as those around gender and race (Sonnett 2016).

How Do Different Methods and Data Sources Privilege Different Kinds of Knowledge about Omnivorousness?

While the vast majority of omnivore research has employed survey data, a small minority has employed qualitative interviews, as mentioned earlier. Survey data are ideal for identifying clusters of tastes and practices. We would not know about omnivorousness in the absence of survey data to establish the presence
p. 369 of these patterns and their ↳ sociodemographic correlates. However, some authors have argued that survey data can only ever be suggestive about the cultural logics that motivate taste and consumption clusters. While survey data can show that the highly educated tend to be more eclectic in their tastes, they cannot show us the meanings that taste and cultural consumption have for these respondents. Research by Johnston and Baumann (2007) analyzes cultural discourse produced by food writers in order to identify the ideological motivations that underlie omnivorous preferences and behaviors. Similarly, Cheyne and Binder (2010) analyze critics' discourse in music, Smith Maguire (2016) analyzes journalism and marketing discourse on wine, and Rössel, Schenk, and Eppler (2018) analyze wine journalism. These authors focus on various aspects of their respective discourses to discover the core values that are upheld through valorizing omnivorous consumption and taste preferences.

Who Is an Omnivore, and Why Omnivorousness?

The question of measuring omnivorousness is an important one, but even if we accept that omnivorousness is a real empirical trend, it's not altogether clear *who* most enthusiastically embraces omnivorousness or *why* this is happening. Let's look first at the question of "who" tends to be a more omnivorous consumer. The first, general point to make is that omnivores tend to be consumers who possess economic resources and cultural capital. As Ollivier writes: "cultural omnivores tend to be young, urban, and well-educated professionals while univores predominate among the less-educated as well as among marginalized members of cultural minorities" (2008:126). Warde and Gayo (2009:141) find that the working class in the United Kingdom is "significantly less omnivorous in respect of participation and taste (than professional-executive class), and also consumes less culturally legitimate items." In various national contexts, low-income people have greater connections to a "taste of necessity" (Bourdieu 1984:56), which operates at the other end of a continuum from the development of an aesthetic disposition toward cultural objects (e.g., Baumann, Szabo, and Johnston 2017). Indeed, the connection between privilege and the eclecticism of an aesthetic disposition makes intuitive sense. When people consume on a limited budget and with fewer educational resources, they have less material resources and cultural flexibility to prioritize the aesthetic of consumption over functionality, and they are more risk averse when it comes to sampling from new cultural forms (e.g., Daniel 2016).

While omnivorousness has an irrefutable link to economic and culture privilege, the demographics of omnivorousness is subtler than a simple binary of upper/lower class. Some privileged consumers still consume in snobbish, exclusive ways, and some less privileged consumers may have relatively eclectic tastes. Ollivier (2008) reviews various scholarly typologies of omnivorous consumption and finds a considerable degree of consistency on key categories, especially when education and age are factored in (2008:123–124; see also Ollivier, Guathier, and Truong 2009). Peterson (2005) reaches similar conclusions
p. 370 in his survey of the field. The general direction of key findings can be ↳ summarized in Table 18.1, which is intended as a heuristic device, since some of these demographic traits have not been consistently empirically demonstrated.

Table 18.1 General Demographic Traits of Omnivorous Consumption Categories

	Narrow Tastes (Univore)	**Broad Tastes (Omnivore)**
Highbrow Tastes (e.g., classical music, ballet, French Food)	"Exclusive highbrows"	"Inclusive highbrows"
	Higher education	Higher education
	Older	Younger
	More feminine	More feminine
Middle-Brow + Lowbrow Tastes (e.g., television, country music, chain restaurants, comedy clubs)	"TV watchers"	"Youthful eclectics"
	Less education	Less education
	Older	Younger

Within the *most educated* consumers, there is a subgroup of older, exclusive highbrows—the old-fashioned "snob." There is also a subgroup of "inclusive highbrows" that are younger and relatively educated; they are familiar with highbrow culture but consume a range of other cultural forms. For consumers with

relatively *less education*, there is a large subgroup of older, cultural univores with very limited cultural consumption—a group that Ollivier, Gauthier, and Truong (2009:468) call the "TV watchers." There is also a younger, inclusive subgroup of "youthful eclectics" (471) that consume an eclectic mix of middlebrow and lowbrow cultural forms. More generally, scholars have found that young people tend to be more omnivorousness than older people, who are much more likely to be "exclusive highbrows" (e.g., Olliver, Gauthier, and Truong 2009:469; Peterson 2005:260, 263). This is especially the case given that the postwar valorization of "youth culture" can work to desacralize elite arts (e.g., baby boomers might canonize Bob Dylan as readily as they listen to Bach) (Peterson 2005:276). Minimal research has explicitly studied the relationship between gender and omnivorousness, but scholars suggest that women are relatively more engaged with exclusive highbrow culture, such as ballet (e.g., Ollivier 2008:123; Ollivier, Gauthier, and Truong 2009:462; Warde and Gay-Cal 2009:142–143). Although a causal relationship between gender and omnivorousness has not been established, Ollivier, Gauthier, and Truong (2009) suggest that high culture's feminine associations may explain the discursive denigration of these cultural forms as stuffy, emasculating, and passive (compared to more exciting, active omnivorous interests) (Ollivier, Gauthier, and Truong 2009:461).

Besides factors of age and gender, there are important interclass differences to make note of, especially since there is interclass variation in omnivorous consumption. Going back to one of Bourdieu's central insights on consumption differences within social elites (1984), various researchers have found that a specific kind of class faction—what scholars call the "dominated fraction of the dominated class"—tends to embrace cultural omnivorousness (Lizardo and Skiles 2015; Olliver 2008:134). This is a group that has more abundant cultural capital than economic capital (e.g., intellectuals and artists versus investment bankers);
p. 371 they feature their knowledge and distinguish themselves through ↳ cultural sophistication and breadth, rather than by their capacity to purchase expensive status symbols like jewellery or luxury automobiles. There are clear, observable demographic patterns with omnivorous consumption, yet future research should continue to investigate national-level variation (e.g., see Jarness and Friedman 2017:21), move beyond the empirical focus on Europe and North America to study other parts of the world (Peterson 2005:261), and investigate intersecting inequalities of gender (Are women more or less omnivorousness?), age (Are highbrow univores aging out?), and ethnicity (What is its relationship to omnivorousness?) that have been relatively underexplored (see Ollivier, Gauthier, and Truong 2009).

Moving beyond the demographics of omnivorousness, we might ask a broader question—why omnivorousness? As Khan opined in 2010,

> Now 15 years into the omnivore thesis we must take the next steps—building upon our descriptions to generate explanations: we must answer why some of the snobs of yesterday are the omnivores of today, why some elites are now omnivorous, and why today's elites are seemingly more "democratic" in their tastes. (732)

While we concur with Khan that this is an important question, particularly in an age of pronounced inequality, we disagree that omnivore scholars have not bothered to take the "next steps" to address this question (e.g., see Peterson 2005:272–276). One problem immediately presents itself with the "explanatory" challenge: understanding why there has been a shift to omnivorousness—specifying factors that lead to large-scale, historical shifts—is extraordinarily difficult. As Peterson noted (2005), sociology is a discipline (like astronomy) that largely relies on observation rather than experimentation, which makes explanations a perennial challenge. Relying on varying methods of data collection (e.g., comparative) and theoretically informed speculations, some scholars have identified important factors that help us understand why appearing culturally eclectic and open has come to confer status and social legitimacy.

Explanations for understanding omnivorousness inevitably have to reckon with inequality. Especially in an American cultural context, it appears that we have entered a new "gilded age" of wealth accumulation (e.g.,

Piketty 2014). At the same time elites have amassed huge fortunes, they are able to culturally "slum it" (e.g., Silicon Valley billionaires wearing t-shirts and jeans) and earn status points. The "democracy versus distinction" argument put forward in the realm of food (2007, 2015) offers one explanation for understanding how culture has adapted to mitigate some of the more noxious effects of cultural inequality. It suggests that omnivorousness operates ideologically to diminish the cultural impact of inequality, presenting a softer framing of elite privilege. These elites aren't the culturally elitist, robber barons of the past, but instead self-present as flexible, reasonable elites who appreciate the foodways of the poor and culturally marginalized, even though they also frequent high-end restaurants staffed by celebrated chefs. As Johnston and Baumann (2007) wrote:

> within the omnivorous paradigm, overt class-status distinctions are displaced by a more subtle process where the construction of food quality allows cultural elites to ↳ have their cake and eat it too, articulating principles influenced by democratic ideologies, while maintaining their central place as arbitrators of omnivorous good taste. (200)

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Other scholars have connected the rise of omnivorousness to structural factors—like globalization, immigration, liberalization—that have evolved alongside growing economic inequality. Peterson argues that "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" (2005:273). Further, he notes an "elective affinity" between omnivorous ideas and "today's business administrative class" who must branch culturally diverse networks in their work, especially in ethnically diverse societies (2005:273–274; for Peterson's listing of explanatory structural and cultural factors, see 272–276). Surveying the field of omnivorous scholarship, Smith Maguire suggests that the key dynamics explaining omnivorousness include "increased tolerance of difference and scepticism towards universalist value judgements, the roots of which are tied, variously to globalization, migration and cosmopolitanism, generational shifts, postmodernism, social mobility and the spread of liberal education" (2016:5). All of these factors make it difficult to credibly defend overt and exclusive cultural snobbery—to credibly assert that Western opera music is *better* music than Jamaican reggae of Nigerian juju music. Indeed, as Peterson writes in 2005, "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 2005:273).

Analyzing qualitative interviews in Québec, Ollivier analyzed the linkage between omnivorousness cultural tastes and cosmopolitan openness, and argued that "openness to cultural diversity certainly represents a new aesthetics and a new ethos" (2008:122). However, she cautions that consumers' openness to cultural diversity must be investigated with a sensitivity to the shaping role of power differences, class, and cultural capital (see also Jarness and Friedman 2017). In Ollivier's words,

> openness to cultural diversity entails neither the disappearance of cultural boundaries nor the flattening of social and artistic hierarchies.... Omnivores would not exist if there were no boundaries to be crossed between high and low, commercial and authentic, global and local cultures. (2008:144)

Ollivier's point can be made more specific in the case of food. Studying cultural and culinary openness in a diverse urban setting, Cappeliez and Johnston (2013) find that certain cosmopolitan food preferences overlap with omnivorous foodie values (e.g., exoticism). This overlap works to recreate status markers and class hierarchies in a subtler form, allowing white upper-middle-class foodies to position themselves as experts in the cuisines of "exotic" Others who reside alongside them in culturally diverse urban foodscapes. Reflecting on these findings, we suggest that appearing open to the urban foodways of diverse groups allows privileged consumers to engage with the ↳ "new aesthetics" of cultural diversity, while downplaying the economic and cultural privilege that distances them from the poverty and racism that

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characterize marginalized "ethnic" Others. This need not be a deliberate distancing or deception. Indeed, as Jarness and Friedman explain, this appeal to cultural openness can occur at the level of the "honorable self" who doesn't want to be snobbish or elitist, but nonetheless performs symbolic boundary work that distances the visceral self from forms of culture that appear trashy, scruffy, superficial, narrow and lowest-common denominator (2017:19).

Besides the social and aesthetic valuation of cultural diversity, Smith Maguire (2016) connects the rise of omnivorousness to a shift in culture production toward "cultural abundance." In the previous era of old-fashioned snobbery, culture was produced and evolved relatively slowly. Today, fashion cycles evolve at a blistering pace, there is a rapid diffusion of elite brands into mainstream consciousness, and mainstream corporate products can quickly incorporate "cool" counterculture trends into mass-marketing campaigns and products. Smith Maguire suggests that this cultural abundance contributes to a "democratization of access to what was once elite and to the valorization of eclectic tastes as a mainstay of the economy" (Smith Maguire 2016:5). Media trends and, more recently, the rise of social media play an important role in a process that Peterson calls "the increasing difficulty of exclusion" (2005:274). Rapidly changing media images work to democratize taste, showing the "common people" how elites consume on their Instagram feeds, making exclusive tastes more visually accessible to consumers of various economic backgrounds (e.g., Johnston and Goodman 2015). For example, consider the erstwhile ultra-cool streetwear brand Supreme, coveted by "skaters, punks and hip-hop heads" (http://www.supremenewyork.com/about). Moving beyond its underground roots, Supreme collaborated with luxury status brand Louis Vuitton, and Beyoncé showcased its collaborative clutch purse on her Instagram feed (Petrarca 2017). As Supreme enters the mass consciousness of middle-class teenagers, fashion commentators worry how the brand can retain its "cult-level cool," especially after receiving a reported $500 million cash injection from an investment group aiming to broaden sales (Wolf 2017). With the rapid pace of cultural abundance exemplified by Supreme, omnivorousness plays a role favoring consumers who can quickly, adeptly, and materially incorporate legitimized high-low style trends and brands before they reach the mass market and become delegitimized. Put differently, in a quickly changing cultural landscape, an omnivorous aesthetic is more adaptable to shifting cultural hierarchies than a stable core of univore preferences, because it enables a nimbler approach to rapidly shifting cultural legitimization hierarchies.

While scholars have contributed important explanations for omnivorousness, there is more work to be done to explain the significance of the rise of cultural omnivorousness and its connection to privilege—especially in an age of sharp inequality. Future work will need to shed light on the paradox of omnivorous privilege: consuming omnivorously encourages an openness to multiple cultural forms from marginalized groups, but it may allow social elites to feel better about their privilege and continue to exercise a kind of symbolic dominance. For example, looking at data from *both* class-divided England and egalitarian Norway, Jarness
p. 374 and Friedman find a remarkable ↳ consistency in how social elites draw boundaries, with a commonly observed "morally-driven desire to downplay class difference and cultural distinction" that allows them to "circumvent any suspicion of snobbery" (2017:15). Based on these findings, Jarness and Friedman argue that an aesthetic valuation of cultural openness "permits very feelings of cultural distinction to fly under a dominant moral radar of tolerance and egalitarianism—even if this is not an intended pursuit on the part of social actors" (2017:15).

Omnivorous Democratization and Cultural Appropriation

As noted above, the orientation to "openness" that scholars link to omnivorousness is often associated with democratic values of tolerance and respect for diversity. This openness is encompassed within political discourses celebrating multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism that espouse the social value of heterogeneous and tolerant democratic societies (Cappeliez and Johnston 2013; Ollivier 2008).[1] Openness is often placed in binary opposition to "closure," conceived negatively as unitary, local, intolerant, and narrow minded, and often serves as a marker of, at best, a conservative, and at worst, regressive and xenophobic form of politics. Democratic values are then often considered to manifest in everyday acts of cultural consumption though the broad cultural tastes of omnivores, who demonstrate their tolerance through tastes that span cultural and classed spectrums (Cappeliez and Johnston 2013; Johnston and Baumann 2015; Ollivier 2008). In turn, rejecting cultural forms holds the potential to act as a form of discrimination (Bryson 1996; Warde 2011). However, as Ollivier (2008) comments, research on omnivorousness generally assumes the correlation between political and cultural openness, rather than exploring or questioning it, begging the question, is cultural openness truly or directly correlated with political openness? Are all omnivores open-minded liberal elites and all univores intolerant lowbrow conservatives? Or put differently, does cultural capital today necessitate political tolerance (see also Bryson 1996; Warde 2011)? Research considering cultural openness as a repertoire or toolkit (Lamont 1992, 2000; Swidler 1986, 2001) rather than an idealized manifestation of multicultural openness offers insight into how openness is differentially articulated and manifest within different groups, while exploring how their access is shaped by and may reinforce economic and cultural privilege (Cappeliez and Johnston 2013; Ollivier 2008).

Ollivier also provokes sociologists of culture to explore more thoroughly the power relations underpinning how cultural openness is defined, and to consider what consequences might result from the association of openness with privileged elites and closure with underprivileged groups. As Ollivier notes, such an association risks lowbrow consumers becoming "implicitly defined as lacking not only the material and symbolic resources necessary to succeed in the global knowledge-based society, but also the personality traits and qualities associated with a desirable form of agency" (2008:125). We concur that research needs to explore this tension more comprehensively to examine not only how omnivorous consumption might look
p. 375 across various classed groups and ↳ political affiliations but also how we as sociologists might reproduce social inequalities in cultural consumption by defining omnivorous consumption in particular ways that reinforce the acceptability of the tastes and practices of economic and cultural elites.

Encompassed in this is consideration into how the consumption practices of certain marginalized groups, and in particular those who come from rural, lower class, and often conservative backgrounds, become stigmatized within omnivorousness. Research on symbolic exclusion has offered insight into how exclusions themselves become difficult indicators in a time where overt ethno-racial or classed antagonisms are socially sanctioned (Bryson 1996; Warde 2011); however, as Lizardo and Skiles (2015:20) note, "as symbolic exclusion becomes a rarer (and normatively proscribed) practice, then whatever symbolic exclusion behavior at the level of overt taste expression that is observed acquires more symbolic (and substantive) significance." The categories that remain excluded by omnivores are often the tastes of lower class, politically conservative groups such as that for country, folk, or religious music (Bryson 1996; Lizardo and Skiles 2015; Ollivier 2008). These forms are unpalatable to many outside these fields, as their consumption has come to signal intolerance, localism, and xenophobia. More research is required to examine the "politicization" of cultural forms within particular political and historical contexts such as rising inequalities (Piketty 2014) and the heightened symbolic significance of identity politics today (Fraser 2009) (see Fishman and Lizardo [2013] for an example of this application).

Also important to consider are the political implications of omnivorous taste patterns on those who have long-standing ties to those cultures being consumed. More pointedly, often overlooked within studies on

omnivorousness is investigation into how this orientation comprises practices of cultural appropriation. While potentially well meaning, broadening cultural tastes necessarily relies on exploring and experiencing cultural forms that are tied to marginalized groups (Heldke 2003; hooks 1992; Oleschuk 2017). Postcolonial theory has established how Western cultural constructions rely on a white, Anglo-European perspective as the central or "neutral" vantage point from which ethnic "Others" are consumed and added, as a "spice [or] seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 1992:21; see also Heldke 2003; Said 1978). This reproduces racial inequalities by essentializing ethnic identities, normalizing white privilege, and reinforcing nonwhite people as "cultural Others" (Harper 2011; Heldke 2003; Oleschuk 2017). Cultural appropriation is best understood intersectionally, to include both raced and classed elements. Through cultural appropriation, poverty is obfuscated, and even romanticized, and nonwhite cultural forms are disproportionately associated with lower income statuses and attributed low monetary value in comparison to classically white forms.

At the same time, omnivorous openness can foster genuine acts of recognition and important entrepreneurial opportunities for people of color that hold the potential to foster more informed understandings and increased tolerance for historically marginalized groups (Narayan 1997). Scholarship has begun to examine the role that racialized consumers (Oleschuk 2017) and producers (Ray 2016) play in
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negotiating the racial dynamics encompassed in omnivorous consumption and, in doing so, create value, ↳ meaning, and opportunity in their own right. The significance of these consumption acts nonetheless remains precarious when they remain reliant on unequal racial hierarchies, and meaningful social change aimed at reconciling these inequalities is unlikely through consumption alone (Oleschuk 2017). This conversation can nonetheless be elaborated through a stronger situation of cultural consumption within contemporary race and classed politics, and by tying cultural consumption more directly to conversations with other subfields working with critical race theory (e.g., hooks 1992) and critical scholarship on class such as that on "white trash" culture (e.g., Wray and Newitz 2013).

Why Cultural Consumption Matters for Our Understandings of Inequality

The nature of the connection between cultural consumption and inequality has evolved over time, and the study of this link has evolved as well. The trickle-down effects of fashion trends identified by Simmel (1957) can still be identified in some contemporary examples. However, they do not provide a full picture of the relationship between cultural consumption and inequality. The Bourdieusian shift toward a field analysis, with its focus on the key concepts of habitus and capital, opened a new paradigm for understanding linkages between class and cultural consumption. The homology between class and culture was empirically supported through survey data, and it showed how members of dominant classes eschewed cultural choices that were not legitimated by consecrating authorities. In contrast, members of dominated classes rarely consumed culture that was highly legitimated.

Peterson's pioneering research complicated our understanding of the kinds of culture that were consumed by high-SES people. Instead of a homology between class and culture, we appeared to see more inclusiveness among high-SES people and an overlap across classes between some cultural choices. While more recent research has found that class differences can still be identified through a fine-grained analysis, there is no doubt that the snobbish kind of cultural consumption exemplified by the Boston Brahmins that DiMaggio (1982) wrote about is no longer with us.

It is feasible to argue that omnivorousness represents a kind of cosmopolitanism and openness that legitimates and integrates cultural consumption across lines of class, gender, and ethnicity. Ever since the rise of jazz (Lopes 2002), we have seen clearly how socially elite people can agree on the legitimacy of a

cultural form that is historically associated with a group that has been othered and socially marginalized. It is also plausible to see omnivorousness as a productive and generative response to globalization and multiculturalism. However, it is equally feasible to point to the potential for negative consequences for class politics associated with omnivorous cultural consumption preferences and patterns. Researchers remain committed to the idea that cultural consumption retains a relationship to distinction, even if that
p. 377 relationship contains some tensions and ↳ contradictions. Thus, while omnivorousness embodies openness and cosmopolitanism and an aversion to snobbery, this progressive ethos can divert attention away from the role of cultural consumption in reinforcing class differences. The result is an obfuscation of inequality, rather than any meaningful social change to reduce inequality. Moreover, well-meaning openness to the culture of socially disparate groups can devolve into simple cultural appropriation in the absence of any action beyond consumption alone to reduce hierarchical social differences (Oleschuk 2017).

Inequality is on the rise (Piketty 2014). The shift over the last forty years toward omnivorous cultural consumption coincides with this rising inequality. In the absence of a rigorous analysis, we could speculate that the correlation between omnivorous cultural consumption and inequality does not seem to support the idea that a move away from cultural snobbishness is, in substance, connected to actual equality. Another, more cynical perspective might see omnivorousness as an ideological suture that functions to hold together an increasingly unhealthy social structural fraying. Future research that examines societal-level, rather than individual-level, trends and associations could address productively this question about the significance of omnivorousness.

Note

1. The effectivity of cultural identity politics emphasizing tolerance, democratic inclusion, and recognition of ethno-cultural identities is certainly not without critique, and this rhetoric must be placed within important debates about the limits of multiculturalism and its role in perpetuating a form of color-blindness that masks existing inequalities (Bannerji 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Mackey 2002).

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