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Cultural Sociology 2007; 1; 143
DOI: 10.1177/1749975507078185

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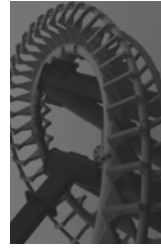
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Understanding Cultural Omnivorousness: Or, the Myth of the Cultural Omnivore

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ABSTRACT

The concept of omnivorousness has become influential in the sociologies of culture and consumption, cited variously as evidence of altered hierarchies in cultural participation and as indicative of broader socio-cultural changes. The 'omnivore thesis' contends that there is a sector of the population of western countries who do and like a greater variety of forms of culture than previously, and that this broad engagement reflects emerging values of tolerance and undermines snobbery. This article draws on the findings of a study of cultural participation in the UK to explore the coherence of the omnivore thesis. It uses a survey to identify and isolate omnivores, and then proceeds to explore the meanings of omnivorousness through the analysis of in-depth, qualitative interviews with them. It concludes that, while there is evidence of wide cultural participation within the UK, the figure of the omnivore is less singularly distinctive than some studies have suggested.

KEY WORDS

cultural capital / omnivore / omnivorousness / social class / taste

Introduction: The Status of the Cultural Omnivore

This article joins the cultural omnivore debate, concerning the nature and implications of the fact that a substantial section of the population of western countries likes a greater variety of forms of culture than they previously

did. It is based on interviews with individuals who, in answer to a national random sample survey in the UK, had recorded broad cultural engagement. Interrogation of the interviews permits access to the personal cultural orientations of such people, whose accounts can be held up against the distinctive, singular figure of 'the omnivore'.

Peterson (1992) coined the term 'cultural omnivore' to address an anomaly observed in the evidence revealed by his work with Simkus (Peterson and Simkus, 1992) which showed that people of higher social status, contrary to elite/mass models of cultural taste, were not averse to participation in activities associated with popular culture. Indeed, high status people were adding diverse practices and cultural forms to their cultural repertoire at an accelerating rate: they were omnivores because they were developing a taste for everything. This idea attracted considerable sociological attention, because it challenged some central assumptions about the relationship between socio-economic position and cultural competence, not least Bourdieu's (1984) widely debated account of such matters.

There has been much speculation and empirical research since Peterson's original intervention, aiming to corroborate these findings and to elaborate on their significance. A substantial number of articles have now been written explicitly exploring the nature, extent and significance of the omnivore phenomenon; see Peterson (2005) for a comprehensive list. This copious academic production is based almost exclusively on secondary analysis of survey data, which show that higher status sections of the population of the USA and Europe have broader cultural engagements and tastes than the remainder. It is, however, contested whether this is an historical trend and also what precisely are its implications. The social and aesthetic meanings associated with omnivorousness remain to be unraveled because almost all existing work has been based upon inference and interpretation from survey data, and one can only get so far in understanding individuals' thoughts and actions using such a method. Interviews offer the most effective social scientific method for finding out how omnivores think and reason (Bellavance et al., 2004; Zavisca, 2005). Yet, without use of a social survey, it is hard to isolate a sample of omnivores, for there is no obvious alternative technique for delimiting a sample of people to be approached for interview. This article reports on a study which has a unique set of evidence in this regard, for we interviewed face-to-face the same individuals identified in a survey as having high levels of cultural engagement, that is, people who were putatively omnivores.

Our data, the first systematically to probe in the British context the distribution of cultural capital using, in an integrated way, both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, has several distinctive qualities.¹ The survey was designed with the omnivore debate in mind and is therefore able to address directly some issues raised by it. We have detailed evidence about a wide range of cultural and leisure activities, so that our analysis is not exclusively focused upon behaviour in the sphere of the fine arts. From the point of view of an extensive notion of omnivorousness, we can explore omnivore issues across

many types of recreation and culture. In addition, by interviewing people who had responded to the survey, we were able to follow up in discussion, mostly in interviewees' own homes, the answers obtained more briefly through our survey instrument. Thus it has been possible for quantitative and qualitative evidence about the same person to be compared.

There are two definitions of omnivorousness, which we might call the *volume* and the *compositional* definitions. The first simply maintains that some people, an identifiable sector of the population, do and like more activities and things than others (Holbrook et al., 2002). Peterson (2005: 264) notes that this is increasingly becoming the conventional operational definition. However, volume measures alone do insufficient justice to the rationale for the earlier studies, which suggested that some distinctive status orientation is entailed in the patterns of cultural preferences involved. Peterson and Simkus (1992: 252) viewed omnivorousness as an aspect of the aesthetics of elite status which is, 'being redefined as the appreciation of all distinctive leisure activities and creative forms along with the appreciation of the classic fine arts'. Importantly, this is replacing an old arrangement whereby elite status was associated with cultural snobbery, a situation where it was 'incumbent on members of the cultural elite not only *to do the right thing*, but as importantly, to *absolutely shun* all other sorts of cultural practices'. In a later article (Peterson and Kern, 1996: 906), omnivorousness is seen as a feature of a dominant class: 'As highbrow snobbishness fits the needs of the earlier entrepreneurial upper-middle class, there also seems to be an elective affinity between today's new business-administrative class and omnivorousness'. But there is also a hint that it is a sign of greater tolerance and democratization: '... it [omnivorousness] is antithetical to snobbishness, which is based fundamentally on rigid rules of exclusion' (1996: 904). However, it is not 'liking everything *indiscriminately*', but 'an *openness* to appreciating everything'. Peterson and Kern also add that it 'does not imply an indifference to distinctions', for the highbrow does not necessarily actually embrace the lowbrow forms, but merely seeks to 'appreciate and critique in the light of some knowledge of the genre'. Peterson, then, has conceived of omnivorousness 'as a standard of good taste' (2005: 264), involving 'tastes that crossed class, gender, ethnic, religious, age and similar boundaries' (2005: 260), and with a particular emphasis on its rejection of snobbishness. Hence, to abandon reference to the compositional dimension of omnivore taste cannot be entirely satisfying, for the concept's critical edge resides partly in its specific cultural content.

Other scholars have attempted to specify further the social significance of omnivorousness. Bryson (1996) developed and analysed the idea that the omnivore might be culturally tolerant, showing not only that omnivores in the USA had wider tastes, though they were not appreciative of everything, but that they were also more liberal on racial and political matters, hence her connection between omnivorousness and 'multicultural tolerance'. Erickson (1996) considered omnivorousness more as an instrumental rather than as an expressive orientation, showing, on the basis of a sample of Canadian security industry workers,

that the cultural knowledge of those in supervisory positions ranged more widely. She interpreted this as being useful in personal communications in the workplace. Warde et al. (1999), on the basis of a study of tastes in restaurants in the UK, speculated that a broad range of tastes was emblematic of a new form of distinction among the privileged, where wide knowledge and capacity for the appreciation of many practices and products was itself accorded symbolic honour, and that a section of the most privileged part of the population found in it a new source of reputation and status (see also Fridman and Ollivier, 2004).

In this article we proceed first by identifying individuals who are omnivorous by volume (of participation, taste and knowledge), and then by analysing the extent and the forms of status orientations as exhibited in interviews with these same people. In so doing, we question the strength of the link between wide cultural participation and an allegedly singular and distinctive mode of cultural being, namely being an 'omnivore'.

Isolating 'Omnivores'

We measured omnivorousness, defined as breadth of cultural involvements, along three separate dimensions: taste, knowledge and participation. On the basis of survey responses, we created three scales which summed the number of items that respondents liked, were familiar with, or actively participated in, thus obtaining measures of volume of engagement across a range of activities, including music, literature, television, film, painting and sport. The selection of items included in the survey was guided by preliminary focus groups, which had explored their meaningfulness and accessibility to different groups across the UK.

In order to measure taste, we coded responses to 39 different items, some by name, some by genre, which were said to be liked. They were as follows:

- national TV: which of four programmes would the respondent 'make a point of watching'
- film directors: making a point of watching the work of six film directors
- musical works; having listened to and liked eight named pieces of music
- artists: having seen works, which were liked, by seven named painters
- book genres; score of 1 or 2 on a seven-point scale from like to dislike for seven genres of literature
- genres of music; score of 1 or 2 on a seven-point scale from like to dislike for seven genres of music.

After considerable exploration of the ways in which these items were inter-related, we constructed a simple scale which summed how many items any respondent liked. The lowest recorded score was zero; eight people liked none of the 39 items offered. The highest score was 27. The lowest quintile liked six or less items. The highest quintile liked 14 or more items. The mean was 9, the median scores were 8 and 9. Table 1 lists some of the least and most liked items.

Table 1 Items on scale of tastes: percentage who like selected items

	Percent
Films of Mani Rathnam	0.6
Films of Jane Campion	2.2
<i>Einstein on the Beach</i> (Philip Glass)	3.3
Paintings of Frida Kahlo	3.8
Religious books	8.5
Heavy Metal	10.8
Modern Jazz	12.0
Watching World Cup football on TV	44.4
<i>Wonderwall</i> (Oasis)	46.6
Paintings of Picasso	48.8
Paintings of Turner	50.5
Paintings of L.S. Lowry	54.5
<i>Chicago</i> (Frank Sinatra)	64.7
Paintings of Van Gogh	67.3
Total N = 1564	

In a similar way, we constructed a simple scale based upon respondents' knowledge of specified works. We asked in the survey whether people had heard of or seen particular cultural items. We had available 24 items across four fields. The domains were: four identified national events broadcast on TV, the works of six film directors, the named works of six authors, and eight pieces of music. The scale is therefore a measure of knowledge or familiarity with specific cultural items. Table 2 indicates the frequencies of knowledge across a selection of these items. It demonstrates high levels of familiarity with works chosen to represent 'popular' culture (such as the films of Steven Spielberg), but also high levels of knowledge of literary works (notably *Pride and Prejudice*, although also over 40% know of *Madame Bovary*) and 'classical' musical works (with Vivaldi being broadly as well known as Oasis or Britney Spears).

The scale was normally distributed. One person scored zero, and two people 24. The mean was 15, the median 16. The bottom quartile scored 13 or less and the top quartile 18 or more. A strong concentration was observed in the middle of the scale: 58 percent of respondents scored between 13 and 18.

Finally, we constructed a scale of participation, based upon people's involvement in a range of leisure activities, both within and outside the home. There were 27 activities in all, ranging from watching the television to going to the opera, playing sport to reading newspapers.

The scale was normally distributed. The lowest score was 3, the highest 27. The mean was 17, the median 16. The lowest quartile were involved in 14 activities or less; the highest quartile in 21 or more. Here we see the most popular forms of participation are watching television and eating out, and the least popular are opera and bingo. Perhaps surprisingly, on this scale, more people read books (79.6%) than go to the cinema (74.6%).

Table 2 Items on the scale of knowledge: percentage who knew of selected items

	Percent
Films of Mani Rathnam	5.6
Films of Pedro Almodovar	8.2
<i>Einstein on the Beach</i> (Philip Glass)	16.5
<i>I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing</i> (Maya Angelou)	20.1
<i>Kind of Blue</i> (Miles Davis)	30.4
<i>Madame Bovary</i> (Gustave Flaubert)	40.3
<i>The Firm</i> (John Grisham)	65.0
<i>Wonderwall</i> (Oasis)	73.6
<i>Oops I Did it Again</i> (Britney Spears)	77.4
<i>The Four Seasons</i> (Vivaldi)	79.5
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> (Jane Austen)	92.6
Films of Steven Spielberg	95.3
Films of Alfred Hitchcock	95.3
The Football World Cup	98.9
N = 1564	

Table 3 Items on the scale of participation: percentage who ever participated in selected activities.

	Percent
Bingo	14.3
Opera	15.4
Rock Concerts	31.1
Orchestral Concerts	32.5
Art Galleries	44.8
Theatre	56.4
Museums	62.9
Cinema	74.6
Reading Books	79.6
Pubs	83.6
Eating Out	96.5
Watching TV	98.3
N = 1564	

Thus we produced three different measures of omnivorousness by volume. An analysis of the patterns of engagement, and their socio-demographic bases, will be reported elsewhere. Suffice to say for present purposes that, when analysed using bivariate or multivariate statistical methods, levels of omnivorousness were highest among those with most education, especially degrees, among those who were white, and among those of middle age. We were able

to identify every respondent who had scored in the top quartile/quintile of any of these scales. This provided us with a sub-sample of putatively 'omnivorous' individuals, with some of whom we conducted household interviews.

Interviews with 'Omnivores'

The household interview phase of the study identified 30 individuals who had responded to the initial survey. Interviewees were selected for several theoretical purposes, not specifically geared towards investigating omnivorousness. Households were re-contacted according to a theoretical sample which sought to generate a spread of household types (i.e. lone person households, households with or without children) and ethnicity, as well as levels of institutionalized cultural capital. 'Low' cultural capital meant having no qualification higher than GCSE or equivalent, 'high' meant degree level and above.² Twelve of the 30 interviewees had high cultural capital; of these, nine were women. Interviews were held in locations across the UK, including Northern Ireland, with adults, the youngest of whom was 25 and the oldest 67.

In their entirety the interviews represented an opportunity for respondents to discuss their survey answers, thereby divulging a fuller picture of their forms of engagement and their social location. The interview schedule was designed to explore choices in television and film, music, reading, sport, cuisine and the visual arts, and to allow a more general exchange about cultural attitudes. It also provided, through exploration of life-style and household arrangements, insight into the various contexts in which cultural choices were made.

Of the respondents identified for interview, 13 scored highly (i.e. within the top quartile/quintile) on at least one of the three scales of omnivorousness. This probably reflects the over-representation in our sample of interviewees with relatively high levels of educational capital: 40 percent of our qualitative sample held a degree, compared to 17 percent in the population as a whole (ONS, 2005: 41). Three interviewees scored highly on all three scales. These three were then compared with five additional respondents, who had scored highly on two of the three scales, four scoring highly on knowledge and participation but less highly on likes, and one scoring highly on knowledge and likes but less so on participation. Thus, all eight recognized a large number of cultural items, seven of them participated widely, and four of them expressed many positive preferences.

Seven of the eight respondents thus identified as highly culturally engaged were women, and all but one was white. The high proportion of women might be interesting in itself, for gender has been peripheral to debates about omnivorousness (though recent research has highlighted the relations between gender and cultural consumption (Bihagen and Katz-Gerro 2000; Kane 2004; Lizardo, 2006). However, given that our interview sample contained so few men with higher levels of education, it is as likely to be fortuitous as meaningful. The small numbers involved give us no warrant to pursue such issues.

According to their survey answers, all but one of these respondents had had a university education. They also tended towards professional occupations, including three who were engaged in teaching of some kind, a freelance worker in the heritage industry, two social workers, and a young graduate researcher working in local government. The remaining case, a full-time mother, who was the respondent without a degree, scored highest of the eight on the scale of participation, but among the lowest on the scale of knowledge.

The respondents' occupations were broadly linked to public service, within the health, social care, education and heritage sectors. None could really be described as 'elite'. Rather they represent, in the main, the moderately advantaged and well educated. It is also interesting to note, with Savage et al.'s (2001) warning about the usefulness of self-defined class positions in mind, that, despite their generally high levels of educational qualifications and professional positions, only two of these respondents identified themselves as 'middle class'. In fact, two chose to describe themselves as working class, and the remainder chose variations on 'upper working' and 'lower middle' class.

The Tastes of Our 'Omnivores'

One serious difficulty of most of the omnivore literature is finding a means to identify meaningful cultural boundaries separating high and popular culture. Bourdieu focused on what, on the basis of theoretical reasoning, he called 'legitimate' items, those which were deemed valuable by members of powerful and influential social groups responsible for the production of culture. We think Peterson would not be averse to this reasoning. One option then, using survey data, is to reveal 'legitimate' items by examining the preferences of people with high institutionalized cultural capital (i.e. those with the most extended formal education, rather than simply those with most social, economic and cultural assets). Both Bourdieu and Peterson see exclusivity as a property of 'legitimate' or 'highbrow' culture. Legitimacy is also connected to rarity, a property of items which can also be derived from survey data. Consequently, we can examine whether the omnivorous, identified as persons highly culturally engaged, combine a taste for rare and legitimate items (that is, those to which the highly educated have affinity) with a taste for more common and more popular items. It might be anticipated that an omnivore would like many items of high culture but also a significant swathe of popular cultural items. In addition, we might expect them to exhibit some distinctive commitment to some particular popular forms.

Survey respondents registered comparatively few likes. This permits easy exploration of the effect of rarity among tastes. Out of 39 items, 15 were liked by less than one in seven of our respondents. Eight of those 15 items were disproportionately liked by graduates; the criterion of disproportion was that graduates should be more than twice as likely as an unqualified respondent to state a positive preference. These eight items we call 'consecrated' tastes; they are both rare and endorsed by those with the longest experience in the educational institutions of cultural reproduction. Table 4 lists the eight consecrated

Table 4 Consecrated items: (a) respondents who like an item (percentage); (b) proportion of graduates expressing liking compared with those without qualifications (ratio); and (c) position of that item in rank order of that ratio for all 39 available items

	(a) Mean of all preferences	(b) Ratio of qualifications	(c) Rank order qualifications
Films of Jane Campion	2.2	4.41	5
Films of Pedro Almodovar	2.6	17.36	2
Work of Tracey Emin	2.9	4.31	6
<i>Einstein on the Beach</i>	3.3	3.34	7
Paintings of Frida Kahlo	3.8	42.87	1
Heavy Metal	10.8	2.91	10
<i>Kind of Blue</i>	12.7	2.93	9
Modern Literature	13.5	4.43	4

items specified in order of rarity and by the ratio of preference by those with degrees, compared to those with no qualifications. Interestingly, by these criteria in 21st century Britain, heavy metal is a consecrated genre (cf. Bryson, 1996), as is the jazz classic, *Kind of Blue*.

Returning to our eight interviewees, we can get a symptomatic impression of their tastes by glancing at the combination of consecrated and more popular items that they like. Table 5 lists for each interviewee which consecrated items they reported in the survey as known or liked, along with some others indicative of their less arcane preferences.

All eight had heard of or liked more than one of the consecrated items. James, who holds a PhD, the highest level of institutionalized cultural capital for this group, also liked the most consecrated items. Of most interest here, though, is that, alongside their knowledge of and preference for consecrated items, the respondents tended to like other items, suggesting some degree of transgression of cultural boundaries by the highly culturally engaged. Thus, Jenny likes modern literature *and* Eminem's *Stan*, Cherie likes the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo *and* the animated comedy *Southpark*, James likes Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach and* horror films. Of the others it is notable how many items Seren likes (three of the consecrated, and ten others – the most of this group). Sandra, with the lowest institutionalized cultural capital, also had tastes for the consecrated. Rita and Poppy, by contrast, had each heard of two of the consecrated items but liked none. Their preferences were firmly within the non-consecrated items. These differences can be explored in relation to the various forms of cultural engagement reported in these interviews.

Forms of 'Omnivorousness'

An examination of the answers to the survey in combination with material gathered as part of the household interviews, suggests four distinct forms of

Table 5 Knowledge and likes of consecrated items

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Job</i>	<i>Ed. Qual.</i>	<i>Consecrated items known</i>	<i>Consecrated items liked</i>	<i>Other items liked</i>
Jenny	47	Writer/ Tutor	Degree	Pedro Almodovar; <i>Einstein on the Beach</i> ; <i>Kind of Blue</i> ; Tracey Emin	Modern Literature	<i>The Simpsons</i> ; Steven Spielberg; <i>Wonderwall</i> ; Stan
Cherie	48	Tour guide	Degree	Tracey Emin	<i>Kind of Blue</i> ; Heavy Metal; Frida Kahlo	<i>Southpark</i> ; Alfred Hitchcock; Whodunits; Self-Help books; <i>Wonderwall</i>
James	38	University Lecturer	PhD	Pedro Almodovar; Jane Campion	<i>Einstein on the Beach</i> ; <i>Kind of Blue</i> ; Frida Kahlo; Tracey Emin	<i>The Simpsons</i> ; Horror films; <i>Wonderwall</i>
Seren	55	Social Worker	Degree	Frida Kahlo	Modern Literature; <i>Kind of Blue</i> ; Heavy Metal	<i>Sex & the City</i> ; Sci-fi films; Steven Spielberg; Self-Help books; Rock; World Music; Electronic; <i>Wonderwall</i> ; Stan
Sandra	33	Full-time mother	A-levels	Frida Kahlo; Tracey Emin	<i>Kind of Blue</i>	<i>Sex & the City</i> ; Urban; World Music; <i>Oops I did it again</i>
Caroline	25	Researcher	Degree	<i>Kind of Blue</i> ; Tracey Emin	Modern Literature; Heavy Metal	<i>6ft Under</i> ; Alfred Hitchcock; Rock; <i>Wonderwall</i>

Table 5 (continued)

Name	Age	Job	Ed. Qual.	Consecrated items known	Consecrated items liked	Other items liked
Rita	33	Secondary School Teacher	Degree	<i>Einstein on the Beach</i> ; <i>Frida Kahlo</i>		<i>Eastenders</i> ; Romances; Self-Help books; <i>Wonderwall</i> ; <i>Oops I did it again</i>
Poppy	47	Social care worker	Degree	<i>Kind of Blue</i> ; Tracey Emin		<i>Bad Girls</i> ; Alfred Hitchcock; Biographies; Self-Help books; Country & Western; Urban; <i>Stan</i>

cultural engagement among these eight people. These are the forms of engagement exhibited by omnivores 'objectively' identified. The small numbers in each category preclude any claim about the general distribution of such forms. We present them initially, therefore, as qualification to the unitary and distinctive figure of the omnivore which has been advanced in previous accounts.

1. *The Professional*

There is some evidence of distinctive forms of engagement, which we might recognize as typical of what Bourdieu terms the cultural intermediary, in three of the eight respondents. These three, a university lecturer, a part-time creative writing teacher and professional writer, and a freelance worker in the heritage industry, all exhibit various forms of professional cultural expertise. They manifest discriminating preferences for both high and popular works, and a particular knowledge of differences within, as well as across, genres. In reading tastes, this is demonstrated by a tendency to discriminate within their preferred genre, that is, if they chose science fiction, as two of these respondents did, it was not *all* science fiction that they liked. The distinction made by one of these, Jenny (47), a writer herself, was for 'believable science fiction, not fantasy' typified in her eyes by the author John Wyndham. Another, James, a 38-year-old university lecturer, preferred a specialist type of science fiction, graphic novels. But while commending the quality of the authorship of such work, he emphasized this preference as 'an escapist thing', contrasting with the specialist reading of historical work connected to his own research. In explaining her preference for crime fiction, Cherie

(48), the heritage worker who describes herself as a detective novel 'buff', is similarly keen to specify a preferred sub-genre thus:

Not so much the *Miss Marple*, kind of in the library kind of thing, I actually like the American ones best. I like kind of southern, gothic, I like the kind set down in the bayou with the Cajuns and some really horrible white sheriff, you know, I like that kind of thing.

This discerning approach to genre is also evident in the choices of these 'cultural intermediaries' regarding musical tastes. James, the academic, for example talked in his interview about his preference for jazz, 'but not Dixieland jazz'. When discussing his preference for classical music, he also distinguished between that offered by the BBC's classical radio channel, and the offerings of a commercial station, which he described, somewhat pejoratively, as 'chocolate box music'. He explained his relative dislike of urban and hip-hop music as due to him being 'a little out of touch', rather than by any perceived aesthetic failings of the genre. This is mitigated somewhat by a professed openness to all types of music, described by him as a requirement of his role in teaching the dramatic arts.

Omnivorosity, as Peterson points out, does not imply openness to everything. These cultural intermediaries, for example, may have watched television, preferring *The Simpsons*, *South Park* or *Sex and the City* as 'quality' pieces of popular culture. However, they are also in agreement in their distaste, both for sport on television and for reality TV; the latter is variously described as 'humiliating', 'tedious' or 'boring'. The limits to openness are evident in these forms of discrimination, and can be further illustrated with our second form of engagement.

2. *The Dissident*

This form was particularly strongly developed in one respondent, a social worker from Wales. This 57-year-old woman, Seren, exhibited high levels of participation, knowledge and likes in a mannered way, suggesting cultural engagement as both an expression of identity and as an aspect of status politics. Her presentation of self was specifically geared towards confounding expectations of the correct behaviour of a professional middle-aged woman. Her activities included sporting brightly coloured dyed hair, regular attendance at rock concerts and nightclubs, and preferences for hip-hop and heavy-metal music. These choices, particularly her taste in music, were explained in terms of the emergence of an oppositional consciousness located in the 1960s:

I can remember when I was young teenager, early teens thinking 'I am never going to be like my father' who liked one type of music and that was it, you know. And anything that was modern was rubbish and I was not going to be like that.

Seren reports an openness to music which straddles genres and high/low boundaries, taking in, according to the survey, both Eminem and Vivaldi's *Four*

Seasons. But there was an exception, country and western music, a genre dismissed due to a perception of its links to the racist history of the American south. There is a sense in her orientation of an awareness of the political nature of culture, and its association with processes and structures of power. Such a position, which might emerge from personal biography, through the experience of liberal education or the professional history of a public servant whose job she describes as ‘cleaning up society’s mess’, exemplifies an association between social liberalism and the broader tastes of the omnivore. This political approach to cultural participation is most evident in Seren’s rejection of what she sees as pretentiousness, particularly articulated in terms of perception of the active exclusion of popular audiences by a cultural elite:

Sometimes, you know art critics and music critics actually prevent people from enjoying art and music. Oh, they’re so bloody ... pretentious, isn’t it? You know, they price the opera out of existence ... make such a big splurge about that, you know, people think, ‘Oh that’s too clever for me’, you know? It’s the arty-farty crowd isn’t it? Because the masses aren’t allowed to enjoy it, you know it’s only for the privileged.

Wide participation here is celebrated, associated with social good, breaking down hierarchies and barriers, and challenging powerful forces that are perceived to use culture to keep people in their place.

3. *The Apprentice*

The notion of wide participation as a personal good is also evident in a third distinctive form of engagement. It was particularly evident in our two youngest interviewees, Sandra (33) (a single mother, living in London) and Caroline (25) a recent graduate working as a government researcher in South Wales. In both cases a sense emerges of wide cultural participation as a positive attribute. In Sandra’s case, participation in the visual arts, traditionally a specialist, middle-class taste, is facilitated by proximity to galleries and exhibitions in London, and is no doubt assisted by cultural policies which subsidize museum and gallery admission prices. Here the respondent crosses cultural boundaries in the opposite direction to that imagined by Peterson’s omnivore, i.e. an individual with relatively little cultural capital, and certainly not in a socially elevated position, participates, somewhat tentatively, in highbrow activities, as well as in popular ones. This manifested itself in knowledge of the works of Turner and Hockney (we showed interviewees a painting by each and asked for comment) and a more than typically nuanced appreciation of the status of modern art that demonstrated awareness of current or recent London-based exhibitions, including installation art and sound sculpture. There is the possibility here, then, that in metropolitan centres, where the visual arts, theatre and film are a more visible part of the fabric of daily experience than in non-metropolitan areas, a high level of cultural engagement is seen as one element of a full life by a wider population.

The case of Caroline is slightly different. She scored highly on knowledge and participation on the survey but less highly on likes. Her preferences do not straddle obvious cultural boundaries, so that, while her participation and knowledge are broad, there is less that is distinctively positive about her tastes. In the interview she struggled to articulate the reasons behind her choices (for modern literature, for costume drama, and so on) beyond reference to her recent experience of higher education in the arts and humanities. In fact, one element of this interview was a reluctance to commit to liking anything with particular enthusiasm, rather expressing non-committal openness to everything. In a survey, such an orientation might result in high scores for knowledge or participation, but the interview suggests that such scores might also derive from an inability to discriminate, caused by a relative lack of confidence over what one is supposed to like and do. The likelihood is that the experience of higher education in the arts (she is a graduate in English) opened the possibility of wide participation to her, perhaps revealing it to be potentially socially advantageous. It may be significant that at the time of the interview, she was in the process of renovating her house, strongly influenced by home decoration, design and makeover programmes on television and with some empathy for the notion that home decoration is part of 'expressing your personality'. For both these young people, cultural engagement might be more experimental, oriented to trying new and different things, an expression of their relative insecurity or lack of clarity regarding personal identities. Openness to a variety of experiences, based upon the presumed value of participation for its own sake, rather than deeply held cultural conviction, becomes a means of discovering or altering one's place in the world.

That these three forms of cultural engagement described above are different offers some support, but also some challenge, to the omnivore thesis as it is generally conceptualized. Of equal interest to us, however, is that our research process not only discovered these distinctive forms, but that it also revealed other even more 'orthodox' or 'ordinary' cultural orientations among those identified 'objectively' as omnivorous.

4. *The Unassuming*

The remaining two individuals, while sharing characteristics of class and educational experience with the other interviewees, and reporting equally high levels of participation in the survey as the others, nonetheless professed tastes firmly within the popular mainstream. They chose recent best-selling books (the biography of the comedian Billy Connolly, *The Da Vinci Code*), popular television programmes such as the soap opera *Eastenders*, established rock or pop artists such as Robbie Williams, or mainstream Hollywood films as their preferred cultural forms. Such choices partly reflect the relative lack of opportunities for cultural engagement beyond that easily on offer within the home, or through the mass media, on a day-to-day basis. Both interviewees lived away from major metropolitan centres, in a North Yorkshire market town and a Scottish (Ayrshire) village.

These interviewees demonstrated little sense of adventure, of connection with specifically high cultural forms, or of critical appropriation of the popular. While they scored highly on the scale of knowledge, it would appear that this did not translate, as it did with other respondents, into any distinctive form of engagement. Instead, a picture emerges of the general activities and attitudes of the educated middle classes, whose everyday interests and concerns lie not with cultural engagement, but rather are focused on issues of childcare, family life, career development and security. Both were parents who combined their professional career (one a school teacher, one a social care worker) with their roles in families and partnerships.

In one of the cases, Rita, a 33-year-old secondary school teacher, engagement in culture is articulated as a connection with her youth, as she maintains an enthusiasm for the rock bands (*Deacon Blue* – a popular Scottish rock band of the late 1980s) and films (*Top Gun*, *Grease*) which she enjoyed when she was a child or teenager. The implication here is that cultural participation, particularly in terms of exploring popular culture, is less central to the more pressing and serious concerns of adult life. A similar distinction is made in the second case, Poppy, a 47-year-old social care worker. She has relatively conservative tastes in film, where she refers to ‘old time classics’ and what she terms ‘true stories’, though this perhaps refers to traditional forms of narrative structure given that she chooses literary adaptations *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Colour Purple* and *The Green Mile* as favourites. In terms of reading, she again prefers ‘real stories’ and has a preference for celebrity biographies such as those about the comedian Billy Connolly and the TV presenter Anne Robinson. Such ‘proper’ tastes are contrasted with the tastes in music of her 16-year-old son, who has a preference for R & B music. While she recognizes she ‘used to be a teenager’ and so ‘lets him get on with it’, she dislikes

... the noise, and I don’t understand the words. A lot of these rapping now it just doesn’t sound English to me, you know, I like a song that, you know with proper words in, meaning and stuff.

These two respondents scored less highly on the scale of likes, implying perhaps the significance of taste, more than knowledge and participation, in distinguishing sub-types of omnivorous orientation in engagement with the cultural. Absence of enthusiasm might be seen as an aspect of the sense of ‘ordinariness’ identified by Savage et al. (2001) as typifying contemporary middle-class identification and of the prevalence of ‘ordinary consumption’ (Gronow and Warde, 2001).

Discussion

A principal conclusion arising from the interview material is that a measure of omnivorousness by volume conflates a number of different orientations towards cultural consumption. Precise specification of the concept of omnivorousness has proved elusive, for despite his valiant efforts, Peterson, the

concept's main champion, always had some difficulty in adequately definitively pinning down its characteristics. Though partly changing his mind over time, he initially formulated an optimistic view of the emergent omnivore. The omnivore was a figure likely to appeal to the liberal academic mind, for it sustained a commitment to the values of high culture, while neither being condescending towards popular culture, nor implying that refined taste was deserving of social deference. The evidence of our interviews is certainly that omnivorousness accompanies tolerance; there was no evidence of the drawing of cultural boundaries to exclude other social groups, and few indications of snobbishness when expressing personal cultural tastes. Yet at the same time, extensive engagement is probably now considered a marker of good taste; nobody suggested to the contrary that omnivorousness is in bad taste. Given that a definable section of the populations of western countries is much more heavily engaged across a range of recreational and cultural pursuits than others there is no reason to abandon the concept of omnivorousness. What perhaps should be relinquished is the idea that there exists a singular cultural type, a wholly typical figure, which might be deemed *the* omnivore.

We are not the first to use qualitative methods to explore aspects of the omnivore debate (see especially Bellavance et al., 2004; Carrabine and Longhurst, 1999; Lahire, 2004) and nor are we first to suggest that an 'objective' measure of omnivorousness may conceal some variation in cultural orientation (e.g. Emmison, 2003; Zavisca, 2005). Peterson (2005: 264) commented that a number of authors 'have suggested that there are several distinct types of omnivores ... but looking across the studies published, the proposed sub-types are diverse and fall into no recurrent pattern.' While true, one must add that there have been few such studies, and their selection of subjects has been primarily opportunistic. Our use of multiple methods gives us a unique capacity to examine the variation in dispositions among individuals identified by objective criteria as highly omnivorous.

Our omnivores could not be described as members of a dominant class or elite and, as such, they already trouble the notion emerging from Peterson's work of omnivorousness as a new orientation, an emerging form of habitus that typifies people of the highest status. Instead, in the main, they represent the quite well educated and relatively privileged. Rather than claiming a new orientation, or labelling them as representing a new fraction of the middle class, we prefer to offer them as examples of possible orientations *within* the middle class. In this regard, let us look again at the four types. Of course, we cannot generalize to a larger population on the basis of our qualitative interviews. How prevalent in the British population as a whole each type might be is unknown to us. Yet just because our category of dissident has only one exemplar is no reason to dismiss its possible significance. From a tiny sample what matters is that each of the four types has a coherence and interpretive plausibility, making their diversity and coexistence pertinent to an understanding of cultural omnivorousness.

The professionals among our interviewees most closely approximate to Peterson's initial model. They are open to everything, appropriate legitimate and popular culture in the same critical aesthetic manner, condemn little, and seem indifferent, or perhaps inured, to social distinction conveyed through art and culture. Indeed the things that they do condemn, such as reality television, are as likely to be similarly condemned by people from a range of social positions across our interview sample. This indicates, as Bryson (1996) suggests with reference to heavy metal in the USA, that some popular culture remains beyond the pale of omnivorous tastes. The professionals are, however, engaged as producers and as cultural intermediaries. They profit from their cultural capital through their ability to earn a living making culture, rather than using it as a token in some competition for social honour. They, more than any others, might expect to feel secure and comfortable in the practice of social exchange around cultural matters.

Our dissident shares some of the assumptions of the professionals, but seems much more immediately aware of the social symbolism of cultural attachments. Her diatribe against pretentiousness in culture indicates a positive and conscious reaction to a snobbishness still often thought to characterize the British cultural establishment. Interestingly, a survey question asked whether people agreed with the statement 'The old snobbery once associated with cultural taste has now all but disappeared': 49 percent of our respondents disagreed. The probability is, therefore, that there are others like Seren politically motivated to resist the perceived condescension of aesthetic authority.

Both professionals and dissident seem to attribute some intrinsic importance to aesthetic qualities. They dwell within the ethos of a historical period which put increasing value on the aesthetic aspects of experience. Not only goods but also ways of life came to be filtered through the lens of aesthetic judgment. They are competent in the application of what Bourdieu deemed a 'disinterested' orientation towards art, critically evaluating it apparently 'in its own terms' and 'for its own sake'. Seren certainly was more keenly aware that aesthetic judgment was also bound up with social status and was more exercised by the relationship of art to social status than the actual apparent quality of the art itself.

Neither of the other two types appeared deeply affected by aesthetic discourses. The two young women whom we have cast as 'apprentices' seemed more casually engaged in cultural matters. They were perhaps obeying the imperative that Baudrillard considered definitive of consumer culture, namely that one should 'try everything'. Their endurance, despite a relative lack of confidence, suggests that there is a middle-class norm prescribing command of a broad range of cultural forms. Competence may be sought through experience or, as in the case of the London-based non-graduate, absorbed through everyday life in the metropolis. This form of cultural engagement, informed by a tentative curiosity, presumes that acquiring a broad range of tastes is a valid aspiration, in itself worthy.

The fourth type, our unassuming and ordinary omnivorous interviewees, seems driven by neither aesthetic nor social motivations. Peterson (2005: 259), reflecting on the development of his concept of the omnivore, acknowledged

that he had for a long time ignored the possibility that there were lowbrow omnivores, people who did a lot but whose commitments were not to the forms of high culture. Since Bourdieu's (1984) characterization of the cultural practice of those with high economic but low cultural capital, it has been recognized that cultural activity might be extensive without encompassing the rare, refined and difficult. More recent research (Savage et al., 2005; Van Eijck and Van Oosterhout, 2005) suggests that the critical division at the core of Bourdieu's analysis, between those possessing high cultural capital and high economic capital, is no longer so prevalent a line of distinction. Our ordinary omnivores appear to be exemplars of sections of the population who are widely engaged but without strongly embracing consecrated elements of the fine arts. Somewhat paradoxically, this may be the group for whom the expansion and variety of cultural production has the most significant effect, enabling wide participation without committed engagement.

Conclusion

Where then does the concept of the omnivore now stand? Our evidence would suggest that we should be very suspicious of the notion of *the* omnivore as a characterization or ideal type of cultural actor. There is no associated integrated aesthetic or social orientation towards cultural practice. Those who engage in a broad range of cultural pursuits do have some features in common – their education, and their tolerance of many forms of culture. But their orientations to those activities are differentiated in important ways. Wide engagement counters snobbery, and may indeed be inspired by, and reproduce, an abhorrence of turning differences in taste into markers of social status. This reflects the ethos of the postmodern critique which sought to rescue popular culture from elite condescension.

But wide participation does not necessarily entail consumption of consecrated and legitimate culture. In some cases it does. Most studies which have compared the patterns of participation of omnivores with those of more traditional fine arts audiences, have found that omnivores attend theatre, opera, classical concerts, etc. *more* than do those who restrict their activities to high culture (Lopez-Sintas and Garcia Alavarez, 2004; Lopez-Sintas and Katz-Gerro, 2005). Competence in consecrated culture remains restricted to a limited segment of the middle class. That segment may now have wider tastes in addition, but command of consecrated culture remains a token of distinction which probably still operates effectively as a form of cultural capital.

In other instances, however, extensive involvement occurs without any critical engagement or commitment to high culture. Omnivorousness, when measured by volume of participation and knowledge, is often nondescript and ordinary; it is merely the norm for the university-educated middle class. It is not necessarily held with any great consciousness or commitment. However, most distinctive among our interviewees were the professionals, cultural intermediaries

with a professional interest (and perhaps more an interest than an enthusiasm) in some, but not all, areas of popular culture. Their traits were most closely aligned with the core definition of the omnivore. Yet it is their specificity that most strongly suggests the need to re-examine the notion that there is a single, distinctive form of the omnivore or of omnivorous engagement. Other types, with significantly different meanings, coexist with this type. Whether each type confers practical or symbolic advantage in equal measure is debatable. An omnivorous orientation is probably socially profitable, and is certainly economically advantageous for those for whom it is a professional commitment, but nevertheless it may, in itself, and in some of its manifestations, be culturally rather undistinguished.

Acknowledgements

This article draws on data produced by the research team for the ESRC project *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion: A Critical Investigation* (Award no R000239801). The team comprised Tony Bennett (Principal Applicant), Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde (Co-Applicants), David Wright and Modesto Gayo-Cal (Research Fellows). The applicants were jointly responsible for the design of the national survey and the focus groups and household interviews that generated the quantitative and qualitative data for the project. Elizabeth Silva, assisted by David Wright, co-ordinated the analyses of the qualitative data from the focus groups and household interviews. Mike Savage and Alan Warde, assisted by Modesto Gayo-Cal, co-ordinated the analyses of the quantitative data produced by the survey. Tony Bennett was responsible for the overall direction and co-ordination of the project. Thanks to the members of the team for their comments on this article.

An early version of this article was presented at the European Sociological Association conference in Torun, Poland, 9–12 September 2005. Our thanks to the organizers and participants of that session.

Note

- 1 Qualitative data included focus-group discussions and semi-structured household interviews, exploring the cultural tastes, forms of cultural participation and cultural knowledge of the participants. The focus groups, totalling 25, involved a total of 143 participants, including 74 women and 69 men. The groups were conducted in six areas in the UK in order to take account of regional differences as well as of differences between urban and rural areas and those between metropolitan and provincial cities. Household interviews were conducted with 30 respondents and, in some cases, their partners, yielding a total of 44 interviews. The selection of households was based on a theoretical sample which aimed to take account of the distribution of households in terms of (a) cultural capital composition, (b) the presence or absence of dependent children, (c) geographical location, and (d) a division between 'white' and minority ethnic composition. See Silva (2005) for a technical report on the household interview phase. There was also a national random sample survey,

with an achieved sample of 1564 respondents, which explored similar indicators of cultural capital alongside holdings of economic and social capital. The achieved main sample of 1564 represented a response rate of 52%. The survey was conducted between November 2003 and March 2004 by the National Centre for Social Research. See Thomson (2004) for the technical report.

2. GCSE examinations are taken in England and Wales at age 16.

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