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Cultural Omnivores or *Culturally Homeless*? Exploring The Shifting Cultural Identities of The Upwardly Mobile

Abstract

The concept of the cultural omnivore has become increasingly influential in cultural sociology. Its proponents argue that it has now become a badge of honour to be eclectic and *omnivorous* in one's cultural preferences and explicitly *not* be seen as an exclusivist cultural 'snob'. It is even argued that omnivorousness represents a new source of social and cultural capital, enhancing one's ability to communicate with diverse groups and nurturing greater cultural and political tolerance.

Drawing on a large-scale survey of British comedy taste and 24 follow-up interviews, this paper strongly challenges existing representations of the cultural omnivore. Among comedy consumers, I only find omnivorousness among one social group; the upwardly mobile. However, notably, the culture switching of these respondents does not seem to yield the social benefits assumed by other omnivore studies. In contrast, the life histories of these respondents reveals that omnivorousness is more a bi-product of life *trajectories* - whereby lowbrow comedy taste is established during childhood but then highbrow taste is added as cultural capital resources grow. Significantly, though, this combination of tastes has more negative than positive implications, leaving socially mobile respondents largely uncertain of their cultural identities. While they lack the 'natural' confidence to communicate new, more legitimate, tastes as embodied cultural capital, their upwardly mobile trajectory means they are also acutely aware that the tastes of their youth are socially unacceptable and aesthetically inferior. In short, these comedy consumers are more accurately described as *culturally homeless*, caught with one foot in two different taste cultures.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the dominant paradigm in cultural sociology has arguably shifted from an emphasis on culture as a vehicle for class reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984) towards the widespread adoption of Peterson's (1996) 'cultural omnivore thesis'. The main thrust of this argument is that contemporary 'elites' no longer use highbrow taste to demonstrate their cultural distinction, but are better characterised as inclusive 'omnivores', happy to consume both high *and* low culture. Although originally detected only in US musical tastes, the omnivore theory has since been corroborated in a number of different national contexts (Di Maggio and Mukhtar, 2004; Ollivier, 2008). In Britain, recent research conducted by Bennett et al (2009) has also found evidence of widespread omnivorousness. The authors (Bennett et al, 2009: 189-194) go on to claim that 'there has been a more or less total elimination of hints of [cultural] snobbishness towards other social classes in Britain' and it has now become a 'badge of honour' to embrace a 'spirit of openness' in one's cultural preferences.

Lately, however, a number of qualitative researchers have begun to challenge the empirical validity of the omnivore thesis (Atkinson, 2011; Coulangeon, 2005; Holt, 1997). Primarily, these authors counter-argue that the eclectic taste reported in omnivore studies does not necessarily presuppose that the culturally privileged are now indifferent to aesthetic hierarchies. Indeed, the problem with such statistical studies, they argue, is that they tend to obscure the fact that hierarchies of legitimacy may exist *within* categories of high or low culture (Atkinson, 2011: 6) and, furthermore, that the pursuit of distinction may not just be a matter of what objects are consumed, but the *way* they are consumed (Hennion, 2001; Holt, 1997).

In making this argument, these authors somewhat re-orientate the debate back to Bourdieu, and particularly his (1986) notion of 'embodied cultural capital'. Bourdieu and Passeron (1989: 117) argued that parents from the dominant (middle and upper middle) class inculcate dispositions of 'symbolic mastery' among their children, which can then be converted into tangible resources of cultural capital in social life. Perhaps the most valuable of these

dispositions is the ‘disinterested aesthetic’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 28-42), a (highly valued) way of seeing culture that demands that one put aside any emotional or moral ‘interest’ they have in an art work and instead focus critically on its formal qualities. Bourdieu argued that privileged children come to employ this principle of disinterestedness as if they have an innate gift, and it therefore functions as a form of embodied cultural capital, allowing them to decipher and participate in ‘legitimate’ forms of culture.

Moreover, authors such as Holt (1997) and Lizardo (2006) have noted that embodied cultural capital is not just useful for decoding high art. In his examination of American consumption practices, for example, Holt (1997: 109-115) argues that contemporary elites increasingly consume popular culture but, crucially, in doing do so they wilfully employ the aesthetic ideals of disinterestedness. Coulangeon (2005: 126) argues that this use of embodied cultural resources actually constitutes a more audacious form of cultural domination. Through ‘borrowing forms of expression from outside the perimeter of highbrow art’, elites are not demonstrating omnivorousness, but instead showcasing their ability to ‘culturally empower’ popular art and, in the process, further ‘radically distinguish’ themselves from ‘lower status class members’ (127).

My own research on British comedy taste has further problematised the cultural omnivore thesis (Friedman, 2011). Rather than open and eclectic, I found the field of comedy taste characterised by very strong taste divisions. Indeed, although many comedy consumers appeared to resemble cultural omnivores initially - in terms of statistically measured comedy tastes – qualitative analysis revealed a more nuanced picture. In particular, it showed that culturally privileged respondents used their embodied reserves of cultural capital to read and decode comedy in ways that were knowingly inaccessible to those from less privileged backgrounds.

Yet while my research uncovered strong comedy taste distinctions between those with high and low cultural capital, what about those who did not easily fit into these two groups? In the study’s survey sample, 30% (n= 268/900) of

respondents reported 'mixed' reserves of cultural capital (MCC). Some were intergenerationally stable members of the 'intermediate class'[1], but significantly the majority (81%) were better described as socially mobile. Typically, this mobility was upward – with respondents beginning life with relatively low cultural capital but then accumulating capital by attending university and/or gaining professional or higher-managerial employment.

These upwardly mobile respondents are of particular sociological interest, because previous studies carried out in the US (Peterson, 1992) and the Netherlands (Van Eijk, 1999) have suggested that the socially mobile represent the most likely group to be cultural omnivores. As agents most adept at 'culture-switching' (Erickson, 1996), it is suggested that the mobile have the most eclectic taste profiles, and subsequently reap significant 'social rewards' (Lizardo, 2006). This article aims to add to this literature by examining the comedy taste and wider cultural identities of the *British upwardly mobile*.

The article begins by explaining that, at first glance, the taste profiles of MCC respondents resembled the image of the tolerant 'cultural omnivore' so prevalent in the literature. However, closer qualitative examination revealed that upwardly mobile omnivorousness was less a purposeful choice and more the result of lifecourse trajectories that had left these respondents with affinities to both (rather than neither) traditional comedy taste cultures. Most significantly, though, it demonstrates that comedy omnivorousness yielded little by way of social rewards. Instead, it often left upwardly mobile respondents in precarious social positions, nostalgic but not wholly comfortable with the comedy of their upbringing but lacking the linguistic confidence to convert new, more legitimate, comedy tastes into embodied cultural capital. In other words, these respondents were less cultural omnivores and more *culturally homeless*.

[1] The 'intermediate class', as defined by The National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, includes higher supervisory occupations, intermediate occupations and small employers.

2. Understanding The Socially Mobile

First, though, it is useful to sketch the various sociological arguments surrounding mobility and cultural consumption, starting logically with the foundational contribution of Bourdieu (1984). Although Bourdieu did not completely rule out mobility (he preferred to use more limiting terms like 'trajectory' and 'slope'), it did – in its most long-range form - appear to conflict with a founding principle of his social theory, namely what Bennett (2007: 202) has termed the 'singular unity of class habitus'. Bourdieu argued that those located in neighbouring positions in social space are socialised with similar 'conditions of existence' (meaning stocks of capital and distance from material necessity), which in turn endow them with a similar habitus, that is, a complex set of durable dispositions and schemes of perceptions that guide social practice and shape cultural taste (Bourdieu, 1990: 60). However, significantly, Bourdieu (1984: 101) argued that the dispositions flowing from the habitus were so durable that in the vast majority of the cases they stayed unified through time, meaning that those with strong initial reserves of cultural capital were statistically bound to accumulate further capital in the fields of education and occupation, whereas those with low initial reserves were structurally less able to accumulate later resources (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133)[2].

Bourdieu's (1984: 318-335) only lengthy discussion of social mobility[3] was in relation to the French petite bourgeoisie (lower middle class), who he argued had a 'collective social trajectory' that transformed their habitus towards a durable inclination and 'propensity to accumulation [of capital] in all forms' (336). In other words, Bourdieu conceived the petite bourgeois as inherently aspirational, forever seeking upward mobility but never able to successfully activate the 'embodied cultural capital' of the dominant classes. In terms of actual cultural tastes, he argued this manifested as a sense of 'cultural goodwill', or 'reverence for legitimate culture', which was only tempered by a lingering sense of unworthiness:

[2] Bourdieu did acknowledge some room for agency, what he called aesthetic 'improvisation', but that this generally worked alongside the habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 132-135).

[3] Bourdieu also touched on mobility elsewhere in *Distinction* (1984: 123; 439) and in *The Rules of Art* (1996: 54-55)

> ‘As self made men, they [the upwardly mobile] cannot have the familiar relation to culture which authorises the liberties and audacities of those who are linked to it by birth, that is, by nature and essence’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 331).

Notably, Bourdieu also suggested that this combination of aspiration and status anxiety compelled the upwardly mobile to renounce the cultural identities of their origin, to ‘break the ties, even the family ties, which hinder [their] individual ascension’. Such ties of kinship and friendship, he continued, ‘are merely hindrances, which have to be removed whatever the cost, because the gratitude, the mutual aid, the material and the symbolic satisfactions they give, in the short or long term, are among the forbidden luxuries’[4] (Bourdieu, 1984: 337).

However, many within British sociology have questioned the assertions underpinning Bourdieu’s analysis of the socially mobile in *Distinction* (Bennett, 2007; Goldthorpe, 2008). Indeed, ever since Goldthorpe’s (1980) Oxford mobility studies, there has been a renewed acceptance that late modern British society is characterised by much higher social mobility, particularly upward, than Bourdieu’s theory implies (Breen, 2005; Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010; Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007; Heath, 2000;)[5]. Furthermore, such mobility has not just been confined to the petite bourgeois, but has propelled many from working class backgrounds. A key factor in this process has been credited to the transformative effect of the education system. Despite Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1979) assertion that education largely reproduces social privilege, influential work carried out by Halsey (1980), Marshall et al

[4] Significantly, Bourdieu presents a rather different conception of mobility in *The State Nobility* (1998: 106-07). Here he notes that although the upwardly mobile attempt to incorporate the cultural dispositions of their new group, at the same time they are never able to ‘erase their nostalgia for reintegration into their community of origin’. This tension in Bourdieu’s theorising of the mobile could provide an interesting area for future study.

[5] In recent years, though, while rates of upward mobility have continued to increase for women, they have begun to decrease among men, leading to concern among politicians that social mobility is declining (Hills et al, 2009). However, as Li and Devine (2011: 9-10) point out, there has also been a sharp increase in downward mobility among men, indicating greater overall fluidity in Britain than ever before.

(1997) and more recently Reay (2009) has indicated that the British education system *can* act as a vehicle for upward mobility, with increasing numbers of working class children going to selective schools, obtaining a degree and moving onto professional employment. In such instances, Reay (2009: 1115) argues working class children defy the assumed unity of the habitus and instead develop a skilfully 'reflexive habitus' that successfully traverses the dual fields it inhabits.

However, while there may be broad consensus on the *existence* of British social mobility, and indeed the role that culture plays in driving it (Scherger and Savage, 2010), there is little understanding of the *impact* of this mobility on processes of cultural identity and consumption. Goldthorpe (1980) posited that the upwardly mobile were predominantly satisfied with their achievements, and were rarely plagued by social or cultural disorientation. Moreover, he noted that mobility 'acts to multiply ties between social classes' and therefore the mobile play an active role in reducing social distance and class conflict in society as a whole. However, Goldthorpe's work was based on data collected in 1972/74 and this has not been systematically updated. Relevant data has been collected outside the UK, though. Following an initial suggestion by Peterson and Kern (1996: 255) in the US, Van Eijk (1999) found that the Dutch socially mobile are the social group most likely to exhibit cultural omnivorousness. Far from rejecting their cultural origins, this group instead combines tastes for both 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' forms of culture. Similarly, examining French cultural practices, Lahire (2008: 174) argues that mobility tends to 'translate into a 'heterogeneity of cultural preferences'. These individuals, he notes, retain a range of cultural dispositions that reflect the increased variety of 'socialising agents' they have come into contact with.

These findings are even more significant when they are added to existing work on the cultural omnivore. For example, many have argued that the 'open' and 'eclectic' nature of omnivorousness can be associated with certain 'social benefits' (Lizardo, 2006: 801). Bryson (1996), for instance, largely associated

cultural omnivores with increased social and political tolerance[6], whereas Warde et al (1999) argued that omnivorousness might be a new marker of 'cool'. Most significant of all, however, is the suggestion that omnivorousness now represents the 'dominant expression' of cultural capital (Bennett et al, 1999: 254). According to various studies (Emmison, 2003; Erickson, 1996; Lizardo, 2006), cultural omnivores are in a particularly advantageous position, because they are able to use (and convert) their diverse taste into forms of both 'generalised' and 'restricted' social capital. While their tastes for highbrow culture may help to foster bonding connections in relatively high-status and exclusive interaction networks, taste for lowbrow culture acts as a 'bridging tool', providing what Di Maggio (1987: 443) calls 'fodder for least-common denominator talk', and subsequently aids their ability to make weak-tie social connections that transcend social class boundaries.

Not all theorists are so optimistic about the link between mobility and eclectic taste, however. Lahire (2011: 36-41) prefers to conceptualise taste eclecticism as 'dissonance' rather than omnivorousness, and argues that this plurality is actually an attribute of everyone's taste repertoires. However, while most people employ several aesthetic repertoires that 'co-exist peacefully' and do not threaten their 'personal coherence', the mobile often face two 'contradictory matrices of socialisation', such as a working-class family and the education system, or a middle-class family and a downwardly divergent occupational or personal milieux. Lahire argues that these competing schemes of action lead to 'discomfort', 'paralysis' and 'suffering', with the individual plagued by a 'central internal conflict that organises every moment of existence'. In terms of taste, he notes:

> "Socialised successively but in part also simultaneously in worlds in which habits of taste are different and even socially opposed, these 'class transfuges' oscillate constantly – and sometimes in a mentally exhausting manner – between two habits and two points of view" (Lahire, 2011: 38).

[6] Bryson (1996) does acknowledge limits to elite cultural tolerance, with some elite music dislikes representing clear boundaries with lower status persons.

More specifically in terms of comedy taste, Kuipers (2006: 48-51; 73; 91-94) reports a similar process among the Dutch upwardly mobile. While her respondents describe changing their 'humour register' according to their milieu, she detects a distinct 'uneasiness' in how this makes them feel. Many report scenarios where they feel somewhat alienated by either the humour culture of their origin or destination class.

Yet while the socially mobile may be linked to social 'advantages' in some national contexts (Peterson, 1992; Van Eijk, 1999), and with 'suffering' and 'uneasiness' in others (Lahire, 2011; Kuipers, 2006), most work on British cultural consumption has paid little attention to the socially mobile[7]. This article aims to plug this gap in the literature and specifically hone in on the taste profiles of upwardly mobile Britons. The article's empirical focus is comedy taste, as this reflects the larger study from which the data was gathered. Comedy is primarily of interest because it has been consistently absent from studies of British cultural consumption[8]. However, although traditionally considered lowbrow, British comedy now boasts considerable prestige and increasingly attracts large and socially diverse audiences (Friedman, 2011). Thus while comedy is clearly only one cultural field among many, its growth and increasing diversity means it may represent a useful staging point for understanding wider constructions of British cultural identity.

3. Outline of the Research

I draw upon data from a mixed methods study of the contemporary British comedy field. The study consisted of a survey (n = 901) and 24 follow up interviews. The survey aimed to measure people's 'comedy taste', with respondents asked to indicate preferences across 16 stand-up comedians and 16 TV comedy shows. The survey also asked a number of demographic questions in order to construct variables for gender, age and notably – 'cultural capital resources'. This latter variable was made up of equally

[7] Indeed, Bennett et al's (2009) recent mapping of British cultural taste largely ignored the mobile. There has been more general research on mobility (see Li et al, 2008; Miles et al, 2011;).
[8] See, for example, the recent studies of Bennett et al, 2009 and Savage and Devine, 2011)

weighted measures for social origin (parental occupation and education), education and occupation. 'Education' was calculated on a scale of seven in terms of 'highest completed' qualification. 'Occupation' was calculated on a scale of nine corresponding to which jobs most emphasize 'cultural skills'[9]. Finally, 'Social Origin' was calculated by recording both parents' education and both parents' occupation when the respondent was 14 (using the same scales as above). The respondent's 'score' for each of these three measures was then collapsed into a score out of 5 to give each respondent a total cultural capital score out of 15[10].

The survey was conducted at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the largest arts festival in the world and also the focal point of the British comedy industry. However, previous research has indicated that Edinburgh Fringe audiences tend to be disproportionately drawn from middle-class backgrounds rich in cultural capital (Scottish Arts Council 2007). Such a sampling skew appears to be somewhat confirmed in my sample – 31 per cent of respondents were from 'low cultural capital' (LCC) backgrounds, 30 per cent from 'mixed cultural capital' (MCC) backgrounds and 39 per cent from 'high cultural capital' (HCC) backgrounds[11]. Although this skew was smaller than I expected, it nonetheless differs strongly from the probability sample of British class recently reported by Bennett et al. (2009: 55), which reported a working-class population twice the size of a privileged 'professional-executive' class. It's important to consider that the survey therefore may have under-represented British comedy consumers with fewer cultural capital resources.

[9] This was adapted from a similar scale used by Peterson and Simkus (1992; 154-156)

[10] This is an updated version of the cultural capital measure used by Holt (1997). Although Bourdieu (1984) measured cultural capital only by looking at a respondent's social origin and education, I see cultural capital as a resource that continues to evolve through the life course, particularly as a result of contact with certain occupational cultures.

[11] Respondents with cultural capital scores over 10 were considered 'high', between 8–10 'mixed' and below 8 'low'. Typically, those with high resources were university graduates employed in professional occupations. They also tended to have at least one parent with a similar profile. In contrast, those with low resources tended to have GCSE or A- level equivalent qualifications and were employed in more manual or skilled jobs. Again, their parents typically had similar profiles. Finally, those with mixed resources tended to be stable members of the intermediate class, or have distinctly mobile trajectories. I do not claim these groups contain special explanatory power, rather that they identify the most salient divisions in capital resources.

Furthermore, the fact that all respondents were sampled at an arts festival indicates that the entire sample may have been skewed toward the 'culturally engaged'.[12]

24 respondents were also interviewed about their aesthetic orientation to comedy. Sampling for the interviews was based on a theoretically defined sub-sample of the original survey respondents. Approximately 30 per cent indicated on the questionnaire that they were happy to be interviewed and from this I selected a final list of 24. These respondents were chosen primarily to reflect the demographic distribution of the survey sample. Thus there were 9 interviewees with high cultural capital (HCC) resources, 8 with mixed (MCC) resources and 7 with low (LCC) resources. I also tried to reflect the gender, age and location proportions from the survey.

As the majority (67%) of MCC survey respondents had upwardly mobile profiles, 7 of the chosen MCC interviewees were intergenerationally upwardly mobile. Although this article will begin by touching on the project's overall findings, it will mainly concentrate on these 7 interviews with upwardly mobile respondents. Although the main objective of the interviews was to understand respondents' aesthetic orientation to comedy, I was also able to probe the *development* of respondent's comedy tastes - from early socialisation through to the present day. This was particularly useful for understanding the formation of comedy tastes and, in temporal terms, if and when they altered over the lifecourse.

4.1 Comedy as an Instrument of Distinction: HCC and LCC respondents

I will begin by outlining the main finding that emerged from the research – namely that comedy taste *is* being used by the culturally privileged, at least to some extent, to express cultural distinction. I have addressed this at length

[12]Considering these limitations, I do not seek to make sweeping statements about comedy taste that claim to stand good over time, or across different cultures. Instead, statistical generalizations made here should be understood as fundamentally 'moderate' (Payne and Williams 2005) and subject to confirmation or refutation by further enquiry.

elsewhere (Friedman, 2011; Friedman and Kuipers, forthcoming) so I will somewhat condense the argument and empirical material here.

In particular, the data revealed three key findings. First, my survey data revealed clear differences in patterns of British comedy taste between HCC and LCC respondents[13]. As Table 1 illustrates, most HCC respondents expressed preferences for comedians such as Stewart Lee (77%) and Mark Thomas (59%), and TV comedies *The Thick Of It* (59%) and *Brass Eye* (77%). HCC respondents also reported a clear aversion for comedians such as Roy 'Chubby' Brown (72%), Benny Hill (52%), Bernard Manning (79%) and Jim Davidson (79%). In contrast, many LCC respondents registered preferences for exactly the comedians disliked by HCC respondents (For example 56% liked Jim Davidson, 48% liked Benny Hill, 34% liked Roy 'Chubby' Brown and 31% liked Bernard Manning). Moreover, rather than dislike the comedians preferred by HCC respondents, most LCC respondents had not even heard of these artists (Mark Thomas (59%) Stewart Lee (53%), *The Thick of It* (63%) *Brass Eye* (46%) (see Appendix for a description of all comedians featured in the article).

These comedy taste divisions were significant because they appeared to separate 'highbrow' comedy preference and 'lowbrow' comedy aversion among HCC respondents, with much higher rates of lowbrow comedy preference among LCC respondents, coupled with a lack of knowledge of highbrow comedy. Comedy items were characterized as highbrow or lowbrow[14] based on their level of consecration among comedy critics and academics (see for example Cavendish, 2009; Deacon, 2009; Jack, 2009; Hall, 2008; Bennett, 2006; Stott, 2002)[15]. As Table 2 demonstrates, patterns

[13] Elsewhere these results have been analysed in more depth using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) (Friedman, 2011).
[14] My concern here is not to address whether this high-low division is normatively just, but simply to acknowledge that such a cultural hierarchy is widely *perceived* to exist and has historically carried considerable power in the cultural field (Stott, 2002).
[15] Critics are not only key gatekeepers in the communication of comedy to the public but they are also bestowed with the 'authority to *assess* artistic works' (Bourdieu, 1993). Through the deployment of influential reviews and awards, they are therefore able to endow certain comedians with a widely recognized legitimacy.

of HCC highbrow taste and LCC lowbrow taste were not entirely consonant, but nonetheless 77% of HCC respondents reported at least 3 highbrow preferences (compared to 17% of LCC respondents), whereas 62% of LCC liked at least two lowbrow artists (compared to 5% of HCC respondents).

Comedy Item	Low Cultural Capital	Mixed Cultural Capital	High Cultural Capital
Like Stewart Lee	**15% (42)**	**45% (121)**	**77% (270)**
Dislike Stewart Lee	**11% (31)**	**5% (13)**	**4% (14)**
Like Mark Thomas	**7% (20)**	**28% (75)**	**59% (207)**
Dislike Mark Thomas	**6% (17)**	**4% (11)**	**4% (14)**
Like The Thick of it	**10% (28)**	**24% (64)**	**59% (207)**
Dislike The Thick Of It	**5% (14)**	**1% (3)**	**1% (3)**
Like Brass Eye	**22% (62)**	**46% (123)**	**77% (271)**
Dislike Brass Eye	**8% (22)**	**4% (11)**	**3% (11)**
Like Eddie Izzard	58% (163)	72% (193)	77% (270)
Dislike Eddie Izzard	15% (42)	9% (24)	5% (18)
Like Russell Brand	44% (124)	46% (123)	41% (144)
Dislike Russell Brand	36% (101)	33% (88)	30% (105)
Like Monty Python	75% (211)	83% (222)	85% (298)
Dislike Monty Python	10% (28)	5% (13)	4% (14)
Like Mr Bean	52% (146)	35% (94)	44% (154)
Dislike Mr Bean	27% (76)	28% (75)	30% (105)
Like Michael McIntyre	64% (180)	59% (158)	58% (204)
Dislike Michael McIntyre	8% (22)	7% (19)	14% (49)
Like Jim Davidson	*56% (157)*	*41% (110)*	*2% (7)*
Dislike Jim Davidson	*31% (87)*	*44% (118)*	*79% (277)*
Like Benny Hill	*48% (135)*	*19% (51)*	*5% (18)*
Dislike Benny Hill	*16% (45)*	*29% (78)*	*52% (183)*
Like Last of the Summer Wine	*35% (98)*	*28% (75)*	*14% (49)*
Dislike Last of the Summer Wine	*30% (84)*	*30% (80)*	*43% (151)*
Like Roy 'Chubby' Brown	*34% (96)*	*16% (43)*	*3% (11)*
Dislike Roy 'Chubby' Brown	*31% (87)*	*52% (139)*	*72% (253)*
Like Bernard Manning	*31% (87)*	*5% (13)*	*2% (7)*

Dislike Bernard Manning	*28% (79)*	*52% (139)*	*79% (277)*

Table 1: Selected comedy preferences by cultural capital (Highbrow comedians in bold and lowbrow comedians in italics

	Low Cultural Capital	Mixed Cultural Capital	High Cultural Capital
Like at least 1 'highbrow' comedy item	31% (87)	77% (206)	95% (333)
Like at least 2 'highbrow' comedy items	21% (59)	68% (182)	92% (323)
Like at least 3 'highbrow' comedy items	17% (47)	39% (105)	77% (270)
Like at least 4 'highbrow' comedy items	7% (19)	21% (56)	62% (218)
Like at least 1 'lowbrow' comedy item	83% (233)	77% (207)	32% (112)
Like at least 2 'lowbrow' comedy items	62% (174)	51% (137)	5% (18)
Like at least 3 'lowbrow' comedy items	44% (124)	28% (75)	1% (3)
Like at least 4 'lowbrow' comedy items	29% (81)	14% (38)	1% (2)

Table 2: Consonance and dissonance of comedy preferences by cultural capital

However, although these survey findings demonstrated that several comedy items were associated with cultural capital groups, they also revealed that preferences for the majority of the 32 comedy items was relatively evenly distributed across those with high, mixed and low cultural capital resources (see Table 1). Yet while such 'crossover' taste appeared at first to indicate widespread omnivorousness among comedy consumers, interview data strongly problematised this finding. In particular, it revealed that while HCC and LCC respondents often expressed preferences for the same comedians, their reasons for doing so were very different. They read and decoded comedy in different ways and, crucially, employed strongly contrasting *styles of comic appreciation*. HCC appreciation, for example, centred on deliberately rarefied readings of comedy – readings that, decisively, foregrounded aesthetic elements they felt were missed by others. There was a sense, then, that even when consuming 'crossover' comedy, HCC respondents felt they could always 'get' more from the comedy, extracting what HCC respondent Trever described as a 'whole other level' of humour.

Thus, the second main finding revealed that most HCC respondents – and particularly younger generations - used their embodied cultural capital to employ a distinct comic style. Significantly, the principles of this style were underwritten, at least to some extent, by Bourdieu's notion of the 'disinterested aesthetic'. This involved the valorisation of certain comic themes and the clear rejection of others. For example, comedy that was sophisticated, complex and original was appreciated whereas the 'prosaic' comedy of the everyday was discarded. Similarly, comedy that tapped the entire emotional spectrum was considered valuable while comedy that aimed for only laughter and pleasure was rejected. In short, HCC styles largely represented the inverse of LCC styles – which tended to see comedy as a tool for 'feeling good' and as a counterbalance to the negative aspects of life. It is possible to sum up these contrasting styles in the following way. For HCC respondents, comedy should never be *just funny*, it should never centre purely on the creation of laughter, or probe only what HCC respondent Frank referred to as 'first-degree' emotional reactions. Instead, the form or substance of 'good' comedy should have a meaning or a message, the consumer should have to 'work' for his or her laughter, and through carrying out this aesthetic labour he or she will somehow reach a higher plain of comic appreciation (Friedman, 2011: 357-364).

Third, comedy taste did not just mark difference but also acted as a highly charged area of boundary-drawing between HCC and LCC respondents. Comedy was often an active tool in the policing of culturally-inflected class boundaries, with HCC respondents, especially, reinforcing their sense of self through the explicit rejection of what they saw as the flawed consumption of others. Indeed, eschewing the kind of openness described in other cultural areas (Bennett, 2009), HCC respondents made a wide range of aggressive and disparaging aesthetic, moral and political judgments on the basis of lowbrow comedy taste, inferring that one's sense of humour revealed deep-seated aspects of their personhood. In fact, in its strongest form, such boundary-drawing arguably constituted a form of 'class racism' (Bourdieu, 1984: 178), with HCC respondents using comedy taste as a means of explicitly 'pathologising' those with low cultural capital – equating taste with fundamental

and far-reaching notions of personal 'worth' (Friedman and Kuipers, forthcoming).

4.2 Positioning MCC Respondents

Although the social game of distinction may be evident when contrasting HCC and LCC comic styles, I now want to turn towards a more detailed analysis of upwardly mobile MCC respondents. Significantly, the comedy tastes of all MCC respondents differed strongly from both HCC and LCC groups. Rather than showing any consonant clusters of comedy 'likes' and 'dislikes', these respondents tended to have much more dissonant taste profiles. In particular, MCC respondents often combined preferences for comedy items earlier identified as largely exclusive to HCC or LCC taste cultures. As Table 1 and 2 illustrate, many more MCC respondents preferred 'highbrow' comedy items than LCC respondents, but similarly many more also liked 'lowbrow' comedians than HCC respondents.

What was most striking from these survey findings was that by mixing tastes considered to be at opposite ends of the cultural hierarchy, MCC respondents appeared to fit the profile of the socially mobile omnivore posited by Van Eijk (1999). Indeed, initially this finding seemed to be further corroborated in interviews. Here it became clear that mobile respondents not only possessed heterogeneous comedy tastes, but they also seemed to employ a style of comic appreciation that borrowed heavily from both HCC and LCC styles.

Harriet, a 26-year old primary school teacher, displayed a typically omnivorous profile. Early in our interview she described 'loving' lowbrow comedians such as Roy 'Chubby' Brown. She noted Brown is 'so offensive, so distasteful…I just think it's hilarious'. Asked to elaborate, she noted that such comedy tastes reflected her broader style of appreciation, which eschews intellectual comedy in favour of laughter and pleasure:

> You can tell from the fact I like Roy 'Chubby' Brown that I'm not bothered about comedy making me think or anything afterwards. If it's funny it's funny. If I go to a show I'm going to laugh. I'm not that deep (laughs).

Although such a style was strongly reminiscent of LCC appreciation styles, later in the interview Harriet's aesthetic orientation appeared to change dramatically. In particular, she began to talk about the comedy she's 'into at the moment', mentioning among others the highbrow TV comedy shows *Brass Eye* and *The Thick of It*. Here her style of appreciation seemed quite different, and she began to employ aesthetic terms associated more with HCC respondents. For example, she explained that she admired the 'dryness' and 'subtlety' of *The Thick of It* and the way *Brass Eye* 'sends up' people with 'stupid' views.

James, a 31-year old mental health nurse, displayed a similarly mixed style. On his survey script he reported liking 30 of the 32 comedy items and as his interview progressed it became clear he was passionate about many different types of comedy. For instance, he began by praising 'formal' innovation in comedy, and focused on comedians like Stewart Lee:

> He's got a very unusual style; he gets a line and just repeats it. This probably sounds a wee bit wanky and fucking pretentious, but it's almost like poetry or something. He's just got this knack for disassembling things.

However, having gone on to further express admiration for the originality and critical lens of comedy items like *Brass Eye* and *Spaced*, James suddenly changed tack:

> It's not just about purely intellectual stuff, though. I mean I grew up with Bernard Manning, and y'know Frank Carson and all the mother-in-law jokes. I mean they were a wee bit racist, to be fair (laughs) but that doesn't mean they weren't funny. Bernard Manning had some great material, y'know the kind of classic 'my mother-in-law's too fat' (laughs). I like my comedy to be comedy; I don't want some sort of Alan Bennett thing where it's drama with a wee comedy edge. If it's comedy make it bloody funny.

The comic tastes and appreciation styles of Harriet and James aptly illustrated the omnivorous profiles that characterised MCC taste. However, notably these profiles did not accord with Bryson's (1996) conception of the omnivore as consciously culturally tolerant. Indeed, unlike the culture consumers in

Bennett et al (2009)'s recent study, upwardly mobile omnivores had not cultivated a new style of comic appreciation which celebrated their 'versatile' approach or presented their eclecticism as a 'badge of honour' (186). Instead, their appreciation styles appeared to combine *both* the HCC and LCC style of appreciation, with one style employed to explain certain tastes and other contrasting styles introduced to explain others.

4.3 Aesthetic Slopes and Trajectories

Although most mobile respondents could therefore be accurately defined as comedy omnivores, such analysis assumed a synchronic view of comedy taste. In particular, it presumed that a respondent's taste could be understood fully from the moment they filled in the survey or took part in the interview. However, one of the main strengths of mixing survey methodology with qualitative interviews was that it allowed for a more diachronic examination of comedy taste. Significantly, this allowed for an examination of respondent's biographies, and in particular identified when a certain taste or style was developed.

Such diachronic analysis only further problematised the initial picture of MCC respondents as conventional cultural omnivores. In particular, it indicated that the taste diversity of most upwardly mobile interviewees reflected the slope of their life trajectories, and in particular their evolving resources of cultural capital. For example Patrick, a 41-year-old physics teacher, was brought up in a working class neighbourhood of Salford, near Manchester. He recalled little art and culture in his background, but noted that his dad did introduce him to more lowbrow comedy like *Last of The Summer Wine* and Benny Hill, as well as what he calls the 'usual suspects' of the then Northern comedy circuit such as Bernard Manning and Frank Carson. However, Patrick recalls that when he went to University his style of comic appreciation changed dramatically. In particular, he responded favourably to what he calls 'intelligent satire' such as *Brass Eye*, *The Day Today* and Eddie Izzard that was emerging at the time.

> I was exposed to that by friends that were living down in London so I suppose things started opening up for me during University, undergraduate days, in the early 1990s.

This process of aesthetic ‘opening up’ during university was also echoed by a number of other mobile interviewees. Pete, a 40-year-old theatre administrator, described being brought up in ‘a very uncultured’ working class family where, like Patrick, he was brought up with comedians like Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown and Les Dawson:

> Those were the comedians that were playing the [Working Men’s] clubs on a Saturday night, and my parents used to go down quite a lot, so I suppose that’s how we got into it. Maybe with ‘Chubby’ Brown it’s also because he’s from the North-East and so am I. Maybe I get the humour, the North-East humour…We call a spade a spade, sort of thing.

However, Pete moved to London when he was 18 to complete a drama degree. It was during this period, when he ‘came across more highbrow stuff’, that he notes a significant shift in his aesthetic style:

> But absolutely when I did come into that completely different environment, I sort of changed my whole outlook on things. Sounds a bit profound, doesn’t it (laughs), what a load of wank! But I did, I suppose. I suddenly found myself in literally different surroundings but also culturally, as well, and I lapped it up really. I actively went out and looked for things, theatre and cinema, as well as comedy.

What these passages illustrate is that rather than making a conscious decision to become all-embracing comedy omnivores, Pete and Patrick’s shifting taste had more to do with the slope and trajectory of their lives. Their working-class habitus may have first orientated them towards more LCC comedy tastes, but this habitus was arguably disrupted when they moved into the unfamiliar field of higher education. Here, echoing the findings of Halsey (1980) and Reay (2009), Pete and Patrick were able to create new cultural capital and successfully adapt their habitus to accommodate the academic dispositions demanded by university. In turn, both noted that this process of restructuring had had a profound impact on their cultural tastes, reorientating them towards new cultural products that reflected the dispositions and conditions of their new milieu. In terms of comedy, this manifested in a new style of appreciation for what Phillip called ‘intelligent satire’ like *Brass Eye* or what Pete called ‘highbrow stuff’.

In the case of Pete, it's also notable that this process of reorientation did not necessarily start and finish with the education system. In particular, Pete's occupational involvement with the arts, first as an actor and now as a theatre administrator, seemed to also have had a significant impact on his shifting comedy tastes. For instance, when explaining his interest in the more 'formal' aspects of comedy, he constantly prefaced taste statements with phrases like 'being in the business…' or 'from an actor's point of view…'. For Pete, then, cultural resources inculcated in the workplace had further contributed to the adaptation of his habitus:

> I think because you're doing it all day everyday, y'know, acting and being aware of the arts, you just become more aware of other influences. So that's probably the time when I started actively going out and looking for things, and at things, and examined more what I liked and didn't like. Yeah, probably my mid 20s.

These findings are significant as they qualitatively illustrate that variables like education and occupation do not just *reproduce* cultural capital resources, which following Bourdieu's assumptions about the 'practical unity' of the habitus (1984: 56; 173) we have so far broadly assumed in this paper. Instead, in the case of most mobile respondents, including Pete and Patrick, these environments can also *create* resources, even if the individuals haven't been endowed with many cultural skills from their background. Indeed, as even Bourdieu (2005) noted in later work, habitus can be 'restructured, transformed in its makeup by the pressure of objective structures' (Bourdieu, 2005: 47). Furthermore, this restructuring of resources can have a significant impact on one's orientation to comedy, in this case acting as the catalyst in the development of new, more legitimate, tastes and styles of appreciation.

However, it is also important not to present fields like education and occupation as 'objective structures' with inherent transformative potential. For instance, examining the biographical testimony of mobile respondents in detail, and in particular their accounts of taste transformation, it became clear that the catalyst for change and adaptation rarely came directly from an

institutional environment. Instead, moments of change were almost always attributed to the influence of other social actors (albeit encountered through institutional settings).

Returning to the previous testimony of Patrick and Pete, for example, it's worth noting that Patrick's changing comedy taste at university had less to do with university and more to do with the 'friends' he met there, whereas Pete's transformation at drama school was credited more to the fact that he was 'surrounded by people' interested in acting rather than the course he was enrolled on.

This 'inter-subjective' influence was also evident in interviews with other mobile respondents. Although Sophie, a 44-year old teacher, went to university and now has a professional job, she credited the major shift in her taste to her school experience, and in particular the more middle class friends she met there:

> I started junior school when alternative comedy and political correctness started getting really popular. I mean think I was about 15 when *The Young Ones* came out and I remember it was a real bonding thing with friends at the time, because we had a very similar sense of humour… I mean I've had the same friends for 20 years now and it's basically a constant torrent of abuse, really. So if you like comedy they don't, be prepared for some abuse (laughs). No, not really. You can have your different opinions…As long as you can back it up.'

What was significant about this passage was the way Sophie explained her orientation to 'alternative comedy' as something that was intimately connected to the development of certain enduring friendships. Moreover, she described how the norms established in this group had inculcated a critical appreciation of comedy, whereby taste was only accepted if one can 'back it up' intellectually.

This and other statements of inter-subjective influence are important because, in many ways, they undermine Bourdieu's (1990) conception of how habitus tends to be 'objectively harmonised' with those from similar backgrounds 'and

mutually adjusted without direct interaction or explicit coordination' (Bourdieu, 1990: 58-59). Instead, testimonies indicated that the development of comedy tastes and styles is often a fundamentally collective accomplishment, where agents 'must take into account and act in accord with the expectations of the people they encounter in social contexts' (Bottero, 2010: 13-15). Individual comic dispositions are therefore always adjusted in relation to 'calls to order' from the group they find themselves in, even if such groups have very different tastes to those from which the individual was socialised into, such was the case for Sophie, Patrick and Pete.

The importance of trajectory in this section underlines the fact that the initial analysis of mobile respondents as orthodox cultural omnivores may be somewhat problematic. Rather than consciously and individualistically seeking out a wide and open appreciation of comedy, the heterogeneous taste profiles of mobile respondents was more attributable to the cultural capital resources they gained from either certain institutional environments or the influence of social agents operating in these environments. This indicates that rather than breaking and challenging the traditional cultural hierarchy (between HCC and LCC taste cultures), mobile respondents were simply adapting themselves and their tastes to 'fit into' whichever taste culture was appropriate in a given social context.

4.4 Status Anxiety and (The Lack Of) Embodied Cultural Capital

As noted, the vast majority of mobile respondents appeared to have an upwardly mobile trajectory, whereby early socialisation had inculcated lowbrow comedy tastes but then changes during the lifecourse had facilitated the development of more highbrow tastes. However, although these respondents had successfully developed taste for more 'legitimate' comedy, the expression of these tastes was often tinged with a sense of inferiority or anxiety about whether they were able to employ a 'correct' understanding.

A striking example of this came during my interview with Harriet. After I mentioned the comedy show *The Thick Of It*, Harriet spoke in some detail

about the fact that she loved the show, particularly the dry humour and wit of the writing. However, when I asked if she felt the programme (which satirises the inner workings of British government) was an accurate depiction of what goes on in British politics, she suddenly seemed to freeze and become quite uncomfortable. Her eventual answer seemed almost apologetic in tone:

> If it's something I've really got to think about, chances are I probably won't get most of it (laughs).I suppose I wasn't laughing at the political things in it. I'm not a massively well-read person, I don't read papers or watch the news much, I'm not a very deep person. I probably I wouldn't get anything that's too complicated.

This sense of trepidation and insecurity was even more acute in other mobile respondents, such as Patrick. Even though Patrick had a PhD in physics and spoke with some authority about his taste for HCC comedy items like *Brass Eye* and Mark Thomas, his interview was littered with self-deprecating comments that exposed his insecurity about his understanding of 'intellectual' forms of comedy. One particular conversation regarding the judgments of comedy reviewers illustrated this:

> **Interviewer:** Do you read comedy reviews?
>
> **Patrick:** Yeah, I don't tend to go to live comedy much so when I do I like to hear what people have got to say. And I think often critics do seem to hit the nail on the head. I think they often sway me, actually.
>
> **Interviewer:** What do you mean by 'sway' you? Would you say they affect your opinion of a show?
>
> **Patrick:** I would actually, yeah, It often makes me feel like I've missed the point with something, and this is where it comes to intellect or whatever. I might have got a PhD but it doesn't mean I'm getting it at the level they're wanting me to get it at. I often read them and think 'oh that's interesting. I never got that side of things, I didn't realise that was going on'. Particularly with wordy things because I tend to switch off. So yeah often I read reviews and think oh yeah they might be right there. And on occasion I've actually gone back and watched a bit more and realised 'oh yeah' I'm actually getting into this. Like that guy from *Mock the Week*, Russell Howard, who I've changed my mind on completely.
>
> **Interviewer:** Why do you think you 'miss the point'?

> **Patrick:** Possibly it might be to do with my background. I really like visual things. When I go and see a play I will often lose the plot completely because I'll get distracted. I think it's about having a very short span of attention.

This deference towards what Patrick calls 'intellect' or Harriet terms 'complicated' comedy is reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1984: 318-335) notion of 'cultural goodwill' among the upwardly mobile petit bourgeoisie. Bourdieu argued that the upwardly mobile are filled with an aspirational 'reverence for legitimate culture', but this is tempered with a lingering sense of unworthiness – what Chan and Goldthorpe (2007: 1105) term 'status anxiety'. Indeed, such unease among mobile respondents seemed to greatly impede their ability to convert new tastes into meaningful forms of embodied cultural capital. Thus while Patrick and Harriet's upward social trajectory may have ensured the cultivation of legitimate comedy tastes, they lacked the confidence to publicly express this taste using the legitimate aesthetic style of the culturally privileged. Furthermore, because their cultural capital reserves had been 'learned' and accumulated rather than 'naturally' embodied, both Patrick and Harriet were left with a lingering but persistent sense that they were unable to 'correctly' employ the HCC style of comic appreciation.

However, although most mobile respondents displayed a certain insecurity about expressing HCC comedy tastes, they were not as straightforwardly aspirational as Bourdieu's imagining of the upwardly mobile in *Distinction*. Bourdieu (1984: 336) argued that the 'collective social trajectory' of the upwardly mobile orientates their habitus towards a constant quest for embourgeoisement, as well as – crucially - a *renunciation of their taste culture of origin*.

Yet Bourdieu's description of the upwardly mobile jars strongly with the experience I encountered in interviews. Indeed, far from renouncing the tastes developed in early socialisation, mobile respondents seemed to retain a strong affinity with the comedy they encountered in their upbringing. In many cases, this manifested in terms of a strong sense of 'nostalgia'. For example, Sophie told me that now when she watches Roy 'Chubby' Brown it reminds

her of happy memories in her childhood, where her and her friends would find their parent's 'Chubby' Brown videos and watch them while the parents were out of the house. Similarly, Patrick described an unshakeable preference for the more 'in-your-face comedians' he encountered as a boy. In particular, though, a discussion with Pete about his enduring tie to the humour of Roy 'Chubby' Brown demonstrated this connection between taste and upbringing:

> **Pete:** I like what he does, I respect what he does. I just think he's quite upfront. Y'know his is the comedy where people will say something that even if you're not thinking 'that's what I'm thinking' you can at least acknowledge that 'yeah, I've kind of thought that in the past and laughed'. It's also quite down-to-earth, the humour. It's not pretentious. It's very much rooted in 'ok, this is who I am, take me or leave me' sort of thing. And that's what I love about humour in the North-East.'
>
> **Interviewer:** Do you feel connected to the humour you were brought up with?
>
> **Pete:** Definitely. Certainly where I'm from, the people I was brought up around, humour is a big part of people's lives. I don't know why that is. You can go out with a group of people, whether you know them or not, and get chatting to someone in five minutes because people are just more open up there, up for meeting people and up for having a laugh. I think it's just an inbuilt desire to have a good time rather than be miserable, or think seriously about things, or analyse things. I don't know if that's how we are naturally, or if it's a way of dealing with how shitty it can be up there sometimes (laughs). Especially in recent history with the miners and the shipyards all being shut down on the Tyne and Wear. It's just a way of dealing with life, I suppose. You've got to laugh because otherwise you'll cry, sort of thing (laughs).

Pete's discussion of 'Chubby' Brown and his connection to wider values of working class culture in the North of England is significant for a number of reasons. Like most mobile respondents, it demonstrated Pete's strong bond to the taste culture of his background. Rather than rejecting LCC appreciation, there was a tangible pride in the sociable nature of the comedy inculcated in his youth. Moreover, Pete saw a wider connection between this comedy and a Northern 'sense of humour', which he argued acts as an important vehicle for social solidarity.

This kind of data was also important as it pointed to the enduring strength of primary socialisation in the establishment of habitus. While mobile

respondents may have demonstrated a significant level of agency in the accumulation of new cultural capital resources (and the subsequent establishment of new tastes and styles), this has only led to partial transformations of the habitus. Their was little evidence of ‘disappearing into a new world’ or ‘wholesale escaping of the habitus’ that is discussed by Friedmann (2005: 318) in relation to upward mobility. Indeed, even when mobile respondents had pursued the most determined of cultural accumulation strategies, they were still inextricably linked to the comedy tastes of their upbringing. Echoing the findings of Reay (2009: 1111), there was a ‘determination to hold on to former aspects of self even as new ones were gained.’

3.5 One Foot in Two Different Taste Cultures

Rather than exhibiting solely ‘status anxiety’, then, the data presented so far seemed to suggest that mobile respondents were more accurately described by Erickson’s (1996) ‘culture-switching hypothesis’. Erickson noted that the upwardly mobile both retain and acquire tastes, but significantly they are skilled and successful in switching between these different cultural modes, and this itself constitutes a meaningful social and cultural resource.

However, again, looking more closely at the data, it became clear that the ‘culture switching hypothesis’ also provided a too simplistic theoretical lens on mobile comedy taste. While mobile respondents certainly retained tastes from their past and acquired tastes from an upward social trajectory, it was much less apparent as to whether this combination constituted a ‘successful’ unity. Indeed, such omnivorous taste seemed to suggest less a ‘skilfully flexible habitus’ (Reay, 2009) and more an uncertain ontological position between two (mutually exclusive) taste cultures. One way this was detected was through the uncertain manner with which mobile respondents described the comedy tastes retained from their youth. These statements were striking in that they tended to oscillate between pride and uneasiness. For example Harriet described her preference for Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown:

> **Harriet:** It's so distasteful but it's quite funny that he thinks it's ok to make all those jokes. And I just find that funny. I know I shouldn't laugh at it but the fact that he's just come right out and said something like that I find funny. I mean I know it's not acceptable, and I don't agree with what he makes jokes about. But the fact that he doesn't give a shit that anyone thinks about it. And he's got the brass neck to say it, I just think is hilarious.
>
> **Interviewer:** What do you mean when you say you know it's not acceptable?
>
> **Harriet:** Like I would never sit around in the staff room cracking Roy 'Chubby' Brown jokes (laughs). You would only in certain circles. Like if I met you for the first time I wouldn't tell you all about a new Roy Chubby Brown DVD I just bought!

Although Harriet clearly still enjoys the humour of Roy 'Chubby' Brown, she obviously feels a certain sense of guilt or uneasiness about expressing this pleasure. She continually qualifies her taste statements by saying 'I know I shouldn't laugh', or 'I know it's not acceptable' and seems acutely aware of the incompatibility between such taste and her professional identity as a primary school teacher. Some of this uneasiness may have something to do with her perception of my taste judgments, as the interviewer, but nonetheless there also seemed to be a clear tension between the comedy she inclined towards and her awareness of its low cultural value. A similar type of contradiction could be detected in James's discussion of Benny Hill:

> I mean I was watching some of my Dad's old Benny Hill videos recently and there's just some brilliant one-liners. There's one where this Chinese guy is coming through immigration and he's got thick Chinese glasses on and he's like 'he-looo' (imitates Chinese accent). I mean it's a borderline racist Chinese accent and then the joke is that the immigration guy is Pakistani and he's like 'oh goodness gracious me' (imitates Pakistani accent) (laughs) and now you're thinking 'hold on are you sure about this?' But at the same time the actual jokes are hilarious. He says 'have you just come back from overseas' 'yes I've just come back from the Isle of Man' and the immigration guys says 'that's not overseas' and the guy says 'you try walking there' (laughs loudly). I mean that's just brilliant…

Again, it's clear from this quote that James both finds this joke funny but is acutely aware of its low cultural value as 'borderline racist'. He clearly doesn't find the racist element acceptable, but at the same time is willing to

temporarily suspend this issue in the interests of enjoying the joke. While earlier in the interview James described his Dad as 'more than a wee bit racist', it's clear that for him there's a tension between his own anti-racist values and the fact that he clearly still finds the traditional one-liner-style jokes of his youth very funny.

As well as this tension in the internal taste judgments of mobile respondents, there was also a sense that communicating such omnivorous comedy taste often caused social problems. For instance, staying with James for a moment, he described how he often disagreed with his girlfriend about political correctness in comedy, arguing that 'that there's nothing wrong with observing stereotypes, they're generally there for a reason.' Significantly, however, James described how he was forced to admit that his girlfriend was 'actually right' after he had gone to see another of his favourite comedians, the more highbrow Stewart Lee:

> I remember last year I was ranting to my girlfriend about political correctness and I just gave this clichéd, derivative nonsense that political correctness is rubbish blah blah blah and we went to see Stewart Lee on the same night and he just ripped my argument to shreds. He did this routine about Richard Littlejohn [right-wing columnist], y'know, and I came out humiliated. He just poked holes in my flimsy argument.

This passage is significant for two reasons. Not only does it reiterate the tension between James's different comic tastes, and his awareness of the contradictions of holding both HCC and LCC aesthetic styles, but it also demonstrates the disruptive effect such omnivorous taste can have on important social connections such as James's relationship with his girlfriend. This sentiment was also echoed by Pete, who described how 'awkward' it is in his current social milieu when he discusses his preferences for 'un-PC' comedians with friends who he described as 'much more middle class':

> **Pete:** I wouldn't go and see one of his [Chubby Brown] shows anymore but that comedy was very popular at the time and I mean, it's just jokes…
>
> **Interviewer:** Do you still find the un-PC jokes funny?

> **Pete:** Some I do, some I don't. But I wouldn't find it not funny because it was a racist joke. That doesn't come in to it for me. I'm not easily offended. I mean even if (feigns a more middle class accent) 'one should be seen to be offended by something in polite company' then I will deliberately not be.

In contrast, James described the difficulty of expressing new comedy tastes when he returned to his family home:

> The number of times I've said to my mum you need to watch this, it's really funny, and she's like 'nah, it's not funny'. So when I go home I more slip back into their kind of humour rather than bother to try and introduce them to the stuff I like.

What Pete and James's comments illustrate is that although their comic style may defiantly traverse the cultural hierarchy, the styles of high and low comedy are not necessarily happily united within them. Indeed, far from proudly parading their omnivorous openness, their mixture of tastes often place them in uneasy social situations. Surrounded by those with 'highbrow' comic styles, Pete is acutely aware of the negative cultural capital of his lowbrow tastes. He may cross the cultural hierarchy but he still feels the pressure it exerts, the institutional power it wields, and therefore finds himself defending (rather than celebrating) his diverse comic style. Similarly, rather than introduce his parents to his new interests and tastes, James suppresses this part of his identity. Instead, when he returns home, he finds himself 'slipping back' to the tastes he inherited from his parents, even though he believes the aesthetic basis of this comedy is flawed.

This data is particularly striking as it seems to problematise much of the existing literature on the cultural omnivore. For example, while the comedy omnivirousness of these respondents may, in a strict sense, have aided their ability to communicate with diverse social groups (Erickson, 1996), any potential social capital was undermined by the anxiety and 'mental conflict' (Lahire, 2011) that such culture switching seemed to induce. Moreover, there was even less evidence of MCC comedy eclecticism acting as a marker of cultural distinction or 'cool' (Bellevance, 2008; Van Eijk and Bergeman, 2004; Warde et al, 1999;). Thus while HCC respondents seamlessly employed their

embodied capital to even the less legitimate of their comedy tastes, MCC respondents lacked the ability (and often the desire) to utilise this highbrow comic style.

Rather than the omnivores presented in the literature, then, these upwardly mobile respondents were more accurately characterised as *culturally homeless* – dislocated from a recognisable cultural habitat, permanently caught with one foot in two different taste cultures. Maintaining an affinity with both LCC and HCC comedy styles, most simultaneously resembled ontological outsiders in both cultures. As Savage (2005) has noted, these upwardly mobile persons occupied a 'liminal' space in social space, characterised by an uncertain relationship with those above and below them. While their life trajectory had allowed them to bridge artistic boundaries, mobile respondents seemed nonetheless acutely aware of the cultural hierarchy and their slightly precarious position within it. In a manner reminiscent of the way Bourdieu (2004: 127) described himself in *A Sketch For a Self Analysis* written shortly before his death, mobile respondents displayed a fundamentally divided habitus – a *habitus clivé* – 'torn by contradiction and internal division (Bourdieu, 2004: 161).

Of course, the main conceptual difference with Bourdieu's formulation is that far from being 'exceptions to the rule', the destabilised habitus clive of upwardly mobile respondents constituted a significant minority of this study's overall sample. Rather than isolated 'blips' in the otherwise durable notion of habitus, then, these findings suggest that the habitus of many contemporary Britons may be more flexible than Bourdieu envisaged. In particular, he may have underestimated the sheer numbers of the working-class that would, like himself, 'experience social and cultural dislocation as the price of educational and occupational achievement' (Bennett, 2007: 201).

5. Conclusion

The cultural tastes of the socially mobile have so far been almost completely ignored in British sociology. This article has begun the process of bridging this gap by examining the comedy tastes of the upwardly mobile. It reveals that

mobile respondents appear to have much less consonant taste profiles than HCC or LCC respondents, often displaying omnivorous preferences that span the cultural hierarchy. However, contrary to work that presumes that omnivorousness reflects a conscious cultural openness, my findings indicate that diverse comedy taste is more likely to reflect the trajectory of one's cultural capital resources. This is a potentially telling distinction, as it also problematises the widely held notion that omnivorousness constitutes a form of cultural capital or yields social benefits.

Instead, my data indicates that traversing the taste hierarchy may often have more negative than positive social implications. Certainly possessing a working knowledge of all comedy may be useful for forging weak bonds in settings like the workplace, but the significance of this may be superseded by the harmful effects that combining such tastes can have on the *individua*l and their personal relationships. Thus while my socially mobile respondents lacked the 'natural' confidence to communicate new, more legitimate, tastes as embodied cultural capital, their upwardly mobile trajectory also meant they were acutely aware that the lowbrow tastes of their youth were largely socially unacceptable and aesthetically inferior. Omnivorous taste, then, often brought with it distinct social hurdles as well as a troubling suggestion of ontological uneasiness.

These findings can be interpreted in several ways. First, they somewhat puncture the celebratory air of research that has equated omnivorousness with the breakdown of symbolic boundaries. Instead, they indicate that rather than assume from statistical analysis that omnivorous taste is socially beneficial, it is important to interrogate this further using qualitative analysis. This may reveal, like the findings reported here, that many so-called 'middle class' omnivores are not elites reflexively and wilfully dismantling symbolic hierarchies, but are in fact socially mobile individuals whose diverse taste simply reflects their lifecourse trajectories.

Another possibility is that these results are a specific artefact of the study's empirical focus, comedy. It is important to acknowledge, for instance, that

most people watch comedy in groups rather than alone. In turn, this heightened social dimension may mean that switching between different styles of comedy may be more disorientating and stressful than doing so in other areas of culture. Moreover, comedy's capacity to mark social boundaries may be relatively unique, particularly considering its inextricable relationship with the use of humour in everyday life. As Kuipers (2009) has noted, there is much overlap between what people find humorous in comedy and what they find humorous in everyday life. As HCC respondent Trever neatly summed up, 'there's something fundamental about what makes you laugh'. Moreover, humour is a pivotal lubricant in social interaction, acting as an immediate marker of one's ability to communicate with others. Whereas shared humour is usually a foundational ingredient of friendship, trust and intimacy, its absence often delineates an unbridgeable social divide. It marks out - usually with immediate effect - difference. Thus considering the centrality of humour in constituting 'us' and 'them' in everyday life, it is perhaps not surprising that combining similarly divisive comedy styles of 'us' and 'them' induced such internal anxieties and social disruption.

It is also worth considering the role of national specificity here, something rarely adequately addressed in the omnivore literature. For example, while comedy taste clearly marks powerful symbolic boundaries in Britain and the Netherlands (Friedman and Kuipers, forthcoming), it may perform a much less significant function in the 'cultural repertoires' of other nations (Lamont, 2000). For example, there are other countries, such as the USA, Australia and Canada, where comedy also represents a large cultural industry, but where traditionally culture has played a lesser role in marking out social distinctions (Lamont, 2000; Bennett et al,1999) as well as European countries like Italy, Spain and France, where comedy is a markedly less established art form. It is important, therefore, not to simply presume that these findings hold true elsewhere in the world.

Despite such qualifications, these findings nonetheless provide a useful rejoinder to current debates surrounding cultural consumption. For those working with Bourdieusian theory, the article underlines some of the

difficulties of working with Bourdieu‘s notion of habitus. Although the concept may still provide a persuasive account of the way conditions of existence secure a probabilistic chance of obtaining homologous capital over time, it is important to note the increasingly diverse ways this unity can be threatened. For example, my findings support the assertion that British education *creates* as well as reproduces cultural capital, and that cultural capital resources are affected by multiple socialising agents throughout the lifecourse. Most importantly, though, the findings point toward new directions for those working with the omnivore thesis. Rather than presuming the sociological significance of cultural eclecticism, I urge researchers in this area to pay closer attention to both how and why omnivorous taste is established in the first place, and also what positive and *negative* implications result from deploying such diverse taste in social life.

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Appendix: comedians mentioned in the article (in alphabetical order)

Alan Bennett (1934-) is an English comic novelist, playwright and actor, best known for his role in the satirical revue *Beyond The Fringe*.

Benny Hill (1924-1992) was an English comedian know for his slapstick style and frequent use of sexual innuendo.

Bernard Manning (1930-2007) was an English 'trad' stand-up known for his provocative racist and sexist material.

Brass Eye (1997-2001) was an English TV series of satirical and darkly comic 'spoof' documentaries, which tackled controversial issues such as paedophilia and illegal drug-taking.

Eddie Izzard (1962-) is an English stand-up comedian known for his cross-dressing on-stage appearance and surreal and whimsical style.

Frank Carson (1926-2012) was a 'trad' stand-up from Northern Ireland known for his 'one-liners' and catchphrases.

Jim Davidson (1953-) is an English stand-up and television presenter known for his provocative jokes about women, ethnic minorities and disabled people.

Last of The Summer Wine (1973-2010) was a very popular and long-running TV sitcom about a trio of older men living in rural Northern England.

Les Dawson (1931-1993) was an English 'trad' stand-up known for his deadpan style and politically incorrect jokes, especially about his wife and mother-in-law.

Mark Thomas (1963-) is an English stand-up and TV presenter known for his left-wing political material and humanitarian activism.

Michael McIntyre (1976-) is an English stand-up comedian, known for his observational style. He has a strong popular following and his most recent stand-up DVD is the fastest selling stand-up in UK chart history, selling over a million copies.

Monty Python (1969-1983) were a surreal British comedy troupe whose TV sketch show, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, enjoyed popular success in Britain and throughout the world.

Mr Bean (1990-1995) was a British TV Comedy Programme featuring comedian Rowan Atkinson in the title role. The character and programme were best known for its distinctive physical and slapstick humour.

Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown (1945-) is an English stand-up known for his obscene, racist and sexist material. The controversial nature of his material ensures he rarely appears on television but has a large and loyal live following.

Russell Brand (1975-) is an English stand-up, television presenter, author, singer and film actor. He is known for his confessional stand-up which has tackled his own struggles with heroin and sex addiction.

Spaced (1999-2001) was a cult TV sitcom written by and starring Simon Pegg and Jessica Stevenson, which followed two housemates living in London. It was known for its rapid-fire editing and surreal humour.

Stewart Lee (1968-) is an English comedian, writer and director. He is known for his intellectual and form-bending material.

The Day Today (1994) was a surreal English TV comedy that parodied current affairs TV programming.

The Thick of It (2005-) is a British TV comedy and ‘mockumentary’ that satirizes the inner-workings of contemporary British government.

The Young Ones (1982-1984) was a satirical TV sitcom about a group of undergraduate students who shared a house together. The sitcom was known for its anarchic, offbeat humour and became central to Britain’s 1980s alternative comedy boom.