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Published in:
Proceedings on CD-rom of the XXVIII Annual Colloquium on Research in Economic Psychology, Christchurch, New Zealand

Publication date:
2003

Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal

READING FICTION AS BEHAVIOR TUNED IN TO OTHERS: THE EFFECT OF SELF-MONITORING

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ABSTRACT

Most cultural sociological research about reading fiction, support the thesis that tastes are social class specific in nature. Differences in tastes do not only reflect, but also perpetuate social inequality. In other words, the fiction books one read serve as a mean to signal membership of a particular social class and as a mean to distinguish oneself from people of other social classes. This suggests that reading fiction is regarded as expressive behavior that gives prestige in society if the appropriate works of fiction are read. The appropriateness of a work of fiction is signaled by the choices made by relevant others. According to social comparison theory as well as the cultural sociological approach, the appropriateness of specific works of fiction is dictated by 'the elite' of a social group and will be referred to as the cultural value of the reading repertoire. However, the theory of self-monitoring presumes that individuals differ in the extent to which they are influenced by relevant others; the behavior of some individuals is mainly dominated by their own preferences, while other individuals' actions are tailored in accordance with situational cues. On the basis of these insights, it was hypothesized that self-monitoring moderates the relation between social class and the cultural value of the reading repertoire.

For this study a convenience sample (N = 125) of fiction readers was asked to fill in a questionnaire. The results supported the hypotheses partially. In the paper, the relevant theoretical constructs of this study are discussed and suggestions for future research are made.

INTRODUCTION

In addition to Bourdieu's research (1984, 1985) in France, researchers have found cultural practices to be related to socioeconomic background in diverse societies. Their research confirms a homology between the rankings of individuals in the social hierarchy and the rankings of their cultural tastes in hierarchies of cultural values. In these researches, tastes and patterns of cultural participation are analyzed at the level of the social group ('classes'). Bourdieu holds that members of a given social class have a similar set of schemes of perception, appreciation, and action. The effect of these schemes is that all cultural practices of members of a given social class are harmonized among themselves. In this view, these schemes coordinate tastes within each social class and leads to homogeneity of preferences. It is assumed that differences in tastes do not only reflect, but also perpetuate social inequality. In other words, the cultural practices of an individual serve as a mean to signal membership of a particular social class and as a mean to distinguish oneself from people of other social classes.

This suggests that people use to define and discriminate between worthy and less worthy persons, i.e. between "their sort of folks" and "the sort they don't much like". This categorization of people is based on signals included in the cultural practices. Consequently, cultural practices are regarded as expressive behavior that signals the status of a particular person. The appropriateness of a cultural practice is given by the set of schemes of perception, appreciation, and action. These schemes differ between social classes because of (primary and secondary) socialization as well as the choices made by relevant others. Since individuals in the same social class are, to a certain extent, socialization similarly, people in the same social class show similar cultural practices.

However, it goes too far to assume homogeneity of preferences within social classes. Even if it is assumed that the set of schemes that govern the cultural tastes is based on the perception of choices made by relevant others, and that all relevant others express similar cultural choices. Still individuals differ in the extent to which they are influenced by relevant others. The theory of self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974; 1979) presumes that the behavior of some individuals is mainly dominated by their own preferences, while other individuals' actions are tailored in accordance with situational cues, i.e. choices made by relevant others.

The prototypical high self-monitoring individual is one who, out of concern of the situational and interpersonal appropriateness of his her social behavior, is particular sensitive to the expression and self-presentation of relevant others in social situations and uses these cues as guidelines for regulating and controlling his/her own verbal and nonverbal self-presentation (Snyder, 1974:89). By contrast, the prototypical low self-monitoring individual is not so vigilant to social information about situationally appropriate self-presentation. Neither does he/she have such well-developed repertoires of self-presentation skills. In comparison with their high self-monitoring counterparts, the self-presentation and expressive behavior of low self-monitoring individuals seem, in functional sense, to be controlled from within by affective states and attitudes rather than molded and tailored to fit the situation (Snyder, 1974:89).

Since cultural practices are, according to Bourdieu, regarded as expressive behavior that signals the status of a particular person, the concept of self-monitoring will affect the homogeneity of cultural tastes in a social class. Individuals scoring high on self-monitoring express their class status by the appropriate cultural practice of their social class. They behave as Bourdieu assumes. However, individuals scoring low on self-monitoring are less concerned about the appropriateness of the cultural behavior, given his or her social class, and will behave in accordance to their own preferences and skills. This suggestion will be tested for the cultural practice of reading fiction as a spare time activity. Reading is a cultural practice of special interest, since reading is the most frequently performed cultural practice in the Netherlands. And it is often studied in the context of Bourdieu's theory (Ganzeboom, 1984; Kraaykamp, 1993). Notwithstanding the fact that reading in itself is a solitary act, people talk quite often about the books they read (Kraaykamp, 1993). Therefore, reading, as a spare time activity, is a suitable cultural practice to study the theses of Bourdieu.

On the basis of these insights, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H_1: Social class positively affects the cultural value of reading repertoires

H_2: The relation between social class and reading repertoires is moderated by self-monitoring:

> For individuals scoring low on self-monitoring the relationship between social class and the cultural value of their reading repertoires will be less positive than for those scoring high on self-monitoring.

As can be deduced from the foregoing, the cultural sociological approach suggests that social class is the most important determinant of a reading repertoire's cultural value. However, studies by Kraaykamp (1993) indicate that cultural competence is an important determinant of an individual's reading repertoire. Cultural competence is defined as the amount of experience with reading and knowledge about fiction books; one should have a reading ability that is sufficient given the fiction books one likes to read. Since the cultural value of fiction books is related the complexity of fiction books (Kraaykamp, 1993), it is not surprising that cultural competence affects the cultural value of the reading repertoire. In this study, the effect of cultural competence on the cultural value of reading repertoires will be accounted for.

RESEARCH METHOD

Respondents
This study made use of a convenience sample (N=125) of visitors of a Public Library. A minimum age of 18 was set as well as the fact that all participants should have read at least one fiction book last year.

Design and procedure
During the data collection period, visitors of the Public Library were stopped by pollsters. If respondents met the requirements set for inclusion and agreed to participate in the study, the respondent was asked to fill in the questionnaire. The questionnaire enclosed items about reading behavior in order to estimate the cultural value of the reading repertoire, social class, cultural competence, and self-monitoring. The operationalization of these constructs will be discussed successively.

Cultural value of a reading repertoire

An individual's reading repertoire reflects the kind of fiction an individual reads. In the Netherlands, three main genres are accepted by institutions active the field of fiction books: mystery, romance, and literature. Regarding the genre mystery the respondent should indicate for eight different sub-genres (detective, thriller, was novel, science fiction, ect.) whether or not this sub-genre was, on average, read at least once a year. Regarding romance, the same question was asked about seven sub-genres (family novels, regional novels, love stories, ect.). Since no sub-genres are generally accepted for literature, respondents were confronted with a list of 73 literary books that were quite frequently read in the Netherlands and varied sufficiently in term of their 'cultural value' (Kraaykamp, 1993). Respondents should indicate which titles they have read. Next to what kind of books a respondent had read at least once a year, respondents were asked to indicate their preference for literature, mystery, and romance. These preferences were asked for by means of a paired comparison and analyzed by means of a Thurnstones case V (Meerling, 1981).

The cultural value of fiction books is an important hypothetical construct in cultural sociological studies about cultural practices. Nevertheless, there is no consensus about the definition of the construct, nor how it should be operationalized. According to Bourdieu (1984), works of fiction works are externally acknowledged a valuable by literary institutions, such as literary critics of scholars, and thereby achieve literary prestige (van Rees 1983, DiMaggio, 1987). The cultural value of the sub-genres and literary books was based on expert ratings regarding the literary prestige of the books as reported in Kraaykamp & Dijkstra (1999: 216-218). They used three semantic contrasts (important-unimportant, high literary value-low literary value, not canonized literature-canonized literature) to operationalize literary prestige.

The cultural value of the reading repertoire was calculated by in two steps. Firstly, the average prestige score of the sub-genres or books an individual had read was calculated per genre (literature, mystery, and romance). Secondly a weight sum score across the genres was calculated by weighting the average prestige score of a particular genre with its relative preference. Cultural value had an average value of 6.37 (s.d. = 3.13) and approximated a normal distribution (K-S $Z = 0.829$, $p > 0.05$).

Social class

According to Bourdieu (1984) the position of an individual in society is determined by the amount and composition of his/her capital: The means on the basis of which a class can maintain, defend and enhance it's position. Bourdieu distinguished three kinds of capital. Firstly, economic capital. Indicators of this kind of capital are income, and occupational level. Secondly, cultural capital, indicated by educational level. And thirdly, social capital, with the indicators inherited dispositions and family relations. The last kind of capital is rarely taken into account as a proxy of social class.

In this study two indicators of social class are used: level of education (7-levels) and occupational level measured by the EGP class-scheme of Erikson, Golthope & Portocarero, (1979)(Bakker, Sieben, Nieuwbeerta & Ganzeboom, 1997) consisting of 11 levels. These indicators represent two kinds of capital: Economic and cultural capital. Respondents are not allocated to a specific social class on the basis of these indicators, since the correlation between these two indicators was 0.523 ($p < 0.05$) and such a classification goes together with a loss of information. These two indicators will be used in the regression analysis separately to estimate the effect of "social class" on the cultural value of reading repertoires.

Self-monitoring

In this study, the self-monitoring construct mainly regards the tendency to conform to the appropriate cultural behavior, given social class. Consequently, only the items of the "Concern for Appropriate Scale" of Lenox and Wolfe (1984) were presented to the respondents. The other sub-scale of the self-monitoring construct, the "Revised Self-Monitoring Scale" (Lenox and Wolfe,1984) was not presented to the respondents. Despite the provided statistics about the validity of this scale, it was felt that it only measures the self-assessed power to modify one's self-presentation and sensitivity to expressive behavior of other. However, the scale does not attend to whether or not individuals are inclined to use this power to regulate their self-presentation by tailoring their actions in accordance to immediate situational cues. Since the "Concern for Appropriate " focuses on actual behavior, it does not suffer this flaw. The Concern for Appropriate scale consists of 20 items that are divided into two sub-scales: Cross-Situational Variability

(CSV) consisting of 7 items and Attention to Social Comparison Information (ASCI) consisting of 13 items. Respondents were asked to consider each of the 20 items and to indicate, on a five-point Likert-scale, their opinion.

The internal consistency of each sub-scale was appropriate (CSV: Cronbach's alpha = 0.80 ASCI: Cronbach's alpha = 0.75). Since the correlation between these two sub-scales was only 0.40 ($p < 0.05$), the two sub-scales will not be summed into one index for self-monitoring, but treated as two dimensions of self-monitoring. CSV had an average value of 2.65 (s.d.= 0.64) and ASCI had an average value of 2.74 (s.d.= 0.50). Both scales approximated a normal distribution (CSV: K-S Z = 0.859, $p > 0.05$, ASCI: K-S Z = 0.764, $p > 0.05$).

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is defined as the amount of experience with reading and knowledge about fiction books. Two antecedents of cultural competence are distinguished: General intellectual capacities which affect the cognitive capacity to process information, and the acquired knowledge and skills regarding reading and reading materials. The general intellectual capacities are operationalized as educational level. However, as in this study, educational level is often regarded as a proxy of social class. The theory of Ganzeboom substantiates how educational level and the tendency to read prestigious fiction are related. Consequently, in this study only the acquired knowledge and skills regarding reading and reading materials is regarded as an indicator of cultural competence.

In this study cultural competence was operationalized by an authors recognition test. This test consisted of names of popular (in terms of reading or buying frequency in the Netherlands) authors of mystery (20), romance (20), or literature (20). Next to these real authors' names, 15 fake names were included in the test. Respondents were asked to mark the author's name if they knew he/she was a writer of books. The total of marked real authors' names was reduced with the total of marked fake names. Cultural competence has an average of 17.41 (s.d. = 10.24) and approximates a normal distribution (K-S Z = 0.697, $p > 0.05$).

RESULTS

In the introduction, it was hypothesized that social class (level of education and occupational level), cultural competence, self-monitoring, and the interaction between social class and self-monitoring have an effect on the cultural value of the reading repertoire of an individual. Firstly we will examine this hypothesis by looking at the correlation between the cultural value of a reading repertoire and the variables mentioned. Since an interaction effect was expected (the relation between social class and cultural value of the reading repertoire will be stronger for high self-monitoring individuals compared to low self-monitoring individuals), the sample was split into those who scored high (above the mean) and those who scored low on a sub-scale of self-monitoring. Regarding educational level, for those who scored low on either ASCI or CSV a smaller correlation was found then for those who score high on the corresponding sub-scale. However, the correlations didn't differ significantly ($p > 0.05$). For occupational level the low ASCI group showed even a higher correlation then the high ASCI group, but the differences in correlations were not significant ($p > 0.05$). When examining the correlations between cultural value and the interaction effects between the indicators of social class and the dimensions of self-monitoring, the low ASCI showed a significant lower correlation than the high ASCI group (occupational level * ASCI: z = 1.99, p< 0.05; educational level* ASCI: z = 2.40, p < 0.05). The same pattern occurred for the CSV sub-scale: the low CSV group showed a significant lower correlation than the high CSV group. These differences in correlations were significant (occupational level * CSV: z = 1.51, p < 0.10; educational level * CSV: z = 2.08, p < 0.05). These results support the hypothesis that social class positively affects the cultural value of the reading repertoire and it partially supports the hypothesis that self-monitoring moderates this relation.

Table 1: Correlations between cultural value of the reading repertoire and the independent variables.

	low on ASCI	high on ASCI	low on CSV	low on CSV	Total sample
social class					
occupational level	0.285**	0.251**	0.248*	0.287**	0.257**
educational level	0.279**	0.506**	0.251*	0.478**	0.417**
cultural competence	0.544**	0.376**	0.400**	0.507**	0.516**
self-monitoring					
ASCI	0.128	0.016			0.208**
CSV			-0.011	0.206	0.294**
interaction					
occup * ASCI	-0.136	0.219*			-0.007
occup * CSV			-0.142	0.127	-0.026
edu * ASCI	-0.073	0.346**			0.132
edu * CSV			-0.113	0.254**	0.054

* $p < 0.10$
** $p < 0.05$

Next, the hypotheses were examined in the multi variate case by means of nested regression models. In the base model the cultural value of a reading repertoire was related to the two indicators of social class only (see also Table 1). This model explained 0.18% of the variance in the cultural value of reading repertoires (F-value = 11.65, $p < 0.05$). In model 2, cultural competence was added to this base model and resulted in a significant improvement (F-change = 26.740, $p < 0.05$). In model 3, the two dimensions of self-monitoring were added, which resulted in a marginal improvement of the model (F-change = 2.909, p = 0.59). In the last model the interaction effects were added, which didn't increase the amount of variance explained (F-change = 1.233, $p > 0.05$). Still all the variables together predicted the cultural value of a reading repertoire successfully (Adj. R-square $\doteq$ 0.40, F-value = 7.65, $p < 0.05$). Table 2 presents the beta coefficients of the last model.

Regarding the positive effect of social class on the cultural value of reading repertoires, these results supported the hypothesis partially; educational level has a significant positive effect (beta = 0.271, t = 2.921, $p < 0.05$) but occupational level didn't affect the cultural value of reading repertoires. As expected, cultural competence had a positive and significant effect on the cultural value of reading repertoires (beta = 0.420, t = 4.822, $p < 0.05$). These results partially support the hypothesis that social class positively affects the cultural value of a reading repertoire.

Table 2: Multiple regression of cultural value of reading repertoires on the predictor variables.

Variable	Beta	t-value	sign. t
social class			
occupational level	-0.017	-0.185	n.s.
educational level	0.271	2.921	< 0.05
cultural competence	0.420	4.822	< 0.05
self-monitoring			
ASCI	0.039	0.450	n.s.
CSV	0.155	1.806	0.074
interaction			
occup * ASCI	-0.180	-1.881	0.063
occup * CSV	0.021	0.209	n.s.
edu * ASCI	0.165	1.672	0.098
edu * CSV	0.021	0.209	n.s

The interaction effect of the social class indicators (occupational level and educational level) and ASCI are marginally significant (respectively $t = -1.88$, $p < 0.10$ and $t = 1.672$, $p < 0.10$). Following Aiken and West (1991), the centered scores of each predictor was taken as a reference point to provide a meaningful base at which the interaction effects can be evaluated. With these considerations in mind the beta coefficients suggested that the slope of the relation between educational level and cultural value is steeper for high ASCI and that the slope of the relation between occupational level and cultural value is steeper for low ASCI. The interaction effects between the indicators of social class and CSV were not significant. These results partially support the hypothesis that self-monitoring moderates this relation between social class and the cultural value of reading repertoires.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper the hypotheses were tested that social class positively affects the cultural value of reading repertoires and that this relation is moderated by self-monitoring. The results only partially supported these hypotheses. When looking at the correlation analyses, the results of the regression analysis were somewhat disappointing. These seemingly contradictory results can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the dissimilar effect of occupational level may be attributed to multicollinearity of both indicators of social class r $= 0.523$). Since educational level has a stronger relation with the cultural value of reading repertoires (see Table 1), the possible effect of occupational level is hard to demonstrated in the regression analysis. Secondly, the difference in effect of the interaction terms in the correlation analyses compared to the regression analysis, may be attributed to the non-linear moderating effect of the dimensions of self-monitoring on the relation between social class and the cultural value of reading repertoires. If the moderating effects were linear, the correlation each of the interaction effects and the cultural value of the repertoire should be smaller in each of the split samples than in the total sample in consequence of restriction of range. And that was not the case. Moreover, when looking at the correlations coefficients in the two sub-samples, the correlation between the interaction terms and the cultural value of a reading repertoire were often negative (although not significantly different from zero) for the low scoring sub-sample, while they were positive for the high scoring sub-sample. This suggests a curvilinear relation instead of a linear relation.

Some additional comments can be made regarding self-monitoring. In this study, the effect of ASCI was more pronounced that the effect of CSV, suggesting two dimensions of self-monitoring. In the results of the regression analysis this dissimilar effect of both components of self-monitoring may partly be attributed to multicollinearity, since their correlation was 0.40. However, multicollinearity is not the only reason. In the correlation analysis, the effects of ASCI were more pronounced than the effects of CSV. Since both component should have a positive moderating effect, the correlations suggest a dissimilar moderating effect for each component. In the case of cultural behavior, this result may be attributed to the contents of each sub-scale. The CSV (Cross-situational Variability) focuses on the heterogeneity of behaviors across situations. This scale makes respondents aware of inconsistencies in their behavior, and according to consistency theories, individuals may be less eager to admit that they behave inconsistently across situations. Furthermore, the score on this scale may covary with the heterogeneity of the situations one comes across. Studies by DiMaggio (1987) indicate that people of a high social class than people of a low social class know more different people in terms of their social class. Since social class affects the cultural value of the cultural behavior, people in a high social class are confronted with more different social (cultural) situations. If self-monitoring is not social class depended, the difference in the heterogeneity of social situations across social classes may affect the variance of the scale: in a high social class the variance of CSV may be larger than in a low social class. The ASCI scale, on the other hand, focuses on the extent people behave according to a specific social situation and not on the extent people behave differently in different social situations. In the light of consistency theories, this scale is more positively framed and people may be more willing to admit they behave according to the social situation and consequently differently across different social situations if they approach them. In further research into cultural behavior, this issue should be explored more intensively.

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