The Strength of Weak Culture

Jennifer Schultz¹ and Ronald L. Breiger

Department of Sociology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, United States

¹Department of Sociology, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, United States. Tel.: +520.621.3531; fax: +520.621.9875. Email address: jschult1@email.arizona.edu.

*Corresponding author. Department of Sociology, University of Arizona, 400 Social Sciences Bldg., Tucson, AZ 85721, United States. Tel.: +520.621.3531; fax: +520.621.9875. E-mail address: Breiger@Arizona.Edu.

Abstract

The theoretical work of Granovetter on the strength of weak social ties needs to be extended to the study of cultural objects and relations. The tie that binds an actor to a cultural taste might be strong (purposive, intensive in time or commitment, fostered by a tightly integrated community bound by social symbols and representations) or weak (banal, non-instrumental, non-demanding, non-exclusive). Weak culture can be “strong” in several different respects. We elucidate various possibilities and conundrums: whether weak culture bridges across otherwise disconnected social groups, or bonds actors to a wider collectivity than is possible on the basis of strong-culture commitments; weak culture as signifying elaborated (as opposed to restricted) genre codes, versus the moderation of genre commitments; and weak culture as enabling publics and institutional domains as well as enabling movement across domains. Then, in analysis of items from the US General Social Survey Culture Module (1993; N = 1,606), we illustrate the strength of weak culture (operationalized as “liking” versus “loving” musical genres) in producing perceptions of an integrated national society.