

**Cultural Reception and Production:  
The Social Construction of Meaning in Book Clubs**

C. Clayton Childress and Noah E. Friedkin

University of California,

Santa Barbara

Forthcoming, *American Sociological Review*

Word count: 15,716 (excluding tables and title page)

Key words: Culture, cultural reception, social networks, interpersonal influences

Contact Information:

Clayton Childress  
Department of Sociology  
University of California  
Santa Barbara, CA 93107

Email: [ccchildress@gmail.com](mailto:ccchildress@gmail.com)

Telephone: (510) 375-5052

**Cultural Reception and Production:  
The Social Construction of Meaning in Book Clubs**

Abstract

Investigation of the reception of textual objects has alternately emphasized structural, demographically-conditioned patterns of evaluation and taste, or the agency of viewers, readers and listeners in constructing their own interpretations of cultural texts. In the present article we advance an empirical and formal analysis of the cultural reception of texts in which interpretations of the multiple dimensions on which a text may be evaluated are transmitted and modified within small groups of individuals in face-to-face contact. We contribute an approach in which the intersection of social structure, individual readings, and interactive group processes all may enter in readers' interpretations of a novel. Our investigation is focused on a set of book clubs on which data has been collected on group members' pre and post discussion evaluations of a specific book, and the interpersonal influence networks that were formed during the groups' discussions. We analyze these data with a multilevel model of individuals nested in groups which allows us to address both structural and group dynamics effects on cultural reception in a single analytical framework.

## **Introduction**

In sociology there has been an interest in the reception of cultural products (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1987; Griswold 1987; Long 2003). These products take many forms. Analysis has focused on works of art and media (a book, musical composition, painting, photograph, film, or architectural object); however, the potential domain of analysis also may include other cultural objects (e.g., a religious scripture, war memorial, festival, holiday, institution, or practice). As cultural objects are subject to different interpretations, they exist within local or global arenas of consensual or disputed meaning and related actions, including groups, in which cultural meanings are created and modified (Fine 1979; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Martin 2002). Work on the cultural reception of textual objects such as novels has been a central preoccupation in this line of inquiry and is the focus of the present article (Long 2003; Griswold 2008).

We advance an empirical and formal analysis of the cultural reception of texts that simultaneously attends to structural, demographically conditioned patterns of evaluation and interpretation, readers' agency in constructing their own comprehensions of cultural text, and the process of interpersonal influence in which readers' interpretations may be modified within small groups of individuals in face-to-face contact. Drawing on Friedkin and Johnsen's (1999, 2011) formalization of the group dynamics that operate to modify individuals' cognitive orientations towards objects (here, a specific text), we concentrate our analysis of cultural reception on the process of interpersonal influence among individuals who may display and debate their viewpoints on the text among themselves, and who may come away from this discourse with modified or reinforced viewpoints on the meaning of the text and its evaluation. Such study-groups arise in the heavily institutionalized arenas of religion and law, and also occur more generally as informal social assemblages of individuals with an interest in a particular domain of

cultural objects. We open the “black box” of the specific group dynamics that may operate to shape cultural meanings via interpersonal influence processes.

Our setting is a set of book clubs that have regularly met in the past to discuss published works of fiction, to whose members we have presented a new work of fiction—*Jarrettsville*—in order to investigate factors affecting the reception of the book. This design required agreements by the writer, publisher, and book clubs. The writer of the book provided a framework for specific dimensions of her manuscript, and her intended meanings on these dimensions. The publisher agreed to serve as a site of study throughout the book’s developmental editing, packaging, marketing, and promotion. The book clubs agreed to provide data bearing on the social structure of their groups prior to reading the book, data bearing on individual members’ evaluations of the book prior to discussion, the group dynamics that occurred within their discussions of the text, and their private post-discussion evaluations of the book.

Thus, rather than strictly emphasizing the structural patterns of taste or the agency of readers in creating their own subjective meanings for cultural texts prior to group discussion, both of which have been subjects of continued interest in the literature on cultural reception, we also consider and highlight contributions to the reception of the text that are based on the social construction of meaning and evaluation allowed by interpersonal influences. We place our analytical emphasis on the dynamic space in which cultural reception takes place—the individual differences of reception that arise within the context of structural effects and the process in which readers influence each other in the practice of localized meaning-making. To paraphrase Geertz (1977), readers aren’t fully trapped in an *a priori* web of their own spinning, but instead spin and re-spin webs of meaning both individually and through collaborative group processes.

With a text in which issues related to race and gender figure prominently, and with book clubs consisting of homogeneously white and highly educated members who vary in gender and age (i.e., small groups with marked status homophily on particular dimensions), the process of interpersonal influence that unfolded in the book clubs generated both small and large changes of individual orientation toward the book on specific and general evaluative and interpretive dimensions, and an aggregate mean change of individuals' pre- and post-discussion general orientations toward it. In the following section, we flesh out the three perspectives—structure, agency, and interpersonal influence—which have a potentially important bearing on the analysis of readers' reception of this text and our related hypotheses. The detailing of these perspectives serves to frame our multi-level analysis of cultural reception. We analyze individuals, nested in small groups, who enter into a discussion of the book with heterogeneous viewpoints on the text, consistent with the dual effects of structure and agency, and who become subject to the interpersonal influences of other individuals' responses to the text.

### **Perspectives on Cultural Reception**

Investigation of the reception of textual objects has alternately emphasized structural, demographically-conditioned patterns of evaluation and taste, or the agency of viewers, readers and listeners in constructing their own heterogeneous interpretations of cultural texts. The relative merits and precarious balancing of approaches that emphasize structure versus agency in the analysis of culture have been strongly argued and well documented (Bourdieu 1977; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Giddens 1984; Swidler 1986; Sewell 1992). Yet as Hays (1994) notes, the discord between structurally-centered and agentic-centered approaches to cultural analysis relies on the construction of an opposition that places structure and agency at non-overlapping ends of a continuum. Within work on cultural reception, the distinction between

these emphases often occurs in tandem with distinctions of macro and micro-levels of analysis, the use of quantitative or qualitative methods, and a more general theoretical alignment with *Sociology of Culture* or *Cultural Sociology* frameworks (see Alexander 2003; Griswold 2003).<sup>1</sup>

These two emphases in the literature on the cultural reception of texts are not necessarily oppositional or inconsistent. Both structural conditions and reader agency may be involved simultaneously in an explanation of readers' responses to a text. Depending on the setting and the text, either one or the other basis of explanation may be more or less salient. Similarly, authors' intentions, as conveyed through textual objects, may either strongly or weakly constrain the meanings constructed by readers. Readers may also influence each others' evaluations of texts, creating localized cultural niches (McPherson 1983; Mark 1998, 2003) of interpretation and understanding.

In this section we develop the background for three hypotheses. The first focuses on demographically dependent, structural conditions of evaluation and taste. The second focuses on the treatment of reading as a social practice and the interpretive schemas or, "horizons of expectations," that readers construct (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Jauss 1982). Contained within this hypothesis are debates about the role of the author and his or her intentions in the interpretive process of reading. The third focuses on how readers' evaluations and interpretations of texts may be affected by interpersonal influences occurring within localized discussions of cultural objects. These hypotheses define the framework of a comprehensive perspective on cultural reception that encourages an attention to all three hypotheses.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although not universally recognized or codified by the ASA as separate approaches to the study of culture, the differences between these approaches are not small and not without their tensions. In the strongest summation of this differentiation, Alexander (2003, pp. 1-14) posits that *cultural sociology* is different in that it alone thinks of culture as an independent variable.

### *Readers' Sociodemographic Positions*

The intersection of cultural tastes and social-economic statuses has been well documented (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1987; Erickson, 1996; Halle 1996; Lamont 1992). Although theorists differ in their emphases on the role of economic class (Morley and Brunson, 1999), the recreation of the cultural “habitus” through formal and informal training (Bourdieu 1984), the varied resources provided through overlapping cultural schemas (Sewell 1992), or the deployment of cultural “tool-kits” during unsettled times (Swidler 1986), there is common agreement that social statuses impact cultural tastes (see Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1993), and that cultural taste impacts social statuses (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Lizardo 2006; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010; Schultz and Breiger 2010). Viewers, readers, and listeners differentiate between highbrow and lowbrow cultural preferences (DiMaggio and Useem 1978; Gans 1999; Lamont and Fournier 1993), mark themselves from others through their reception practices (Bryson 1996), and express their status through “omnivorous” tastes (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson 1997). With regards to fiction reading, readers express regional preferences for different authors, and the very act of reading for pleasure can also be traced along socio-demographic lines (Collins 1992; Griswold 2008; Tepper 2000).

Observed demographic variations in reception may also be indicative of a structural organization of meaning itself. Much of this work, usually relying on ethnographic observations, the study of “surrogate consumers” such as reviewers (Hirsch 1972), or the construction of researcher-constructed focus groups, finds variation in the interpretations of cultural objects within and between demographically homogenous communities. In example, white listeners of rap music use “color-blind ideology” to de-racialize lyrics that emphasize topics of racial

inequality (Rodriguez 2006), and white and black viewers “read” *The Cosby Show* differently (Jhally and Lewis, 1992: pp. 93-130). Griswold (1987) finds that reviewers in the U.S., U.K. and West Indies have different interpretations on the key dimensions of a text’s meaning, as do Liebes and Katz (1990) among viewers belonging to different status groups within Israel, and in the U.S. and Japan. Radway (1984) concludes that women readers find pleasures in romance novels that escape academic critiques of the genre, and DeVault (1990) highlights the gendered differences in readings of a novel between cultural “insiders” and “outsiders.” In turn, the Adam West era *Batman* can be interpreted as liberating gay camp, as inducing “deviant” sexuality, or as completely unconcerned with alternative sexualities, depending on the viewer (Medhurst 1991).

This recitation of work dealing with cultural reception across different social groups is far from exhaustive, but it highlights a common framework across varied schools of work on cultural reception—demographic social positions not only influence cultural participation, but also impact the interpretations of texts themselves. We allow that the social positions of readers have some influence on what they bring into and draw out texts. Such effects depend on the text and the setting of its readers. When cultural reception is filtered by small groups, assembled to discuss a text, the demographic composition of the groups may be importantly constrained by homophily, i.e., the formation of contact networks among persons with the same demographic status on particular dimensions of such status (see McPherson et al. 2001 for review). Structural effects on reception may appear as group-level differences (e.g., between groups that are predominately male or female in their composition) and, to the extent that within-group variation on demographic variables exists, as effects on individual-level differences (e.g., within groups whose members vary in age). When all of the small group formations that are dealing with a

particular text predominately attract members with homogeneous demographic status on particular dimensions (e.g., income, religion, or education), those demographic dimensions may affect the baseline mean response but not explain any between-group and within-group variation of cultural response. When the text presents issues that involve particular demographic statuses and not others (e.g., gender and race issues), the between-group and within-group variation of group members on those salient statuses are likely to be more explanatory of differences of reception than is the variation of group members on social dimensions that are not emphasized in the text. With *Jarrettsville*, readers' are drawn into issues related to gender and race.<sup>2</sup> Their reception of the book is filtered by small group formations that are markedly homophilous and undifferentiated on the dimensions of education, income and race.

Hence, we hypothesize that structural effects will be concentrated on between-group and within-group effects related to gender and age (generational) status. In the following hypothesis we leave the specific nature of these effects open:

*Hypothesis 1.* We expect structural effects of gender and age on readers' initial (pre-discussion) responses to *Jarrettsville*.

The important feature of this hypothesis is not only its expectation of sociodemographic effects but also its specification of such effects on readers' *pre-discussion* responses. Readers' post-discussion responses may be affected by interpersonal influences and such influences potentially disrupt the correspondence of an individual's demographic status position and his or her responses to the text on different evaluative dimensions. For individuals whose initial pre-

---

<sup>2</sup> Of note, we arrive at our conclusion that *Jarrettsville* is concerned with issues of gender and race inductively. Both the author of *Jarrettsville* and the book groups which make up our sample considered *Jarrettsville* to be concerned with the issues of gender and race, in addition to other issues. In text and interview, Robert Goolrick, the reviewer of *Jarrettsville* in the *Washington Post*, interpreted the novel to be most centrally concerned with issues of race (Goolrick 2009; Personal interview with Robert Goolrick, October 24, 2009).

discussion responses have not been influenced, the correspondence will, of course, be maintained. However, for individuals who are embedded in a group with substantial within-group heterogeneity of initial responses, interpersonal influences may draw responses toward the viewpoints of the more influential members. The result may or may not be a reinforcement of the initial structural effects on reception. The agency perspective on cultural reception, fleshed out in the next subsection, becomes crucial. Individual differences of initial reception set the stage for influence network effects that moderate structural effects on readers' post-discussion responses. Thus, Hypothesis 1 pertains to the first stage of the temporal process of reception that has unfolded among the readers of *Jarrettsville*.

#### *Readers' Agency*

While readers' understandings of texts are in some ways constrained by their social positions, their interpretations may also be affected by the authored words of texts themselves. An author's intentions for the interpretation of a text as conveyed through the text itself may present additional constraints on readers' reception. The literature on cultural reception contains strong arguments on the extent to which readers' receptions of texts are unconstrained not only by readers' demographic positions, but also by the text. With respect to the former constraint, positing agency is equivalent to acknowledging substantial individual differences of reception net of structural effects. As Griswold (1993) notes, "readers having identical sociological characteristics, but who apply different conventions to their reading, might come up with different communicates from the same texts" (p. 459). With respect to the latter constraint, texts may be more or less explicit in conveying an author's intended meaning, i.e., how particular events, characters, and the text as a whole should be viewed. But even with an explicit display of an author's intentions in the text, individual readers may interpret the meaning of a text

differently. Here, we focus on the debate which has developed in the literature on whether authors' intentions ever strongly constrain readers' interpretations. We enter into this complex debate because it must be dealt with—in the absence of readers' direct communication with the author(s) of a text, the text itself may powerfully shape readers' viewpoints on the detailed characters and events presented in a work of fiction or history.

Readers' ability to evaluate and draw meanings from cultural texts that deviate from the intentions of their creators and producers has been of central concern in both the study of reception in Literary Theory and the treatment of active audiences in Cultural Studies (Machor and Goldstein 2001; Press 1992). Both approaches developed as interventions to the previous pathologization of readers, with differential readings being treated simply as misreadings in earlier literary theory paradigms, and audiences being treated as passive, "cultural dopes" in some strands of Marxist analysis (Fiske 1989).<sup>3</sup> Although the study of symbolic elements of culture in U.S. sociology has largely been oriented toward the Production of Culture perspective, as Richard Peterson (2000) notes, "it may prove useful to focus on the process by which people go about creating patterns of culture in concrete situations," highlighting "a reception process in which people actively select and reinterpret symbols to produce a culture for themselves" (p. 230).

In the strongest articulation of readers' freedom from an author's encoded constraints post-structuralist and deconstructionist scholars in Literary Theory have argued for the wholesale dismissal of authors' intentions in the evaluation of meanings of texts. The case for such

---

<sup>3</sup> Early media theory in the U.S. also mirrored this pathologization of cultural receivers, relying on a "hypodermic model" of media effects in which the ideological values of mass-media were "planted" in the minds of a mass of solitary consumers who were incapable of critical evaluation. As Curran et al. (1982) summarizes the shift away from this model in American media theory, "the view of society as being composed of isolated and anomic individuals gave way to a view of society as a honeycomb of small groups bound by a rich web of personal ties and dependencies. Stable group pressure, it was concluded, helped to shield the individual from media influence" (p. 12).

dismissal was strongly argued by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946), who referred to a reliance on trying to discern an author's intentions from texts when decoding their "true" meanings as an "intentional fallacy." Instead, they posited that a text is "detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it" (1946, see pp. 468-488). Foucault (1977), who also critiques an over reliance on author's intentions, deconstructs the authors into a mere social function, an "ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (p. 22). Barthes (1974) famously gives authors and their intentions similarly short-shrift, writing that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" and "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (1974: p. 148). In support of this position, Fish (1982) argues that *interpretive communities* of indefinable boundaries fully determine the meaning of texts without any authorial constraints on readers' interpretations.

In contrast to these positions, Griswold (1993) argues that readers may exhibit considerable freedom in their interpretation of texts beyond the intentions of authors, without entirely erasing the work of authors or their ability to convey intended meanings in the texts that they create:

Sociologists should rediscover that forgotten soul, the author, who has been deconstructed into oblivion. It may seem a sign of theoretical naiveté, but it is a sign of common sense as well, to remind ourselves that human agents create the literary objects under consideration (Griswold 1987)...[T]here is no reason why authors, with their intentions, experiences, sociological characteristics, and "horizons" of understanding, cannot be treated in parallel fashion to readers: as agents who interact with texts, working to encode meanings (which may or may not be decoded by any particular group of readers – for all its sins, deconstruction has surely profited us by establishing the unreliable nature of texts). (p. 465)

Griswold is not alone in this middle-ground position which allows for effects of authors' intentions. Schmidt (1982) argues that a third "communicate" point exists between authors and readers in which the intentions of authors and the experiences of readers both influence interpretation, and Oatley (1994) writes that readers "receive speech acts addressed to them by the writer, and...integrate disparate elements to create a unified experience" in their interpretive readings (p. 53). The unified experiences may be highly idiosyncratic. In this middle-ground viewpoint, one that we adopt for testing, both the intentions of authors and the experiences and identities that readers bring to texts may have a role in the reader's interpretative process of making sense of creative works.

The question of whether an author's intentions constrain readers' reception of a text presumes the existence of an author *with* intended meanings, who has attempted to directly convey these meanings in a text. The question becomes more subtle when *readers* presume the existence of an author with intended meanings, in the absence of the author's direct communication to readers of what meanings (if any) the text was intended or not intended to convey. It is difficult to dismiss this "second-order" postulate that an author's motives and intentions are often an important domain of imputation and a negotiated constraint for the *readers* of a text, especially in cases where the author is viewed an important source of meaning worthy of apprehension (Pfaff and Gibbs 1997).<sup>4</sup>

With the above noted qualifications and nuances, the thrust of the agency perspective is the assertion of substantial individual differences in the reception of texts, even among readers'

---

<sup>4</sup> In our post-discussion debriefings with the book clubs, the readers in our sample did display a marked level of interest in the author's intentions for the text, asking questions for between 30 and 90 minutes about both the author's intended meanings along specific dimensions of the text, and the processes of her decision making in constructing the manuscript. With regards to authorial intentions, we make no claims as to how literary critics should or should not engage with texts, and instead, limit our analysis to the book club members who made up our study.

with a shared engagement with the content of a text, shared demographic characteristics, and shared experiences. The agency postulate leaves open the extent to which the heterogeneous responses of particular individuals are strongly held beliefs about the text or merely uncertain viewpoints about its meaning, and coupled with such variation, whether these individual responses are modified by interpersonal influences. The clear implication, however, is that interpersonal disagreements will be nested in commonalities (i.e., readers are unlikely to enter into a discussions of a text with consensual viewpoints on it) and that such discussions present opportunities for interpersonal influences to alter some, if not all, readers' viewpoints.

We take authorial intentions, conveyed by text, as a potential strong constraint on readers' responses. Here, because we actually *do* have direct access to the author's intentions, we may take a direct approach to the following limited question: when an author composes a text with particular intentions about the meaning of characters and events, do these authorial intentions strongly constrain readers' responses to those characters and events? We, but not the book club readers of *Jarrettsville*, have direct access to a set of specific authorial intentions that, via the text, may or may not have strongly constrained the readers' responses. In accord with the thrust of the literature on readers' agency, we evaluate the following hypothesis on the importance of authorial intentions:

Hypothesis 2. Readers' initial (pre-discussion) responses to *Jarrettsville* may and often do importantly depart not only from the author's general viewpoint on the merits of the text, but also on the author's intended specific perspectives on characters and events.

Note that, again, we are dealing with readers' *pre-discussion* responses on the basis of which the discussion of *Jarrettsville* unfolds. Our measures of the author's general viewpoints and specific intentions are *constants*, i.e., each being a private declaration to the first author of this article,

unknown to the readers of the text, but potentially manifested in the text itself. Thus, such declarations do not provide a *variable* that can be neatly folded into our analysis of the variation of readers' responses. In the multilevel statistical analysis that we will present, an effect of these authorial intentions is perforce mingled with all other effects that raise or lower the intercepts of the within-group effects on responses to the text. However, with a modest loss of analytical elegance, we can and do address this hypothesis with a separate analysis of the extent to which the readers' responses significantly depart from the author's privately declared, textually encoded intentions. The hypothesis that an author's intentions may be discounted is a prominent component of the literature on cultural reception. We bring some empirical evidence to bear on the hypothesis, and present this evidence as part of the prelude to our central interest—interpersonal influences on reception.

#### *Interpersonal Influences on Reception*

Kaufman (2004) suggests that “the canon on cultural consumption assumes that audiences have more or less static worldviews around which they reconcile their respective interpretations of cultural goods” (p. 339). While the practice of literacy is historically located, bounded within social institutions and power relationships, and embedded within other available cultural practices (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic 2000), readers are also nested within local communities in which they collectively work to evaluate and make sense of texts. When cultural works are subject to varied interpretations, the confrontation of different viewpoints may lead to changes of viewpoint via local processes of social influence (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).

Book groups are a naturally occurring setting in which readers organize to discuss both the character and content of cultural works. Long (2003), in her study of book groups, finds that

these groups do in fact develop their own local evaluative standards for discussing the quality and content of books. Readers in book groups discuss books in a “playful” manner, and feel no need to compete in the creation of an authoritative and conclusive consensual interpretation. As such, discussions in book clubs are open, freeing readers to not only enter discussions with their individual interpretations, but to also be influenced and to influence each other’s understandings of texts through conversation. Long (2003, p. 187) writes:

Conversations allow participants to clarify their own insights and opinions and also to integrate the various perspectives other readers bring to bear on the book. Through this integrative process, individuals – and sometimes the group as a whole – can reach new understandings, whether about life or about the text at hand. The discussion itself, then, can be a creative process, for it elicits a certain kind of value-oriented textual interpretation and encourages (through difference and disputation) a clearer articulation of partially formulated perceptions and implicit assumptions, whether about a specific book or about a personal experience. This process is particularly enlightening for participants (and perhaps most innovative) when groups can forge a new consensus from the diversity of opinions represented in discussion.

While readers come to discussions with individual interpretations of books, Long argues that limiting analysis to these pre-discussion opinions or the recitation of them within groups while overlooking the collaborative process of meaning making that can occur in book clubs “almost entirely misses the point of why participants are there at all” (p. 144). As Long notes, an ultimate consensus in opinions, while possible, is not a requirement in the informal book group setting. However, some modification of opinion, among some of the individuals involved in the discussions, is far from uncommon, and often signals an “enjoyable” book club experience.

The existence of interpersonal influences, in which the responses of individuals are affected by the responses of other individuals, is among the central postulates of social psychology: regardless of the value placed on the formation of consensus, when individuals are located in circumstances that allow a comparison of different opinions, a heterogeneous set of

responses to such comparisons is triggered—disputation, intransigence, flexibility—that typically generates shifts of opinion among some, if not all, individuals involved in the discussion of an issue. We hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3. Structural effects on individuals' post-discussion responses to *Jarrettsville* are moderated by the interpersonal influence networks that are constructed in the book clubs.

With interpersonal influences affecting responses, individual responses become interdependent social constructions. Note that our hypothesis deals with *post-discussion* responses and the interpersonal influences that have affected these responses. Also note that we conceptualize the significance of influence networks in cultural reception as moderating, as opposed to strictly intervening and transmitting, structural effects. The influence network and process may serve to maintain the pre-discussion viewpoints of some group members and alter the viewpoints of others. Depending on the influence network, structural effects on readers' pre-discussion responses may be disrupted and re-organized. We formalize this perspective in the next section.

Drawing on a well-established model of social influence networks and process, we bring a new formal perspective to bear on current questions about the active practices of cultural interpretation and meaning. The formal (technical) features of this model present a theoretical position on *how* interpersonal influences modify individuals' cognitive orientations towards objects (here, a text) and the implications of such influences unfolding in an influence network. In broad stroke, our approach dovetails with the increased application of social network constructs to cultural questions (see Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994, Pachuki and Breiger 2010, DiMaggio forthcoming), and the formal measurement of culture (see Mohr and Rawlings forthcoming, for a review). However, we ground the network analysis on a formal theory of *how* individuals' cognitively integrate heterogeneous information on objects.

### **Formal Framework of the Analysis**

The book club members are nested in groups. Each member read the text, agreed to withhold from interpersonal discussion of it prior to their formal meeting, and completed a set of pre-discussion evaluations of *Jarrettsville* that were recorded immediately prior to the group discussion. In each group, the members engaged in a discussion that may or may not have modified their interpretations and evaluations. Each group member then completed a set of post-discussion evaluations at the end of the group discussion. In this framework, group discussion may be treated, in the traditional way, as a condition with a hypothesized main effect on individuals' evaluations, i.e., as an effect that is manifested by a significant difference in the means of the pre and post discussion distributions of interpretations and evaluations. Such main effects are in evidence in these data, as we will show. However, our analysis is attentive to the group dynamics that occurred *within* each group; specifically, we treat each group as an influence system, open up the construct of "group discussion" and treat it as a structured group process in which (a) group members may vary in their pre-discussion viewpoints on *Jarrettsville*, (b) group members may vary in their accord of influence to particular other group members' viewpoints on the text, and (c) group member's post-discussion evaluations are subject to an influence process unfolding in a structured network of accorded influence. This approach does not assume, *a priori*, that any (or all) of the members were influenced. Nor does it assume (if group members are influenced) that consensual evaluations are formed.

Within a multilevel modeling framework, the effects of sociodemographic variables on within-group and between-group variations of response are considered. In addition, group dynamics are introduced as a source of explanation of the reception of *Jarrettsville*. The group dynamics contributions to the within-group variance are effects of group members' pre-

discussion responses that are moderated by the influence system of each group. The contribution of the influence system, of each group, to each group member's post-discussion response is a multiplicative construct  $\mathbf{V}\mathbf{y}^{(1)}$  in which  $\mathbf{V}$  is an emergent collective construct for each book club, i.e., a  $n \times n$  matrix of the total (direct and indirect) interpersonal influences of each of the  $n$  members of a group on each other member of the group, and  $\mathbf{y}^{(1)}$  is the  $n \times 1$  vector of group members' pre-discussion general evaluations of *Jarrettsville*. Letting  $\hat{\mathbf{y}} \equiv \mathbf{V}\mathbf{y}^{(1)}$ , we have an individual-level variable  $\hat{y}_i = \sum_{j=1}^n v_{ij} y_j^{(1)}$  for each group member  $i$  in a particular group, which is the predicted evaluation of group member  $i$  based on the group's influence system. In addition, we have a group-level variable  $\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \hat{y}_i$  for each book club, which is the predicted mean evaluation of a group's members based on the group's influence system. Both group dynamics variables are incorporated into the multi-level explanation of the reception of *Jarrettsville*. These variables capture the deduced implications of the specified cognitive *process* of information integration unfolding in a network of accorded influences. To see the "how" of this process, specifically, the process origins of the group matrix of total (direct and indirect) interpersonal influences, we present a skeleton overview of social influence network theory, and detail its features in the appendix.

Our formalization of the group dynamics contribution to cultural reception employs Friedkin and Johnsen's model of the interpersonal influence process unfolding in a network of accorded influences (Friedkin 1998; Friedkin and Johnsen 1999, 2011). This model has been empirically supported in both experimental and field study investigations (Friedkin 1999, 2001; Friedkin and Johnsen 2011). The model is premised on a social cognition mechanism of

information integration in which the evaluative position (attitude toward an object) of each group member is temporally formed in a process of iterated weighted averaging. The weights involved in the mechanism are cognitive constructs, i.e., the cognitive accorded relative influences of each group member to themselves and particular others. These weights may include instances of no (zero) accorded influence to particular members. For each member of a group, the discrete time interpersonal influence mechanism is

$$y_i^{(t+1)} = (1 - w_{ii}) \sum_{j=1}^n w_{ij} y_j^{(t)} + w_{ii} y_i^{(1)}, \quad (i = 1, 2, \dots, n; t = 1, 2, \dots)$$

from which the collection of accorded weights of the group members forms a *network* of direct influences. This influence network may be represented by a  $n \times n$  matrix  $\mathbf{W}$  in which  $0 \leq w_{ij} \leq 1$

for all  $i$  and  $j$ , and  $\sum_{j=1}^n w_{ij} = 1$  for all  $i$ . The individual-level self-weights  $\{w_{11}, w_{22}, \dots, w_{nn}\}$

correspond to the extent to which each individual has not accorded influence to others and is anchored on his or her initial position. Since all members of the group are engaged in this process, the evaluative positions of those persons who have been accorded influence by others may be altered over time; hence, each individual is located in a potentially changing landscape of evaluative positions. The model generates a prediction of the evolution of each group members' orientations toward an object based on their initial orientations and the network of accorded influences in which the process is unfolding. The influence network  $\mathbf{W}$  is *in* the process, as opposed to being an exterior constraint on it, since it is an aggregate construction of the “cognitive algebra” of the individual level (within the skin) mechanism of information integration (Anderson 1981).

The equilibrium equation of the influence system process for each group member is

$$\begin{aligned}
y_i^{(\infty)} &= (1 - w_{ii}) \sum_{j=1}^n w_{ij} y_j^{(\infty)} + w_{ii} y_i^{(1)} \\
&= \sum_{j=1}^n v_{ij} y_j^{(1)}
\end{aligned}
, \quad (i = 1, 2, \dots, n)$$

in which the  $v_{ij}$  appear as derived values (emergent resultants) of the influence process unfolding over time among the members of the group. The derived  $n \times n$  matrix  $\mathbf{V}$  has  $0 \leq v_{ij} \leq 1$  for all  $i$  and  $j$ , and  $\sum_{j=1}^n v_{ij} = 1$  for all  $i$ . The elements of  $\mathbf{V}$  correspond to the relative total (direct plus indirect) influence of each group member  $j$ 's initial position in determining the content of each group member  $i$ 's equilibrium position, for all  $i$  and  $j$  members of the group. The technical appendix details the derivation of this matrix from the influence process. While the underlying formal apparatus is nontrivial, the operationalization of the model is not difficult given measures provided by each group member on their pre-discussion positions and the weights accorded by each group member to each other group member on the issue. For our analysis of the book clubs, both such measures were obtained, as well as a measure of group members' post-discussion positions.

In the present application of the model, we emphasize its following important features. It is not premised on the existence of interpersonal influence; whether such influence occurs depends on the weight that a particular individual accords to *self* on a particular issue. Hence, for an individual who accords no weight to others, i.e., an individual  $i$  with  $w_{ii} = 1$ , the influence network model presents no change of position. An individual who accords some influence to others is subject to a position change, i.e., an individual with  $0 \leq w_{ii} < 1$ . A particular group may

contain a mixture of individuals with different self-weights and extent of openness to interpersonal influences that they, themselves, have allowed via the accord of weights to others.

Self-weight corresponds to a degree of ongoing anchorage on the initial position of the individual; hence, with self-weighted group members who are in initial disagreement, the influence network model generates an equilibrium state of disagreement in which none, some, or all of the group members' initial positions have been modified. In the book clubs, in contrast to the small groups in experimental settings that have been analyzed in previous work (Friedkin and Johnsen 2011), the book club members' reported *self-weights* are high. This may be due to a low demand for consensus in the informal assemblage of book clubs, as they exist as a form of leisure activity voluntarily taken up by individuals in groups (Hartley 2001; Long 2003). Unlike some task-oriented small groups, e.g., juries, where reaching consensus is a valued goal, the individuals involved in our book club discussions do not enter into the discussion with the aim of achieving a consensual position via compromise or abandonment of positions. But even in this context, modified positions are the expected consequences of a set of less than completely self-weighted individuals who are cognitively integrating their own positions with the positions (and associated information and arguments) of those members to whom they have accorded influence. We present an assessment of the influence system's predicted net contribution to book club members' post-discussion positions. In this setting, where the pressures towards uniformity are not dramatic, interpersonal influences among group members may generate substantial changes of evaluative positions, i.e., a markedly *influenced* settled pattern of post-discussion interpersonal disagreements.

Lastly, the influence network model is premised on an influence network construct that is involved in the process of interpersonal influence on *specific* issues considered by a particular

group. Because the network construct **W** is *in* the process of group members' interactions on a specific issue, and constructed by the individuals who are engaged with a specific issue, the network may vary across a sequence of different issues that arise in a group over time. In our book clubs, where the specific issue is a particular book, the influence network of the group may change from book to book. Our design solicited measures of both the general (past) relative influence of the book club's members and the specific influences of the book club's members in their discussion of *Jarrettsville*. Interestingly, a substantial number of book club members balked at providing an assessment of general (past) influence stating that the influence of particular members varies, depending on their involvement, areas of expertise, and the book being considered. Although we intended to assess whether a stable social structure of relative influence might be operating in these groups, we are not able to make such an assessment; perhaps, the prevalence of non-response to the question that attempted to solicit a description of such a structure is indicative that it does not reliably exist. In contrast, no problem was encountered in eliciting a description of the influence network involved in the *Jarrettsville* discussion. For this influence network, specific to each book club, the reported accorded influences pertain to the general evaluative positions of a group's members on the text. Our multilevel analysis of readers' responses is focused on the variation of group members' general evaluative positions. We will show that certain specific compositional dimensions of the text are strongly associated with these evaluations.

### **Data and Methods**

*Jarrettsville* is work of historical fiction that takes place in a border town in Northern Maryland immediately following the Civil War. Based on a true story, the novel highlights the still simmering tensions between Northern and Southern sympathizers in the town, and the

effects of those tensions on the two central characters of the novel, Martha Jane Cairnes and Nicholas McComas. Based on archival research, family documents, and journalistic accounts, the story traces the courting and engagement of Cairnes to McComas, Cairnes shooting and killing McComas in front of 50 eye-witnesses during a parade celebrating the fourth anniversary of the surrender at Appomattox, and the ensuing trial of Cairnes.

*Jarrettsville* was written by Cornelia Nixon, a descendent of Cairnes. The novel was published by Counterpoint Press of Counterpoint LLC., which selected *Jarrettsville* as its “lead” fiction title for the fall 2009 publishing season. This distinction included increased resources and attention paid to the novel by the Counterpoint’s publicity and marketing staff, and the focused promotion of *Jarrettsville* at BookExpo America 2009, the premier U.S. tradeshow for the publishing industry. *Jarrettsville* received positive reviews in the two major within-industry trade publications, *Publisher’s Weekly* (2009) and *Kirkus Reviews* (2009), and was selected by the American Booksellers Association as a fall 2009 title to watch for (IndieBound 2009). As Counterpoint CEO Charlie Winton described to regional sales reps in a pre-sales distribution meeting in February of 2009, “[*Jarrettsville*] is a big title for us, so sell mightily!” (field notes, 02/03/2009).<sup>5</sup>

Sales reps reported that they had strong successes getting placement for *Jarrettsville* in bookstores, and Counterpoint entered a cooperative agreement with Borders to place *Jarrettsville*

---

<sup>5</sup> Both the author and publisher of *Jarrettsville* are well established players in the U.S. trade publishing industry. Counterpoint LLC is known for producing “quality” fiction and nonfiction, and its books are regularly reviewed in publications such as the *New York Times*. Counterpoint’s Publisher, Charlie Winton, has also been named one of the 80 most influential people in the last 100 years of American trade publishing by *Publisher’s Weekly*, the major trade publication in the industry. Likewise, Nixon, who has written two novels prior to *Jarrettsville*, is the recipient of two O. Henry Awards, two Pushcart Prizes, and NEA, Carnegie, and Yaddo fellowships. Like *Jarrettsville*, her two previous novels had also been reviewed in the *New York Times*. These are non-trivial distinctions, as reviews in the *New York Times*, awards, and fellowships are important signals of the placement of both publishing firms and authors within the literary field (de Nooy 1991; Bourdieu 1993, 1996; for *New York Times* reviews see Ohman 1983; Eckelund and Börjesson 2002; for prizes and awards see English 2005).

in front-of-store display. The novel was reviewed upon release in the Sunday editions of the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* (Goodheart 2009; Goolrick 2009). The *Times* review was strongly negative, and, according to Winton, “really punctured the buzz” that had built for the novel (Personal interview with Charlie Winton, March 3, 2009) 3/3/2009). At time of report *Jarrettsville* was not a best-seller, but had out-sold its initial expectations, been awarded the Shaara Prize for Civil War fiction, and had once again been noted by the American Booksellers Association, appearing as one of ten titles for the summer 2010 season recommended to book groups.

### *Data*

Data were collected from 20 book groups in the United States between October 2009 and June 2010. Two of these groups were dropped from the analysis due to conflicts with the design of this work.<sup>6</sup> While most groups met in members’ houses, meetings were also held in community centers, local cafes, libraries, and bookstores. Groups were based around friendship ties, neighborhood affiliations, places of employment, and religious and social organizations. At time of study the groups had been meeting for between less than one and over fifteen years, with the median group having met for around six years. Groups ranged between five and sixteen members, with the median group consisting of nine members. Nine of the groups were a convenience sample found through two-step ties (i.e. friend of friend, friend of familial tie, etc.) of the first author, four groups were recommended by early study participants, and five groups were recommended by bookstore employees or located through public records of group meetings

---

<sup>6</sup> The two groups dropped from this study were withheld on consistency grounds. In one of the groups, the author of *Jarrettsville* was invited to the group meeting, answered members’ questions, and participated in the group discussion of her book, all significantly altering the influence structure of the group’s discussion. The second group was an ad-hoc “focus” group formed by the first author. While this group might allow us to have a baseline model to measure the cumulative effect of multiple meetings across books over time, as it was not a naturally occurring group, its inclusion here would not be appropriate for our analysis.

at local libraries and online book group databases. In an effort to minimize the effects of researcher intervention in our naturally occurring field settings, before participation group members were informed by the first author that we had no personal or financial relationship with the author or publisher of *Jarrettsville*, and that their natural, *in situ* practices within their book groups was the primary goal of study for this portion of the data collection.

Two groups approached by the first author declined to participate in the study, leaving a group-level response rate of 91%.<sup>7</sup> Offers of “reciprocity” may have led to our high response rate (Jorgensen 1989). Copies of *Jarrettsville* were provided to the book groups, freeing them from an economic cost for participation. In several groups in which the first author was asked to “present” the study to groups before their decision to participate, members also joked that participating would relieve them from deciding which book they would next select to read.<sup>8</sup> In the post-discussion debriefing, the first author shared key documents and stories about the writing and publishing of *Jarrettsville*, and answered questions. Group participants expressed great interest in getting “behind the scenes” of a book they’d read, learning about the author, her process, and her intentions; information they are quite interested in but usually do not have access to. We suspect their interest in participation was raised by the inclusion of this offer of “sharing back” during the post-study debriefings.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> One group declined to participate because they had only had one previous meeting. The second non-participating group worried that providing the data would be too taxing and would not be of interest to members.

<sup>8</sup> This difficulty in selecting books for group-reading is consistent with Long’s (2003) findings from book groups in the Houston area (see Long 2003, chapter 5 for the various ways in which book groups make selections).

<sup>9</sup> While participation in “book group” is a leisure activity for our respondents, they expressed that their groups provided both social and personal fulfillment. In later communications respondents suggested that another factor in their participation emerged out of fascination, and an appreciation that this personally fulfilling activity in their lives might be studied and “taken seriously” by a researcher. More details on these book clubs, including additional ethnographic information on their meetings, are available upon request from the first author.

### *Pre and Post Discussion Design*

Data from book groups were collected through surveys, audio-recordings of group discussions, and field notes from club meetings, allowing for “methodological triangulation” of findings (Denzin 1978).<sup>10</sup> The findings presented here are based on the collected survey data. Participants agreed to read *Jarrettsville* and fill out four surveys, two before their group discussion, and two at the conclusion of their group discussion. A social influence questionnaire reporting the structure of influence within the group (the group’s matrix of accorded influences **W**) was completed by respondents before the beginning of the meeting (the group’s general **W**, and a second influence questionnaire was completed after the discussion of *Jarrettsville* (the group’s book-specific **W**). We take the latter as the basis for our analysis of group dynamics involved in the discussion of the novel. Participants also filled out a 79 item questionnaire recording their demographic characteristics, reading habits, and impressions of *Jarrettsville* along 57 dimensions. These dimensions included their overall evaluations of the text and a battery of questions on the historical accuracy, pacing, genre, alternative climatic scenes, and overall structure of the novel. Respondents also recorded their evaluations of *Jarrettsville*’s major characters and their actions, as well as their evaluations of which factors encoded in the novel by Nixon were most important to the dissolution of the relationship between the protagonists.<sup>11</sup> Finally, respondents were asked to evaluate the packaging of the novel, including its cover, “blurbs”, and plot summary on the back of the novel. Respondents completed this survey prior to the beginning of their group discussion and again at the end of their group

---

<sup>10</sup> Field notes were recorded for 18 of the 20 participating groups. Timing and travel costs prevented attendance by the first author at the remaining two groups, although a voice recorder was used by the participants to record the audio transcript of their group discussions of *Jarrettsville*, in addition to the 18 groups in which field notes were also recorded.

<sup>11</sup> A full list of questions asked about the novel is available from the first author upon request.

discussion, allowing us to measure individual position changes on these various dimensions of the reading experience. Nixon also completed our survey, which was adapted to record her intentions on the various dimensions of the text, the definition of which she helped to frame for the survey design, along with the novel's editor, and several other key informants in the development of the book.<sup>12</sup>

### *Measures*

*General Evaluative Measures.* Prior to the group discussion and post-discussion, individuals provided their global evaluations of the book on four dimensions, each scaled 1-100: "How much did you like *Jarrettsville*?", "How likely would you be to recommend *Jarrettsville* to a friend?", "Thinking only about the quality of writing, how well written was *Jarrettsville*?", and "How likely would you be to read another novel by Cornelia Nixon?". These four evaluations, which are strongly correlated, provide pre and post discussion global measures of evaluation, with scale reliability coefficients (alpha) of 0.929 and 0.930, respectively. This scale captures the readers' general reception of (attitudinal orientations toward) a cultural object—the book.

Our employment and reliance on this measure does not imply that we conceptualize the book club discussions as a simple give-and-take on whether the book was bad or good. Specific dimensions of evaluation and sense-making defined the substantive content of the discussion, although the discussions regularly included readers' statements of general enthusiasm or disappointment. The content of book clubs' discussions varied in their emphasis on particular specific features of the book. However, as we will show, a small subset of specific evaluative and interpretive dimensions is strongly associated with the measure of the general evaluation of

---

<sup>12</sup> More detailed information on the design of the larger investigation are available upon request from the first author.

the book on a bad-good continuum. The readers' discussions tended to be focused on an evaluation of the author's employment of peripheral accounts at the beginning and conclusion of the story, the extent to which the story was emotionally compelling, and the extent to which the story prompted thoughts about the nature of human relationships. We take the global evaluative measure as reflective of the reader's synthesis of these focal "common currency" compositional issues and other specific issues that arose in the groups' discussions. The specific dimensions of evaluation may be viewed as the *medium* of the discussion that resulted in a net negative or positive shift of attitude toward the book as an object, at the individual-level. We have come close to adopting the position that the detailed discussions of the book are framed, in the minds of the book club members, as dealing with the general issue of locating the book on the *evaluative* semantic differential dimension of the EPA cognitive space (Evaluation, Potency, and Activity) defined by Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957).<sup>13</sup>

*Sociodemographic measures.* The sociodemographic measures include age, gender, and education. While race was measured, the 18 book club's members were 96% white. Income was dropped as a variable: its distribution is skewed with 73% of the members reporting incomes greater than \$80,000; the non-responses on this item substantially lower the number of cases available for analysis (from 139 to 107); and in the analyses that were conducted with this variable included, it had no detected main or interaction effects. The ages of readers ranged from 26-90 years old; the readers were nearly evenly distributed in these range. The gender distribution is 38% male. The education levels of readers is skewed with 54% of the readers

---

<sup>13</sup> A book club discussion, depending on the club, may focus on different *specific* dimensions. We find that a subset of six specific dimensions account for 74% of the variance on the general evaluation measure. We do not present the analysis of each of these specific dimensions. We felt that the analytical burden would become overwhelming, and further enlarge an already large manuscript. Moreover, our influence network measure is not tailored to address the particular specific dimensions of evaluation.

reporting having an advanced degree, 41% having a college degree, and the remainder either some college or a high school diploma. This variable is treated as dummy variable with the indicator being an advanced degree. Individual-level interactions among the three variables are included (age-education, age-gender, and gender-education). The included group-level variables are the group's mean age, proportion of members with an advanced degree, and a gender dummy variable with the indicator being a predominately male group (49% of the readers are located in all female groups, 36% in all male groups, and the remainder in predominately female groups). We also considered the inclusion of a group-level variable indicating the regional location of club; some of the clubs were located in West Coast states, others in North Eastern states, and the remainder in the South Eastern states. We detected no regional effects and thus eliminated this variable from the analysis.<sup>14</sup> With the available data, we have detected only a small set of significant effects of exogenous variables on the book club members' responses. The data set is not large and, in the context of a multilevel modeling framework, the pursuit of an enlarged set of exogenous variables is ill-advised.

*Influence Network Measures.* Respondents were asked to complete two surveys reporting the network data for social influence structures within their book club. As all members of the groups filled out these surveys, we are able to capture the full social influence structure for each book club. The first survey contained the following instructions: "This form is used to measure the amount in which other members of the group tend to influence your feelings and impressions

---

<sup>14</sup> Regional effects may be depressed by the high education levels of readers in our sample and the relative lack of regional cultural boundaries when compared to moral boundaries (Lamont et al. 1996). With regards to the high levels of educational attainment in the naturally occurring groups we've studied, this is largely a function of frequently reading for pleasure being correlated with educational attainment. In turn, that our respondents are disproportionately women, middle-upper class, and white-identifying is also in-line with the demographic packages that make up much of what Griswold calls the "reading class" in the United States (see Griswold 2008, chapter 2). This package of demographic characteristics is so common among book club members that Long (2003) centers her study of book groups on those comprised of middle-upper class white women.

about the books you've read." A substantial proportion of book club members expressed doubts about "tending" to be influenced by the same individuals across meetings, noting that while this is sometimes true, the experiences, cultural resources, and perspectives brought to the discussion are not stable from meeting to meeting, and are frequently dependent on which book has been read for the discussion.<sup>15</sup> As one respondent phrased it, "if we're reading about the South I might want to know what Sandy thinks because she grew up outside Atlanta. But if the story takes place in Africa, Laura went there. She has really good insights about the book because she's been there." This instability of influence also occurs with regard to genre, as another reader explained: "Nancy and I both like mysteries, so we want to know what the other one thinks about mysteries, unlike, I don't know, we don't always feel the same about other types of books we read for [the book] club."<sup>16</sup> Book club members, however, had no problem filling out influence surveys for a single book-specific meeting and discussion (see below).

Immediately following the group discussion, book club members were given a second influence network survey which mirrored the first, save for a key change in instruction: "This form only measures your discussion of *Jarrettsville* and the present meeting. Please use it to record the amount in which other members of the group have influenced your feelings and impressions about *Jarrettsville*." This form was filled out in two steps. In the first step, respondents were asked to consider the totality and the extent to which those feelings and impressions had been changed or shifted during the process of group discussion, or remained unchanged or shifted during the discussion; they allocated 100 points among these two response

---

<sup>15</sup> In addition to reported unstable influence structures, it is also worth noting that in these voluntary groups attendance itself is not entirely stable. Although it goes beyond the scope of our study, in anecdotal conversations with many of the participating groups there was a reported core network of regular participants, and a periphery group of infrequent or former participants who were still considered group members by at least some regular participants. We did not however collect longitudinal two-mode data (person x meeting) to verify these impressions.

<sup>16</sup> Pseudonyms are used in both of these quotes.

categories. The first category, change/shift, refers to the degree to which each respondent was influenced by other group members, and determines the values on the main diagonal of  $\mathbf{W}$ , i.e.,  $w_{11}, w_{22}, \dots, w_{mm}$  for each group. The larger the value of  $0 \leq w_{ii} \leq 1$ , the more self-weighted the individual and the smaller the relative direct influence accorded to all other members of the group,  $w_{ii} = 1 - \sum_{i \neq j} w_{ij}$ . Although some group members accorded no influence to other group members ( $n=15$ ), the vast majority of respondents reported that the discussion had some influence ( $0 \leq w_{ii} < 1$ ) on their post-discussion impressions and evaluations of the book. In the second step of the post-discussion social influence survey, respondents were asked to take the total value accorded to others  $1 - w_{ii}$  and distribute this value among the other group members. Respondents filled out the names of the other book group members, and accorded them weights in changing/shifting their feelings and impressions.

This measurement model of  $\mathbf{W}$ , the matrix of accorded influence, has been previously employed by Friedkin (1999) and Friedkin and Johnsen (1999) in their studies of groups assembled under experimental designs. A detailed assessment of the measurement approach appears in Friedkin and Johnsen (2011), where 450 issue-specific influence networks are examined. The available evidence suggests that group members' formations of issue-specific influence networks are subject to numerous conditions, and are often importantly idiosyncratic social constructions that vary between groups on the same issue, and within groups across a sequence of different issues. Social influence network theory takes off from the realized constructed network of a group on a specific issue. Friedkin (1998, 2001) has employed measurement models of influence network structures based on structural features of groups' contact networks (in the book club discussions all pairs of members are in direct contact). As he

notes, approaches that draw on contact network data to specify influence network structures entail a set of challenging problems. Interpersonal influences are not restricted to contact relations, some measure of the relative weights of particular contacts and non-contacts must be obtained, and a measure of the important construct of potentially heterogeneous *self-weights* also must be obtained. Currently, the most direct approach to a measure of  $\mathbf{W}$ , and the approach that most closely corresponds to the cognitive foundations of the theory, is one that draws on group members' self-reported accorded weights. We rely on self-reported accorded influences in the present analysis, under the assumption of individuals' veridical appraisals of the relative direct interpersonal influences that have shaped their orientations on a specific issue that has immediately preceded the appraisals. As the implications of dealing with influence network structures are fleshed out, the measurement models of these structures will surely become an increasing focus of attention and refinement.

## **Findings**

The readers' mean general, pre- and post-discussion, evaluations of *Jarrettsville* were favorable with a pre-discussion mean of 68.0 (sd = 24.8, n = 136) and post-discussion mean of 61.3 (sd = 27.4, n = 136). However, as is evident, the book clubs' discussions of the book were associated with a decline of the mean favorable evaluation ( $t=7.3$ ,  $df=135$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , two-tailed paired t-test). The distribution of the individual-level changes of evaluation is one in which 66.2% of individuals modified their evaluations toward a more negative position, 22.8% shifted to a more positive position, and 11.0% were unmoved. The shifts toward more positive positions were, with one exception, modest in magnitude; in contrast, the shifts toward more negative positions on the text were more often dramatic.

As defined in the previous methods section, the scale of general evaluation is composed of four dimensions that pertain to a negative-positive attitudinal evaluation of the text. The following four specific compositional dimensions are associated with this general evaluative scale of readers' viewpoints on the text:

Would *Jarrettsville* have been more effective if it had just been told from Martha's perspective as opposed to being told from the perspective of multiple narrators? Was it a good idea to begin *Jarrettsville* with periphery accounts of what happened immediately after the murder as opposed to telling the story as a more linear narrative? Was it a good idea to tell the back story of the murder both from Martha's and then from Nick's perspectives? Was it a good idea to tell the story of the trial from periphery accounts at the conclusion of the novel?

A regression of the readers' pre-discussion general evaluations of the book on the above four specific evaluative dimensions accounts for 44.3% of the variance ( $n = 137$ ,  $F(4, 132) = 28.04$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). With the addition of the following two specific evaluative dimensions

How emotionally compelling did you find the story? How much did the story make you think about the nature of human relationships?

a regression of the readers' pre-discussion general evaluations of the book on the six specific evaluative dimensions accounts for 74.0% of the variance ( $n = 136$ ,  $F(6, 129) = 65.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Although the average reader, as we have noted, had a favorable general evaluation of the text, these specific dimensions along with other specific evaluative dimensions are reflected in the readers' pre-discussion general evaluations, and entered later into their discussions of the book. It can be argued that the specific evaluations were the basis of the general evaluations, or the reverse, i.e., that a reader's general more or less positive response was rationalized in terms of specific arguments (Zajonc 1980). Both mechanisms were probably involved across the set of readers. We analyze the changes of readers' orientations to the text in terms of their general evaluative positions. The above noted aggregate significant shift of the readers' mean general

evaluation of the book, toward a more negative orientation, is generated by the *group dynamics* involved in their discussions. Our analysis begins with the consideration of the sociodemographic variables and authorial intentions that may have shaped readers' pre-discussion positions on the text, and then turns to the consideration of the contribution of the influence networks of the groups, and the influence process that unfolded in them, to their post-discussion positions on the text.

#### *Antecedents of Readers' Pre-Discussion Evaluations*

Readers' pre-discussion evaluations may be associated with their sociodemographic characteristics. These evaluations also may be conditioned by the text-itself and the authorial intentions that shaped the text. As previously discussed, we must separate the analysis of authorial intentions from the multilevel statistical analysis of sociodemographic and group dynamics effects. An author's intent is a common contextual condition for all readers and not a variable either at the individual or group level. We analyze authorial intentions first, so as not to disrupt the presentation of the body of findings obtained from the multilevel analysis.

Interestingly, we found (as reported above) that particular *compositional* dimensions of the text appear as important components of the readers' general evaluation of it. Although it is possible that the author might have immediate self-deprecating regrets on the composition of text, it is not surprising to find that the author's own general evaluative orientation is a displayed positive appraisal. The author's intended appraisals on the components of the global scale are the maximum values (100) on the 1-100 scale employed for each component (obtained in a personal interview with the author). This self-scoring reflects the author's solid (no regret) commitment to the text as one would expect for most authors with passionate engagements in their work. Moreover, the author's own intentions for her more specific compositional decisions also are

maximally positive, specifically, on the four compositional features of the book that we found to be associated with readers' general evaluative positions. On each of these four compositional dimensions, the average reader had a significantly different (more negative) position.

In addition, the text involves sub-objects (particular characters and events) with an author-designed meaning and intended impact. For example, on the dimension "How important were the class differences between Martha and Nick's families in the dissolution of their relationship?" the author's own viewpoint is that class differences are not, i.e., were not intended to be, particularly important (10), and on the dimension of "How sympathetic were you to the character of Richard (Martha's brother) and his actions?" the author's position is that Richard is not a sympathetic character (5). Table 1 assesses whether the readers' mean pre-discussion interpretations on 29 specific dimensions significantly differ from the author's privately stated position. The results show that the average reader significantly departs from the author's stated intention on 20 of the 29 dimensions. Most of the differences are significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level, indicating that the differences tend to be more pronounced than the large confidence intervals associated with 99.9% intervals. Clearly, individual differences of pre-discussion interpretations of the text are rampant, and the average reader significantly departs from the author's intention on numerous dimensions of encoded meaning. The importance and limitations of the specific question that is addressed by these findings were noted in our introduction. We see strong evidence of reader agency on many of dimensions of the text.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

The observed heterogeneity of orientations may be explained, in part, by the heterogeneity of readers' sociodemographic characteristics. We now show that age, gender, and education are significant antecedent variables. An ANOVA analysis indicates some significant

differences among the means of groups' pre-discussion general evaluations of *Jarrettsville*.

Table 2 presents the findings of a multilevel linear regression of readers' pre-discussion general evaluations on their individual-level and group-level sociodemographic characteristics. The baseline Model 1 indicates substantial within and between group variances of pre-discussion evaluations. Model 2 introduces individual-level sociodemographic variables, including three interactions. Model 3 introduces group-level sociodemographic variables. Age, education, and gender effects are detected at both the individual and group levels. At the individual-level the significant male-age interaction effect indicates that young males have a more favorable evaluation than young females and that this difference declines, and reverses around age 66 (using the Model 3 estimates). Males older than age 66 have a less favorable evaluation than do females of the same age, and this difference increases with age. At the group-level, the proportion of group members with a graduate degree is negatively associated with a favorable evaluation of the book. Some reduction of the between-group variance of evaluations is obtained with this structural account. The within-group variance remains largely unexplained by these sociodemographic variables.

The weak structural account of readers' pre-discussion evaluations may be due to strong selection effects on the engagement of these individuals in a book club. As we noted, the entire set of book club members is markedly homogeneous in race, education, and income. A stronger set of individual-level structural effects on pre-discussion evaluations might have been obtained if *Jarrettsville* had been presented to a random sample of individuals from the adult U.S. population. However, small group formations are not randomly assembled. A general point may be highlighted: if the engagement with particular cultural objects tends to attract sociodemographic homogenous segments of a population, then sociodemographic effects on

their reception of such objects will be manifested in the grand mean value of their responses and not in an account of within-group and between-group variation of response.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

### *Interpersonal Influences on Readers' Post-Discussion Evaluations*

We now examine the contribution of the group dynamics that occurred in the reading groups. Individuals' enter into their interpersonal interactions on the text with heterogeneous viewpoints. In the book clubs that we are considering, there is no strong pressure to reach a consensus or social controls aimed at enforcing a particular normative viewpoint. The clubs bring members together and allow the social comparisons of responses that may trigger interpersonal influences. While these influences do not generate consensus in any of the groups, the within-group discussions generate noteworthy shifts of individual positions on the book, shifts of group-level means, and significant differences (noted above) of the pre and post discussion distributions of evaluative orientations. The challenge taken up by social influence network theory is an explanation of the influenced settled pattern of post-discussion interpersonal disagreements.

Table 3 presents the findings of a multilevel linear regression of readers' post-discussion general evaluations. The baseline Model 1 indicates substantial within and between group variances of post-discussion evaluations. Model 2 introduces the same suite of variables involved in Model 3 of Table 1. A significant male-age interaction effect also appears here. As in the analysis of the pre-discussion evaluation, some reduction of the between-group variance of evaluations is obtained with this structural account, and the within-group variance remains largely unexplained by the sociodemographic variables.

Model 3 of Table 2 introduces the readers' pre-discussion evaluations as an individual-level variable. The structural effects of age and gender disappear under this control. Obviously, if the group discussions have *not* altered readers' evaluations, then the post-discussion evaluations will be based on the same conditions, absent disturbances, that determined their pre-discussion responses. In such a circumstance (no within-group interpersonal influences), the pre-discussion evaluations will mediate all structural effects. However, when group-discussions alter readers' evaluations, the association of pre-discussion and post discussion evaluations is potentially disrupted.

The influence network model generates a prediction of each group's member's post-discussion evaluation based on other group members' pre-discussion evaluations, the accorded influences that define the influence network of the group, and all the flows of influence (direct and indirect) that unfold in the network. Because the model includes, as a special case, the circumstance in which there are weak or no interpersonal influences, introducing the model's predicted post-evaluations is expected to capture all of the instances of no influence and, in addition, provide an account of the evaluative changes that did arise from the influence system. Model 4 is trimmed of the structural variables, retains the control for readers' pre-discussion evaluations, and introduces the group-dynamics account of individuals' post-discussion evaluations. The significant effect of the influence system indicates that it is making an independent contribution to the account of post-discussion evaluations, controlling for pre-discussions evaluations. The non-significance of the pre-discussion evaluations indicates that the influence system also is capturing instances of individual-level continuity in pre and post discussion evaluations.

Model 5 of Table 3 is strictly constructed on the basis of the influence network model. The model assumes that the effects of all exogenous variables on individuals' evaluations are confined to the determination of individuals' pre-discussion evaluations, and that the endogenous interpersonal influences involved in the group discussion strictly governs the occurrence of any changes of evaluation. In turn, the influence system's predicted group-level means of post-discussion evaluations are now introduced to account for the between-group variation of post-discussion evaluations. With these two variables, i.e., the derived emergent constructs of the influence process mechanism, the baseline (Model 1) within- and between-group variance components are substantially reduced. In contrast to Model 3, which does not explain the changes of evaluation that arose in the book clubs' discussions of *Jarrettsville*, Model 5 contributes an explanation.

[Insert Table 3 Here]

Thus, both macro-structural effects and localized interpersonal influence processes are dealt with in a theoretically coherent framework. The former enter as conditions affecting individuals' independent initial responses to the text. The latter enter into cultural reception when individuals are embedded in communities (here, small book clubs) that allow endogenous interpersonal influences to unfold in influence networks in which their own and other members' perspectives on cultural objects are made visible and, via individuals' accorded influences to others, made salient. The extent to which individuals' responses to a cultural object are negotiated outcomes depends on the social structure of the influence system: the array of its members' initial positions on an issue and the influence network that they themselves construct as they discuss the issue. The group dynamics implications of the social structure are realizations

of the influence process that unfolds in the structure. Social structure and social process are co-joined and dually important.

## **Discussion**

We have documented three levels of analysis in interpretive responses to cultural objects, highlighting two frequently distinguished approaches, and advancing inquiry on a third approach that emphasizes the importance of attending to the interpersonal influence systems in which individuals' responses to cultural objects are shaped. We have traced a temporal process in which individuals' responses to their private engagement with a text (their reading of it) are conditioned by individuals' demographic characteristics, and the experiences and identifications related to these characteristics. No doubt, the social-structural positions of readers do influence cultural interpretation; however, the contribution of such structural effects, which has been the grist of a perspective on individuals as embedded in and constrained by their social positions, is overemphasized. We suggest that the implications of individual differences (freedom from structural constraints) emphasized by the agency perspective on cultural reception require more detailed attention. It is implicated even in the cognitive foundation of the network theory employed in this investigation, which is based on readers' distributions of accorded influence to self and others.

One specific implication of the agency perspective, which has been extensively debated, is that readers' responses are weakly constrained by authors' intentions and meanings, and by the content of the text in which these intentions and meanings are conveyed. Albeit with some qualifications, the thrust of the debate has been supportive of a theoretical position that discounts the text itself as an important "structural" constraint on individual responses. While texts are the medium of responses, they rarely directly generate a homogeneous response. Our findings are

consistent with this perspective. The same substantial freedom from constraint that occurs with respect to authors' intentions also occurs with respect to the demographic positions in which individuals are situated. We find significant evidence for deviations from author's intentions and freedom from socio-demographic conditioning and constraint, which we take as indicative of substantial levels of individual agency in cultural interpretation. Unmeasured variables may account for some of this variation, but it does not appear that the suite of most commonly considered demographic variables (race, gender, age, education, income, and region) suffice to provide a powerful explanation of heterogeneous interpretations of cultural texts.

A key implication of agency is a marked level of individual-level heterogeneity in first responses to cultural objects. This heterogeneity may or may not be reduced over time. For an explanation of observed reductions and emergent shared interpretations and meanings, the theoretical importance of endogenous interpersonal influences becomes large. Although the acknowledgement of the potential importance of such influences is not a contentious matter, it is more difficult to formalize the influence process and empirically investigate its contributions. Readers' responses are subject to both direct and indirect flows of interpersonal influences.

In this context, the significance of our analysis is multifaceted, i.e., both methodological and theoretical. Our agenda is to present a comprehensive perspective on the suite of major approaches to cultural reception and an analysis that addresses them. The vehicle is a multilevel statistical modeling framework, which has the analytical flexibility to attend to the theoretical issues that have been posed in the literature on cultural reception. We demonstrate its applicability, but also note its limitations in addressing the question of the importance of authorial intentions.

As part of the above agenda, we include and highlight the analysis of interpersonal interactions in the formation of meaning for cultural objects. The important contribution to such interactions, although generally accepted, has largely been a “black box” with regards to *process* in the field on cultural reception and in other sociological fields. Where interpersonal interactions have been attended to in investigations of interpersonal influence systems, the employed models have been behavioral—threshold models of interdependency based on actions influencing actions. The social influence network theory upon which we have drawn, and the empirical work that has been conducted on this theory, represents a sustained exception to this behavioral emphasis. With it, individuals’ cognitive evaluations and assessments are brought to forefront. The theory presents a detailed theoretical position on the process of symbolic interaction, that is, “how” individuals’ cognitive orientations are affected by an interpersonal influence process, and the implications of this process unfolding in influence networks that may differ in their structure. Here, the theory is applied to open the “black box” of the group dynamics that affect cultural reception. The key implication of our analysis is that this theory may be usefully employed in investigations of the interpersonal influence process on cultural reception. A door is now opened toward an exploration of both origins and implications of particular types of influence network structures that are involved in cultural reception. These structures may take a variety of forms in cultural groups and communities, and they may have *various* implications, which may be analyzed in terms of the specified process that unfolds in them. Some structures may systematically generate a collective consensual orientation toward a cultural object, some may generate competing factions each with a different shared orientation, and others may substantially alter many, if not all, orientations without the result of a clear social organization of orientations.

Finally, the article contributes a field setting design that provides a “way” of investigating interpersonal influences on cultural reception. The design involves collecting data on group members’ pre-discussion positions on a specific issue (here, specific evaluative dimensions of a book), their post-discussion positions on the issue, and information on the influence network that is assembled by them, based on their accord of influence to themselves and other group members. Our book clubs are field-setting groups which present an opportunity to empirically investigate complex systems of interpersonal influence. The present investigation is the first field setting application of social influence network theory that applies exactly the same methods that have been employed to evaluate the theory on groups assembled under experimental conditions. Although the issue dealt with in the two settings are quite different and the production of consensus appeared far less frequently in the field setting than in the experimental setting (as one might expect), we found it remarkable that this shift of design from the laboratory to the field proved productive. This approach may be applied to a single group or, as we have demonstrated, in a multi-level analysis of individuals nested in different groups.

The formal features of the present article bolster the more general perspective that we have sought to advance in the substantive domain of investigations on cultural reception. Assemblages of readers embedded in regularly interacting groups bring their interpretations to bear on texts, and via group processes, may not only shift the interpretations of others, but also the aggregate distribution of the population of readers nested in different groups. Book clubs are a mundane, but theoretically useful, site for analyzing this temporal process of meaning making and the coordination of interpretations of cultural objects. Books clubs are a special case in a broader domain of small groups that assemble to discuss and interpret texts (sacred scriptures, contractual agreements, procedural and constitutional documents) and other culturally

conditioned objects of societies. We concur with Long (2003) that the special case of book clubs is a particularly useful site for the study of cultural reception. By permitting the survey design that we have employed, they open a window into how cultural meanings are actually negotiated by communities of individuals in naturally occurring settings.

Of course, like any window, book groups provide a limited view of the entire landscape of cultural reception. Selection effects on book club membership may be more pronounced than selection effects on other groups focused on other cultural objects. Some domains of cultural objects may be more constrained by sociodemographic status than other domains of objects. Interpersonal influences on cultural objects are not restricted to enduring regularly interacting small groups. We hope that future studies will take up alternate naturally occurring sites for the study of cultural reception in a way that allows the empirical investigation of the contribution of influence networks to cultural reception. Interpersonal influences that generate shifts of interpretations of texts may have broader implications for what readers get out of texts when discussions of specific dimensions of a text, its characters and events, which are indicators of broader latent viewpoints, are altered and feedback to affect these broader latent viewpoints. Perhaps such broader classes of hermeneutic effects are not beyond the scope of a formal level analysis.

## Appendix

The standard model of Friedkin and Johnsen's social influence network theory (Friedkin 1998, 1999; Friedkin and Johnsen 1999, 2011) is

$$y_i^{(t+1)} = (1 - w_{ii}) \sum_{j=1}^n w_{ij} y_j^{(t)} + w_{ii} y_i^{(1)}, \quad (i = 1, 2, \dots, n; t = 1, 2, \dots) \quad (1)$$

where  $y_i^{(1)}$  for each group member  $i$  is the initial position the group member on an issue, and each individual  $i$  accords influences (weights) to self and particular other members,  $0 \leq w_{ij} \leq 1$ ,

$\sum_{j=1}^n w_{ij} = 1$ , for each  $i = 1, 2, \dots, n$ . The accorded influences of  $i$  may be heterogeneous and include instances of no accorded influence, e.g., for an individual  $i$  with  $w_{ii} = 1$ , no influence is accorded to any other member, and with  $w_{ik} = 0$ , no influence is accorded to group member  $k$ .

The influence system of the group on a specific issue is described by the matrix equation

$$\mathbf{y}^{(t+1)} = \mathbf{A} \mathbf{W} \mathbf{y}^{(t)} + (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A}) \mathbf{y}^{(1)} \quad (t = 1, 2, \dots) \quad (2)$$

where  $\mathbf{A} = [a_{ij}]$  is a diagonal matrix, with  $a_{ii} = 1 - w_{ii}$  values on the main diagonal and zeros elsewhere, and  $\mathbf{I}$  is the identity matrix (with ones on the main diagonal and zeros elsewhere).

Note that  $\mathbf{A}$  is determined by group members' self-weights in  $\mathbf{W}$ , and that the influence structure  $\mathbf{W}$  is *in the process*, i.e., a cognitive structure of accorded weights.

The process of interpersonal influence, which unfolds in the influence network  $\mathbf{W}$ , may involve direct and indirect influences. The direct influences, at each time  $t$ , are described by Eqn. (1). Indirect interpersonal influences on an individual arise from the process as it unfolds over time. As the process unfolds, we have

$$\begin{aligned}
\mathbf{y}^{(2)} &= \mathbf{A}\mathbf{W}\mathbf{y}^{(1)} + (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A})\mathbf{y}^{(1)} = \mathbf{V}^{(1)}\mathbf{y}^{(1)} \\
\mathbf{y}^{(3)} &= \mathbf{A}\mathbf{W}\mathbf{y}^{(2)} + (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A})\mathbf{y}^{(1)} = \mathbf{V}^{(2)}\mathbf{y}^{(1)} , \\
&\vdots
\end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

and so on, where

$$\begin{aligned}
\mathbf{V}^{(1)} &= \mathbf{A}\mathbf{W} + (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A}) \\
\mathbf{V}^{(t+1)} &= \mathbf{A}\mathbf{W}\mathbf{V}^{(t)} + (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A}) \quad (t = 1, 2, \dots) .
\end{aligned} \tag{4}$$

If the process has an equilibrium, which may be a settled influence pattern of interpersonal disagreements, then

$$\mathbf{y}^{(\infty)} = \mathbf{A}\mathbf{W}\mathbf{y}^{(\infty)} + (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A})\mathbf{y}^{(1)} = \mathbf{V}\mathbf{y}^{(1)} ,$$

where  $\mathbf{V} \equiv \mathbf{V}^{(\infty)}$  is the limit of the above recursion (4), when such a limit exists. An analytical solution for  $\mathbf{V}$  is available when  $\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A}\mathbf{W}$  is nonsingular,

$$\mathbf{V} = (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A}\mathbf{W})^{-1} (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A}) , \tag{5}$$

The matrix  $\mathbf{V} = [v_{ij}]$  is emergent from the influence process that has unfolded in the group, based on all flows of direct and indirect interpersonal influences. Each value  $v_{ij}$  is the total (direct and indirect) influence of  $j$  on  $i$ . These values are  $0 \leq v_{ij} \leq 1$  for all  $i$  and  $j$ , and

$\sum_{j=1}^n v_{ij} = 1$  for each  $i$ . Thus, each row  $k$  of  $\mathbf{V}$  describes the distribution of relative total influences

on  $i$ , and each column  $k$  describes the total influences of  $k$ .

## References

- Anderson, Norman. H. 1981. *Foundations of Information Integration Theory*. New York: Academic Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2003. *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Aschaffenburg, Karen and Ineke Maas. 1997. "Cultural and Educational Careers: The Dynamics of Social Reproduction." *American Sociological Review* 62:573-587.
- Barthes, Roland. 1974. *S/Z*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Barton, David and Mary Hamilton. 1998. *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Barton, David, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanič. 2000. *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London, UK: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited by R. Johnson. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, translated by S. Emanuel. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press
- Bryson, Bethany. 1996. "'Anything But Heavy Metal': Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes." *American Sociological Review* 61:884-99.

- Collins, Randall. 1992. "Women and the Production of Status Cultures." Pp. 152-186 in *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, edited by M. Lamont and M. Fournier. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Curran, James, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Wollacott. 1982. "The Study of the Media." Pp. 6-25 in *Culture, Society, and the Media*, edited by T. Bennett, J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Wollacott. London, UK: Routledge.
- DeGroot, Morris. H. 1974. "Reaching a Consensus." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 69:118-121.
- Denzin, Norman K. 1978. *Sociological Methods: A Sourcebook*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- DeVault, Marjorie L. 1990. "Novel Readings: The Social Organization of Interpretation." *The American Journal of Sociology* 95:887-921.
- DiMaggio, Paul. 1987. "Classification in Art." *American Sociological Review* 52:440-455.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Forthcoming. "Cultural Networks." in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Network Analysis*, edited by John Scott and Peter Harrington. Essex, UK: Sage Publications.
- DiMaggio, Paul and Michael Useem. 1978. "Social Class and Arts Consumption." *Theory and Society* 5:141-161.
- DiMaggio, Paul and John Mohr. 1985. "Cultural Capital, Educational Attainment and Marital Selection." *The American Journal of Sociology* 90: 123 1-61.
- Ekelund, Bo G. and Mikael Börjesson. 2002. "The Shape of the Literary Career: An Analysis of Publishing Trajectories." *Poetics* 30:341-364.
- Emirbayer, Mustafa and Ann Mische. 1998. "What is Agency?" *The American Journal of Sociology* 103:962-1023.

- Emirbayer, Mustafa and Jeff Goodwin. 1994. "Network Analysis, Culture, and the Problem of Agency." *American Journal of Sociology* 99:1411.
- English, James F. 2005. *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Erickson, Bonnie H. 1996. "Culture, Class, and Connections." *American Journal of Sociology* 102:217–52.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1979. "Small Groups and Culture Creation: The Idioculture of Little League Baseball Teams." *American Sociological Review* 44: 733-745.
- Fish, Stanley. 1982. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fiske, John. 1989. *Reading the Popular*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. "What Is an Author?" Pp. 113-138 in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D. F. Bouchard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Friedkin, Noah E. 1998. *A Structural Theory of Social Influence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. "Choice Shift and Group Polarization." *American Sociological Review* 64: 856-75.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. "Norm Formation in Social Influence Networks." *Social Networks* 23:167-89.
- Friedkin, Noah E. and Eugene C. Johnsen. 1999. "Social Influence Networks and Opinion Change." *Advances in Group Processes* 16: 1-29.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. "Attitude Change, Affect Control, and Expectation States in the Formation of Influence Networks." *Advances in Group Processes* 20: 1-29.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2011. *Social Influence Network Theory: A Sociological Investigation of Small Group Dynamics*. New York: Cambridge University Press (forthcoming).
- French, John R. P., Jr. 1956. "A Formal Theory of Social Power." *The Psychological Review* 63:181-194.
- French, John R. P., Jr. and Bertram Raven. 1959. "The Bases of Social Power." Pp. 150-167 in *Studies of Social Power*, edited by D. Cartwright. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.
- Gans, Herbert J. 1999. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1977. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodheart, Adam. 2009. "The War at Home." *The New York Times*, October 25, BR26.  
Retrieved July 29, 2010 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/books/review/Goodheart-t.html>)
- Goolrick, Robert. 2009. "An Unsettled Town in an Unsettled Time." *Washington Post*, October 25. Retrieved July 29, 2010 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2009/10/23/AR2009102303599.html>)
- Griswold, Wendy. 1987. "The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies." *The American Journal of Sociology* 92: 1077-17.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. "Recent Moves in the Sociology of Literature." *Annual Review of Sociology* 19:455-467.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. *Culture and Societies in a Changing World*. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *Regionalism and the Reading Class*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Halle, David. 1996. *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Harary, Frank. 1959. "A Criterion for Unanimity in French's Theory of Social Power." Pp. 168-182 in *Studies in Social Power*, edited by D. Cartwright. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.
- Hartley, Jenny. 2001. *The Reading Group Book*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Hays, Sharon. 1994. "Structure and Agency and the Sticky Problem of Culture." *Sociological Theory* 12: 57-72.
- Hirsch, Paul M. 1972. "Processing Fads and Fashions." *The American Journal of Sociology* 77:639-659.
- IndieBound. 2009. "The Indy NEXT List October '09." September 3, 2009. Retrieved July 29, 2010 ([www.indiebound.org/files/nextlist/pdf/IndieNextList200910.pdf](http://www.indiebound.org/files/nextlist/pdf/IndieNextList200910.pdf))
- Jauss, Hans. 1982. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jhally, Sut and Justin M. Lewis. 1992. *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*. Jackson, TN: Westview Press.
- Jorgensen, Danny L. 1989. *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies*. Essex, UK: Sage Publications.
- Kaufman, Jason. 2004. "Endogenous Explanation in the Sociology of Culture." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30:335-357.

- Elihu Katz and Paul Felix Lazarsfeld. 1955. *Personal Influence: the Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Kirkus Reviews. 2009. "Jarrettsville Review" August 8. Retrieved July 29, 2010  
(<http://catalog.dclibrary.org/vufind/Record/ocn316026662/Reviews>)
- Lamont, Michèle. 1992. *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamont, Michèle and Marcel Fournier. 1993. *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamont, Michèle, John Schmalzbauer, Maureen Waller and Daniel Weber. 1996. "Cultural and Moral Boundaries in the United States: Structural Position, Geographic Location, and Lifestyle Explanations." *Poetics* 24: 31-56.
- Liebes, Tamar and Elihu Katz. 1990. *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of "Dallas."* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Lizardo, Omar. 2006. "How Cultural Tastes Shape Personal Networks." *American Sociological Review* 71:778–807.
- Long, Elizabeth. 2003. *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Machor, James L. and Phillip Goldstein. 2001. *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mark, Noah. 1998. "Birds of a Feather Sing Together." *Social Forces* 77: 453-485.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. "Culture and Competition: Homophily and Distancing Explanations for Cultural Niches." *American Sociological Review* 68:319–345.

- Martin, John Levi. 2002. "Power, Authority, and the Constraint of Belief Systems." *The American Journal of Sociology* 107: 861-904.
- McPherson, Miller. 1983. "An Ecology of Affiliation." *American Sociological Review* 48: 519–532.
- McPherson, J. Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook. 2001. "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27:415–44.
- Medhurst, Andy. 1991. "Batman, Deviance, and Camp." Pp. 149-163 in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, edited by R.E. Pearson and W. Uricchio. London, UK: Routledge.
- Mohr, John W. and Craig Rawlings. Forthcoming. "Four Ways to Measure Culture: Social Science, Hermeneutics and the Cultural Turn." In *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, edited by J.C. Alexander, R. Jacobs, and P. Smith. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Morley, David and C. Brunsdon. 1999. *The Nationwide Television Studies*. London, UK: Routledge.
- de Nooy, Wouter. 1991. "Social Networks and Classification in Literature." *Poetics* 20:507-537.
- Oatley, Keith. 1994. "A Taxonomy of the Emotions of Literary Response and a Theory of Identification in Fictional Narrative." *Poetics* 23: 53-74.
- Ohman, Richard. 1983. "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975." *Critical Inquiry* 10: 199-223.
- Osgood, Charles E., George J. Suci, and Percy Tannenbaum. 1957. *Measurement of Meaning*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Pachuki, Mark A. and Ronald L. Breiger. 2010. "Cultural Holes: Beyond Relationality in Social

- Networks and Culture." *Annual Review of Sociology* 36: 205-224.
- Peterson, Richard A. 1997. "The Rise and Fall of Highbrow Snobbery as a Status Marker." *Poetics* 25:75-92.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "Two Ways Culture is Produced." *Poetics* 28: 225-33.
- Peterson, Richard A. and Roger M. Kern. 1996. "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore." *American Sociological Review* 61:900-907.
- Pfaff, Kerry L. and Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. 1997. "Authorial Intentions in Understanding Satirical Texts." *Poetics* 25(1):45-70.
- Press, Andrea L. 1992. "The Active Viewer and the Problem of Interpretation: Reconciling Traditional and Critical Research." *Communication Yearbook* 15: 91- 106.
- Publisher's Weekly. 2009. "Jarrettsville Review." August 10. Retrieved July 29, 2010 (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/new-titles/adult-announcements/article/15300-fiction-book-reviews-8-10-2009-.html>)
- Radway Janice. 1984. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rodriguez, Jason. 2006. "Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35: 645-668.
- Schmidt, Siegfried J. 1982. *Foundations of the Empirical Science of Literature*. Hamburg, Germany: Helmut Buske.
- Schultz, Jennifer and Ronald L. Breiger. 2010. "The Strength of Weak Culture." *Poetics* 38(6):610-624.
- Sewell, William H. 1992. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation." *The American Journal of Sociology* 98:1-29.

Swidler, Anne. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51:273–286.

Tepper, Steven J. 2000. "Fiction Reading in America: Explaining the Gender Gap." *Poetics* 27: 255-275.

Vaisey, Stephen and Omar Lizardo. 2010. "Can Cultural Worldviews Influence Network Composition?" *Social Forces* 88: 1595-1618.

Wimsatt, William K. and Monroe C. Beardsley. 1946. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review* 54: 468-488.

Zajonc, Robert B. 1980. "Feeling and thinking: Preferences need no inferences." *American Psychologist* 35: 151-75.

Table 1. Mean Comparison Test of the Author's and Readers' Specific Meanings

Text Dimension	Author	Average Reader (std. dev.)	T-test (d.f.)
How funny did you find the story?	66	13.94 (17.41)	-35.13*** (137)
How sad did you find the story?	90	67.66 (24.15)	-10.87*** (137)
How true-to-life did you find the story?	66	65.11 (22.78)	-0.45 (131)
How emotionally compelling did you find the story?	90	67.50 (26.39)	-9.98*** (136)
How much did the story make you think about the time period?	100	91.66 (55.01)	-1.78 (136)
How much did the story make you think about the nature of human relationships?	90	76.02 (23.19)	-7.05*** (136)
How historically accurate do you think <i>Jarrettsville</i> is with regards to details such as language, dress, transport, lifestyle, geography, time period, etc.?	100	78.50 (18.02)	-13.71*** (131)
How historically accurate do you think <i>Jarrettsville</i> is with regards to the details of Martha and Nick's story and the characters surrounding them?	75	69.47 (21.42)	-2.95** (130)
How sympathetic were you to the character of Martha and her actions?	66	66.83 (23.07)	0.42 (136)
How sympathetic were you to the character of Nick and his actions?	66	53.27 (26.03)	-5.70*** (135)
How sympathetic were you to the character of Richard (Martha's brother) and his actions?	5	17.31 (20.44)	7.02 (135)
How sympathetic were you to the character of Mary Ann (Martha's Mother) and her actions?	10	31.14 (24.56)	9.97*** (133)
How sympathetic were you to the character of Tim and his actions?	100	84.11 (16.13)	-11.36*** (132)

(continued)

Notes. \*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 1. Continued

Text Dimension	Author	Average Reader (std. dev.)	T-test (d.f.)
In your estimation how traditionally “feminine” was Martha with regards to her needs, wants, thoughts, and actions compared to societal expectations of women in that place and of that time?	3	42.15 (22.58)	20.22*** (135)
In your estimation how traditionally “masculine” was Nick with regards to his needs, wants, thoughts, and actions compared to societal expectations men in that place and of that time?	60	62.35 (21.18)	1.28 (133)
How much did you identify with the character of Martha?	50	52.93 (27.76)	1.23 (136)
How much did you identify with the character of Nick?	50	36.66 (26.57)	-5.87*** (136)
How responsible was Martha for the failure of her and Nick’s relationship?	50	42.21 (24.04)	-3.78*** (135)
How responsible was Nick for the failure of his and Martha’s relationship?	50	73.46 (18.74)	14.60*** (135)
How responsible was Richard for the failure of Martha and Nick’s relationship?	20	65.53 (22.64)	23.53 (136)
How responsible was Mary Ann (Martha’s Mom) for the failure of Martha and Nick’s relationship?	20	37.56 (25.39)	8.06*** (135)
How important were the competing sympathies for the Confederacy and the Union in Maryland after the Civil War in the dissolution of Martha and Nick’s relationship?	90	66.50 (25.62)	-10.74*** (136)
How important was racism, slavery, and rumors of interracial sex in the dissolution of Martha and Nick’s relationship?	100	75.58 (19.21)	-14.82*** (135)
How important were the class differences between Martha and Nick’s families in the dissolution of their relationship?	10	47.35 (24.57)	17.73*** (135)
Did Martha have a physical/sexual relationship with Tim during the story?	10	10.85 (19.32)	0.51 (134)
Given what happened to him, how justified was Nick in leaving for Amish country after having been beaten by Richard and his militia?	80	64.25 (25.50)	-7.20*** (135)
Given what happened to her, how justified was Martha in shooting Nick after he left her pregnant and did not show himself at their wedding?	80	35.69 (33.16)	-15.52*** (134)
How much would you call <i>Jarrettsville</i> a love story?	70	70.88 (20.38)	0.50 (135)
From a scale of “slow and methodical” to “entirely action packed” how would you describe the pacing of <i>Jarrettsville</i> ?	66	56.03 (19.67)	-5.96*** (137)

Notes. \*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 2. Sociodemographic Associations with Group Members' Pre-Discussion General Evaluations of *Jarrettsville*.

<b>Fixed Effects</b>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	68.087*** (4.247)	71.965*** (15.310)	91.987*** (17.227)
Age		0.017 (0.266)	0.378 (0.346)
Male		48.163* (23.245)	66.115** (25.401)
Grad		-4.541 (15.025)	-0.097 (15.046)
Age*Grad		-0.017 (0.257)	-0.065 (0.255)
Male*Age		-1.036* (0.407)	-1.108** (0.398)
Male*Grad		2.911 (8.157)	5.618 (8.125)
Group Mean Age			-.5570 (0.381)
Male Group			-16.781 (13.610)
Group Prop. Grad			-19.751† (11.704)
<b>Random Effects</b>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	276.343* (110.473)	158.259* (77.929)	128.783* (67.696)
Residual	350.097* (45.137)	359.696* (47.356)	356.173* (46.891)
<b>Model Fit</b>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Deviance	1229.038	1204.956	1184.800
AIC	1235.038	1222.955	1208.800
BIC	1242.820	1249.301	1243.927

Notes. † p < 0.10 \* p < 0.05 \*\* p < 0.01 \*\*\* p < 0.001; 18 groups; 138 group members

Table 3. Contributions of Groups' Influence Systems to Post-Discussion General Evaluations of *Jarrettsville*.

<b>Fixed Effects</b>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Intercept	62.332*** (5.093)	86.408*** (21.894)	4.831 (10.629)	-5.519 (3.474)	-15.489* (6.157)
Age		0.497 (0.373)	0.156 (0.171)		
Male		53.389† (28.515)	-3.003 (13.243)		
Grad		4.445 (14.952)	1.980 (6.820)		
Age*Grad		-0.161 (0.252)	-0.077 (0.115)		
Male*Age		-1.138* (0.453)	-0.213 (0.211)		
Male*Grad		8.821 (8.180)	5.158 (3.734)		
Pre-Evaluations			0.887*** (0.041)	0.095 (0.261)	
V*(Pre-Eval)				0.891** (0.282)	0.959*** (0.045)
Grp Mean Age		-0.649 (0.455)	-0.143 (0.208)		
Male Group		-5.119 (14.84)	10.239 (6.792)		
Grp Prop. Grad		-21.370 (15.214)	-4.516 (6.949)		
Grp Mean V*(Pre-Eval)					0.173† (0.098)
<b>Random Effects</b>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Intercept	419.360* (159.045)	277.100* (122.439)	56.928* (25.614)	38.644* (16.911)	33.621* (14.819)
Residual	329.419* (43.396)	331.032* (44.613)	68.882* (9.338)	68.149* (9.066)	67.539* (8.904)
<b>Model Fit</b>	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Deviance	1184.037	1140.347	950.667	967.729	966.783
AIC	1190.037	1164.347	976.667	977.729	976.783
BIC	1198.708	1199.032	1014.242	992.180	991.235

Notes. † p < 0.10 \* p < 0.05 \*\* p < 0.01 \*\*\* p < 0.001; 18 groups; 133 group members