

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

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## Abstract

Investigations of the reception of textual objects have alternately emphasized demographically conditioned patterns of evaluation and taste, or the agency of viewers, readers, and listeners in constructing their own cultural interpretations. 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 into readers' interpretations of a novel. Our investigation focuses on a set of book clubs for which we collected data 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 the effects of structure and group dynamics on cultural reception in a single analytic framework.

## Keywords

culture, cultural reception, social networks, interpersonal influences

In sociology there has been an interest in the reception of cultural products (see Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1987; Griswold 1987; Long 2003). These products take many forms. Analysis has focused on works of art and media (e.g., books, musical compositions, paintings, photographs, films, and architectural objects); however, the potential domain of analysis may include other cultural objects (e.g., religious scriptures, war memorials, festivals, holidays, institutions, or practices). Because 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 (Griswold 2008; Long 2003).

We advance an empirical and formal analysis of the cultural reception of texts that

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simultaneously attends to the macro-level effects of demographically conditioned patterns of evaluation and interpretation, the micro-level effects of readers' agency in constructing their own cognitive orientations and evaluations of cultural texts, and the meso-level effects of a 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 toward objects (here, a novel), we concentrate our analysis of cultural reception on the process of interpersonal influence in which individuals may display and debate their viewpoints on a text and come away from discussions with modified or reinforced viewpoints on the text's quality and meaning. Such study groups arise in the heavily institutionalized arenas of religion and law, and also occur more generally as informal social assemblages oriented around shared cultural interests or tastes. We open the black box of specific group dynamics that may operate to shape cultural meanings via interpersonal influence processes.

Our settings are book clubs that regularly meet to discuss published works of fiction. We presented club members with a new work of fiction—*Jarrettsville*—to investigate factors affecting cultural reception. This design required agreements with the book's author, publisher, and book clubs. The book's author provided a framework for specific dimensions of her manuscript and her intended meanings for the text on these dimensions. The publisher agreed to serve as a site of study throughout the book's developmental editing, packaging, marketing, and promotion. Book club members agreed to provide data bearing on the social structure of their groups, their evaluations and interpretations of the book before and after discussion, and group dynamics that occurred within their discussions of the text.

Thus, rather than strictly emphasizing structural patterns of taste or readers' agency in creating their own subjective meanings for

cultural texts, both of which have been subjects of continued interest in the literature on cultural reception, we additionally consider and highlight contributions to the reception of a text based on the social construction of meaning and evaluation allowed by interpersonal influences. Our analytic emphasis is on the dynamic space in which cultural reception takes place—that is, individual differences in reception that arise within the context of structural effects and the process by which readers influence each other in the practice of localized meaning-making. To paraphrase Geertz (1977), readers are not fully trapped in an a priori web of their own spinning; instead they spin and re-spin webs of meaning 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 within book clubs generated small and large changes in individuals' orientation toward the book on evaluative and interpretive dimensions, as well as aggregate group-level shifts in orientation. In the following section, we flesh out three perspectives—structure, agency, and interpersonal influence—that have a potentially important bearing on analysis of readers' reception of the text and our related hypotheses. These perspectives frame our multilevel 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 interpersonal influences of other individuals' responses to the text.

## PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL RECEPTION

Investigations of the reception of textual objects have alternately emphasized demographically

conditioned patterns of evaluation and taste, or the agency of viewers, readers, and listeners in constructing their own heterogeneous interpretations. 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; Sewell 1992; Swidler 1986). Yet as Hays (1994) notes, the discord between structurally centered and agentic-centered approaches to cultural analysis relies on 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. Structural conditions and reader agency may be involved simultaneously in 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" (Mark 1998, 2003; McPherson 1983) of interpretation and understanding.

In this section, we develop the background for three hypotheses on cultural reception. The first focuses on demographic effects on readers' evaluations and taste. The second focuses on readers' active, unconstrained reading practices. Contained within this hypothesis are debates about the role of the author and her intentions as constraints on the interpretive process of reading. The third focuses on interpersonal influences occurring within localized discussions of cultural objects. These hypotheses define the

framework of a comprehensive perspective on cultural reception that encourages simultaneous attention to all three hypotheses.

### *Readers' Sociodemographic Positions*

The intersection of cultural taste and social-economic status is 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 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 general agreement that social status affects cultural taste (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1993) and that cultural taste affects social statuses (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Lizardo 2006; Schultz and Breiger 2010; Vaisey and Lizardo 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 reception practices (Bryson 1996), and express their status through omnivorous tastes (Peterson 1997; Peterson and Kern 1996). With regard to fiction reading, readers express regional preferences for different authors, and the very act of reading for pleasure can be traced along sociodemographic 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 researcher-constructed focus groups, finds variation in interpretations of cultural objects within and between demographically homogenous communities. For example, white listeners of rap music use "color-blind ideology" to de-racialize lyrics that emphasize racial inequality (Rodriquez 2006),

and white and black viewers read *The Cosby Show* differently (Jhally and Lewis 1992). 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). Griswold (1987) finds that reviewers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the West Indies have different interpretations on key dimensions of a text's meaning, as do Liebes and Katz (1990) in a study of viewers belonging to different status groups within Israel, the United States, 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. 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 affect interpretations of texts themselves.

We allow that readers' social positions have some influence on what they bring into and draw out of texts. Such effects depend on the text and the setting of its readers. When cultural reception is filtered by small groups, the demographic compositions of the groups may be constrained by homophily, that is, the formation of contact networks among persons with the same demographic statuses on particular dimensions (see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Structural effects on reception may appear as group-level differences (e.g., differences between groups that are predominately male or female in their composition) and, to the extent that within-group differences on demographic variables exist (e.g., within groups whose members vary in age), as effects on individual-level differences in reception. When small groups dealing with a particular text predominately attract members with homogeneous demographic status on particular dimensions (e.g.,

white, college educated, and high-income individuals, as is the case with our groups), homogenous demographic statuses may affect the baseline mean response to the text but not explain any between- or within-group variation in cultural response. When a text presents issues that involve particular demographic statuses (e.g., gender and race issues, as is the case with *Jarrettsville*), sociodemographic differences within or between groups, which affect individuals' perspectives on the issues, may be more explanatory of differences in reception than would group members' variation on social dimensions that are not emphasized in the text. With *Jarrettsville*, book club readers are drawn into issues related to gender and race, and they are embedded in groups that are markedly homophilous and undifferentiated on dimensions of education, income, and race.<sup>2</sup>

We thus hypothesize that structural effects will be concentrated on between-group and within-group effects related to gender and age (generational) status for which there exists relevant variation. 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, which have not been subject to potential effects of interpersonal influences during book club discussions. Hypothesis 1 thus pertains to the first stage of the temporal process of reception, consisting of readers' interpretations and evaluations of the text prior to group discussions. For cases in which demographically similar readers exhibit substantial variations in their interpretations and evaluations of the text, the agency perspective on cultural reception, fleshed out in the next subsection, becomes crucial. These differences in initial reception also set the stage for

potential effects of interpersonal influence networks in small groups, which may shift evaluations and interpretations at the individual or group level.

### *Readers' Agency*

An author's intentions for interpretation of a text, as conveyed through the text itself, may present additional constraints on readers' receptions. 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, which may be the case with "readers having identical sociological characteristics, but who apply different conventions to their reading, [and who] might come up with different communicates from the same texts" (Griswold 1993:459). With respect to the latter constraint, texts may be more or less explicit in conveying an author's intended meanings on how particular events, characters, and the text as a whole should be interpreted. But even with an explicit display of an author's intentions in the text, individual readers may evaluate the text differently. Here, we focus on the debate in the literature over 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 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 may deviate from the intentions of their creators and producers has been a topic of theoretical discussion in literary theory, cultural and media studies, and sociology (Machor and Goldstein 2001; Press 1992). Approaches oriented toward audiences and their reception practices emerged as interventions to the pathologization of readers in

earlier Marxist literary theory paradigms, which treated differential readings as simply misreadings and audiences as passive, cultural dopes (Fiske 1989). As Peterson (2000:230) notes of the study of mediated culture in U.S. sociology, "it may prove useful to focus on the process by which people go about creating patterns of culture in concrete situations" through a "reception process in which people actively select and reinterpret symbols to produce a culture for themselves."

In the strongest articulation of readers' freedom from an author's encoded constraints, poststructuralist and deconstructionist literary theorists have argued for the wholesale dismissal of authors' intentions in evaluating the meanings of texts. Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946) 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" (1946:470). Foucault (1979:159), who also critiques an over reliance on authors' intentions, deconstructs the author into a mere social function, an "ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning." Barthes (1974:148) 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." 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 (1993:465) 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 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. . . . [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).

Griswold is not alone in this middle-ground position that allows for the potential effects of authors’ intentions. Schmidt (1982) argues that a third communicate point exists between authors and readers in which authors’ intentions and readers’ experiences both influence interpretation, and Oatley (1994:53) 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. These unified experiences may be highly idiosyncratic. In this middle-ground viewpoint, one that we adopt for testing, authors’ intentions and the experiences and identities that readers bring to texts may both have a role in readers’ interpretative processes 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, absent 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 an important domain of imputation and a negotiated constraint for readers of a text, especially in cases where the author is viewed as an important source of

meaning worthy of apprehension (Pfaff and Gibbs 1997).<sup>3</sup>

With these 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 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 readers’ heterogeneous interpretations and evaluations are strongly held beliefs about the text or merely uncertain viewpoints about its meaning, and if these individual responses might undergo future modifications through interpersonal influences. The clear implication, however, is that interpersonal disagreements will be nested in commonalities (i.e., readers are unlikely to enter into 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 the author’s intentions that, via the text, may or may not have strongly constrained 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, depart not only from the author’s general viewpoint on the merits of the text, but also from the author’s intentions for how characters and events in the text should be interpreted.

Note that, again, we are dealing with readers' *pre-discussion* interpretations and evaluations of *Jarrettsville*. Our measures of the author's general viewpoints and specific intentions are privately declared constants that may be manifested in the text itself. Such declarations do not provide a variable that can be neatly folded into our analysis of the variation in 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 mean response to the text. However, with a modest loss of analytic elegance, we address this hypothesis with a separate analysis of the extent to which 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 we present this evidence as part of the prelude to our central interest—interpersonal influences on reception.

### *Interpersonal Influences on Reception*

Kaufman (2004:339) 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.” 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 Ivanič 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 the

character and content of cultural works. In her study of book groups, Long (2003) finds that these groups do in fact develop their own local evaluative standards for discussing the quality and content of books. Readers in book clubs discuss texts in a “playful” manner and are not strongly motivated to construct 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 be influenced and to influence each other's understandings of texts through conversation:

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. (Long 2003:187)

While readers come to discussions with individual interpretations of books, Long (2003:144) argues that limiting analysis to these pre-discussion opinions or the recitation of them within groups “almost entirely misses the point of why participants are there at all.” As Long notes, an ultimate consensus in opinions, while possible, is not a requirement in the informal book group setting. Some modification of opinion, among some individuals involved in the discussions, is far from uncommon, however, and often signals an enjoyable book club experience.

The existence of interpersonal influences, in which individuals' responses are affected by others' responses, is a central postulate 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, and flexibility—that typically generates shifts of opinion among some, if not all, individuals involved in the discussion. This leads to our third hypothesis:

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

With interpersonal influences affecting *post-discussion* responses, individual responses become interdependent social constructions. 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 maintain some group members' pre-discussion viewpoints and alter the viewpoints of others. Depending on the influence network, structural effects on readers' pre-discussion responses may be disrupted and reorganized. 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 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 toward objects (here, a novel) and the implications of such influences unfolding in a network. In broad stroke, our approach dovetails with the increased application of social network constructs to cultural questions (see DiMaggio forthcoming; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Pachuki and Breiger 2010) and the formal measurement of culture (for a review, see Mohr and Rawlings forthcoming). We ground our network analysis on

a formal theory of *how* individuals cognitively integrate heterogeneous interpretations of objects.

## FORMAL FRAMEWORK OF THE ANALYSIS

Book club members are nested in groups. Each member agreed to not discuss the book with others while reading *Jarrettsville* and to provide evaluations of the text immediately prior to their group discussion. Book club discussions may or may not have modified members' initial interpretations and evaluations, which we measured by administering a post-discussion survey for each member. In this framework, group discussion may be treated as a condition with a hypothesized main effect on individuals' evaluations, that is, as an effect manifested by a significant difference in the means of the pre- and post-discussion distributions of interpretations and evaluations. As we will show, such main effects are evident in these data. Our analysis, however, attends to the dynamics that occurred *within* each group. Specifically, we treat each group as an influence system and open up the construct of "group discussion" by treating it as a structured process in which group members may (1) enter discussion with different viewpoints on *Jarrettsville*, (2) vary in how much weight they accord to other group members' viewpoints, and (3) emerge with post-discussion viewpoints on *Jarrettsville* that have been affected by an influence process unfolding in a structured network of accorded influences. The approach does not rely on an a priori assumption that any (or all) of the members were influenced, nor does it assume that group consensus must result from the influence process.

We consider effects of sociodemographic variables and group dynamics on within- and between-group variations in response within a multilevel modeling framework. We analyze each group's influence system as a source of the modification (if any) of each member's interpretations and evaluations of the text. We

formalize the predicted contribution of each group’s influence system to each member’s post-discussion response as a multiplicative construct  $\mathbf{V}\mathbf{y}^{(1)}$  in which  $\mathbf{V} = [v_{ij}]$  is the  $n \times n$  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, that is, a process-emergent collective construct for each book group, and  $\mathbf{y}^{(1)} = [y_i^{(1)}]$  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 post-discussion response 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 group, which is the predicted mean post-discussion response of a group’s members based on the group’s influence system. We incorporate both group dynamics variables into the multilevel explanation of the reception of *Jarrettsville*. These variables capture the deduced implications of the specified cognitive process of information integration that unfolds within a network of accorded influences. To see the “how” of this process and the origins of the group matrix of total interpersonal influences  $\mathbf{V}$ , we present a skeleton overview of the social influence network theory that generates  $\mathbf{V}$  and detail this theory in the online supplement (<http://asr.sagepub.com/supplemental>).

Our formalization of the contribution of group dynamics 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 with experimental and field studies (Friedkin 1999, 2001; Friedkin and Johnsen 2011). The model is premised on a social cognition mechanism of information integration in which the evaluative position (i.e., attitude toward an object) of

each group member is temporally formed in a process of iterated weighted averaging. Weights involved in the mechanism are cognitive constructs, that is, the cognitively accorded relative influences of each group member to themselves and self-selected others. These weights may include instances of no (zero) accorded influence to particular others. For each member of a group, the discrete time interpersonal influence mechanism is

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

$$(i = 1, 2, \dots, n; t = 1, 2, \dots)$$

from which the collection of accorded weights of all group members constitutes a network of direct influences. This influence network may be represented by an  $n \times n$  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 influence network  $\mathbf{W}$  is in the process of the specified “cognitive algebra” of the individual’s (“within the skin”) mechanism of information integration (Anderson 1981). Individuals’ 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 initial position. The weight each individual accords to others  $(1 - w_{ii} = \sum_{j \neq i}^n w_{ij})$  is distributed by the indi-

vidual to others. With  $\mathbf{W}$  and group members’ pre-discussion evaluations, the model generates a prediction of the evolution of group members’ orientations. During the unfolding process, each individual is located in a potentially changing landscape of evaluative positions.

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

$$y_i^{(\infty)} = (1 - w_{ii}) \sum_{j=1}^n w_{ij}y_j^{(\infty)} + w_{ii}y_i^{(1)},$$

$$= \sum_{j=1}^n v_{ij}y_j^{(1)}, (i = 1, 2, \dots, n)$$

and the system of these equations is

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{y}^{(\infty)} &= \mathbf{A}\mathbf{W}\mathbf{y}^{(\infty)} + (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A})\mathbf{y}^{(1)} \\ &= \mathbf{V}\mathbf{y}^{(1)} \end{aligned}$$

where  $\mathbf{A} = [a_{ij}]$  is a diagonal matrix with the values  $a_{ii} = 1 - w_{ii}$ ,  $i = 1, 2, \dots, n$ , on the main diagonal.<sup>4</sup> The matrix  $\mathbf{V} = (\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A}\mathbf{W})^{-1}(\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{A})$  is the emergent resultant of the influence process unfolding over time among members of the group.<sup>5</sup> Because  $\mathbf{V}$  has  $0 \leq v_{ij} \leq 1$  for all  $i$  and  $j$ , and  $\sum_{j=1}^n v_{ij} = 1$  for all  $i$ , each  $v_{ij}$  describes

the relative total influence of each group member  $j$ 's initial position in determining the content of each group member  $i$ 's equilibrium position. The online supplement details the foundations of this formalization and contains notes on its present application. While the underlying formal apparatus is nontrivial, operationalization of the model is not difficult when there is access to each group member's pre-discussion positions,  $\mathbf{y}^{(1)}$ , and the weights,  $\mathbf{W}$ , they accord to each group member on the issue. As described below, we obtained both measures from the book clubs, in addition to members' post-discussion positions.

## DATA AND METHODS

*Jarrettsville* is a 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 simmering tensions between Northern and Southern sympathizers in the town, and the effects of those tensions on the novel's two central characters, 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 eyewitnesses 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. *Jarrettsville* received positive reviews in the two major within-industry trade publications, *Publishers Weekly* (2009) and *Kirkus Reviews* (2009), and was selected by the American Booksellers Association as a fall 2009 title to watch for (IndieBound 2009).

The novel was reviewed upon release in Sunday editions of the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* (Goodheart 2009; Goolrick 2009). The *Times* review was strongly negative and according to Counterpoint CEO Charlie Winton, "really punctured the buzz" that had built for the novel (personal interview with Winton, March 3, 2009). To date, *Jarrettsville* is not a bestseller but it did out-sell its initial expectations. The book was awarded the Shaara Prize for Civil War fiction and was recognized again by the American Booksellers Association, which chose it as one of 10 recommendations for book groups in the summer 2010 season.

## Data

The analysis is based on data collected from 18 naturally occurring book groups in the United States between October 2009 and June 2010.<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 the time of study, groups had been meeting for between less than one year and more than 15 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 groups were a convenience sample found through two-step ties (i.e., friend-of-friend or friend-of-familial tie) of the first author, four groups were recommended by early study participants, and five groups were recommended by bookstore employees or found through public records. To minimize effects of researcher intervention in our naturally occurring field settings, the first author informed

group members before participation that we had no personal or financial relationship with the author or publisher of *Jarrettsville*, and that their natural, *in situ* practices within their groups was the primary focus of study for this portion of data collection.

Offers of reciprocity were an important factor in securing groups' participation (Jorgensen 1989). Copies of *Jarrettsville* were provided to the book groups, freeing them from a financial cost for participation. The first author also offered to answer questions and share key documents and stories about the writing and publishing of *Jarrettsville* during post-participation debriefings with the groups. All of the groups readily accepted this offer and expressed great interest in getting "behind the scenes" of a book they had read, learning about the author, her process, and her intentions—information they are quite interested in but usually do not have access to.<sup>7</sup>

### *Pre- and Post-discussion Design*

Data were collected through surveys, audio recordings of group discussions, and field notes from club meetings, allowing for methodological triangulation of findings (Denzin 1978).<sup>8</sup> 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. These surveys include pre- and post-discussion social influence questionnaires, with which we collected data on individuals' accorded influences, and pre- and post-discussion surveys, with which we collected data on their demographic characteristics, reading habits, and impressions of *Jarrettsville* on 57 dimensions. These dimensions include members' overall evaluations of the text and a battery of questions on the novel's historical accuracy, pacing, genre, alternative climatic scenes, and overall structure. Respondents also recorded their interpretations of *Jarrettsville*'s major characters and their actions, as well as their interpretations of which factors encoded in the novel by Nixon were most important to

the dissolution of the relationship between the protagonists.<sup>9</sup> The pre- and post-discussion survey design allows measures of individual position changes on these various dimensions. Nixon also completed our survey, which we adapted to record her intentions on various dimensions of the text, the definition of which she helped to frame for the survey design.

### *Measures*

*General evaluative measures.* Before and after the discussion, individuals provided global evaluations of the book on four dimensions, each scaled 1 to 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 .929 and .930, respectively. The summated measures capture readers' general reception of (i.e., attitudinal orientation toward) the cultural object.

Our employment of this general measure does not imply that book club discussions were simply a give-and-take on whether the book was bad or good. Specific dimensions of evaluation and sense-making defined the substantive content of the discussions, although discussions regularly included readers' general evaluative statements about the text. While the book clubs' discussions varied in their emphasis on particular features of the book, as we will show, a small subset of specific evaluative and interpretive dimensions is strongly associated with the measure of the general evaluation of the book on a bad–good continuum. Readers' discussions tended to focus 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. We have come close to adopting the position that detailed discussions of the book are framed, in the minds of 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>10</sup>

*Sociodemographic measures.* Sociodemographic measures include age, gender, and education. Although we measure race, the vast majority of book club members are white (96 percent), as was the case with Long's (2003) study. We dropped income as a variable: its distribution is skewed with 73 percent of members reporting incomes greater than \$80,000. Nonresponses on income substantially lower the number of cases available for analysis (from 139 to 107 cases), and in analyses conducted with this variable included, it had no detected main or interaction effects. Readers' ages range from 26 to 90 years, with nearly even distribution in this range. Gender distribution is 38 percent male. Readers' education level is skewed: 54 percent report having an advanced degree, 41 percent had a college degree, and the remainder had either some college or a high school diploma. We treat this variable as a dummy variable with the indicator being an advanced degree. We include individual-level interactions among the three variables (i.e., age–education, age–gender, and gender–education). The included group-level variables are a 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 percent of readers are located in all female

groups, 36 percent in all male groups, and the remainder in markedly disproportionate female groups). We also considered including a group-level variable indicating book groups' regional location (i.e., West Coast, North East, or South East), but we detected no regional effects and thus eliminated this variable from the analysis.<sup>11</sup> With the available data, we detected only a small set of significant effects of exogenous variables on book club members' responses. The dataset is not large and, in the context of a multilevel modeling framework, 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. 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 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 frequently depend on which book is under discussion.<sup>12</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 [South] Africa, Laura went 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>13</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 that 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*." Book club members filled out this form in two steps. In the first step, respondents were asked to allocate 100 points in any way between two response categories; one category represented the extent to which their interpretations and evaluations of *Jarrettsville* were influenced by the discussion, the other represented the extent to which their interpretations and evaluations were not influenced by the discussion. The individual point allocations to the latter response category is our measure of the main diagonal values of  $\mathbf{W}$ , that is,  $w_{11}, w_{22}, \dots, w_{nn}$ , 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,  $w_{ii} + \sum_{j \neq i} w_{ij} = 1$ . 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 on their post-discussion interpretations and evaluations of the book. In the second step of the post-discussion social influence survey, respondents filled out the names of the other book group members and distributed the points allocated to the first response category among them. The individual allocations are the basis of our measure of the off-diagonal values of  $\mathbf{W}$ .

This measurement model of  $\mathbf{W}$ , the matrix of group members' accorded influences, has been employed by Friedkin (1999) and Friedkin and Johnsen (1999) in their studies of groups assembled under experimental designs. An assessment of the measurement approach appears in Friedkin and Johnsen (2011), where 450 issue-specific influence networks are examined. Available evidence suggests that group members' formations of issue-specific influence networks are subject to numerous conditions and are often 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, and researchers must obtain some measure of the relative weights of particular contacts and non-contacts as well as a measure of potentially heterogeneous self-weights. 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. As the implications of dealing with influence network structures are fleshed out, measurement models of these structures will surely become an increasing focus of attention and refinement.

## FINDINGS

Readers' mean general evaluations of *Jarrettsville* were favorable before and after group discussion, 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, book clubs' discussions were associated with a decline of the mean favorable evaluation ( $t = 7.3$ ,  $df = 135$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed paired  $t$ -test). In the distribution of individual-level changes of evaluation, 66.2 percent of individuals modified their evaluations toward a more negative position, 22.8 percent shifted to a more positive position, and 11.0 percent were unmoved. Shifts toward more positive positions were, with one exception, modest in magnitude, and shifts toward more negative positions on the text were more often dramatic.

As defined in the 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:

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 backstory 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 readers' pre-discussion general evaluations of the book on the above four specific evaluative dimensions accounts for 44.3 percent of the variance ( $n = 137$ ,  $F(4, 132) = 28.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). With the addition of 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 readers' pre-discussion general evaluations of the book on the six specific evaluative dimensions accounts for 74.0 percent of the variance ( $n = 136$ ,  $F(6, 129) = 65.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Although the average reader had a favorable general evaluation of the text, these specific dimensions, along with other evaluative dimensions, are reflected in readers' pre-discussion general evaluations and entered into their discussions of the book. One could argue that a reader's specific evaluations of these issues were the basis for a general evaluation of the book, or the reverse, that is, a reader's 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 changes

in readers' orientations to the text in terms of their general evaluative positions. The significant shift in 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 consideration of the sociodemographic variables and authorial intentions that may have shaped readers' pre-discussion positions. We then consider contributions of the groups' influence networks, and the influence process that unfolded in them, for members' post-discussion positions on the text.

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

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

Interestingly, we found (as reported earlier) that particular compositional dimensions of the text appear as important components of readers' general evaluations. Although an author could have immediate self-deprecating regrets regarding a text's composition, it is not surprising that *Jarrettsville's* author had a generally positive appraisal of the book. On a scale of 1 to 100, the author gave the components of the global scale the maximum values (i.e., 100). This self-scoring reflects the author's solid commitment to the text (i.e., no regrets). Moreover, the author's intentions for her more specific compositional decisions are also 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 (i.e., more negative) position.

In addition, the text involves sub-objects (i.e., particular characters and events) with an author-designed meaning and interpretation. 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 viewpoint is that class differences were not (i.e., were not intended to be) particularly important (10). On the dimension of “How sympathetic were you to the character of Richard (Martha’s brother) and his actions?” the author did not intend for Richard to be a sympathetic character (5). Table 1 assesses whether readers’ mean pre-discussion interpretations on 29 specific dimensions significantly differ from the author’s intentions for the text. Results show that the average reader’s interpretation of the text significantly departs from the author’s intended meaning on 22 of the 29 dimensions. Most differences are significant at the  $p < .001$  level. Clearly, readers’ ability to “take away” things from a text that an author did not intend to “put in” to it is quite prevalent, and we see strong evidence of reader agency on many dimensions of the text.

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 significant differences among the means of groups’ pre-discussion general evaluations of *Jarrettsville*. Table 2 presents findings of a multilevel linear regression of readers’ pre-discussion general evaluations on their individual- and group-level sociodemographic characteristics. The baseline Model 1 indicates significant within- and between-group variances of pre-discussion evaluations (i.e., the random effects). Model 2 introduces individual-level sociodemographic variables, including three interactions, and Model 3 introduces group-level sociodemographic variables. Age, education, and gender have significant effects at the individual and group levels. At the individual

level, the significant male–age interaction effect indicates that young males have a more favorable evaluation of the book than do 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. With this structural account, we see a substantial reduction of the between-group variance of evaluations (compare the intercept random effects of Models 1 and 3). Individual differences on sociodemographic variables appear to be the main source of reduction in between-group variance of response. Contextual group-level variables enter more modestly into the account of group-level variance. Within-group variance remains largely unexplained by these sociodemographic variables (compare the residual random effects). In other words, groups’ sociodemographic composition contributes to the explanation of differences of mean responses among the groups but does not explain the substantial within-group differences of pre-discussion viewpoints.

### *Interpersonal Influences on Readers’ Post-discussion Evaluations*

We now examine the contribution of group dynamics that occurred in the reading groups. Individuals enter into their interpersonal interactions on the text with heterogeneous viewpoints. The book club discussions are not predicated on a goal of reaching consensus, but discussion of the text, including overall evaluations and interpretive discussions of elements of its meaning, may trigger interpersonal influences. While these influences did not generate consensus in any of the groups, within-group discussions did generate noteworthy shifts in individual positions on the book, shifts in group-level means, and significant differences (noted earlier) in pre- and post-discussion distributions of evaluative orientations. The challenge taken up by social

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

Text Dimension	Average		
	Author	Reader (SD)	T-test ( <i>df</i> )
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)	-.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)	.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)
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 of 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)	.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)	.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)

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests).

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

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Fixed Effects			
Intercept	68.087*** (4.247)	71.965*** (15.310)	91.987*** (17.227)
Age		.017 (.266)	.378 (.346)
Male		48.163* (23.245)	66.115** (25.401)
Grad		-4.541 (15.025)	-.097 (15.046)
Age x Grad		-.017 (.257)	-.065 (.255)
Male x Age		-1.036* (.407)	-1.108** (.398)
Male x Grad		2.911 (8.157)	5.618 (8.125)
Group Mean Age			-.5570 (.381)
Male Group			-16.781 (13.610)
Group Prop. Grad			-19.751† (11.704)
Random Effects			
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)
Model Fit			
Deviance	1229.038	1204.956	1184.800
AIC	1235.038	1222.955	1208.800
BIC	1242.820	1249.301	1243.927

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

† $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests); 18 groups; 138 group members; multilevel mixed-effects linear regression (Stata 10).

influence network theory is an explanation of the *influenced* pattern of post-discussion interpersonal disagreements.

Table 3 presents findings of a multilevel linear regression of readers' post-discussion general evaluations. The baseline Model 1 indicates significant within- and between-group variances of post-discussion evaluations (i.e., the random effects). Model 2 introduces the same suite of variables involved in Model 3 of Table 2. A significant male-age interaction effect also appears here. As in the analysis of the pre-discussion evaluation, we obtain a substantial reduction of between-group variance of evaluations with

this structural account, and within-group variance remains largely unexplained by sociodemographic variables.

Model 3 of Table 3 introduces readers' pre-discussion evaluations as an individual-level variable. Structural effects of age and gender disappear under this control; pre-discussion evaluations mediate all structural effects. Controlling for individuals' pre-discussion evaluations markedly reduces within- and between-group variances (compare random effects of Model 3 with those of Models 1 and 2). However, the pre-discussion variable does not and cannot account for evaluative changes that arose from the discussions, mostly in the

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

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<b>Fixed Effects</b>					
Intercept	62.332*** (5.093)	86.408*** (21.894)	4.831 (10.629)	-5.519 (3.474)	-15.489* (6.157)
Age		.497 (.373)	.156 (.171)		
Male		53.389† (28.515)	-3.003 (13.243)		
Grad		4.445 (14.952)	1.980 (6.820)		
Age x Grad		-.161 (.252)	-.077 (.115)		
Male x Age		-1.138* (.453)	-.213 (.211)		
Male x Grad		8.821 (8.180)	5.158 (3.734)		
Pre-evaluations			.887*** (.041)	.095 (.261)	
V x (Pre-eval)				.891** (.282)	.959*** (.045)
Group Mean Age		-.649 (.455)	-.143 (.20)		
Male Group		-5.119 (14.84)	1.239 (6.792)		
Group Prop. Grad		-21.370 (15.214)	-4.516 (6.949)		
Group Mean V x (Pre-eval)					.173† (.098)
<b>Random Effects</b>					
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>					
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

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

† $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests); 18 groups; 133 group members; multilevel mixed-effects linear regression (Stata 10).

direction of more negative viewpoints on the text.

Influence network theory generates a prediction of each member's post-discussion evaluation based on other group members' pre-discussion evaluations, the accorded influences that define the group's influence network, and the flows of influence (direct and indirect) in the network. Because the theory allows for individuals who are uninfluenced by others, the model's predicted post-discussion evaluations are expected to capture

all instances of no influence and contribute to the explanation of the evaluative changes that occurred in the groups. Model 4 is trimmed of structural variables, retains the control for readers' pre-discussion evaluations, and introduces the influence system account of individuals' post-discussion evaluations. The pre-discussion evaluations' nonsignificance in Model 4 indicates that the predicted post-discussion evaluations capture instances of individual-level continuity in pre- and post-discussion evaluations. Controlling for

pre-discussion responses, the significant effect of the influence variable indicates that it contributes an explanation of the magnitude and direction of the evaluative changes that occurred in the groups.

Model 5 of Table 3 is strictly constructed on the basis of the two influence system constructs. The influence system's predicted group-level means of post-discussion evaluations are introduced as part of the account of between-group variation in post-discussion evaluations. All sociodemographic effects on individuals' evaluations are reflected in their pre-discussion evaluations. Endogenous interpersonal influences involved in group discussion determine the occurrence of any changes in evaluation. Thus, Models 2, 3, and 4 are subsumed by Model 5. The influence system constructs provide a *sufficient* explanation of between- and within-group variance of post-discussion evaluations (compare the random effects of Model 1 and Model 5). Moreover, the influence system constructs are a *necessary* part of the explanation of individual-level changes of evaluation that occurred in book clubs' discussions of *Jarrettsville*.

Thus, both macro-structural effects and localized interpersonal influence processes are captured 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 coordinated depends on the influence system, which is created through the array of members' initial positions on an issue and the influence network that they themselves construct as they discuss the issue. Sociodemographic variables contribute to an explanation of readers' pre-discussion responses. These structural effects are limited, however, to an account of differences between groups' mean initial responses and

contribute little to the explanation of variance in initial responses within groups. The heterogeneity of readers' largely unconstrained agency in forming their initial responses is subject to interpersonal influences that may substantially alter and coordinate individuals' evaluative responses. These interpersonal influences are not exterior to or imposed on individuals but are due to readers' voluntary and often highly idiosyncratic accords of influence. What appears to be largely outside the control of readers are the *implications* of the influence network that they construct and the influence process that they enable, as they temporally incorporate others' viewpoints.

## 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 present an unfolding temporal process in which individuals' responses to their private engagement with a text are partially conditioned by their demographic characteristics and the experiences and identifications related to these characteristics. No doubt, readers' social-structural positions influence cultural interpretation. However, the contribution of such structural effects, which has been the grist for a perspective that depicts individuals as embedded in and constrained by their social positions, is overemphasized. We suggest that the implications of individual differences, emphasized by the agency perspective on cultural reception, require more detailed attention. Agency is implicated even in the cognitive foundation of the network theory employed in this investigation, which allows for idiosyncratic distributions of accorded influence, as opposed to assuming consensual deference structures.

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. 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 authors' intentions and freedom from sociodemographic conditioning and constraint, which we take as indicative of substantial levels of individual agency in cultural reception. Unmeasured variables may account for some of this variation, but it does not appear that the suite of most commonly considered demographic variables (i.e., 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 marked individual-level heterogeneity in first responses to cultural objects, which 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 acknowledgment 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.

In this context, the significance of our analysis is both methodological and theoretical. We 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 that has the analytic 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 this research design, we highlight the analysis of interpersonal interactions in the formation of meaning for cultural objects. The substantial contribution to such interactions, although generally accepted, has largely been a black box with regard to *process* in the field on cultural reception and in other sociological fields.

In investigations of interpersonal influence systems that have attended to interpersonal interactions, scholars have used behavioral-threshold models of interdependency based on actions influencing actions. The social influence network theory upon which we draw, 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 the forefront. The theory presents a detailed position on the process of symbolic interaction, that is, *how* individuals' cognitive orientations are affected by an interpersonal influence process, and the implications when this process unfolds in influence networks that may differ in their structure. Here, we apply the theory to open the black box of 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. We have opened a door toward an exploration of 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 that 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 leading to 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 they assemble, based on their accord of influence to themselves and other group members. Our book clubs are field-setting groups that 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 to use exactly the same methods that have been employed to evaluate the theory on groups assembled under experimental conditions. Although the issues 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 find 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 multilevel 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, they may not only shift others' interpretations but also the aggregate distribution of the population of readers nested in different groups. Structure and agency meet at the meso-level in the interpersonal influence process that unfolds in small 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. They are a special case in a broader domain of small groups that assemble to discuss and interpret

texts (e.g., sacred scriptures, contractual agreements, and procedural and constitutional documents) and other culturally conditioned objects. 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 employed, they open a window into how communities of individuals actually negotiate cultural meanings 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 groups focused on other cultural objects, and sociodemographic status may affect discussion of some cultural objects more than others. Interpersonal influences on cultural objects are not restricted to organized and regularly interacting discussion groups. We hope that future studies will take up alternate naturally occurring sites for the study of cultural reception in a way that allows empirical investigation of influence networks' contribution. Interpersonal influences that generate shifts in interpretations of texts may have broader implications for what readers get out of texts when discussions of specific dimensions of a text—such as its characters and events, which are indicators of broader latent viewpoints—are altered and feedback to affect these latent viewpoints. Perhaps such broader classes of hermeneutic effects are not beyond the scope of a formal level analysis.

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## Notes

1. Although not universally recognized or codified by the ASA as separate approaches to the study of culture, differences between these approaches are not small and not without their tensions. In the strongest summation of this differentiation, Alexander (2003) posits that cultural sociology is different in that it alone thinks of culture as an independent variable.
2. 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 that make up our sample considered *Jarrettsville* to be concerned with issues of gender and race, in addition to other issues. In text and an 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).
3. In our post-discussion debriefings with book club members, readers in our sample displayed a marked level of interest in the author's intentions for the text. For between 30 and 90 minutes, readers asked questions about the author's intended meanings along specific dimensions of the text and the processes of her decision making in constructing the manuscript. With regard to authorial intentions, we make no claims as to how literary critics should or should not engage with texts. Instead, we limit our analysis to the book club members who make up our study.
4. A diagonal matrix  $\mathbf{M}$  is an  $n \times n$  matrix with values for  $m_{11}, m_{22}, \dots, m_{nn}$  and zero values elsewhere. The identity matrix  $\mathbf{I}$  is a diagonal matrix with 1's on its main diagonal. The superscript  $\infty$  indicates the equilibrium in which the influence process results in a settled (no longer changing) set of evaluative positions.
5. The theory allows for a nonsingular  $(\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{AW})$ , but such cases do not arise in the present data.
6. Two groups approached by the first author declined to participate in the study. One declining group worried that they had only one previous meeting. The second declining group felt the data collection would be too taxing and not interesting to members. We withheld two participating groups from this analysis on consistency grounds; one of the groups was an ad-hoc "focus group" (i.e., not naturally occurring) and Nixon was an invited guest of the other group (i.e., a significant intervention in the group's influence network).
7. While participation in book group was a leisure activity for our respondents, their groups provided social and personal fulfillment. Another factor in their participation was an appreciation that this personally fulfilling activity might be studied and "taken

seriously" by a researcher. Some members also joked that participating would free their group from selecting the next book to read. More details on these book clubs, including additional ethnographic information on their meetings, are available upon request from the first author.

8. Field notes, surveys, and audio were recorded for 16 groups, while the remaining two groups yielded only surveys and audio recordings due to timing and budget constraints.
9. A full list of questions asked about the novel is available from the first author upon request. Coding syntax and statistical commands for this work will be made available on the first author's website (<http://www.claytonchildress.com/>), where the raw data will be released as well.
10. Book club discussions, depending on the club, may focus on different specific dimensions. We find that a subset of six specific dimensions account for 74 percent of the variance on the general evaluation measure. We do not present analysis of each of these specific dimensions. We felt the analytic burden would become overwhelming and further enlarge an already large manuscript. Moreover, our influence network measure is not tailored to address specific dimensions of evaluation.
11. Regional effects may be depressed by the readers' high education levels and the relative lack of regional cultural boundaries when compared to moral boundaries (Lamont et al. 1996). With regard to the high levels of education in our naturally occurring groups, this is largely a function of frequently reading for pleasure being correlated with educational attainment. Our respondents are disproportionately women, middle-upper class, and white-identifying, mirroring the most prevalent demographic package in what Griswold (2008) calls the "reading class" in the United States. This package of demographic characteristics is so common among book club members that Long (2003) centers her study of book groups on those composed of middle-upper-class white women.
12. In addition to reported unstable influence structures, attendance itself was not entirely stable. Even the boundaries of the book groups were subject to some internal disagreement, with some core members considering former or irregularly attending members as part of the group, while other core members did not.
13. Pseudonyms are used in both of these quotes.

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