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Contextualizing Cognitive Consonance by a Social Mechanisms Explanation: Moderators of Selective Exposure in Media Usage*

Abstract: While many studies from analytical sociology apply agent-based modeling to analyze the transformational mechanisms linking the micro to the macro level, we hold the view that both situational and action formation mechanisms can rather be unveiled by means of more advanced quantitative methods. By focusing on selective exposure to quality newspapers, our study has both an analytical and a substantive aim. First, our analytical aim is to amend the psychological mechanism of avoiding cognitive dissonance by social mechanisms allowing postulates on how the selective exposure effect might vary by particular social groups. Second, our substantive aim is to set the ground for a longitudinal analysis of selective exposure to quality papers by placing these social mechanisms in the context of social and cultural change. By referring to hypothetical data, we illustrate which kind of (multilevel) moderator effects would have to hold if our hypotheses were true.

1. Introduction

Survey data do not only provide access to representative population data but also represent a rich resource for studying the logic of social action in context and the functioning of the underlying social mechanisms. While social network analysis and agent-based modeling provide direct ways of representing relations and dynamic interdependencies among actors and thereby of testing *transformational* mechanisms, many survey studies lack this relational information. Yet, they provide the opportunity to incorporate a range of contextual data in order to specify *situational* mechanisms. Moreover, they comprise individual-level information suitable to operationalize *action formation* mechanisms. Using representative real world data on a wide range of topics, thereby, important sociological questions can be answered which are devoted less attention when mechanism-based research in the social sciences primarily focuses on transformational mechanisms.

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Thus, we will show that a bundle of statistical techniques is able to both unveil situational and action formation mechanisms, and indicate their stability or volatility by making use of well-established statistical methods such as mediation and moderation analyses.

The *analytical objective* of our study is to make a *mechanism-based* contribution intended to set the ground for future quantitative-statistical analyses. To do so, we first study the desire for cognitive consonance as the crucial psychological mechanism responsible for *selective exposure* (SE) which we apply to newspaper usage in consonance with one's leftist vs. rightist party identification. Second, we deduce from theory how several of the most important psychological mechanisms that were observed to moderate the SE effect can be linked to sociologically relevant theoretical constructs which have most often been excluded from SE research (Hart et al. 2009, 559). By doing so, we amend the *psychological* mechanisms by genuine *social* mechanisms. Third, we place these cross-sectional social mechanisms in the context of social change and postulate how additional time-variant social mechanisms should also influence the psychological mechanisms accounting for selective exposure over both periods and cohorts.

The *substantive objective* is to develop a research design using survey data to test if reader's consent is (still) reader's digest, i.e. if selective exposure to so-called quality newspapers (which is driven by one's ideological position) remains stable in the face of cultural change in terms of decreasing social cleavages. For this purpose we develop an integrated macro-micro model of political cleavages that is linked to a revised version of Shively's (1979) model of party identification to provide a comprehensive explanation of selective exposure to quality papers. Moreover, we provide plots based on hypothetical data to illustrate how results would be expected to look if our hypotheses were true.

Though our formal model is not limited to newspaper usage but is easily applicable to selective exposure to other information, we focus on quality papers for two reasons. First, Hart et al. (2009) observed that in their meta-analysis, "samples generally (a) were published in earlier decades, (b) appeared in journals, (c) included college students as participants, (d) took place in the United States or Canada, and (e) with the exception of a minority of field studies, took place in the laboratory" (574). Hence, we extend SE research by setting the theoretical grounds for studies with *ad a)* more recent data, *ad c)* a representative sample of *ad d)* a European country studying selective exposure in *ad e)* a more natural setting such as newspaper usage. Second, Freedman and Sears (1965) have already noted that in mass communication settings such as newspaper usage, we can expect a more pronounced SE effect than in experimental settings, since in the latter, individuals might try to *reduce their cognitive dissonance* (e.g. because the non-supportive material is administered by a scientific authority) rather than to *avoid* non-supporting information.¹

¹ One downside of mass-communication settings is that individuals might use media for other reasons than finding supporting information while the *de-facto* selectivity observed is caused just by accident (Freedman/Sears 1965). To control for accidental selective exposure, we limit our object of research to *quality papers* only. One major advantage of large-N quanti-

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. *Section 2.1* outlines our plea for a theoretical refinement of SE research more concretely. *Section 2.2* presents the idea of balance and cognitive consonance theory and how it links to selective exposure to newspapers. In *section 2.3*, we provide both an introduction into mechanism-based explanations and a comprehensive macro-micro model of political cleavages. *Section 2.4.1* uses this new model in order to deduce cross-sectional moderators of selective exposure to newspapers. In *section 2.4.2*, we argue how changes in the opportunity structure in terms of value change can be expected to moderate the cross-sectional underlying mechanisms of selective exposure. In *section 3*, we illustrate how (multilevel) moderator models can be used to test for social mechanisms. Finally, *section 4* provides both a summary of the argument and an assessment of the compatibility of statistical analyses and mechanism-based explanations.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 The Need for a Theoretical Refinement

The need for a theoretical refinement becomes obvious when explicating the axiomatic assumptions of the different approaches applied to the linkage between media use and ideology. On the one hand, political communication researchers in the tradition of deliberate democracy theory suppose the latter to be a consequence of citizens being exposed to preferably diverse viewpoints including those even contradicting their own attitudes (Gentzkow/Shapiro 2011; Miller 1992). On the other hand, both political cleavage theory and SE research assume media consumption to be in accordance with social identity (Bartolini/Mair 1990; Lipset/Rokkan 1967, 4).

However, as cleavage theory (with a dominant focus on the macro-structure) neglects the individual level, we provide the relevant situational and action-formation mechanisms to link macro-level cleavages to the micro level. In a second step, these genuine *social* mechanisms are supposed to affect the *psychological* mechanisms underlying selective exposure to newspapers. This alternative perspective of reasoning stresses the *implausibility* of diverse media usage which will be highly dependent on individuals' ideological position. Drawing on a well-founded psychological mechanism, the *selective exposure hypothesis* postulates that individuals tend to prefer information that is consistent with their initial attitudes (Festinger 1957). Otherwise, cognitive unbalances would arise that individuals strive to avoid (Heider 1946).

Though earlier evidence on the SE effect in general was mostly mixed (Sears/Freedman 1967), later research applying better methodological controls was able to produce more confirming results (Cotton 1985, 25; Frey 1986; Hart et al. 2009). Moreover, a robust SE effect was observed for the relationship between in-

tative survey data is that any remaining heterogeneity among individuals' usage motives (e.g., demand for local information) can be controlled by corresponding covariates (e.g., respondents' city of residence) once suitable indicators are available.

dividuals' party preference and their newspaper usage (Donsbach 1991; McLeod et al. 1965; Stroud 2008). Yet, two important shortcomings can be identified which we would like to tackle in the present study.

First, *analytically*, although important *psychological mechanisms* such as attitude confidence (Canon 1964), closed-mindedness (Feather 1969) or value relevance of the presented content (Jonas et al. 2003) have been identified as moderators of the SE effect, very little is known about how these psychological mechanisms relate to more fundamental sociological concepts, i.e., in which social groups they are more likely to hold than in others, and which situational mechanisms may account for potential differences. For instance, in Hart et al.'s 2009 meta-analytic review, the relevance of the presented content to respondents' enduring values was found to be the most powerful moderator of the SE effect. However, although the literature in the social sciences is very rich on the differences of social values held by various social groups (Hitlin/Piliavin 2004, 368–78; Spates 1983, 41f.), surprisingly hardly any study in the domain of SE research controls for sociologically relevant theoretical constructs²—not to speak of deducing and testing for social mechanisms that could shed light on the potential variance of the SE effect between different social groups. Hence, what we do is to link the *psychological* mechanisms that have been found to moderate the SE effect to social background variables, and we also present the *social* mechanisms—which our model sets analytically prior to the psychological mechanisms—to account for differences regarding the SE effect by different social groups. To unveil these social mechanisms, we use the *desires, beliefs* and *opportunity* model proposed by Hedström (2005, 38ff.) and link the psychological mechanism which underlies selective exposure to newspapers to inter-individual differences by social divisions and educational background.

Second, *substantively*, SE research lacks more extensive longitudinal analyses. Whereas numerous longitudinal studies investigate both the decline of newspaper usage in general³ and the stability vs. volatility of political cleavages (see below), we are not aware of any study testing for the stability (or volatility) of the SE effect with respect to newspaper usage over a longer period of time. In our view, the reason for this academic void is that deducing hypotheses on longitudinal change is unevenly harder when a comprehensive cross-sectional foundation of the crucial concepts for which such a change might occur is still absent. Having provided the relevant social mechanisms for our cross-sectional model, we postulate that value change constitutes an additional opportunity-driven mechanism that might affect both individuals' desire for cognitive consonance in general and the relation between social value divisions and selective exposure to quality papers in particular.

² For instance, in their study of selective exposure to online information, Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman (2012) controlled for variables such as education, gender, and income. However, the authors do not provide *theoretical* reasons how the underlying constructs could be expected to be linked to the SE effect.

³ For recent international evidence see Blekesaune et al. 2012; for Germany cf. Kolo/Meyer-Lucht 2007.

2.2 Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Building on Heider's (1946) assumption that unbalanced cognitive states are associated with cognitive costs which individuals try to avoid, Leon Festinger (1957) developed his more comprehensive cognitive dissonance theory aiming to unify the consistency between actors' knowledge and attitudes and their usage of specific information. Festinger starts from the assumption that not only attitudes among one another, but also attitudes and action are consistent with each other.⁴ While for Festinger, this consistency is the *result* of individuals' preference for consonant information *as a consequence* of the cognitive load caused by dissonant information that may have occurred before, Sears and Freedman (1967) provide a definition of selective exposure (SE) which does not rely on preceding dissonant information as a driving force of cognitive consonance: "The strongest form of the selective exposure proposition is that people prefer exposure to communications that agree with their pre-existing opinions. Hence, people are thought actively to seek out material that supports their opinions, and actively to avoid material that challenges them." (Sears/Freedman 1967, 197) Understood this way, the underlying psychological mechanism of the SE hypothesis is that cognitive consonance is not necessarily the *result* of a previously dissonant cognitive state, but also the *avoidance* of any dissonant information at all. While early reviews of SE studies found not more than mixed evidence for the SE hypothesis (Freedman/Sears 1965; Sears/Freedman 1967), later reviews applying more sophisticated methodological controls observed more convincing results (Cotton 1985, 25; Hart et al. 2009). Moreover, among the few studies applying the selective exposure hypothesis to party preference and newspaper usage, a thoroughly robust consonance effect was observed (Donsbach 1991; McLeod et al. 1965; Stroud 2008).

While in the earliest studies, findings for variables potentially *moderating* the SE effect were as controversial as for the SE effect in general (Mills 1968), later studies indeed identified several psychological mechanisms as moderators.

First, a number of studies found individuals' *attitude confidence* to moderate the SE effect. While experiments manipulating external pressure (Canon 1964) or operationalizing attitude confidence by respondents' anxiety (Frey et al. 1986) observed negative effects on selective exposure, studies touching upon important political or social values towards abortion, the death penalty, or a particular party preference found the desire for consonance to become more pronounced with increasing attitude strength (Brannon et al. 2007; Brock/Balloun 1967; Garrett 2009; Holbrook et al. 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2015; Westerwick et al. 2013).

Another influential moderator of the SE effect is individuals' *closed-mindedness*. Based on Rokeach's (1960) dogmatism scale, Feather (1969) demonstrated that more dogmatic respondents showed a higher preference for information on

⁴ "It is still overwhelmingly true that related opinions or attitudes are consistent with one another. Study after study reports such consistency among one person's political attitudes, social attitudes, and many others. [...] There is the same kind of consistency between what a person knows or believes and what he does." (Festinger 1957, 1)

the American intervention in Vietnam consistent with their initial attitudes than less dogmatic respondents. Olson and Zanna (1979) observed that “repressors” (a personality type applying avoidance strategies to deal with threatening information) showed significantly more selective exposure to previously-rated paintings than “sensitizers” (a personality type applying more intellectualistic approach strategies).⁵ Lavine et al. (2005) found that high-authoritarian subjects were more likely to prefer information on capital punishment consistent with their initially-measured attitudes than low-authoritarian respondents.⁶ A third important moderator of the SE effect is the personal *value relevance* of the issue individuals are exposed to. Jonas et al. (2003) found that when confronted with newspaper information on the political party donation scandal of the German Christian Democratic Union, CDU (which became public in December of 1999), individuals with a preference for the CDU opted more frequently for political information consistent with their party preference than individuals with a preference for the Social Democrats (SPD). It can be argued that for the former group, the personal value relevance of the information on the party donation scandal is higher than for the latter group. In another study by Jonas et al. (2003), mortality salience (invoked by being asked to write down the expectations and emotions associated with the end of one’s life) affected respondents’ selective exposure to information more strongly when the information concerned the worldview issue of conventional vs. alternative medical treatment (high value relevance) compared to the fictitious example of a sales manager’s business decisions (low value relevance). This result could be replicated by Fischer et al. (2005) who later successfully tested for value relevance as a moderator applied to another relevant issue for their student sample at hand, i.e. tuition fees (Fischer et al. 2008).

In our view, research on moderators of the SE effect has to be refined for the following reasons. First, we see the need to sharpen the analytical razor to dissect the theoretical concepts underlying the psychological mechanism of exposure to consonant information into more distinct entities. Second, it is surprising that although individuals’ value relevance showed to be the most robust moderator of the SE effect, we are not aware of any study linking *social* mechanisms accounting for value differences between social groups to the *psychological* mechanism underlying the SE effect.

Hence, in the following, we first use the *desires, beliefs, and opportunity* (henceforth DBO) model (Hedström 2005, 38ff.) to provide clarification on the analytical units relevant for the SE effect to quality papers and its moderators (*desires* and *beliefs*). Second, we link these desires and beliefs to the *opportunity* structure by providing a multilevel foundation of political cleavage theory from which we deduce the social mechanisms accounting for desires and beliefs relevant for the SE effect. Third, we amend our argument on the importance of the opportunity structure by postulating additional social mechanisms explicating

⁵ For the repressor vs. sensitizer distinction see Byrne 1964.

⁶ Smith et al. 2008 argued that all constructs form a common dimension of closed-mindedness.

how social change might affect the SE effect to quality papers both directly and indirectly.

2.3 Social Mechanisms, Cognitive Consonance, and Political Cleavages

Taking for granted that causal mechanisms exist, that they are productive of events, and that many of these events are observable (Bhaskar 1975), mechanism-based explanations in the social sciences argue against “black-box” covering-law explanations (Hedström/Swedberg 1996) and strive to overcome the shortcoming of merely correlational statistical analyses confounding correlation with causality (see critique of ‘variable sociology’ by Esser 1996). Instead, a causal association between two variables X and Y must be tied “to some process existing in time and space, even if not perhaps directly observable, that actually generates the causal effect of X on Y and, in so doing, produces the statistical relationship that is empirically in evidence” (Goldthorpe 2001, 9).

A quite basic but nonetheless useful scheme to classify social mechanisms is the *desires*, *beliefs* and *opportunities* (henceforth referred to as *DBO*) model proposed by Hedström (2005, 38ff.). Concretely, a *desire* can be described as a wish or want, *beliefs* are propositions of the world actors hold to be true, and *opportunities* refer to the ‘menu’ of action alternatives available to the actor. In sum, beliefs and desires are a *compelling reason* or have a *motivational force* (Hedström 2005, 38f.). According to the authors, opportunities must always be known to the actors in order to influence their action via their beliefs or desires. However, as actors’ opportunity structure constitutes a distinct social reality—and, as we will argue, can influence individual action even *independently* of actors’ beliefs and desires—the former concepts do not suffice in order to explain individual action.⁷ While the value of *DBO* as a rigorous social action theory is still disputed (Diekmann 2010; Manzo 2013; Opp 2013), we adopt it as a useful tool for the classification of social mechanisms (see Hedström 2005, 59). Regarding classic dissonance theory, both *desire*- and *belief*-driven mechanisms are possible. On the one hand, classical cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) argues that *ego* might adjust their *beliefs* according to a single or generalized *alter’s* beliefs due to the psychological discomfort the dissonance between the two belief sets may cause (Hedström 2005, 51). On the other hand, *dissonance-driven desire formation* may also cause actors to adjust their wishes or wants according to the wishes or wants of others (Hedström 2008, 328).

2.3.1 A Formal Model of Selective Exposure to Newspapers

We hold the view that the *DBO* schema is able to sharpen the theoretical foundations of SE research in several respects. First, SE is assumed to be driven by both *defense motivation* (defending existing attitudes and behaviors) and *accuracy motivation* (forming accurate appraisals of stimuli; cf. Chaiken et al. 1989). While both motives were basically labeled as *desires*; it was argued that at least the defense motivation may capture individual beliefs as well (Hart et

⁷ This view is also known as *structural individualism* (Udehn 2002; Wippler 1978).

al. 2009, 557). Our mechanism-based argument is able to clarify this confusion by specifying that the defense motivation may refer to both beliefs *and* desires (dissonance-driven desire formation in the latter case).

More precisely, the following dimensions have to be distinguished: *i*) the general *desire* for cognitive consonance as the underlying mechanism of the selective exposure effect; and *ii*) desires and beliefs as two distinct underlying analytic entities cognitive consonance may refer to. More formally, the selective exposure effect to newspaper readership can be expressed as follows:

$$\{D_I, B_I\} \Rightarrow D_M \Rightarrow \{D_O, B_O\}$$

$\{D_I, B_I\}$ refers to individuals' desires and beliefs on the input side (e.g., individuals' values and attitudes on political issues),⁸ $\{D_O, B_O\}$ to individuals' desires and beliefs on the output side (e.g., values and attitudes on political issues reported in the newspaper), and D_M to the desire for cognitive consonance as the crucial psychological action-formation mechanism explaining individuals' selective exposure to newspapers expressing political values and attitudes. D_M can be understood as a distance function comprising a subjective threshold above which a given distance between $\{D_I, B_I\}$ on the one hand and $\{D_O, B_O\}$ on the other hand will be experienced as psychologically stressful (and a given newspaper therefore avoided).⁹ Since we regard $\{D_O, B_O\}$ as pre-given by newspapers, the SE effect can vary by either $\{D_I, B_I\}$ or D_M . The crucial question is which psychological (and behind them: social) mechanisms are responsible for changes in either $\{D_I, B_I\}$ or D_M .¹⁰ This is where three of the most important moderators of the SE effect can be integrated in our model, i.e. attitude strength or certainty, personal value relevance, and closed-mindedness. In a most simple specification, let attitude strength s be a weight for input beliefs B_I , value relevance r a weight for input desires D_I , and closed-mindedness c a weight for the desire of cognitive consonance D_M . Thus, we can rewrite our model:

$$\{r \cdot D_I, s \cdot B_I\} \Rightarrow c \cdot D_M \Rightarrow \{D_O, B_O\}$$

By content, this means that personal value relevance fosters or attenuates the SE effect via individuals' input *desires*, attitude strength fosters or attenuates the SE effect via individuals' input *beliefs*, and open-mindedness fosters or attenuates the SE effect by directly altering the subjective threshold (*desire* for cognitive consonance) among which desires and beliefs expressed in media content produce psychological stress for one individual, but not for the other.

⁸ An example for a political value (desire) is that society should be driven by the principle of egalitarianism. An example for a political attitude (belief) is that John Smith believes that the exit of Greece from the European financial union might be a severe risk for the stock market.

⁹ Hence, one implication of our model is that desires may refer to both individual values defined as abstract imaginations of the desirable (Kluckhohn 1951, 395) *and* to individual preferences in a more rigid action-theoretical sense such as the preference for cognitive consonant information.

¹⁰ While a direct test of our model would require to measure $\{D_I, B_I\}$ or D_M , for an indirect test it suffices to measure the hypothesized *causes* supposed to *affect* either $\{D_I, B_I\}$ or D_M (see below) and *thereby* foster or attenuate individuals' selective exposure to newspapers.

A question still unanswered by several decades of SE research is if social groups exist that are more likely to be affected by the SE effect than others. In our mechanism-based approach, this question asks for the *social* mechanisms linking the *opportunity structure* to the *psychological* mechanisms just formalized. To do so, we refer to cleavage theory and provide a micro foundation explaining the process of how a social division (e.g., by social class or religious denomination) is translated into a political cleavage or not.

2.3.2 A Macro-micro Model of Political Cleavages

According to Bartolini and Mair (1990, 212–49), a cleavage is characterized by three distinct characteristics: (1) a social division based on social-structural characteristics or distinct values, (2) the sense of collective group identity, such as being a farmer, a worker, or member of a gender, and finally (3) an organizational expression, e.g. in a political party. Yet, within cleavage theory, it remains unclear which causal mechanism leads from a social division to a collective group identity. Hence, before cleavage theory can be used to deduce the social mechanisms linking to selective exposure, we provide a micro-foundation in terms of the DBO schema. To do so, we refer to a two-step process model of Coleman's (1990) boat to illustrate the micro foundations of cleavages according to value differences. In a first step, the mechanisms of *rational adaptation* and *imitation* (Hedström 1998) make individuals in a given socioeconomic situation adopt more conservative or more liberal values during socialization (1). Equipped with division-specific desires and beliefs, individuals will act (2) to form or join respective interest groups, e.g., conservative vs. liberal social movements or parties, while single actions will of course aggregate to the spread of those interest groups on the macro level (3). In a second step, a new social situation (4) will enforce the formation of group-specific desires and beliefs (which are not reducible to the one in (1)). Finally, individuals' actions based on group-specific desires and beliefs (5) aggregate to collective identities.¹¹ *Figure 1* depicts a more general model that could also be applied to other cleavages based on social class or religious denomination. Yet, for the example at hand we can note that in cross-sectional perspective, both *division*-specific desires and beliefs and, as a consequence, *group*-specific identities are relevant for individual values as far as they can be subsumed beneath the concept of cleavages.

¹¹ Both transformational mechanisms can be expected to comprise complex interdependencies of social actions (e.g., threshold models of movement participation) exceeding simplistic aggregation of single individual actions.

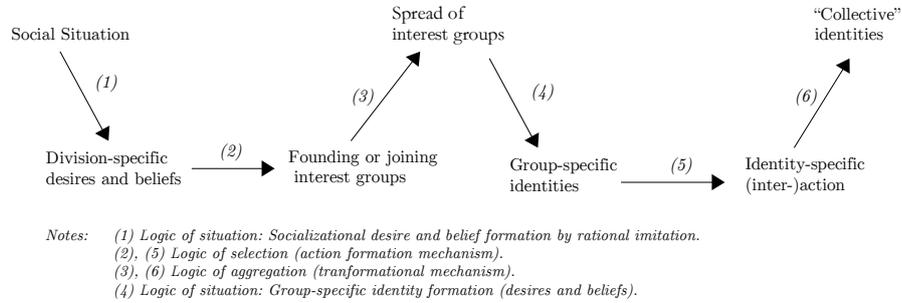


Figure 1: A micro-foundation of political cleavage theory.

Figure 1 illustrates that according to cleavage theory, either social divisions (1) or division-specific interest groups (4) or collective identities (which would equal another top-down macro-micro arrow) can influence individual desires and beliefs. We would like to add the postulate that not only individual desires and beliefs *per se*, but also their relative salience will be affected by the social situation.¹² Thus, two of the most important moderators of the SE effect, attitude strength and personal value relevance, must be linked to the opportunity structure in terms of social divisions or ideological cleavages as well. Finally, it is argued that even personality differences such as closed-mindedness vs. openness to change can be attributed to differences in underlying social values (Wilson 2005; see *section 2.4.2*). Hence, closed-mindedness as a weight of individuals' desire for cognitive consonance can be affected by the opportunity structure as well. Recapitulating our formalism from above, we can repeat that

$$\{r \cdot D_I, s \cdot B_I\} \Rightarrow c \cdot D_M \Rightarrow \{D_O, B_O\}$$

while both $\{D_I, B_I\}$, $\{s, r, c\} = f(O)$. By content and applied to selective exposure to quality papers, $\{D_I, B_I\} = f(O)$ specifies how social divisions or cleavages affect individuals' division-specific desires and beliefs. The latter, in turn, determine whether an individual obtains the belief B_P of a leftist vs. rightist party identification as the driving force for D_M , i.e. the desire for consonant newspaper usage. Moreover, $\{s, r\} = f(O)$ states that the opportunity structure (e.g. in terms of educational background) will also influence the strength and personal relevance of the desires and beliefs underlying a person's party identification. And finally, $\{c\} = f(O)$ postulates that there might be social value differences as another part of the opportunity structure affecting the degree of individuals' closed-mindedness which will influence how strongly the desire for cognitive consonance, D_M , is pronounced.¹³ In a longitudinal perspective, social

¹² This is suggested by action-theoretical framing theories, e.g. Lindenberg 2008 or Kroneberg 2014.

¹³ By contextualizing individuals' desires and beliefs in terms of linking them to the oppor-

and cultural change constitutes another opportunity-driven mechanism affecting the extent to which individuals' socio-economic situation is translated into division-specific values (*value de-/re-alignment*). *Thereby*, of course, the formation of group-specific identities will also be affected, but rather as a matter of path dependency than in terms of a direct effect of the opportunity structure. Formally, O can again affect both s , r and c (details to follow in section 2.4.2).

2.4 Contextualizing Party Identification and Selective Exposure to Newspapers

Having outlined a formal model of the analytical units in which the SE effect to quality papers can be assumed to be passed on, we are now able to specify which social concepts of the opportunity structure affect which of the above-sketched analytical units. To do so, we first link our macro-micro model of political cleavages to a revised model of Shively's (1979) approach to party identification (section 2.4.1). Second, we extend our arguments to the longitudinal perspective by referring to theories of social and cultural change (section 2.4.2).

2.4.1 Cross-sectional Foundations of Selective Exposure

In section 2.3, we specified party identification as a front-end to division-specific desires and beliefs, we postulated that desires and beliefs may be weighted by inter-individual differences in both personal value relevance and attitude strength, and that all of these units will be influenced by specific social constructs situated in the opportunity structure. Here, we aim to show that a revised version of Shively's (1979) functional model of party identification provides several crucial social mechanisms also relevant for selective exposure to quality papers. One social background variable that may account for available moderators of the SE effect is *educational background*:

On the one hand, we can deduce from Shively's model that determinants of party identification such as *political information costs* and available *resources* to deal with them suggest a *negative* effect of education on party identification as a consequence of a *cognitive processing mechanism*: due to their higher cognitive resources, higher educated individuals might be less in need of its structuring and complexity-reducing function. Hence, the cognitive processing mechanism builds on the argument of *cognitive utility* of party identification which is higher for *lower*-educated individuals.

On the other hand, the resource model of political participation (Brady/Verba/Schlozman 1995) which models individuals' *civic skills* between their social status and political participation (Glaeser et al. 2007; Milligan et al. 2004) expects both the *need to participate* and *concern for quality* to be *positively* related to education. Hence, the civic skill mechanism builds on the argument

tunity structure, we avoid a crucial shortcoming that analytical sociology has recently been accused of, i.e., neglecting the *situational mechanisms* (macro-micro link) by treating desires and beliefs as exogenous and invariant entities (Edling/Rydgren 2014; Little 2012). Substantively, individual desires and beliefs may be formed by both basal social divisions (*figure 1*, arrow 1) and more complex collective identities (arrow 4). Henceforth, we only refer to the 'minimal condition' in terms of division-specific desires and beliefs.

of *normative utility* of party identification which is higher for *higher* educated individuals.¹⁴ Of these two micro mechanisms counter-balancing each other, the civic skill mechanism is the stronger one (also see Ohr et al. 2009) and thereby also productive of the empirically observable positive effect of education on selective exposure. However, Shively (1979) predicted that *other shortcuts* to party identification apart from education might weaken the complexity-reducing function of party identification. This is exactly where our micro-foundation of political cleavages is integrated in the present account: apart from the information-processing and civic-skill mechanism, an additional mechanism of *value binding* becomes salient. There is ample evidence that values are an important motive of party identification and may thereby also constitute a form of political cleavage. Examples in that respect are values based on social class, religious vs. secular values, and the materialist-post-materialist division according to Inglehart (1977) who postulates a shift from *materialist* (maintaining law and order and fighting rising prices) towards *post-materialist* values (giving people more say in important political decisions and protecting freedom of speech). For Germany, this shift materialized in a spread of social movements and other unconventional forms of participation, to the emergence of the Green party, and it caused established parties such as the Social Democrats to adopt policy positions such as environmental protection and gender equality (Fuchs/Rohrschneider 1998, 95). With respect to party identification, in the group of 'pure' post-materialists, the majority of voters opt for the Social Democrats and the Green Party who even score before the Conservatives (Klein 2014, 584f.).

While Shively assumed that the complexity-reducing function of party identification *per se* should be weaker for those who hold pronounced value-based identification motives,¹⁵ our formal model suggests that the *value binding mechanism* as a driving force of party identification should be stronger for the higher educated, as due to the civic skill mechanism, their attitudes will be more deeply rooted and their values of higher personal salience. Thereby, we suppose education to affect parameters r and s in our formal model. *Figure 2* applies these arguments on the cross-sectional case of selective exposure to quality papers.¹⁶

¹⁴ In Shively's (1979) initial model, he counter-intuitively expected a negative effect on party identification also for individuals' need to participate and concern for quality.

¹⁵ It is a commonplace of the post-materialism thesis that besides strict (post-)materialists, mixture types also exist.

¹⁶ For the distinction between primary and secondary effects of educational inequality see Breen/Goldthorpe 1997. For the distinction between class-specific desires and beliefs on the one hand and identities on the other hand see *figure 1* of this contribution. For the concern of media fragmentation see e.g. Holbert et al. 2009.

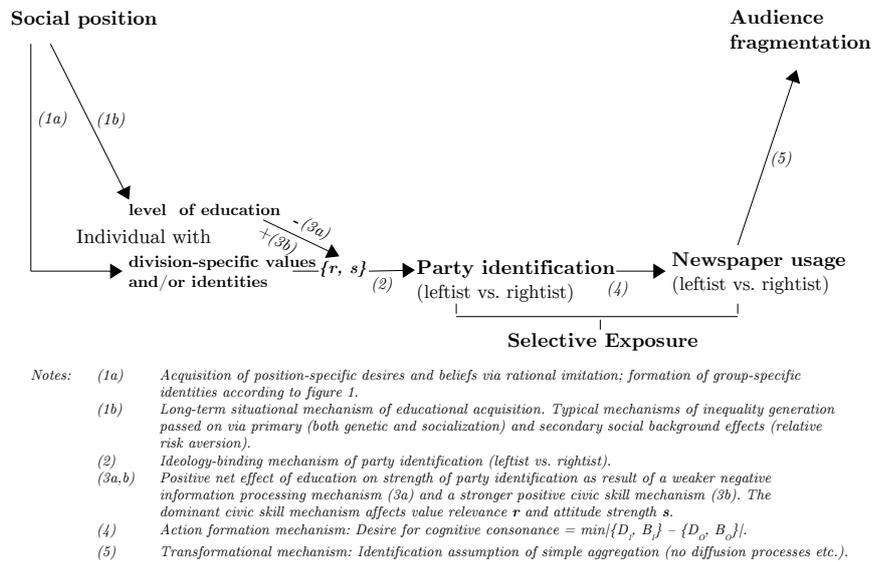


Figure 2: The social mechanisms of selective exposure to newspapers in cross-sectional perspective.

Drawing on this systematization, it is possible to deduce a set of cross-sectional hypotheses. The most basal one is the selective exposure hypothesis:

H_1 : *Individuals identifying with leftist (vs. rightist) parties show a higher probability to use leftist (vs. rightist) quality papers.*

In terms of the DBO schema, we assume a *belief-mediated mechanism* in that individuals holding a leftist or rightist party identification (above referred to as B_P) are subject to a selective-exposure effect with regard to using either leftist or rightist quality papers (figure 2, arrow (4)). In accordance with the caveats of rational choice theorists against *ad-hoc* preference changes (Lindenberg 1984), at this point, no assertions about the extent of *desire* for cognitive consonance as an *action-formation mechanism* are made.

When social divisions manifest in division-specific desires and beliefs (arrow (1a)), according to Shively (1979) we suppose that the latter will serve as an ideological shortcut of (though are not analytically equal to) party identification and thereby moderate the SE effect.¹⁷ As one example to illustrate our mechanism-based approach, consider the distinction between materialist and

¹⁷ When referring to moderators of the SE effect, we mean that the effect of party preference on newspaper usage is moderated by other variables. For further comments on the operationalization of these postulates cf. section 3.

post-materialist values. Cognizant of leftist and rightist parties' ideological position (Inglehart 2002), first, post-materialists' preference for leftist parties and materialists' preference for rightist parties should be more distinct. Analytically, division-specific desires and beliefs D_I and B_I affect the strength of the belief of party identification B_P .

H_{2a}: The selective exposure effect (on leftist newspapers) is more pronounced for individuals holding more post-materialist values.

H_{2b}: The selective exposure effect (on rightist newspapers) is more pronounced for individuals holding more materialist values.

Regarding individuals' *education*, at the same time, there will be one *information processing mechanism* causing a negative effect and one *civic skill mechanism* causing a positive effect on party identification. Hence, we are facing two mechanisms that are *counterbalancing* each other while the *net effect* is expected to be positive (arrow (3)). Phrased differently, these mechanisms *mediate* each other while their net effect positively *moderates* the belief-driven selective exposure effect:

H_{2c}: The selective exposure effect is more pronounced for individuals with higher levels of education.

2.4.2 Value-Based Cleavages and Selective Exposure in the Context of Cultural Change

Having sketched the cross-sectional social mechanisms of party identification and their relevance for the selective exposure effect on newspapers, it is now possible to place it into the context of cultural change. For the simplicity of the argument, we will focus on the *value binding mechanism* and the question of whether the underlying cleavages freeze, de-align, or re-align over time (cf. *section 2.2*).

Beforehand, however, a more conceptual question arises: Which temporal units can be affected by changes at all? In repeated cross-sectional surveys, age, period and cohort effects are possible units for modeling temporal change—although for *simultaneous* analysis, more sophisticated identification strategies are required (Glenn 1977; Yang/Land 2006; also see below). While value change researchers commonly adhered to the hypothesis of *generational replacement* (i.e. value change by means of cohort change), more recent evidence points to the possibility of value change by means of period change as well. This amounts to a *lifelong openness model* postulating that intra-individual value changes are possible throughout their entire life course via the mechanism of *rational imitation* (Tormos 2013).¹⁸ Turning to a longitudinal perspective, the empirical literature discusses whether voter alignments are stable according to the famous “freezing hypothesis” (Lipset/Rokkan 1967), or whether a de- or re-alignment occurs. A de-alignment might be the consequence of social change (e.g., in

¹⁸ For a comparison with more restrictive models such as the *persistence* or the *impressionable years* model see Sears/Levy 2003.

terms of economic growth and expansion of the welfare state) and weakened organizational ties of churches and parties (Dalton/Wattenberg 2000). As a consequence, the traditional cleavage lines of social class and religion may have declined (Best 2011; Clark/Lipset 1991; Dalton 2012) or even vanished over time (Lane/Ersson 1997). If this were true, declining ideological cleavages would attenuate ideological schemes as foundations of party identification (*ideological binding mechanism*).

But value and social change can also result in a re-alignment of the political landscape via changing voter loyalties and the emergence of left-libertarian and right-populist parties (Ignazi 2003; Inglehart 1984; Kitschelt 1988). Already Manza et al. (1995) sketched a more differentiated empirical picture of the class-party relationship over time. More recently, Kriesi et al. (2008) hypothesized that the combination of de-industrialization and globalization will lead to a new cleavage between cultural demarcation and integration.¹⁹ Hellwig (2008) has shown that although working-class people no longer vote for working-class parties, the working class still reveals a relatively coherent voting pattern (nowadays by trend in favor of the culturally right parties instead of the political left). In terms of party manifesto data (Budge 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Volkens et al. 2013), European Christian and Social Democrats have become ideologically closer to each other (Franzmann 2008; Keman/Pennings 2006). The invariant traditional class-cleavage based so-called RILE scheme for assessing left-right party positions (Laver/Budge 1992) is still able to explain a great deal of variance of party positions. However, approaches regarding issue change and the absorptive power of the left-right dichotomy are doing a better job (Franzmann/Kaiser 2006; Franzmann 2013; Jahn 2011).

Empirically, Elff and Rossteutscher (2011) find persisting class-based, religious-secular and denominational cleavages in Western Germany and even moderate increases in Eastern Germany. Yet, against the Null of no decrease, if the decreasing cleavages theorem was valid, this should result in lower party attachments and thereby also weaken the selective exposure effect.

To illustrate the importance of mechanism-based explanations while trying to avoid any overcomplexity, we limit our theoretical analysis to potential period and/or cohort effects of *value change*.²⁰ Inglehart (1977) argues that the elderly cohorts who were socialized in times of material scarcity hold by trend more *material* values in terms of satisfying their physiological and safety needs, while the younger cohorts who were socialized in times of relative material wealth hold more *post-materialist* values such as self-fulfillment, personal freedom, political participation, humanism, and protection of environment. While Inglehart's theory as such has been subject to various criticisms which cannot be reviewed here (for an overview see Hadjar 2006 instead), for the present contribution, two arguments are relevant.

¹⁹ However, re-alignment should only occur where a high amount of people develop a common group identity linked to the new social divisions.

²⁰ While *educational expansion* might additionally moderate the *civic skill* mechanism, *secularization* and *economic change* might be additional moderators of the *value-binding* mechanism.

First, as a consequence of cultural change, individuals' values and attitudes might be less deep-rooted. Here, changes in the *opportunity* structure affect individuals' *desires* and *beliefs* on the input side (D_I, B_I) and thereby weaken the selective exposure effect. Second, as already sketched above, post-materialism has been associated with a general *openness to change* (Wilson 2005).

While SE research already focused on openness to change as a cross-sectional moderator, information processing research discussed this construct also in a longitudinal perspective: the notion of *pervasive ambiguity* refers to situations hard to define for individuals (Ball-Rokeach 1973, 378). This is most likely in social contexts of cultural shocks, periods of social change, and situations of role conflict (Ball-Rokeach 1973) which may cause individuals to be particularly open to dissonant information (Donohew/Tipton 1973): On the one hand, individuals seek for an optimal level of arousal between *variety* and *redundancy*: if the level of arousal is too low, people strive for more variety in terms of new information; if arousal is too high, more redundancy is aspired. On the other hand, individuals compare current situational stimuli to older situational images anchored in their mind. Donohew and Tipton (1973) assume individuals to update these images in congruence to new situational stimuli as long as the latter do not exceed a person's tolerance level of variety.

Returning to our formal model from *section 2.3*, in times of social and cultural change, the threshold of the desire for cognitive consonance D_M above which discrepant information initiates psychological discomfort may be raised and thereby, SE to quality papers may be lessened. We argue that this *openness-to-change* mechanism of modernization may refer to both cohort effects as a consequence of socialization and period effects as a consequence of modernization in terms of *Zeitgeist* or climate effects (Marsh et al. 2012) which hold also for those individuals who were socialized in less wealthy times. As outlined above, this view follows the lifelong openness model advocated first by Flanagan (1979) and more recently by Tormos (2013). Importantly, cohort and period effects even of the same construct (i.e. value change) are subject to distinct underlying social mechanisms: cohort effects require long-term mechanisms of socialization such as rational adaptation or imitation, while period effects are based on short-term framing effects increasing the salience of particular issues.

To sum it up, value change can affect the SE effect via two pathways. First, individuals' desires and beliefs may be less deep-rooted and thereby weaken the SE effect via parameters r and s .²¹ Second, assuming values and attitudes to remain preliminarily unchanged, the information processing argument by Donohew and Tipton suggests that social change drives individuals to look for new, even dissonant information as long as a person's variety threshold is not exceeded. In that case, the opportunity structure exerts a negative impact on parameter c which weights individuals' desire for cognitive consonance, D_M , as the crucial psychological mechanism underlying the SE effect.

In both cases, we find something that Gambetta (1998) calls a *concatenation of mechanisms*: value change constitutes a change in the opportunity structure

²¹ Hunter et al. 1976 assume attitudes to be organized in hierarchical chains, which implies that changes of more fundamental attitudes may result in changes of 'path dependent' ones.

either influencing personal value relevance r or attitude strength s which weight individuals' input desires and beliefs D_I and B_I , or affecting individuals closed-mindedness c weighting individuals' desire for cognitive consonance D_M .

By content this translates into the following hypotheses. Though acknowledging the 'conventional wisdom' on decreasing social cleavages to be a potentially overhasty conclusion, in falsificationist tradition we nonetheless maintain it as a working hypothesis. If ideological cleavages decreased over time, division-specific values and attitudes would forfeit their function as schematic foundations of party identification. This leads to the following hypotheses applicable to both period and cohort effects (cf. *figure 3*, arrow (6)):

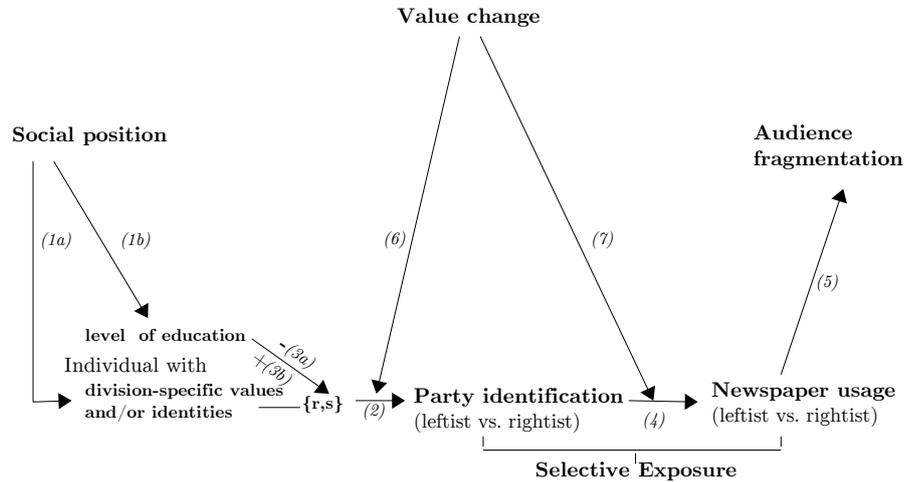
H_{3a}: The impact of division-specific values on the selective exposure effect decreases with post-materialist value change.

In addition, value change may motivate individuals to look for political information contradicting their respective value systems. In contrast to H_{3a} , we now argue that the opportunity structure directly affects individuals' *desire* for cognitive consonance: post-materialist value change may lead to an increase in the desire for openness to change and thereby to a decrease in closed-mindedness c which would in turn attenuate individuals' desire for consonant information (arrow 7):

H_{3b}: The selective exposure effect decreases with post-materialist value change.

Notably, in contrast to the preceding hypotheses, in H_{3b} we allow individuals' *desire* for cognitive consonance as part of the *action formation mechanism* to vary as well. While we concede that allowing for preference variability in cross-sectional models stands at risk of making them empirically unidentifiable, we postulate that this can be overcome in longitudinal analyses. Having outlined both a cross-sectional model of individuals' input desires and beliefs underlying their party identification and a longitudinal model specifying how the opportunity structure might account for the former, we argue that an additional direct effect of the opportunity structure in terms of value change on cognitive consonance would identify residual effects of preference variability *net of* individuals' beliefs.²²

²² We do not assume this strategy to fall prey to contextual fallacy (Hauser 1970): As the underlying mechanism refers to both cohort and climate effects, it should be passable to approximate both effects by macro variables only once respondents' age is controlled for.



Notes:

- (1a) Acquisition of position-specific desires and beliefs via rational imitation; formation of group-specific identities according to figure 1.
- (1b) Long-term situational mechanism of educational acquisition. Typical mechanisms of inequality generation passed on via primary (both genetic and socialization) and secondary social background effects (relative risk aversion).
- (2) Ideology-binding mechanism of party identification (leftist vs. rightist).
- (3) Positive net effect of education on strength of party identification as result of a weaker negative information processing mechanism (3a) and a stronger positive civic skill mechanism (3b). The dominant civic skill mechanism affects value relevance r and attitude strength s .
- (4) Action formation mechanism: Desire for cognitive consonance = $\min\{D_r, B_r\} - \{D_o, B_o\}$.
- (5) Transformational mechanism: Identification assumption of simple aggregation (no diffusion processes etc.).
- (6) Dealignment of position-specific desires and beliefs on the input level as a consequence of value change.
- (7) Reduction of desire for cognitive consonance by attenuation of closed-mindedness c as a consequence of value change.

Figure 3: The social mechanisms of selective exposure to newspapers in longitudinal perspective.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Identification of Social Mechanisms in Quantitative Analyses

Given a comprehensive explanation of situational and action-formation mechanisms is provided, multivariate regression models provide a convenient way to carry out statistical identification by quantitative methods. Multivariate models can control for a range of alternative influences, which are also specifiable in advance by means of theory-driven mechanism-based reasoning. With respect to the hypotheses outlined above, this section aims to clarify several prerequisites of the data structure necessary and several statistical techniques suitable to test for the hypotheses outlined before. Moreover, we provide plots based on hypothetical data which show how results would be expected to look if our hypotheses were true. We first stick to the identification of our cross-sectional hypotheses and then turn over to the longitudinal case.

Cross-sectional Identification

A mechanism-related challenge to be tackled by the quantitative analyst making use of whatever data²³ is the problem of *selection bias*: As it is known that individuals' probability to read newspapers in general (and, we would add, quality papers in particular) depends strongly on variables such as education, income, political interest, etc. (Meulemann 2012), the opposition of leftist vs. rightist quality paper readers will be a distorted sub-sample of the general population. As a consequence, both regression coefficients and their significance values of any equation relying on the sub-sample of quality paper readers only may be biased (Heckman 1979). Statistically, one way of controlling for selection on unobservables amounts to estimate two equations simultaneously: 1) the 'selection equation' into quality paper readership (e.g., by education, income, etc.), and the 'equation of primary interest', e.g., predicting quality paper readers' usage of leftist vs. rightist quality papers by their party preference.²⁴ Hence, already when testing for the most basal hypothesis H_1 which states that there will be selective exposure to leftist vs. rightist quality papers in accordance to individuals' leftist vs. rightist party identification, the issue of selection bias has to be addressed.

The next set of hypotheses $H_{2a,b}$, H_3 postulates the effect of leftist vs. rightist party preference on usage of leftist vs. rightist quality papers to vary by individuals' values and educational background, respectively. Statistically, testing for $H_{2a,b}$, H_3 amounts to compute *moderator effects*: the effect of one variable on another one can be significant for some level(s) of the moderator, but not for other ones, or can take very different coefficient signs. We believe that moderator effects aptly capture the idea of *middle-range theories* (Hedström/Udehn 2009; Merton 1957) postulating mechanisms which are only valid in a limited situational domain.

By referring to hypothetical data which were produced by generating patterns of leftist vs. rightist newspaper usage for people with different party preferences and (post)materialist values, *figure 4* illustrates how results would be expected to look if our hypothesis on individual value differences as moderators of selective exposure to newspapers was true.

²³ A promising dataset for an analysis of German newspaper usage in general is the 1998 file of the *German General Social Survey* (GGSS; available at GESIS under archive number ZA3753). For a more profound test of the SE hypotheses we recommend secondary analyses of the *German Media Analysis* data (also available at GESIS; cf. Hagenah et al. 2006; Hagenah/Meulemann 2009).

²⁴ For statistical identification purposes, the selection equation must contain one 'instrumental variable' which is neither theoretically nor statistically associated with the outcome of the equation of primary interest. For the present investigation, income of household might be such an instrument.

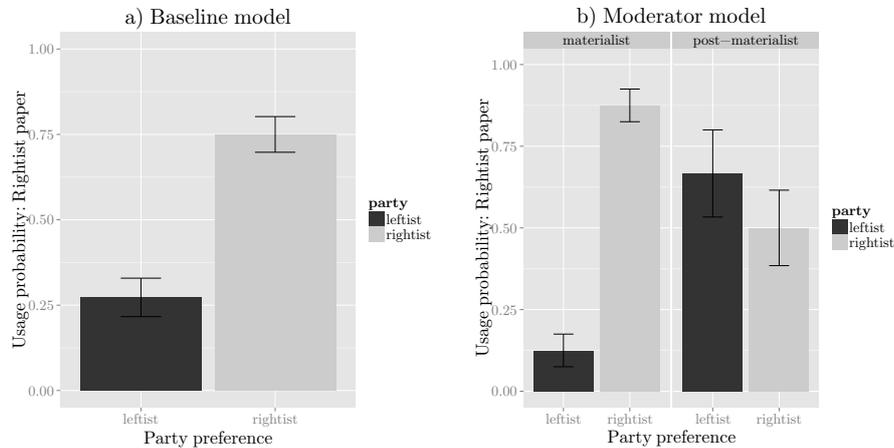


Figure 4: Illustration of cross-sectional interaction plots (hypothetical data).

The left panel of *figure 4* shows hypothetical results for the baseline test of H_1 . The outcome on the y axis constitutes individuals' probability to use rightist quality papers, which is conditioned by party preference. Here, we would conclude in favor of the SE hypothesis, as the probability to read rightist quality papers is significantly higher for individuals with a rightist party preference compared to those with a leftist one.

The right side of the panel shows hypothetical results if the artificial data were additionally conditioned by respondents' materialist vs. post-materialist values. We would conclude that the bivariate SE effect only holds for the materialists in the sample, whereas post-materialists, being more open-minded and/or holding less deep-rooted division-specific desires and beliefs, would show a higher preference for dissonant information (which is not significant here, though).

In sum, these hypothetical data show how the *psychological* mechanism of individuals' desire for consonance might be moderated by an additional *social* mechanism linking the division-specific materialist-postmaterialist value distinction to selective exposure to quality papers.

Longitudinal identification

In order to facilitate statistical analyses of cross-level moderator effects, we recommend computing a new SE criterion variable that takes the value 1 for consonant newspaper usage (i.e. leftist party preference and leftist newspaper usage, or rightist party preference and rightist newspaper usage) and 0 otherwise (also see *figures 2 and 3*). The reason for this strategy is that the longitudinal models which are necessary to test for hypotheses H_{3a} and H_{3b} should be estimated via *multilevel modeling* including cross-level interaction effects (for an introduction see Hox 2010).

According to a proposition by Yang and Land (2006), the age-period-cohort (APC) identification problem which emerges due to the linear dependency of $\text{period} = \text{cohort} + \text{age}$ can be circumvented if period and cohort are estimated as level-two random effects in a cross-classified multilevel model.²⁵ While it is still disputed if these models can actually 'solve' the APC identification problem statistically (Bell/Jones 2014), we hold the view that they are well-suited from an analytical perspective if not only the outcome's variance is decomposed into hopefully true age, period, and cohort effects—but if this variance is *explained* by predictor variables on each level that have been deduced by theory.

By content, this means that selective exposure to quality paper usage may not only vary by individuals' materialist vs. post-materialist values (as postulated by H_{2a}), but also by materialist post-materialist values as political 'climate' effects on the period level (H_{3b}). In addition to this pure contextual effect, H_{3b} postulates that the effect of individual values on selective exposure to quality papers varies by post-materialism both on the period and cohort level. In order to avoid three-way interactions between individual party preference, individual values, and values on either period or cohort level, we suggest computing a new outcome variable which directly measures consonant vs. dissonant quality paper usage. The latter can be predicted in a straightforward manner by simple two-way cross-level interaction effects between individual values and values on either period or cohort level. Ideally, all cross-classified multilevel models again control for the self-selection of respondents into quality paper readership.

Figures 5 and 6 once again illustrate the idea of cross-level interaction effects by drawing on hypothetical data. Imagine we had estimated a logistic cross-classified multilevel model with selective exposure (taking value 1 for newspaper usage in consonance with one's party preference and 0 otherwise) as an outcome, individual materialist vs. post-materialist values as the main predictor, and both period and cohort as the contextual-level units among which the estimate of (post)materialism may vary. *Figure 5* would plot both point estimates and confidence intervals of the effect of individuals' values (materialist/post-materialist) on selective exposure to quality papers. As the effect of (post)materialism on selective exposure is allowed to vary over both periods and cohorts, we also obtain separate parameter estimates and confidence intervals for each category of period (*figure 5a*) and cohort (*figure 5b*). As the point estimates of individual materialism on SE tend to get smaller for more recent periods, but not for younger cohorts, based on this hypothetical data one would infer that the materialism effect notably diminishes over periods, but remains relatively constant over birth cohorts.

²⁵ Cross-classified means that a respondent surveyed in 2000 and aged 40 is a member of the birth cohort group '1960–1965', but so is a respondent surveyed in 2010 and aged 50. Hence, period and cohort are partly overlapping (and not strictly 'nested' as students in school classes or respondents in nations).

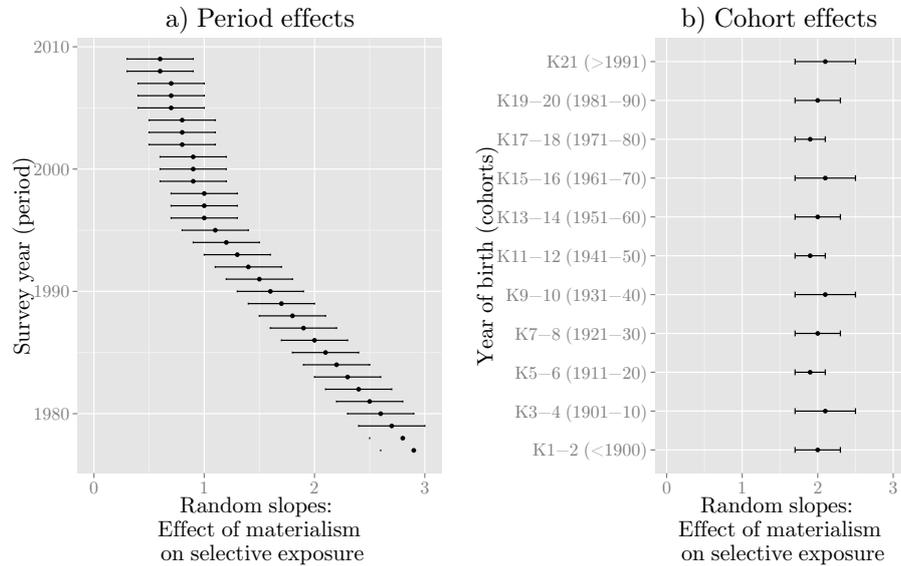


Figure 5: An illustration of random period and cohort effects (hypothetical data).

The question of interest would now be whether this reduction in effect size is due to post-materialist value change on the period level. Imagine that in addition to the hypothetical model underlying the plots shown in *figure 5*, we not only included an indicator measuring the average amount of (post)materialism in each category of period and cohort—but also the *cross-level interaction* between these *contextual-level* measures and the *individual-level* of (post)materialism. In *figure 6*, we would plot the predicted probabilities of individuals' SE to quality papers conditional on both individual (post)materialism and a dummy variable differentiating between materialist/post-materialist periods and cohorts.²⁶ In the left panel (*figure 6a*), we would observe that individuals' predicted probabilities of selective exposure to quality papers is highest for individuals holding materialist values and lowest for individuals holding post-materialist values. But we would also observe that this difference is larger for individuals surveyed in more materialist periods than for those surveyed in more post-materialist periods. In contrast, as the two lines in *figure 6b* are strictly parallel, one could not infer a similar conclusion for individuals who were born in materialist vs. post-materialist cohorts. Here, *figure 6* would suggest that in post-materialist *periods*, the effect of individual values on selective exposure is attenuated, while in materialist and post-materialist *cohorts*, the effect of individual values on SE remains constant.

²⁶ This dummy variable could be computed via a median split of the period- and cohort-specific metric ratios of post-materialists.

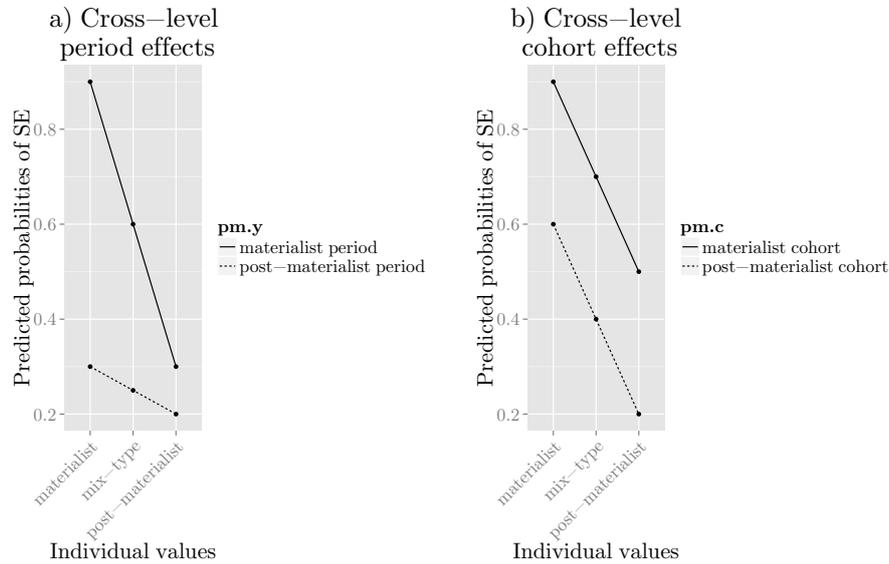


Figure 6: An illustration of predicted probability plots of cross-level interaction effects (hypothetical data).

4. Summary and Outlook

The overall aim of this paper was to provide a mechanism-based explanation of selective exposure (SE) to leftist vs. rightist newspapers and to illustrate its statistical identification. The *analytical objective* was to enrich available *psychological* mechanisms of SE by *social* (i.e. situational and action formation) mechanisms linking SE to sociologically relevant theoretical constructs such as individual values or educational background. The *substantive objective* was to deduce another set of social mechanisms about whether SE to quality newspapers remains stable in face of cultural change in terms of decreasing social cleavages.

Concerning the cross-sectional social mechanisms, we first provided a micro foundation of political cleavage theory. From the latter, we deduced that *division-specific desires and beliefs* will constitute one important social mechanism affecting the *personal value relevance* of individuals' leftist vs. rightist party identification. Second, we identified respondents' *education* to be linked to party identification by means of two social mechanisms counterbalancing each other: an *information processing* mechanism which is negatively, and a *civic skill* mechanism that is positively related to party identification. Yet, the net effect is expected to be positive. Individuals' educational background is in turn expected to moderate the value binding mechanism by affecting respondents' *attitude strength*. Third, we postulated post-materialist individuals to be less

prone to SE as their lower level of closed-mindedness also attenuates their desire for cognitive consonance.

Regarding the longitudinal social mechanisms, we referred to the hypothesis of decreasing political cleavages, and the theory of value change, as driving forces that might attenuate the SE effect either by less deep-rooted division-specific desires and beliefs or by reducing individuals' desire for cognitive consonance in general.

Finally, we illustrated how quantitative techniques in terms of (multilevel) moderator models could be used to empirically test for the social mechanisms outlined in the present paper. With respect to the longitudinal social mechanisms, we emphasized that period and cohort effects are caused by two different types of mechanisms which may be identified statistically by cross-classified random effects multilevel models. The study at hand shows that large scale survey data are compatible with a well-grounded action theory and a social mechanism explanation by applying, e.g., moderation or mediation analysis. These and other techniques of analysis set the ground to bridge the gap between data analysts and theoreticians in sociology and support the use of realistic empirical data to test the existence, stability and volatility of social mechanisms.

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