

Social Status, Lifestyle and Cultural Consumption

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This research project is a macro-sociological study of cultural consumption in seven countries: Britain, Chile, France, Hungary, Israel, the Netherlands and the US. We brought together an international team of scholars to study the social bases of cultural consumption. Based on analyses of existing survey data, we have investigated how cultural consumption is related to social status – a hierarchy of perceived and often accepted social superiority, equality and inferiority. We also examined how the status–consumption link might be modified by social class, education, income, age and gender.

KEY FINDINGS

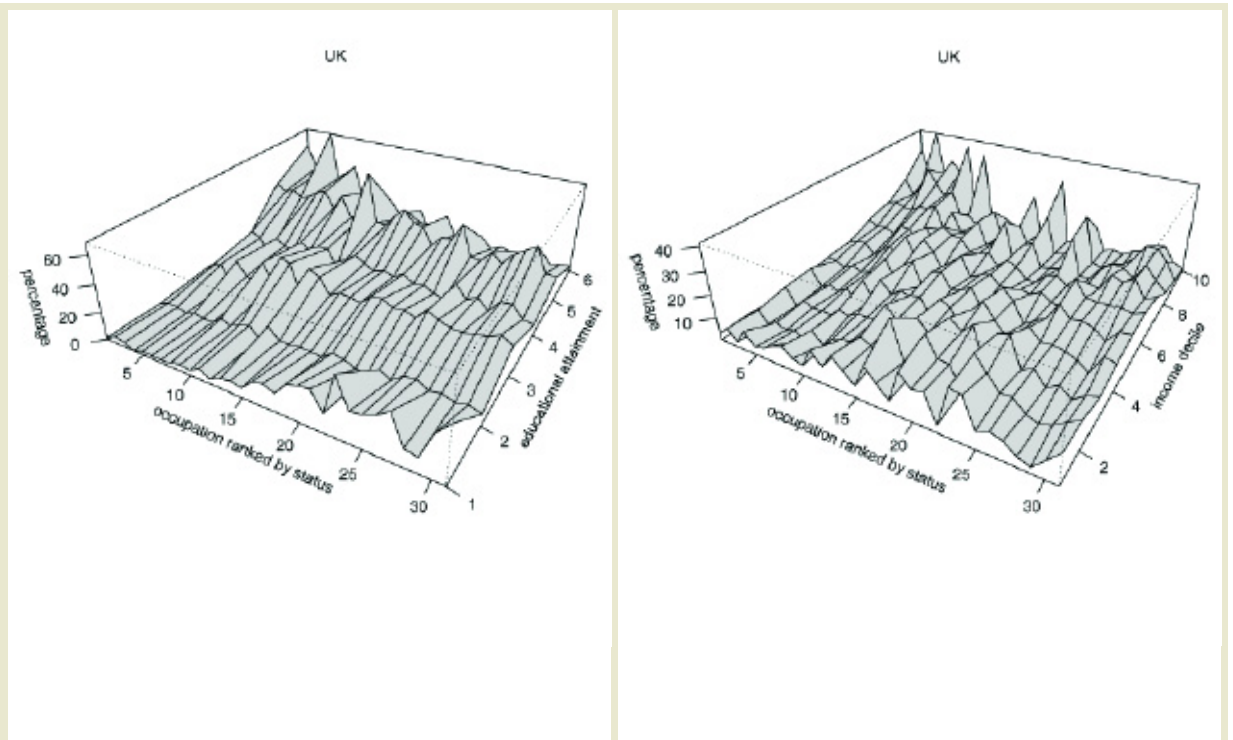
- A status order, in the classical Weberian sense, can still be identified in contemporary British society.
- Social class and social status are related, but they are not the same thing. There is a clear status gradient across classes, but the spread of status within certain classes is quite large, and there is considerable overlap of status between classes.
- It is education and social status, rather than social class, which predict lifestyle and cultural consumption.
- Cultural consumption is socially stratified, but not along an elite – mass line. Instead, the division is between *cultural omnivores* and *cultural univores*.

- Omnivores are those who consume both ‘high’ culture and ‘popular’ culture, while univores are those whose cultural consumption is restricted to one form only.
- Broadly comparable results are obtained in all countries in the project.

HIGHLIGHTS

Following Max Weber, we maintain that the distinction between ‘class’ and ‘status’ is crucial to understand how cultural consumption is stratified in contemporary societies. We regard a class structure as one formed by the social relations of economic life or, more specifically, by relations in labour markets and production units.

Figure 1:
Distribution of education and income within status groups

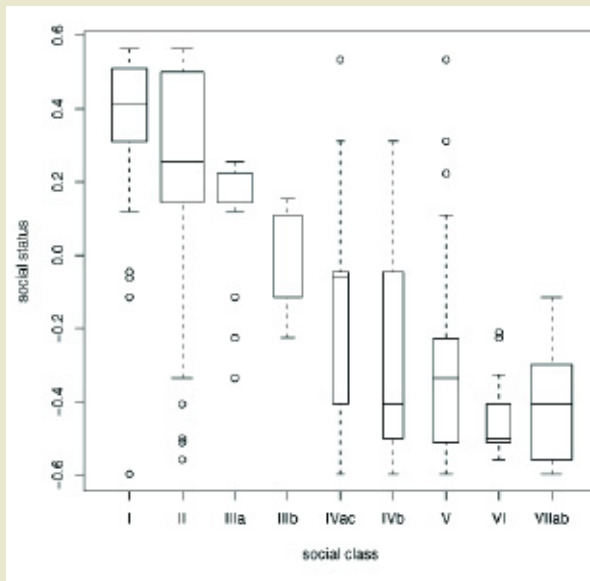


Findings:

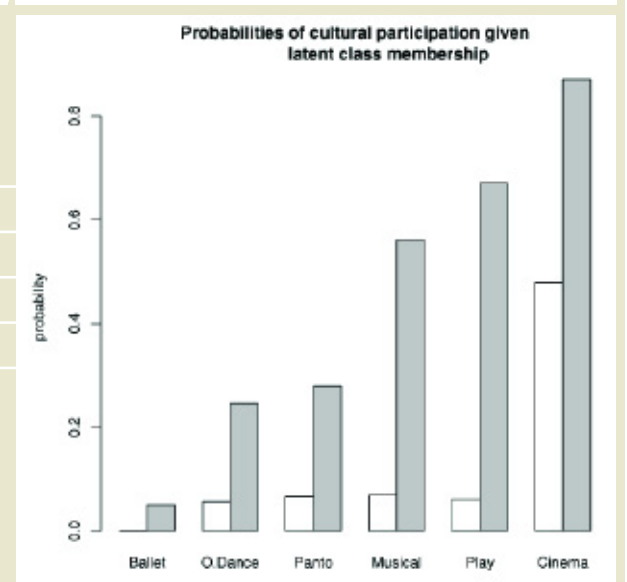
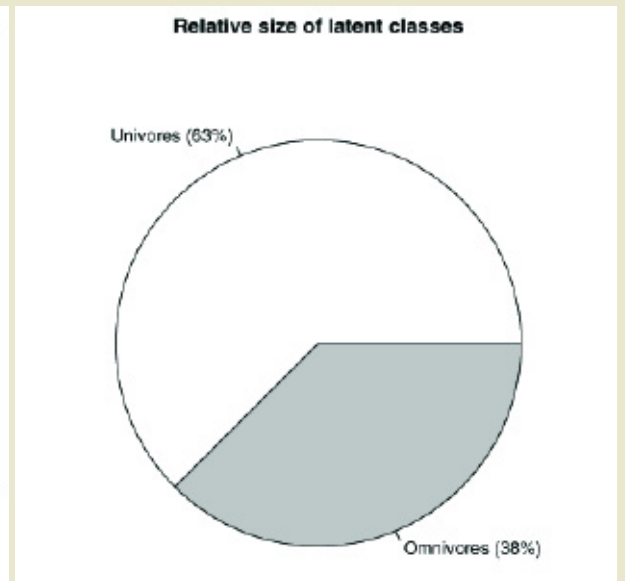
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Figure 2 (right):
Distribution of
status within and
between classes

Figure 3 (far
right): Latent
class solution



Cultural consumption is socially stratified, but not along an elite–mass line. Instead, the division is between cultural omnivores and cultural univores



By a status order, we refer to a structure of relations of perceived, and in some degree accepted, social superiority, equality and inferiority.

Social status is expressed primarily through patterns of intimate association: with whom you eat, and with whom you sleep. Based on data on close friendship from the British Household Panel Survey, we establish that a status order can still be identified in contemporary British society. Our results echo historians' accounts of the status order in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, with non-manual occupations ranking above manual occupations, and within non-manual occupations, professionals ranking above managers.

Social status is related to both education and income, but the correlation is quite modest (see figure 1). Status is also related to class, but they are not the same thing. Figure 2 shows a clear status gradient across social classes. However, the spread of status within class can be quite large, especially for class II (lower level salariat), class IV (self-employed and own-account workers) and class V (technicians and supervisors of manual workers).

Also, there is considerable overlap in social status between classes.

To investigate the social bases of cultural consumption, we use data collected in the *Arts in England Survey*. This survey was commissioned by Arts Council England, and was carried out in July to November 2001 by the Office for National Statistics (N=6,025). Our analysis was restricted to respondents aged 20–64.

The Arts in England Survey covers a wide range of cultural activities. We have carried out separate but parallel analyses of cultural consumption in three domains: (1) theatre, dance and cinema, (2) music, (3) the visual arts. In each domain, respondents were asked whether they have taken part in various cultural activities in the past 12 months.

Figure 3 shows that 'univores' account for just under two thirds of the sample. Their probability of going to the cinema is .48, and they are quite unlikely to have taken part in other cultural activities. By comparison, 'omnivores', which make up about a third of the sample, are much more likely to participate in all sorts of cultural activities, whether they are highbrow, middle-

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Table 1:
Percentage of respondents who have taken part in various cultural activities

Theatre dance and cinema	Visual arts	Music
Ballet 1.9	Video or electronic art 7.7	Opera (L) 5.7
Other dance 12.7	Cultural festival 11.0	Jazz (L) 6.3
Pantomime 14.6	Craft exhibition 18.5	Classical (L) 10.2
Musical 25.4	Exhibition 21.0	Pop/rock (L) 23.2
Play/drama 29.0	Museum/art gallery 38.7	Opera (M) 16.3
Cinema 62.7		Jazz (M) 24.7
		Classical (M) 51.9
		Pop/rock (M) 88.5

Note: For music, (L) attending live concerts in past 12 months, (M) listening through media in past four weeks.

Using 'latent class analysis', we show that cultural consumers in this domain fall into one of two types: 'omnivores' or 'univores'.

brow or lowbrow. Thus, cultural consumption is clearly stratified, but not along the elite–mass line. Rather, the division is between cultural omnivores and cultural univores.

Membership in one or the other types of cultural consumers is clearly patterned. Women are generally more likely than men to be cultural omnivores, and so are older people as compared with younger people. In terms of social stratification, it is education, income and status, but not social class, which predict cultural consumption.

Similar results are obtained for other cultural domains, and for other countries in this project.

‘MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

An argument that underlies much current discussion of cultural policy is what we label as the 'homology' argument. What this argument claims is that social hierarchies and cultural hierarchies map closely onto each other. Individuals in higher social strata are those who prefer, and predominantly consume 'high' or 'elite' culture; and individuals in lower strata are those who

prefer, and predominantly consume, 'popular' or 'mass' culture. Some kind homology argument often lies behind criticism of public funding for the arts – insofar as the arts are associated with high culture. Such funding is seen to reinforce class and status divisions in society rather than contributing to greater social integration. New Labour policy in regard to the arts has been influenced by such criticism – leading to a governmental demand that public funding for the arts should be linked to a requirement that the arts show a commitment to overcoming 'social exclusion'.

Our research shows the problems with this line of reasoning. In England today, we are unable to identify any numerically significant group of cultural consumers whose consumption is essentially confined to high cultural forms and who reject, or at least do not participate in, more popular forms. Any such group that may exist is, at all events, too small to be reliably determined even within a relatively large national sample (one in fact of over 6000 respondents). And, we can further say, this negative finding is for the most part replicated in the other countries in our comparative

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project. So the debate about elitism versus dumbing down in cultural consumption is a little misplaced.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Our research was supported by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme (grant number: RES-154-25-2006) and ran from October 2004 to March 2007. The principal investigator was Tak Wing Chan (Oxford). Other investigators: Arthur Alderson (Indiana); Erzs/ebet Bukodi (Florence); Philippe Coulangeon (Paris); John H Goldthorpe (Oxford); Tally Katz-Gerro (Haifa); Gerbert Kraaykamp (Nijmegen); Yannick Lemel (Paris); Florencia Torche (New York); Wout Ultee (Nijmegen); Koen van Eijck (Leuven) and Meir Yaish (Haifa). We are grateful to Arts Council England for access to the detailed occupational codes of the Arts in England data set. The views expressed in this paper are entirely our own, and not necessarily those of the Arts Council.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

Chan T. W. and Goldthorpe J. H. 'Is There a Status Order in Contemporary British Society? Evidence from the Occupational Structure of Friendship', *European Sociological Review*, 20(5) (2004), pp.383-401.

Chan T. W. and Goldthorpe J. H. 'The Social Stratification of Theatre, Dance and Cinema Attendance', *Cultural*

Trends, 14(3) (2005), pp.193-212.

Chan T. W. and Goldthorpe J. H. 'Class and Status: The Conceptual Distinction and its Empirical Relevance', *American Sociological Review* (forthcoming, 2007).

Chan T. W. and Goldthorpe J. H. 'Social Status and Newspaper Readership', *American Journal of Sociology*, 112(4) (2007), pp.1095-1134.

Chan T. W. and Goldthorpe J. H. 'Social Stratification and Cultural Consumption: Music in England', *European Sociological Review*, 23(1) (2007), pp.1-19.

Chan T. W. and Goldthorpe J. H. 'Social Stratification and Cultural Consumption: The Visual Arts in England', *Poetics* (forthcoming, 2007).

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

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