# Class dis-identification, cultural stereotypes, and music preferences: Experimental evidence from the UK

Aaron Reeves [a,*], Emily Gilbert [b], Daniel Holman [c]

[a] Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom
[b] Department of Quantitative Social Science, UCL Institute of Education, London, United Kingdom
[c] Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom

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A B S T R A C T

Do people change their cultural preferences in social interactions where social class is particularly salient? It remains unclear whether cultural preferences vary across interactions or whether they are stable over time. We argue that individuals may alter their cultural preferences over time and that this will be influenced by both the specifics of a particular social interaction and the 'cultural politics of class' in which that interaction is embedded. Using a lab-based split-ballot experiment in a research university in the East of England ($n=300$), we examine preferences towards music genres depending on whether respondents are assigned to one of three experimental conditions: (1) a vignette describing someone who is working class, (2) a vignette describing someone who is middle class or (3) no vignette. Those born in the UK alter the strength of their preferences towards highbrow music genres when social class is made more salient. When the salience of class is increased it also activates particular cultural stereotypes and these stereotypes influence the strength of respondents' preferences towards highbrow music genres. This mechanism suggests that individuals use cultural stereotypes in social interaction to position themselves and others in the social hierarchy through cultural preferences.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0)1865 286177.
E-mail address: aaron.reeves@sociology.ox.ac.uk (A. Reeves).

## 1. Introduction

The cultural turn in stratification studies has examined how cultural practices and preferences are embedded within and constitutive of the social hierarchy (Reeves, 2012; Savage et al., 2013). Underlying much of this research is an assumption that cultural preferences are relatively stable across social interactions. However, there are reasons to be cautious about this hypothesis. Cultural preferences are different from cultural practices, and may be subject to short-term fluctuations (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007). Additionally, the pattern of class dis-identification in the UK – whereby respondents avoid labelling themselves as being a member of a particular social class despite being familiar with class rhetoric – has emphasised cultural signals of social position (Skeggs, 2004). One manifestation of this tendency is the practice of avoiding the social sin of snobbery (Bennett et al., 2009; Skeggs, 2004), where people do not describe themselves as 'middle class' for fear of being labelled a snob (Savage et al., 2010). Finally, cultural preferences mark individuals as being members of particular social positions and may shape friendship networks (Chan, 2010; Vaisey and Lizardo, 2010). Taken together, this research suggests that the 'cultural politics of class' – which is concerned with how culture is associated with power structures but also how social groups are (de)valued based on their social position – means that individuals alter cultural preferences depending on the specifics of a particular social interaction (Savage et al., 2010).

Using a lab-based split-ballot experiment conducted in a UK university, this paper examines how occupational class and cultural engagement intersect (Savage et al., 2013) by testing if musical preferences vary depending on whether social class is made salient. In particular, we sought to answer the question: do cultural preferences change in social interactions where social class is particularly salient? We find that among those born in the UK the strength of their preferences towards highbrow music genres alters when social class is more salient. Further the salience of class activates cultural stereotypes which, in turn, influences the strength of respondents' preferences towards highbrow music genres.

### 1.1. The cultural politics of music

Cultural practices and preferences mark ourselves in relation to others (Bourdieu, 1984; Lizardo, 2006) because they differ across the social hierarchy; for example, university graduates and non-graduates tend to have different cultural preferences and practices (Chan, 2010). This difference is manifest both in the propensity for those higher up the social hierarchy to pursue more highbrow tastes but also in the range of cultural tastes in which individuals will express a positive preference (Bennett et al., 2009). These tendencies are observed in many cultural domains but especially in music (Bryson, 1996; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007; Savage, 2006).

Music is an interesting case because it is both pervasive and also deeply divided (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007; Savage, 2006). Musical taste is a way of identifying with a particular group or subculture while dis-identifying with other groups (Kruse, 1993). This may be manifest in preferences for particular artists, genres and even labels. Rhetorical distinctions between 'pop', 'alternative' or 'indie' capture mainstream or oppositional positions in the cultural field. In many cases, such distinctions are drawn consciously (Kruse, 1993). Similarly, Thornton (1995) observes that such distinctions, e.g., between 'mainstream' and 'hip', are incredibly forceful in defining hierarchies within a specific subculture.

For Bourdieu, 'nothing more clearly affirms one's "class" . . . than tastes in music' (Bourdieu, 1984: 18). According to one UK-based survey (Bennett et al., 2009), almost everyone in the adult sample owned some recorded music and some of these individuals were devoted music fans. Music spans both elite and popular cultures, is especially divided, has low financial barriers to participation (Edelmann and Vaisey, 2014), and is a contentious domain of the cultural field (Bennett et al., 2009; Savage, 2006). Perhaps due to the pervasiveness and divisiveness of music, people express both positive preferences towards a variety of musical genres but are also willing to express intense dislike of certain genres (Savage, 2006). Shared music consumption is as important as shared non-consumption because tastes are cultural schemas which draw distinctions between groups (Edelmann and Vaisey, 2014). Symbolic exclusion along musical boundaries is common in many settings. In the