



'I'm not a snob, but . . . ': Class boundaries and the downplaying of difference

Vegard Jarness^{a,*}, Sam Friedman^b

^a Department of Sociology, University of Bergen, Norway

^b Department of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom



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ABSTRACT

In this article we demonstrate how upper-middle-class respondents in Norway and the UK draw strong symbolic boundaries based on cultural taste and lifestyle. However, we also find that such expressions of judgment are marshalled in interview settings by a strong moral imperative to appear open, tolerant and respectful of others. We argue that these apparently contradictory accounts represent the collision of interviewees' spontaneous *visceral* and scripted *honourable* selves. We also focus on how this complex presentation of self plays out in social life – both in terms of respondents' interactions with ourselves, as interviewees, and in their recollections of everyday-life encounters with those very different to themselves. Strikingly aware that others may perceive them as 'snobbish' and 'elitist', interviewees go to lengths to downplay difference in social encounters. Such reflexive monitoring of self-presentation, we argue, constitutes a distinct Bourdieusian 'strategy of condescension', allowing the privileged to both benefit publically from adherence to culturally dominant norms of openness, while continuing to privately harbour private feelings of snobbery. Thus, contrary to claims that the pervasiveness of egalitarian moral sentiments makes cultural-aesthetical boundaries less effective in social life, we argue that flying under the moral radar of egalitarian sentiments may – intentionally or otherwise – help secure the legitimacy of cultural distinctions.

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1. Introduction

Do class-structured lifestyle differences imply that the upper-middle classes are hostile to, and even avoid interaction with, working-class people? According to the longstanding, yet frequently contested, thesis forwarded by Pierre Bourdieu they do, and violently so: 'Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different life-styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes' (Bourdieu, 1984: 56). Framed in Weberian terms, Bourdieu held that the social space – his concept of social class – 'tends to function symbolically as a *space of life-styles* or as a set of *Stände*, of groups characterized by different life-styles' (Bourdieu, 1985: 730). This symbolic function is in effect a *masking* of underlying social class divisions: people tend to view differences in lifestyles in an 'innocent' language of likes and dislikes, yet the (often unintended) consequences of people's choices of friends, spouses and neighbourhoods include group formation, symbolic boundaries and social exclusion.

* Corresponding author at: University of Bergen, Department of Sociology, Postboks 7802, N-5020 Bergen, Norway.
E-mail address: vegard.jarness@uib.no (V. Jarness).

Against the backdrop of Bourdieu's advances, sociologists have increasingly questioned the relevance of this model beyond the case of 1960s France. Objections include the arguments that historical developments have made cultural distinctions less pervasive over time (e.g. Chan, 2010; Peterson & Kern, 1996), and that cross-national differences indicate that Bourdieu's advances are 'typically French' and not readily generalizable to other national contexts (e.g. Lamont, 1992, 2000). In short, because upper-middle-class people are becoming less snobbish and more egalitarian – or so the arguments go – the less consequential differences in lifestyles are in terms of cultural hostility.

Our aim in this article is twofold. First of all, we map and compare class-cultural boundaries in Norway and the UK, drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with subsamples of upper-middle-class respondents from both countries. A comparison of these countries is particularly fruitful with regards to what Lamont (1992) terms national repertoires of evaluation, i.e. the culturally specific classification systems people draw on to make sense of their and other people's way of life. On the one hand we have the UK, a country where class division has a long and culturally significant history, e.g. between the nobility and the commoners, the middle and working classes, and more recently between an 'ordinary elite' and a growing 'preariat' (Savage et al., 2015; Skeggs, 1997); on the other we have comparatively egalitarian Norway, characterized by the absence of an influential nobility or a strong industrial bourgeoisie (Sejersted, 1993) and where egalitarian sentiments are highly prevalent in expressions of self and interactional styles (Gullestad, 1992; Hansen, 2012; Jarness, 2013; Ljunggren, 2015; Mangset, 2015). Some scholars even argue that strong moral values encouraging refrain from judgment make Norway an exceptional case when it comes to symbolic boundaries (Sakslind & Skarpenes, 2014; Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2010). Thus, a comparison of these presumably different countries is particularly suited to an investigation of class-cultural boundaries: previous sociological accounts would lead one to believe that Britons are somewhat 'snobbier' in their evaluations of others and, conversely, that Norwegians are markedly more tolerant.

Our findings suggest that the prevalence of boundary drawing is strikingly similar across both countries. Yet we find that these judgments appear only fleetingly in interviews and are marshalled by a morally-driven desire to downplay class difference and cultural distinction. We argue that this monitoring of self-presentation is constitutive of the 'practical sense' embodied in the habitus of the upper-middle classes and, if effective, may function as one means through which they exercise symbolic domination. In particular, it constitutes a distinct 'strategy of condescension' (Bourdieu, 1984: 472), allowing respondents to conceal powerfully felt feelings of judgement, and therefore circumvent any suspicion of snobbery from those in less privileged positions. This process, we argue, permits very feelings of cultural distinction to fly under a dominant moral radar of tolerance and egalitarianism – even if this is not an intended pursuit on the part of social actors.

Second, in developing this empirical argument we also advance a methodological case for the use of particular interviewing techniques in investigating class-cultural boundaries. In particular, we follow Pugh (2013) in urging researchers to mine, analytically, the seemingly contradictory information that interviews elicit about people's 'honourable' and 'visceral' selves. Such data not only helps elucidate how equally real sentiments of snobbishness and openness often co-exist in the socially advantaged, but it can also reveal the 'meta-feelings' through which people grapple with how they feel and how they feel they ought to feel (Hochschild, 2012). One fruitful way to elicit such meta-feelings, we argue, is to use the interview-setting to probe people's recollections of cross-class encounters. These accounts offer fertile territory for probing how people negotiate potential interstices between their normative attitudes towards those different from themselves, and their actual feelings when thrust into cross-class interactions.

2. Boundary drawing: connecting the honourable, the visceral and the strategic

A central tenet of Bourdieusian thought is that lifestyle differences are linked to misapprehended relations of domination between the upper and lower classes, expressed in the latter's compliance with the status quo. According to Bourdieu (1977, 1984), power differentials linked to class-structured lifestyles are misrecognised by social actors, meaning that power relations are not perceived for what they objectively are, but in a form that renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder. Legitimacy in this sense does not imply that power relations are acknowledged, accepted, or even explicitly perceived. On the contrary, it results from a misconception of the real basis of asymmetric power relations, which, according to Bourdieu, is the unequal distribution of various forms of capital. The legitimacy of power relations is thus secured because the question of legitimacy is not raised. Power relations are naturalised and taken for granted and remain in the realm of doxa, 'the universe of the undisputed'. Meanwhile, the symbolic value of, and social prestige associated with, specific cultural practices are maintained through institutional recognition, consecration and canonisation in the fields of cultural production and education.

In contemporary class and stratification research, several streams have challenged this model of symbolic domination. Most notably, some proponents of the 'cultural omnivore' thesis argue that the eclectic taste orientations of recent generations of the upper-middle class indicates a marked blurring of class-structured cultural distinctions (for overviews, see Hazir & Warde, 2016; Ollivier, 2008; Peterson, 2005). The figure of the 'highbrow snob' exclusively appreciating goods inaccessible to the wider public, they argue, is therefore losing prevalence. Although there are several authors who have pointed out that this development was foreshadowed, and even a central part of, Bourdieu's initial advances (Friedman, Savage, Hanquinet, & Miles, 2015; Jarness, 2015; Johnston & Baumann, 2014), the usual tendency in the literature is to frame findings of omnivorousness as a rebuttal of Bourdieu's model (see e.g. Chan, 2010; Warde, 2011).

However, there is a serious problem with the notions of 'openness' and 'snobbishness' operationalised in this stream of research; in particular, analytical aspects of taste (i.e. evaluations, classifications and judgments of cultural and material

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