Comments on "Understanding Cultural Omnivores: Social and Political Attitudes" by Tak Wing Chan and "Class and Status: On the Misconstrual of the Conceptual Distinction and a Neo-Bourdieusian Alternative" by Magne Flemmen, Vegard Jarness, and Lennart Rosenlund

Irmak Karademir Hazir
Oxford Brookes University

How cultural tastes relate to the formation, maintenance, and reproduction of social stratification processes is still central to the debates held in class analysis. Most of the recent empirical research tends to align with one of two broad camps in this field, one utilising Bourdieusian concepts and the other drawing on Goldthorpe and Chan's Weber-inspired approach. It is important to note that the former body of work is quite heterogeneous in terms of the methods used in the analysis and interpretation of findings vis-à-vis Bourdieu's original thesis. However, both streams of research have provided evidence against the individualisation thesis and others announcing the decline in the explanatory power of social class. That said, in my opinion, the two original papers in this special section have very little in common in terms of how they measure and make sense of the distinct taste profiles they observe in their own national contexts.

Chan's paper aims to unpack social attitudes of omnivores and builds on his earlier research with Goldthorpe (e.g., Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007), which provides an elaborate discussion of their understanding of class and status. The paper also has a clear motivation to challenge the Bourdieusian version of omnivorousness as a mark of distinction. I find Chan's question of 'who are these omnivores?' highly relevant; despite the breadth of the literature on the cultural profiles of omnivores, we don't know much about the extent to which their supposed tolerance—evidenced in a willingness to cross hierarchical taste boundaries—is mirrored in other dispositions. However, I don't think that Chan's operationalisations do justice to the complex, dynamic, and multi-faceted character of cultural repertoires. For instance, Chan argues that only a small portion of the culturally and economically advantaged now engages with conventional 'highbrow' culture, but he continues to take their appreciation as the sole indicator of a repertoire of distinction. Why should we consider those practices to indicate highbrow taste, if "the majority of individuals in advantaged positions do not consume highbrow culture at all"? (Chan, p. 2). As stated by many others, legitimacy is granted to cultural products and profiles through a long process in which many institutional and non-institutional actors play a role. Therefore, perhaps measurements that acknowledge the

embeddedness of the legitimation process in context would be more reliable compared to those that treat highbrow culture as a category frozen in time. One way of doing this is to link legitimacy to the tastes of the highly educated and define what should be considered as 'highbrow' in that particular sample. Warde and Gayo-Cal (2009) and more recently Hanquinet (2017) used such a measure to define taste boundaries, and they demonstrated how different orders of distinction can coexist. Also, automatically attributing mediums (e.g., exhibitions) a status (e.g., highbrow) regardless of their contents can impose serious limitations on attempts to delineate the transformation of cultural repertoires.

Chan implies a connection between someone's self-awareness in terms of cultural resources and the disposition to perform distinction. He cites Bourdieu in that "cultural consumption fulfils a social function of legitimating social differences" and he suggests that to regard omnivorousness as a repertoire of distinction, omnivores should *act*, deliberately or not, to realise this function. Further in the analysis, Chan finds that omnivores (as measured in his study) are not significantly different from univores in the significance they attribute to their profession and education. Connecting these two assumptions, Chan implies that the thesis of omnivorousness as a mark of distinction is refuted. However, this account reduces those with high levels of capital and power of legitimation to self-conscious 'snobs' who consume and like 'accordingly'. I do not think the proponents of omnivorousness as a distinction thesis assume those people to be necessarily status-conscious. From a Bourdieusian perspective, what matters is whether or not the embodiment of a certain cultural disposition grants advantages in other social fields or is misrecognised by others as a deserved natural capacity. From my point of view, to assess how broader cultural repertoires have become a tool for performing 'distinction', we need to inspect their capacity to reproduce cultural inequalities rather than looking at how conscious the profile holders are. Disregarding cultural omnivorousness as a symbolic expression of class domination on the basis of a lack of status consciousness is also problematic in light of recent and extensive empirical research inspired by Bourdieu (i.e. cultural class analysis), demonstrating how little consciousness or class identification relates to the operation of class cultural hierarchies. Finally, I think it would be unfortunate to limit our discussion of the change in taste repertoires to a 'tolerance versus distinction' dichotomy, given the robust literature demonstrating the heterogeneity of eclectic profiles (e.g., Bellavance, 2008; Ollivier, 2008; Warde and Gayo-Cal, 2009; Lopez-Sintas and Katz-Gerro, 2005) and their varied implications in social life (e.g., Freidman, 2014).

Both the dataset and the analytical method employed in the article of Flemmen, Jarness, and Rosenlund are successful in revealing this variation in cultural profiles. They aim to challenge Chan and Goldthorpe's interpretation of Bourdieu's perspective as being one-dimensional by empirically showing how his approach could be put to use to distinguish stratification on multiple levels. In other words, Flemmen et al. argue that the same toolbox Bourdieu used to show the homology between social space and space of lifestyles can be utilised to show the points of mismatch between the two, revealing distinctions between Weberian Status[1] and Class.

I share the reservations of Flemmen et al. in regards to measuring the distribution of social honour, namely Status, by classifying occupational groups on the basis of their friendship patterns and artificially ranking them, as Chan and Goldthorpe do. I agree that multi-layered processes, many material, are at play when it comes to the formation and maintenance of social networks. To be more precise, differential association is influenced far too much by economic factors to measure Status, which is supposed to indicate a form of stratification outside of the material realm. Criticising this, Flemmen et al. inductively map the available impressively broad lifestyle indicators and find different 'Status' groups within the Norwegian space of lifestyles. As revealed in their analysis, this space of lifestyle is not completely parallel with social space. It seems that similar positions in social space can have different forms of conditioning, especially due to the impact that age and gender make on the generative principle called 'habitus'. This finding is parallel with that of Bennett et al. (2009) within the context of the UK; it also reveals the conditions that 'intervene' in the homological conditioning of the space of lifestyle vis-à-vis the social space. This is in decided contrast to the approach of Chan and Goldthorpe, which assumes the status order to be structured solely on socially related occupational groups. Of course, they do acknowledge the influence of other ascribed characteristics such as ethnicity or religiosity, but still prefer to assume that "the status-conferring effects of occupation are largely replicated" within each grouping (Chan and Goldthorpe, p. 515). Chan and Goldthorpe assume this to be the case in the UK, based upon Laumann's measurements of the interaction effect. Unfortunately, their scale was designed to be blind to any other status group distinctions, which cannot be captured by the differential association-based ranking of occupations—which I think reveals the limits of that attempt to 'save' the multidimensionality of stratification.

[1] I am using the capital letter S here to refer to status as honour, as described by Weber, rather than status as social position.

Flemmen et al. criticise Chan and Goldthorpe for lumping status and non-status forms of inequality together in the pursuit of creating a scale for the distribution of honour in a given society. They suggest that "the economic and symbolic…can be analytically distinguished and empirically modelled" (p. 19), mapping the distributions of capital and lifestyle indicators separately. Their analysis reveals different clusters; however, the extent to which social prestige is yielded by social profiles, or the directionality of the hierarchy amongst them, is only meaningful as long as the space of lifestyle is parallel to the social space. In other words, we consider 'the traditional and established' cluster to have higher Status than the 'illegitimates' not because the classical music they like is more valuable intrinsically but rather because they correspond to respective positions in the hierarchically ordered social space. What Flemmen et al. define as autonomy then potentially generates problems for understanding and explaining the power dynamics between different lifestyle groups. How can we assess the symbolic value of the status groups that emerge outside of the principle of homology? For instance, what is the symbolic value of the status (as honour) of an 'action and excitement seeking' cluster compared to an 'emotional and traditional' cluster?

Flemmen et al. consider this misalignment as a sign of autonomy, and as a proof of Bourdieusian methodology's capacity to reveal multi-dimensionality. However, it occurs to me that to be able to speak about autonomy, we should be able to estimate the symbolic value of each lifestyle cluster within the space itself. In this current picture, we derive the symbolic value of certain clusters via homology principle (e.g., assigning titles such as 'legitimate' based on the fact that the cluster is drawn towards the end of the social space rich in capital), but others are value-neutral 'status situations'. Age and gender seem to be effective in the structuring of these situations in this Norwegian context, but it is likely that more of these situations would emerge in studies of this kind, perhaps in different national contexts, if elements of lifestyle that potentially generate religio-ethnic status distinctions are incorporated into the measurement tools. Faced with the existence of many clusters, some taking their value from the social space and some not, how do we theorise the system that reproduces these patterns? On a more theoretical level, Flemmen et al.'s paper has more potential to inspire readers to ask how far Bourdieu's theory on the reproduction of inequalities holds if the homology principle operates selectively, rather than making them appreciate its potential to reveal different class and status configurations.

In an earlier debate on the concept of cultural capital, Goldthorpe (2007a) accused those who sought to refine it with 'domesticating' Bourdieu's theory. According to him, the challenge

lies in “how much of the theoretical baggage that comes with the concept in its original version these sociologists would wish to retain and how much to jettison” (Goldthorpe, 2007b, p. 5). While I do not agree with the strictness of Goldthorpe’s perspective, I do think that we should put more effort into clarifying how we can make sense of the findings that do not sit easily with the broader assumptions of the theoretical framework that we are refining[2]. To strengthen the approach Flemmen et al. suggest in their paper, the ‘holes’ that appear in Bourdieu’s much contested homology thesis need to be empirically and theoretically explored further. I would like to think more about how we could assess the symbolic power of status groups that do and do not align with that of the social space, the extent to which they differ in terms of how they classify themselves and others, and of course what implications they would have for the neo-Bourdieusian agenda that the authors propose.

Finally, for the sake of the omnivore debate that Chan empirically engages with, I think we should start asking questions about the processes beyond individuals’ immediate appreciation. For instance, to what extent are omnivore repertoires legitimised through cultural intermediaries (e.g., art critics)? Are crossing the boundaries of taste and knowing a bit about everything appreciated and promoted by the agents of transmission and reproduction (e.g., school curricula of elite institutions)? To what extent is cultural openness sought after in the field of employment; does it have a currency outside of the field of cultural consumption? Analysis of transmission and conversation has the potential to reveal the value of a particular cultural disposition and the role it plays in the reproduction of inequalities. Overall, Bourdieu’s central thesis is that culture has an *economy* of its own, so any assessment of a change in repertoires, and its compatibility with Bourdieu’s arguments, should include the analysis of this economy and the broader processes of legitimation and exchange.

Bellavance, G (2008) Where’s high? Who’s low? What’s new? Classification and stratification inside cultural ‘repertoires’. *Poetics* 36(2–3): 189–216

Chan, T. W., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (2007). Class and status: The conceptual distinction and its empirical relevance. *American sociological review*, *72*(4), 512-532.

Goldthorpe, J. H. (2007a). " Cultural Capital": Some Critical Observations. *Sociologica*, *1*(2)

[2] The concluding chapter of Bennett et al. (2009) addresses these issues very succinctly.

Goldthorpe, J. H. (2007b)."Cultural Capital": Some Critical Observations: A Response. *Sociologica*, *1*(2)

Hanquinet, L. (2017). Exploring Dissonance and Omnivorousness: another look into the rise of eclecticism. *Cultural Sociology*, *11*(2), 165-187.

López-Sintas, J., & Katz-Gerro, T. (2005). From exclusive to inclusive elitists and further: Twenty years of omnivorousness and cultural diversity in arts participation in the USA. *Poetics*, *33*(5), 299-319.

Ollivier, M (2008) Modes of openness to cultural diversity: Humanist, populist, practical, and indifferent. *Poetics* 36(2–3): 120–147

Warde, A, Gayo-Cal, M (2009) The anatomy of cultural omnivorousness: The case of the United Kingdom. *Poetics* 37(2): 119–145