

# RESEARCH FOR THE WORLD

## A life less ordinary? Why highbrow pursuits are out of fashion for today's elites

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For over a century *Who's Who* has functioned as a bible of the British establishment. The most authoritative and trusted catalogue of who is (and who is not) in the country's true upper echelons, it reveals much about elites and their relationship to wider society. **Sam Friedman** and **Aaron Reeves** explain.

In June 2019, as he vied for the Conservative leadership, Boris Johnson was asked by a journalist what he liked to do in his spare time. His answer might have included reading Thucydides or enjoying opera; both recreations we know he enjoys. Yet Johnson's reply elided any of these highbrow pursuits. His real passion, he told the interviewer, was making model buses out of wooden crates. Discounted by some as pointless trivia, Boris' buses are actually representative of a much wider sea change in the way elites signal their cultural distinction.

We recently brokered access to data on the "recreations" of over 70,000 entrants included in *Who's Who* – a unique catalogue of the British elite – since 1897. And our analysis reveals something intriguing; we now live in an era of distinctly *ordinary* elite distinction.



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The dominant mode of contemporary elite culture is omnivorous; most retain some preferences for traditionally highbrow culture, along with critically-acclaimed popular tastes in music and film. Yet tellingly, such legitimate preferences are increasingly positioned alongside a set of more mundane and everyday cultural

practices that signal very little in relation to conventional ideas about cultural capital. Some of the fastest growing elite pastimes over the last 30 years, for example, are spending time with family and friends, or caring for pets.

This doesn't necessarily mean elites are *actually* becoming ordinary, of course. The data in *Who's Who* is intriguing not because it documents what elites do, culturally, but more because it reveals how they wish to present and perform their cultural selves *publicly*.

## A class act

The distinctly public-facing nature of *Who's Who* (which is fully searchable online) is central to understanding the move toward ordinary elite distinction. Put simply, the expression of everyday cultural preferences performs an important signalling function for elites.

Research suggests that many people distinguish strongly between elites they see as decent and open and those they see as snobbish and condescending. Elites are not viewed with suspicion because they are elite; rather, it is any perceived smugness that rouses negative reactions.

Considering this, it is possible to read the very public expression of ordinary cultural preferences in *Who's Who* as an attempt to forge cultural connection and claim authenticity with the public, while at the same time retaining many of the highbrow tastes that continue to function as a form of cultural capital. This careful manufacture of ordinary self-presentation is effective in securing elite distinction because it means the actual cultural boundaries between elites and others are not questioned, as individuals in lower class positions no longer see the highbrow elements of the elite taste palette as status-seeking.

This has taken on particular significance in recent years. Our analysis indicates that the rise of ordinary elite distinction is most clear cut from the 1990s onward, coinciding neatly with the continuing rise of the top one percent.

Put simply, as elites have pulled away economically, there is mounting evidence that they are increasingly insecure about their moral legitimacy, and increasingly sensitive to public concern they are snobbish, self-interested and out-of-touch.

How elites present their cultural lives in public has therefore become a key PR battle ground. And performing ordinariness may provide a very effective means of shoring up authenticity in an era of rising inequality.



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[\*\*From Aristocratic to Ordinary: shifting  
modes of elite distinction\*\*](#) by Sam  
Friedman and Aaron Reeves (2020)  
can be read in the *American  
Sociological Review*.

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## A matter of taste?

But what does being an elite omnivore actually mean today? Some argue this blending represents the end of elite distinction; definitive evidence that elites no longer use culture to signal status. Our analysis points in another direction.

Take music. One of the most popular recreations reported in *Who's Who* is simply «music». Of course this in itself tells us very little. Yet, fortunately, more than 1,000 of the people in *Who's Who* have also appeared on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs too. Like *Who's Who*, what you play on Desert Island Discs matters. It constitutes an even more public performance of one's cultural identity. Tony Blair famously convened a focus group to help him calculate what to play.

Combining these data sources reveals two surprising patterns. While most guests play at least some form "classical" music, today's guests make a more mixed selection than earlier generations, integrating recognisably "highbrow" classical pieces with pop, rock, electronic, world and country.

Furthermore, analysis of the average album "score" of the artists played on the show using the music website, Metacritic, reveals that guests are very careful consumers of pop music. Artists played by *Who's Who* entrants are consistently more critically acclaimed, in terms of their mean Metacritic score, than the average musical artist.

There is one further indication that elites are not quite ready to relinquish cultural distinction. Flicking through the pages of *Who's Who* it is striking that many entrants report their recreations in ways that go beyond the conventional list of activities. These people actively play with their entry, describing their interests in knowing, humorous and slightly ironic ways. Academic Professor Azriel Zuckerman tells us that he enjoys "sailing, opera, gardening, and perfecting espresso coffee", while senior Civil Servant Anthony Ash simply spends his time "applying Wittgenstein", and Admiral Sir Edward Ashmore simply, "[the] usual".

Such entries represent subtle acts of distinction, demonstrating one's aesthetic confidence to "play with the form". And strikingly, they are largely a contemporary phenomenon, increasing sharply among those entering in *Who's Who* in the last 30 or 40 years. ■