

The reason why middle class people are more likely to play music, paint and act revealed by research

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The reason why middle class people are more likely to play music, paint and act has been revealed in a major new study.

Research involving 78,000 people found that it was not wealth or social status that were strongly linked to people taking part in arts activities as amateurs or professionals.

Instead, it was the level of education that lay behind arts participation, the study by Dr Aaron Reeves, a sociologist at the University of Oxford, found.

In an article in the journal *Sociology*, Dr Reeves said that of the 78,011 surveyed, 18% had taken part in painting or photography, 9% in dance, 10% in music, 2% in drama or opera; 6% had written poetry, plays or fiction. Only 22% had not done any artistic activities.

He found that having a higher income did not make arts participation more likely – those earning over £30,000 a year were less likely to take part than those earning less.

Social status mattered little – those in higher professional jobs were less likely to take part in the arts than those in lower professional jobs, and only slightly more likely to take part than those in lower supervisory roles and semi-routine roles.

Instead, the clearest link with artistic activity was education. After accounting for the influence of family class background by statistical analysis, he found that those with a degree were around four times more likely to take part in painting and photography than those with no educational qualification, five times more likely to be involved in dance and in crafts, and four times more likely to play a musical instrument.

Those taking part in arts were more likely to be middle class, simply because they were more likely to be highly educated. But although having a middle class background makes it more likely that someone had gone to university, Dr Reeves's findings showed that they were no more likely to take part in arts after graduating than were working class students.

Dr Reeves said that results for arts participation were different from those for watching or listening to arts performances, where social class and status were strongly linked to higher rates of arts consumption.

“Arts participation, unlike arts consumption and cultural engagement generally, is not closely associated with either social class or social status,” said Dr Reeves in the article. “This result deviates from the expectation – unexpectedly, those with higher incomes are less likely to be arts participants.

“These results show that it is educational attainment alone, and not social status, that is shaping the probability of being an arts participant.”

Dr Reeves suggests two reasons for the link with education. “First, those with higher information processing capacity are more likely to enjoy highbrow cultural practices, such as arts participation, and be university graduates. In short, university graduates are more likely to possess the cultural resources necessary for both arts consumption and arts participation.

“Second, universities make admissions decisions using information on extracurricular and cultural activities, increasing the likelihood that university graduates are culturally active.”

Sociology is published by the British Sociological Association and SAGE.

For more information, please contact:

Tony Trueman
British Sociological Association
Tel: 07964 023392
tony.trueman@britsoc.org.uk

Notes:

1. Data were taken from three pooled waves of the Taking-Part survey (2005–6, 2006–7, 2007–8) ($N = 78,011$). The survey consists of a representative sample of face-to-face interviews with people aged 16 or over in private households in England, with a booster sample of adults from non-white backgrounds.

The odds ratio (proportion of those carrying out arts activity divided by proportion of those not taking that activity) for the various activities are:

		Those doing painting and photography/ not doing these	Those doing dance or crafts/not doing these	Those doing music/ not doing this
	Less than 5 GCSEs	2.28	2.33	1.78
	5+ GCSEs	2.38	2.64	1.86
	Apprenticeship	2.14	1.94	1.74
	A levels	3.11	4.07	2.06
	Other higher education	4.38	3.25	3.22
	Degree	4.28	4.95	3.94

2. The article is ‘Neither class nor status: arts participation and the social strata’ and appears in the latest edition of *Sociology*, published by the British Sociological Association and SAGE.

3. The British Sociological Association’s charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk