

Should Ahmad Go to the Opera? Highbrow Tastes and Ethnic Discrimination

Rikke Haudrum Rasmussen¹

Abstract

We know that ethnic minorities face discrimination, for example from employers², landlords³, and public officials⁴. However, can a taste for highbrow culture (e.g., opera or haute cuisine) compensate for ethnic discrimination – or perhaps even be a ladder for social mobility for ethnic minorities? To address these questions, I analyze data from several survey experiments in Denmark designed to identify effects of cultural tastes on others' perceptions of individuals' social rank and personal traits (e.g., competence and sociability). First, I compare vignettes describing hypothetical (male) individuals with the same lifestyle but with different ethnic status (minority vs. majority). I find that, holding highbrow lifestyle constant, ethnic minority status leads to less favorable perceptions of social rank and competence (e.g., makes a lot of money) but more favorable perceptions of sociability (e.g., fun to talk to at a party). Figure 1 presents these findings. Second, I analyze data from a paired conjoint experiment and find that, compared to ethnic majority status, ethnic minority status leads to more favorable perceptions of sociability and “polish” (i.e., being “cultured”). Third, I am currently developing a new experiment where I manipulate information on cultural tastes (highbrow vs. lowbrow), ethnic status (minority vs. majority), and gender (male vs. female). This experiment, whose results I will present at the NSA conference, enables me to identify how ethnic minority status intersects with cultural tastes and gender in producing (or potentially offsetting) discriminatory perceptions of social rank and personal traits.

Keywords: *Cultural stratification, ethnic discrimination, cultural tastes, survey experiment.*

¹ University of Copenhagen (rikkehr@soc.ku.dk)

² Pager, D., Bonikowski, B., & Western, B. (2009). Discrimination in a low-wage labor market: A field experiment. *American sociological review*, 74(5), 777-799.

³ Bosch, M., Carnero, M. A., & Farre, L. (2010). Information and discrimination in the rental housing market: Evidence from a field experiment. *Regional science and urban Economics*, 40(1), 11-19.

⁴ Costa, M. (2017). How responsive are political elites? A meta-analysis of experiments on public officials. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 4(3), 241-254.

Figure 1. Status and Trait Perceptions: Highbrow Ahmad vs. Highbrow Peter

