



# Symbols of class: A computational analysis of class distinction-making through etiquette, 1922-2017

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## ABSTRACT

Social scientists of class and inequality have documented the rise of omnivorousness, informality, ordinariness, and emphasis on meritocracy. This apparent decline in class closure contrasts sharply with rising inequality and declining economic mobility. How are these competing developments reflected in everyday class distinction-making? In this article, we answer this question by applying Goffman's work on the symbols of class status to the analysis of unique data: a corpus of etiquette books published between 1922 and 2017. We use word embeddings to quantify the salience of six class concepts (affluence, cultivation, education, employment, morality, and status) in the corpus. We find that education and employment are increasingly salient while status, affluence, cultivation, and morality decline in their salience to class distinction-making. These results signal a decline of class operating as a status group through cultural closure, the rise of education and employment as the carriers of class in everyday life, and the corresponding legitimization of class position and class inequality based on supposedly meritocratic grounds. This research opens up new avenues for studies of class and the application of computational methods to investigations of social change.

## 1. Introduction

Much sociological thinking on class focuses on the economic determinants of class position, but some sociologists have contributed to the field by theorizing cultural processes of distinction-making that set and legitimate class boundaries – processes including such elements as cultural capital, legitimation, group closure, and consumption practices (e.g. Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Khan, 2012; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Wright, 2009). Through this work, sociologists conclude that the nature of class has changed as a result of globalization, rising economic inequality, and the growth of multiculturalism and institutional access (Khan, 2012). Indeed, despite growing “informalization” (Wouters, 2007) of public behavior and manners, inequality in the United States is at historical highs and social mobility is decreasing (Balestra & Tonkin, 2018). Instead of reflecting greater equality, the cultural omnivorousness and meritocratic leanings of elites shore up class boundaries by offering protection against the stigma of wealth (Hahl et al., 2017; Sherman, 2017) and providing cover for new forms of distinction-making (Khan, 2011; 2012).

In this article, we contribute to this literature on class by examining everyday class distinction-making as it relates to the six sociological elements of class identified by Kozlowski et al. (2019): affluence, cultivation, education, employment, morality, and status. We draw on Lamont and Lareau (1988) theoretical synthesis of Goffman and Bourdieu, which emphasizes distinction-making based on

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class symbols described in etiquette books and other behavior manuals. Using a computational sociological technique that measures background meanings in text, we analyze a corpus of etiquette manuals published between 1922 and 2017. Etiquette manuals are books “concentrated on precise descriptions of the exact rules of interpersonal behavior” (Curtin, 1985: 409). Analysis of these books makes it possible to examine historical shifts in the centrality of different elements of class in everyday social distinction-making. We use examples from the texts and supplementary analyses to confirm and interpret our results.

Our analyses uncover trends in distinction-making. The period from 1922 until 1960 is characterized by high relevance of embodied aspects of class (affluence, cultivation, morality, and status) in social distinction-making; the period from the late 1960s to 1975 is a diffuse period in which all the aspects of class have average salience, and after 1975 there is rising distinction-making based on education and employment as manifest elements of class. Embodied elements of affluence, cultivation, morality and status are concerned primarily with *being* class-normative and manifest elements of education and employment are concerned primarily with *displaying* evidence of merit that justifies class position. This shift suggests that, when it comes to distinction-making, class is decreasingly connected to situated behavior and increasingly attached to credentialing and the acquisition of supposedly meritocratic achievements as symbols of class (Young, 2017 [1958]). In addition to contributing to our understanding of historical change in class distinction-making, this article demonstrates the value of etiquette as data and presents a new approach to studying social class with computational methods.

## 2. Theory and literature

This research draws on and contributes to previous work on class manners, distinction-making, and the value of etiquette for social research.

### 2.1. Class norms and behaviors

Despite rising cultural omnivorousness, class-based behaviors and characteristics play a role in the reproduction of social inequality, including through distinction-making. Existing research shows the relevance of class-based norms. Class is legible in facial cues (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017), speech patterns (Kraus et al., 2019), and basic conscious and unconscious behaviors like grooming practices, modes of interaction, and how one demonstrates engagement with a speaker (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). These behavioral differences affect the outcome of job interviews, client-provider encounters, and other settings and encounters determining access to important resources (Kraus et al., 2019; Ridgeway & Fiske, 2012; Rivera, 2012). For example, Rivera (2012) notes that styles of interaction and chosen extracurricular pursuits are crucial to elite university admissions and success in acquiring an elite job.

### 2.2. Distinction-making

Particular behaviors and characteristics may be reliably associated with a specific class, but that does not guarantee those behaviors and characteristics are relevant to class distinction-making. According to Goffman (1951), only *class status symbols* are used in everyday life to interpret someone's class position and implement group closure through distinction-making. For example, in his study of elite lifestyles in Stockholm, Sweden, Holmqvist (2017) explains how elites display their position through houses decorated in a classic country style. However, in her study of New York City elite, Sherman (2017) observed an eclectic mix of styles combining relatively inexpensive furniture with high-end pieces. Would these elites fail to recognize one another?

Beyond speaking to regional variation, these differences in furnishing reflect the distinction between what Goffman called a *test of status* and a *status symbol*:

Persons in the same social position tend to possess a similar pattern of behavior. An item of a person's behavior is, therefore, a sign of his social position. A *sign of position* can be a *status symbol* only if it is used with some regularity as a means of “placing” socially the person who makes it. Any sign which provides reliable evidence of its maker's position... may be called a test of status... A symbol of status is not always a very good test of status (Goffman, 1951: 295, emphasis added).

Interior design choices and other common practices or characteristics may be reliable indicators of class status, but they may not be meaningful symbols used to assign, interpret, or display class position in everyday life. Symbols of class are not reliable tests of status because a symbol of class *communicates* one's position, and “it is always possible, therefore, that symbols come to be employed in a ‘fraudulent’ way” (Goffman, 1951: 300). The use of status symbols evolves to limit the possibilities of status fraud. As one way to restrict access to status symbols, social style consists of particular behaviors that indicate someone is “one of our kind”... These behaviors involve matters of etiquette, dress, deportment, gesture, intonation, dialect, vocabulary, small bodily movements and automatically expressed evaluations...” (Goffman, 1951: 300). In other words, NYC and Stockholm elites have other ways, error-prone as they may be, to recognize one another.

Symbols of class are therefore key to researching class distinction-making. Lamont and Lareau (1988) understood this when they argued that research on distinction-making should examine how status symbols are used to discriminate and exclude. They identify a ready-made source of data, etiquette books:

Much of our knowledge concerning high-status cultural signals is located in “how to” books which spell out in detail the proper symbols and behaviors... including clothing, jewelry, conversation styles, gift giving, alcohol consumption, dinner party etiquette, leisure time activities, and community service (Lamont & Lareau, 1988:162).

### 2.3. *Etiquette as data*

Manners and etiquette are already recognized as a source of data on class-cultural behaviors, signals, social valuations, and justifications of status (Arditi, 1999; Bourdieu, 1984; Elias, 2000; Goffman, 1963). Past research examines the role of manners and etiquette in establishing social control, generating in people an emotional predisposition to act in concert with their social class and social roles, constructing channels for communication and mutual understanding, creating and indicating social distinctions, and legitimating moral evaluations (Arditi, 1999; Elias, 2000; Mennell, 2007; Wouters, 2007). Changes in etiquette shed light on more general social changes (Abrutyn & Carter, 2015).

Etiquette writing is a subset of the self-help genre, which focuses on providing practical behavioral guidance. Etiquette is the successor to the courtesy literature of the 16th and 17th centuries (Curtin, 1985). While courtesy literature was geared toward the nobility and addressed moral development, etiquette writing focuses on social behavior (Curtin, 1985). With the rise of a literate middle-class, including women, in the 18th and 19th centuries, etiquette books became lucrative for publishing houses (Curtin, 1985; Hart, 1950; Lees Maffei, 2014; Weller, 2014). Beginning in the mid-19th century, five to six etiquette books were published annually in the United States, and magazines and newspapers ran etiquette columns (Schlesinger, 1946). Etiquette guides remain a staple for print and digital media (Williams, 2013). Etiquette media includes etiquette books, films, podcasts, and magazine and newspaper columns. There is etiquette for particular settings (e.g., etiquette for business), social groups (e.g., etiquette for children), and rituals (e.g., wedding etiquette).

Class is central to etiquette. The close relationship between etiquette and distinction-making arises from the purpose of etiquette guides: to discuss accepted social meanings of behavior; describe proper behavior for those who would like to comply with normative expectations; and provide standards by which people can evaluate themselves and others (Lees-Maffei, 2014; Wouters, 2007). The primary market for etiquette is the middle class, who use etiquette media to acquire insider information on symbols of class. As Curtin (1985: 414) notes,

Upward mobility was built directly and explicitly into the structure of the etiquette book: middle-class readers learned aristocratic manners in order to convert their economic success into social prestige. Individuals were “placed” and identities formed on the basis of a myriad of tiny bits of information drawn from the realm of manners, most of which could be understood only in the context of the social class system.

Tensions between the class aspirations of etiquette books’ intended audience and the idea that truly elite people do not need such instruction leads to disdain for etiquette among the most privileged and a sense of shame around the use of this literature (Lees-Maffei, 2012). Nonetheless, etiquette media is referenced by the elite and their event planners, designers, and other support staff (Hart, 1950; Weller, 2014).

## 3. Data and analysis

In this section, we highlight the contributions of computational approaches to research on class distinction-making and describe the text corpus for the study. These data require a break from traditional assumptions of causality, so we explain the analytical approach. We then describe our methods of analysis.

### 3.1. *Computational approaches*

Machine learning and other computational methods have much to contribute to research on distinction-making through etiquette. In designing this study, we drew on Kozlowski et al. (2019) computational analysis of the relationships between affluence, employment, status, cultivation, education, morality, and gender over time. They observe stability in the relationship between these dimensions of class but find that the words associated with each dimension change a great deal. We interpret these findings to suggest that the symbols of class have shifted even if the dimensions of class have not. Likewise, Friedman and Reeves (2020) examine leisure interests reported by people included in a British catalog of elites published annually between 1900 and 2020. They uncover three periods of elite distinction-making: an aristocratic period characterized by outdoor pastimes like hunting, boating, and horses; a highbrow period characterized by cultural preferences like the theater and the opera; and a contemporary period characterized by the combination of elite and mainstream tastes and activities.

Computational research on class distinction-making could benefit from a focus on status symbols in the selection of text corpora. For example, Kozlowski et al. (2019) examine differences between sociological and general texts when it comes to the dimensions of class. They find that a corpus of sociological articles produces very different results from general texts. They conclude these differences reflect gaps between sociological and popular understandings of class, but the problem of mediating between these two understandings when it comes to the meaning of class in social life remains. Meanwhile, Friedman and Reeves (2020) face the challenge of distinguishing between what is common or typical (i.e. tests of class status) and what is meaningfully related to class distinction-making. Is elite distinction-making a cultural process we expect to play out in *Who’s Who* biographical statements? The accentuation of ordinariness in biographical statements could be, for example, the result of a template distributed to recipients. Texts focused on symbols of class status provide theoretical leverage to assist with the interpretation of computational results.

### 3.2. *Emily Post corpus*

Our text corpus consists of every edition of the etiquette manual, Emily Post's *Etiquette*. Twenty editions of *Etiquette* have been published between 1922 and 2017. *Etiquette* is an encyclopedic tome intended to be a comprehensive reference for the broadest possible audience (Lees-Maffei, 2014). The book covers a variety of topics: correct pronunciation, sports etiquette, letter writing, dating, manners for driving, how to conduct a job search, and wedding planning are just a few subjects routinely covered (see Appendix A for more information on *Etiquette*). The corpus includes only the flagship manual, *Etiquette*. Other etiquette media tend to be episodic and inconsistent because they focus on specific questions and issues raised by their audience.

*Etiquette* is culturally significant in the United States. According to McHugh (2021: 9), Emily Post's *Etiquette* is one of just a few select texts that can be classified as "American 'bibles': those dog-eared books for daily life that ostensibly taught readers one subject, all while subtly instructing them about their role in society and their responsibilities to family and to country." The first edition of *Etiquette* was an immediate success, spending a year at the top of the non-fiction bestseller lists (Claridge, 2009). *Etiquette* was ranked second to the *Bible* as the book most commonly sought from schools and libraries (Jacobs, 2001). *Etiquette* was featured in the New York Public Library's 1995 "Books of the Century" exhibit, and it was commemorated with a postage stamp in 1998 (Lees-Maffei, 2012). *Etiquette*'s enduring popularity, selling in at least the 10s of millions (McHugh, 2021:13), mean it has a history as a source of information on the American "mainstream". As McHugh (2021:10) notes, "The foundation of American popular culture can be located more easily, not in highbrow literary books - or even in the Constitution, a text that fewer than half of Americans read - but in the ordinary, instructional books that average Americans have consulted every day."

More than an "American bible," *Etiquette* is a "pre-eminent example of American advice literature" (Lees-Maffei, 2012: 217). Emily Post was widely acknowledged as the "absolute authority on etiquette" during her life, and her reputation and influence persisted past her death in 1960 (Lees-Maffei, 2014: 20). Elements of her work were incorporated into public culture and other etiquette books by other authors (Lees Maffei, 2014). The Emily Post Institute, which was founded by Post and her children, continues to publish *Etiquette* and several other books and media (e.g. recent books about wedding etiquette, golf etiquette, and etiquette for legal cannabis use) and provides etiquette consulting, training, and expert commentary.

*Etiquette* is not just classed, it is also raced and gendered. Educated women under age 50 from the East Coast and the Southeastern United States looking for advice on attire, behavior, business, travel, and weddings are the primary audience for *Etiquette*.<sup>1</sup> Men are a substantial minority of customers and are also a market for other Emily Post products, including business etiquette training and specialized guides like *Emily Post's Essential Manners for Men* (Post, 2012). Women are also overrepresented among etiquette authors (Curtin, 1985, Lees-Maffei, 2012). This gender imbalance reflects the role of women in status attainment in the United States, both historically and in contemporary times. Less likely to be employed, women from higher classes have had the role of displaying and reproducing class through conspicuous consumption, hosting elite events, elite leisure activities, and membership in selective clubs (Ostrower, 1995; Rollins, 1985; Woynsher, 2005). Emily Post's *Etiquette* also tends to depict a white American mainstream (Voyer et al., 2022). Meanwhile, etiquette instruction specifically for the Black elite has a long history in the United States (Smith, 2006). Interracial etiquette can reproduce racial inequality (Ritterhouse, 2006) and was a cornerstone of Jim Crow segregation (Davis, 2006, Harris, 1995, Kennedy, 2011).

### 3.3. *Causality and contingency when studying Etiquette editions*

*Etiquette* includes both prescriptive and descriptive content. The purpose of the book is to highlight important social practices. This descriptive aspect of etiquette writing leads *Etiquette* to keep pace with the changing social norms of its intended audience, helping to keep the book consistent with contemporary etiquette manuals (Wouters, 2007, Arditi, 1999). However, *Etiquette* should not be read as a simple depiction of central behavior tendencies similar to survey data on values or behavior. As discussed in the theory section, only some behaviors take on meaning for the purpose of distinction-making. This means the values, attitudes, and social practices covered in *Etiquette* are not universal, modal, or statistically-average. Instead, the texts present socially- and culturally-significant behaviors and incorporate a prescriptive normative stance (e.g. assertions that "too few behave this way").

*Etiquette*'s authors should not be credited with creating the social changes the texts reveal. As Elias (2000: 63) notes, etiquette books "do not contain as much as others to which we habitually give more attention, the extraordinary ideas of an outstanding individual, that they are forced by their subject itself to adhere closely to social reality." The legitimacy of *Etiquette* hinges upon some level of consistency and defensibility in relationship to social practices and social boundaries. Emily Post observed social life and revised her etiquette instruction, to suit the changing times (Claridge, 2009, Lees-Maffei, 2012: 225). *Etiquette* authors respond to audience feedback, with some of that material finding its way into future editions (Jacobs, 2001). *Etiquette* author Lizzie Post believes an etiquette expert positions themselves between prescription and description by observing common behavior, identifying best practices, and systematically presenting and explaining those best practices.<sup>2</sup>

Using *Etiquette* makes it possible to foreground historical change in distinction-making by studying a single book as it develops across editions. Many factors contribute to edition-by-edition change in texts (Giuliani et al., 2006). Because *Etiquette* is written in explicit reference to previous editions, changes such as the decision to revise, add or delete topics can certainly reflect social change. Social change may also be represented in general and superficial shifts in vocabulary and style, editorial practices, and developments in

<sup>1</sup> Emily Post Institute internal research shared by Lizzie Post, March 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Voyer on March 17, 2015.

publishing. Studying multiple editions makes it possible to consider both topical and superficial changes as they relate to distinction-making. *Etiquette*'s authors often discuss social change and reference past editions. For example, in 1942 Post discussed changes in women's social independence in a chapter entitled "The Vanished Chaperon and Other Lost Conventions" (sic). Many other changes in topic, vocabulary, recommendations, and style of writing go without mention.

Exploratory computational analyses support the claim that changes in *Etiquette* cannot merely be attributed to changes in authorship. Table 1 shows the extent to which the text changes over time by plotting cosine similarity, a measure of how similar two documents are, between all editions. To create these scores, we tokenized words from the full corpus represented across all editions, removed stop words, and pruned the corpus to those terms used more than 10 times and less than the 99 percentile. Using text2vec, the bag-of-words corpus is next vectorized, transformed to document term matrix, and weighted using TF-IDF. Lastly, pairwise cosine similarities are computed between the matrix representing each edition and presented in the table.

Table 1 shows that editions display a high degree of similarity, with edition-by-edition changes rarely exceeding .3. The pace of change is largely independent of author, outside of an increase in the rate of change after Emily Post's death.

### 3.4. Analytical approach

Our goal is to observe class distinction-making over time through the link between *Etiquette* and the elements of class identified by Kozlowski et al. (2019): affluence, cultivation, education, employment, morality, and status. This study does not include specific measures or estimates of affluence, employment, status, education, cultivation, or morality. Instead, we estimate the salience of the concepts of *affluence*, *employment*, *status*, *education*, *cultivation*, and *morality*. We use italics when referring to these elements of class as operationalized in the analysis.

#### 3.4.1. Affluence

*Affluence* refers to the notion of wealth, advantage, and being posh. Emily Post takes up the topic of *affluence* on the first page of the first edition of *Etiquette* when she notes that "to the general public a long purse is synonymous with high position..." (Post, 1922:1). *Affluence* is woven through *Etiquette*'s topics and references. Take, for example, the decision, beginning with the 1975 edition, to include sporting etiquette, with a focus on the elite sports of golf, tennis, sailing, and skiing: "four sports... in which good manners beyond the rule book are most important" (Post, 1975: 765-767). *Affluence* is also a frequent background condition in the authors' own reflections, such as this quotation from the 1997 edition: "Emily did not offer guidelines for manners on corporate jets because when she wrote about manners, there were no corporate jets on which to travel..." (Post, 1997: xvi).

#### 3.4.2. Cultivation

*Cultivation*, the characteristic of propriety, refinement and being civilized, is linked to *Etiquette*'s content. The book describes how to behave in elite cultural settings such as the opera, the theater, balls, and formal dinners with prominent social and cultural figures. Perhaps one of the most accessible examples of cultivation in *Etiquette* is Post's critique of the *nouveau riche*, people who are wealthy but lack cultivation:

**Table 1**

Edition by edition similarity. Author Transitions indicated by bordered cells. Higher values and darker greens represent more similarity. Lower values and darker reds represent less similarity. Indicating less consistency across adjacent editions over time. Substantial by-edition change is not confined to author transitions. Editions beginning with 2004 represent the least consistency with all prior editions. Table adapted from Voyer et al. (2022).

	1922	1927	1931	1934	1937	1940	1942	1945	1950	1955	1960	1965	1968	1975	1984	1992	1997	2004	2011	2017
1922	1,000																			
1927	0,920	1,000																		
1931	0,920	0,990	1,000																	
1934	0,910	0,985	0,994	1,000																
1937	0,856	0,923	0,932	0,934	1,000															
1940	0,866	0,934	0,943	0,944	0,994	1,000														
1942	0,891	0,939	0,944	0,934	0,934	0,947	1,000													
1945	0,853	0,909	0,922	0,922	0,948	0,958	0,946	1,000												
1950	0,842	0,897	0,910	0,912	0,939	0,950	0,931	0,982	1,000											
1955	0,852	0,896	0,903	0,898	0,904	0,917	0,947	0,947	0,955	1,000										
1960	0,819	0,875	0,882	0,889	0,898	0,908	0,906	0,939	0,945	0,967	1,000									
1965	0,759	0,817	0,814	0,807	0,805	0,818	0,861	0,847	0,855	0,897	0,871	1,000								
1968	0,671	0,721	0,740	0,734	0,753	0,769	0,750	0,789	0,797	0,795	0,803	0,839	1,000							
1975	0,685	0,748	0,751	0,745	0,751	0,763	0,779	0,774	0,780	0,813	0,796	0,907	0,843	1,000						
1984	0,648	0,695	0,704	0,705	0,712	0,723	0,732	0,750	0,755	0,774	0,774	0,848	0,815	0,919	1,000					
1992	0,613	0,659	0,661	0,656	0,664	0,674	0,705	0,703	0,709	0,744	0,727	0,845	0,780	0,903	0,927	1,000				
1997	0,569	0,613	0,629	0,630	0,668	0,676	0,644	0,703	0,708	0,692	0,719	0,755	0,803	0,822	0,866	0,899	1,000			
2004	0,437	0,469	0,481	0,483	0,531	0,534	0,498	0,552	0,551	0,545	0,613	0,580	0,625	0,640	0,677	0,687	0,788	1,000		
2011	0,393	0,421	0,422	0,420	0,433	0,440	0,464	0,458	0,460	0,486	0,474	0,566	0,508	0,598	0,611	0,656	0,611	0,664	1,000	
2017	0,374	0,398	0,402	0,399	0,411	0,418	0,445	0,435	0,437	0,458	0,450	0,527	0,483	0,584	0,581	0,618	0,580	0,626	0,951	1,000

Key:   Author Transition

Edition by edition similarity. Author Transitions indicated by bordered cells. Higher values and darker greens represent more similarity. Lower values and darker reds represent less similarity. Indicating less consistency across adjacent editions over time. Substantial by-edition change is not confined to author transitions. Editions beginning with 2004 represent the least consistency with all prior editions.



A man whose social position is self-made is apt to be detected by his continual cataloguing of prominent names. Mr. Parvenu invariably interlards his conversation with, "When I was dining at the Bobo Gilding's"... and quite often accentuates, in his ignorance, those of rather second-rate, though conspicuous position (Post, 1922: 253).

#### 3.4.3. Education

In the first edition, Post notes that *education* contributes to personal development: "Culture in its true meaning is widest possible education, plus especial refinement and taste" (Post, 1922: 65). *Education* is also acknowledged as a means to social advancement. For example, when describing the "varied social standing of the private secretary," Post notes he "is invariably a young man of education, if not of birth, and his social position is always that of a member of his 'chief's' family" (Post, 1922: 135). *Education* is often a background topic as the book generally assumes that its readers will have college experience. Fraternities, sororities and alumni clubs are mentioned, and the etiquette of "co-ed" life is often discussed explicitly.

#### 3.4.4. Employment

Discussions of work, jobs, careers, and professions are common in most editions of *Etiquette*. As Post wrote in 1950: "a fundamental knowledge of etiquette is no less an asset in business or public life, or in any other contact with people, than it is in society" (Post, 1950: 555). The texts describe work situations, work functions, and other aspects of working life with the assumption that the reader is likely employed, married to someone who is employed, and/or is an employer. *Employment* emerges as an element of life in the home as well, including through discussion of entertaining important people from work in one's home and guidance on how to recruit, hire, fire, and compensate household staff.

#### 3.4.5. Morality

*Morality*, meaning decency, goodness and ethical behavior, is a prevalent theme in *Etiquette*. In the first edition, Post notes that "Etiquette must, if it is to be of more than trifling use, include ethics as well as manners" (Post, 1922: 2). She further develops this discussion in the 1945 edition, writing "Actually etiquette is most deeply concerned with every phase of ethical impulse or judgment..." (Post, 1945: 2). *Morality* is also an assumed rationale for the reader's desire to engage in correct behavior, because "civility and courtesy, the outward expressions of human decency, are the proverbial glue that holds society together-qualities that are more important than ever in today's complex and changing world" (Post & Senning, 2017: 7).

#### 3.4.6. Status

*Status*, the property of having prestige or high rank, is routinely taken up. The early editions of *Etiquette* (1922-1950) devote a chapter to the subject of "One's Position in the Community":

When new people move into a community, bringing letters of introduction to prominent citizens, they arrive with an already made position, which ranks in direct proportion to the standing of those who wrote the introductions. Since, however, no one but "persons of position" are eligible to letters of importance, there would be no question of acquiring position... (Post, 1922: 73).

*Status* is also present in the background of the texts. For example, *Etiquette* explains that the order and manner of introduction (who is introduced to whom first, and how) reflects social standing, including considerations of age and gender as well as other aspects of social rank (see for example, Post, 1984: 4). Race and class background are clear elements of *status*. For example, the 2011 edition discusses how to navigate the complexities of class inequality when offering unwanted items such as used clothes and leftover food to household help (Post et al., 2011: 504), and in 1992 readers were counseled not to protest restrictions on membership in elite social clubs: "When you do invite guests to your club they should be people who are compatible with the membership. No matter what your particular feelings are about politics, race, or religion, you should not make your club the place to launch a crusade." (Post, 1992: 192).

#### 3.4.7. Accessing concepts with word embeddings

This introduction to *affluence*, *cultivation*, *education*, *employment*, *morality*, and *status* in *Etiquette* relied on reading. Interpretation is key as often there was no use of the words *affluence*, *cultivation*, *education*, *employment*, *morality*, and *status* or their synonyms. Computational techniques offer another angle for interpretive research that supplements human reading with machine learning.

Word embeddings get at explicit and background meanings in texts, leveraging both qualitative insights and quantitative power (Nelson, 2020). The core idea of word embeddings is that words are linked by the way they are used and there is a strong connection between the meanings of words and their semantic context (i.e. the words they tend to be used with, and other words used in similar ways) (Ellis, 2019; Firth, 1957; Garvin, 1962; Lenci, 2018; Stoltz & Taylor, 2019). Embeddings are built through machine learning in which an algorithm is trained on a large collection of texts. The embedding develops a multidimensional map reflecting all the ways words are used. Imagine words laid out like a starry night sky - a semantic universe. Each word's position is determined by its many different neighboring words over the texts. The closeness and distance of words gives a sense of how close or distant these words are in terms of their meaning. Imagine, for example, the word "apple." We might expect some neighboring words like pie, eat, bake, and tree. But we can also imagine some other neighbors like MacBook, iPhone, camera, and cellular. Other neighbors are more distant or even opposing terms; for example, orange and PC. These terms may be placed close to apple because they are used in similar contexts - for example, orange often appears with juice just like apple does, and PC often appears with computer just like apple does. Drawing on our knowledge, we could interpret these observations to suggest that there are at least two concepts including apple - *technology* and *fruit*.

Concept Mover's Distance (CMDist) uses word embeddings to establish a given concepts' salience to a document by calculating the semantic similarity (i.e. closeness in the semantic universe) between all the words in the document and the concept (Stoltz & Taylor, 2019). In this research, the concepts are the elements of class. CMDist locates each concept by dropping an anchor in the center of a collection of words representing it. Mathematically, the anchor is a "pseudo"-document-by-term-matrix ( $DTM_p$ ) representing what the document of interest would look like should it only be specified by the concept terms.<sup>3</sup> So, to locate *affluence*, CMDist drops an anchor in the center of words we selected (i.e. affluent, rich, and wealth. For more information on concept specification, see Procedures). The equation below, from Stoltz and Taylor (2019), simplifies how scores are calculated. CMDist first uses a relaxed words movers' distance to estimate the total distance between the concept anchor ( $DTM_p$ ) and each document in the corpus, returning  $RWMD_D$ . For every word in each document, CMDist calculates the distance to the concept anchor by multiplying two numbers: the cosine distance between the word and the concept anchor, and a weight for the relative frequency of the word (Stoltz & Taylor, 2019; Kusner et al., 2015). In the case of concepts represented by multiple words, these distances are weighted to represent the number of words in the anchor. CMDist next returns a score that represents the standardized total distance as it relates to the average distance across the documents ( $RWMD$ ).

$$CMD_d = \left( \frac{RWMD_D - RWMD}{\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{D=1}^n RWMD - RWMD}{n-1}}} \right)$$

Through these procedures, CMDist returns a score for the salience of *affluence*, *cultivation*, *education*, *employment*, *morality*, and *status*. Standardized scores fall between -3 and 3 (Stoltz & Taylor 2019). A standardized CMDist score of 0 means that the concept is just as salient in the particular edition as in all editions (the mean score across all editions for each concept is zero). Large positive scores suggest that the symbol of class is particularly salient while negative scores suggest that it is especially lacking in salience. Comparing CMDist scores across editions makes it possible to observe change in the salience of each class concept to the everyday distinction-making covered in *Etiquette*. However, it is important to note that our method does not show the salience of the concepts relative to each other.

### 3.5. Procedures

#### 3.5.1. Corpus digitization

To prepare the corpus, we digitized the books using OCR software, and imported the text into R as a tibble; a data frame with one word per row and one column per document. Punctuation and stop words were removed, and words were unnested into lower-case form and tokenized using TidyText (Silge & Robinson, 2020).

#### 3.5.2. Concept specification

The first step in the analysis was selecting terms for the concept anchors. CMDist uses these words to identify a "centroid," referring to a concept vector that exists at the center of the words' semantic space. We specified the concepts with the following terms: *affluence* (rich, wealthy); *employment* (work, job, career, occupation, profession); *status* (distinguished, rank); *cultivation* (cultured, civilized, proper, refined, cultivated); *education* (education, graduate, college); *morality* (good, virtuous, decent, moral). We selected terms based on our sociological understanding of the concepts and our close readings of the corpus. We refined the concepts by selecting additional terms from the word pairs Kozlowski et al. (2019: 935-937) used to construct the dimensions of class in their word embeddings. Appendix C provides more detail regarding concept specification, including our process and decisions, robustness checks, and alternative specifications.

Because word embeddings assume definitionally-related words are close neighbors, it is not necessary to identify all words associated with a concept. At the same time, it is important to specify the concept carefully to pick up the intended meaning and avoid picking up other meanings and associations. If our six concepts are related as elements of class, we would expect to see conceptual linkages as well (for example, we might expect *education* and *cultivation* to be close neighbors with overlapping terms). Specifying a concept is, therefore, not about identifying the absolute "correct" semantic space. A concept could very well be represented by multiple definitionally valid specifications. For example, we concluded that CMDist results for *status*, when the specification included the word *status*, were driven by *Etiquette*'s attention to marital and family status as something to be managed and accounted for. These observations are in line with past research on the significance of marriage for class status, particularly among women (Boertien & Bernardi, 2020; Ostrower, 1995). Meanwhile, the an alternative specification of *status*, based on prestige and rank, centered the concept of status around extra-familial aspects of social standing, downplaying more gendered elements of marital and family status in class distinction-making. In this analysis, we selected the latter specification at the expense of another good representation. This decision highlights complexities associated with the intersectional nature of *status*. We reflect on this in the discussion and conclusion.

#### 3.5.3. Embedding selection

Selecting word embeddings was the next step in the analysis. Pre-trained embeddings are recommended when analyzing texts in their broader cultural and linguistic contexts (Stoltz & Taylor, 2021). We selected FastText embeddings. Prepared by Facebook's AI

<sup>3</sup> Stoltz and Taylor use the word "pseudo-document" to refer to what we refer to as the anchor.

research team, FastText is trained on a large set of contemporary sources including Wikipedia, and common crawls of the web (Bojanowski et al., 2017; Joulin et al., 2016). FastText is among the most reliable sources of pre-trained word embeddings and has been used to make comparisons across periods (El-Ebshihy et al., 2018; Stoltz and Taylor, 2019). However, the meanings of words shift over time, and FastText embeddings are trained primarily on more contemporary texts. As a confirmation of the results, we conducted additional analyses using three period-specific embeddings (1908-1933, 1933-1958, 1983-2008) created from Google ngrams. We observed similar trendlines, but more noise in comparison with FastText embeddings. Appendix D provides more details about these robustness checks.

### 3.5.4. Main analysis

For the main analysis, we calculated CMDist scores for each edition of *Etiquette* using 3000 MB of FastText (Arnold, Bailler, & Lissón, 2020) word embeddings weighted for frequency using Tf-idf (term frequency-inverse document frequency; Stoltz & Taylor, 2021). Our method does not show the salience of our concepts relative to each other. Instead, by comparing the salience of symbols of class relative to themselves, CMDist prevents a symbol's prevalence (across all editions or over time) from being mistaken for difference in salience between editions. Furthermore, imposing a relationality assumption on class concepts (for example, that there is a connection between increased salience of *cultivation* and declining salience of *affluence*) is not indicated by our theory. All concepts could become more salient or less salient over time while maintaining similar relationships to one another. The relationship that is important for our analysis is the connection to *Etiquette's* coverage of the symbols of class used in everyday distinction-making.

We used bootstrapping to take greater account of the variation in the texts. A bootstrap approach takes a more expansive view of variation by conceptualizing each edition as a snapshot of class etiquette, whose changes reflect the shifting salience of class symbols across and within all of the topics that are discussed. We can, therefore, divide each edition into equal-sized chunks and randomly sample from these chunks with replacement to form a randomly-composed edition. In this way, we create variations within the edition's salience scores and we use standard deviations to indicate the extent to which the salience of the concept is widely reflected in the texts, or is instead driven by changes in specific sections. A standard power analysis using "smpsize\_lmm" determined 70 to be the appropriate number of chunks for each edition (Cohen, 1988).<sup>4</sup> These randomly-composed editions form an analytic corpus from which one set of CMDist scores are computed (giving each concept in each of the 20 editions a score). One hundred randomly-composed corpora are created, yielding a data set of 2,000 standardized scores for each concept. The figures are created using STATA.

### 3.6. Limitations

Word embeddings, like all algorithms, are inscrutable. We cannot directly observe the calculations that built FastText's map of the semantic universe and produce the CMDist scores for the texts in our corpus. These unknowns make confirmatory analyses and triangulation through complementary qualitative analysis important. For these reasons, we use traditional text analysis to support our findings and interpretations. Although we do not intentionally exclude confounding quotations, other readings of the text may contradict our conclusions. We also cannot eliminate the possibility that there are other alternative interpretations of the results that do not rely on reading the texts, although we did attempt to eliminate the most obvious alternative explanations through the confirmatory analyses presented in the appendices.

## 4. Results

Fig. 1 plots the salience of each concept over time by using locally-weighted scatterplot smoothing (LOWESS). LOWESS produces a weighted running line that is easily interpretable, sensitive to local deviations, and reflective of dynamic corpus change (see Appendix E for scores). Scores can be interpreted as detailed in Section 3.4.7.

When viewed together, these scores are illuminating. Between 1922 and 1960, *affluence*, *cultivation*, *morality*, and *status* have generally higher salience than at other times. Between 1960 and 1975, there is a convergence between 0 and 1, suggesting all concepts were about as salient as would be randomly expected. We interpret this to suggest that during this period, class distinction-making along the concepts we consider is present, but not particularly emphasized. After 1975, we see a divergence with the rise of *education* and *employment* and the decline of *affluence*, *cultivation*, *morality*, and *status*. These trends make sense relative to the history of inequality in the United States. There was declining salience of the concepts in general as the Gilded Age passed through the Great Depression to World War II. There were no particularly potent concepts during the 50s and 60s - a time of significant social unrest and change in the United States, but also relatively less economic inequality (Piketty, 2014) and a relatively smaller non-native-born population (Alba & Nee, 2003). From the 1970s until the present day, the increased salience of *education* and *employment* coincides with the rise of meritocracy (Young, 2017 [1958]) and increasing American inequality.

### 4.1. Symbols of class

Fig. 2 presents the LOWESS scores with standard deviations for each concept in the bootstrapped corpora. First, we identify the

<sup>4</sup> "Smpsize\_lmm" was designed to compute an approximate sample size of two-level models based on standard design while adjusting for the design effect of two-level models (e.g., Lüdtke 2020). For more details, see Appendix B.



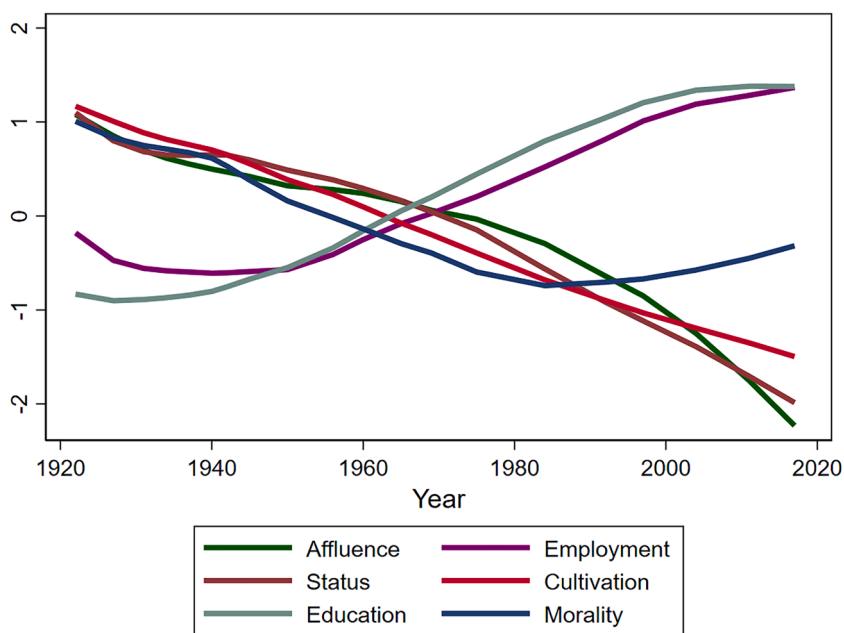


Fig. 1. Salience of Symbols of Class. LOWESS Plots of Edition Scores

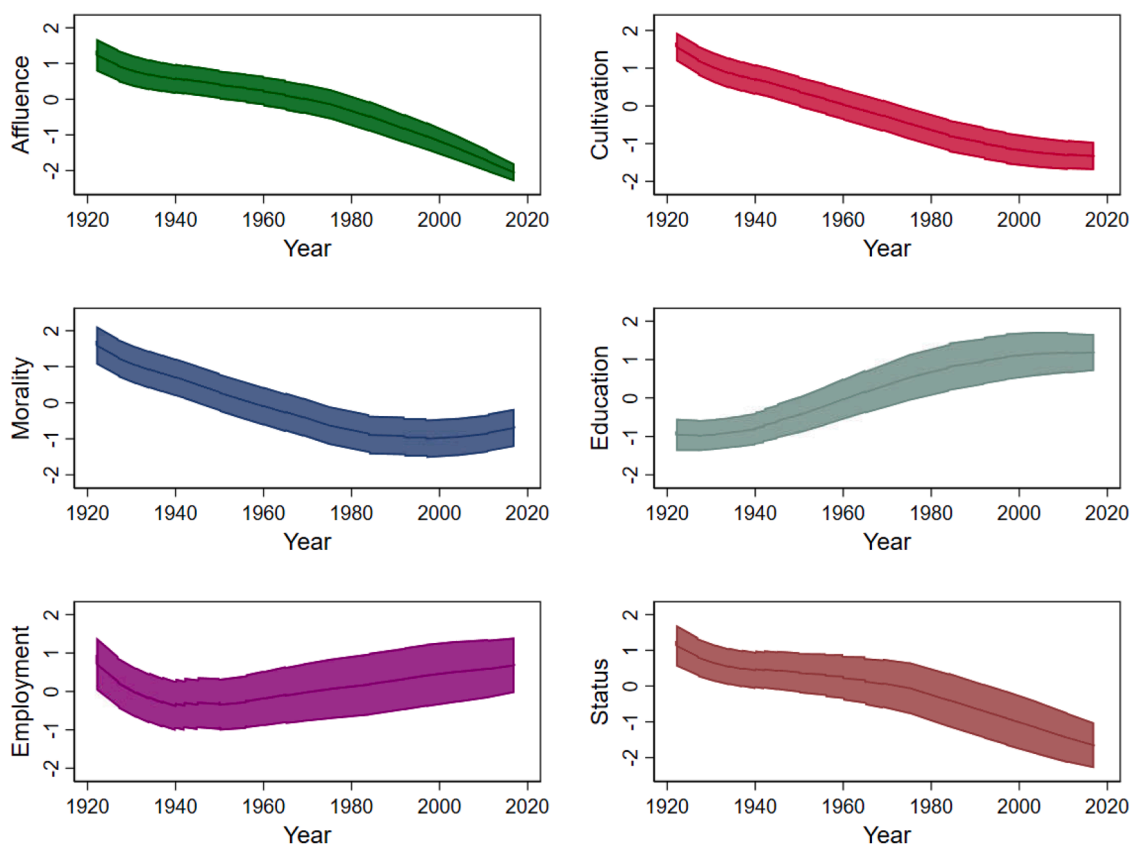


Fig. 2. LOWESS plots of Median Salience and  $\pm 2$  Standard Deviations from 100 Randomly-created Corpora

median score for each concept and edition from the 100 randomly-composed corpora. The upper and lower limits, represented by the shaded band behind the line, are identified by adding and subtracting two edition-level standard deviations. LOWESS plots use these CMDist scores to illustrate a weighted average and weighted-range for each edition. The bands provide crucial information about the nature of change in *Etiquette*. The tighter the band, the more the salience of that concept is reflected consistently, which means that the concept is more evenly salient throughout the edition. A wider band suggests that the salience of the concept is less evenly distributed and being driven more by particular sections.

#### 4.1.1. Concepts with decreasing salience

*Affluence*, *cultivation*, *morality*, and *status* have decreasing salience to *Etiquette* for most of the period. *Morality* and *cultivation* track closely in parallel trajectories<sup>5</sup> with similar rates of decline until the late 1900s and some signs of divergence in more recent editions. This suggests that, for the purpose of distinction-making on the basis of the symbols of class, morality and cultivation have a great deal of overlap. Beginning in the 2000s, however, these concepts seem to diverge in their relationship to class distinction-making. *Morality*'s trajectory begins an upward trend, while *cultivation* is leveling off. Meanwhile, there is no indication that the declining salience of *affluence* and *status* is rebounding. The trendlines for these two concepts are also somewhat parallel, showing a slower decline in salience, which accelerates beginning in the 1980s. In the case of *affluence*, *cultivation*, and, to some extent, *morality*, the bands are relatively tight to the line, indicating these concepts are well-distributed in the texts. In the case of *status*, however, the band is wider, suggesting that the concept of *status* is less consistently salient in *Etiquette*. These results suggest that, consistent with research on rising ordinariness in elite cultural consumption and expression (Chan, 2019; Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Jarness & Friedman, 2017; Khan, 2011; Peterson & Kern, 1996), everyday displays of *affluence*, *cultivation*, *status*, and *morality* are less important than they once were as symbols of class used in distinction-making. However, we also uncovered some evidence of *morality*'s recent uptick in salience, which can be interpreted as support for the conclusion that the moral stigma of wealth prompts elites to establish their moral worth as the "deserving rich" (Sherman, 2017).

#### 4.1.2. Concepts with increasing salience

*Employment* and *education* have increased salience over time. Whereas *employment* is initially more salient to *Etiquette*, it loses salience quickly, has its nadir in the 1950s, beginning an upward trajectory thereafter. *Employment* only moves into positive salience at the end of the twentieth century, achieving a position similar to where it began. *Education*, on the other hand, begins with lower salience, acquires positive salience in the 1960s, and increases thereafter. The concepts also vary in terms of their consistency. It does appear that *education* is more well-distributed throughout *Etiquette*. Meanwhile, the band for *employment* is wider, suggesting that this concept is less consistently salient. Taken together, these results show that *education* and *employment* play an increasingly important role in class distinction-making.

## 5. Discussion

Our analysis showed two sets of concepts we interpret as representing the embodied and manifest dimensions of class. *Affluence*, *cultivation*, *morality*, and *status* are embodied aspects of class – focused on social locations, dispositions, tastes, habits and the intentionality of behaving in a class-consistent manner. These concepts are concerned with *being* class-normative. *Education* and *employment*, on the other hand, are manifest aspects of class – they are tied to class distinction-making through credentials. If the embodied concepts echo Bourdieu's (1990) logic of practice, the manifest concepts recall the Protestant ethic's association between worldly success and divine grace (Weber, 1958). The results further show three periods of class distinction-making. Embodied aspects of class were particularly salient from the 1920s until the 1950s. The 1950s through the 1970s were a diffuse period where all concepts were about as salient as average. After 1975, manifest aspects of class became particularly salient.

These computational findings are consistent with the interpretation that emerges through human reading and interpretation of *Etiquette*. Being elite, wealthy, refined, and good were all part of the same package in early discussions of etiquette, but these elements of class diverge over time. The shift away from the significance of status, wealth and refined taste is already visible in the first few editions of *Etiquette*. For example, the earliest editions begin with a 3-page first chapter, "What is Best Society?," in which Post argues that social etiquette is modeled after the manners of the elite and most cultivated members of society.

Best Society is represented by social groups which have had, since this is America, widest rather than longest association with old world cultivation. Cultivation is always the basic attribute of Best Society, much as we hear in this country of an "Aristocracy of wealth." (Post, 1922: 1).

Beginning with the 1937 edition, Post develops a less affluence- and cultivation-focused approach to etiquette. Claiming that charm can be a characteristic of people from all walks of life, she maintains that good manners are natural and practical behaviors that are, at base, just common sense. Post's break with cultivation in favor of natural manners is most evident in her discussion of "nature's nobleman":

<sup>5</sup> Although values cannot be compared across concepts, slopes are comparable.

We've all heard the term "nature's nobleman"; meaning a man of innately beautiful character who, never having even heard of the code, follows it by instinct. In other words, the code of a thoroughbred, whether it be applied to a man or a woman, or to a half-grown child, is the code of instinctive decency, ethical integrity, self-respect and loyalty (Post, 1937: 2).

With this shift, *Etiquette* decouples from the idea that the observed and acknowledged cultivation of a class habitus is itself a symbol of class. What in earlier editions was called the "code of a gentleman," is now a naturalized "code of ethics." Etiquette becomes the instinctive and common-sense behavior that arises from people of quality, whatever their rank.

The increasing daylight between wealth, inherited status and high-brow cultivation, on the one hand, and markers of worth, on the other hand, are evident across editions. For example, in the 1960 edition, Post shared her optimism on the rise of a well-mannered public, which should make affluence, cultivation, and status less salient for social distinction-making. "I do think Americans today are drifting toward, not away from, finer perceptions and good taste," Post writes (Post, 1960: xxvii-xxviii).

In the 1975 edition of *Etiquette*, morality begins to emerge as more central. The book's authors deny a connection between manners and status, cultivation or affluence, arguing instead that etiquette is based on morality:

Today, fortunately, our attitude toward manners is far more sensible. As Peg Bracken writes, "Once a proof of your breeding, manners are now an indication of your warm heart and good intentions as well." (Post, 1975: v-vi).

Given the apparent rise of morality as a replacement for cultivation and affluence in *Etiquette*, we were not surprised to see the divergence in *morality's* salience as a symbol of class and the salience trends of *status*, *cultivation* and *affluence*, and we would expect that this may be a continued development in the future.

Our observations of the increasing salience of *employment* and *education* support the conclusion that these aspects of class are increasingly relevant to class distinction-making. We find evidence in the text to support this. For example, the 2011 edition describes young adulthood as "higher education and career-forming years" (Post et al., 2011: 464), quite distinct from earlier emphases on young married couples tasked with "making one's position" through the creation of an "intimate visiting list" of people with whom one socializes (Post, 1934: 69-70).

Over time *Etiquette* incorporates more discussions of work and working life, with the assumption that the reader is likely employed. For example, when the word stem *employ* appears in early editions, it is often in the context of discussing how to manage as the employer of household servants. By the 1950 edition, the topics of etiquette for the office and correct comportment for women in business are added to the book. Beginning in 1984, "Your Professional Life" receives its own chapter. The increased movement of women into the labor force is an obvious reason for these changes in the text and reinforces the finding that *employment* is an increasingly important element of everyday class distinction-making. The texts show the rise of work as a place that must be discussed. The establishment and maintenance of social relationships with colleagues at the office, but also at work dinners, and even at the golf course ultimately supplants community-based social life that once unfolded at the opera, balls, the social club, and through home visits and dinner parties.

Education is a widespread and relevant element of class distinction-making in *Etiquette*. However, the continued salience we observe in the computational results diverges from observations of the text. Education first emerges, and then disappears as an explicit topic. Education, in particular at the university level, is present from the very first edition of *Etiquette*, although it remains in the background. For example, when discussing using honorifics in introductions, the text explains the meaning and correct use of different university titles. Education gradually enters the foreground. The 1940 edition includes a section entitled "How to Dress at College." College receives its own chapter in 1945. But then education moves back into the background. It no longer has its own chapter beginning with the 1984 edition. In more recent editions, college moves further into the background. By 1992, education does not have its own section, and by 2011 there are not even any index entries for education, schooling, university, or college. However, education returns to the background with a twist. Earlier editions focus on behavior while at college, but recent editions refer to completed education as a credential. For example, the 2017 edition includes etiquette advice for graduation parties in the events section, the correct format of a resume for the college graduate in the job section, and recommendations regarding joining one's university alumni club in the section on the "social side of business" (Post & Senning, 2017: 448). Education in *Etiquette* also has a gendered component. The earliest discussions of college focus on men. By the 1940s, women are recognized as accessing higher education, albeit with an emphasis on social aspects of college life, such as meeting a future spouse. There are no discernable gender differences in the discussion of education beginning in the 1990s.

Combining the computational results on *education* with these observations through reading, in which education appears to move from the background to the foreground, and the background again, has important implications for our understanding of how education works in class distinction-making. First, it suggests that college graduation and post-graduation inclusion in alumni networks is closely linked to employment, and a crucial aspect of class distinction-making in contemporary times. In the past, relationships and happenings *during* college were much more salient to the role of education in class distinction-making. Meanwhile, the continued salience of *education* despite the concept's return to a background role in *Etiquette* in more recent editions suggests that attending college is a taken-for-granted symbol of class that is so obvious it does not need to be discussed explicitly.

## 6. Conclusion

The rise of ordinariness, cultural omnivorousness, and the moral deservingness of the elite cannot be interpreted as evidence of classlessness and social equality. On the contrary, this research provides new insight into class distinction-making. In this article, we applied word embeddings to a text corpus with a theoretical relationship to the topic to get a view of how salient *affluence*, *cultivation*,

education, employment, morality and status were to everyday distinction-making. We used etiquette books as data because the purpose of etiquette books is to illuminate symbols that convey one's class position - crucial information both for those with mobility aspirations and those who fear downward mobility.

The results show three periods of class distinction-making between 1922 and 2017: an embodied period characterized by distinction-making on the basis of affluence, cultivation, morality, and status; a diffuse period in which no concepts were particularly salient to distinction-making; and a manifest period in which education and employment emerged as highly salient for class distinction-making. These shifts make sense relative to the history of inequality in the United States. There was declining salience of class as the Gilded Age passed through the Great Depression to World War II. There were no dominant or particularly prevalent aspects of class during the 50s and 60s - a time of tremendous social upheaval, but also a time in which the United States had the least economic inequality and smallest relative foreign-born population. The rise of meritocracy coincided with the rise of American inequality from the 1970s until the present day.

Additional findings point to directions for further research. Status proved challenging for the analysis because different specification of that class concept were influenced by intersecting inequalities. Future research exploring intersections inequality through etiquette could produce further insights into how symbols of class status contribute to the reproduction of gender and racial inequalities. It also suggests that the concept of status is explicitly aged, gendered, and raced; and should be used with caution. In addition, morality appears to be gaining ground in its salience to class distinction-making, a finding that is consistent with other research on the importance of moral justifications of class position (Sherman, 2017).

Taken together, these findings suggest that class operates less through status group closure and more through symbols associated with stratification and attainment. How does this pivot affect the chances of mobility for those who are outside of the economic and cultural elite? In the first edition of *Etiquette*, Post argues that social standing is available to all who can wield the symbols of class:

The outsider enters society by the same path, but it is steeper and longer because there is an outer gate of reputation called "They are not people of any position" which is difficult to unlatch. Nor is it ever unlatched to those who sit at the gate rattling at the bars, or plaintively peering in. The better, and the only way if she has not the key of birth, is through study to make herself eligible. Meanwhile, charitable, or civic work, will give her interest and occupation as well as throw her with ladies of good breeding, by association with whom she cannot fail to acquire some of those qualities of manner before which the gates of society always open (Post, 1922: 45).

What Post refers to as "making herself eligible", Goffman calls "status fraud." Our results suggest that associating with the "right sort," cultivating one's taste, and engagement in good works no longer hold the key to social advancement, if they ever did. Class distinction-making has evolved in such a way that one's correct behavior is less relevant. Status fraud is increasingly precluded by distinction-making on the basis of educational and occupational credentials regulated by institutional gatekeepers like selective universities and elite employers, who implement logics of valuation and costs of participation that limit access. The rising salience of education and employment may be a cultural shift in line with the meritocratic ideal, but the meritocratic meaning of class in modern times belies the inequality in access to salient symbols used in everyday distinction-making.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:[10.1016/j.poetic.2022.101734](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2022.101734). A replication package is available, at [https://github.com/avoyer/Symbols\\_of\\_Class](https://github.com/avoyer/Symbols_of_Class).

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