

## Status Distinctions in Interaction: Social Selection and Exclusion at an Elite Nightclub

Lauren A. Rivera

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**Abstract** Although social status plays a crucial role in the generation and maintenance of social inequalities, how status processes operate in naturalistic social contexts remains less clear. In the following article, I provide a case study of doormen—individuals who simultaneously represent status experts and status judges—at a highly exclusive nightclub to investigate how people draw status distinctions in micro-social settings. Using interview and ethnographic data, I analyze on what bases doormen evaluate the relative worth of patrons and confer the status prize of admission. I find that in making such decisions, doormen drew from a constellation of competence and esteem cues, which were informed by contextually specific *status schemas* about the relative material, moral, and symbolic worth of particular client groups. Moreover, the ways in which doormen used these cues and schema depended on the identity of the specific patron being evaluated. As such, I argue that processes of interpersonal evaluation and status conferral are contextually specific, culturally embedded, and interpersonally variable. Despite such variations, a patron’s perceived social connections seemed to outweigh other types of cues in admissions decisions. I conclude by discussing these findings in light of both *status characteristics theory* and Bourdieu’s work on the transubstantiation of capital to suggest that social capital is a powerful status cue that can, under certain conditions, be a more potent source of social distinction and status advantage, or hold a greater *conversion value*, in systems of stratification than other types of qualities.

**Keywords** Status · Micro-sociology · Distinction · Exclusion · Cultural capital · Social capital · Bourdieu

Status, defined here as estimations of competence, honor, or esteem (Weber 1968), significantly affects opportunities for economic and social success (e.g., DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Collins 2004). Specifically, status serves as a marker of economic (Podolny

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L. A. Rivera (✉)  
Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2001 Sheridan Road,  
Evanston, IL 60208-2011, USA  
e-mail: l-rivera@kellogg.northwestern.edu

2005), social (Gould 2002), and moral (Lamont 1992) worth that plays a large role in defining how individuals are evaluated, allowed access to resources and rewards, and ultimately directed towards or away from positions of power and wealth (see Berger and Webster 2006; Bourdieu 1984; Ridgeway 2006).

Despite the fact that status pervades social life and social outcomes, there is a striking lack of empirical research addressing how status processes operate in naturalistic social settings (see Gambetta and Hamill 2005; Sauder 2005). Sociometric research has shown that individuals can identify with a surprising amount of accuracy who does and does not have status in their social environment. For example, when asked to rate individuals on status dimensions such as likeability or popularity within a social context such as a school or workplace, there is profound convergence in reports of who has high and low status (e.g., Adler and Adler 1996; Coleman 1961; Ridgeway and Walker 1995). Moreover, social psychologists have demonstrated that people are able to draw status distinctions between actors rapidly, usually within seconds—often a “mere glimpse” of someone’s behavior is sufficient (see Ambady et al., 1999; Ridgeway et al. 2009). These types of status judgments can affect how people distribute material and symbolic rewards in both the short and long term, making them a potent source of inequality in interaction (see Berger et al. 1977; Bourdieu 1984; Collins 2004; Gould 2002; Tilly 1998).

Existing studies indicate that people rapidly draw status distinctions between actors in micro-social settings and that these judgments are consequential for the distribution of valued resources. Yet, for the most part, sociologists have paid less attention to investigating empirically how status is conferred in *naturalistic* social contexts, focusing instead on laboratory, quasi-experimental, field experimental, or other types of controlled settings. The purpose of this paper is to begin to address this gap by providing a case study of doormen at an elite nightclub. I investigate the processes through which doormen evaluate the relative worth of patrons and on what bases they distribute the valued status prize of admission to this exclusive social space. In doing so, I aim to extend sociological understandings of status processes in interaction as well as to contribute to a burgeoning body of literature exploring the links between cultural sociology and social psychology (see Cerulo 2000; DiMaggio 1997; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lizardo 2009; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Vaisey 2009).

### **Status distinctions: Bridging social psychological and cultural perspectives**

Although status processes are crucial to understandings of social inequality (Bourdieu 1984; Weber 1968), over the past 30 years, stratification scholars have tended to shy away from analyzing social status, focusing instead on material and structural bases of inequality (see Goldthorpe and Chan 2007; Sauder 2005 for discussions). As such, the majority of recent work on status processes in social interaction has occurred in subfields outside stratification, notably social psychology and cultural sociology. Here, I outline two research paradigms that are particularly relevant for understanding status processes in micro-social settings: *status characteristics theory* and research on *symbolic boundaries*.

#### Status characteristics theory

Pioneered by social psychologist Joseph Berger and his colleagues, *status characteristics theory* (SCT) is the dominant paradigm in sociology for understanding status processes in micro-social interaction. Although research in this tradition is prolific and has been

reviewed comprehensively elsewhere (see Ridgeway 2006; Wagner and Berger 1993; Webster 2003), I provide a brief overview of findings relevant to processes of status distinction here.

Drawing upon experimental data from task groups, SCT suggests that when individuals gather to perform a task, they are unsure of where to direct their attention and whose contribution to value. As such, they search for cues in the environment indicating that particular actors may be more capable team members than others. The cues individuals draw from tend to be easily perceptible traits that are correlated with differences in material or symbolic resources between actors. They may be *indicative cues* (i.e., those that directly convey a particular status), *expressive cues* (i.e., those that infer a particular status), or *task cues* (i.e., those that indicate competence on a specific task) (see Berger et al. 1986; Wagner and Berger 1993). Moreover, the particular cues used in a given setting can be imported from societal stereotypes, induced artificially through “priming,” or produced organically through repeated “doubly dissimilar” pairings of resource/cue level (see Ridgeway 1991 for discussion). However, in general, characteristics that are salient,<sup>1</sup> immediately perceptible, and related to the task at hand are more likely to emerge as status signals than other types of characteristics (see Berger et al. 1977).

Once a characteristic acquires value as a status marker, it can become a potent source of inequality in interaction. Status characteristics can result in self-fulfilling cycles of expectations and performance. Possessors of a high status trait are expected to be more competent, are given more opportunities to participate in social settings, and are evaluated more positively by gatekeepers such as teachers and employers. With such increased social resources, high status individuals may eventually perform better (see Correll 2004). Conversely, low status individuals are given fewer opportunities and encouragement to achieve, are evaluated more harshly by both themselves and others, and often suffer decrements in performance as a result (Foschi et al. 1994). Thus, status distinctions between actors, which may initially occur on the basis of minor or even trivial distinctions, rapidly create powerful and durable systems of inequality.

Although SCT is perhaps best known for its analysis of the relationship between status cues, performance expectations, and behavior, recently scholars have expressed increasing interest in investigating the symbolic dimensions of status distinctions; namely, how *status beliefs* about the value of possessors of a given level of a trait inform how status cues are used in interaction (e.g., Rashotte and Webster 2005; Ridgeway et al. 2009; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Status beliefs are important because they both shape people’s attitudes towards other individuals and constitute a set of cultural rules that guide behavior (Ridgeway 2007). However, when analyzing status beliefs, SCT studies have tended to focus on “hegemonic cultural beliefs” (Ridgeway 2007, p. 322), or widely shared, often externally imported conceptions of worth that permeate social life across numerous contexts, such as gender, race, and physical attractiveness. Although these beliefs and their corresponding status characteristics are critical components of the creation and maintenance of systems of social inequality, they are far from the only qualities that organize relations of deference and esteem in interaction.<sup>2</sup> Particularly in naturalistic social contexts, where both the nature of social relations and the array of status information available to participants are

<sup>1</sup> Berger et al. (1977) define salience as whether the characteristic has relevance in the group. For example, gender would not be a salient cue in single-sex company but would be salient in male-female interaction.

<sup>2</sup> As noted by SCT practitioners and scholars using the *minimal groups paradigm*, nearly any trait can acquire status value given the right circumstances (see Ridgeway 1991; Tajfel and Turner 1979).

potentially more complex<sup>3</sup> than in the controlled settings typically used in SCT research, contextually specific status beliefs can play a crucial role in shaping the patterns of status differentiation that emerge in a given setting (see Coleman 1961; Milner 2004). Analyzing the content of such local status beliefs is likely to be particularly important for understanding those naturalistic contexts where status rewards are mediated through an influential third party, or *status judge* (see Sauder 2009), such as an admissions (see Stevens 2007), review (see Lamont 2009), or external rankings body (see Sauder and Espeland 2009; Zuckerman 1999). In such settings, which have received considerable interest by sociologists across subfields in recent years, those charged with conferring status may hold different status beliefs and draw status distinctions differently than would direct participants in a small group setting. Yet, to date, little research<sup>4</sup> in the SCT paradigm has examined how individuals and/or status judges negotiate between the various status beliefs and cues available to them in naturalistic status systems.

### Symbolic boundaries

Similar to social psychological work on status, cultural sociologists have depicted status processes as arising from limitations in cognitive processing. In their everyday lives, individuals are bombarded with a plethora of stimuli in their social world. However, they lack the time and mental capacity to process each person, object, experience, and environment they encounter fully. As result, individuals develop classification schemes to divide up these often random and disparate sensations and perceptions into meaningful entities and use these schemas to evaluate which actors and objects are worth attending to and which should be neglected. These schemas serve as important cognitive heuristics and cultural tools that both individuals and institutional gatekeepers draw from when assessing the relative worth of others and making decisions about the allocation of valued resources (see DiMaggio 1997; Espeland and Stevens 1998; Zerubavel 1999).

Whereas social psychological perspectives have historically tended to focus more on investigating the relationship between status cues, expectations, and behavior, cultural sociologists interested in status have taken the content of such classification schemes as their analytical focus. In particular, research on *symbolic boundaries* investigates the content of the cognitive schemas individuals draw from when distinguishing who is high and low in terms of competence, esteem, and/or social standing (see Lamont and Molnar 2002 for a review). Scholars in this tradition have demonstrated that these classification schemes are highly contextually dependent; they are informed by locally meaningful “scripts” (Goffman 1981) of value and often vary by national, institutional, and organizational context as well as actors’ positions in socio-demographic space (see Erickson 1996; Gambetta and Hamill 2005; Lamont 2002; Lamont 2009; Lareau 2003). Furthermore, such scholars have demonstrated that individuals and institutional gatekeepers often confer status on the basis of estimates of actors’ relative stocks of social resources, namely perceptions of their economic standing (*economic capital*), social connections

<sup>3</sup> In naturalistic contexts: (1) the status cues displayed by actors are often multiple (see Collins 2000) and may be ambiguous, overlapping, and/or contradictory; (2) status information is often communicated not only through direct interaction but also through an individual’s reputation and his/her embeddedness in networks of social relations (see Podolny 2005); and (3) status rewards may be conferred on the basis of performance on multiple tasks in potentially different domains over time.

<sup>4</sup> For exceptions see Bunderson (2003) and Grant (1984).

(*social capital*), display of high status cultural signals (*cultural capital*), and underlying moral character (*moral capital*). These qualities, although typically not discussed as status cues in the social psychological literature, have been depicted by cultural sociologists as both status signals and bases of exclusion (see Bourdieu 1984; Erickson 1996; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Stevens 2007).

Although it provides important insights into the cognitive dimensions of status processes as well as the variable nature of status distinctions, research on symbolic boundaries also suffers from limitations. As noted above, it tends to be very cognitively focused, analyzing how people *think about* the relative value of particular individuals or social groups *in general* terms. Although the paradigm assumes that the symbolic distinctions that people use to conceptualize the worth of others inform behavior (see Lamont and Molnar 2002 for discussion), this link is most commonly an analytical assumption; few works analyze how individuals actually deploy such classification schemes to confer social and symbolic rewards in actual interaction settings that have real distributive consequences for individuals.

### Status distinctions in interaction

I argue that social psychology and cultural sociology represent complementary approaches that can be used to enrich sociological understandings of how status processes operate in naturalistic micro-social settings. First, both research traditions approach social status as a socially constructed, contextually dependent source of interpersonal inequality that is intimately intertwined with but not reducible to material divisions between actors. Second, both perspectives depict status conferral as comprised of two interrelated processes: a) an *evaluative* dimension, where individuals draw from either shared *status beliefs* about possessors of a particular trait or broader cognitive *schemas* about the relative worth of various groups in a given social context to ascertain the competence, honor, and/or esteem of targets; and b) a *distributive* dimension—where they use such symbolic distinctions between groups to allocate desired rewards. However, the two perspectives vary in their empirical focus and historical strength, with cultural sociologists tending to focus more on the analysis of cognitive schema and processes of status evaluation and social psychologists focusing more on the analysis of cues, performance expectations, and processes of status distribution. In many ways, these two approaches represent complementary conceptual toolkits that can be merged to develop a more complete account of status processes, specifically one that analyzes both the symbolic and behavioral dimensions of how individuals evaluate and distribute status in naturalistic micro-social settings that have actual consequences for participants as well as highlights sources of variation in how individuals do so.

In this paper, I attempt to bridge these two perspectives by moving beyond studying the broad cognitive categories that individuals use to *conceptualize* the relative worth of others to investigate how people actually evaluate and confer status in one naturalistic setting context—that is, to examine processes of status distinction in interaction.<sup>5</sup> To do so, I provide a case study of doormen—who represent both status experts and status judges—at an elite nightclub. I analyze how doormen navigate between the numerous status cues and

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<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this article is not to devise an alternative theory of the emergence of status cues or symbolic boundaries in interaction but rather to study how individuals draw from the various status cues and schemas available to them in naturalistic social settings when evaluating the relative worth of others and conferring status prizes.

constellations of status beliefs about the relative value of various qualities and groups—cognitive frames that I collectively term *status schemas*—available to them when making decisions about how to distribute the status prize of admission.

### The nightclub as a status setting

Nightclubs are potent sites of status assessment and social exclusion (May 2001). As Grazian (2004) notes, the livelihood of a nightclub depends on successful impression management on the part of its staff. In the case of high-end nightclubs, success depends on the ability of a club and its employees to cultivate an aura of prestige and exclusivity (see Williams 2007). As the status of any business is linked with that of its customer base (see Podolny 2005), clubs devote large amounts of resources to insuring that their clientele consists of individuals perceived as prestigious, attractive, affluent, or otherwise high status.

Like many other types of elite organizations (see Parkin 1974), a primary means through which high-end nightclubs acquire and maintain their elite reputation is exclusion. Because these venues commonly attract many more customers than they can actually fit inside, patrons physically queue outside waiting for entry. Although in less elite establishments, customers enter the club in the order in which they lined up at the door, in high-end clubs, staff and promoters engage in “selection at the door,” handpicking customers for admission from lines sometimes in excess of several hundred people on the basis of perceived “fit” with the club’s mission, elite image, and clientele. Moreover, as admission to exclusive nightclubs and involvement in high-end nightlife “scenes” is in many ways a form of productive play that can provide participants with access to desired rewards such as inclusion in high profile social scenes, romantic and sexual possibilities, and networking opportunities (see Grazian 2007; Grigoriadis 2003), the reward of admission is in many respects a status prize in its own right.

Thus, high end nightclubs represent a sort of microcosm of status conferral processes that occur on a broader level. Individuals from a variety of economic, social, and cultural backgrounds literally line up to gain access to a valued and scarce opportunity (entry to a prestigious social organization), but their chances of receiving this status prize are contingent upon the judgments of one or more “gatekeepers” who physically guard the door. These gatekeepers—known as doormen—represent both status experts and *status judges* (Sauder 2009). They are status experts in that evaluating patrons’ relative worth quickly and accurately is a vital part of their working lives, and they make hundreds of such assessments each night. They are status judges because their impressions and interpretations determine who does and does not receive the status prize of admission. Yet, the bases on which door staff make inclusion and exclusion decisions are subtle, subjective, and warrant further exploration. Although the nightclub setting is somewhat particular, given the organization’s focus on entertainment and the club’s predominantly young clientele, it provides a unique site in which to study *processes* of interpersonal evaluation and status conferral in naturalistic micro-social interaction.

## Methods

To examine on what bases doormen evaluate the relative worth of patrons and make decisions about how to confer the status prize of admission, I conducted qualitative research at one nightclub in a major northeastern metropolitan area that had a reputation for being one of the most difficult clubs in the region to get into. I selected this particular club—a

multi-level dance club, which will be referred to by the pseudonym *PoshBar*—on the basis of its “upscale,” “exclusive,” and “elite” image, as reported by major travel publications and news organizations in the Northeast, such as the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and Citysearch.com.

## Interviews

After I secured permission from the club’s manager, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 members of the club’s door staff, defined as employees who, as part of their job description, stood at the door and made entry and rejection decisions about patrons or, in their terms, “watched the door.” Such individuals included persons with different job titles including bouncer,<sup>6</sup> promoter, and manager, but for the sake of clarity, I will refer to all such participants as *door staff* and/or, given the sex of my interviewees, *doormen*. Although the number of interviewees is seemingly small, it is important to note that this figure represents nearly the entire population of door staff at the club (86%); only two door staff declined to be interviewed. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, took place off-site, and covered general questions pertaining to participants’ experiences working at the nightclub as well as questions about processes of customer selection (see [Appendix](#) for interview schedule). Following Lamont’s (2009) protocol for probing the criteria individuals use to assess merit, I asked specific questions about the qualities participants look for in door selection and had them discuss specific individuals they have encountered during their time at the club’s door whom they believed were well—or mal-suited for entry. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed when participants consented; when a participant declined to be taped, I recorded detailed notes in real-time. All participants were males aged 22–35. They were predominantly foreign-born and nonwhite, as the club’s management purposefully seeks to create a cosmopolitan and international ambience (as one door man described, “similar to [European club hot spots] Ibiza or San Tropez”) not only through its music and décor but also through the identities of its staff. Most door staff worked at the club part-time, supplementing a primary day job, self-employment, or school. Three had received a degree from a 4-year college or university.

## Participant observation

In order to substantiate interview data with first-hand accounts of staff and customer behavior, I performed ethnographic observation of the club twice per week for a period of 6 months. These sessions lasted nearly 4 hours and began 15 minutes before the club’s 11 p.m. opening time and ended approximately 30 minutes after its 2:00 a.m. closing time. During these sessions, I observed door staff and customer behavior in the interior and exterior of the club, spoke informally with door staff, non-door employees (e.g., bartenders, wait staff), and customers about “selection at the door.” In particular, I would ask doormen about particular patrons accepted and rejected from the club each night. Moreover, for three of these 6 months, I also worked as a “coat check” and “cigarette girl,” positioned adjacent to the club’s door, with a clear view of all customers who entered the club and a sufficient but slightly obstructed view of those who were turned away. I kept a journal of field notes to record observations and impressions and coded them with the analytic strategy described below.

<sup>6</sup> “Bouncer” is a slang term for doorman.

## Data analysis

I coded interview transcripts, interview notes, and field notes for criteria of admission and rejection and mechanisms of social selection. In accordance with the analytical strategy of grounded theory (Charmaz 2001), I developed coding categories inductively and refined them in tandem with data analysis. To analyze processes of interpersonal evaluation and status conferral, I coded mentions of the various cues, criteria, and schemas participants described using in “selection at the door” in interviews and field notes as well as in observations of patrons accepted for and rejected from admission. After coding this data, I quantified frequencies of themes by category using the data analysis software package ATLAS.ti. In the article, I have replaced all proper names with pseudonyms and stripped otherwise potentially identifying information to protect the club, its staff, and its customers.

### Behind the velvet rope: The nighttime elite

Overall, interviews and participant observation revealed that, like many other exclusive social organizations, there was a dominant and cohesive group of high status customers that constituted the primary customer base of PoshBar. However, a smaller number of customers outside this “in-group” were handpicked nightly by door staff. Newcomers, or “new faces” as door staff referred to them, were admitted or rejected from the club on the basis of whether staff believed they would enhance the club’s a) successful functioning, defined as its profitability and safety, and b) status and image.

PoshBar represents a relatively “closed” social space dominated by a relatively stable status group—there is a consistent and cohesive group of regular club-goers that both contribute to the exclusive image of the club and monopolize access to it. Doorman Mohammad describes, “Our club is not a club; it’s a ‘clubhouse.’” According to door staff reports and my own observations, the same clients tended to gain entry to the club on its busiest nights and use the club as a semi-private gathering spot (or “clubhouse”) for themselves and their friends. Another doorman Pedro explained, “At PoshBar, you get the same crowd Tuesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. You get some new faces, but it’s pretty much the same crowd every night.” The customer base is not only consistent but represents a tightly-knit clique of individuals with strong ties both inside and outside the club. As described by Omar, “Half of them live in the same apartment complexes...so, everybody knows everyone. Everyone knows each other by name, by family name, by what kind of car they drive, what their father does. Who’s a minister, who’s in the government, who’s a big business man, who’s a big shot.” John agreed, “They all already know each other from school or from their country or country club or whatever. They probably even ate lunch together that day before coming here!”

Furthermore, this dominant group of regulars has a cohesive image. Both door staff and the popular press describe PoshBar’s clientele as international, upscale, and elite, consisting primarily of well-heeled foreign students and young professionals from Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. Pedro asserted, “I mean, everyone there speaks at least two languages. Maybe three or four.” Moreover, patrons were described as being extremely fashionable and affluent. The popular press<sup>7</sup> has referred to PoshBar’s customers as the “A-list, jet set” and the city’s “wealthy svelte.” As a result, the atmosphere inside PoshBar is

<sup>7</sup> I have purposefully omitted the names of particular publications so as to protect the identity of the club and its staff.



one of status and money, with customers being quick to flaunt their own wealth. Doorman Antonio confessed, “You can say it’s a spoiled-rich kind of club. And it is.” Door staff described customers as constantly trying to show off for one another and “top each other,” through means such as who can achieve the highest bar bill for the night, who has the biggest table, and who can attract the most women. As summarized by Alexi, “They throw around money like you wouldn’t believe!” In fact, management has coined a term to describe their moneyed customer base—“CODs”—which stands for “Cash in On Daddy.”

### **Door selection: Reproduction of a status group**

Max Weber (1968) argues that status groups gain their elite social standing through a process of *social closure* in which the group effectively restricts access to valued resources to members of their own group. Similarly, PoshBar maintains its reputation as a desired and exclusive night spot by excluding the majority of customers who attempt to enter and by having staff engage in rigorous “selection” at the door. Mike, a doorman who also served as the club’s head promoter and thus wielded strong influence over door policy, explained that the club’s strategy was purposely to “promote to more people than we have the capacity to fit” in order to make sure “we can select...and get the best people inside.”

Door staff believed that engaging in strong selection at the door was essential to the viability of the club. Specifically, they felt that such social sorting and screening enabled them to protect both the safety of their customers and the profitability of their establishment. First, they believed that safety was crucial for customer enjoyment and retention. Rao describes, “We have to select because we want to keep everything good inside...if people don’t feel safe, if people are fighting all over the place, then they’re not gonna have a good time. And if they don’t have fun they’re not gonna come back.” By filtering out customers who may be carrying weapons or are otherwise “looking to start something,” door staff believed that selection was a means of preventing unwanted attention or intervention on the part of the police. Alexi explains, “If someone gets in with a knife or a gun or something...and unfortunately, it’s happened...then we have real trouble. All it takes is one time...one person with a gun and something to prove and we’re all out of jobs....Not just me or the guy who didn’t catch it...the whole club would get shut down.”

Screening for safety was seen as a necessary but not sufficient means of sustaining the club’s overall viability. In addition to screening out potential threats, because the club has the luxury of having more people who want to get in than they actually have room for, “controlling the door” is also a way of socially engineering a more profitable customer base. Staff restricted entry to individuals whom they perceived would spend more money once inside the club both to enhance nightly profits and to reproduce the affluent and elite reputation of the club. Door selection, thus, had a strong economic motivation. Antonio summarizes:

We’re looking at it as a money situation....You gotta select. Recruit a certain type, promote a certain type...when you start letting everybody in, you gonna lose the customers you know is gonna pay you big and really make you money. And that’s why they wanna keep that formula the same. Once you change the formula, you lose the crowd. And that’s the key. You cannot lose the formula. Any other crowd you put in there, you’re dead.

## Bases of selection

Thus, selection was seen as a crucial means of reproducing the club's material and symbolic success. But how did doormen assess the suitability of prospective customers, both "new faces" and "old" from among hundreds at the door and confer the valued prize of admission? I argue that doormen made entry and rejection decisions on the basis of whether they perceived an individual would be a) a competent customer, that is one who was both "safe" and who would contribute to a high alcohol spend inside the club, and b) one who would elicit feelings of attraction, admiration, and/or deference from current and prospective customers. These two types of underlying qualities correspond roughly to the *competence* and *esteem* dimensions of social status typically examined by sociologists.

Yet, door staff had to make selection decisions very rapidly, frequently on the basis of only seconds of interaction or "mere glimpses" (Ambady et al. 1999) of behavior. As such, in line with research in the status characteristics theory tradition, they tended to rely on readily perceptible cues and characteristics that they believed were signals of underlying competence and esteem. However, the particular constellation of cues used in a given admission or rejection decision a) was informed by contextually specific status schemas about the relative economic, social, and moral worth of particular client groups, and b) varied by the identity of the particular club-goer being evaluated. As such, processes of interpersonal evaluation and status conferral were contextually specific, culturally embedded, and interpersonally variable. Table 1 summarizes the main cues and schemas door staff drew from in customer selection in order of their reported and observed weight in evaluation. In the following pages, I analyze each of these cues and schemas in further detail.

### Cue #1: Being a recognized member of the elite

Familiarity is one of the most powerful bases of trust in social relations because information about past behavior in a given social context can be used to predict future action. Consequently, particularly under conditions of uncertainty, a prior history of exchange is one of the strongest predictors of future and repeated exchange (see Cook and Emerson 1978; Gulati 1995). Similarly, according to all door staff interviewed and my own observations of the club's door, being recognized as an established member of the "crowd" was the most important criterion for entry. Much like the function attributed to the selection process as a whole, admitting customers who had a longer history of attending the club was seen as a preventative measure to insure the safety, profitability, and reputation of the club because regulars were seen as being more predictable and appropriate in both behavior and style and evoked the strongest frames of customer competence. Door staff viewed regulars as less likely to engage in disruptive behavior or violence within the club. As Antonio summarized, "We know they're okay."

However, in addition to being perceived as "safer" customers, door staff believed that regulars spent more money once inside the club. In general, nightclubs are potent sites of status and affluence display (see Bernstein 2005), but all doormen interviewed described regulars as being particularly big spenders. Alexi describes, "For them, spending 600 to a 1000 dollars a night is nothing. I mean they got guys there that in a year spend 10,000 dollars. I mean if you come and you're buying bottles of Cristal, and spreading them around, that's 600 dollars a pop. And you're buying three bottles [a night]?" Moreover, because, as noted earlier, many regulars know each other not only from the club but also

**Table 1** Most common status cues and schemas drawn from by doormen in selection

Cue used in selection	Status dimensions signaled	Status schema(s) evoked	Most commonly used as a basis for
Recognition as regular	Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulars have already proven their competence as customers and thus are believed to be reliably safe patrons who will spend more than other groups</li> </ul>	Inclusion
Ties to prominent members	Competence Esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networked customers are similar to regulars; tie serves as a voucher of competence and image, even if they display potentially threatening cues</li> </ul>	Inclusion
Women	Competence (by proxy) Esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are profitable customers because their presence increases alcohol purchases by men (as gifts, courtship and/or status displays)</li> <li>• Women are safer customers who are less prone to engaging in physical violence in the club</li> <li>• Having a larger number of women will enhance the club's image as a desirable nightclub</li> </ul>	Inclusion
Dress	Esteem Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patrons' dress reflects their underlying willingness to spend, their fit with the upscale image of the club, and propensity for "trouble"</li> <li>• Individuals who display fashionable, expensive, professional (for men) clothing and accessories are more likely to spend once inside the club, be found attractive by other club-goers, and stay out of trouble</li> <li>• Individuals who display less fashionable styles or dress in hip hop or other racialized styles are less likely to be competent or safe customers</li> </ul>	Exclusion
Race/Ethnicity	Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Race is seen as a signal of a patron's underlying economic potential and willingness to spend, and their propensity for trouble</li> </ul>	Exclusion

from work, school, or other outside activities, they were seen as being more invested in the internal status system of the club. They frequently engaged in a sort of spending "arms race" on cocktails and tips to display their affluence to other patrons and attract women to their table.

Moreover, regulars were also willing to pay a premium to occupy the most desirable spaces in the club. PoshBar is set up like an amphitheater. Private tables line the perimeter of the semi-circular dance floor, and at the top of the horseshoe is an elevated stage with two tables on it. These tables represent the choicest real-estate in the club because they provide an unobstructed view of the entire venue but also are visible from any vantage point within it. Reserving any table required a minimum bar tab of 250 dollars on a weeknight and 400 dollars on a weekend. However, although an unspoken rule, the "better"

the table, meaning the more visible, the more customers were expected to spend. As the promoters are in charge of table reservations, they kept close accounting of how much customers spent and allocated future tables accordingly—the higher the spend and/or the more “prominent” the customer,<sup>8</sup> the closer to the stage the promoter seated them. Consequently, much like a high school lunchroom, the customer status hierarchy was visible and entrenched in social space. Informal conversations with club-goers revealed that regulars knew this unspoken monetary code and were willing to spend large sums of money to display their standing and quite literally “see and be seen.” Mike, who in addition to his door duties frequently matched customers to table reservations describes, “Like the table on the stage—that’s one of the best tables—and normally the people who sit up there are the people who are going to spend between 1500 and 2000 dollars a night—in alcohol alone. And they come every week.” In addition to a higher spend per night, regulars were perceived as being better long-term investments for the club because they represent a more consistent and reliable source of income for the club than “new faces.” As two doormen describe:

Basically, if it was the first time you came here, and you could have had plenty of people with you....But if he [the owner] has three people who come here every night, he knows how much money they gonna spend, versus how much money you gonna spend. So he lets these guys in because they come on a regular basis, versus you, you come here one night and you never come again. So, he lets this group in (Antonio).

We have people in the club who’ve been buying champagne for 6 or 8 years. Bottles and bottles and bottles. And if they come in one night and they don’t buy a bottle, we don’t care. You know, we don’t say anything. Because we know that they’re loyal, and they’re gonna come back the next week and buy three bottles (Mike).

However, as noted above, not all regulars are perceived as being equal. Just as the dance floor seating was stratified by customer spend, so was admission time. Those in charge of table reservations frequently communicated with those manning the door about how much regulars typically spent. Mike describes, “How fast you get in depends on your popularity and your status,” which, in the context of PoshBar, stem largely from the frequency and quantity of spends as well as the number and perceived status of people in a customer’s party:

Status is like the relationship you have with the promoters, the relationship you have with the club itself, how long you’ve been coming, how loyal you’ve been, how many people you show up with....See, we have customers that’s been with us for as long as I’ve been here. So those people, when they come, they’re in right away.... We never turn away someone who’s...like really close...but someone who’s kind of like mediocre...meaning that they just came to the city...they just started coming since like September. They’ve been coming every night loyally, but they’re still not at that point yet. You know, they still have like a way to go. So, yeah, like people like that, though...they come second.

Therefore, given that regulars evoked extremely strong status schemas of competence, doormen perceived them to be the most desirable “guests” and granted them priority in admission.

<sup>8</sup> Celebrities were also given such tables.

## Cue #2: Social capital—“who you know”

Network scholars have long demonstrated that the size, strength, and status of one’s social ties, or their *social capital*, is both a status signal and a resource that can be used to gain access to valued economic and symbolic rewards (see Bourdieu 1984; Lin 1999; Podolny 2005). Similarly, after being recognized as an established member of the group, having ties to prominent or high status club personalities was reported by all interviewees as being the second most important criterion for entry into the club. In particular, being a friend of a doorman, promoter, or manager was an almost fool-proof way for “new faces,” or nonregulars, to get in. On any given night, doormen are allowed to put up to four names of friends at the door. According to door staff and my own observation of the club’s door, these individuals are rarely refused entry. In my 6 months as a participant observer, I never saw a friend of a staff member turned down, even when they violated the dress code or other evaluative criteria such as being big spenders or having a lot of women (see “Girls, Girls, Girls,” below) in their party. Still, each night, promoters and managers stand at the door alongside door staff and will personally let friends in without any wait time. As explained by doorman John, “You always want to take care of your friends, you know? If I don’t know you, then you’re gonna have to wait.”

In addition to direct ties with one of the club’s door staff, nonmembers could also be brought in under a *system of nomination* (Parkin 1974) whereby individuals are brought into the group by an established member. Mike refers to this technique as “promotion from within” and cites it as the primary way that the club brings in new members. According to Mike, “promotion from within” is preferable to recruiting outsiders through mass publicity because it “keeps the family-orientation of the club” and insures that “new people who do come will fit in.” Mike describes how this internal method of recruitment operates:

See, your cousin brings five of his friends...and those five bring another five. And that’s how it grows. You bring in who you know and who you like and most of the time, we like them, too...We treat your cousins and your friends just as we’d treat you...we just make them feel as special as possible so they feel as special as you feel when you come...and that’s how we build and build and build and build.

The club’s promotion team does engage in external advertising—through distributing flyers at university events and occasionally publicizing club special events in local newspaper and magazine event listings. But as Mike relates, these activities are designed primarily “for image....to get our name out as *the place* to be” and to increase the length of the line at the door. However, in reality, he notes, “People who know about us just though a flyer or [a magazine] or whatever—unless they’re *exceptional*—more than likely will not get in.”

## Cue #3: Girls, girls, girls

Grazian (2007) notes that nightlife establishments and in particular nightclubs are highly sexualized spaces in which customers enact highly ritualized performances of gender and courtship. I found that doormen played a crucial role in such performances, not only by drawing from their own gendered scripts in “selection at the door” but also by making sure that the “scene” was set for such gender play and the “right” players were available for performance. In fact, after being recognized as a member of the established elite and having connections to prominent club personae, being a woman and/or the number of women in one’s party was reported to be the next most important cue used in “selection at the door.”

According to 100% of door staff interviewed, being a female or having a substantial quantity of women in one's party increased one's chance of entry. "It's about ratio," said Rao, "Because you always want more girls than guys in there," For door staff, "gender play" represented a potential source of revenue on which they capitalized to increase the club's profitability and enhance perceptions of its desirability. Staff believed that a high ratio of women was associated with an increased customer spend inside the club; the more women there are in the club, the more drinks males would buy both for themselves and for women in order to flirt with and impress these women. In explaining the use of gender as a criterion of selection, Mike explained, "As I'm sure you know, girls don't buy alcohol for themselves [*laughs*]. It's the guys. So, you know, the more girls, the more the guys spend. That's the only reason." John agreed:

These guys who come here want to impress the women. So, when they see a girl they like, it's like "Lemme buy you a drink." Or if they are at a table with a group, they'll try to outdo the table next to them, and order a few more bottles to show off....So, it's like you get more girls in here, the more bottles they [the men] are gonna buy.

In addition to enhancing customers' overall spend on alcohol, having "more girls" in the club is seen as promoting a safer and more desirable atmosphere inside the club. Drawing from gendered stereotypes of aggression, doormen believed that women were less likely to engage in physical fights, although I witnessed on average one female-female fight per month while observing the club. In fact, the club had hired a female door person soon before my observation began to deal with such same-sex conflicts while minimizing the potential for sexual harassment charges.<sup>9</sup> Still, doormen believed, on average, that women were less aggressive and less "trouble" than men. Moreover, door staff reported that a high ratio of women would make female customers inside the club feel safer and more comfortable. Antonio explains, "What you gonna walk up there and have like ten thousand guys and like five girls? You would feel awkward yourself given that ratio. You'd be like, 'They're all gonna hit on me pretty soon.' (*laughs*). And then one does, you'll be like, 'They're not really hitting on me. It's 'cause they're desperate.'" Finally, door staff saw a large proportion of females inside as a means of attracting more men to the club. Rao explains, "If there are girls in a nightclub, the guys are gonna come....I can call ten of my guy friends and if there are ten girls in the club, they can be there in 5 minutes, you know what I mean? And so we don't really have to promote to guys, you know. But we push to get as many girls as possible for the club." Because women evoked strong schemas of profitability, safety, and esteem, they were reported by all members of the door staff as having "more leverage" and thus a higher likelihood of entry than men. In fact, similar to regulars with high "clout" in the club status hierarchy, door staff gave women more leeway with the dress code and other evaluative criteria. Doorman John describes:

The women get away with so much more when it comes to the dress code. Um...they'll never get turned away with jeans on. They basically get away with sneakers, and they get away with anything, really. Usually the dress code is more or less for guys. But I don't think I've ever turned away a girl for dress code. Unless it's like she's got running pants or she totally looks like she doesn't belong, you know, we'll let her go.

Thus, being a woman evoked sufficiently strong frames of competence and esteem that seemed to override those elicited by other cues in door selection.

<sup>9</sup> However, this door person declined to be interviewed.

## Cultural capital

Regulars, women, and men with large numbers of women in their party were often excused from further scrutiny. However, all other patrons were subsequently sorted by the degree to which they were perceived by doormen as “looking like money.” Being allowed access to the club is partially governed by possession of *cultural capital*, or high status cultural signals valued by society at large (Lamont and Lareau 1988). Although most research on cultural capital focuses on the role that “highbrow” knowledge and tastes play in social stratification (see Erickson 1996; Kingston 2001 for discussions), it is important to note that Bourdieu’s original definition also encompasses material goods (*objectified cultural capital*) as well as communicative styles and physical characteristics (*embodied cultural capital*) (Bourdieu 1984; Shilling 1993). According to the PoshBar doormen, the next two most common bases of distinction between patrons were dress and race/ethnicity. Like Bourdieu’s notions of objectified and embodied cultural capital, these highly visible cues were used both as indicators of patron competence and esteem and as bases of exclusion (see Bourdieu 1986).

### Cue #4: Objectified cultural capital—dress

Like many nightspots, PoshBar has a “dress code” that door staff use to exclude patrons based on clothing. Officially, this policy states that individuals wearing jeans, t-shirts, shorts, sandals, or baggy clothing will not be admitted. However, in reality, the dress code was highly subjective and was not uniformly or consistently enforced. As Ishmael confessed, “There is a set dress code, but it tends to fluctuate...depending on *who you are* more or less.” In particular, an individual’s display of other cues influenced to what extent his/her dress would be evaluated. Alexi describes, “If you’re good friends with the promoters, then you get a little more leeway on the dress code.” Rao agrees, “See, we change the rules...if it’s one of our friends or good customers.” Moreover, as noted earlier, being a woman or having a large number of women in one’s party also resulted in more lenient enforcement of the dress code. Thus, although the dress code is encouraged for all patrons of the club, its enforcement applies primarily to “unfamiliar faces” and groups that otherwise do not at first glance evoke strong schemas of competence and/or esteem in interaction.

According to door staff, the dress code has two primary functions. The first is to project and reinforce the club’s affluent and upscale image. By encouraging customers to “dress up” and by screening out those who do not “look like money,” the club seeks to cultivate an atmosphere in which customers are “out to impress” and “look impressive.” As Mike describes, having patrons who are perceived by outsiders to be affluent, attractive, and desirable enhances the club’s reputation, profitability, and ability to be exclusive:

Everyone in the club is for fashion; people are here to see and be seen....That’s why they come....You know, I mean they party and have a good time, too, but they’re mainly here to be seen....Whoever is whoever in [the city] who is popular or well-known or good-looking or wealthy or anything pretentious, this is where you come.

As a result, the club tends to have an “unofficial” dress code in which “trendy,” “designer,” or “expensive” clothing is the norm; wearing clothing that is seen as “not fashionable” or “just average” is a marker of outsider status. John illustrates, “These kids come out and they all have their Gucci, their Prada, and Coach...and then you get someone

who just comes in with like a sweater and a pair of Levis and you're like, 'Eh' [*shrugs his shoulders*]." As staff were well versed in designer labels and fashion trends, they reported being able to ascertain the affluence of patrons through brief glimpses of their apparel. Although door staff reported that "it's just a vibe you get," and "when someone doesn't fit, you can just tell," some identified placing particular emphasis on the brand name of specific accessories, including shoes and watches for men, handbags and jewelry for women, and mobile devices for both sexes, which—to doormen—signaled a customer's monetary status as well as his/her knowledge of current trends.

Yet, in addition to projecting an "upscale" atmosphere believed to attract more affluent and socially attractive customers, the dress code is also a means of identifying and excluding potential "troublemakers." According to door staff, the club does not manually search guests because doing so might "send the wrong message" to customers and detract from the carefree atmosphere of disinhibition and indulgence that the management seeks to cultivate inside. Consequently, door staff must rely on visually discernable cues to judge whether or not an individual represents a potential threat. Pedro explains how clothing is seen as a particularly salient signal of safety and/or threat, "See, we don't pat people down, so even though they [the management] never said it, they go by the dress code. They think that if you're wearing baggy clothes, you're hiding a weapon or you're gonna do something." As a result of this perception, the dress code is biased towards traditionally white, upper-middle class, often vaguely professional styles. Consistent with prior research on nightclubs (see May and Chaplin 2008), individuals wearing hip hop or "street" style clothing characterized by loose-fitting garments are often turned away from the door for "not meeting dress code." Mohammad describes, "If you're wearing baggy clothes, you're not gonna get in. They want *nice* clothes." John agrees, "You can have a thousand dollar sweatsuit on or even an Armani sweatsuit on, but that's not what we want. We want you in slacks, collared shirt, and shoes." Moreover, consistent with prior research on the criminalization of styles of dress associated with African Americans (see May and Chaplin 2008 for discussion) door staff believed that dressing in hip hop fashion *regardless of a customer's race* is associated with unruly behavior, drugs, or other types of "trouble." Antonio used another club in the city that does not exclude patrons who wear hip hop styles to illustrate the "danger" of admitting patrons who dress in this style:

If you're not dressed properly or somethin', you got your gold chains hanging out, I'm gonna ask you to put them in....we're not a "bling bling" club....So, like Heaven [another club in the city]...you walk in there, their crowd is really messed up. Um, they have problems constantly. They attract more like a hip hop crowd. It's like rappers, players of basketball, some of the football players go in there....They seem to attract...the bad crowd. Some of the drug dealers go over there. And we know they are. The bouncers [at Heaven] know they are. But that's where they hang out. But over here...that's an element we don't want in here...we're not that type of club.

Thus, the dress code had a strong but *indirect* racial component as individuals of any race who dressed in hip hop styles were typically not allowed in. However, as discussed below, door staff also *explicitly* used race itself as a basis of exclusion.

### **Cue #5: Embodied cultural capital—race, ethnicity, and accent**

According to *status characteristics theory*, race is an extremely powerful status cue because it is often an immediately perceptible signal that is salient in social interaction (see Berger



et al. 1977; Ridgeway 1991). Moreover, prior research on nightclubs (e.g., May and Chaplin 2008) has demonstrated that race is a powerful basis of rejection at the door (e.g., May and Chaplin 2008), a phenomenon that has recently received media attention (see Levitt and Candiotti 2009). Similarly, door staff at PoshBar used race and ethnicity to assess new customers' level of "threat" as well as their capacity to spend if admitted. In fact, roughly three-fourths of door staff reported that, unless they "know someone," black and Latino patrons tended to encounter more scrutiny and difficulty in obtaining entry than white or "Euro looking kids" who approached the door. The following conversation with the club's only American-born black employee, Mohammad, illustrates this phenomenon:

I: Do you think it's harder for someone who's black to get into the club?

P: Yes, it would be harder because of your appearance. You have to look productive to get up in this club.

I: What do you mean by "productive"?

P: I mean, you have to be dressed neat....You know, I figure, I look at the way we [African Americans] dress anyway, you know, those you have Fubu and Mecca gear, Phat Farm, the different styles of clothes that we wear, it's just the way the clothes are made...but a lot of [African American] guys dress neat. Like wear their Timberland boots. They're dressed okay. *But they still don't get in.* You know what I'm sayin'? I can understand that they don't let the people come in if they have their pants all hanging down their butts...I can agree with that, you know. No, they shouldn't come in because we runnin' our business here. This is not just no club that's in the neighborhood that you can go to wearin' whatever you want to. Here, you be trying to attract different people who just wanna have fun. To take their money.

When discussing the fate of black and Latino patrons who try to enter the club, he described:

They pretty much get the...uh...what I call the "eye search." I mean we check what they have on their feet. What type of clothes they're wearing. We lookin' for *anything* that ain't right. And we lookin' hard....So pretty much Blacks and Latino kids around here, you know like the ones from 'round Roxbury and Dorchester, they ain't gotta chance to get up in that club.

As noted above, a similar phenomenon applied to Latinos. Door staff drew strong *symbolic boundaries* (Lamont and Molnar 2002) between Latin American customers and US-born Latinos, the former being perceived as highly desirable customers who were both affluent and "safe," the latter evoking schemas of "threat" and danger. Antonio explains this difference, "You have two kinds of Latinos....You have the Latinos who come who are foreign Latin, and then you have the not-European Latinos who are born and raised here. Two different kind of people." Doormen reported being able to distinguish the two groups on the basis of dress, which they reported for US-born Latinos was similar to the styles worn by many African Americans. However, because many of the door staff spoke Spanish, if the ethnic identity of a Latin/o customer was unclear, they would either listen to them speak with their friends or ask them a short question in Spanish and gauge their country of origin by their accent. Rao describes, "It's easy to tell Latino kids born here 'cause they dress just like the African kids, the African-American kids. They all walk, you know, I wouldn't say with a more ghetto type attitude but are more streetwise than those that come from Europe. You can hear their accent more. You know, they have a different way of speaking Spanish."

The greater scrutiny given to blacks and US-born Latinos is due not only to the sort of confounding of race, ethnicity, dress, and income illustrated above but also partially to the

fact that the door staff tend to associate particular races and ethnicities with “trouble.” “It sounds bad, but race does matter,” confesses Omar. Part of this association is due to broader racial stereotypes of threat. Antonio describes, “It’s just instinct...it’s like when you’re sitting on the bus or the train and you pull your purse next to you ‘cause you know somebody might take your purse. You do it automatically, yeah?...But race seems to matter, right....With some people just you pick the sense up, that they’re coming for trouble.” However, this belief also stems from stereotypes based on previous incidents. Door staff recounted several fights involving African Americans as well as “gangs” of US-born Latinos that occurred during the first months the club was open. As a result of these incidents, the door staff and management have developed a generalized perception that African Americans and Latino Americans are “threats” and, as a result, they are more reluctant to let either group in. Angel explains:

See, on a few nights they let *that* group in. They caused trouble. Next time they not going to do it again....You not coming in. And what happens is, the bad thing is, it will come down to all the other ones that looks almost the same. We’ll “x” them out, too, so we won’t have none of that type in here. At all. Because, you know, they cause trouble.

It is important to highlight how both broader cultural stereotypes and contextually-specific frames influence the interpretation of local realities, such as the incidents mentioned above. Although women have also engaged in fights and management hired a female doorman specifically to deal with such problems, as discussed earlier, they are actually perceived to be “safer” customers. Regardless, these sorts of status schemas associated with race, bound up in both societal stereotypes and contextually specific meanings, played a strong role in customer selection. During my six months as a participant observer in the club, I saw only four black customers inside the club—one of whom was reported to be the “best friend” of one of the promoters and, thus, had strong social capital, two of whom were female, and one who was dressed in professional attire and was in a group of all whites. Overall, such findings suggest that race itself was a salient factor in status assessment. However, it also suggests that nonwhite club-goers could “crack the code” of the door (May and Chaplin 2008) not only through display of white, upper-middle class cultural capital but also through having high status connections, which served as an economic and moral voucher for the former.<sup>10</sup>

### Seeing status: The visual activation of social distinction

The various cues used in door selection were described as having a strong visual component. This was the case not only for traditionally studied status characteristics such as

<sup>10</sup> However, it important to note that the dearth of nonwhite customers was likely compounded by self-selection. Door staff reported that the numbers of African Americans and Latinos attempting to enter the club had dwindled over the past several years. Door staff attributed this decline in the number of non-foreign minorities to an intentional decision on the part of management to stop playing hip hop music in the club in favor of strictly European, techno, Latin, and Middle Eastern music. Consequently, a certain amount of self-selection may be occurring on the part of African American and Latino Americans. Moreover, the lack of racial diversity that currently characterizes the club may make it a less desirable destination for these groups. Finally, given that US-born Latinos and blacks are regularly turned away from the door, it may be that the club has gained a reputation for being unfriendly to members of these groups, resulting in further self-selection and low numbers within the club.

sex and race but also for more abstract criteria such as in-group status, social capital, affluence, and safety. For example, with regards to in-group status, because PoshBar's customer base tends to be comprised of "the same crowd and the same faces," door staff report being able to recognize immediately who is part of "the group" and who is not. Antonio explains, "It's good because I can actually pick out the ones who are not in the crowd, you know, so you can actually say 'these ones do not belong' in this particular group because they don't come." Omar agrees, "It's pretty much instantaneous. You've seen them before and you just know." Similarly, door staff reported being able to "see" a customer's social capital and overall position in the club's status hierarchy, particularly given a) the visible status hierarchy of seating within the club, b) frequent talk between doormen about the relative spend level of particular customers, and c) the fact that both regulars and new customers tended to come to the door in groups. Consequently, "After a month or two," explained John, "you start having an unbelievable memory of who's whose friends and who spends a lot of money and who doesn't. Who's the promoters' friend and who's not. Who's an asset to this club and who's not. There's some people you *see* and you know you gotta let them in, even if they don't have a stamp or they come late or whatever." Alexi reaffirms, "So, there's certain people that we know by face—that know the managers that know the promoters or who spend a shitload—and we know they have unlimited access to the club." Moreover, a customer's economic potential was also reported to be visually discernable through cultural and physical cues. Mohammad summarizes, "Like I said, they lookin' for these people that's gonna be spending. Who's coming in nice cars, you know, drive nice cars. How many women a person might have, and pretty much...their nationality." Finally, interpersonal evaluation and status conferral processes for "new faces" were described as being almost immediate and taking place on the basis of brief observations of and interactions with potential customers. Pedro related, "It's right off the bat. People's demeanor. It's all their demeanor. As soon as I see you walkin' across the way, where you come in, and I see how you act, I see how you acting, I can tell if...you can come in or not." Thus, my findings suggest that in-group status, economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital can serve as important status signals in micro-social settings in addition to the macro and meso-level contexts typically analyzed by cultural and economic sociologists (see Bourdieu 1984; Gambetta and Hamill 2005; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Podolny 2005). As such, they may represent potentially fruitful directions for future research by social psychologists interested in status processes.

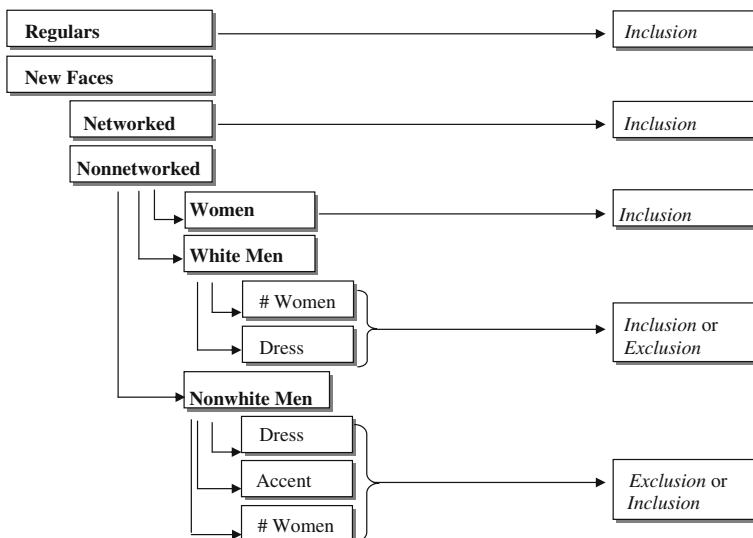
## Summary

Doormen sought to reproduce PoshBar's material and symbolic success by selecting those individuals whom they believed would be the most competent and attractive players in this affluent and exclusive nighttime "scene" (Grazian 2004). Consistent with social psychological perspectives, doormen made such assessments rapidly and on the basis of a constellation of mostly visible markers that they believed were signals of underlying customer competence and esteem. However, in line with cultural perspectives, the specific cues used to evaluate a given customer as well as their relative weight in decision-making were informed by shared status schemas about the relative material, moral, and symbolic worth of certain client groups that were derived from a combination of broader societal stereotypes, contextually specific "scripts" of value, and prior interaction. Specifically, the particular status schemas evoked by the display or absence of a given cue for a given client group informed both a) whether the cue was to be used as a

basis of inclusion or exclusion, and b) what other cues, if any, were to be used in evaluation. As such, processes of interpersonal evaluation and status conferral were intimately intertwined with processes of meaning-making and varied depending on the identity of the patron being evaluated. Figure 1 summarizes how such processes differed by patron group.

Such findings suggest that processes of interpersonal evaluation and status conferral are dependent not only on structural and contextual features of the status system (see Sauder 2006) but also the properties of the particular actors being evaluated at a given time. The way in which doormen evaluated worth and conferred status varied by a) the constellation of cues displayed by a specific actor, and b) the meanings they attributed to a given level of a cue for members of a particular social group. Thus, the process through which status distinctions are drawn in micro-social settings seems not to be a uniform phenomenon but rather one that is relative, culturally embedded, and interpersonally variable. Such results highlight the importance of understanding how various status cues and status schemas interact and intersect with one another in real-life evaluative settings.

In terms of the characteristics most commonly used in evaluation, other than being recognized as a regular customer (i.e., a previously screened in-group member), a patron's social connections seemed to outweigh other types of cues. For "new faces," having a connection to a prominent in-group member or club persona virtually guaranteed admission even when a patron displayed low status and/or potentially threatening or disconfirming cues. Such high status connections served as a voucher of a patron's competence and esteem in the nightclub setting. Sex was also a powerful inclusion cue, with women most commonly assumed to be competent and esteemed customers who were frequently excused from further sorting. Conversely, race served as a powerful exclusion cue, one that interacted more strongly with dress and accent than other criteria.



**Fig. 1** Interpersonal evaluation and status conferral processes by patron group.

## Conclusion

At PoshBar, selection at the door was based largely on perceptions of customers' material, moral, and symbolic value to the club, as defined as their ability to contribute to the continued profitability, safety, and status of the organization. To make such assessments, door staff drew from visibly discernable *status cues* and culturally informed *status schemas*, but the way in which they did so varied by the identity of the particular patron being evaluated. Across groups, however, it appeared that social capital was the most valued and valuable resource in gaining admission to the club. Individuals who “know the right people” or had sufficiently high status members in their party were likely to be admitted faster and more frequently than other types of customers. In addition, they tended to receive leniency on other evaluative criteria or bypass additional screening altogether even when they were in violation of other selection rules. Such individuals, for example, were rarely turned away for violations of the dress code. In addition, my observation of the club revealed that even the “trouble” criterion was loosened for high status members. Despite the official policy that customers who engage in fights in the club are thrown out immediately, I watched doormen on several occasions allow high status customers and their friends to remain inside the club after physical altercations. As John confessed to me after one such episode, “The guy [engaged in the fight] is a psycho, but he’s one of our best customers, so my hands are tied.”

### Implications for social psychology

Although based on a small case study, which limits generalizability, such findings illuminate *processes* that have important theoretical implications for social psychological understandings of status distinctions. First, the clear hierarchy of markers that doormen drew from during selection suggests that in naturalistic social settings certain qualities may have a stronger *status valence* and may constitute more powerful signals of worth and bases of status conferral in a given social context than others. In line with theoretical and experimental research in the status characteristics theory tradition, those cues that were readily perceptible tended to be powerful bases of inequality in selection (see Ridgeway 2006). However, my results also suggest that the status valence of a particular cue and its relative weight *vis à vis* others in naturalistic settings are contingent not only upon the cue's perceptibility in a given scenario but also the content of the contextually dependent meanings that evaluators attribute to each cue, which may or may not coincide with broader societal status beliefs about the cue. For example, in the case of race, these contextually specific meanings coincided with broader racial stereotypes, but in the case of sex, women were actually perceived as having higher status in the nightclub context than men. Furthermore, my results suggest that, at least in the case where status rewards are mediated by an influential third party, such as a doorman or other status judge, it appears that these contextually dependent meanings may render particular status cues *conceptually* salient in a given setting even when they fail to physically differentiate between participants in a particular micro-interaction. For example, doormen used sex and race as powerful bases of distinction even when engaged in same-sex and same-race interactions with potential clients.

Second, my findings speak to debates about how individuals process conflicting status cues. Some researchers have suggested that individuals respond to the presence of contradictory status cues through an *elimination* approach in which they focus on either a positive or negative cue and simply ignore conflicting information. Others have suggested

more of a *balancing* approach where individuals calculate a “net” status judgment that represents the result of positive minus negative elements (see Wagner and Berger 1993 for a review). In my study, the way in which doormen responded to potentially conflicting cues varied by the identity of the patron being evaluated. When a patron displayed a cue with a particularly strong status valence in the nightclub context—namely, in-group recognition, social capital, and female sex—their stocks of other cues were often discounted or ignored. In the absence of such strong cues, an evaluation of aggregate cues more similar to a balancing approach seemed to occur. Such results suggest that the way in which conflicting status information is processed is highly contextual and may vary according to the nature of the task, the specific constellation of status cues that are co-present, and the content and strength of status schemas associated with these cues. Future research should probe further the conditions under which elimination versus balancing processes occur in both naturalistic and controlled settings.

### Implications for cultural sociology

First, my findings speak to Bourdieu’s notion of the *transubstantiation* of capital. In “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu (1986) argues that both social and cultural capital derive their power as markers of social standing and sources of inequality from their ability to be used to gain access to desired material and symbolic resources. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to demonstrate empirically how individuals are able to “cash in” their stocks of social, cultural, and economic capital for access to valued status prizes distributed by gatekeepers. Moreover, my results suggest that, under certain circumstances, social capital may be a more potent source of social distinction and status advantage or, in Bourdieu’s terms, hold a greater *conversion value* (Bourdieu 1986) than cultural capital in competitions for scarce resources. Possessing the right quality and quantity of social ties was seen as a more meaningful and reliable signal of customers’ underlying competence and esteem than their displays of cultural capital alone. Moreover, possessing the right social ties gave actors more leeway to deviate from established cultural codes. The finding that social capital can, under certain conditions, be a more powerful basis of status distinction than cultural capital is particularly important because much of the literature on the topic in cultural sociology and the sociology of education has examined the effects of social and cultural capital on systems of social stratification independently of one another rather than exploring the interaction between the two constructs and the relative weight of each (Lamont and Lareau 1988). In addition, it highlights the importance of social capital for individuals who are otherwise perceived as being low status. Future research should probe the relationship between the context in which status judgments take place and the relative weight of social versus cultural capital. Such research should include contexts in which the status prize in question is more consequential than nightclub entry, such as in educational or occupational domains.

Second, the study sheds light on the *embodied* nature of social status. When making status assessments based on brief glimpses of behavior, participants tended to rely on visual, vocal, and physical cues. Door staff reported being able to judge the economic standing and propensity for “trouble” of a potential patron by simply glancing at his/her body or clothing or listening to his/her voice. These cues were intimately intertwined with both societal and contextually specific scripts of value but always had an easily discernable, bodily component. This finding supports Bourdieu’s idea of the body as a key marker of social position—an intriguing and rich theoretical proposition that has yet to be supported by empirical data (Shilling 1993).

Finally, the prominent role that race played as a status cue and basis for rejection in this study seems to support the notion of “subtle racism” documented by scholars across disciplines (Banaji 2001; Feagin 1991). Although the club does not have an official policy prohibiting Blacks and Latinos from entering the club, its selectively enforced and racially loaded dress code policies keep racial diversity in the club low. This finding was particularly interesting given that the majority of door staff interviewed were nonwhite, yet they still used race-based stereotypes as a means of assessing the character of customers of color. Such data is testimony to persistence of the connection between race and status ingrained in the cultural logic of American society, even among individuals of color (see Banaji 2001) and that racial stereotypes tend to be employed as criteria of exclusion even in low stakes, conventionally color-neutral environments such as nightclubs. In future research it would be interesting to examine whether the reliance on race and ethnicity as markers of competence and esteem varies depending on the demographic composition of both the nightclub and the surrounding neighborhood in question.

### Limitations

The current research was limited by the reports of doormen and my observations of their behavior. As such, the bases of selection described here are by no means an exhaustive list and there may be others that were used in selection that were not available for analysis given the current data. One factor that may have been underestimated in my analysis is perceptions of physical attractiveness. There was no objective measure of the attractiveness of individuals admitted to or rejected from the club and only minimal discussion of the role that attraction played in social selection, conversations that were almost exclusively focused on women. Because there tends to be a high correlation between being physically attractive and being perceived as high status (see Webster and Driskell 1983), it is possible that door staff are knowingly or unknowingly admitting patrons of either sex based on assessments of their physical attractiveness. Semi-experimental techniques could be fruitfully applied in future research to explore the role of attractiveness in nightclub admittance procedures and other naturalistic status settings.

Finally, the generalizability of these findings remains to be tested. It is important to note that the research described was conducted in a single nightclub with a unique, upscale image and international customer base. Future research should examine whether nightclub door staff from organizations that cater to a broader range of patrons (in terms of socio-economic status, race, and nationality) and/or are located in more diverse neighborhoods employ similar processes of assessing the relative worth of patrons and conferring status. Moreover, the research was performed in a very specific social setting, one which—due to the brief, impersonal nature of door selection processes—places strong emphasis on visual and physical characteristics as opposed to more internal or stable criteria. Status processes in slightly more “informed” face-to-face interaction, in which assessors are provided more extensive background data on individuals (i.e., romantic dates, college interviews, job interviews, etc.) may diverge from the findings presented here. Future research should build upon the results obtained by this study by examining how the particular status cues and status schemas that individuals use to draw status distinctions between actors as well as their relative weight in selection vary across levels of knowledge of individual background characteristics and across different types of naturalistic settings.

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## Appendix: Interview Guide

### A. Opening/Warm Up Questions

- How long have you been working as a doorman? How long have you been working at [club]?
- How did you come into this line of work?

### B. Work

- Which nights do you work? Do you have a favorite night to work? If so/not why? Do you have a least favorite night to work? If so/not why?
- How do you feel about your job? Are there aspects you like about it? Dislike about it? What do you think is the most difficult part of your job?
- How do you explain your line of work to people who are not other door staff?
- How do your friends feel about your being a bouncer? Your family?

### C. Selection Process—Door

- What are the different roles you work at the club [*for each, probe responsibilities, attitudes towards the role*]
- When you work the door, do you ever have to turn people away? [*If yes*] Under what circumstances does this happen?
- What percentage of customers would you guess you turn away on a given night?
- What do you look for in a customer?
- How do you personally assess whether to admit a specific customer?
- How do you personally assess whether to turn away a specific customer?
- Tell me about the last three customers whom you admitted
- Tell me about the last three customers whom you rejected
- Please describe an ideal customer
- Is there a dress code? What is it for men? Women? Are there exceptions?
- When the club is close to capacity (or there is space for only a few people), how does selection work? Are the criteria similar or different than when the club is less busy?
- Do patrons ever try strategies for getting in? What are some of these strategies?
  - Probe for bribes, flirtation, name-dropping
- How does the promoter list work?
- Have you ever had to turn away a “regular” (i.e., someone you know from the club)? For what reason(s)?
- How do you feel when you have to turn people away? What kind of reactions do you get when turning people away?

### D. Selection Process—VIP (*If bouncer regularly works the VIP area*)

- You said that you work the VIP room on the weekends. How does someone get into the VIP area?



- Is the selection process for the VIP different from selection at the door? How so?
  - Do people ever try things to get into the VIP area? *If so*, what kind of things do they do? What do men do? What do women do?
- E. Clients/Club Climate
- How would you describe the people inside the club?
- F. Relationship with Other Club Staff
- On a typical night, how much do you interact with the club management? In what ways do you interact with them? Does this change depending on which role you are working each night?
  - Do you have formal meetings with management? *If so*, how often? What usually happens during these meetings?
  - Does the management have official rules that they want you to follow? *If so*, what are they? How do you feel about these rules?
    - Probe for policies about selection, “special treatment” for particular guests
  - Have you ever had formal training with the managers? *If so*, what has this training consisted of?
  - Overall, how do you feel about the management? Have you ever had conflicts with them? *If so*, about what?
  - On a typical night, how much do you interact with the club promoters? In what ways do you interact with them?
  - How do you feel about the club promoters? Do you ever have conflicts with them? *If so*, why?

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**Lauren A. Rivera** is Assistant Professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. She received her Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University in 2009. Her work examines processes of status signaling and evaluation—specifically, how individuals assess the worth of actors and organizations in real-life contexts and how actors alter their self-presentation strategies to influence such perceptions. Her research, which seeks to link both cultural and economic perspectives and micro- and macro-levels of analysis, has appeared in *American Sociological Review*.

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