

THINKING ABOUT CLASS AND NAMING PRACTICES IN AUSTRALIA



In Chapter 7, we discuss how class frames the cultural experiences and everyday life of people across the world. Comparisons of the [Great British Class Survey](#) to a similar [Australian version](#) led Australian sociologists to argue that their country was less divided by class than the UK, and that class had less meaning in Australia than had previously been the case—although Australians remained acutely aware of their class identity (Sheppard and Biddle 2017).

One of the ways in which class persists as a form of social stratification connects with some of the most personal aspects of our lives—the names parents give to their children. In a qualitative study with 41 parents in Australia, feminist sociologists Jo Lindsay and Deborah Dempsey (2017) document the importance that these parents placed on choosing appropriate names. Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of capital as a form of social distinction they argue that names are a form of symbolic capital because of the way that names provide an indication of *social location*, in terms of class and ethnicity.

Consider this excerpt of data from Lindsay and Dempsey’s study:

My partner always says that [name] is a great judge’s name. If it’s the Right Honourable or Doctor or a teacher or whatever it might be, they’ve got a name that sounds like it might have a bit of authority.

The notion here is that high status jobs – jobs that have social respect and, in general, pay well – are likely to be held by people with particular names. This only makes sense if names confer meaning beyond “sounding nice” or complementing a person’s surname. Indeed, the Bourdieusian approach suggests that names are imbued with social meaning—that class background and ethnicity can be presumed merely from having a name that is deemed typical of that class. This may well be completely inaccurate, but the parents in the research clearly believed these ideas.

For many middle-class parents, one of the key class-based issues to avoid is the image of the “bogan”. “Bogan” is a slang term in Australia and New Zealand for a person whose speech, clothing and style is unsophisticated—an insult that can be seen to parallel the “chav” in British culture, and the “redneck” or “white trash” in the US (Pini and Previte 2013; Tyler 2008). Here, then, is a cultural stereotype that is seen as an image to avoid, and naming practice is one important component of doing that. As Lindsay and Dempsey (2017, 589) argue “names perceived to carry negative symbolic capital were lower-class or ‘bogan’ names, which were mocked, ridiculed and pathologized”. Thus, the care and consideration given to naming children is a classed practice that includes the marginalization and othering of names associated with other classes.

Further Reading

Lindsay, J. & Dempsey, D. (2017). First names and social distinction: Middle-class naming practices in Australia. *Journal of Sociology*, 53(3), 577-591.

Academic online magazine *The Conversation – Australia* has a set of articles that examine topical issues about class in Australian society. Issues range from how class affects health to the impact of class on understandings of climate change; <https://theconversation.com/uk/topics/class-in-australia-9097>

References

Lindsay, J. & Dempsey, D. (2017). First names and social distinction: Middle-class naming practices in Australia. *Journal of Sociology*, 53(3), 577-591.

Pini, B. & Previte, J. (2013). Bourdieu, the boom and cashed-up Bogans. *Journal of Sociology*, 49(2-3), 256-271.

Sheppard, J. & Biddle, N. (2017). Class, capital, and identity in Australian society. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 52(4), 500-516.

Tyler, I. (2008). “Chav mum chav scum”: Class disgust in contemporary Britain. *Feminist Media Studies* 8(1), 17-34.