Topic 3

SPECIFICATION AREA

The problems of defining and measuring social class; occupation, gender and social class

There have been many difficulties in trying to define and measure class. Most sociologists have relied on something tangible and easy to see. Apart from income and wealth, occupation has long been the most widely used aspect of life since it is an objective fact that most can agree on. It does, of course, ignore those who do not work, either because they do not need to, they cannot, or they do not wish to. Later studies have attempted to look at consumption patterns as indicators of class, but they are, essentially, based on levels of disposable income, which is, of course, related to occupation, among other things.

The Registrar General's Scale

The categories that are still widely used in old government statistics were first devised by the Registrar General in 1901 (see table 4.15). There have been alterations to some categories as society has changed, but the basis has remained relatively constant, which allows comparisons to be made between various eras of the twentieth century. Problems begin to arise when trying to compare current statistics with those of 100 years ago, as the categories recently underwent change when, in 2001, the NS-SEC model was adopted (see the next section for details).

Table 4.15 The Registrar General's classification of class

Class	Typical occupations
Class I Professional	Accountants, dentists, doctors, lawyers, university teachers, vets, vicars
Class II Intermediate	Actors, airline pilots, chiropodists, diplomats, MPs, teachers, journalists
Class III Skilled	
N = non-manual	Bank clerks, police officers, secretaries
M = manual	Bus-drivers, miners, plumbers, printers
Class IV Semi-skilled	Farm labourers, gardeners, postal delivery workers, bar staff
Class V Unskilled	Builder's labourers, ticket collectors, chimney sweeps, porters, office cleaners

Criticisms of the Registrar General's (RG) Scale

Problems with the Registrar General's Scale are:

- It became inaccurate as certain occupations changed their social status over time.
- Some occupations became deskilled, and others disappeared altogether.
- It also classified whole families by the occupation of the male head of household.
- It ignored people who did not work, whether it was because they had enough wealth to live on or because they were unemployed or retired.

Feminists, in particular, objected to the false picture this produced, especially in those households where the woman's job was of a higher status or more highly paid than that of the man.

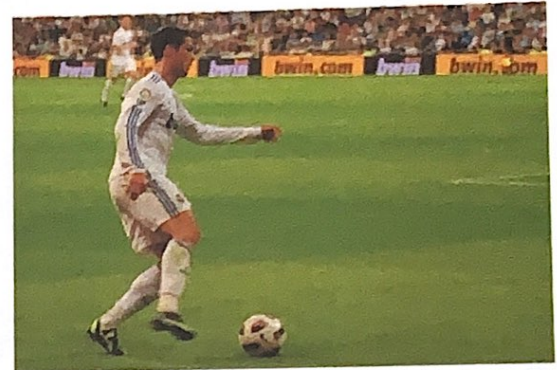# National Statistics Socio-economic Classification: NS-SEC

For government purposes, the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS–SEC) scale has been used since 2001 (see table 4.16). This scale recognizes women as a distinct group of wage earners and categorizes them according to their own occupation rather than that of their father or husband. It considers occupation, security of income, prospects of advancement, and how much authority or control the occupation in question has over other people/employees. In order to assign an occupation to a particular rank, certain questions are asked, such as:

- What education or training is required?
- Does the post involve supervising others?
- How much autonomy or control over their own actions do post-holders have?

Table 4.16 The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification

Occupational classification	Percentage of working population	Common name	Examples
1 Higher managerial and professional	11	Upper middle class	Company directors, doctors, clergymen, barristers, solicitors, accountants, dentists, university lecturers
2 Lower managerial and professional	23	Middle class	Teachers, nurses, police inspectors and above, physiotherapists, journalists, authors, sportspersons, musicians
3 Intermediate	14	Lower middle class	Secretaries, clerks, computer operators, travel agents, nursery nurses, ambulance staff, fire officers, lower police officers
4 Small employers and self-accountable workers	10	Lower middle class	Taxi drivers, publicans, self-employed one-person businesses, child-minders, plasterers
5 Lower supervisory, craft and related	10	Skilled manual/ upper working class	Train drivers, printers, plumbers, motor mechanics, electricians, TV engineers
6 Semi-routine	18	Semi-skilled manual/working class	Traffic wardens, shop assistants, call-centre workers, scaffolders, forklift-truck drivers, farm workers, shelf-fillers, security guards
7 Routine	13	Unskilled manual/lower working class	Cleaners, road-sweepers, carpark attendants, labourers, van drivers, bar staff
8 Long-term unemployed or the never-worked		The poor/ underclass	

- How much security of tenure is attached to the post?
- How much job advancement exists in the post?
- How much money is paid, and is it a pensionable post?

It is hoped through this mechanism to have a more specific and accurate ranking of occupations, so that those found in the same level could be said to have much in common with each other.

NS-SEC condensed scale

NS-SEC can also be collapsed into three analytic classes. This is known as 'condensed' NS-SEC and comprises:

1. *Professional and managerial* (consisting of analytic classes 1 and 2 in table 4.16)
2. *Intermediate* (consisting of analytic classes 3 and 4 in table 4.16)
3. *Routine and manual* (consisting of analytic classes 5, 6 and 7 in table 4.16)

Hope-Goldthorpe scale

Originally designed as a tool for the Nuffield Mobility Study (see Topic 4), this scale was derived from a survey of the social standing of occupations, so jobs are ranked in terms of their social desirability and status in the marketplace, a Weberian aspect taken into consideration.

Like the NS-SEC scale, this looks at autonomy in the workplace, how much the individual is in control of their own work and that of others. It dispensed with the RG scale's distinction between manual and non-manual occupations and created an intermediate class. This scale was also based on the position of the male head of household.

Table 4.17 Hope-Goldthorpe scale

Service class

1 Higher Professionals: high-grade administrators, managers of large enterprises and large proprietors

2 Lower Professionals: higher-grade technicians, supervisors of non-manual workers, administrators in medium-sized enterprises, small business managers

Intermediate class

3 Routine clerical and sales [non manual]

4 Proprietors of small businesses, self-employed craftspeople

5 Lower-grade technicians, supervisors of manual workers

Working class

6 Skilled manual workers

7 Semi- and unskilled manual workers

Source: adapted from Goldthorpe (1980)

The Great British Class Survey (GBCS) or the Savage-Devine Scale

This scale was drawn up by asking members of the public to answer a raft of questions in a BBC internet survey known as the Great British Class Survey (GBCS) (2014). It recognized that **economic capital**, **cultural capital** and **social capital** (see glossary boxes) are resources that can give people the opportunity to do things they would not otherwise be able to do. This scale attempted to move from mere employment to look at other aspects of life in defining class boundaries. It produced seven groups:

- **Elite:** This is the most privileged class in Great Britain who have high levels of all three capitals. Their high amount of economic capital sets them apart from everyone else.
- **Established Middle Class:** Members of this class have high levels of all three capitals although not as high as the Elite. They are a gregarious and culturally engaged class.
- **Technical Middle Class:** This is a new, small class with high economic capital but its members seem less culturally engaged. They have relatively few social contacts and so are less socially engaged.
- **New Affluent Workers:** This class has medium levels of economic capital and higher levels of cultural and social capital. They are a young and active group.
- **Emergent Service Workers:** This new class has low economic capital but has high levels of 'emerging' cultural capital and high social capital. This group are young and often found in urban areas.
- **Traditional Working Class:** This class scores low on all forms of the three capitals although they are not the poorest group. The average age of this class is older than the others.
- **Precariat:** This is the most deprived class of all with low levels of economic, cultural and social capital. The everyday lives of members of this class are precarious.

Economic capital refers to people's wealth, earnings, assets and savings

Cultural capital refers to the extent and nature of people's cultural interests and their participation in cultural activities.

Social capital refers to the social networks of influence and support that people have: the number and status of the people they know

Criticisms of the Great British Class Survey

Mills (2014) points out that the internet survey of over 160,000 people was a self-selecting and therefore biased unrepresentative group, that the data collected was of poor quality, and he suggests that the seven 'classes' are not social classes at all, but reflect people's different ages and are more life-style groups based on cultural preferences. He believes that the survey findings show that cultural

consumption (cultural capital) is related to more conventional measures of social class, such as those of the NS-SEC model which has been extensively validated. Bradley (2014) points out that the emphasis placed on social contacts (social capital) and cultural activities (cultural capital) means that people with the same occupation are placed in different classes, and she questions whether there is anything which really binds these 'classes' together into coherent groups of people. Bradley argues the GBCS underplays the importance of economic capital, and that traditional Marxist and Weberian conceptions, in which classes are defined by their economic position, remain at the heart of class relations. She suggests such a class structure involves the broad classes of the elite, defined by their ownership of wealth (the upper-class owners of wealth in the form of ownership of the means of production), the middle and working classes defined by their income, and the 'Precariat' defined by its marginal and insecure temporary and part-time employment. Bradley also rejects the suggestion that the 'Precariat' is the same as the Underclass, and she points out that many people currently in the Precariat do not have the same low or non-existent levels of social and cultural capital as some suggest is found in the Underclass.

Problems with using occupation to measure class

All systems based on occupation have problems for sociologists, for the following reasons.

1 They always exclude the very wealthy who do not need to work, and thus hide some very real differences that exist in society.
2 Unpaid workers, such as houseworkers/housewives, voluntary workers, and those never employed and the long-term unemployed are also excluded.
3 They tend to be based on the occupation of the highest earner in a household, ignoring households with two incomes, whose class position may well be different from that of a single-earner household.
4 Occupational scales can be very broad and include within them people whose interests might be seen as very different – for example, a headteacher and a classroom teacher fall in the same category, though their responsibilities and powers are very different.
5 They assume a similarity of tastes and attitudes amongst people in the same occupation or ranking. This may be untrue, given that personal interests are formed in many ways. Also, those who are born into and remain in the same class may well have different attitudes from those who have entered the class through **social mobility**. We will consider this in more detail in Topic 5.

Social mobility is the movement of individuals or groups from one social class to another, both upwardly and downwardly.

Feminist alternatives

There have been several attempts at classification by feminists such as Arber et al. (1986), who drew up the Surrey scale, which attempted to reflect more closely the types of work women did and to include them in the scale, and classified women and men separately based on their occupation. Because of women's disjointed work careers, as they are more likely to take career breaks for motherhood and other caring roles, it was difficult to know how useful this scale would be in projecting data concerning life experience as a whole. Similar work undertaken by Martin and Roberts in 1984, which was a modification of the RG scale with emphasis on women's occupations, was eventually subsumed into the NS-SEC model currently used by the government.

IPA scale – Institute of Practitioners in Advertising Social Grade

This scale is widely used in the advertising industry and by some government departments who are attempting to inform the public or change public attitudes. It defines target markets and discriminates

Table 4.18 The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) scale

Social class	Commonly called	Examples of occupations
Class A Higher managerial, administrative or professional occupations	Upper middle class	Opticians, judges, solicitors, senior civil servants, surgeons, senior managers (in large companies), accountants, architects
Class B Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional occupations	Middle class	Airline pilots, MPs, teachers, social workers, middle managers, police inspectors
Class C1 Supervisory or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional occupations	Lower middle class	Clerical workers, computer operators, receptionists, sales assistants, secretaries, nurses, technicians
Class C2 Skilled manual workers	Upper working class	Carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, chefs/cooks, plumbers
Class D Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers	Semi-skilled and lower working class	Postal workers, bar workers, office cleaners, road sweepers, machine minders, farm labourers
Class E Those on the lowest levels of income	The poor	Pensioners (on state pensions), casual workers, long-term unemployed, and others on income support and the lowest levels of income

Source: Browne (2011)

across markets and products. It contains six grades which cover a wide range of occupational groups as well as people on state benefits and pensions. It, like most scales, is based on employment status, current or previous occupation with consideration given to grade, size of employer, supervisory capacity and qualifications. However, it is not widely used in academic sociology.

Advertisers are mainly interested in selling things to people, so their scale ranks occupations primarily on the basis of income. They obviously want to know how much money people have so they can target their advertising at the right people. This scale is very widely used in surveys of all kinds.

Non-occupational measures of social class

Various attempts have been made in academic circles to find measures of class that avoid occupation. As seen earlier (see page 279), the neo-Marxist Wright thought that exploitative relationships might be a way to measure class. The difficulty in how this might be measured has not really been addressed. Runciman (1990) has also suggested that we need to look at the sets of roles held by each individual based on three elements – ownership, control and marketability of skill – whilst those who have no job should be assigned a role dependent on their economic power. However, at no point does Runciman explain how easy it would be to collect the information needed to assign people to their role and he himself has never carried out such research.

It has been suggested that, since the Census now includes questions about housing tenure and car ownership and other consumption variables, as well as educational achievement, this might form the basis of classification. This might help, for example, to give a more accurate picture of the population over 65. In response to this, it should be noted that consumption variables, whilst

interesting, are again reliant upon income, and income is heavily reliant upon occupation, or lack of it. The GBCS/Savage-Devine Scale also attempted to use non-occupational measures of social class, employing the concepts of economic, cultural and social capitals (see page 326) to categorize people into social classes, based on data gathered from a very large (though unrepresentative) survey of over 160,000 people.

Problem of defining and measuring each of the main social classes

We have just seen the problems with using occupation as a basis of measurement, due to the lack of agreement over which occupations should be considered part of each class, where women should be placed, and so forth. For some theorists, such as Marx, this whole discussion is, essentially, irrelevant, since it merely reflects the false consciousness of the vast majority of the population: that section that is not the bourgeoisie. Weberians pay great attention to the market situation of individuals and it is this theory which underlies most of the British work in this field. As markets change, so the social class system changes and membership of classes changes.

One possible problem with all occupational categorizations of class is that they are essentially snapshots in time, and those currently in what are regarded as middle-class jobs may have been born and raised in a working-class household. Others now in manual occupations may have been born into managerial families – though this is rarer, as we shall see in Topic 5. Such groups are more likely to define themselves as belonging to their class of origin, though this is partly dependent on the links they have kept with their family of socialization.

We will look in more detail in Topic 4 at who makes up these social classes and how things may or may not have changed. At present it is probably true to say that most people can agree on who are members of the upper class and who are members of the underclass. In-between these two extremes lies the great mass of the population. We have tried to classify them objectively, but what do they themselves think about their own class position?

Objective and subjective views of class

Whatever scale is used, it consists of objective views of people's social class. An individual's own view of his or her social class may well be different. Few people are likely to say 'I belong to social class seven', but they may well say 'I am working class.' Subjective classifications need to be considered, especially when attitudes to and relations between classes are examined. Giddens (1991), considering the subjective aspects of class, suggested that employment/occupation is being replaced by patterns of consumption as an indicator of the group one sees oneself as belonging to, an idea much espoused by postmodernists, as we saw in Topic 1.

In 'Class, Mobility and Identification in a New Town' (2002), Southerton showed that **consumption patterns** were important in people's minds when describing *other* inhabitants of the new town as 'them' or 'us'. Thus, class identification has been replaced by consumption patterns as a way of identifying others' as well as one's own social position.

However, Savage et al. (2001) used in-depth interviews to discover how people classified themselves. They found a marked reluctance to assign oneself to a class in a specific way. Most people valued being normal and 'just like everybody else' above a specific class label for themselves. A proportion wished to be considered as individuals rather than accepting a class designation and were more likely to say what they were *not* rather than what they thought they were. Postmodernists might regard this as proof of the rise of the pick 'n' mix society and thus of their belief that class is an individual choice.

When people consider themselves as belonging to a class to which others might not objectively assign them, and attempt to live out the lifestyle which they believe is appropriate for that group,

Consumption patterns describe the ways in which people spend their money – some sociologists, such as Giddens, suggest this is as important as class in demonstrating identity.

reality – in the form of other people's responses and their own previous socialization – may well prevent them living out their fantasy: Cooley's 'looking-glass self' (see page 383) will affect their self-perception.

Conclusion

Because of the difficulties of classifying groups, and also because of the vagueness of people's own self-assignment to class, it has been suggested that maybe class is dead and we now live in a postmodern world of consumption patterns and hybrid, pick 'n' mix identities. We shall look at the evidence for this in Topics 4 and 5.

Activity

1 As a group, devise a questionnaire to discover how people define their own social class. Do not forget to include questions that can help you identify people's objective class, as well as questions asking them how they would describe themselves and why.
2 Administer the questionnaire to a range of relatives/friends.
3 Compare people's subjective class with their objective class.
4 From your evidence, do you think that consumption patterns have replaced occupation as a way of defining one's own class position? Give reasons for your answer based on your findings.

Practice questions

1 Outline and explain **two** problems with using the occupation of the father to explain the social class position of the whole family.   **(10 marks)**

2 Read **Item A** below and answer the question that follows.

Item A

Postmodernists suggest that subjective class is as important as occupation in defining a person's social class, as in our fluid occupational structure an individual may change jobs many times, thus changing their identity. Consumption patterns may play a part in their self-classification. Marxists, however, would suggest that objective social class is the most important aspect of an individual's position in society.

Applying material from **Item A**, analyse **two** problems with using subjective class as an indicator of an individual's position in society.   **(10 marks)**

3 Read **Item B** below and answer the question that follows.

Item B

Marxists suggest that occupation is still the most efficient way of describing the social class of both an individual and the family they belong to at any point in their lives. Most studies have concentrated on the occupation of the man in the household. Some feminists would argue that to fully understand the class position of a family the occupation of both parents should be considered.

Applying material from **Item B** and your knowledge, evaluate the extent to which occupation is a useful indicator of an individual's social class.   **(20 marks)**